



# Alaya Ang Talbot Rice Residents

# Artist in the city

Talbot Rice Residents

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How do you channel the humidity of the tropics? Or catch a breath? Or compose with the weather? These questions underpin **Alaya Ang**'s practice and disrupt the established production of meaning. As sweat pouring from a labourer or the strained gasp of a person undertaking backbreaking work carries a powerful yet diffuse politics – this practice works into the space of things as they happen. If, when we make sense of things, we are already dealing with a world transformed by language and analysis, then Ang tries to escape this trap with work that is, "on the way to becoming, but not yet there".

Ang's tactics anchor these flexible and subjective concepts by focusing on things that are generative – everything carrying a performative aspect. This sensibility infuses their sculptural practice, which see objects as instruments or props, or speaks to some fleeting gesture. They include ropes that might be pulled, strained or rung taught, or seeds and shells that might catch the wind and become musical instruments. This is a practice rooted in an emergent experience.

With the centrality of humidity in Ang's thinking, it is difficult not to think of Anthropologist Michael Taussig's reflections on heat, as, "a force like colour that sets aside the understanding in place of something less conscious and more overflowing, radiance instead of line, immanence instead of that famous bird's-eye view." With Ang's recent work the qualities that drive its intensity might also be: tension, strain, sweat and something deep within the sea. Their recent work, for example, references their family and also the Samsui women, migrant labourers who came to Singapore from China. An aspect of British Colonial legislation, these women ended up largely working in the construction industry and would face long gruelling days for little pay. This reference to the construction industry also speaks of Ang's first training in Building Science.

From its open structures that seek to evoke transient moments therefore, Ang's practice also clearly transitions into a political territory that evokes the undocumented labour of those subjugated by power. Diffuse, elusive and transient, it operates at the level of those who are displaced, always mobile and without stable roots.



Samsui women working at a construction site, 1978. Photo: Singapore Press Holdings



*Saturation: a semblance of breath, (work-in-progress).* Photo: Najma Abukar

## Unravelled Gathering

James Clegg, 2024

*Unravelled Gathering* consists of a rope carrying bangles, moon blocks and an array of cast bronze feet. As a sculpture it suggests tensions, movement, depth and labour – whilst the feet give it the quality of being a multi-footed organism.

The rope, for Ang, symbolises a number of things. Firstly, it is an old measurement of the depth of the sea – Ang noting that *fathom* is an Old Norse word meaning "outstretched arms"; the bangles on it are suggestive of the ribbons or knots tied in ropes to support the act of "fathoming" how deep the sea is. Ang's bangles however, reference Chinese traditions of recording family heritage in bracelets and carry relief-images of different zodiac signs related to their family – suggesting something counter to reductive, standardised measurement: an ancestral depth. The rope, dyed maroon, supports the connection to blood, bodies and could symbolise an umbilical cord, and ancestral matrilineages. Moon blocks (筊杯) become an item representative of Ang's grandmother, practising a ritual of throwing them to ask "yes" or "no" questions to a divine source – guidance when the corporeal world fails to give answers. With *Unravelled Gathering*, the rope becomes a carrier of other places, histories and people – an alternative navigation tool. In Ang's hands, it is less a physical restraining device, and more of a connecting tool.

In Chinese mythology, the blacksmith is believed to be an agent of diffusion of mythology, rites and metallurgical

mysteries, while in traditional Chinese medicine, the reflex points of the feet are believed to directly relate to other bodily organs and systems. The bronze feet formed at the base of the rope sculpture hold moments of strain, as weight is pushed and pulled across the body, alluding to action, movement and moments. Together with the roof tiling of the bangles, they speak of the Samsui women. These were women who migrated to Singapore from China between the 1920s and 1940s to earn money for family back home. Most of these women ended up as labourers in the construction industries, becoming iconic in their red headgear, black tunics and feet, bare except for simple sandals. The Samsui women became synonymous with gruelling work, poor wages and challenging living conditions. In the context of their labour, the rope signifies the many hardships they would endure, including the ropes hung from rods to carry buckets full of debris, bricks and mortar.

When these migrant women arrived in Singapore they would have to seek an agent called a *sui hak* ("water guest"), a reminder of their connection to the sea and the distance from their home.

