

## **Anthony Pelchen: Kuang Road Prayer**

Kuang Road starts at the right-hand turn off the road from Sungai Buloh to Kuala Selangor on the coast of Selangor. There is a high school on the left just before the turn-off. This part of Kuala Lumpur is on the northern outskirts of what is now a huge city. Kuang Road runs north say 15 kilometres and joins together kampong after kampong as urbanisation catches up and fills in gaps.

Living at Rimbun Dahan—where Anthony Pelchen was an artist resident in 2010—I couldn't help but remember my own childhood on the urban fringe of a new city, growing up on its outer edges and literally watching it change shape. Maybe it was the number of kids and new families in the area, or seeing the same jostle of schoolchildren in uniforms or the familiar 4 o'clock picking-up-kids traffic crush. For me, 'call to prayer on Fridays' is similar to 'rush to mass on Sundays'. Kuang Road might almost have been on the south-western edge of Sydney at some time.

While Anthony Pelchen was at Rimbun Dahan there was a terrible accident out the front. Nowadays Kuang Road easily clogs with traffic, especially, lately, monster-sized construction trucks doing rat-runs from the quarry close by. Sure enough, a gravel truck collided with a thirteen-year-old boy on his motorbike and the boy was killed. The bike riders are crazy but that's no explanation.

Anthony Pelchen's works often evoke a kind of 'threshold' thinking—suggesting that we are always in a place before another place. Not just in the way that the works refer to particular locations (because Pelchen travels so much these experiences accumulate in the work) but in the metaphysical sense. Even where his work moves between different media such as, in this exhibition, between drawing, video, photography and sculpture, the threshold he suggests is not a literal site. Pelchen's artworks vie in their evocation of honour (or justice) and love and sadness and purpose, only ever though reaching the edge of a waking thought.

In recent years Pelchen has lived mostly in relative quiet in open country near Horsham. Talking to me about the exhibition, Horsham Regional Art Gallery curator Alison Eggleton suggested that his story is in part a survival narrative, something she associates with generations on the Wimmera.

Pelchen has titled his new video *Vectis*. I Googled the word, and found a site in country west of Horsham. I have an impression that the video is somehow from this place or filmed at this place, although there is nothing to suggest a specific site, just the distant sound of a jet flying high overhead in the night and an owl calling.

A belief that animals in some way allow passage or are common souls is not unusual. At the old Hindu shrine, Batu Caves, in Kuala Lumpur I watched an old man pinch off a tuft of fur from a small dead animal—a wild animal like a small forest deer. It was an offering of a sort or a protection, something involving the priests. The old man then turned around to me and smiled proudly; he was very old and his family was watching.

Describing his reweaving of the body bag for the floor installation at Horsham—the same type of body bag the Malaysian police would have used after the Kuang Road accident—Pelchen recalled how he had been transported back to the trauma of its first making in 2010. He talked about being '...periodically drawn back to the weaving process and how the body contradiction always slaps me in the face ... it calms the breath but makes the neck and back ache ... The routine, ordering and repairing is kind of soothing though. In its initial making [I was thinking] of the mother of the thirteen-year-old dead boy and how routine helps you to simply get on'.

The most recent work in this exhibition, the large 140 x 220 cm charcoal drawing, is in some ways a coalescence or abstraction of the different elements introduced in the accompanying works. Pelchen

says it began as a drawing of the motorcycle wreckage along with an owl image. He would have used as a beginning point the same images of the wreckage he has documented in the photographs, where he has propped the wreck up against a wall and used maroon cloth as a backdrop to frame the remains of the broken machine. We barely see the owl in the finished drawing.

There is another element to the drawing. This is its affect as an accumulation of actions. As a whole this work is an intense concentration of temporal accumulations, time and place, imagining and thinking. So much so it's confusing, but in a good way. It is a beautiful work. I can't quite work out what I am seeing, whether I am looking at something with my feet on the ground. Or perhaps I am looking down at some place from very high above.

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Melbourne, 2013