

## SHAPING GEOGRAPHIES, ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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# art, woman, southeast asia

A dancer moves across the screen. Accompanied by a jaunty piano score, her *danse tacquetée* is effortless and evokes the vivacity of the Spanish folk dance known as the *Cachucha*, similar to the Bolero. The time is 1981 and the dancer is Margaret Barbieri of the Royal Ballet performing a version of the legendary *La Cachucha* ballet dance of 1836 that was revived in the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The original dancer of *La Cachucha*, the Austrian Fanny Elssler (1810-1884), became internationally-renowned during the Romantic period as the first ballet dancer to popularise 'exotic' styles of dance in traditional European ballet standards.

On an opposite screen, another woman dances silently, accompanied only by the rustling sound made by the friction between the dancer's body and her costume. This dancer's lively movement mirrors Barbieri's 1981 performance yet, on closer inspection, somewhat differently. As she twirls her fan and executes her dance we discern that, in fact, the dance is a Balinese interpretation of *La Cachucha*. Notably, this second dancer is also the Balinese-born visual artist **Tintin Wulia** who has created the dual-screen film installation *Dos Cachuchas* (2018), included in the current exhibition.

As the two women dance in opposition, an 'in-between' space is activated for the exhibition visitor by the parallel placement of the two large screens projecting the *dos cachuchas* (two cachuchas). In doing so, the visitor's body becomes implicated in transmitting the story of *La Cachucha*'s migration across different temporalities, spaces and geographies, as suggested by Wulia's artwork, and indeed, the curatorial premise of this exhibition.

As Wulia explains, the video project *Dos Cachuchas* arose from her conceptual inquiry into dance through the lens of migration. From this perspective, dance can be understood as a form of language and translation that migrates across different cultural and historical contexts. At the same time, *Dos Cachuchas* also questions the notion of identity as rigidly defined by the nation-state, which in Indonesia includes constituent island geographies such as Bali. Continuing the legacy of Dutch colonialism, the Indonesian New Order government (1996-1998) implemented discriminatory regulations during the second half of the twentieth century. They defined 'Chinese-Indonesians' as a separate ethnic group and imposed a legal ban on Chinese-Indonesians in expressing their culture.<sup>2</sup> During this ban,

Wulia – who began dancing as early as she started to walk, making Balinese dance a kind of ‘native language’ to her – often had to assert her Balinese dance skills as proof of her Indonesian identity because of her Chinese ethnic background marked by her perceived ‘Chinese looks.’ Following the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Wulia’s intimate act of performing a translation of *La Cachucha* with her Balinese dancing body may be read as a reflection of her complex relationship with her own ‘impossible’ and ‘necessary’ identity. She states, “while my interrogators made it necessary for me to have to prove my identity, at the same time the fact that I had to prove it deemed my identity impossible.”

Interestingly, Elssler’s cultural fluidity strengthened her cosmopolitan belonging in the changing world of the nineteenth century. In the context of her performances in New Orleans for instance, she appealed to people of both Spanish and French descent in her shifting performances between the great ballets of the Paris Opera and her renditions of *La Cachucha*. Meanwhile, Wulia’s global movements as an international contemporary artist of the twenty-first century have provoked for her a questioning of her formative years in Bali in shaping her present-day geographies of belonging. For Wulia, *La Cachucha* raises important questions regarding notions of cultural authenticity and sameness as dance migrates from one cultural context to another. Given that processes of cultural adoption and translation are never straightforward or identical, it is inevitable that *La Cachucha* should result in myriad and hybrid forms of the ‘same’ dance. This is made even more complex by *La Cachucha*’s twentieth-century revival through secondary and tertiary archival sources, whereby not only does the dance migrate culturally but also across different temporalities and materialities.



Detail of Tintin Wulia's *Dos Cachuchas*, 2018

### **SOUTHEAST ASIAN WOMEN ARTISTS SHAPING GEOGRAPHIES**

For the exhibition *Shaping Geographies* we invited eleven women contemporary artists from Southeast Asia to engage with the notion of geography – as shaped by their positionality as women. Here ‘geography’ is being imagined as an arena where space is not fixed. Instead, it is defined through changing political, cultural and social relations with the idea and sense of place understood as always shifting and often contested; and finally, with the environment understood as the deeply interconnected effects and integrated system of both the socially-constructed and natural worlds. Moreover, in curating an exhibition on women artists from Southeast Asia, we have also been interested to actively inquire into the terms ‘Southeast Asia’ and ‘women artists.’

In connecting gender and geography, feminist geographers throughout the 1980s and 1990s – such as Janet Townsend, Janet Henshall Momsen, Naila Kabbeer and Ananya Roy – challenged the orthodoxy of the field with its delimiting dichotomies of the private and public, production and reproduction, and culture and nature. In their studies of social reproduction, domestic space, communities and bodies, gendering rather becomes an analytical description of a process through which experiences of being woman are integrated into existing analyses of, for example, labour, the state and the city. In a sense, one could understand such research as motivated by an interest to pursue the ‘intimate’ – or *intimate geographies* – and its links to broader structural processes and relations of power.

In this spirit, we invited artists in this exhibition to respond, explore, and also, to challenge traditional notions of space, place and environment – as shaped and framed by their position as women. In essence, our curatorial approach has been a form of critical inquiry towards existing ideas of geography as a field and as a practice. Thus, the exhibition rather encourages us to look, closely and intimately, at the shapes and patterns that make up life. It explores the intersecting lines, grids, circles, trajectories and complex geometries of places,

people, spaces, histories, memories, energies, forces and affects; and how these entangle and disentangle with each other, to build networks, cities, neighbourhoods, regions and worlds – from a gendered perspective.

