

***Interdisciplinary Art Approach, Common Language and Equal Partnership***

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**Abstract**

Artists no longer need to dwell in the “ivory towers”, which isolate them from the existing world in order to create artworks based on their personal interests and beliefs. Such mode of creative engagement has been overtaken by an interdisciplinary art approach that encourages artists to leave their “ivory towers” to collaborate with people from non arts disciplines so as to create artworks that reflect a common language and equal partnership. An example of such an interdisciplinary art approach takes reference from my experiences as an interdisciplinary visual artist who collaborated with Professor James Francis Warren, an ethnohistorian and professor from Murdoch University, Australia. My approach was to translate a book on the history of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San, Prostitution in Singapore, 1870 and 1940 by Professor James Francis Warren into a series of contemporary symbolic drawings into a journal. The journal was exhibited in the Sketchbook Project 2011 organised by Brooklyn Library in USA. The journal reflected the contemporary symbolic drawings and selected quotations from Professor James Francis Warren’s book to promote Singapore history and heritage worldwide through The Sketchbook Project 2011. My paper aims to share how I collaborated with an ethnohistorian to promote Singapore history and heritage worldwide through an interdisciplinary art approach to reflect a common language and equal partnership between Professor James Francis Warren and I.

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## **Introduction**

Artistic language is a form of an artistic expression by an artist. The artists express their thoughts or ideas artistically by creating 2-dimensional artworks or 3-dimensional artworks. Examples of 2-dimensional artworks are paintings or drawings whereas 3-dimensional artworks are sculptures or installation arts. Most of the time, artists choose to create these artworks by themselves. Some people remark that artists tend to isolate themselves from their surrounding environment, thus artists live solely in their “ivory towers” to create artworks. However, such mode of individualistic artistic endeavour has been overtaken by an interdisciplinary art approach.

The interdisciplinary art approach is a way for artists who choose to leave their individual comfort zones or “ivory towers” and collaborate with people from non arts disciplines to create artworks together. Non arts disciplines people refer to people who are not engaged in art or design disciplines, for instances, historians, anthropologists, scientists and mathematicians. Consequently, these collaborative artworks reflect a common language in terms of their common understanding and equal partnership pertaining to their common intent so as to share their new output to people. The success of interdisciplinary art approach depends on the capability between both parties to negotiate their terms without compromising on each other’s vision and aspiration.

An example of such an interdisciplinary art approach was my collaboration with Professor James Francis Warren, a prominent ethnohistorian and professor from Murdoch University, Australia. I created a series of contemporary symbolic drawings by translating his book on the history of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San, Prostitution in Singapore, 1870 and 1940. These contemporary symbolic drawings were documented into a journal, which was exhibited in the Sketchbook Project 2011 organised by Brooklyn Library in USA. The journal also achieved its aim of promoting Singapore history and heritage worldwide.

In view of the above, my attempt is to discuss how I collaborated with an ethnohistorian to promote interdisciplinary art form for the purpose of promoting Singapore history and heritage through an interdisciplinary art approach. Discussion of this paper is as follows:

- a. Initial Interdisciplinary Approach
- b. Common Language
- c. Equal Partnership

### **Initial Interdisciplinary Approach**

Integrative thinking consists of taking disconnected material or ideas and synthesizing them into something new, a task that is certainly a form of creativity, (Sill, 2001,p.293). According to Sill, integrative thinking is a process to connect different types of information or ideas to formulate a new idea or outcome. Drawing upon Sill’s explanation on integrative thinking, I connected someone’s ideas with my ideas to create artworks that reflect both the collaborator and my ideas. Our ideas represent our common language in terms of our common understanding and equal partnership in regards to our common intent. These ideas relate to a history of Singapore. It also

depicts an interdisciplinary art form. An example of such an interdisciplinary art form is related to a series of contemporary symbolic drawings that I created with the help of an ethnohistorian. These drawings were created based on an interdisciplinary art project that I collaborated with an ethnohistorian.

