

The following essay:

Cattoni, V 2005 "Kedai Kebaya", (exh.cat.) **Kedai Kebaya**, Art Space Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

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## **Kedai Kebaya**

**Kedai Kebaya** is a new development of a recent cross-cultural project previously undertaken in Indonesia and Australia. That project, *Through the Kebaya*, was developed around an extensive series of workshops and exhibitions in Indonesia - Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Semarang and Bali. *Through the Kebaya* utilised the kebaya as a 'doorway' through which to examine definitions of femininity in relation to social and cultural change in particular parts of Indonesia, specifically Java and Bali. A comprehensive thesis of the same title resulted from this body of this work.

The current show – **Kedai Kebaya** – being presented at Art Space Gallery expands upon the recent Indonesia/Australia project, widening the scope of my enquiry to examine the functions and meanings of the kebaya as they exist today within particular settings in Malaysia.

Recent focus on the kebaya in Malaysia is reflected in a number of exhibitions held in Kuala Lumpur. The National Gallery hosted *Baju + Sarung: Pemakaian Satu Bangsa /Dressing a Nation* in 2002 and *A Showcase of Nyonya Kebayas from the Collection of Datin Seri Endon* in 2003, with Petronas Gallery presenting *Nyonya Kebaya: A Living Art* earlier this year. The accompanying publications to these exhibitions, a catalogue<sup>1</sup> by the same title in the first, a book - *The Nyonya Kebaya*<sup>2</sup> and its later Singaporean edition<sup>3</sup> by the late Datin Seri Endon Mahmood in the second, and the Petronas catalogue *Nyonya Kebaya: A Living Art*<sup>4</sup> have presented the kebaya as an ethnographic cultural artefact and/or fashion item. While the former has presented the kebaya cross-culturally as well as historically, including both 'Malay' and 'Nyonya' variations, the other publications weigh heavily in favour of the 'Nyonya' kebaya. Indeed one would be mistaken for presuming that the nyonya kebaya is the most dominant form judging by what is currently being sold in retail outlets around the city. On the street however, the usually unadorned long kebaya – kebaya panjang/labuh - worn interchangeably with baju kurung, is the most visible. This is either as work uniform or a Friday choice of work attire for urban KL women.

In Indonesia the kebaya's functions remain largely unchanged, and generally relegated to specific usage such as ceremonial dress for Balinese, daily wear for many elderly rural and urban poor, and formal attire for special occasions. There is a deeply felt sense, even for many younger and especially urban women who rarely if ever wear it, that the kebaya is a 'benang merah' connecting them to culture and tradition. By comparison, within central Kuala Lumpur, the kebaya today appears to be mostly limited to being worn as a consciously chosen fashion item, or, as mentioned above, interchangeable with the baju kurung blouse.

What are the defining features that distinguish baju kurung from kebaya in Malaysia? Is it always possible to distinguish? Is it important to do so given both are considered national dress? When does the kebaya represent culture and when 'nation' [nationality]? What does the nyonya kebaya symbolise today? And when kebaya is worn with tudong, what is it then displaying? A woman from West Java wearing 'jilbab'<sup>5</sup> with kebaya explains to me that while her headscarf identifies her religious orientation, the kebaya ties her to her cultural roots<sup>6</sup>, signifying a negotiation between cultural identity and religious observation. What kinds of daily negotiations are occurring when women in Malaysia choose to wear kebaya in various combinations including kebaya with tudong, kebaya with jeans, with kain sarong? When we see women in KL wearing kebaya baju kurung style, are we witnessing a lingering desire to

maintain a link to [an ideal of] 'culture'? One may also ask, to which 'culture'? Or is it merely a fashion choice? What underlies the apparent kebaya 'revival' evident in KL and what can it reveal about changing – cultural and multi-cultural - identities in relation to definitions of 'femininity'?

The project, *Kedai Kebaya*, in raising such queries, is intended to orientate the viewer, participant, reader, beyond questions of form or correct classification in relation to the kebaya, towards a socio-cultural space where the kebaya can operate as a tool – a 'doorway' - to uncover the layers of meaning that the garment itself carries: those embedded within it – personal meaning, memory and sentiment - and those planted onto it – socio-cultural-political.

