

WEIZEN HO

Slow down, be still, breathe, reflect and listen...

Stories from the Body is a performance series in an ongoing life-work by WeiZen Ho in which she seeks to describe the *ancestral template* embedded within her physiological being. WeiZen traces her family lineages from the South Fujian province of China to Java, Singapore and Malaysia.

WeiZen's performances and her *Memoria* work-shops, using voice, body and memory, are based on the *Pancha Tanmatra*: core vocal body activation where memory is mobilised through movement and mark-making. During July and August this year WeiZen's performances and workshops offered a pivotal experience in the 'with every breath' exhibition at the Blue Mountains City Art Gallery.

WeiZen describes herself as a Performing Artist and Deviser who brings together phonic-vocals and movement. Her performances transform and extend mundane postures, sounds and everyday objects or speech into poetic prayer. She searches through linguistic processes to find their connection to identity.

WeiZen draws on a lineage of Chinese immigrants who have lived for several generations in Melaka (Malaysia) and Java and relates this to her life today as an Asian immigrant in Australia. She is fascinated by ritual, in particular the *possession rituals* still practised throughout South-East Asia. For her, these rituals are distilled in her performances with the *visceral joining together of voice and body*. This parallels her interest in the idea of communing with

the physical space of performance, and so coalescing voice, body and place.

WeiZen's performance series *Stories from the Body* began in 2014 with the first presented at three festivals across Indonesia and also incorporated into Palimpsest Performance #1 at Woodford Academy. The series began as a means to re-trace lineages disrupted, to remember myths that have been distorted and stories fragmented as a result of migration and time, from China to Java, Singapore, Melaka and now Australia.

WeiZen works from the premise that all of human living is performance. She says: 'I chose to activate this process of uncovering, reclaiming and reimagining through my body and its voice – my ancestral template is embedded within my physiological being.'

'As an example, in *Stories from the Body #2* the entity I am exploring is a hybrid between *Opium Being* and *The Drunken Beauty*, drawn from the deity possession states of the shaman by the King of Hungry Ghost and a famous Chinese Opera character.

'The performance I created was presented as part of Cerita Pendek night-works at Melaka Arts and Performance Festival in 2014 where I was privileged to have the special participation of Bantengan (Bull Trance) Leader, Agus Riyanto from Batu, Indonesia.'

Spices are used in *Stories from the Body #3 Spice Trails* for their references to kitchen, tradition, trade,





Stories from the Body #1 performed by WeiZen Ho, Undisclosed Territory #8 Performance Art Festival in Solo, Indonesia photo Watan Wuma

*visceral : felt in or as if in the internal organs of the body : deep, a visceral conviction :
not intellectual : instinctive, unreasoning*

and for their colours and scents. For WeiZen the history of the Dutch East India Company, trading through the Straits of Melaka, is a history of coolies as a cheap or a kidnapped source of labour at the time of colonisation, and of the Chinese Diaspora. It also references the history of women in domestic and kitchen slavery, sometimes by choice but sometimes by force. *Spice Trails* has been performed in Japan's Setouchi Triennale 2016 in Port Takamatsu, and at *Critical Path* as a combined performance with Alan Schacher titled *shoesandspices*.

WeiZen: 'As I roll, roll and baste my body again and again on the turmeric, paprika, coriander, cumin,

I imagine the journeys these spices have taken and then the imageries come...

- bodies of coolies (*ku li*), the bitter use of strength, labour that gave us roads, buildings, townships; rubber, cotton, sugar plantations; coolie, racial slur, slave..
- female coolies under the Asian sun were swaddled completely in long sleeves, gloves, and scarves for protection against the sun; from their harsh labour they emerge as fair-skinned beauties...
- opium dens to forget the bitterness of poverty...
- women chained to kitchens, pounding, mixing spices, dried chilli, delimiting, green papaya, buah keras, tamarind, tangy, daun kesum, belachan, daun



serai, fever grass to produce the aromatic Chinese-Malay fusion dishes known as Nyonya food' (nyonya or nonya is the term for women, baba for men)...

For her performance of *Stories from the Body #1* in 'with every breath' at Blue Mountains City Art Gallery this year, WeiZen has had created an installation with which to interact (opposite).

'I have expanded the performance motif and image into a sculptural installation, creating a pre-ritual scene or perhaps the aftermath of a ritual-like performance.'

WeiZen activates a process of uncovering, reclaiming and re-imagining through her body and its voice in an expression of how an ancestral template is embedded within her physiological being.

The sophisticated interactive sculptural piece consists of steel, fishing line, paper, cardboard, piping conduits, Arduino and servomotors. (Arduino can

sense the environment by receiving input from a variety of sensors and can affect its surroundings by controlling lights, motors, and other actuators.) It has been created by Brad Allen-Waters (bracket design, bespoke steel engineering and fabrication), Horst Kiechle (3-D design) and Michael Petchkovsky (material design, research and creative development, kinetic-electronic sound design and construction and process facilitator). Alan Schacher and Megan Blaxland also enabled the project.

WeiZen's performance series is an ongoing life-work which is constantly being built on. The most recent in the series is *Stories from the Body #9*.

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Photos Silversalt courtesy of Blue Mountains City Art Gallery

'I am a Performing Artist and Performance Deviser who brings together phonic-vocals and movement. I have ventured into the territory of visual installation as a way of capturing the traces, the aftermath of a performance, or to evoke a landscape for the audience to inhabit before and after the performance. The accoutrements help invoke the performance entities that I am exploring, and are built into this sculptural-like landscape.'

'Ritual, imagery-work and accoutrements distilled into performance locate my visceral vocal-body. The concept of communing with the performance space and coalescing an architectural relationship between body, voice/sound and site is key in my creative performance research.'

