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INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS ALLEN



# MODERN-DAY RITES

THE TURBULENT INNER WORKINGS OF THE MALAYSIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE SERVE AS CREATIVE FODDER FOR THE LIGHT SURGEONS' LIVE CINEMA PERFORMANCE, *SUPER EVERYTHING*.

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Christopher Thomas Allen, founder and creative director of the Light Surgeons, was recently spotted at the Kuala Lumpur Design Week after-party, holding a beer and looking slightly worse for wear. Given the occasion, who could blame him? After all, everything had literally just come to a head that evening. *Super Everything*, that is.

Nearly a year ago to the day of the party, Allen, an audio visual artist known for his studio's work on experimental music videos and art installations, and Tim Cowie, his creative collaborator on the aforementioned project, had journeyed to Kuala Lumpur by invitation of the British Council. To the UK-based duo, the brief came across as at once clear and exasperatingly opaque: develop an artwork that would serve to convey a holistic portrait of Malaysia as a nation. But while the act of eking out underlying narratives from a strange landscape wasn't exactly old hat, it wasn't really foreign territory either; the two had found themselves in a similar situation years before when they'd spend some months combing the state of New York in search of truths and myths for a performance-cum-documentary project titled *True Fictions*.

"We were just blown away by the variety of subject matter that came our way [through talking to the arts community in Kuala Lumpur]," says Allen. "From the beginning, the British Council was interested in us exploring identity. For us, this was interesting to look at in relation to Malaysia because of its mix of ethnic groups. There is, of course, also the whole 1Malaysia campaign." The country's tenuous juxtaposition of modernity and tradition clearly struck a chord with the artists from the outset.




By the time they returned to London, the pair was inundated with enough excess information about Malaysia for Allen to title the project *Super Everything*. "We wanted to make a work that would transcend that idea of one country or one nation, which could explore issues that would be relevant in other places – the environment, tourism and so forth," Allen recalls. "It took us a while to find the angle which eventually grew into this concept about ritual." With the support of the British Council and Canon, The Light Surgeons would return later that year to shoot the project and collaborate with local artists in the process. The epic trek took them across Peninsular Malaysia, from Kuala Lumpur to the most obscure reaches of Kelantan and Terengganu, in search of everyman stories.

The final work, a dynamic visual and audio commentary on identity, ritual and place, was showcased through an elaborate



patchwork of impromptu and pre-set motifs and presented in three parts at Publika Gallery alongside the Kuala Lumpur Design Week events. Documentary footage of the country's landscape had been rhythmically interlaced with video clips of Malaysians pronouncing their views on the project's key themes, and in an ambitious effort to bring an interactive feel to the performance, a live Twitter feed was embedded into the mélange of overlapping media, enabling audience members to contribute to the dialogue via smartphone. In order to enhance the relationship between cutting edge technology and older methods of storytelling, the talents of local musical contributors Hands Percussion and Rhythm in Bronze were enlisted, as well as the haunting presence of *Wayang Kulit* or Malay shadow puppets. The overall effect was at times unnerving, and almost always sensually beautiful.

The topic of consumerism notably exists as a recurring theme, reiterating Allen's initial fascination with ritual and what is involved in the sacred act – whether viewed against the backdrop of religion or of everyday life. "We all participate in this ritualistic culture of consuming things and disposing with them," he maintains. "As human beings, we've kind of lost the real meaning of ritual and we participate [in activities] without really realising what we're doing." The next step, says Allen, is to bring *Super Everything* to venues all over the globe, including the Sundance Film Festival, in the hopes that audiences may uncover their own respective ways of engaging with the themes, add their emotive feedback to the performance and help realise the subsequent dream of transforming the piece into what he calls, "a true survey of human existence." [supereverything.my](http://supereverything.my), [lightsurgeons.com](http://lightsurgeons.com) 

*Belief* is part of the project *Super Everything* showed at Kuala Lumpur Design Week.