Our curatorial approach acknowledges prior exhibitions of Southeast Asian and Asian women contemporary artists and is conscious of this exhibition history. Significant exhibitions of Southeast Asian women contemporary artists include *Womanifesto* (Thailand, 1995-2008), *Women Imaging Women* (the Philippines, 1998, 1999), and the pan-Asian *Text and Subtext* (Singapore, 2000). At the global level, exhibitions such as *Global Feminisms* have also recognised the significance of Southeast Asian women artists within international histories of women’s, and specifically feminist, contemporary art practices.<sup>3</sup> Such exhibitions foreground the distinct voices and practices of women artists from the region. While each prior exhibition had their own curatorial strengths and limitations, a shared premise was to elevate the marginalised stories and voices of women suppressed under patriarchy. For example, works in the *Text and Subtext* exhibition emphasised the radical possibility of women as makers and producers of meaning through their practice. Importantly, these exhibitions also contributed to the long-standing project of recovering art histories, whereby curators and art historians ‘rediscover’ works by women artists that have been forgotten in the mainstream or national art historical narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Our curatorial premise for *Shaping Geographies* develops from these ideas and exhibition precursors. In doing so, we acknowledge the pathways that previous generations of women artists, curators and art historians have paved for the current generation. At the same time, we also wish to emphasise a new direction and alternative sense of urgency for many women artists in responding to issues that are distinct from prior exhibitions of Southeast Asian women artists. An example of this shift can be observed in recalling curator Binghui

Huangfu's remarks in her essay for the *Text and Subtext* exhibition in 2000. Huangfu noted that "many male artists have taken up contemporary art as a form of social protest, and the same can be said for women artists... [U]nlike their male counter parts they seem to be less obviously seeking a grand audience."<sup>5</sup> By contrast, we suggest that through their art the women artists in *Shaping Geographies* make bold yet intimate statements that resonate across the multiple scales of the local, regional and global. Moreover, unlike earlier moments in contemporary art practice from the region, the artists in the current exhibition seem less preoccupied in unpacking the notion of 'contemporary art' per se (the idea, manifestations and practices of contemporary art) as relates to Southeast Asia or Asia; rather, two decades into the twenty-first century, it is acknowledged that contemporary art has its own distinctive histories and practices in Southeast Asia, including by women artists.

Indeed, the regional curatorial imaginary we adopt for this exhibition continues a now established exhibition history of connecting the region with contemporary art making, which intensified in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The imagined geopolitical construct of Southeast Asia has been regularly employed by scholars and curators, both inside and outside Southeast Asia, to investigate distinctive manifestations of 'the contemporary' across the region, to explore the region's interconnectedness, and to foreground alternative geographies that are experienced outside of national and global frameworks even as nationalist paradigms and interests persist. Art historian Pamela Corey, for example, has noted that metaphors of geography – such as The Mekong River – have been used to lend credence to the idea of a connected region and to satisfy regional and global imaginaries of a unified Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as she also argues, for those who are working within the region, these geographical constructs overlay complex political realities of living in Southeast Asia and mask intra-regional tensions and outsider influences, such as China's heightened political and economic presence in the region in the twenty-first century. This points to the need to be constantly attentive to the changing meaning of geographical metaphors as they are constantly in flux; that we need

to always situate the significance of imagined geographical constructs within the actual histories and lived realities of shifting experience specific to Southeast Asia. As writer and artist Susie Lingham notes in her essay for the *Text and Subtext* exhibition,

The quintessence of Asian-ness, in particular Southeast Asian-ness, is already a paradoxical 'multiplicity', not merely reducible to a single motif but a repetition of morphing motifs.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, in curating our exhibition the regional frame of Southeast Asia has allowed a flexible negotiation of both sub- and supra-national formations. Film scholar Jasmine Nadua Trice also speaks to the enabling possibilities of the regional lens, arguing that it affords us opportunities to see "interconnections across the Global South, and across subnational points of comparison such as gender and sexuality."<sup>9</sup> Following philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, it has also been germane to think of the 'region' of 'Southeast Asia' as a 'pass-word' – that moves and agitates – instead of an 'order-word' – that fixes and defines. In this way, we work through Southeast Asia's dual status as something carrying its own if contested integrity (such as its collection of nation states), yet also being a region marked by other characteristics, something other than its physical borders.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in our approach to the region we attend to the intersecting lines, images, and words coming from the region (or regional situations), but at the same time hope to be never contained by such regional characteristics. Rather, we recognise that these elements at times also overflow the accepted borders of Southeast Asia, and for contemporary artists, enables spaces of critical transformation and imagination for rethinking the past, present and future. In this regard too, we move away from a romantic perception of Southeast Asia as a region defined by an unchanged past and rather situate our curatorial interest in the region as an affective counter-geography – that helps to complicate totalising national and global narratives – in the present.

Similarly in focusing on ‘women’ artists, the exhibition does not presume that art made by women is a vehicle for some kind of essential or eternal woman-ness, nor that there is any obvious, literal, or uniform relationship between the sex of the maker and the work produced. *Shaping Geographies* instead focuses on works by women artists that attends closely to art’s potential to signify gender differently and to materialise women’s subjectivity, as discussed by the feminist philosopher, Elisabeth Grosz.<sup>11</sup> The curatorial framing reflects the complex relationship between the corporeality and subjectivity of the artist-creator, and the artwork’s materiality and its effects in marking the bodies of the artist and their audiences. For instance, Filipina artist Imelda Cajipe Endaya sums up the inextricable connection she feels between art-making, and being a woman and a feminist when she says, “As feminists we are artists first, and as artists we are women first.”<sup>12</sup>

Relatedly, Trice notes that the term ‘Southeast Asian women artists’ should be seen as taxonomies that classify according to gender and scale.<sup>13</sup> As Trice also reminds us, it is crucial to consider how taxonomies have been produced institutionally – in our case, this is through prior art exhibitions, the work of art museums, and related art historical scholarship, for instance. Indeed, the significance of Japanese cultural institutions in helping to shape Southeast Asian art histories is a connective thread through the experiences of some of the artists and artworks in the exhibition (in works by Suzann Victor and Anida Yoeu Ali, and more informally through Kayleigh Goh and Savanhday Vongpoothorn’s works).

