A Slice of Light: A Stroke in Time

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Abstract
Visualized as a practice-based research project in digital art by Kong Ho, "A Slice of Light: A Stroke in Time" is a photographic foray into the natural wonders found in the tropical rainforest of Ulu Temburong National Park in Brunei Darussalam in order to capture images that will later be manipulated and re-imaged. This artistic research is set to explore the digital images that are created through documentation and aesthetic framing of natural objects found in the tropical rainforest reserve in Temburong with substantial discourse in support of the work. From an artistic perspective, the tropical forest region around the Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre in Temburong is an inspirational place that needs to be highlighted as having visual power and social influence, as well as scientific value. The aim of this practice-based enquiry is meant to allow viewers to transcend the scenic notions of a tropical rainforest and get to know the magnificent primary rainforest through Ho's personal interpretation and expressive images. Specific identities pertaining to the tropical rainforest seem to reverberate the environmental identity of Brunei Darussalam through the utilization of Ho's altered visual language. This paper will also explore how the re-contextualization of visual images can amplify the natural phenomena of tropic rainforest. By analyzing the concepts behind Ho's recent digital artworks, which will be showcased in a forthcoming two-person exhibition in Brunei Darussalam in May 2015, Ho has been able to bring new insights to his notion of the timeless moments presented in his digital art series.

Keywords: Digital art, digital photography, image as art & natural phenomenona
Introduction

A Slice of Light: A Stroke in Time is the poetic title of Prof. Kong Ho's recent practiced-based research project in digital art. The muse for his photographic foray was the natural wonders found in the tropical rainforest of Ulu Temburong National Park in Brunei Darussalam. A quote by Nobel Prize in literature winner, Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), "I grew up in this town, my poetry was born between the hill and the river, it took its voice from the rain, and like the timber, it steeped itself in the forests" (Feinstein, p. 229) illustrates the poetic feeling of the inspirational moments encountered by Ho in the vast tropical rainforest.

Inspired by the flora and fauna found around the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre, in the heart of the Ulu Temburong National Park, Prof. Kong Ho has created a series of digital artworks based on his interpretations and imaging of digital photographs taken during his 4-day field study experience in Temburong. This interpretation led to his swirling fractal designs of colour and texture with no beginning or end. This series of digital art prints will be showcased in a forthcoming two-person exhibition, A Slice of Light: A Stroke in Time – Digital Art & Photography Exhibition by Dr. Martie Geiger-Ho & Prof. Kong Ho, at UBD in Brunei Darussalam in May 2015. Ho has been able to bring new insights to his notion of the timeless moments through his digital art series. His recent body of art holds new identities infused with complex meaning interpreted from his artistic perspective and personal understanding of the scenic notions of a tropical rainforest. Specific identities pertaining to the flora and fauna found in this tropical rainforest seem to reverberate the environmental identity of Brunei. Ho utilizes these patterns in his altered visual images. His artistic research intends to explore how the re-contextualization of visual images found in this tropical rainforest can amplify the natural phenomena of Temburong. Based on the manipulation of digital images of patterns and colours of found flora and fauna that may have been common to scientists or local inhabitants, Ho transcends the unrevealed moments of light into evolving memories of time and space. His swirling images can only be described as having an association with contemporary digital images of fractals.

Location of Ulu Temburong National Park

According to Brunei Directhys.net, Ulu Temburong National Park is located in Temburong district in eastern Brunei with 50,000 hectares of unspoiled rainforest and is the first ever national park in Brunei. A book by Tamara Thiessen (2008) describes Ulu Temburong National Park as the "Green Jewel of Brunei" (p. 145), and it was open to the general public in 1996. The Park Visitation Zone, limited to 100 hectares with basic infrastructures, including elevated walkways, canopy, suspension bridges and wildlife observation tower, was open to the general public in 1996. Fortunately, UBD took over management of the Kuala Belalong Field Studies Center (KBFSC) located a kilometer upriver from the National Park headquarters in 1992 after the joint expedition of the Royal Geographical Society of the United Kingdom. The mission of KBFSC is "to generate, describe and disseminate knowledge in science and education related to the vast diversity of Brunei's tropical rain forests, including all the varied life forms and ecosystem processes" (Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre, para. 2). As faculty members of UBD, Prof. Ho and Dr. Martie Geiger-Ho, took advantage of the KBFSC by conducting a 4-day artistic research project in digital photography to
record the natural wonders found in Ulu Temburong National Park from 30 November to 4 December 2014.

