



FRAN MILLER

QUIET EXPLORATION IN THE ISLANDS OF THE EQUATOR

Interview by Lucy Small
Images provided by Fran Miller

Fran begins our chat with a quote from an Al Jazeera article. It's about how salience is given to Western history and everything else is marked as periphery. The quote reads that the major events of the 20th century were not just the Second World War, the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, but rather the violent dismantling of the colonial empires throughout Asia and Africa. These were giant revolutions and liberations that thrust entire populations into the nationalist, capitalist global economic system. These battles for self-determination affected millions of people, yet the dominant narrative of global history has its scope tightly limited to events centred on the Western world. This may not seem like the launch of a surf story, but it's the space in which Fran Miller is currently existing.

Fran has mentioned a few times over the past year that people think that because she isn't posting much on social media anymore, that she isn't doing anything. She laughs at the idea that because something isn't documented on Instagram then it mustn't be going on. She laughs as she sails, camera in hand, to Indonesia's remote outer islands. She's probably still laughing as she puts together her book, build's her own studio in the bushes behind the Goldy and definitely still laughing as she gets barrelled in Sumba while we sit around scrolling through our social feeds. Fran opened up about identity, art and exploration.

SW: So, Fran, what have you been doing since you went underground?

Fran: I've started doing a deep exploration on colonialism, imperialism and surf exploration but from the subjectivity of a half-Asian, half-white, female modern surf explorer who has the privilege to travel. I decided to start a major body of work around that perspective. It's the subjectivity of my coming to terms with my being Asian, being

Australian and being in a privileged position of travelling to all these places that are experiencing post-colonialism or experiencing degrees of imperialism. I'm moving my direction towards artistic projects that convey my mindset, my emotions and everything I'm feeling about what I want to tell the world.

So, you went to northern Indo last year, what's it like there?

It opened a world to me that I'd never really thought about. There're very little modern imports of the stuff we're doing day-to-day but they're being severely influenced by the nature of the 15, 16 and 1700s when it was the heart of the spice trade at the time. Everything comes out of the ports there, the ports themselves are the central focus of the town. Something important is also the influence of Islam in the area. One of the most amazing, yet haunting experiences I have ever had was waking up on the first night of the boat trip in this little bay and there's no lights around, nothing anywhere. The most magical sound of the call to prayer is coming across the bay, it was a really stunning moment. The most beautiful sound emanating from the distance in a totally silent area. No other sound except the rocking of the boat.

How was it coming onto land? Do they see many foreigners there?

We went to one place and there was this old man with cataracts and he approached us with a machete. We grasped something was going on and we saw four teenage boys down the beach, they looked at us and were laughing. We realised we weren't appropriately dressed because we'd just swam in from the boat. We decided to move away from the old guy and approach the young boys because they seemed less hostile compared to the guy with the machete.

Was he holding the machete up? Where was the machete?!

Yeah, he was walking slowly toward us holding up the machete. We went down and spoke to the boys and they burst out laughing when one of the girls I was with who could speak fluent Indonesian said hi to them. They told us they hadn't seen a single white person in the last three or four years and they'd never seen a woman surfing. They didn't know women could surf.

What were your experiences like in West Timor and PNG?

I went on a trip to West Timor in September last year. The one day we pulled up to this little bay and there's this one-foot wave breaking. I went onto land to this tiny little village. We sat down and there was this lady whose name is Sophia. We were chatting and she said there were a couple of Westerners she'd seen in the past but it's not a big tourist town. Then she goes to me, "Can I show you something?" and invited me into her house. Inside, the rooms are separated by wooden barriers. She took me into this room and she opens the curtain and there's literally a dying lady on the floor. I ask my friend who's fluent in Indonesian to ask Sophia to explain what exactly I was looking at. Sophia says, "That's my mother, she's dying of bronchitis. We have no medication for her and she's lying here dying."

In PNG we were near this island and I swam to land and started walking for a bit. I see these two little boys and they run away from me, they can't even believe they're looking at me. Then this old man walks out from behind them and he comes over to me. He worked for the government of PNG at the time. He walks me around the whole island. There are two full-sized runways on the island built by the American army during World War Two. They literally told everyone they that had to leave the island, constructed two runways in the space of 10 days, defeated the Japanese from it and left with no reparations to the island. Douglan, the old man, was still talking about the impacts of poverty that they're



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experiencing currently from World War Two. All the top soil is washed away so they can't grow anything anymore. One of the stories in my book is about how I was walking along the path with Douglan and I was walking off to the side so I could walk next to him and he goes, "No, no, get back onto the path." When I asked why he said, "If you get a cut here, it will never, ever heal."

So how are you expressing these kinds of experiences in your art and photography?
 I'm seeing myself as an artist more these days. Not because I've done some major projects but because it's where my tendencies are lying and I want to express more deeply my sentiments and things like that. For example, something I'm constructing at the moment is touching on linguistic imperialism. Taking a sentence in English, constructing every letter as a puzzle piece and scrambling them so it doesn't read in English. That's kind of the direction I'm heading, more contemporary art. There are also photos involved. Something I really want to do is shoot macro infections. That probably sounds pretty weird, but it's in relation to the experiences I've had and seen the lack of access to medicine. It's so pervasive. We go to places where they don't have

band aids or antibiotics and a person is going to die from a scratch.

In what way is this exploring yourself and your identity?
 My mum is from Korea. She grew up in a tiny village with absolutely nothing. She was from a peasant farming family. They had no running water, no electricity. Grow your food or die. Growing up I tried to adopt a Western attitude and to appear as a white person in my society because I felt it was more welcoming and I could get away with it. I was ashamed of being Asian for sure. I remember being home one day, hating myself, wishing I was white. Now I feel like I've grown into myself. Now I'm so proud of my heritage and all of myself and my being. Something interesting to touch on is how surfing is so levelling. Catching a wave, it doesn't care who you are. Twenty-four years ago, I started surfing. That's a lot of waves, a lot of time in the water and I feel like I've managed to overcome a lot of difficulties metaphorically and literally, through surfing. Catching the biggest wave or the biggest barrel of my life, it resonated that I did that. I overcame those things. I am myself, a 32-year-old half-Korean, half-Australian woman, and I did that. 🙄