

From Driftwood to Action Project for Typhoon -about the Art of Rahic.Talif

Text / Yun Kang, Hsu

For over ten years, Rahic had been famous for making driftwood art. In recent years, however, he developed the ‘Action Project for Typhoon’ using slippers as the main medium. The project title that marks the turning point of his artistic life seems particularly keen in a moment like this, when the global climate deteriorates rapidly. From this title, one could understand it is closely related to the ocean and island. It not only continues and expands his long-term concern about ethnic culture, but also includes environmental and ecological issues.

For Rahic , the mediums he chooses are not ‘neutral’, but related to the Amis culture and his own experiences. Slippers and driftwood have something in common—they are both inconspicuous, treated as abandoned or useless materials that both appear in a large number after typhoon. However, those inconspicuous materials are collected and transformed by him to become powerful artistic languages depicting Amis’ unique perspective regarding nature/typhoon, while at the same time initiates the discussion about ethnic groups in Southern Islands.

Action Project for Typhoon—Purging and Connecting

Typhoon is the tropical cyclone in which the maximum sustained wind speed is up to 17.2 m/s. It originates in the Southern Sea and Northern Pacific Ocean area before moving towards sub-tropics. Rahic’s tribe is located in the big harbor at Fongbin Township in Hualien County, adherent to the outlet of Siouguluan River. It’s the main place in which typhoon landing Taiwan. He grew up by the sea, confronting it and typhoon every year with other tribe people. For most people, typhoon is regarded as a threat that brings with it great destruction; however, Amis doesn’t think that way. Typhoon may be horrifying, but it is also the power sustaining the tribe.

Whenever typhoon was coming, everyone got so excited, including my parents. My mother hoped buffalos, hogs, Reeves's Muntjacs or goats would be washed down from the mountain.

Everyone would go to the seashore. Fathers would go picking up large woods, for the houses were destroyed by the typhoon, while mothers would go searching for other stuff. Children would search for slippers, watermelons, pomelos, oranges... there were plenty of them; there were also many barely alive fishes around, also plenty of them.

These were luscious gifts for us.

In a time when poverty prevailed, children of the tribe couldn't afford a pair of slippers; they could only pick them up on the shore after the typhoon went away. For them, slippers were not only the symbol of civilization, but also gifts descent from heaven. One of his exhibitions held at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, entitled 'The Invasion after Disappearance', concretely presented the opposing forces carried by typhoon. The exhibition site was divided into two parts. One is the graveyard under the eye of a typhoon, showing the garbage-filled deserted land that had been swept over by a typhoon; the other was a round space where various kinds of colorful slippers were hanging from the ceiling, like fish groups under the sea, or the shore where fishes were put there to dry in the sun. At the top of this space was an ark made by driftwood, with dolls wearing Christmas hats sitting on it as a symbol of childhood gifts. Slippers were also decorated on the bamboo fence adhered to the wall, echoing the decoration often seen in the tribe houses in the past.



The destruction made by natural force and the joyfulness of harvest both exist in the power of typhoon. However, the Amis people interpret typhoon not only at the simple level of material gaining, but proceed deeper to the level of spirit, in which their attitude towards life is demonstrated:

Every year when the typhoon comes, it would purge all precipitates and sweeps the weeds stocked in the riverbed away once for all--only so new life can emerge. Also on the mountains, since badly grew weeds would engulf the trees and the trees would die, typhoon could wash or blow them away once for all, too. More importantly, for us, typhoon would give human beings a brand new start and wash away the filth in our bodies. Even something bad in the mind would be swept way by typhoon. Burdens on people's mind and soul for the past year would also be cleaned by typhoon's sweeping power.

While people often view typhoon as natural disaster, the Amis people don't think in such negative way. For the latter, typhoon is nature's normal cycle. The powerful wind and rain it carries are not only physical phenomenon that rearranges the order of outside world, but also a cleaning process for human mind and soul. This shows the

Amis people's view toward the universe—they respect nature and endeavor to exist in harmony with it. At a time like this, when human beings exploit the resources and cause the counterattack from nature, this world view is definitely worth pondering.

