

The background of the entire page is a large, detailed artwork titled 'Tea Bag Batik Project'. It features a complex, layered composition. On the left and top, there are various pieces of aged, stained, and torn paper in shades of brown, tan, and yellow, some with faint floral or leaf patterns. On the right side, there is a vertical strip of batik fabric with a bold, black and white swirling pattern, accented with small patches of blue and red. The overall texture is rough and organic, reflecting the 'waste material' theme.

2023

Tea Bag Batik Project: Unveiling the Beauty of Waste Material

THETIS BLACKER AWARD 2023

PREPARED BY UMMI JUNID

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am deeply grateful for the incredible opportunity to work on the Thetis Blacker project and bring 'Kain Sapra' to life using waste tea bags. This journey has been a remarkable experience, and I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who has played a significant role in making this project a reality.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Syahida Mat Hussin for her invaluable collaboration. Her expertise in traditional batik techniques and natural dyes has been instrumental in elevating the project to new heights. Working together has been an enriching and inspiring experience, and I am thankful for her unwavering support throughout the creative process.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to Encik Shiham Mohd Nor and Puan Mardiyana Ismail, the talented batik makers from Bachok, Kelantan. Their enthusiasm and openness to embracing the use of tea bags in batik-making made this project possible. Their artistic vision and craftsmanship added a unique touch to the batik patterns, and I am truly grateful for their creative contributions.

To my beloved family and friends, thank you for being my pillars of encouragement and support throughout this artistic journey. Your belief in my work and your constant encouragement have been the driving force behind my efforts. Your presence has given me the strength to overcome challenges and pursue my passion for art and sustainability.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to the Thetis Blacker Award committee for recognizing and honouring this project. This prestigious award is a testament to the power of creativity and sustainable practices in the world of art.

In conclusion, I am humbled and thankful to everyone who has contributed to this project's success. Your support and collaboration have made '*Kain Sapra*' a truly special and meaningful endeavour. Together, we have demonstrated the transformative potential of art and the importance of sustainability in our artistic pursuits.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

With utmost appreciation,
Ummi Junid

Introduction:

Batik, with its mesmerizing patterns and rich colours, has been an age-old art form cherished by art enthusiasts worldwide. Seeking to push the boundaries of this traditional craft, a distinctive project emerged in the United Kingdom, where a novel idea was born - creating batik-inspired prints using an unconventional material: tea bags.

Inspired by the Waste Age Exhibition in London during early 2022, the project took shape with the aim of questioning our responsibility as artists in giving waste a second life. Armed with the vision of transforming everyday waste materials into meaningful art, I embarked on this artistic journey.

Drawing inspiration from traditional Malaysian batik motifs, I explored the possibilities of printing batik-like patterns using a series of natural dye swatches on discarded tea bags. The endeavour was both an artistic exploration and a sustainable statement, showcasing how waste materials could be reborn as creative expressions.

Through this project, I delved into the uncharted territory of incorporating waste into the realm of art, encouraging the audience to reflect on their environmental footprint and rethink the potential of overlooked materials. By infusing tea bags with vibrant hues and intricate designs, the project conveyed a powerful message of upcycling and resourcefulness in the artistic process.



Collecting the tea bags became the crucial first step in this venture. Over the course of 2-3 weeks, tea bags were amassed from the local community from the UK and my own tea-drinking. Fuelled by a passion for tea, the collection expanded, welcoming a wide array of tea bag materials into the project. As the collection evolved, it became apparent that tea bags are available in diverse forms and compositions. Some exuded a plastic-like texture, while others felt more akin to paper. The tea type also played a role in the material's properties, with black tea yielding a rich and intense hue, a nod to the English tea-drinking tradition of adding milk. The project outcome was inevitably influenced by the presence of microplastics within the tea bag fibres. With almost 700 tea bags gathered from different brands, the inherent inclusion of microplastics became an important consideration. This artistic exploration sought to shed light on the environmental impact of our daily habits, urging reflection on the consumption and disposal of everyday items.

The weather presented a unique challenge. A scorching heatwave had settled over the region, with no rainfall for nearly three weeks. Consequently, plans had to be adjusted, and a visit to Kota Bharu, Kelantan, was arranged to collaborate with Syahida Mat Hussin, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Malaysia Kelantan specializing in natural dye making.



Bachok, Kelantan

The collaboration with Syahida brought together expertise in traditional batik techniques and the art of natural dyes. She is a Kelantanese and has been living in Bachok for more than 5 years. She did encounter a lot of batik makers mainly around Tumpat and Bachok area, hence it really gives us an advantage for us to go and speak straight to the batik maker and introduced them to the ideas behind our project. Syahida's research background proved invaluable, adding depth and authenticity to the project. Together, Syahida and I together embarked on a shared mission to explore the potential of

making batik using tea bag, merging tradition and innovation, and shining a light on sustainability.