The interactive video workshop is the starting point and means for this enquiry. During the workshop individuals are invited to interact with the kebaya, verbally and gesturally, exploring their perceptions of the garment while they wear it. Video acts as an intermediary tool between the wearer and the kebaya, recording and reconstructing. The resulting 'video performance' from the workshop feeds directly into the exhibition, situating the kebaya-wearer actively within the artwork as both performer and audience. The workshop cum video-performance cum artwork provides a real experience of how the 'art' in this exhibition is generated and enhances the possibility of public 'ownership' of the work. Implicit in this is the notion that the public has the power to move in and across the different spaces of active participation and passive audience. Furthermore, the use of new media is utilised in a sympathetic and personally interactive way that can hopefully bring audience closer to the work.

*Kedai Kebaya* diverges somewhat from former presentations of this generative project, taking on a more experimental tone in targeting audience. The City Square shopping complex is somewhat unique in the nature of its retail outlets. It has a noticeably high number of art galleries located within it, ten in fact. In addition, it, together with adjacent Plaza Ampang and Ampang Park across the road, appear to have a higher concentration of boutiques selling kebaya than any other shopping malls that I have visited in KL. What would happen if the gallery were to be turned into a boutique? Would it be possible to lure visitors, especially the non-art public, into a space that looked like a boutique, but that in fact was a video installation? This play on the different nature of boutique and gallery, and the role of the 'participant' within these different contexts, functions as another strategy through which to work beyond the boundaries of conventional 'static' exhibition space and 'active' performative space.

Video-performance works from Indonesia are included in the installation, enhancing the cross-cultural nature of the work both conceptually and historically. Being part of national costume in both Malaysia and Indonesia, the kebaya becomes a point of convergence through which to examine definitions of 'femininity' in relation to cultural and social change in both places. The project may reveal as much about Malaysian perceptions of Indonesia [women, gender categories, fashion there] as it does about current conditions within Malaysia.

A component of the project from Darwin, Australia<sup>7</sup> is also included, expanding the cross-cultural dialogue. Whilst the kebaya has no specific cultural links to Australia, in northern Australia where the project was undertaken, historical links to Indonesia exist, dating back prior to European colonisation. Within the more contemporary context of this project, many inhabitants of Darwin, through frequent visits to Indonesia, mostly Bali, are able to draw upon their own personal experiences in the video workshop to reflect upon their presumptions in relation to aspects of Indonesia [women, gender, dress codes, identity].

**Kedai Kebaya** is not intended to promote the kebaya, nor to offer my perspective on kebaya. The kebaya, and the project rather, can operate as a kind of nexus that generates participatory cross-cultural dialogue stimulating us to re-think the limits of our own mindsets in relation to cultural and social constructs. The effectiveness of this work, as put by Baharuddin<sup>8</sup>, will depend upon relationships between people – the capacity for all participating in the project to speak, to listen, to reflect... and to play.

Victoria Cattoni  
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<sup>1</sup> *Baju + Sarung: Pemakaian Satu Bangsa/Dressing A Nation*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2002, Kuala Lumpur

<sup>2</sup> Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, 2002 *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Showcase of Nyonya Kebayas from the Collection of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood*, The Writer's Publishing House, Kuala Lumpur

<sup>3</sup> Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, 2002, *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume*, Periplus, Singapore

<sup>4</sup> Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, 2005, *Nyonya Kebaya: A Living Art*, Yayasan Budi Penyayang, Kuala Lumpur

<sup>5</sup> Bahasa Indonesia for 'tudong'

<sup>6</sup> Cattoni, V 2004, *Through the Kebaya, A Cross-cultural Project: Indonesia and Australia*, Master of Visual Arts Thesis, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia, p.26

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the work component within Australia please refer to the following:

Hujatnikajennong, A 2003, "Menyingkap Selubung Makna 'Kebaya'", in *Membaca Kebaya: Reading the Kebaya*, (exh.cat.), Victoria Cattoni, Denpasar

Cattoni, V 2004, "Tamasya Kebaya" (Chapter 5), in *Through the Kebaya*

Murti, K 2002, *Tamasya Kebaya*, (exh.cat.), Victoria Cattoni, Darwin

<sup>8</sup> Baharuddin, M N 2005, "Contemporary Art...Art for Society", in *Sentap*, Issue 1 Jul-Oct, pp. 6-7