The interdisciplinary art project was to create a series of contemporary symbolic drawings, which were documented in a journal that was exhibited for “The Sketchbook Project 2011” throughout the main cities of United States of America. The event was organised by an independent Brooklyn-based company that organises global, collaborative art projects (information derived from “The Sketchbook Project” face book). My art project was to translate a book entitled, “Ah Ku and Karayuki-San, Prostitution in Singapore, 1870 and 1940” into a series of contemporary symbolic drawings with symbolic shapes to depict the history of prostitution in Singapore. The book was written by Professor James Francis Warren, an eminent ethnohistorian and professor of Murdoch University, Australia. The objective was to promote Singapore history through an interdisciplinary art form.

Like many artists, I have often been challenged and encouraged to collaborate with people from the non arts disciplines for the purpose of broadening my creative experiences in order to develop new creative breakthrough. To attain such breakthrough is to reach out or network with people from non arts disciplines. These were two essential steps that led to my collaboration with Professor James Francis Warren. As an artist, one of my creative themes is to create artworks on Singapore Heritage and History. In 2003, while I was expecting my daughter, I happened to read the book on History of Rickshaw Coolies that was written by Professor James Francis Warren. I was greatly inspired after reading his book and hence I was motivated to create a series of paintings for my solo exhibition that was subsequently held in April 2004 at Utterly Arts, Singapore. I retrieved his email address that was indicated at the back of the book on History of Rickshaw Coolies and I realised that Professor Warren was a visiting professor at National University of Singapore, Asia Research Institute then. I began to correspond with Professor Warren through email.

Sill (2001) said:

... a product of the interdisciplinary process itself: an appreciation of, even seeking out, perspectives other than one's own; the ability to evaluate the testimony of experts; tolerance of, even a preference for, ambiguity; more sensitivity to ethical issues; the ability to synthesize or integrate; enlarged perspectives or horizons; more creative, original, or unconventional thinking; more humility or listening skills; and sensitivity to disciplinary, political, or religious bias. (p. 18).

Sill's perspective inspired me to seek wisdom from Professor Warren by learning and listening from his perspective so as to empower me to develop effective art ideas to promote Singapore History and his works. I decided to reach out to Professor Warren. I sent an email to Professor Warren to share with him my interests to use his book on the history of Rickshaw Coolies as a resource to create a series of paintings for my solo exhibition at Utterly Arts, Singapore in 2004. My initial email to Professor Warren was a way to reach out and network with him because I believed that I would

be able to learn a great deal from his vast experiences. Professor Warren was keen to meet and share with me about his book on the history of Rickshaw Coolies. Professor Warren agreed to meet me at his office at National University of Singapore, Asia Research Institute.

Recalling my first meeting with Professor Warren, I found that Professor Warren was approachable and warm, thus paving a positive outlook to our collaboration. I showed him a few coloured-pencil sketches concerning my interpretation of his book on the history of Rickshaw Coolies. While he was looking at my sketches, I explained the concept and ideas along with each piece of the drawings. Professor Warren was amazed because I was the first artist to translate his book into visual images. I explained to him the development of my concepts, which subsequently formulated a series of paintings. Since then, Professor Warren became my friend and my mentor. Our friendship established because I took the courage to reach out and network with him to demonstrate my sincere interests to collaborate with him as well as to share with him my creative interests using Singapore History as my theme to develop my artworks. This also enabled me to broaden my creative experiences as an artist.

The initiative to seek, write, reach out and network with Professor Warren was my initial approaches. I consider these approaches as significant skills for an interdisciplinary visual artist. I believe that without reaching out and networking with Professor Warren, I might not have attained a positive collaborative relationship. These experiences led me to support and concur what Sill emphasised earlier on the interdisciplinary process, which highlights one's ability to seek, learn and equip with other positive skills to enable one to succeed in collaborative partnership when both parties acquire two different professional disciplines and interests.

In view of the above, the ability to reach out and network provides opportunities to establish a collaborative partnership. To reach out is to seek, learn and listen in order to equip oneself with positive attitudes to embark on a collaborative project. These skills contributed to my collaboration with Professor Warren in regards to a series of contemporary symbolic drawings on the history of prostitution in Singapore that shall be discussed in the following sections.