The last field study journey started from UBD to KBFSC by driving from UBD to the jetty in Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) and taking the speedboat from BSB to Bangar in Temburong. KBFSC staff picked them up at Bangar and drove them to the next jetty in Batang Duri. From Batang Duri, then they took a long boat to KBFSC. The whole journey from BSB to KBFSC took about two and half hours. KBFSC is located near the junction between the Belalong River and the Temburong River and is very close to the Park entrance and the canopy walk. Both sides of the riverbank are covered by mangroves and diverse river palm trees, which are the natural habitat of aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. Temburong rainforest is recognized as having some of the oldest interconnecting ecosystems on our planet. It has a rich unspoiled natural heritage. Undoubtedly, it offers researchers the opportunity to document the biodiversity of this pristine forest. The intent of Ho's artistic research is to show the differences between Brunei's conservation of tropical rainforest and its ecosystem biodiversity with other Borneo nations' deforestation and species extinction. There is a phrase by Edward O. Wilson, quoted in the *Time* article that, "[Destroying rain forest for economic gain] is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal" (Sheppard, 1990, September 3).

**Significance of Ulu Temburong National Park**

From an artistic perspective, the tropical forest region around the Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre in Temburong is an inspirational place that needs to be highlighted as having visual power and social influence, as well as scientific value. The aim of this practice-based enquiry is meant to allow viewers to transcend the scenic notions and biodiversity of a tropical rainforest and get to know the magnificent primary rainforest through Ho's personal interpretation and expressive images.

The resulting fragmented images hold a new identity embossed with a psychological significance that Ho presents as a digital analysis of Ulu Temburong's rainforest. Ho's artistic exposition of illuminating discoveries and evolving memories reframes flora and fauna not as specimens but as colourful art subjects. This paper reveals the contrast between the accurate rendition of photographic lighting – illumination of scenes or objects, and subjective post-photographic interpretation of timeless moments. Specific identities pertaining to the flora and fauna found in Ulu Temburong rainforest and can be seen to represent the environmental identity of Brunei through the utilization of altered visual language. This paper also explores how re-contextualization of visual images and environmental messages can transcend the physical boarder of Ulu Temburong rainforest.

By analyzing the concepts behind Ho's recent digital artworks, this paper will be able to bring new insights to his post-photographic renditions and timeless moments, which are about new sensory experiences in Ulu Temburong rainforest mingled with memories of space and time within the magnificent rainforest. This paper is about sharing the experience of illumination and evolving memories of timeless moments, which is an experience that everyone may be familiar with when one reconnects with the nature.
Exploration of the Natural Wonders in Ulu Temburong National Park

In phase one of his 4-day field study, Ho focused on photographing the natural phenomena, flora and fauna found around KBFSC in Ulu Temburong National Park. He documented a series of digital images based on his feeling and artistic discovery towards certain natural patterns of light, colour, shade, texture, shape, form and spatial relationship found in flora and fauna of the Temburong primary rainforest. As a teaching artist, Ho was sensitive and aware of the rainforest environment around him in his field studies. He discovered unique characteristics or patterns among common plants and wildlife or insects, including tropical leaves, butterflies (Rajah Brooke's Birdwing and Common Bluebottle), skinks, pitcher plants, barking geckos, lizards, caterpillars, and spiders, found in Ulu Temburong rainforest.

