

R O N Y Z A K A R I A

PANTURA

Where are you, Mr. Daendels?



13 MARCH – 19 APRIL 2020

CURATED BY WEI LENG TAY

Pantura: Where are you, Mr. Daendels?,
is presented as a culmination of the Objectifs
Documentary Award, Open Category.

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All images Rony Zakaria, 2018–20

Special thanks from Objectifs to Kevin Lee,
Sam I-shan and Ian Teh

INTRODUCTION

By Wei Leng Tay





(Top) North Jakarta. 2018

(Bottom) Rembang, Central Java. 2019

Since 2017, Rony Zakaria has been traversing Java on De Grote Postweg (The Great Post Road), which was built by the Dutch. While he had begun the inquiry piqued by its colonial legacy, his interests in the manifestations of this legacy took a more layered turn. That while one might see literal remnants in and around the road, how does one understand the consequences of occupation and subsequent displacement? *Where are you, Mr Daendels?*

With this journey, Rony is a descendent, delving into a heady history of Chinese migration he embodies but that he professes to neither fully understand nor know. He is a citizen, questioning how the injustices of the past can explain the present, not in a literal, linear manner of construction and development, but in the hearts, minds and actions of the people who inherit it. He is a guest, entering homes and milieus that appear foreign, and that might not entice his eye once familiarity sets in.

The images take different roles as they are made. As Rony photographs children dressed up in a parade, he bears witness to the fleeting event that he accidentally encounters. As he shows us a man seated slumped in front of a row of women with their hands uniformly clasped in front of their bodies, Rony comments on the commodification of humans that the road brings. And as he documents the submersion of a mosque in waters at the edges of Jakarta, he marks with the present a potential future foretold.

In his photographs, we see a weaving of the gaze and the body of the photographer. Sometimes with an immersion and immediacy that makes us a third dancer partaking in a performance. Sometimes with a stolen glance in a room with a man and child that turns us into interlopers. Sometimes we see a slice of society that we think we know, and yet whose adamant nature quickly demands its unravelling.

There is an interplay of roles for the photographer, photograph and viewer — as insider, outsider, creator, receiver, testament, commentary. This interplay presents challenges that Rony navigates in creating these images, and foregrounds the push and pull of familiarity and otherness, reality and projection, for all involved.

Rony began his journey in Lasem. It is not the start of the Great Post Road, but holds the beginnings of the Chinese in Java. It is also the beginning of his exploration into how one can photograph an idea. This exhibition invites audiences to share this journey of exploring an idea of history, the self, and the tenuous yet indelible road in between.

INTERVIEW WITH
RONY ZAKARIA

By Wei Leng Tay





Lasem, Central Java (2019)

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Rony: So a couple of years ago, I read more about the Great Post Road. I found it fascinating. I have been very much interested in history for the past few years, so I decided to give it a go. I made a short road trip in 2017 to see whether it would interest me more, and that's how it started, actually.

Wei Leng: So what about that first trip made you think, 'yes I want to do this?'

That trip, I went from Jakarta to Semarang, which is the midpoint of the road, and then to Lasem, which is a small Chinese town. Most of the cities and small towns are quite similar, in terms of design and architecture, but Lasem is quite distinct. It's where the Chinese first landed in Java. I am third generation Chinese. So, I felt kind of close with that history, and yet so foreign... because I didn't know about the history of the Chinese Indonesian before. So I went there. I stayed for three days. I found it very fascinating to hear a lot of stories from Lasem that I didn't know before, like how we fought the Dutch. I wanted to see if there were similar stories along the road, because we are not really good at recording histories as a nation.

So how did these stories guide how you then went back and forth over the next few years?

When I do projects like this, it's always led by curiosity. Stories like this give a feeling of how — is it about identity? Is it about hidden histories? In Lasem, I get a feeling that it is about identity, as a Chinese, and also as an Indonesian. In other places, there are other feelings.

I use the stories as a guide to where the pictures would be and how they would feel. For instance, in Lasem, I found similar stories about Chinese identity like 'I have never been anywhere. I have never been to Jakarta! I am not going to Jakarta. What for?' The only cities they know would be Surabaya to the East, or Semarang to the West. These kinds of stories give a guide to how the pictures will feel, specifically in this place, Lasem.

When you first visit, it's all brand new. When does the place become familiar for you as you are photographing?

I always take the best pictures when I am there for the first time. Because I have no familiarity. Familiarity makes me take things for granted. Most of the time, I will take a lot of pictures during the first time. The second time, of course there is familiarity, and I know my bearings. I see a scene and it's ok and I don't do anything.



Pasuruan, East Java. 2018

Are there other projects you have done where you are in the same place repeatedly, such that it creates a different way of looking than *Pantura*?

In *Men Mountains and the Sea*, a few of them are in the same location. Like Yogyakarta, Bromo, Bali, I made a few trips. But that is different because I knew the specific visuals that I wanted. With *Pantura*, there is an idea that interests me, but I don't know what to photograph, you know, in the first place. I am in the city; I want to feel this place. For me, going back again to a specific place, for *Pantura*, it's because I still feel that there is something that I can photograph or I can see or I can experience or I can collect, that I don't have yet.

Do you think, 'oh, I should have the safe, descriptive shots?' Is there a fall back where you think you should work in a particular way first?

