At the Waterline: Syaiful Aulia Garibaldi and the Ecology of Making

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When I first started working with mussels, what struck me wasn't entirely scientific wonder, it was how much the shells already knew. Left in acidifying seawater, they dissolve from the outside in, their structure quietly giving way to chemistry. There's something in that image I keep returning to when I think about Tepu's work: the way a material can carry the conditions of its environment inside itself, visibly, irreversibly, without any intervention from an artist or a researcher.

Syaiful Aulia Garibaldi or best known as "Tepu" always returns to the threshold: the edge where one system meets another, and where the living is indistinguishable from the dying. Trained first in agronomy, then printmaking at the Bandung Institute of Technology, and later environmental science, he has spent his career at the intersection of art and biological inquiry. *Lesap*, his solo exhibition at ROH, is perhaps his most ambitious articulation of this position yet, a work that travels from the mangrove coastlines of West Java to the gallery floor, carrying with it the biological, social, and material residues of that journey.

The journey begins, literally, with a river.

The Citarum runs from the mountains south of Bandung all the way north to the Java Sea, emptying at the coast of Muara Gembong. It is one of the most significant, and most burdened, waterways in West Java, carrying with it the sediment, the nutrients, and increasingly the industrial residue of everything it passes through. Tepu has been tracing this gradient for years. He lives and works in Bandung, a highland city that feels removed from the coast in atmosphere and altitude, but is connected to it by exactly this kind of invisible thread. The river is the thread.

For *Lesap*, he follows it to its mouth. At Muara Gembong, the coastline is receding. Land subsidence, driven by overdevelopment and groundwater extraction, combined with coastal abrasion, has been steadily consuming the shore. The mangrove ecosystems that once held the coastline– their root systems binding sediment, buffering wave energy, sheltering juvenile marine life– have been cleared or degraded. The families who live there have watched it happen. Those who remain hold a particular knowledge about their own shoreline that no satellite image or scientific survey fully captures.

In recent years, Tepu has worked with coastal communities in West Java facing acute environmental pressures: abrasion, land subsidence, the steady loss of coastline to both sea-level rise and overdevelopment. Mangrove ecosystems, which once served as natural buffers have been cleared or degraded along much of the Javanese coast. The communities that remain are navigating an environment that is visibly, measurably shrinking. Tepu's engagement with these places is not that of an outside observer. He has spent time there, worked alongside families, listened to the particular knowledge people hold about their own shorelines.

Earlier in his practice, his attention was focused inward, on the scale of the invisible. He was interested in what microorganisms look like when you blow them up large enough to see; the strange, often beautiful geometry of forms that exist just below the threshold of human perception. This took the form of paintings and sculptures that translated microscopic imagery into monumental scale, where the enlarged perspective of organisms invisible to the naked eye were rendered with precision and hushed reverence. Fungi were incorporated directly into gallery installations, their growth and decomposition becoming part of the work's duration. To visit those exhibitions over time was to witness a living system.

The materials in *Lesap* have a biography that mirrors this expansion. The process he has developed is curious, through algae harvested from river and mountain water is cooked down and combined with spores to produce a base medium. This mixture is then sealed and set aside to grow mold. The mold in itself, while manufactured, allows it to take control and manifest as its own being through its cultivation. It is something that is structural, chromatic and alive. Yeast introduces further variation in accent colors that bloom unpredictably across the surface. The artist is allowing the organism to take over, simply creating the conditions and in a way, negotiates with biology. Tepu has long incorporated living and decaying materials into his work, but the specificity of the sourcing here and the deliberateness of the geographic trace embedded in the material, gives it a new urgency.

There is a kind of attention that science trains you toward through careful observation of systems you cannot fully control, comfort with results you didn't predict, respect for processes that operate on their own timescales. Tepu brings that attention to his studio practice, and to the communities he works with, in a way that resists the extractive logic that so often governs the relationship between artist and subject, or researcher and site. He worked directly with Muara Gembong from the outside, using its materials, and returning something made from them.

The mural at the center of the exhibition extends this logic furthest. The concept originates from the waterline, the boundary where the sea meets the land, increasingly redrawn by subsidence and erosion. Tepu asked community members, including students and families from the affected coastline, to imagine the waterline together, then to participate in painting it. The technique he chose was sponge: a deliberately low-barrier, no training required. You press the sponge and drag it, and the surface records the particular weight of your hand, the angle of your arm, the moment you lifted off. Multiply that by many hands and you get something no single author could have made.

Antara Muara, first shown at Art Jakarta in 2024, continues to evolve alongside Tepu's expanding network of coastal sites. The original work used actual mangrove branches with mycelium leather, a composite developed in collaboration with Mycotech from mushroom cultivation waste. For *Lesap*, the mycelium leather is replaced by a composite made from ground shells sourced from Kali Baru, another maritime village on Jakarta's northern coast facing its own crisis of seashell waste accumulation. This somewhat new iteration of *Antara Muara* absorbs a new community's material surplus, transforming what a place discards into the substance of the work. A box in the piece was inspired by the toilets of Muara Gembong villagers, functional structures built on the water's edge, hovering above a coastline that can no longer reliably hold them.
What *Lesap* ultimately traces is a kind

of collage of places, communities, and timescales. The mountain gives water and wood. The river carries algae. The coast gives seaweed, shells, and a human story of loss and adaptation. The gallery receives all of this, transformed by heat, by mold, by many hands. The waterline that haunts the mural is simultaneously a geographic fact and a conceptual figure as individual gestures becomes collective form. You find yourself, in his exhibitions, inside a process, one that began long before you arrived and will continue long after you leave.

That is, in the end, the logic of the mangrove. It does not hold the coastline by force but by entanglement through its sheer, patient complexity of its root system and making its place hospitable to the next generation of itself. Tepu's practice has something of that character: persistent, intricate, shaped by what it touches.

I think about this often in the context of my own work: of how the mussel shells dissolve in water that has changed its chemistry, the material carrying inside it the conditions of an environment under pressure. In my own practice, I work with the calcium carbonate structures of Mytilus shells, grinding them into hash and embedding them into unfired clay vessels that I take to the ocean and let dissolve. What I am drawn to in that process is the same thing I recognize in Tepu's. The moment when you stop imposing on the material and let it respond to its environment on its own terms. The ceramic vessel fails because it is built to fail, because failure is what the organisms it memorializes are experiencing right now, slowly, in water that is changing faster than they can adapt to.that is changing faster than they can adapt to.

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Alessandra Samson is a Singaporean-Filipino artist who is a dual Environmental Analysis and Art major whose practice exists at the intersection of both fields. Her most recent practice centers on creating large-scale ceramic vessels shaped like urns that dissolve at tidal zones, with video documentation to memorialize the organisms being impacted by ocean acidification. In the past, she has also created works exploring her identity of living between her two heritages, as well as her life abroad in America.