

## **Ellie Pratt, Slade Artist in Residence at Bangkok University February-April 2017, with support from Cass Art**

“Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places”

Italo Calvino – Invisible Cities

I had never travelled to Asia before. This was my first time in a completely foreign landscape. As I stepped through the arrival gates at the airport I was immediately hit by the heat. Dragging my huge heavy suitcase full of art materials through the crowds in search of our contact with Bangkok University who would be taking us to the city. A Friday Afternoon the roads were gridlocked with taxi's, buses, cars and trucks spilling out with people on their way home from work. I was tired and jet lagged. It was meant to be 2.30 in the morning but here I was stuck in the afternoon traffic of the Bangkok highway. My face was glued to the window taking in the sites of the city's suburbs. Huge billboards sat next to traditional Thai housing and Temples. As we moved closer to the city centre the buildings got taller. Towering above us as we moved from the highway to the streets of the city the sunlight blinding our view. The sides of the roads were moving with people. Nothing was still. Smart business men and women in suits buying food from the street vendors on their way home from work. Past, new, present all merged to one. I have always thought the drive into a city is it's best introduction.

We spent our first few days getting lost in the city streets trying to track down shops for art materials. This took us to the busy shopping centre of Siam square to the north east centre of the old town, home to the grand palace and golden Buddha. We walked the streets of china town in the midday heat, through a maze of small enclosed alleyways with street stalls and food vendors, dodging pots of hot oil while trying to sieve our way through the crowds. There was so much life on the streets here. An intense bodily experience that completely overwhelmed my senses. A boat trip up the Chao Phraya River took us to a small cave like shop in the north of the city. Here we found canvas, some paints, oil and brushes, enough to start working as soon as we were given our studio's in Bangkok university the next day.

The next two months were spent working in the Fine Art studio's alongside the students and tutors. Daily life was waking up at 7.00 am to catch the faculty bus that took us from our apartment in the centre of town to Bangkok University Campus in the north-eastern suburbs of the city. We had weekly tutorials and meetings with the students and generally soaked up the university atmosphere. There was so much time to paint. Such a luxury I hadn't experienced since my time at Slade and RCA. I was able to completely immerse myself in my work, building my ideas, confidence and excitement about the body of work I was creating for the final show at the end of the three months. Everything was feeding my inspiration. We would eat our lunch alongside the students in the university canteen which was situated outdoors surrounding a beautiful lake filled with wildlife. At the end of the day we would catch the bus home back to the city centre and go out into the Bangkok streets for food and bars. Bangkok is such a night time city. It's evening energy has a pulse that beats through the crowds, eating, drinking and selling under the city lights. Bangkok evenings were full of people socialising and interacting on it's streets. We spent many a night eating and drinking all over the city. The food was amazing and the atmosphere was addictive.

After these long dreamlike evenings we would then catch a ride on the skytrain back to Ekkamai where we were staying. The skytrain was our main mode of transport. A huge train line that moved through the city skyline, towering above the streets below. This gave way to my first painting 'Night Tube'. I was struck by these crowds of people being moved around the city. So many people packed into each carriage but all sat on their mobile phones not interacting with each other. I wanted to make a painting that was of a crowd but each person was isolated and lit up individually like a Caravaggio painting. Bangkok's stark difference in energy between light and dark, old and new was something that would be a main source of inspiration for me over the rest of the residency. I was so intrigued in how Bangkok's new technologies, architecture and generations collided with it's historical buildings, culture and traditions.

Encountering such new and inspiring daily experiences provided me with imagery and ideas I could not have created otherwise. It was so stimulating to be able to develop my painterly language in an environment that was so rich with both physical and visual experience. I had such an amazing time and it was so beneficial for the development of both me as an artist. It was a surreal experience to be immersed into such an unfamiliar place and culture however it provided me with an understanding of my self and my work that I could not have imagined.

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