Art historian Joan Kee has also reflected on the significance of scale in framing our understanding of the broad category of ‘contemporary Asian art.’<sup>14</sup> Kee notes the challenges to paying attention to the various scales (or measurements) that comprise the world of (globally mobile) contemporary Asian artists.<sup>15</sup> Seen in this light, the dexterity of women artists to negotiate and address multiple scales – of the local, national, and transnational

– can be regarded as a form of agency, and this we suggest, is evident in the practices of the artists in the exhibition. Further, in *Shaping Geographies*, the notion of scale (in units of measurement, in technique and in research processes) is also connected with the aesthetics of intimacy or art-making that attends to intimate relations of looking and responding to the world.

Geographers Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli define intimacy as three sets of intersecting relations: spatial relations, a mode of interaction, and a set of practices.<sup>16</sup> All these relations draw out proximity and the personal as their central features, connecting proximate bodies and households with distant ones, within “interpersonal, institutional and national realms.”<sup>17</sup> Importantly, some of the artworks selected for this exhibition look at the intersection between geography and intimacy by unpacking the notion of intimacy itself. We see how the term is no longer limited to dimensions of life taking place at close quarters, spatially and socially. Rather the intimate also constitutes a powerful framework for rethinking and challenging the larger political ideologies and regulatory forces that govern contemporary social subjects and social bodies in the public sphere – and in the case of the exhibition, artists use the framework of the intimate to illuminate women’s significant place in history and the present.



Installation view of *Shaping Geographies - Art | Woman | Southeast Asia*

### CHALLENGING THE ARCHIVES OF HISTORY

**Nguyễn Trinh Thi's** *Eleven Men* (2016) is a project that draws from Vietnam's national film archive, and alongside Wulia's *Dos Cachuchas*, is one of two moving image works in the exhibition. Nguyễn's film engages found images to re-present an alternative vision to the officially remembered history of Vietnamese women's experience and significance in nationalist projects. In particular, Nguyễn departs from the heroic meta-narratives of nationalism and instead hones in on the relationships between men and women in Vietnamese films, offering intimate filmic portraits of them, to redress the elided topic of women's subjectivity and desire.

At the same time, *Eleven Men* offers a durational filmic portrait of the popular Vietnamese actress, Như Quỳnh, whose acting career over three decades became the source material for Nguyễn's historical tracing and re-interpretation of women in Vietnam's cinema history. *Eleven Men* is composed of a number of scenes from different Vietnamese classic narrative films featuring Như Quỳnh – from 1966 to 2000 – and mostly produced by the state-owned Vietnam Feature Film Studio. Như Quỳnh was a regular in socialist films of the 1970s and later starred in the French co-productions *Indochine* (1992), *Cyclo* (1995), and *Vertical Ray of the Sun* (2000) – scenes from the latter two appear in *Eleven Men*. In selecting and reassembling these different scenes from different films into a single narrative, Nguyễn foregrounds the less noticed moments in these films and, in contrast to usual nationalist imagery of “sweeping panoramas of war, landscape or statecraft,” her interest lies with close-ups of individuals, rescaling the original scenes to emphasise the human face as a window onto a person's subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as Trice notes, Nguyễn's “reconstructive tactics evoke critiques of normative historical narrative, ... and suggests an alternative logic of time by critically engaging with the archive of official history.”<sup>19</sup> On this Nguyễn responds, “Vietnam has been a Communist country for a very long time, and

we only have one kind of official history, written by the Communist Party. So, I am always very interested in a different kind of history, and I try to do different work. ... It's a way to re-interpret history."<sup>20</sup>

*Eleven Men* is the second film in Nguyễn's multi-part series *Vietnamese Classics Re-Cut* (2011-2012). The series became possible after the Vietnam Feature Film Studio released a number of its classical socialist films to DVD. Indeed, the significance of *Eleven Men* can only be fully understood in relation to the introduction of Vietnamese cinema and its role in supporting the revolution and unification of North and South Vietnam. In this period of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, as film historian Nguyễn Hoàng Quý Hà explains, "cinema played an essential role in mobilizing women for the resistance and helped redefine a new perception of socialist womanhood. On the one hand, revolutionary cinema performed a new form of patriarchy, restricting women to traditional activities; on the other hand, it carved out a space for women's subjectivity with an emphasis on their heroism and militancy-related skills."<sup>21</sup> Departing from this normative narrative of the ideal Vietnamese woman, Nguyễn's film instead foregrounds woman's experience, subjectivity and desire within the heteronormative relationships celebrated in these Vietnamese classic films. This motivation is set from the very outset of the film when, even before we see any imagery, a woman's voice launches *Eleven Men* announcing, "I have eleven men. The first is outwardly very plain, but serious and clever."

*Eleven Men* is carried by the voice of a woman who narrates a fictional story about the eleven men in her life. The voice-over is in fact narrated by Nguyễn herself, and the ageing images of Như Quỳnh over her acting career stand in as a proxy to the woman narrator's voice. As Nguyễn explains, the narrated text is her reworking of Franz Kafka's short story 'Eleven Sons' first published in 1919 and which "begins with a father's declaration: 'I have

eleven sons,' then describes each one of them in acute and ironic detail." In *Eleven Men*, instead of the father's voice of Kafka's story, Nguyễn empowers the emblematic woman figure of classic Vietnamese films, as represented by Nguyễn, with the authorial agency to describe in intimate detail all the qualities of her eleven men.