Preparation of the Tea Bag

During the first two days kickstart of the project, Syahida and I meticulously planned our workflow to ensure efficient progress. The preparation work had already begun before my arrival in Kelantan, as I had taken the initiative to prepare the tea bags. This thoughtful preparation saved us valuable time, allowing us to dive into the batik stamping and colouring process promptly. In preparing the tea bags for the project, firstly, I laid out flat each tea bag and used cutter to unfold them open and flat. After ensuring that the tea bags were immaculately cleaned and thoughtfully organized by colour, the next step involved connecting them to form square shapes, each measuring around 10cm by 10cm. To achieve the desired effect, it took the use of at least 700 tea bags to create 20 of these large square formats. To achieve this, I used tapioca paste as an adhesive. Tapioca paste, it turns out, was an excellent choice for this purpose. It not only securely bonded the tea bags but also added strength to the material. Once the paste dried, it made the tea bags easier to handle, ensuring they remained in place and formed a cohesive part of the overall design.

The idea to use tapioca paste came to me through a nostalgic memory from my primary school years. I recalled a few friends bringing homemade tapioca paste to school for collage projects. We would use colourful rice paper and create patterns to form collage designs on drawing blocks. Drawing inspiration from this childhood experience, I realized that tapioca paste could serve as an effective bonding agent for the tea bags, allowing them to form a cohesive and resilient fabric.

As the unfolded, cleaned, flattened, and string-free tea bags are examined, a tapestry of enchanting colours and patterns comes to life. The tea stains manifest themselves in a myriad of captivating ways. Delicate light browns evoke a sense of warmth, while deeper, darker tones convey an air of mystery. Mixed berry colours infuse vibrancy and joy, while the turmeric stains add a touch of exotic allure. The resulting patterns are a testament to the artistry that lies within each tea bag.

The resulting tea-stained patterns, with their mesmerizing hues and intricate designs, capture the essence of each tea's unique pigmentation. Engaging in this artistic process fosters a deep appreciation for the beauty that can be found in the simplest of materials.

Introduction of a new material to the batik artisan



Syahida and I had a discussion to choose the main batik stamp maker for our project before heading to Kelantan. After careful consideration, we decided to collaborate with Encik Shiham bin Mohd Nor (Abe Ha) and Puan Mardiyana Ismail (Kak Ana), a talented husband-and-wife duo running a cottage industry batik workshop. Both in their 40s, they have been making and selling batik creations for about 15 years. Excited about the experimentation, Abe Ha and Kak Ana eagerly agreed to participate when approached by Syahida. Located behind their quaint little shop, Abe Ha and Kak Ana's workshop exudes creativity, adorned with at least four standing batik frames, showcasing their meticulous craftsmanship. Abe Ha primarily focuses on drafting and drawing the designs, while his wife takes over the colouring process, mainly on cotton fabric.



The heart of their work lies in the traditional technique of hand-drawn batik. With steady hands and keen attention to detail, they skilfully apply hot wax in intricate patterns onto the fabric using a traditional tool called a tjanting. This labour-intensive process requires precision, as each stroke contributes to the final design, resulting in unique motifs and narratives on the fabric. Aside from hand-drawn batik, they also embrace the use of bronze copper stamps dipped in hot wax to achieve specific designs. This approach allows them to explore different textures and add depth to their creations, showcasing their versatility as batik artisans. Working collaboratively, they infuse life into the fabric through their artistry.



The most exciting part of the project was the surprise element of using tea bags in batik-making, which Abe Ha and Kak Ana were completely unaware of initially. I was concerned that they might reject the idea once they found out about it. However, upon arriving at their batik workshop, we were warmly welcomed and given a tour. At that time, they were busy fulfilling a large order for 150 pieces of school batik uniforms to be sent to Kuala Lumpur. As a cottage industry, they hired daily workers from the neighbourhood, and with an additional staff member helping with the client's order, they could allocate 4-5 hours to our project.

In one corner of their studio, we found the batik stamp area. It was constructed with wooden planks and measured 1 meter wide to accommodate standard fabric width. This stamping area was set up only when there was an order from a client. The setup involved stretching cushion foam on the surface, covering it with fabric, and then making it slightly wet before adding a thin layer of transparent plastic on top. This preparation is a common and standard way of making the stamping area. The cushioned surface is essential to absorb the wax when stamping with the copper material, and it needs to be cold to allow the hot wax to dry quickly after

stamping. A large gas stove situated next to the stamping table was used to heat and melt the wax before the stamping process began.

The Stamping Process



The introduction of copper stamp canting as an innovative material in the batik production process has been a significant step in Malaysia. The choice of copper is attributed to its strength, heat resistance, and ease of shaping. The stamp canting is manufactured using welding and assembling techniques, possibly inspired by methods used in gold and silver jewellery making, as many canting stamp makers have backgrounds in these crafts. This fusion of knowledge and techniques from different trades has contributed to increased efficiency and creativity in the batik industry, resulting in the creation of unique and beautiful batik designs.