In his phase two of his research, Ho explored the visual relationships of the rainforest to include recurring patterns, colour schemes, and other dynamic connections between illumination and timeless moments. Through imaging technology, Ho transcended the natural sceneries, plants and wildlife of the rainforest to form a unique conceptual expression of the environmental identity of Ulu Temburong rainforest based on his artistic preferences and interpretations.

Timeless Moment as Evolving Fragment of Experience

According to Melissa Hogenboom, a science reporter of BBC News, our memories are unreliable. Whenever we recall our memories, we reconstruct parts of images stored in collections of memory forming cells. Dr. Xu Liu of the RIKEN-MIT Center for Neural Circuit Genetics told BBC News, "These differing combination of cells could partly explain why memories are not static like a photograph, but constantly evolving." (Hogenboom, 2013, July 25) As a sensitive visual artist, Ho has tried to capture the timeless moments of his memories through his art. However, it is hard for anyone to have an explicit and complete picture of one's specific memory. It is similar to his memory of Rajah Brooke's Birdwing, a live one and deceased specimen, which are always shifting and uncertain. It is not because we run out of specific terms in describing this tropical butterfly in our vocabulary, but the incapability of recalling the specific moment, colour and action of these two distinguished creatures and objects in our memory cells, gives rise to interpretations.

"Every time we think we remember something, we could also be making changes to that memory – sometimes we realize [this] sometimes we don't," suggested Dr. Liu. It is similar to the art making experience of Ho's deconstructive fractal-look digital art. The process by which his digital artworks are created along with the media used in the works is a very important part of the final statement or content of the work. For example, in his recent digital art piece, Enduring Rajah Brooke's Birdwing, shown in Figure 1, which relies on the fractal effect, Ho articulates a remembered state of mind through the process of creating the images of a Rajah Brooke's Birdwing and Common Bluebottle butterflies, commonly found in Borneo. John Briggs (1992) has described fractals as the tracks and marks left by the process of dynamical change:

Fractals describe the roughness of the world, its energy, its dynamical changes and transformations. Fractals are images of the way things fold and unfold, feeding back into each other and themselves. The study of fractals has confirmed many of the chaologists' insights into chaos, and has uncovered some
unexpected secrets of nature's dynamical movements as well. (p. 23).

Digital imaging can alter layers, colours, textures, dimensions, repetitions, rotations and transformations in a photograph to form differing combinations and changes, which are different from hand-drawn compositions. Ho cannot visualize the final outcome of his digital art images, but the process always reminds him of his free-floating fractured memory with no defined space or time. Also, each magnification of his digital fractal image reveals more details of the chosen pattern, which is difficult to present in a traditional hand-painted image. Moreover, the post-photographic imaging enhances the species most outstanding feature coupled with the recollection of colours, patterns, textures of the particular moment and illuminated space.

The composition of his recent body of work is created to form a transcendental kind of space, which may turn out to include the visual phenomena of spiral, rotational, transforming, dissolving, or overlapping visual effects to reveal the progressive transforming of our memory and resemble a timeless moment of seeing butterflies fluttering around the river bank or an illusory space with no beginning or end. Rabindranath Tagore noted, "The butterfly counts not months but moments, and has time enough" (Krishan, 2004, p. 188).

Six pieces of his recent digital art prints, such as Modified Leaf Glow, shown in Figure 2, were exhibited in the recent group exhibition, International Art Moves (IAM) Exhibition: Brunei Calling, in Bethanien Art Centre in Berlin, German, in February 2015. Through this exhibition, Ho was able to bring new insights to his notion of the timeless moments presented in his digital art series.

Figure 1: Kong Ho. *Enduring Rajah Brooke's Birdwing*. 2015. Digital print, 20"H x 20"W.
Reconnection to the Nature and Timeless Moments

The creative impetus or intent behind Ho's recent spiral fractal digital art based on Ulu Temburong rainforest is to reconnect to the nature and timeless moments he experienced in the rainforest. Psychologically, the motivation behind his transfigurations of butterflies found in Temburong is to hold on to the essence of the transitional feeling, remembrance, and time of a fleeting moment. It may seem contradictory to try to reconnect to the moment and space that are already gone, but a part of the large historical list behind humankind's reasons for making art seems to favour this endeavour.