Mm, no. For instance if I go to Lasem or if I go to Surabaya, I know the places I want to visit because they are relevant and visually interesting for my eye. Other than that, no. Usually I have a few places that I think I have to photograph on the first day. If it is at the beginning of my trip, I will be *safer* with my shots. My photojournalist training will kick in, which is not really fun, because you get boring pictures. But after that, you will just photograph for the sake of photographing. When that kicks in, it then follows my instinct as a photographer.

What is the difference for you? Your instinct as a photographer versus your training as a photojournalist?

As a photojournalist, you know you want to get a few shots to report a story, to illustrate a story. And you know which shots you are going to get — "you do this low-angle, you do this framing, there are some technical stuff that you do, and the editor will say it's cool." But it is so predictable. I cannot avoid it, because I am still working as a photojournalist.

When you talk about your instinct as a photographer, what is that instinct?

Photographing for the sake of taking photographs, for the joy of photography. 'oh that guy looks nice, the gesture, the shadow looks nice, maybe I will photograph it.' But I am photographing in a location that is quite contextual for the project. For instance, in Surabaya, I went to the tomb of a great cleric. And there were many pilgrims. There, I was not looking for a photograph that gave a classic moment or that was for the front page of the *New York Times* — I know what they like, but it can be taken by anyone. I would photograph, maybe just a snapshot, anything, anything that caught my fancy. When I am in this mode, I will take three to four pictures of each scene, and it is usually the first one that works. Because the second or third one you are just trying. That's when you try to *cheat*, thinking you can do it better, perhaps it's my photojournalist side kicking in. Most



Rembang, Central Java. 2019

of the time it's the first one. It catches your eye and you take it. Yah, that's the picture!

A few days ago, when we were talking about the portrait of the children surrounded by flowers, you were talking about your role as *witness*. You were talking about how for some photographs, you see it and you have to make it as it is happening, for others, "they do different things..."

That was really a lucky coincidence. It was like a gift, that particular picture. I was not planning on photographing that day. After lunch, I was bringing my friend back to the train station and I saw it and was like, 'what is this?' I took out my camera, and I wanted to photograph. These two kids were sitting, all dressed up, and not enjoying themselves. It was high noon, 36 degrees, it was so hot, so humid, and they were drenched. I think I only took five photographs in total and it was the first picture. And it worked. I was not being too conscious as a photographer. I just thought I should just take a picture, and I did. Sometimes it's really, really good, and you can't repeat it.

You were saying people along the road are different than you, you are going to places you had never been to before. So do you think about this when you go along the road?

In a way, yes. For instance, during the second last trip, I went to two fishing villages next to each other. They were having a big *dangdut* night. I know I look different for sure. I look Chinese, which correlates with 'you're rich', in Indonesia. But I photographed them because they are a part of the road, not because they were a lower social class.

When we photograph scenarios, or communities, very often we are dealing with difference anyway. It's a question of how you mediate between yourself and the object or place or people you are photographing right? How do you interact with people; how do you present people?

To answer your question, I usually go alone to these people. To photograph. So they know I am vulnerable. I am not bringing anyone. It is as uncomfortable for me as it is for them. Of course, I can talk to people most of the time. After a while, they invite me to events, invite me to their homes. I tell them I am doing a project. I am collecting stories. I am here.



Bandung, West Java. 2018

About the Artist

Rony Zakaria is a photographer based in Indonesia. He studied photography at Galeri Foto Jurnalistik Antara and Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines. Zakaria's work focuses on how historical, sociocultural and religious underpinnings of daily life shape his native country, Indonesia. He has been commissioned by publications like The New York Times, GEO, and Monocle. Zakaria has also participated in exhibitions with institutions and platforms like the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, Fotografie Forum Frankfurt, Recontres d'Arles, France, and Chobimela Photo Festival, Dhaka. He has two monographs: *Encounters* (2013) and *Men, Mountains & the Sea* (2019).

About the Curator

Wei Leng Tay works with mediums including photography, audio, video and installation. Her projects begin with conversations and draw links between how desires, personal relationships and histories are tied to society and the state. Tay presented her most recent four-part solo exhibition, *Crossings*, at NUS Museum (2018–2019). She has collaborated with organisations like ARTER Space for Art, Istanbul, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, and Vasl Artists' Association, Pakistan, through exhibitions and residencies, and is in museum collections across Asia. She is a part of Sightlines (comprising 7 artists/researcher, 2016–) which questions collectivity through conversation and image-making.

The Objectifs Documentary Award

The Objectifs Documentary Award champions Objectifs' mission to broaden perspectives through image making, by supporting original voices in visual storytelling in Singapore and the wider region. The Award enables photographers to work on new or existing projects, encouraging them to discover and tell stories about their communities. It welcomes creative approaches to non-fiction storytelling, from established documentary photography to visual experiments, with projects presented as still images or through multimedia. Awardees were given professional and financial support to work on their projects over nine months, and their works were exhibited at Objectifs from March to April 2020.

The Awardees for the 2019 edition are:

Rony Zakaria	Open Category
Dave Lim	Emerging Category

The jury panel consisted of the following members:

Kevin Lee	Photographer and founder, Invisible Photographer Asia
Sam I-shan	Curator, National Gallery Singapore
Wei Leng Tay	Visual artist
Ian Teh	Photographer
Emmeline Yong	Director and Co-founder, Objectifs



Established in 2003, Objectifs is the leading art space in Singapore that champions film and photography and their value to society. Our goal is to cultivate original voices in visual storytelling, and to inspire and broaden perspectives through the power of images. We do this by presenting exhibitions, developmental programmes, screenings, talks and workshops that advance the practice and appreciation of photography and film.

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