### **Common Language**

My first collaboration with Professor James Francis Warren on the art project concerning the History of Rickshaw Coolies in Singapore was not the last as I continued to read his books. My second collaboration with Professor Warren was based on his book, "Ah Ku and Karayuki-San, Prostitution in Singapore, 1870 and 1940". This book is a sequel to the History of Rickshaw Coolies. I used the book on "Ah Ku and Karayuki-San," as my resource to create a series of contemporary symbolic drawings to depict an interdisciplinary art form.

The initial interdisciplinary approach to reach out and network with Professor Warren to carry out an interdisciplinary art project needed further attention. This was achieved by finding a balance or a common language to reflect both of our visions or understanding. To search for a common language required me to examine Professor Warren's works in details and as such I asked myself three questions. The three questions were: 1) What is the appropriate research method to examine Professor



Warren's work? 2) What are the key issues in Professor Warren's work? and 3) How to create visual images to relate to Professor Warren's work?

## **Research Methods**

Most artists utilise research methods that akin to art and design to assist artists to develop concepts and ideas. However, I combined art and design research method with social science research method.

Ayres & Paa (2009):

Interdisciplinary research builds on theories and previous research from more than one discipline and uses methods for data collection and analysis from more than one research tradition. (p. 1).

In other words, Ayres and Paa encouraged the combination of more than one particular form of research methods to collect and examine data for interdisciplinary research. I concurred with Ayres and Paa because the combination of more than one research methods widened a researcher's research experiences. It allows a researcher to have more in-depth analysis to look into diversified aspects to give more insightful findings.

In order to connect Professor Warren's ideas in his book with my artistic ideas to create an interdisciplinary art form, it is appropriate and relevant to integrate more than one research methods. It is also not unusual for artists to read and gather information from materials, which are related to the artistic theme for the purpose of developing an artistic language to be expressed by creating 2-dimensional artworks or 3-dimensional artworks.

The two research methods that assisted me to formulate my artistic ideas were documentary analysis and art and design research. The objective of documentary analysis is to search for common ideas or common themes that frequently appear in documents through a process known as "content analysis" (Scott, 1990, p.30). Documents can be defined from books or published articles. In other words, the search for common ideas or common themes in the book, "Ah Ku and Karayuki-San," was an important process for me to frame the overall theme to formulate an artistic language for my artworks.

Gray and Malins (2004) said that art and design research is:

The process described here is essentially generic but should be framed and customized by your particular discipline and subject area. The process is usually shaped by three apparently simple questions: 'what?' – the identification of a 'hunch' or tentative research proposition, leading eventually to a defined and viable research question. 'why?' – the need for your research in relation to the wider context, in order to test out the value of your proposition, locate your research position, and explore a range of research strategies. how?' – the importance of developing an appropriate methodology and specific methods for gathering and

generating information relevant to your research question, and evaluating, analysing and interpreting research evidence. (p.12).

Suggestions from Gray and Malins on art and design research process is ideal for my research because it offered me the flexibility to plan out my research process without adhering to a set of stringent research methods. This allowed me to negotiate my research process to meet my needs to integrate Professor Warren's intent with my artistic intent to develop a series of contemporary symbolic drawings. The research questions on "what" proposed by Gray and Malins supported my idea to find a suitable research method to examine Professor Warren's book in order to understand "why" the chosen research method was relevant to examine Professor Warren's book and subsequently to find out "how" the proposed research method was able to assist me to find out the key contents of the book. These questions led me to incorporate social science research method on documentary analysis to find out the common themes or common ideas from Professor Warren's book in order for me to evaluate these themes and ideas on the history of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San. Consequently, the art and design research process helped me to explore concepts to interpret the common themes and contents in the book of Ah Ku and Karayuki-san, Prostitution in Singapore, 1870 to 1940.

### **Key issues in the book**

Warren (2003) said:

An analysis of prostitution and the lives of the Ah ku and karayuki-san requires an interdisciplinary method and approach. With the emergence of contemporary feminism and women's history and the advent of the new social history, a compelling urge has developed to explain the past of woman...(p.18).