As suggested by the title, *Unravelled Gathering* seems to rest between something falling apart and coming together. Ang has an interest in knots for this very reason – in their ability to hold and be undone. (In their preparation they referenced artist and curator Anthony Huberman who said, "... tying knots in different places along a length of string is something that can be altered, updated, and adjusted, so as to better handle changing circumstances. In that sense, what happens between the knots is life!") With this the work enables a communion with those forced to work and live contingently. A sign of work, a lifeline, a measurement of ancestral depth – it is in a sense a tenuous coming together. Where it is a privilege of power to ascribe certainties, this is the realm of repressed hopes, bodies and histories.



*Unravelled Gathering*, 2024. Frelands Foundation Mimosa House. Photo: Andy Stagg

## The Sea, the Heat, the Rope and the Fingers Pulling the Thread

Kandace Siobhan Walker, 2023

We begin the conversation by discussing rope. Alaya Ang is teaching themselves how to make their own rope, learning to twist the cordage into structures that will hold together.<sup>1</sup> There are leaves of printed paper and books on her desk and among these, Emily Berry's *Unexhausted Time* (2022): "under the river like pebbles or like the lives / of unseen creatures that keep us alive ..."

She explains the significance of the oysters that figure in their references and notes, describing strings of oyster shells suspended in hatcheries as "instruments". The soundscape

<sup>1</sup> Alaya Ang's studio at the Edinburgh College of Art overlooks low rooftops against a uniformly white sheet of cloud. Reference images taped to the wall facing their desk present a variety of ropes, oysters strung up in cages in the sea and rope sculptures suspended from ceilings or hanging from freestanding supports in familiarly impassive gallery settings. Beneath this careful arrangement lies a pair of heavy-looking ropes piled on the floor. They are made of two colours, a natural shade of light brown intertwined with dyed cords – one red, the other blue.

underpinning the performance they are working on will feature field recordings evoking waves and seed shakers and oyster farm gabions,<sup>2</sup> using the "percussive elements" of natural materials to create a brief, transient world.

They describe personal histories like a subgenre of science fiction, as much creation as recollection, and emphasise the necessity of simulating a distinct atmosphere in which to stage their performance. It will need to be hot, they explain, and humid.<sup>3</sup>

We talk about work, about the body as the language of labour.<sup>4</sup>

Alaya raises up a wax casting of their left foot, captured in a tip-toe pose. The cast cuts off halfway along the plantar fascia. The viscerally sharp angle at which the ball of the wax cast meets its near-perpendicular arch solidifies the strain and pull of muscle, tendon, skin.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Rendering recognisable objects in materials to which they do not "belong", appears, to me, to be an inherently speculative act. Experiences rendered not as they are, but as the thing really feels. Or something close.

<sup>3</sup> An environment presents a somatosensory syntax, an equally suggestive sensory medium for the recreation or simulation of the past. In this way, Alaya's performance will be a kind of citation of an experience, like a quotation read aloud.

<sup>4</sup> A body's movement as the language of experience, experience as the language of empathy.

<sup>5</sup> Yet the wax still appears so pliant that I half expected it to move, to relax and flatten out. The endlessness of the moment to which the cast refers – the moment when her foot was set in the mould – is emphasised by the way the light hits the deep green wax, giving the wrinkles and folds in the skin the appearance of waves, or of a river crystallised by a deep and sudden freeze.



*Unravelled Gathering* [detail], 2024. Frelands Foundation Mimosa House. Photo: Andy Stagg

In the notes Alaya shares with me, they ask, "how to create a material vocabulary for effort, heaviness, pull and friction?" In performance, the airy staccato of their breath will be effort's main lexicon: "the sounds of exertion – inhaling and exhaling".

