

INTERVIEW WITH PRATCHAYA PHINTHONG

Katie Guggenheim: There is so much to talk about with your exhibition. Shall we start with what and who is here in the space?

Pratchaya Phinthong: In terms of the physicality of the work... the fake skull... all we see now is really quite a small object but there is a rich content or context surrounding this particular object.

I think that the exhibition is going to perform, somehow, for the public. I see this show as an invitation to the audience to hear this unheard story. We are presenting another perspective of the story, bringing Kamfwa Chishala, the guide from the Lusaka Museum – where the fake skull comes from – here as well, and relocating the situation from Zambia to here, enabling a dialogue, presenting it to people in London – what will this be? As well as the audience, I'm also interested in what Kamfwa will experience personally as a guide who deals with this context everyday.

KG: Could you explain again about how you first came across the story of the fake skull in the Lusaka Museum?

PP: I heard a story from a young Thai filmmaker, Jakrawal Nilthamrong, in 2009. He told me about his memory of an object in the museum in Lusaka – the guide had told him that the object was a copy and the original had been taken to London a long time ago. So I told him that I was really interested in knowing more about this but he couldn't recall much more. He could only give me the names of the people I could contact – and when I called them, nobody picked up, so I thought, I'll go there and make it into a kind of project that's a challenge – it's a challenge to work in this way. So I made the trip to Africa.

At that time I was also doing a parallel project for documenta. It was about sleeping sickness – the fly that bites people and they die. Around that time I was invited to do the exhibition at Chisenhale and so this was always in the back of my mind as well.

KG: *On that trip to Zambia you made the film with the local filmmaker Musola Cathrine Kaseketi, Broken Hill Man, which will be screened at the ICA in London on 30 July, alongside Jakrawal Nilthamrong's film, Unreal Forest.*

PP: I tried to use Jakrawal's methodology and use the same tools to dive back into this vague situation. I had a budget to do a film and so I contacted Jakrawal's film crew, including Musola. She picked me up at the airport and she tried to see what the film could be. I wasn't the filmmaker so I gave everything to her and she decided that we should go to the museum the next morning. That was the first approach to the museum and we met Kamfwa there and he took us around and showed us this skull and revealed the history that this is exactly the one that I was thinking about and the one Jakrawal had remembered.

KG: *And so making the film was research for you – you were finding out about the subject through making the film?*

PP: When we started the film, I didn't make a script, I used the film to travel, to have an excuse to do things. Then later, Musola fell into the subject and then she wanted to do everything herself. The work is more about inviting people. After a while, they can believe in this story, be angry with it, love it. I'd like that people talk about this later.

KG: *And then you continued your research in London when you visited last year...*

PP: You and I went to the Natural History Museum in London together to see the real skull and we went through the history of the skull with

Professor Robert Kruszynski. What did you think, when the professor told you the story?

KG: *Well, it's interesting because you saw the fake skull first and then the real one and I saw the real skull first and now the fake skull from Lusaka has arrived here. They do look pretty similar.*

Meeting Professor Kruszynski and having him showing us the skull in his office at the museum was quite a theatrical experience. It was exactly how you would imagine, or how it would be in a film – full of cupboards and drawers with lots of skulls in old wooden boxes with hand-written labels. His office was so full of stacks of paper that we barely fitted in. It was quite amazing.

PP: The skull was kept there in this kind of box. It was really well kept and it looked exactly like the replica, the same colour. In order to send the skull you need a box so I thought we should copy the box from the photo. So I sent the photo to my friend who made it. It looks exactly like the one in the photo, somehow.

At the museum in London I took pictures and videos. The postcard, which you find here at the reception desk, is part of the work that can be taken away by visitors, is one of the pictures I took. It is a picture of the real skull in its box in the Natural History Museum and the information about the skull is on the back. This is a proof that the skull exists in the same city now. It's displayed at the Natural History Museum now in the *Treasures* exhibition with exactly this kind of set up.

KG: *Yes, it's actually a coincidence that the real skull is now in an exhibition at the Natural History Museum at the same time as the fake skull is in your exhibition at Chisenhale. This is also the first time that the real skull has ever been on public display. It's there until 29 August. You also decided to copy the plinth that displays the real skull at the Natural History Museum to display the fake skull at Chisenhale.*

It is interesting that you see the postcard as a form of proof that the

original skull exists. You've also included another form of proof – the document on the wall, which is the export license that we had to obtain from the National Heritage Conservation Commission in Zambia, because the replica skull is classified as a national relic. I wanted to ask about how you've displayed this document.

PP: The document is fixed with two copper nails. Copper is the biggest export for Zambia. Also the skull was discovered in Zambia in a mine near the copper belt area. I thought it was important to include a trace of copper in the work. The document is not framed as also the case of the plinth is on the floor beside it. I want the air to go through everything so we can reach it easily. There is no protection. Here we have Kamfwa to take care of it, who takes care of it in reality.

***KG:** So Kamfwa is here to take care of the skull but also to talk about the history of its discovery and its archaeological significance, as he does at the Lusaka National Museum where he works as a guide. What will he be telling visitors to the exhibition?*

PP: The story of the skull – it's supposed to be all of our ancestors, so this guy is the origin of all of us. Kamfwa will talk about that himself, academically. For me I'm interested in the different ways we see things. This is a potential that I had, to invite him to come. Kamfwa coming here to London is a mirror of me travelling to Zambia. You invited me and I invited him. I'd never been to Africa before and it gave me a lot of things. I'm not sure what Kamfwa will find in London. Maybe he'll start to think that it's ok that the skull is here or maybe he'll get more angry. I don't know.

***KG:** It's a very complicated situation that you have set up here and there are many different narratives that could be taken up by visitors to the exhibition with lots of different potential experiences of the work. What interests you about this situation?*

PP: This work also functions like a film, a fiction: something that

has been told over time and it depends, if you believe it or not – its not a documentary, it's something else... For me, it's a complex of things that clash together – even the subject of where we come from – whether you really believe Darwin's theory. It's nice that one living skull is speaking for the other dead skull. This is a beautiful aesthetic for me. And it came from the same place. To listen to a particular history of the skull is already heavy. I really don't know what will happen but I'm happy.

Pratchaya Phinthong interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, July 2013.