

# “More or Les”: mapping landscapes in between

by **Monika Proba**

*(n)desa / bloody woop woop* is a story about two villages and a girl. Ida Lawrence didn't grow up in Barmedman (Australia) nor did she grow up in Kliwonan (Indonesia) but her parents and family did, and that's how she got inseparably tied to two spots on the map that barely anyone has ever heard of.

This exhibition is a window into the ongoing process of the artist's efforts to locate and identify herself in the uncertain space between a Javanese “desa” and an Australian village in “bloody woop woop”. With a nudge and a wink, Ida invites us to play a game in which her identities, memories and stories serve as pawns.

**Wish you were here** takes inspiration from a family trip to Kliwonan during which Ida's father stated “Yes, just like Barmedman”. This comparison, far from being obvious, was a starting point for visual and cultural comparative research of both villages. To get started, the artist chose to use postcards from her mother's hometown which are sold in Barmedman's post office to this day. Postcards are a series of images that are supposed to promote the wonders and cultural heritage of a place, but in the case of Barmedman - a village of 206 inhabitants - the main “attractions” are a swimming pool and two bars. Barmedman's postcards can't help but show the town as a place filled with gloomy emptiness. Thousands of kilometres away, in Kliwonan, Ida has tried to look for the visual and cultural equivalents of Barmedman's “representative” pictures. Surprisingly it wasn't very difficult. Ida's postcards from Kliwonan present a similarly vague and melancholic space where there are no monuments, no spectacular views; nothing that makes it explicitly different from any other Javanese village. By inserting pictures of Kliwonan into a similar set of postcards, she frames the undefined character of these two spaces and places them together in the one discourse. With this work Ida introduces us to the poetics of the exhibition where big words such as nationality and identity are approached from their flipside; with curiosity, a sense of humour, distance and irony, putting an equals sign between facts and phantasmagoric auto-creation.

In moving to Indonesia two years ago, Ida created yet another home for herself. **Good times** is an imaginary living room in which she locates her “new memory”. While history is founded on the idea of objective narration, memories are traces of the past representing something absent. As such they always test the borders between reality and imagination and their representation. Ida's surrealist collages such as the one showing her Javanese cousin and husband with her Australian grandparents in the main street of Barmedman is a literal depiction of the mechanism of human memory which is always fluid, emotional and non chronological. In **Good times**, as well as in other works in this exhibition, the artist creates “heterotopias”,

spaces that are neither here nor there, that are physical and mental at the same time.

In **Like Madonna** the artist shares a childhood anecdote of when her Australian cousins, curious about Ida's “exotic” Javanese family, tried to piece together an understanding of a foreign concept using their own references and knowledge (in this case, of American pop culture). The incongruous way in which Ida's cousins came to “understand”, as narrated in this work, highlights the idea, meaning, need and implications of multiple perspectives. It also brings into discussion the process of learning, as on a personal and cultural scale.

**Map for Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John** and **More or Les: language exchange between Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John** are two works creating an imaginary communication between Ida and these two uncles or between the uncles themselves, one living in Australia and the other in Indonesia. In **Map** Ida invites her Australian uncle to come and meet her Indonesian family and for her Javanese uncle to make the journey to meet her Australian relatives. Through a montage of different media such as maps and letters the artist opens up an experimental space in which heterogeneous times and spaces coexist, contradictions are abolished and documentation and fiction are juxtaposed.

In **More or Les** the word “less” is misspelled, turning it into the Indonesian word “les” which means “lesson”. The title, a pun on the English phrase “more or less” (meaning “approximately”), is a reference to the difficulty of ever fully understanding the linguistic and cultural subtleties of another culture. The work presents a blackboard on which we see traces of Ida's uncles' imaginary meeting during which they teach each other their languages: Australian idiom and Javanese expressions and proverbs. By symbolically introducing her relatives to one another and creating a scenario where they learn about each other, the artist distances herself and observes a process she is herself going through, a process of confrontation and learning.

In **Eye Sea**, by drawing her Indonesian grandfather's eyes on one side of the canvas and her Australian grandmother's eyes on the other, and then fusing them in the middle, Ida attempts to create her own genealogical portrait. In this piece metaphor meets representation on one level. The portrait drawn with chalk is a “work in progress”, a constantly changing and evolving reality. By a subtle game with the viewer the artist inserts a personal and temporal complexity within the image. **Eye Sea** is the multiple character of cultural heritage in which the artist constantly tries to learn to locate herself in a portrait yet to be accomplished. “**Eye Sea**” when read “I See” is a self-portrait of Ida Lawrence here and now, a portrait of an artist who is to some extent already formed by two countries, two languages and two families.

**Melihat (Looking)** are pictures representing family members the artist has spent a lot of time with over recent years. Curiosity and interest in her family members and their daily lives naturally led to the artist's observation of and, often, participation in their activities. The drawings - made as if the artist is looking from the models' perspectives, or through their glasses - are literal interpretations of learning that may sometimes take the form of empathy; putting oneself in someone else's position.

The exhibition ends with an installation titled **Suara Leklekan Malam** (which can be read as meaning “the sound of melting wax”, “the sound of melting night”, “the sound of the night gathering” or “the sound of flaming wax”). The installation is situated in an isolated dark room in which the artist has placed two televisions on opposite sides. The televisions show footage from Indonesian and Australian news about the other and are veiled with cotton fabric. The fabric has been waxed with the *canting* tool, and dyed - as in the batik process that is practised in Kliwonan, including by Ida’s family. In the dyeing process the wax is usually boiled out and the complexity of the design is finally made visible. In this installation however, the artist has allowed the wax to remain on the fabric, suggesting that it is a work still in progress. The design, however, is not inspired by the traditional motifs used in Kliwonan, but by the night sky seen most clearly in isolated “bloody woop woop” areas such as Kliwonan and Barmedman. The fabric distorts the news footage into gentle light signals flashing across the installation space. After a while the televisions go off, leaving the audience in the dark, and soon a third waxed screen is illuminated as if by morning light. At the same time familiar, site specific morning sounds can be heard - such as birdsong at daybreak in Barmedman, and the mosque call to prayer, early morning sweeping and the noise of the markets in Kliwonan and surrounds. Between the three wax screens are wooden stools, like the ones the women of Kliwonan sit on to make batik, which invite the audience to not only sit and experience the “conversations” of the stars/televisions or of the daytime sounds of the two places, but also to participate in their own conversations. **Suara Leklekan Malam** creates an intimate sensory microcosm that brings together the most subjective and objective aspects of both countries under one sky.

**Monika Proba studied cultural studies in Warsaw and Paris and has a keen interest in film, baguettes, jathilan, onde-onde, writing and the visual arts. She has been living in Yogyakarta since September 2011.**

The above text was published as a catalogue essay to accompany the solo exhibition *(n)desa/bloody woop woop: stories from Kliwonan, Barmedman and between*, by Ida Lawrence:

TeMBI Rumah Budaya, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
12 - 22 April 2012

TeMBI Rumah Budaya, Jakarta, Indonesia  
2 - 12 May 2012