

# Interviews

## Interview with Pan Huiting

November 10, 2014 23:12



The term “Pulau NTU” is not an alien one for many young Singaporean students. Nanyang Technological University earned that moniker from its removed, inaccessible location in the South-West – so much so that it might as well be an island (*pulau*) in itself.

***Kepulauan*** – the malay word for archipelago – is an anthology of poems by students from NTU, and we speak with the artist behind the artwork, Pan Huiting. A cacophony of dark, glacial colours, the cover is all sorts of deafening and is a true representation of work that is found within its pages: prolific, streams after streams of well-crafted verses.

### How does your painting complement or echo the themes in *Kepulauan*?

I like the celebration of uniqueness as well as togetherness expressed in *Kepulauan*, so I thought about the significance that islands have for me and these were the islands dreamed up for us by artists – Watteau’s *Cythera*, Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*... the list goes on. In all these stories, shipwrecks are common because we have to journey out of our everyday in order for unique experiences – the fodder of art and literature – to happen to us. Sure, these are Anglosaxon references but Singapore is part of the larger archipelago of the world and storms and shipwrecks feature richly in Singapore’s history as well. All of us know the story of Sang Nila Utama from childhood. In the visual arts, the frame serves a similar isolating function. Island, isolate, insular... their common etymologies should give us a clue. This consciousness is embedded in the language that we use. I knew that the central image would be a ship tossed in a storm. As a nod towards the literary, I incorporated printer’s ornaments under the island in the painting. Originally used as spacers in typesetting, here they serve to set the island apart. I think this delineates – another word that treads the line between word and image – what we’ve been discussing about islands and frames very well.

### What is the painting meant to evoke when viewed?

Movement. Storm-tossed. I want viewers to find themselves on Lilliput.

### What were some difficulties faced while you were painting the artwork?

Time probably? There’s a deadline... and it doesn’t help that oils dry slowly.

### Did the knowledge that this would be a book cover affect the way you painted?

Yes (laughs). Even before I started painting Adeleena had already advised, “Not too dark!” I tried to keep her request in mind as I painted the waters lightning lit. But you need darks in order for the lights to stand out. If the whole painting is light, then it is no longer light at all.

### What is your favourite aspect of your painting?

It’s hard to say... everything works in tandem... I like it that people find it ambiguous. Someone told me that he sees the scales of dragon’s back. Another told me that it looks like a closeup of an open flower. It’s meant to be topsy turvy... I painted birds and fishes in the same realm. It’s like air is water and the birds are swimming and the fishes are flying. In landscape painting the ground is usually dark and the sky light. I reversed it for this painting.

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*Kepulauan* is available for purchase at [BooksActually](#), [Booktique](#), [Books Kinokuniya](#), [MPH](#), and [here](#).

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