Initially, when the batik makers were presented with the tea bag material, they were taken aback and had some doubts about its suitability for stamping using copper stamps. They perceived the tea bags as thin and fragile and

were unsure if it would work well with the copper stamps. However, after spending some time feeling and exploring the tea bag material, they became more open to the idea and realized that it could be made to work. The surface of the combined tea bags is considered crisp and slightly tough due to the starch effect of tapioca paste on them. Unlike cloth or fabric, tea bags are not woven but made from pulp papers mixed with plastics. Initially, there were concerns that the surface of the tea bags might shrink or crumple during the stamping process. At least there were 20 pieces of 10x10cm square tea bags were used to form a picnic cloth, commonly referred to as a *Kain Sapra*. The cloth used to line or cover the dishes being served and is referred to as a "food cloth"



Traditional *Kain Sapra* made using batik stamp/cap

An Overview About *Sapra*

There are a variety of designs used in *Sapra*, and in Malaysia they are mainly batik in origin. Certainly, the project's goal was to capture the essence of traditional batik *Sapra*. To attain this, it is essential for the fabric to take on a square shape, providing ample space for at least four people to dine comfortably on each side of the square. This layout fosters a feeling of togetherness and camaraderie during communal meals, aligning perfectly with the project's intended cultural significance.



Tea bag patches of 10cm x 10cm square before being glued together to form bigger square



Working Together

The project embraced a collaborative approach where the batik makers were given complete artistic freedom to explore and create pattern stamping on the tea bag material. The primary objective was to closely emulate the traditional batik *Sapra* while introducing an innovative element with the use of tea bags. By entrusting the batik makers with this creative process, the project sought to maintain the authenticity and essence of the batik art form. The tea bags provided a novel twist, allowing the batik makers to tap into their expertise, experience, and artistic vision to craft distinctive and captivating designs. Throughout the project, the central focus remained on capturing the essence of the traditional batik *Sapra* in terms of layout, shape, and the sense of communal dining it embodies. The integration of tea bag materials brought modern experimentation while still honouring the cultural significance and aesthetics of batik *Sapra*, enriched by the authentic touch of the batik makers themselves.

This kind of collaboration between traditional artisans and innovative materials demonstrates the seamless integration between the maker's expertise and a new, unconventional material like tea bags. Despite being a novel material for them, tea bags, as a common and daily-used object, were transformed into a medium for artistic expression, forging a closer relationship between the makers and their materials. The project showcased how creativity and tradition can harmoniously come together, resulting in a remarkable fusion of the past and the present in the art of batik making. In the beginning, the batik makers felt uncertain about using the tea bag material for stamping. However, after a few attempts, they found their rhythm and the movement of swinging the copper stamp started to flow naturally. This flow indicated that the tools, materials, and the batik makers had formed a harmonious connection.

Abe Ha in particular, quickly found his flow while working on his second patch of tea bags. He mentioned that the key aspect to be mindful of was ensuring the evenness of each tea bag when they were patched together to create the larger cloth. Additionally, he noticed that some tea bags had poor absorption due to an excess of tapioca paste applied to their surfaces. This observation and adjustment process were crucial for the success of the project. As the batik makers continued their exploration, they became more adept at working with the tea bag material, learning how to achieve optimal stamping results and address any challenges that arose.



The collaboration between the batik maker and the tea bag material was a spontaneous success. Both parties recognized the potential of working with this innovative material, seeing it as a practical and beneficial addition to their craft. They expressed their enjoyment in exploring new media and expressed their hope for more innovative ideas integrating tea bags into their art.

As they continued with the project, the batik makers made a thoughtful note to themselves and their part-time workers: the next time they drink tea, they will keep the tea sachets aside. This simple act of preserving the tea bags showcases their commitment to sustainability and the realization that these everyday objects can be transformed into artistic mediums.

Moving on to the next phase of the project, Syahida and the artist will work together to apply natural colours to the tea bag. Turmeric, Sechang, and Iron water were chosen for this exploration. The existing tea stain on the surface already formed a delightful abstract appearance. However, by introducing a contrasting colour, the batik pattern is elevated, and the motifs are accentuated.



Turmeric dye and Sechang(Brazil Wood) Dye



Taking a closer look at the creation, one can appreciate the beautiful combination of the wax cracking effect and the flow of logwood dye absorbed between the tea bag fibres, creating a harmonious interplay between man-made art and the forces of nature. This subtle interrelation signifies the project's deeper message about coexisting with the environment and finding beauty in the simple, everyday materials around us.

Conclusion

As the Tea Bag Batik Project progressed, the humble tea bags were transformed into vibrant pieces of art. The batik wax technique, combined with the natural dyes extracted from plants, infused the tea bags with unique patterns and colours. Each piece became a testament to the transformative power of creativity and the ability to repurpose waste material into something beautiful. The project's overarching message goes beyond the realm of art. It serves as a reminder that creativity can play a pivotal role in tackling environmental challenges. By reimagining waste materials and exploring innovative techniques, we can inspire change and promote a more sustainable future. The Tea Bag Batik Project stands as a testament to the limitless possibilities of art and the immense potential for finding beauty in the most unexpected places. It encourages us to question our relationship with waste, and to seek creative solutions that can breathe new life into discarded materials. In a world where sustainability is an urgent priority, this project serves as a shining example of how art can be a powerful catalyst for change.



Left to right: Ummi Junid, Puan Mardiana Ismail, Encik Shiham Mohd Nor and Dr. Syahida Mat Hussin











TERIMA KASIH.
THANK YOU.