

RITUALS AND/OFF THE EVERYDAY

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE LIM

BY ALFONSE CHIU

A quiet, though no less witty, video installation that observes the various rituals, both spiritual and mundane, to be found in contemporary Singaporean society, visual artist Dave Lim's *The Believers* is the culmination of the Objectifs Documentary Award, Emerging Category, which featured a six-month-long mentorship with veteran photographer Ian Teh and a solo exhibition at Objectifs. With subjects ranging from traditional performances to a major sporting event to even a mosh pit, *The Believers* strains a bemused and humanistic gaze on the performance of belief and faith that goes beyond the superficial category of religion, and instead probes the different stratas of local society and their idiosyncrasies.

Writer-researcher Alfonse Chiu sits down with Lim for a quick fireside chat about his work, his method, and his experience of the mentorship programme.

Alfonse: How has the project evolved since you started the mentorship programme?

Dave: The original project, titled *Religious Procession*, was, as its name suggests, focused on religious processions, and it was more of a filmic essay than anything. The shift to this new work occurred mainly because of a personal experience that I had with a Taoist medium in a graveyard. In a way, the previous project came from an angle where I would basically denounce gods and spirits in an almost atheistic way, so entering that sort of environment was intriguing for me, because it was a game between logic and feelings. For the longest time, I thought that Taoist mediums were always sort of play-acting but then there was this bunch of Malay boys who were in the graveyard in the middle of the night, asking the medium of the temple I was following to help break them out of a trance. This event was a turning point that jolted me into doing the film I am doing now.

Compositionally, *The Believers* has a very interesting look; one can see that there is always a certain consistent plane of viewing, but then there is also always a certain distance. As a documentarian, how would you describe your gaze with regards to your subjects?

It is kind of interesting when you compare the film vis-à-vis the title. To some degree, this work is about believers, but then the only thing that you're looking at are the believers themselves, so you are not looking from the believers' perspective. I'm still thinking about it, and I do think it's a big point of contention. Currently, the believers are in and of themselves the subject of focus, and that is the gaze. It does switch around once in a while, but it is mostly strained on the people. I did find it easier to work with a certain visual formalism —my last film was really a mishmash from any angle and every angle that I could think of—and I think having this helps to unite the message for myself quite a bit more.

It is very consistent, but it is also not very well thought out yet, to be precise. I do film and photography in a very flat, formal way in general, and for this work, I had less of a point to prove; my last film, *Religious Procession*, had more to say, which was a general feeling that guided the film. I guess I could be more consistent this time because my process demanded less on-the-fly recording, so the burden of truth involved in making a documentary subsided a bit, and *The Believers* went into a slightly more existential, abstract direction instead.

Given that you work across a variety of lens-based media, how would you frame your practice?

I work fluidly across mediums, because I am conceptual in my practice; I described this to someone else recently: the conceptual for me is about creating a neat box in which that environment and world can exist and understand itself. Imagine that you are in an Agatha Christie book and you are given enough clues to solve a mystery—that is how I think about my work. The themes are always similar as well; my works are about development, sometimes it is about the object of nostalgia.

Time as a medium has always been a main thrust... I think it is interesting that during the second half of the mentorship when Ian and I had more meetings, we had a lot of Skype calls about the very similar cuts that we liked, and he wouldn't have much to say apart from the details that need tweaking, but he would be very focused on how the moment has been elongated in the film—how the decisive moment in photography has been elongated into this lengthy thing that you watch. There is this formal aspect of working with time, and with the themes of nostalgia, time itself is the object to contend with, because time makes history, and thus nostalgia, which is unto itself just heavily constructed history.

On this note of history and process, what was your own artistic journey like? What were your influences?

I came from a photojournalistic background and then became more conceptual. I am always juggling the two in my head: what burden do I have to truth; which concepts am I interested in; and what feelings am I interested in portraying? In a way, these two strands really only merged because they have been separate for a long time. My artistic works have always been very personal: one was about intimacy, the other about the state of Singapore. I feel that every young artist will go through a this-is-the-state-of-Singapore phase for their works. For me, I found that the object of ritual itself was something to tease through, but was still concerned with the burden of truth to affairs as captured.

