

## *Artist Feature Conversation with Claire Kim*

**Claire Kim:** Justin, you're our fourth artist in residence, and I think we've worked with artists who have come into this studio with different motivations. Some people come in with a very specific idea, working toward a particular show, while others use the time to explore new directions in their practice. I feel like you lend yourself towards the latter category. You came into the studio with a portfolio that was very focused on oil painting, and yet, after the nine paintings for the London show were shipped out, you really switched gears. While I still see so many of the influences from your paintings in this new work, it's also completely different. I think it was quite shocking for folks who came into the studio after seeing those nine paintings on the wall. Tell us a little bit about this new and exciting shift in your practice.

**Justin Rui Han:** I see it more as a return to the kind of breadth I'd been pursuing before the show. Before I finished





my undergraduate degree, I was casting and blowing glass, and just beginning to learn to weld and pour metals, and then I lost access to those resources. Though painting has always been my first disciplinary home, I felt a certain discomfort with being bound to the formal constraints of oil on canvas. The new materials I've been introducing into my practice are wood, rattan, and yarn; each requires distinct methods of working by hand.

I'm working on building supports that highlight the armature as an internal network—forms that are informed by objects from my paintings. I'm interested in creating systems that rely more on a diagrammatic logic than a narrative one. For now, I'm stepping aside from my reliance on cinematic space, or maybe I'll employ film stills differently, rather than allowing them to dictate the structure of each work.

It's been refreshing to take out a jigsaw, shape plywood or pine, and build something from the ground up instead of off the wall. I think I'm starting to absorb ideas in my practice that I encountered a long time ago—from performance, time-based media, and especially, sculptures I've seen around the city.

**CK:** We were just talking about your transition into sculpture, and we also have this explosion of mood boards and material explorations behind us. Since we're sitting in front of the textiles, do you want to talk a bit about those pieces and what you've been doing with the knitting machine in your studio?

**JRH:** I've been working with the Silver Reed knitting machine for about a year now, but it hasn't made its way into any finished works yet. I wanted to make a commitment to building my own surfaces—and that includes both the wood and the fabric. I'm starting to diagram out what kinds of shapes and

forms I need in the fabric, then designing the patterns that run throughout.

Sometimes I create slits in the fabric so that it can be enmeshed among the other materials, as if creating a mechanical joint or a kind of hardware, or else I embed it more organically into the structure as it grows.

On the wood surfaces, I'm thinking of using a lime plaster surface called tadelakt, a North African soap-finishing method that I first encountered in the work of Jumana Manna. In her work, the material evokes Levantine grain storage methods, and the material reminds me of the time I spent in Jordan, working with an archaeological team on terraces and cisterns near Petra.

Each material I've chosen has clear ties to land use and land sovereignty. Rattan, in particular, has environmental and historical connections to Southeast Asia, especially the Philippines. I want to build material ecosystems for myself, where I can explore how the materials respond to one another and what kinds of incompatibilities might arise.

There are both historical and technical reasons I'm drawn to each material. A surface made with lime plaster takes three or four days to build. It needs to be in a space with 80% humidity or higher, and you have to attend to it the whole time.

Each of these materials exists on its own timeline—they offer different working durations and carry distinct social and economic histories. I don't have all the language yet for why or where the compulsion comes from, but I know the compulsion is there. I'm beginning to find that language, and also considering how the works could grow to include sonic or kinetic elements.

**CK:** Can you talk a about what you're struggling with most right now? I know you've been experimenting with limestone as a





new material and trying to figure it out. Is there anything else you've been wrestling with?

**JRH:** I've been doing a lot of reading to build a knowledge base for these new sculptures. I really want to think about systems of dispersed power, like water management (as in how Jia Zhangke's work explores the Three Gorges Dam), telegraphs, electricity, and railways. I'm thinking about how colonial infrastructures made claims to serve colonized peoples—whether under the French, the British, or the Dutch—while, in truth, these systems obfuscated the reality of resource extraction. You can often see these contradictions in socialist filmmaking, as exemplified by the protagonist of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* setting her ear against the hum of a power station. That scene, to me, is where her character witnesses the imposed promise of electricity but finds that it hardly benefits her in the present.

But it's not a one-to-one relationship. You don't always read a text and find an image. Often, there's nothing there. There's no visual record, nothing to reflect on. So it then has to be conjured through fabulation or imagined entirely.