*We all begin life because someone once breathed for us. (Philip, 2018)*

Her family are tailors,<sup>6</sup> and this is why they want to cast the body parts of other people, especially women. Women who, like their occupations, are frequently made invisible, even as the material evidence of their lives and work is shipped around the world. When cast, these disembodied feet and hands might create a way to understand their subjects' lives that privileges the primacy of their lived experiences.<sup>7</sup>

*By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breadth of the*

<sup>6</sup> Imagine the environment of a tailor's workshop, with its heat and humidity: the air filled with dust motes, the sewing machines' drills, the arched feet over the treadles, the hunched backs and surrounded by reams of fabric tucked into deep nooks. This work, as a feature and consequence of the geopolitical and socioeconomic hierarchies that give imperialism its structure, is routinely hidden away from the groups of people for whose benefit that labour is often undertaken.

<sup>7</sup> To look past a person's productive capacity, past the thread weaving along a hemline: at the fingers pinched just below the needle's eye, at the knuckles, the wrists, the arms held still, at the expression of concentration or distraction or boredom.

*disremembered and unaccounted for, but  
wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing  
too quickly. Just weather. (Gladman, 2022)*

We talk about being alive as a state of interconnectedness,<sup>8</sup> about science fiction and quantum physics. Will a conversation about intimacy feel intimate? Will the recreation, the performance, of memory become itself, "be like wind blowing thought back onto itself, behind itself so that thought moves by leaning forward?"<sup>4</sup>

Alaya wants to make a language out of sound and heat and movement and, I think, witness. Before we leave, they show me a picture of a grey stone, studded with multicoloured chunks of plastic. Plastiglomerate rocks are composites, mixtures of sediment and natural debris held together by plastic: an accumulation of fragments.<sup>9</sup> The colours interweaving, the cords coiling, like rope.

Kandace Siobhan Walker is a writer and artist.

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<sup>8</sup>She shows me a picture on their computer, of mangrove trees in a swamp. When the water falls at low tide, the nakedness of the mangroves' roots reveals a system of relationships woven together like lace. It is clear that this is a forest: each tree belongs to all the others.

<sup>9</sup>She has heard the clatter of oyster shells, tilted the dried-out husks of seed pods and beaten the stretched skin of a drum. They want to hear these sounds again. They want to listen to the simulated ocean with other people, they want to hear people hearing them breathe – to understand what we struggle to talk about, the way we take everything into ourselves and become it.



*Saturation: a semblance of breath (work in progress). Photo: Najma Abukar*

## Biography

Alaya Ang 洪瑩瑩 is a Singaporean artist working in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland. They graduated from The Glasgow School of Art, Sculpture and Environmental Art, in 2016.

Alaya's practice utilises installation, performance and artistic processes to uncover the intimacies and imprints of history and counternarratives, often in relation to communal and individual identities, labour and diaspora. Their work has been presented at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, 2021; New Contemporaries, Royal Scottish Academy, 2017; blipblipblip, Leeds, 2017.

Since 2022, Alaya has led Confluence, a research and residency programme, with The Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow and LE18 Marrakech for artists and cultural practitioners to engage in long-term exploration on the politics and poetics of water. They were curator at The Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow from 2021 to 2023 and committee member at Transmission Gallery, Glasgow from 2018 to 2020.

## Talbot Rice Residents

Talbot Rice Residents is a two-year programme within the unique context of Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art and the University of Edinburgh.

A part of the Frelands Artist Programme, Talbot Rice Residents provides time and support for emerging, or re-emerging artists based anywhere in Scotland. It is supported by Edinburgh College of Art, where the Residents have a studio and access to facilities. Residents also receive year-round curatorial and technical support from the Talbot Rice team, as well as access to workshops, libraries and collections, and contact with the vast academic community within the University of Edinburgh. In addition to an annual artist fee, Residents receive an individual budget for production and travel, and meet at key points in the programme for masterclasses and workshops delivered by invited guests. The programme also includes national and international research trips, new commissioned writing and culminates with exhibitions in Edinburgh and London.

## Freelands Artist Programme

The Freelands Artist Programme is a landmark initiative to support emerging artists across the UK launched in 2018 by Freelands Foundation. The programme nurtures emerging artists' practices by fostering long-term relationships and collaborations with arts organisations and bolstering regional arts ecosystems.

In its first five-year phase, 80 artists have undertaken the programme across four partner organisations – g39, Cardiff, PS<sup>2</sup>, Belfast, Site Gallery, Sheffield and Talbot Rice Gallery.

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