"Life is full of contradictions and so is art" (Ho, 2012, p. 6). Artists like Ho try to capture timeless moments in his life through reconnection with the nature. It is not clear that whether the nature affects individuals or individuals are the influence on the nature. Similarly, we cannot be sure whether we can live without nature or our memories. The only certainty is that the natural environment and personal experience are always in a state of flux. The connection to our memories with the nature gives us a reason for preserving the nature and our own identities. It stops us from creating a world where the nature is erased.

When Ho starts out to make an image of a particular fauna or flora found in Ulu Temburong he knows that he is only creating an illusory memory of that particular experience. Through the use of manipulated digital photos taken of a particular plant or animal, he begins to merge that species' most outstanding feature with his unique experience. This coupled with his recollection of having experienced the colours, patterns, and textures of that particular species on a specific day adds to his desire to work his subject into an image that can engage others into seeing the compelling
illusory world around us. The composition of Ho's recent body of work inspires others to experience a transcendental kind of space, which may turn out to include spiral, rotational, transforming, dissolving, or overlapping elements. The picture plane may end up resembling an evolving memory or a timeless moment with no particular beginning or end, or it may be more like the interweaving of space and time. The Evolution of Metamorphosis, one of his digital art pieces generated by Adobe Photoshop, shown in Figure 3, reveals the transfiguration of two common butterflies found in tropical rainforest. A series of photos of Common Bluebottle and Sawtooth butterflies was taken at the riverbank of KBFSC in Temburong. These two butterflies express Ho's passion with the transience of life and the evolving Fibonacci sequence and his delight with seeing these two butterflies fluttering around the riverbank through an illuminated environment.

![Image of butterflies](image.png)

Figure 3: Kong Ho. *The Evolution of Metamorphosis*. 2015. Digital print, 20"H x 20"W.

Ho transfigured his memories of the two butterflies found in Borneo by blending them with his personal feeling towards the natural environment of the Belalong River. Ho never has a preconceived notion of how his digital images will turn out. Ho repeatedly transfigures memories into digital images. Digital art, like painting, allows Ho to explore colours and to use his intuition to direct his images toward a composition that finally feels "right" and matches his associated memories.

Ho selected two major digital photos of these two butterflies for the transfiguration of his digital art piece, including a photo of Common Bluebottle and Sawtooth butterflies. He applied the actions effect of Adobe Photoshop to transform the cutout images of the Common Bluebottle and Sawtooth based on his formulated imaging effects, such as resizing, rotating, moving, changing colour, adding blurry effect, duplicating, grouping, rearranging and merging layers. Then he organized different
groups of transformed images according to the formalistic visual relationship of individual groups of images and background images. This is how Ho abstracts his "straight" photographs of clearly defined subjects.

In a way, the digital medium allows Ho the luxury of working in a manner that is not only original and bold in its outcome, but digital art coupled with contemporary digital printing technology is also effective for displaying details because the high resolution digital image guarantees the final outlook of digital print. This new method of working has come to affect almost every aspect of his art and life. His latest work with a focus on photographic truth of the nature and personal evolving memory or timeless moment follows the principles put forth in the writings of French art historian Hippolyte Taine in his essay titled "Le Bouddhisme" published in 1865:

Nature is … an infinite chain of causes from effects and effects from causes, an infinite progeny into the past and the future of decompositions and recompositions with no beginning and no end. Such is the view of the whole to which [Buddhists] are led, on the one hand, by their main theme of nothingness and, on the other, by the spectacle of things incessantly changing. Having suppressed fixed causes, there remains only the series of changing effects. Thereupon, the imagination comes alives. (Taine, 1886 [1865], p. 291)

This is the kind of intuitive feeling that comes from losing oneself in the enormity of experience with the nature. According to Baas (2005), "Buddhism challenges thinking as a path to knowing. And what both the creation and the perception of art share with Buddhist mediation practice is that they allow us to forget ourselves and thus realize ourselves. They are parallel practices" (p. 11). This sort of experience has led Ho to try and capture the over-whelming elements that make up the fragments of our evolving memories unconsciously.