Maybe what I'm trying to say is that I'm constructing a language for something that doesn't have a visual archive. I do have a few printouts from state archives and the like, but they don't always offer the kind of visual provocation that makes someone want to paint or build.

**CK:** For this specific structure, you had a reference that we can see above and to the right—some sketches of police shades from Ho Chi Minh City [Fig. 1 & 2]. I'm curious how important it is that this reference be legible to the viewer, especially when the sketches and source images are no longer present. How



important is it to you that these histories are translated, whether clearly or ambiguously, to the audience?

JRH: Some shapes in the work are borrowed from vernacular architecture, used for their compositional power. Other elements are more graphic, more charged, and I do want them to be read in more provocative ways, more locatable within history.

This umbrella, in particular, caught my attention. It's this kind of lumbering, molded plastic police umbrella I encountered on the street, and it felt like it could act as a structural shelter for other kinds of stories. I'm not totally sure what that story is yet for this piece—it's being developed in conversation with the image of this monumental boiler from an irrigation project in Dutch Surabaya.

This is a new work I'm developing [Fig. 3]. It doesn't have a title yet. I'm imagining a peachy orange palette that involves this particular persimmon dye (*kakishibu*) I want to use. In this I'm reworking an idea from the last painting I made for the London show, titled *Lighthouse and Semaphore*. I developed that painting as I read historian Eric Tagliacozzo's writing on the lighthouses the Dutch built across the Indonesian archipelago. He describes this system as a sort of oceanic panopticon, and I was interested in this identification of the insidious within a network that was ostensibly just to serve the interests of maritime commerce.

That painting opened something up for me, but it didn't fully resolve the formal and conceptual questions I had. I felt like a sculptural structure would better convey the kind of dispersed spatial quality I'm looking for.

The main shape of this piece comes from an early modern Egyptian shadow puppet that depicts the Argo. The Persian



Fig. 1

astronomer Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi depicted the same ship as a constellation while he was translating Ptolemy's images for his audience. I was struck by the feeling of coincidence as I looked at these images together—dioptic lenses blinking across Dutch lighthouses, this Persian rendering of stars arranged to evoke the sea. I hope my work suggests that the movement of ideas, objects, and people can always evade strictures and defy impossibility, wherever they might be imposed.

So yes, I take long-winded routes to get to an image. It's not always important to narrate all of that on a wall label, but the journey is important to me. And it's fun, figuring out how to bend this material, how to make a fabric that fits the armature just right.