Visually, I have been told that I am very formalist, though I can't really pinpoint where it came from. I enjoy the process, so that is most likely the cause. I had a class with Dr. Yanyun Chen which propelled me into reading up on a lot of artistic processes, like how they would start, where they would end up, and what would happen in-between. What is really important for me is the process of how something comes to be—it doesn't need to be rigorous, it just has to be motivated.

There were a few major influences that I started with. One was Léonard Pongo's *The Necessary Evil*. There is a new language to this film that I have not fully grasped, mainly because there is a hyper-sensitive emotional core to it.

It is interesting that you mentioned the word ‘motivated’, because even with conceptual works there always need to be a certain iterative process. In this vein, how would you describe *The Believers*? Would you say it is more conceptual in its organisation or is your process more oriented around molding what you have around what you want to say?

I build my film with a corpus of materials, almost like a library. *Religious Procession* was very argumentative; there is a certain reflexivity and there are concerns that I want to argue, and from there you latch onto metaphors and words. For *The Believers*, I was grabbing on to feelings. From a visual perspective, *The Believers* is an entirely different process. It is not something I would have worked on a few months ago. Not that I am not in touch with myself, it was just hard to think of what the visual does to the emotional sense for me at least. With the film, sure it is conceptual, but it also only exists within your mind because the only guiding words are *The Believers*, and I think it is good enough—it was really hard to choose the title.

What was the mentorship process like for you?

Ian Teh is possibly the most visually articulate person I have ever met. He just understands the flow of the image, which is really interesting, because that is the way the film dictates itself. It took me a while, but the film has a certain photographic flavour to it, and this is sort of Ian’s biggest contribution. Of course there are always the “What do I want to say?”, “Where is this going?” questions but the funny thing is that we never really talked about the individual stories. I am pretty organised; I have clips, I have a whole Google Doc—one page each for everything I film and feel like is happening—and all these were excluded. We just tacitly agreed to just talk about the film cuts I was generating.

The first few months were painful, because I couldn’t give him anything to look at yet, I just had this idea in my mind. But in the later part of the mentorship, we corresponded via Skype, where I would send him links to different cuts, and then we would have a discussion about them. One thing that helped me was also how good he is with his words—he is very concise and precise, and that’s what really helped me because I was hesitant with my direction for the film; I had a direction, but wouldn’t commit to it immediately.

How would you situate *The Believers* in your current practice?

It is hard to talk about it retrospectively; I cannot imagine my future self saying that this is a theme I am preoccupied with, so I can only talk about the present. I do have multiple strands; when I work I think in strands, which is similar to themes, though I don’t really think of my work in themes. A lot of the times when I am asked to think about themes, because that is how some people understand things, it comes up with words like spirituality, development, and nostalgia, sort of these three, but they do meld. I think they will definitely join up at some point... Some of the aspirations for the feature length version of *The Believers* includes exploring urban or national development as a ritual, and how to move it back to the individual.

THE BELIEVERS

13 MAR TO 19 APR 2020
LOWER GALLERY, OBJECTIFS
16 MIN / 2020 / VARIOUS LANGUAGES

The Believers is a film about witnessing religious and everyday rituals. It explores the convergences between the secular and spiritual, the ceremonial and the banal. Through observing the emotion, repetition and symbolism that often mark the rituals in our lives, *The Believers* harkens to a search for comfort, connection and transcendence that traverses different faiths and beliefs, alluding to a complex but common humanity.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dave Lim is a visual artist with a photojournalistic background. He graduated with a BA(Hons) in Urban Studies from Yale-NUS, Singapore. He is interested in the temporal landscapes that humans create and participate in. His accolades include the Singapore Young Photographer Award in 2018, and the NTU Global Digital Art Prize 2020. As part of the Objectifs Documentary Award, he was mentored by photographer Ian Teh.

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