Ho believes that before he can make art, whether it is digital photography or a digital art, that certain elements must be present, including a bittersweet mix of emotions. According to the Taoist/Buddhist perspective, the transient nature of being can be seen in natural phenomena, such as the cyclical nature of any species that goes from life to decease. The beauty of a natural order evokes a melancholic sense of the transience of being and leaves a fragment of memory. Ho's digital photos of flora and fauna found in Ulu Temburong rainforest during his 4-day field study still feel timeless to him, but they take on a slightly intangible almost ethereal quality when he transfigures them. In one of his digital art pieces, Starry Night Geckos, shown in Figure 4, reveals the remembrance of amazing barking sound emitted by that unique gecko in the rainforest under a particular starry night, which is hard to describe in a single photo or other art medium.
**Conclusion: Transpersonal Experience**

The visual styles of Ho's spiral fractal-inspired digital art series based on spiraling forms, and the timeless moments encountered with the tropical rainforest in Ulu Temburong have their starting point in the real world, but the same representational starting point that grounds the digital photos in the center of compelling, make-believe illumination also transforms them before the viewers eyes into pure visual patterns, colours and visual relationships. This is something that Ho sees as being akin to Claude Monet's Water Lilies, an Impressionist masterwork depicting his water garden in Giverny, France. Like the water lilies in Monet's paintings, the water lilies are about colours and sense of place, which are not painted in realistic style. However, the poetic and time-shifting feeling of Monet's Water Lilies as it is described by Baas (2005) echoes the qualities that Ho is seeking in his art. According to the description of Baas (2005) about Monet's Water Lilies:

> The painting seems to contain a moment or—better—a totality of moments in deep summer, when the greens go dark and the water reflects a bottomless sky. The sensation of a moment I wasn't even aware of losing is suddenly mine again. Or maybe what the painting embodies is change itself, and the awareness is an awareness of time and the losses that time brings (p. 19).

In his new series of digital art, Ho intends to use his spiral fractal-looking digital art to trace the inspirational forms that frequently materialize in his work. Just as with everything else in life, the image of Ho's digital art piece, Before There Were Fractals, shown in Figure 5, appear to have fluid meaning and even to take on different physical characteristics when one looks carefully at the structure of the work and contemplates the image as a whole. Ho's digital art provides a new imaginative dimension of the tropical rainforest identity of Brunei Darussalam.
After completing his 4-day field study at KBFSC, Ho posted his research findings, digital photos and digital art pieces on his online research blog, A Slice of Light, at http://asliceoflight.blogspot.com, to share his practice-based research with other interested researchers. Twelve pieces of his recent digital art series embedded with natural references and personal memorable experiences of tropical rainforest will be displayed in a forthcoming two-person exhibition, A Slice of Light: A Stroke in Time – Digital Art & Photography Exhibition by Dr. Martie Geiger-Ho & Prof. Kong Ho, at Inspiring Hall, UBD Student Centre, in Brunei Darussalam from 11 to 16 May 2015.

By analyzing the concepts behind Ho's recent digital artworks, Ho has been able to bring new insights to his seemingly contradictory notion of the timeless moments and evolving memory presented in his digital art series. All of these twelve digital art images contain textured natural segments of Ulu Temburong revealing the natural phenomena and identity of rainforest in Brunei and the tendency of reconnection of personal memories with nature. Lastly, John Muir shares similar idea with Ho toward rainforest, which is "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness" (Hanna & Wolfe, 1966, p. 313).
References


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