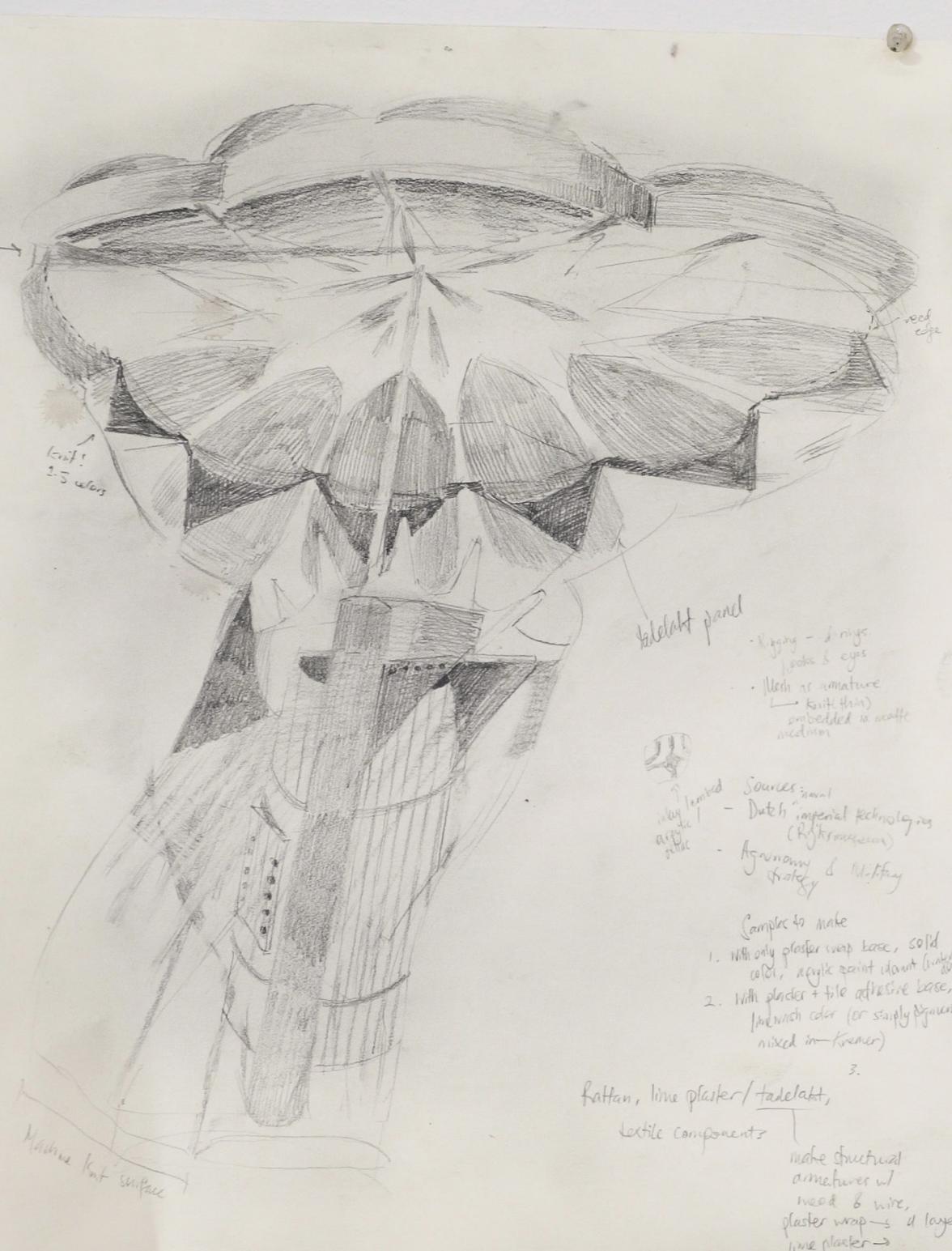


Fig. 2 (sketch for Palembang Canopy)

Palembang Canopy, 2025

**CK:** You say it's a long-winded journey, but I think that kind of deep research, even if it doesn't end up on the wall, will really have an impact on your practice. There's something powerful in the density of references. It becomes a kind of timekeeping. Do you want to talk a bit about how this piece will move forward?

**JRH:** Yeah. I've set aside a bunch of yarns for this—there's a silver one, and an orangish-brown persimmon-dyed one. The fabrics will fill this space. I've woven the rattan to act as handles or bars to stretch and hang the fabric on.

I might dye the reed to be in dialogue with the other materials. I've been sketching with draft fabrics to figure out how the surface will move around the armature. The drawing's underway—it's back there. But there will be many more drawings and diagrams to help me think through how the materials relate, how the structure stands, and so on.

**CK:** Have you thought about how the work relates to the viewer?

**JRH:** I'm thinking of this work as a bridge into installation, where the conditions of a viewer's encounter have a certain priority. I think the works as they are now need some sort of tertiary link, such as text, drawings, or video, to paint a fuller picture of the questions I'm trying to engage. I want the work to be more ambitiously engaged with how culture, infrastructure, and technology invoke questions of accountability—how powerful actors resist or neglect the needs of those they claim to represent. This is something that the filmmakers I revere put at the forefront of their work, and it should find its way into what I do as well.

**CK:** I'm really excited to see more. I just want to say it's been such a pleasure having you in the studio over the last five



*Shadow puppet of a ship with soldiers. Egypt, fourteenth to eighteenth century. Present location unknown. (After Paul Kahle, "Islamische Schattenspielfiguren aus Ägypten II," *Der Islam* 2 [1911])*

months. There's a kind of energy that comes into the studio when shifts like this are happening. There has to be a real fearlessness in trying new things, especially in a residency setting, where people are constantly coming in and out of the space. I really applaud you for that. And, I'm so excited to see not only where this new series goes, but where your practice goes from here.