Continuing the interest in rewriting the official archives of history, **Suzann Victor's** new work *She's Closer Than You Think* (2019), seeks to make visible how the modern nation state in Southeast Asia has been shaped by often unacknowledged and invisible histories of female labour across the region. As certain parts of Southeast Asia have undergone intense programmes of modernisation and globalisation since the late decades of the twentieth century, certain stories have been remembered for Southeast Asia's futures while others have not. The hidden histories of women's labour and associated trauma is one such forgotten/invisible narrative in the official archive. Through her artwork, Victor rather points to the types of "underlying geographies that prop up current ones through the lens of 'unskilled' female labour" across the region. *She's Closer Than You Think* is a visual commemoration and tribute to the life of one such significant woman and her labour, integral to the shaping of modern Southeast Asia. It also forms part of a lineage of works in Victor's practice that engages in discourses of women's trauma.

For this work, Victor continues her long-standing visual experiments with the lens as a device for refocusing our perspectives on the past, present and future.<sup>22</sup> This idea also represents a further development of the artist's lens mural series produced from her residency at STPI (Singapore Tyler Print Institute) in 2015, and which presented an 8 metre-long fictional national portrait of a Singapore comprising a family of diverse races, backgrounds, status and walks of life during the so-called 'coolie days' prior to independence, in the period between 1920s–1950s.

Harking back to this same period, Victor's work for the current exhibition is a life portrait in honor of a Malaysian friend's late grandmother, pictured at different stages of her life. In extending her interest to Malaysian histories, Victor inquires into issues of shared women's experience across present-day Southeast Asia. The portrait is comprised of multiple black-and-white images of Victor's friend's grandmother. Yet, our perception of these images is not immediate as they are altered by an overlay of lenses which acts as an interface, at once hindering and enabling our view of the images – much like the physical effect of tears that at once blur and clarify one's sight. In the viewer's necessarily shifting lateral movements to see what is in the background, the lens interface causes the images behind to alternately magnify and fade out, reminiscent of the way that memories can intensify or grow faint over time and space. The lenses also bear burn lines or 'cracks', invoking broken bloodlines or geographic boundary lines; sometimes, the cracks are so large (and deep) that they afford us direct glimpses or slivers of the image behind the lens curtain, as if revealing different parts of a story.

It is only upon close inspection that we may realise that the portrait behind is comprised of the multiple black-and-white images of Victor's friend's grandmother. This monochrome memory field of photos of the past is an 'image map' of this grandmother's unique life story. The images of her have been digitally 'sutured' together in a single composed image. They are overlaid on a meticulously composed, brightly coloured backdrop that is abundant with wondrously detailed renderings of flowers, birds, insects and fishes – different motifs derived from antique Chinese bowls and plates. While all the imagery is initially composed by Victor through a digital process, the final has been meticulously painted in a realistic style closely approximating the digital composition.



Detail of Suzann Victor's *She's Closer Than You Think*, 2019

Most significantly for Victor is that this friend's grandmother was taken away in her youth to become a so called 'comfort woman' – a euphemism to refer to the women forced into sexual slavery by Japanese occupiers to provide sex for Japanese soldiers, before and during World War II. Thus, the imaging of her friend's grandmother's story is an attempt to address historical geographies of women's trauma that repeat across Southeast Asia and which continue to shape the present. As Victor has explained, "this transgenerational trauma has been eclipsed thus far by the furore generated by the politicisation of the comfort women issue and the revisionist history/ies imposed upon it" – the 'image map'

painting includes the images of the second and third generation – Victor’s friend and her sister as little children and their mother (the outcome of Victor’s friend’s grandmother’s time as a comfort woman) as a toddler and as an adult woman with children of her own. Intersecting with this is a form of transnationalism affecting different generations across Southeast Asia, born out of the ugliness of war. After DNA testing in her forties, Victor’s friend shockingly discovered that what she regarded as her Chinese identity up to then was instead confirmed as Japanese by bloodline. Thus, as Victor suggests, the effect of war is not only to occupy territories but “to ‘spread’ race through the violation and ‘occupation’ of women’s bodies not only at the time but inter-generationally as well.” For Victor’s friend, this discovery has caused much inward-directed conflict and hatred for the part of her that embodies the violence and atrocities done onto her grandmother and other women by Japanese soldiers of this period. Working with Victor also presented Victor’s friend an opportunity to tell the important story of her grandmother and to celebrate her life and legacy. As ongoing research in process, *She’s Closer Than You Think* forms part of a larger image narrative that Victor is working on about unacknowledged women’s labour in Southeast Asia – the domestic servants known as *Amahs*, the sexual slaves known as *Karayuki-san*, and the *Samsui* women who gave up the opportunity for marriage and intimacy to work in the traditionally male-dominated construction industry – in order to present an alternative portrait of what womanhood and femininity looked like in the period of the 1920s to 1950s, as a counterpoint to the kinds of images found in official national archives across the region.

## **RADICAL BODIES**

If the intimate registers scale at the socially-lived and embodied level of the personal and inter-personal, in the artworks in this exhibition such intimacy is often reflected through the signs and gestures of the intimate rather than via a didactic aesthetics. Of course we have encouraged such an ‘intimate’ enquiry of Southeast Asia through our curatorial direction, but this may also be an interesting point of difference and revealing in the way women artists are approaching the kinds of meta-narratives and (patriarchal) structures that have dominated how we live and relate to each other in the modern world. The body is an especially pertinent marker of such intimacy – both the woman artist’s body and the body/ bodies she represents in her art. It is precisely in representing the intimacy of women’s bodies that the body also offers radical potential.

