

## On 'Clouded Water: The Changing of Kok River.' An Exhibition.

What is the worth of art that pleads for justice yet strips its subject of dignity?

I have drifted through galleries without a word, but this. This spectacle of protest and prettiness, is the first to draw my voice, not in praise of the artist, but in defense of the fish whose suffering had been borrowed, painted, and displayed before they could be saved.

On the museum's second floor, I was met by a leviathan in protest. A great catfish, mouth agape, banners spilling from it like a prophet's tongue. "Stop" killing us they said. "Save lives". It stood at the threshold like an uninvited truth, the kind that bars your way until you feel its weight in your chest.

Somewhere along the Thai–Myanmar border, the river's skin has turned against its children. Catfish are born folded and broken, shaped by a sickness no one can see. The hands that once pulled them from the water now return empty.

I believed the mission was singular: to shield the fish from our cruelty. But the wall text spoke in two tongues, and somewhere between them, the mercy unraveled. Was I to grieve for the fish or for the fishermen? Was this a requiem for a species or an accountant's ledger of loss?

The river itself seemed undecided in which tragedy it wanted me to hold. And yet, in all of this, the fish itself was never named. Nowhere did the exhibition grant it the courtesy of its own species. I recognised it only by the faint sweep of its whiskers, a detail I might have missed, had I not recently watched a documentary where its kind still swam whole. Here, there was only one image, and that of a body already broken.

Not a single glimpse of a healthy form, as though the memory of what it once was must be erased. To strip a creature of its name, its image, and its wholeness is to kill it twice. Once in the river, and again in the story told about it.

Inside, the first wall struck like a current. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of painted fish swirled across the expanse, each one born of a different hand. The brushstrokes told their own hierarchy. Some precise and reverent. Others rushed, uneven, almost careless.

Bright primaries collided with soft pastels, interrupted by deeper, natural tones. Without tonal restraint, the palette leaned toward a festival-like vibrancy. And here, scattered among them, were cartoon intrusions. SpongeBob, Rick and Morty, and other pop culture flotsam grinning out from bodies meant to carry and embody grief.

The suffering of a species reduced to novelty, their deformity draped in irony. I was offended. Not for myself, but for the fish, whose tragedy had been co-opted into spectacle.

Behind them, photographs and images of farms hinted at the human economy tied to the river, but the fish themselves, the real, damaged fish, were slipping out of their own story.

The painted fish gestured toward migration, its spiraling form suggesting displacement and drift. But the jubilant palette, flirtations with pop culture, and uneven detail fragmented the grief. What should have lingered, scattered.

From the grand hall of swirling fish, I stepped out to the balcony, where the air opened and the river's reflection seemed to fold into the countryside skyline. Beyond the view, the catfish sculpture loomed. Part protest, part ornament. Its bamboo frame catching the light like a net in shallow water.

Its skeleton was bound in bamboo, its body patched with fishing baskets and protest cloths. The materials were raw: bamboo frames, woven traps, cloth banners, cut-out fish tethered with ribbon. Red and black skulls glared from the fabric, their outlines as blunt as warnings on poison bottles, speaking in the language of protest.

Yet here too, the urgency was softened: multicoloured fish dangled from the frame like festival charms. The reds and blacks of activist tone were diluted by decorative colour, and the message fractured between memorial and craft fair, between grief and community cheer. Some elements shouted "STOP," others invited you to admire the handiwork.

From the balcony, a narrow passage drew me toward the far corner of the floor, into a smaller, almost intimate chamber. The walls closed in, hung dense with paintings that pressed against one another. Landscapes beside abstractions, river scenes beside portraits, each vying for a voice in a space too small to hold them all.

One wall dreamed in oil landscapes, impressionistic strokes bending with the light on the water, naturalistic palettes occasionally punctuated with heightened reds or electric blues. Another leaned into heavy impasto and muted earth tones, as if painted from the riverbed itself.

Elsewhere, delicate line drawings brushed against cartoonish portraits, and fine botanical studies shared a wall with swirling graphite storms.

The river appeared here and there, but like a visitor, not a host. The emotional register broke. One wall read as pastoral study, another as experimental workshop.

Curatorially, the exhibition opened like a siren. Sharp, immediate, unignorable. The fish wall and central sculpture set a tone of urgency, even reverence. But the narrative frayed as one drifted further in. The corner pieces didn't falter for lack of merit, but for lack of translation. Each spoke in its own dialect, and no one bothered to teach the viewer the tongue.

There had been a press conference about it. The kind with invited guests, cameras clicking, and the choreography of a cause. It felt less like the rallying cry of a movement and more like an event on the museum's calendar, something to fill the hall before the next exhibition rolled in.

And there is nothing inherently wrong with that; art institutions must occupy their walls somehow. But the absence of genuine care for the creature at the heart of it all seeped into the work itself, muddying its purpose, until what should have been a clear act of witness dissolved into a polite spectacle. The fish was no longer the subject. They were merely was the excuse.

I left the msueum feeling heavier for the fish than when I arrived. Mining is deforming them. Killing them. Severing them from their river. But here too, even their dignity was being siphoned. drowned not by industry, but by intention. Cartoon smiles and community ornaments stood where lament should have. What began as a cry for life blurred into a chorus of contradiction. The river is breaking. But here, its story fractured into fragments, each too soft to carry the wound.

And no one is saved by fragments.

By Dorian Vale

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