Warren's statement reinforced and supported my decision to adopt integrative research methods by combining art research and social science research on documentary analysis to examine the contents of the book. The first key issue showed the critical intent of Warren's book. In Warren's statement, the objective of his book was to reflect these unsung heroines' voices in terms of their hope, fear and sorrow in order to educate and reshape people's perception on these prostitutes who were often been marginalised as undeserving and lowly people. Warren also advised that these heroines' voices must be examined from an interdisciplinary method and approach.

Warren's advice to use interdisciplinary method and approach to study these unsung heroines voices corresponded to suggestions made by Gray and Malins on "how?" – the importance of developing an appropriate methodology and specific methods for gathering and generating information relevant to your research question, and evaluating, analysing and interpreting research evidence". (p.12). Both critical advice from Warren (2003), Gray and Malins (2004) reinforced the relevancy of combining art and design research process based on Gray and Malins (2004) with social science research method on documentary analysis by Scott (1990) to attain appropriate data for analysis and interpretation.

“The sketchbook project 2011” in the form of the travelling journal was to support Warren’s intention because the purpose of the travelling journal was to share with local and worldwide audiences. This was executed in the form of a travelling exhibition throughout the main cities of United States of America and in cyber form by uploading the artworks onto the “The Sketchbook Project 2011” website for worldwide audiences.

The second key issue concerns the rationale for Ah Ku and Karayuki-San in Singapore. Ah Ku refers to Chinese prostitutes from Mainland China and Karayuki-San is a term used to connote Japanese prostitutes. Warren (2003) explained:

Much remains unknown about the phenomenon of migration and brothel prostitution in Singapore. However, demography is the vital clue to the importance of prostitution in the history of Singapore. The development and expansion of the city was the direct result of a vast immigration of Chinese labourers that continued steadily from the 1880s. The population quadrupled in 40 years. This massive influx of migrants altered the character of Singapore, building roads, railroads, and government buildings, loading and unloading cargo and supplies, and working such an unprecedented increase created serious social problems as nearly all the immigrants were bachelors. These coolies crowded into more and more singkeh (newcomers) moved in, the need for prostitution climbed proportionately (p.9).

The necessity to operate brothels was primarily to meet the needs of these male migrants who played a crucial role in supporting the Singapore economy in the late 1900s and early 2000s then. This phenomena coincided with the depressing situation in China and Japan, which were suffering from acute poverty and hence many young girls were motivated and encouraged to work as prostitutes in Singapore for the purpose of remitting money to support their families back home. Girls were regarded as non significance in the traditional Chinese and Japanese societies during those days and they had to adhere to filial piety, which became an obligatory value to propel these women to become prostitutes to support their families. Since there was a demand for prostitutes in Singapore, this became a convenient rationale for these girls to become prostitutes.

Warren’s explanation on the rationale for these women to become prostitutes responded to the art and design research process by Gray and Malins (2004) to encourage me to search for ‘why?’ – the need for your research in relation to the wider context, in order to test out the value of your proposition, locate your research position, and explore a range of research strategies” (p.12). My question was to find out “Why” I needed to search for an appropriate research method to examine Warren’s book because Warren inferred that it was important to look into the historical demography in relation to the large influx of Chinese male migrants from Mainland China allowed by the British government during the 1880s. This also means that the history of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San must be analysed in detail and as such, it was necessary to use a rigorous research method to examine the contents.

Documentary analysis (Scott, 1990) enabled me to examine the contents in detail to search for insights that were pertinent for me to develop my artistic concepts to create

the drawings. The documentary analysis of the contents of the book shows the following common issues that depicted the rationale for prostitution of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San, their destroyed hopes, physical and emotional abuses and their sorrows in their dying beds.