As earlier generations of feminist artists highlighted, the work of women artists is often an important way of countering women’s invisibility in society. Crucially, women artists have challenged the kind of patriarchal gaze that traditionally serves to objectify women in artistic and other visual representations, and more to the point, women artists have demonstrated that they have the agency to represent women’s bodies themselves. Not surprisingly, the (woman’s) body has remained a constant source of artistic inspiration throughout women’s contemporary art practices over a number of generations. Perhaps a difference is that now the body is less of a vehicle for exploring the artist’s own personal identity and instead a means to give visibility to other women’s stories. Included in *Shaping Geographies* is one of Victor’s earliest installations, *Promise*, a work that offers a radically intimate and political reading of women’s bodies. It is only the second time that this artwork has been exhibited since its first showing in Japan in 1995 as part of the seminal exhibition *Visions of Happiness* featuring ten Asian contemporary artists.<sup>23</sup> Curated by Shimizu Toshio, the exhibition sought to shine a light on a new generation of Asian artists

at the forefront of contemporary art practice across the region. Notably, Victor has also been part of formative exhibitions of ‘Southeast Asian’ and ‘Southeast Asian women’ artists, including *Text and Subtext*.

*Promise* presents a pair of seamless white garments, draped over a central table. The garment/s are hung in opposition to each other and, as the artist suggests, they appear to “rise in confrontation.” They are accompanied by clanging woks, disembowelled bread loaves that glow and emit a toasted scent from the warm lightbulbs within them, as well as concentric circles of vibrant red ‘hairscript’ laid on the floor. The work was an extension of Victor’s prior installation, *His Mother is a Theatre* (1994), created just one year before *Promise* and shown in Singapore in response to new proscriptions on performance art.<sup>24</sup> In *His Mother is a Theatre*, Victor “reclaim[s] the censored body of performance” but it is even more particular in its address of the disembodied *female* body. Instead of mimicking the female figurative form in visual representation, Victor instead uses words to prompt the viewer to do their own work in imagining women’s bodies – uterus, amniotic fluid, umbilical cord, and fallopian tubes, among others are ‘writ large’ on the floor. Moreover, in reworking *His Mother is a Theatre* to create *Promise*, Victor rather drew from the Japanese context in which the *Visions of Happiness* exhibition was sited. The concentric rings of words scripted and sculpted from bright red hair invoked the red sun motif of the Japanese flag, shaped through writing woman’s body. Here, the bodies of so called *ianfu*, or Korean ‘comfort women’ as well as the Japanese *Karayuki-san*’s body are re-membered by Victor as “part of the arsenal of war” and the making of modern Japan. *Karayuki-san* (literally meaning ‘Ms. Gone Abroad’) were impoverished Japanese women who went overseas to work as prostitutes – mainly in Southeast Asia – during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, servicing the demands of the Japanese military, foreign indentured labourers, and locals.<sup>25</sup> This international network of Japanese prostitutes was labelled the ‘Yellow



Installation view of Suzann Victor's *Promise*, 2019

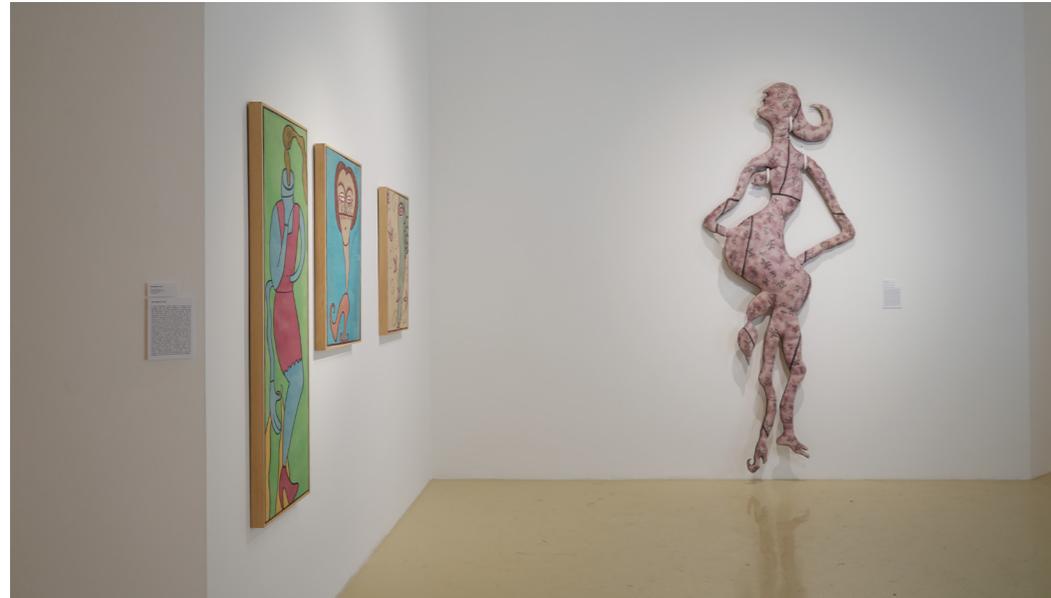
Slave Traffic.’ These young impoverished girls were trafficked, coerced, sold or deceitfully recruited to become comfort women.<sup>26</sup> Discussion of both *ianfu* and *karayuki-san* has largely been contested and suppressed in the public sphere in Japan, and the bodies of these enslaved women made invisible.<sup>27</sup> Victor’s installation protests such censoring, boldly declaring the histories that these women’s bodies became brutally enslaved to. More than twenty years on from *Promise*’s first showing in Japan in 1995, representing the truths of comfort women in the public sphere in Japan remains highly sensitive, as witnessed by the recent censoring of work in The Aichi Triennale exhibition in 2019.<sup>28</sup>

