

INTERVIEW WITH GABRIELLE BRADY AND POH LIN LEE

Filmmaker Gabrielle Brady and therapist Poh Lin Lee have been close friends since 2007. They met while both were living in Mongolia where they worked: Gabrielle was directing a TV series for teenagers and Poh Lin was working as a social worker with a domestic violence NGO. Over ten years they have both travelled and lived on opposite sides of the world, but always remained in close contact. In 2010, Gabrielle travelled to Benin, West Africa for the birth of Poh's first daughter, and Gabrielle's god-daughter, Poppy, who is also featured in the film. Gabrielle was living in Jakarta working on a film when Poh invited her across to Christmas Island for a holiday and to catch up. This was the beginnings of their collaboration on ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS.

Interviewer: *So Gabrielle, you first went to the Christmas Island as a tourist to visit Poh?*

Gabrielle: I was living in Jakarta at the time, so it was a short flight across. And I was thrown in to the beautiful paradise parts of Christmas Island. Poh was on holidays at the time and so didn't want to talk much about what was going on with her. But at the very end of my trip was a bit of a turning point. At that time asylum seekers were still allowed out of the centre for short afternoon trips around the island—usually just once every six months or so. And on one of these trips I went along and was able to meet three young guys from Afghanistan. There was immense relief that they were out of the centre for the afternoon and they were in high spirits. They shared jokes and songs. They were actually seeing the island for the first time—even though they had been there for over a year. When they were taken back to the centre there was just a very deep and heavy silence. It was so hard to let them go and not be able to do anything about it. After this Poh took me to one of the remote jungles. We cut our way through the growth. And at the look out, down below, for the first time, I could see the enormous high security detention centre. Imagining these young guys I had just met back in this anonymous and looming place was terrifying. I was lost for words. The stark contrast of the beauty I had experienced on the island and then this kind of horror I saw in front of me really marked me, along with the atmosphere and strangeness of the island. This planted a seed for the beginnings of the film idea.

Poh, were you aware from the beginning that your experience on the island could be a film?

Poh: When Gab first arrived to the island I was really in the grips of helplessness in terms of what we could or could not do as a counselling agency. The authorities were really starting to close the shutters in terms of information sharing. I had a feeling of relief that Gab, someone I'm so close to, was finally seeing my reality a little bit. But as much as I wanted to take action, I also felt a fear surround it. Literally everything we did was being monitored and we even thought that our emails were being monitored. So I was less open to any possibility of a film. But there was a turning point for me when they cancelled our plans to celebrate Refugee week. It was all shut down. This was such an explicit use of power and up until then I just hoped that maybe it would lessen

at some point and that things would resume. And at that point I realised it wasn't going to get better, it would only get worse and I had to think about what that meant for the people I was working with, myself and my family. So I felt a sense of urgency to work with Gab to create some kind of platform for those people seeking asylum that wanted to be a part of creating a record of what was happening on the island in this moment of time.

Gabrielle: I had said to Poh from the beginning that I am not interested in any image that has already been shown of the island in the media. So even down to the scene where we do see the detention camps, that the way we arrive at it in the film it's not like anything people have seen before. And Poh totally agreed. So we had this intention together. We wanted to avoid anything that was shown in the media before. In the film the detention centre has more of a psychological presence. The film explores the feeling of threat the place has—as a kind of pulsating force that emanates from the jungle.

So the island was a really big part of it for you?

Gabrielle: Yes. The island is the film.

Poh: The Island is also the intrigue...

Gabrielle: Definitely. The context of this specific island is so relevant to the overall film. Even the allegorical nature of an island itself. The history of Christmas Island is that there are no native people that have lived on that island. It's just the crabs. So everyone that lives there has immigrated by choice or by force at some point in recent history. My first impressions of the island was that it is like a paradise in many ways: the beautiful waters, the whales... I was even swimming with the dolphins on my first trip there. But then it's also incredibly wild and rugged and you really do get the sense that no one ever should have arrived there. Because there's not even a real landing point and it's got jagged rocks around the whole island. You feel the roughness and you feel very small in comparison to the movement of nature there. Even the waters are in constant movement between flat, idyllic and safe, and then a raging swell can bring 5 metre waves and be big enough to sweep cars out to sea. The island has a kind of double face that was a really interesting contrast for me. The idea of beauty and horror being so present in this one tiny island was a huge reason why I started digging deeper in the first place.