Taking into consideration of Warren's statement that highlighted the appropriateness and relevancy of putting on the lens of contemporary feminism and woman's history and advent of social history to express the history of Singapore prostitutes, my concept was to use contemporary visual language through symbols and Chinese numerology as opposed to traditional figurative images. This was to akin to our "contemporary" intent to depict our voices into a common language between Professor Warren and I. Because these girls were regarded as economical physical assets to alleviate poverty in their families and to support the needs of the male migrants in Singapore, they were portrayed and valued as "digits". "Digits" also connotes an element of economics; and therefore, my proposed visual images were to incorporate symbols and Chinese numerology to personify "digits" as my visual language for my artworks. Number 3, 4, 8 and 9413 were used to articulate the feelings of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San. "3" represents hope and life, "4" represents sorrowful and death. "8" represents wealth and "9413" represents everlasting death. Most of the images were represented with female gender sign and the total numbers of each individual female gender sign would add together to make a total of 3, 4 or 8 that depicts the common issues of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San.

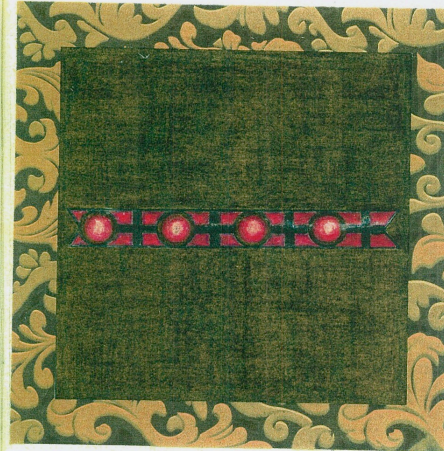
### **Equal Partnership**

My definition of equal partnership in this interdisciplinary art form was to seek for Professor Warren's views to ensure that the description of the visual images did not deviate from his book. Upon confirmation that the ideas behind each of the visual images did not misinterpret his book, I extracted relevant quotations from Professor Warren's book and displayed along with the description of each artwork to highlight our equal partnership. Below shows three drawings in the sketchbook. The examples are to reflect that the final production of the journal consists of both of our voices. The synopsis of the artwork represents the artist's intent of each of the drawing, which is to support Warren's intent of his book. By putting both artist's synopsis and quotations extracted from Warren's book were to show to the audiences that the artworks were based on a common intent without compromising on each other's interests.

4 numbers of female gender signs form the ribbon. "4" represents death in Chinese numerology and as such the ribbon depicts death. The ribbon also relates to their physical and emotional abuses. The ribbon also represents sexual diseases they had to live with. The ribbon is not shown to be in a "tied" position that is similar to the "International Red Ribbon". The ribbon is straightened against the brown background to reiterate the Chinese and Japanese characters of "1". This is to correspond to the previous quotation in Warren (2003: 30) that the girls were left with one cent on the street. For that matter, the straightened ribbon is to reinforce that girls were worth only one cent and that scenario was no difference to their lives as Ah Ku and Karayuki-San because they were equally worth as little as "one cent" in their lives too.

Warren (2003: 313)

Because ah ku and karayuki-san lacked basic rights-in-persons they were also subjected to emotional and physical violence by mamas and okasan. Yamazaki notes that the karayuki-san were defined by the fact that they did not even have the freedom to love. They were 'weak beings' at the bottom of an already low heap, almost totally lacking in power and autonomy. Violence and harsh treatment by brothel-keepers against the prostitutes was most evident in lower-class brothels. Chinese and Japanese women found themselves pitted not only against the cruelty of clients, but also the beatings, punches, and kicks of keepers expected to earn a daily income. There was absolutely no let-up from work in Malay and Smith Street houses; eight or ten hours a day, seven days a week. If a girl fell ill, contracted VD, or failed to serve customers during her menstruation, she did not make as much.



Title: Abuse

As the youth of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San withered, they suffered from broken-heartedness because of depression. The image represents a broken heart that is made up of 4 female gender signs. "4" reflects "death" in Chinese numerology and hence it represents the "death" of their physical youth. When you turn the image of the broken heart in an up-side down position, it depicts two tear drops. These tear drops represent their sorrowful tears. The grey background represents their greying years as Ah Ku and Karayuki-San.