As with Victor, there is a radical address of the physicality of women’s bodies in the work of the late Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek (**IGAK Murniasih (Murni)**), particularly in the context of conservative contemporary attitudes to representing women’s bodies and sexuality in modern Indonesia.<sup>29</sup> Murni’s paintings since the early 1990s are well known to have traversed the landscape of intimacy through the artist’s bold depictions of the female body, and expressions of her inner feelings with regards to female sexuality and desire. The artist was an autodidact who learnt painting from the Balinese artist I Dewa Putu Mokoh – who taught her the traditional Balinese *Pengosekan* painting style – and Edmondo Zanolini – also an artist and who became Murni’s life partner in Bali, later collaborating with her in art. The *Pengosekan* style, as characterized by the thick black ink outline and grading inside the outline, gives Murni’s paintings their distinct soft lines. While Murni used traditional techniques to create her art, her subject matter remained emphatically modern and deeply intimate.

Hendro Wiyanto, curator and writer, observes that Murni was less interested in depicting everyday scenes as her mentor Mokoh did.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Murni was also less interested in filling her canvases with objects and shapes that generally occupied the canvases of

traditional Balinese painters. Wiyanto attributed this tendency to Murni’s affinity to the works of I Gusti Nyoman Lempad (1862-1978), one of the prominent painters of the pre-war period in Bali.<sup>31</sup> In Lempad’s paintings, the decorative background was stripped bare to bring focus to a single scene or subject matter, an approach that was considered groundbreaking at the time. Murni’s strategy was quite similar, but in contrast to Lempad, she filled the ‘empty’ spaces with colour plays. The artist explored a variety of colours – from muted ochre or teal that echoed *Pengosekan* style, to vivid neon greens and pinks that resembled street stickers often seen on public transport in Indonesia. These spaces not only functioned as a background to the object, but they also spoke eloquently of Murni’s strong instincts for colour and composition. Equally important was the artist’s strategy in representing bodies – in Murni’s words, “the body is beautiful and cannot be expressed in words.”<sup>32</sup> More specifically, the body in Murni’s art is an expression of her particular observations and self-reflections from the position of her female subjectivity.

Dating from 2000 and 2001, the three paintings by Murni included in *Shaping Geographies* exemplify these distinguishing characteristics of the artist’s approach and style. We can see how the artist has applied the colour scheme and single subject matter that typify her painting practice. Moreover, the fantastic and grotesque figures that dominate Murni’s oeuvre are present. This is seen, for example, in the distorted and reassembled body depicted in *Disaat Itu Aku Sedang Sakit* [I Was In a Lot of Pain Then] (2000) and body parts that take on comic proportions in *Aku Susah Bernapas* [I Have Difficulty Breathing] (2000). The painting *Aku Sedang... [I Am...]* (2000) also characterises the artist’s delight in word and visual plays. The painting appears to represent a phallic form, surrounded by a group of half circles and abstract patterns on a teal background. The playful title and imagery suggest the artist’s well-known worldview, namely that she did not identify with the restrictive norms governing female sexuality in Bali.



Installation view of paintings and sculpture by I Gusti Ayu Kadek (IGAK) Murniasih (Murni)

Murni has stated that she painted her own life. Most writers have translated this statement by interpreting her paintings as a reflection of her difficult life trajectories, namely her well publicised story<sup>33</sup> of sexual abuse and domestic violence before she found solace in art. In 2000, the artist had major surgery to remove a uterine myoma, and as a result, was unable to conceive naturally. Her experiences during this time could be seen to have inspired the paintings in this exhibition. Indeed, while her life stories were the building blocks of her art making, it was her imagination that took firm hold in her painting. Alongside Murni's paintings in *Shaping Geographies* is her soft sculpture, *Thumb* (undated). The work is a testimony to Murni's development and confidently affirms her identity as an artist. The misshapen female figure with elongated body parts echoes the female figures in her paintings. Yet, in contrast to the paintings, the sculpture bears Murni's repeating signature stamped all over the sculpted body, forcefully registering her authorship as artist and quite possibly also, metaphorically signing her claim to her body.

### BEYOND THE SELF: COLLABORATIONS, COLLECTIVES, AND COMMUNITY

Significantly, compared to the 1980s and 1990s, it is now more common for women in Southeast Asia to work full time as professional artists. Whether this growth has a direct influence on the new tendencies we see in women's art practices is unclear but what is noticeable in the works in this exhibition is less of a focus on issues of self-identity that was a common theme in women's art practices of the 1980s and 1990s (such as the late Murni's works) to stories of women's connection and human connection. Alongside this is a general interest from individual to collaborative or community-based practices, as seen in works by Savanhday Vongpoothorn, Yee I-Lann, Muslimah Collective, and even Suzann Victor and Geraldine Javier's new works are generated from collaboration and/or collective work. Furthermore, as women are finding their voices and strengthening their networks, they are also reminding us that the political is inextricably tied with the personal. Some artists actively use their art practice to reflect socio-political issues and effect changes within their community such as the works by Muslimah Collective in Thailand, and Yee I-Lann's collaboration with women weavers in Sabah highlights womens' collective creativity and labour.