How did you both know that Poh should also be in the film?

Gabrielle: We were in discussion about Poh's role on the island and what she was witnessing for a long time. And in these discussions Poh would have a way of looking at it that was very unique—a kind of mix between philosophical, poetic, and reflective ideas around displacement. So it wasn't just her position as a therapist in the middle of this difficult situation, it was also the way Poh had of grasping what was happening and the way of engaging with it—this is what touched me deeply. Just as a philosophical approach or a poetic approach doesn't try to put in your face these message-driven ideas, but instead helps you to step back and see it in a much wider context of human themes. So for me it

was pretty clear early on that we would enter in the world of the island through Poh's eyes.

Poh: And for me, during the early parts of the process of working with Gab, I had this kind of realisation that I needed to step up and be in front of the camera, that I couldn't just be in the film as the therapist. With the asylum seekers and the locals and other people's stories, they are being really generous in their intimacy. If I only stayed as the therapist, this would be taking up a kind of privilege and position regularly used in my profession. I also understood that the implications for me in sharing my story were minimal in comparison to the people seeking asylum. Their decision to participate in the film propelled me forward and across that line to show myself as a mother, a partner, a woman, with all the bumps and complexities, rather than comfortably hiding behind just my professional identity.

Gabrielle: For me, it was also the way that Poh would speak to her daughter Poppy about it. She never tried to sugar-coat what was happening. Of course she also wasn't ever filling dark images in her head. But Poh and her partner Art were always treading this fine line and it was just captivating to watch those conversations. And in this very honest interaction I could almost see the situation for the first time. When Poppy was like, "That doesn't make any sense. That is completely unfair. Why are they there if they haven't done anything wrong? Why can't they come and out see the island?" I was like, yeah, this doesn't make any sense at all.

So Gabrielle, this helped you to find a perspective for the film?

Gabrielle: Yes it did. I think in a lot of really good films, it's not about showing something, or revealing something for the first time. It's just seeing the familiar in a new way that can then lead you to feel shocked or disturbed. We already knew a lot of what was going on—it was reported extensively within Australia. But suddenly in these conversations between Poh and Poppy the familiar became really disturbing. Because I was faced with the questions of how did we get here? I became completely disturbed by the situation.

How did you arrive at filming the therapy scenes?

Poh: Initially during the conversations with Gabrielle about how we might film with people—and what kind of scenes would be filmed—I had two things I was considering. I was thinking that interviewing someone, without a therapeutic framework could run the risk of inviting a linear, factual telling of one's story, similar to what is required by the immigration system in determining if someone is a "genuine refugee". So I was worried that if Gab did do this kind of testimony interviews, that in a way it might reinforce the very ideas we were questioning. My second concern was ensuring that people did not experience re-traumatisation. In thinking through how to record people's stories in ways that were similar to what I was witnessing in therapy—multi-storied and honouring of both effects and resistance—we started to look at the possibility of filming some therapy sessions.

Gabrielle: I was always really curious about Poh's work as a therapist in this kind of environment and was fascinated by the idea of what it would be like sitting in on a therapy session. To me that's the epitome of an intimate space. So when you have that against the vastness of the island—this presented a very interesting contrast to me. It was also a counter reaction to the media representation at the time. The policies themselves are all about distancing. Creating people seeking asylum at such a distance. So I was asking myself: what is the closest space we can be with someone. I was also really curious about filming in this space that is unknown—for all of the people in there. Including the person telling the story. So everyone is discovering. This creates a really interesting starting point for filming.

So in the therapy sessions you also witnessed something that people get to know about themselves and their lives that they didn't know previously? Which doesn't always happen in straight interviews.

Gabrielle: Exactly. To me this is far more interesting than a director's interview to somebody speaking directly in a testimony style about parts of their life they already know.

Poh: And I wanted to invite people to participate in a two way process and for them not to walk away feeling like they had yet again given away a part of themselves. I had a hunch that the filming process could be developed to be in itself therapeutic.