The Action Project for Typhoon used a large number of slippers. The work 'Invasion after Disappearance' (2010) collected thousands of slippers. They came from Taiwan, Philippine and Indonesia. The arrival of typhoon always made young Rahic wondered how it's like on the other side of the sea. Indonesia and Philippine are not just the origins of typhoons, inhabitants there also belong to the Southern Island language system. Rahic purposely went to the residences of local ethnic minorities, and when he was there, he realized these places were as poor as the tribe he grew up in. Moreover, their languages are also similar to each other. About 40 percent of the way they depict body, animal and numbers are the same.

He spent one month in the residences of ethnic minorities in Indonesia and Philippine. He had never been there before but felt a unique sense of familiarity nonetheless. However, why slippers become the key element in his creation? Several key factors are there. Slipper is the key item in people's daily lives in these areas. Furthermore, it's the product of modern life that marks a sense of time. All these factors make Action Project for Typhoon not just a discussion about tradition or going back to the past, but a reflection on the current situation of people, including the ethnic minorities among them, in the Southern Islands, that they are still in poverty, in a socially peripheral position. These slippers are not new, but used, abandoned, drifting to the seashore, broken, without owners, nor in a pair. It could be said that each slipper has its own drifting history; thousands of slippers then have thousands of different histories in which their origins are not traceable. It's because these slippers all carry their own memories and smells that Rahic tirelessly collects them for a very long time. This allows him to demonstrate with the drifting of these slippers the migrating experiences of people of the Southern Islands—drifting endlessly with the pain that they could never find their roots, nor knowing where is the other half of them. The trip to South East Asia is also the journey for the artist to search his own self.



Slippers, driftwoods, and bamboos picked up on the seashore were main mediums to make artworks in this exhibition. Fluid lines were combined with the slippers to

create the vigorous energy of the ocean. In the videos, a new perspective to interpret typhoon and form conversation with it was demonstrated. The idea is that, going through 'typhoon' is the experience giving people a new start, as well as a chance of rethinking. By the invasion of typhoon, the audiences are invited to rethink what it means by their 'own culture', to feel in person the ideas conveyed to them.

Whether it is making Action Project for Typhoon or driftwood artworks, long time physical laboring is the necessary process for Rahic to obtain the mediums. From picking up light-weight slippers to carry woods weight about 100 kilograms, he always needs to experience the process in person to really form his creative idea for the artwork. Looking back to the origin of the Action Project for Typhoon, it's when, on the seashore of Lakayan in the west part of Philippine, Rahic subconsciously bent down to pick up a slipper. This movement reminded him of the same experience in his childhood. The emergence of this piece of memory linked the past and present of these two locations together. These movements that emphasize the importance of 'doing it with your own body' are telling him that he needs to listen to his own inner voice, to search for artistic expression that is his original creation.

Looking back to Rahic's creative life, for over ten years since the early 1990s, the issue of tribal culture has always been the theme of his driftwood artworks, by which he reflects in depth the pain he felt for the drastic changes of tribal life and the rupture of traditional culture caused by modernization experiences. Over the past 100 years, aboriginal tribes that had been living in Taiwan for over one thousand years went through the ruling of Japanese colonial government and KMT regime, as well as the intervention of religions from the West, which forcefully changed the political and religious system of the tribe. Capitalism resulted in the change of tribal economic, plus the Han Chinese society purposely separate and distort the image of aboriginal people, etc. These factors all strongly influenced the formation of aboriginal people's identity—they are afraid to admit who they are.

Due to the experience of modernization and colonization, a prevailing sense of lost and unfamiliarity towards traditional culture is the common experience felt by many non-western aboriginal tribes. After leaving tribe for thirty years, it's not until the age of 30 did Rahic return there, and he deeply felt the rupture and loss of traditions. In a matriarchal society like Amis, making daily life tools such as pottery was the skill each woman should learn to master; driftwoods were needed to provide heat and build the house, while all eight classes of the young men were responsible for building traditional houses. These all belong to the traditional culture of Amis. When Rahic went back to the tribe, however, the only things he could find were broken pottery pieces and ruined buildings.