**JRH:** Thank you so much for having me in the space. Thank you for this conversation today.

repeat brushing until no longer absorbing  
allow to set while spraying  
every so often - carbonization  
completes after ~72h

crushed &  
heated in  
pit @ high temp

Quicklime  
(caustic)

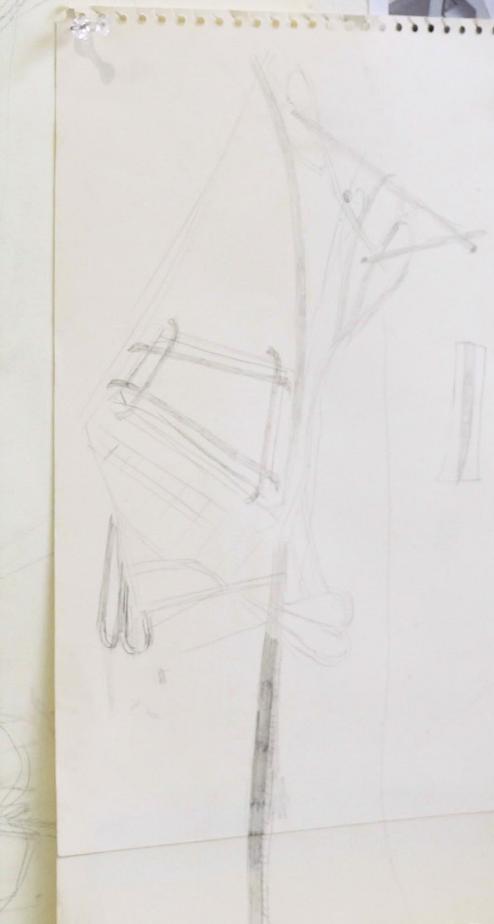
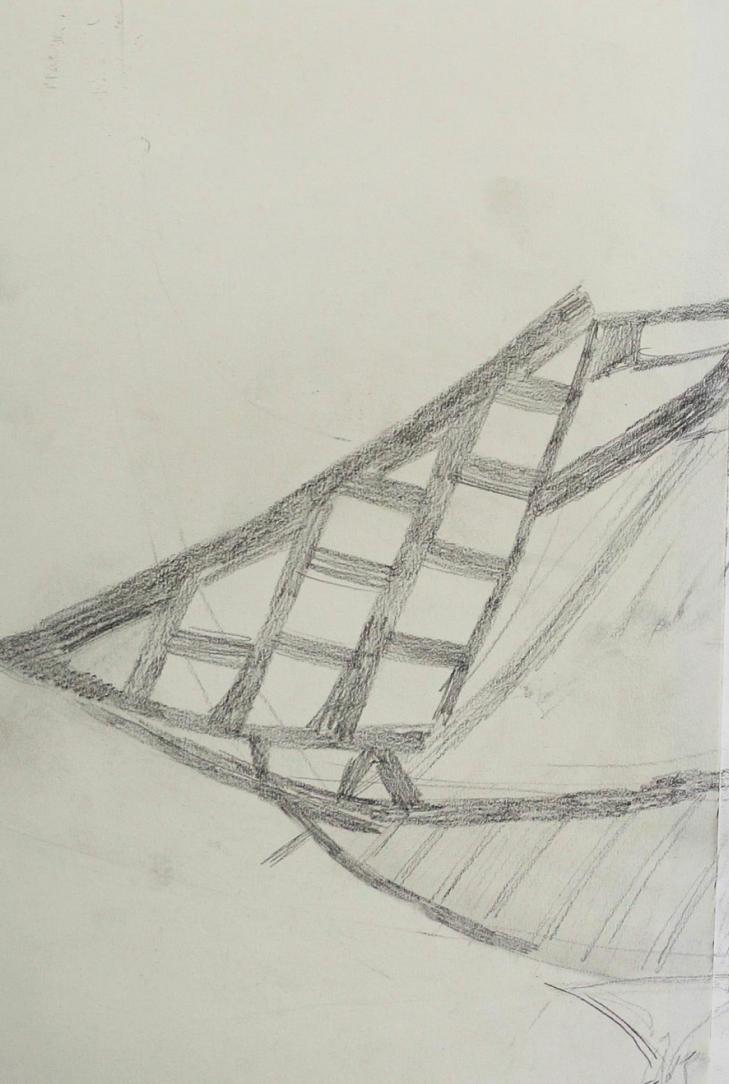


Fig. 3







*Floating Beacon (after Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi), 2025*







Monsoon Messenger (after Satyajit Ray), 2025







Installation view of *Under the Talking Tree*,  
Kunsthal n, Copenhagen (curated by Kathy Huang)



Retracted Permissions, 2024