Warren (2003: 341)

The relationship between the passage of time and age, personality traits, and life experience had a marked effect on the 'well-being'-satisfaction and self-fulfilment-and 'ill-being'-anxiety or depression-of a majority of the prostitutes. In terms of ebb and flow of human life, the closing days of prostitute's career could be compared to 'a revolving lantern painted with shifting scenes ... while their soul resembles a drop of water that appears reddish on a maple-leaf and greenish on a laurel-leaf.



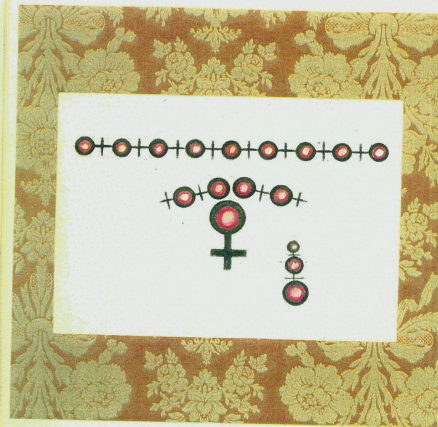
Title: Broken-hearted



The image represents the facial expression of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San. The eyebrow is made of 9 numbers of female gender signs. The eye-lid is made of 4 female gender signs. The pupil is represented by 1 female gender sign. The entire image represents the Chinese numerology of "9413" and it symbolically means everlasting death in life in accordance to Chinese understanding.

Warren (2003: 345)

Ever since their brothel-keepers abandoned them years earlier, some had lived the desolate life of a street hawker or an itinerant seamstress mending the old clothes of former clients from nearby lodging-houses. They slept nights beneath the stars on the Esplanade or under the trees in chronic diseases associated with the ageing process and workplace assumed increased importance because the chronic infections, internal pains, and sexually transmitted diseases sapped her final strength, prostitute was rarely mourned. Nor could a solarly, ill ah ku or karayuki-san always prepare herself for imminent death in a city where epidemic disease had struck in a sudden and unpredictable manner.



Title: Everlasting death

## Conclusion

The challenge of interdisciplinary art form is to reflect that both parties' interests are met without compromising the objectives of both interests. To overcome such challenge is to search for a common language in terms of a common understanding from both collaborators. It was achieved by combining both social science research method on documentary analysis (Scott, 1990) and Art and Design Research Process (Gray and Malins, 2004) to derive a common understanding to embark on an interdisciplinary art form. It also demonstrates that the final production of the artwork shows that both parties share the same views to reflect an equal partnership in collaboration.

The search for a common language is to show that both collaborators share a common voice to talk about the history of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San. This was achieved by understanding the overall objectives of both artist and collaborator. In this case, Professor Warren's highlights on contemporary feminism, woman history and social history were being corresponded with contemporary art form as opposed to straightforward figurative images. This was to support Professor Warren's caution that the book was not written based on superficial framing of what people most commonly interpret prostitutes. Instead, the content of the book was formulated in relation to looking at the subtle cause of the existence of these prostitutes who were primarily generated due to political and social impact. In this way, it reshaped the perception of the definition of prostitutes to a more appreciative perspective against prejudicial and bias attitudes.

The contemporary symbolic drawings in terms of the symbols and Chinese numerology corresponded to the roles that were carried out by Ah Ku and Karayuki-San. These were largely influenced by political and social impact, which caused these prostitutes to be measured in favour of economical value to support the needs of the

male migrants in Singapore. The contemporary symbolic drawings are to suggest that the history of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San is not to be visually read in a straightforward manner such as figurative images, instead these drawings are catalysts to spur audiences to look closer and examine deeper to understand the subtlety of the lives of Ah Ku and Karayuki-San through symbols and Chinese numerology. This was intended to correspond with Professor Warren's highlight in terms of the importance to understand the history of these prostitutes not in a straight and narrow angle but through a wider lens.

The equal partnership was driven by the initiative of the artist to seek affirmation from Professor Warren that the description and the meaning of each symbol were interpreted coherently as to the book. Consequently, both the voices from author and the artist were concurrently displayed in the sketchbook so as to reflect that both collaborators' interests were displayed, thus concluding the positive collaboration in this interdisciplinary art form.

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