Therefore, it's very meaningful for Rahic to choose pottery and driftwoods as the mediums for his artistic creation. His artworks always imply deep concerns about how to revive tribal consciousness. For example, in the artwork entitled 'Square and Round' (2000) made from Argil, he arranged utensils, accessories, and millet into an array to symbolize the idea of how a tribe could exist and sustain; the footprints in the work 'Return-to-Zero' (2000) implies the idea of returning to and re-step on the land/soil.



In Taiwan, Rahic is the pioneer in creating artwork with driftwood. Compared to potteries, he makes more driftwood art. However, driftwood is not the easy way out for him. To understand Rahic's artwork, besides looking at the finished work, one must also understand why he chose driftwood in the first place. Most driftwoods are broken branches and trunks swept down by typhoon. They will flow down the river and suffer numerous impacts in natural environment while they are drifting. Woods with lower quality would crash during the process, so the woods eventually drift to the seashore may seem already dead, but it's unlikely so—they are the selected ones that gone through the test of nature; they are woods with tenacity.

Through the test of nature, Rahic saw the essence of driftwood. He matched it with the experiences of the tribe, and further taking this as the theme of his artistic creation. Several aspects were explored in his driftwood artworks. For instance, to commemorate the chieftain, the work named 'The one who stands' was made to commemorate the late chieftain Lekal Makor; the 'Ending and Beginning' series that included artworks such as 'Green Beans and One that Giving Birth' (1997) attempt to symbolize with the curve on the pottery jar the role females play—as the one that giving birth to life. In artworks like 'The Mountain of Spirit' (1998), 'Worshiping the Sea' (2000) and 'The Dance of Standing' (2005), the spirit of the tribe and the power of dance and singing in the traditional rituals are sophisticatedly expressed. Here, those huge driftwoods were no longer used for daily life purpose but were transformed into artworks that were meaningful in a highly ritual way. More importantly, there were no aboriginal tattoo or stereotype form in them, which is consistent with what Rahic insisted since he began these creation, that there will be 'no given aboriginal symbol' in his artworks.



In 2007, Rahic held a solo exhibition entitled ‘Litheness of Space and Speed of Time—Ponal (incomplete)’ at the Performance/Exhibition Hall of Eslite (Xin-Yi Branch). In this special exhibition, many of his driftwood artworks were very different from those he made in the past. Not only were the sizes a lot smaller, but the structures were no longer solid and standing upright—they were lithe with soft lines, some of them could even be hung up with a string. These artworks contained an agile sense of rhythm, no longer loaded with a rigorous sense of commitment. From this obvious change, one can see Rahic is exploring his artworks on a deeper level.

Back to the theme of the 2007 exhibition, ‘Ponal’. If translated into Chinese, the word means ‘incomplete’, which is usually interpreted as a negative word, similar to ‘deformed’, ‘residual’, ‘broken’, etc. But people of Amis don’t think this way. According to Rahic, ‘Ponal’ means precipitates, that is, the microorganisms. In fact, some microorganisms could be good, such as the moss. While some may think it’s bad, that it’s where the weeds grow, yet as long as the typhoon comes, flushing it with large amount of water, new life would thrive. Therefore, in the thoughts of Amis, the idea of ‘Ponal’ is a force that may seem weak but in fact full of life. As a result, though in the past he would choose driftwoods that have complete form and thick trunk to work on, in the exhibition of ‘Ponal’, however, what he used were those he would not pick up in the past, those thinner and inconspicuous woods. But once they past the test of natural floods, they are just as good as those bigger ones. Therefore, thin yet tenacious driftwoods and small round ball symbolizing the movement of rolling and the purge of time became the main image of ‘Ponal’. The more inner side of driftwood was wonderfully demonstrated.



From the artworks made by Argil and driftwood to the Action Project for Typhoon, Rahic starts from his own live experiences, exploring the deeper meaning of his own culture with mediums no one really sets eyes on before. These unique thoughts open up new perspective and imagination. It reminds us of how we should be humble to the nature, while at the same time to appreciate the beauty and value of the co-existence of multiple cultures. Moreover, the Action Project for Typhoon further initiates the discussion in relate to the ocean and people from the Southern Islands, reminding us of how we should start to really look at this wide yet rarely explored area.

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