The works by **Muslimah Collective**, an all-women art collective from southern Thailand, highlight the ways emotional geographies operate in the context of the environments that frame everyday activities and interactions. Muslimah Collective artists Nuriya Waji, Keeta Isran, Kusofiyah Nibuesa, Arichama Pakapet, and Heedayah Mahavi, document the geography of the daily lives of Muslim women in the Patani region in southern Thailand. The region, which consists of Malay Muslim communities, has experienced an ongoing military conflict with the Thai government for over fifteen years. Scholars have estimated that more than 6,500 people have been killed and almost 12,000 people injured, as a result of the military operations on both sides.<sup>34</sup>



Installation view of artworks by Heedayah Mahavi (left) and Keeta Isran (right)

Isran remarks that, "... in all the discussion of war and violence, it is the stories of women who also suffer that are never heard, so this art collective, our movement, is about creating work which documents our experiences."<sup>35</sup> Despite the ongoing conflict, the artists in the collective choose not to focus on the violence and the resultant losses in their works. Instead, the experience of loss is expressed through aesthetic strategies that highlight beauty and the resilience of women who often suffer the most in spaces of conflict. Mahavi, for instance, insists on the significance of beauty in her works as a feminist strategy for negotiating suffering. Following the work of queer studies theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, indeed we may read the beauty in Muslimah Collective's artworks as offering reparative potential – as texts that may be empowering and regenerative, encouraging personal healing and affecting social change. That is, beauty can be employed as a strategy to deal with politically sensitive and difficult issues that affect communities. Furthermore, the relationship between beauty and the collective's Islamic faith is inseparable for the artists. As Mahavi offers, "Art and religion belong together. Islam talks about beauty and art is a matter of beauty too. Every human wants beauty."<sup>36</sup>

Works by Isran and Mahavi use the genre of portraiture to look into the close connection between women across generations. Portraits of mothers, aunts, and elders are memorialised to celebrate the strength and resilience of women. According to Isran, her drawing series *The Area of Muslimah* (2019) represents this inner strength by depicting the women in Muslimah Collective's community. As members of Malay Muslim minority communities within a predominately Thai Buddhist state, Isran's artworks use aesthetics to engage with identity politics to motivate conversations about cultural belonging. In the series of charcoal drawings for this exhibition, she presents portraits of different Muslim women veiled in hijab, focusing our attention on their faces. Yet at the same time, the blurriness of the charcoal sketches seems to emphasize a certain fragility and lack of

visibility regarding the identity of Patani Muslim women in the wider Thai community. Notably, the artist often incorporates elements from newspapers in her drawings, situating the women figures within news of the events and happenings taking place in her community.

Mahavi uses portraiture to engage deeper with her sense of being and place. Her pairing of works entitled *Feeling from Loved Ones* (2019) show faces framed by embroidery hoops and captures the intimate connection that she has with her family, particularly her mother. By framing the portraits against a dark background, the artist draws our attention closer to these faces. The small scale of the works also instinctively draws the viewer's body and eyes nearer to the works, to take in their detail. In doing so, we also begin to observe the materiality of the works: the roughness of the paper, the gaps between each strand of grass fibre, and the delicate white flowers pasted around and on the faces. As the audience is drawn into close proximity with the works, they also enter the space of affect that occurs during the making of the works between the artist, the woman subject of her works, and the medium.

The artist cites the *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad's sayings) that states heaven is under your mother's feet, to reflect on her relationship with her mother. She explains that in using grass as her main material to make the paper for her drawings, her works are symbolically linked to her mother, with the grass referencing the ground beneath her mother's feet. Mahavi's series is, therefore, more than an attempt to capture her mother's likeness; it also strives to reflect the intensity of her fondness and respect for her mother.

The search for a sense of belonging in Mahavi's works is echoed in Nibuesa's three-dimensional print-on-paper assemblage, *Cultural Assimilation 02* (2019). Her artwork

captures a vignette of daily life by focusing on everyday interpersonal connections in the Patani region – here, through the depiction of a man and woman in a market setting, sharing in a moment of convivial exchange. The larger scene has been composed through the artist assembling separate printed paper-cutout and textile forms that the artist sourced from scrap papers and recycled materials. Each cutout component is printed with patterns that combine Malay, Chinese and Thai motifs to represent the multiculturalism in Patani's three provinces. The three-dimensionality and realism of the work adds to the liveliness of the scene. As with her other artworks, *Cultural Assimilation 02* becomes a record of the different life-stories of people from these areas; these are positive stories of inter-cultural exchange and connectedness often, forgotten in conflict-ridden areas where stories of trauma, violence, and division instead predominate in the public sphere.

Yet these difficult stories do need to be told so people can remember: Waji and Pakapet use textiles to reconstruct memories of loss and to convey hope for a peaceful future through the creative labour of handwork. Waji collects items of clothing from the people who are affected by the political tensions in her community, and reworks them into her artworks in order to tell these peoples' stories. In her work *Yaenah Doloh* (2018), we see how she deconstructs the clothing into individual parts before sewing them back together onto the canvas. Much like a surgeon carefully stitching the skin to close body wounds, Waji states that each thread and each stitch is to represent steps towards healing the trauma that has occurred in her community over the past fourteen years. For Pakapet, the materiality of the natural fibre that she uses for her large woven works represents the dual nature of humanity. According to the artist, the hard and the soft textures of the thread are similar to the 'good' and 'bad' characters in human beings, and deeply connected to the sense of self. Pakapet's work for the exhibition, *Untitled* (2017), is a large woven hanging made from fishing net and the fibres of water hyacinth. The work's distinctive parabolic curve is



Detail of Nuriya Waji's *Yaenah Doloh*, 2018

formed from loose and heavy folds that hang at its bottom edges. With its varied fibres, thicknesses and shapes, the work represents the struggles of a woman's inner-world as she navigates her life. The work is also a marker of Pakapet's familial experience: the artist's parents fished for a living and as a child, Pakapet often helped her parents repair fishing nets. This childhood activity is remembered in the making of this work, imbuing it with a sense of connection between the self, family and community.

For Muslimah Collective, their works represent the stories of the women in their community and are also expressions of their Islamic faith. The techniques of drawing, sewing, papermaking and hand weaving they use in creating their artworks are closely connected to the domestic labour that is traditionally part of many women's daily rhythm in Patani and wider Southeast Asia. Indeed, the connection between handwork and women's labour in

Southeast Asia cannot be overstated. In cultural practice, women across the region have continuously worked with their hands to create intricate objects, especially textiles, which serve an important function in both secular and religious life. The level of skill and artistry is incredibly high, and these objects are greatly valued as part of the region's cultural heritage. Moreover, it may be argued that Muslimah Collective also use the techniques in a distinctly feminist way – as an art form to give voice to their perspectives as women artists outside the Bangkok-centred Thai art world, and to give expression to their concerns as women about the political tensions that they experience in their day-to-day life in regional Thailand.

The collective spirit and interest in art communities outside the dominant urban art centres is also registered in **Yee I-Lann's** weaving work *Louvre* (2019). The collaborative work is a *tikar*, or woven mat, that the artist created in Keningau, Sabah, with local weavers Julitah Kulinting, Lili Naming, Shahrizan Rupin, and Juraen Sapirin. *Louvre* represents a new direction in the artist's practice since her move from Malaysia's capital city of Kuala Lumpur, where she had lived and worked for over twenty years, back to her home in Sabah in Malaysian Borneo. She explains, "I needed to find my *tikar*, my platform, my community to commune with again." *Louvre* represents one of many striking *tikar* that Yee has created since moving to Sabah and beginning to work with local weaving communities there, especially women weavers who are the traditional makers and knowledge holders of *tikar*.

We can recognise the woven image of a 'louvre' that is depicted on this *tikar* – the kind of window or door with regular intervals of angled slats that is often found in tropical architecture, to allow air or light or smoke to pass through. For Yee, the louvre also poetically denotes the daily passing of life – the air, light and smoke that passes through us everyday, that symbolises "the days of our lives." Beyond this symbolism, the temporality of *Louvre*

also lies with the long duration of its making process: the artist describes weaving as “slow work” that is contingent on community and communal effort. This intensity of shared labour is registered in the intricate alternating bamboo weave patterns in *Louvre*, requiring a long and complex plaiting process done by hand. Traditionally these sophisticated weaving skills are acquired from a young age, and they are passed down through generations of women; Yee’s Sabahan grandmother used to weave mats too.

Different kinds of *tikar*, known by other names, can be found across the Nusantara region and are traditionally recognised as an everyday utilitarian object, used in homes as floor mats, for sitting, sharing in meals, and taking rest. Reflecting on its significance for her, Yee says, “I see the woven *Tikar* mat as providing a kind of performative space. When laid out on the ground, it invites a gathering of some sort ... holding people together, to commune.” With the introduction of colonial ways of domestic living and the spread of modernisation beyond metropolitan centres, this kind of communal gathering around *tikar* competes with modern domestic furniture – such as tables and chairs – and *tikar* are increasingly home adornments. As Yee reminds us, there are real social and political effects in such introduced colonial arrangements and architectures of living which change the dynamics of human relationality: “In my contemporary experience in Sabah, I have come to equate the table less with knowledge than with the violence of administrative power: the census, education curriculum, national cultural policies, the tender of commerce, subjugating people to be literally beneath the table of power and exercised control.” For Yee, community and community driven solutions are key to our local and global futures, including finding ways forward in the age of climate change and the Anthropocene. It is a necessity to move from colonial and capitalist narratives of domination, to notions of collective gathering, holding, and sharing that is represented by the *tikar*.



Installation view of Yee I-Lann's *Louvre*, 2019

### **SPACES OF HABITATION: LIVING WITH NATURE AND CONSTRUCTED WORLDS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

While visual artists have continually delved beneath the troubled waters of the contemporary condition to seek explanations for societal and political change, we note that artists in *Shaping Geographies* are also paying closer attention to global and planetary change and also, to use art historian Flaudette May Datuin's term, world issues at the "sub-atmospheric" level.<sup>37</sup> That is, they also focus on the human and non-human relationships shaped by the Anthropocene era, as seen in Geraldine Javier's installation exploring climate change and Fika Ria Santika's sculptural investigations into shifting Minang natural and cultural worlds.

In their explorations of the social and environmental problems of our age, women artists also echo multispecies feminist theorist Donna Haraway's plea to "stay with the troubles."<sup>38</sup> As Yee I-Lann has reflected from her work with women's communities, inspired by Haraway and the late speculative fiction author Ursula Le Guin, "In the patriarchal world of the phallic pen & gun, we need to rebalance and emphasize our 'carrier bag' our 'vessel' in which we carry our communities, all pains [and] joys. Everything. Each in relation to/with other. This vessel is the strength of the woman in the patriarchal world. Staying with the troubles, not dismissing belittling or shooting troubles down but staying with addressing and carrying them for whole solutions in the age of the Anthropocene and climate change." What we see here is that contemporary women artists are also interested to explore the social and environmental problems of our age, and what can be done about this, often referring to other women's thinking and practices as a counter to patriarchal thinking and structures that are argued to have led to some of our current day problems.

**Geraldine Javier's** contribution to the exhibition draws our attention to pressing issues of the environment and climate change affecting her local barangay or neighbourhood in the Philippines. This new set of works comprises a pairing of large-scale paintings – *Seascape (Blue Hour I)* and *Seascape (Blue Hour II)* (2019) – which in their allusion to 'seascapes' appear to melt and drip in hues of watery blue and green, and are accompanied by a rectangular 'pool' installation. The artist's process in creating these paintings ironically mirrors the slow and therefore hardly visible human-induced destruction to climate and the environment: the artist begins with a foundational layer of highly refined and detailed imagery that is gradually covered with layers of paint and built up to a more abstracted representation. In this case, the paintings have come to simulate an organic environment that "spills out from the melting process" of a warming planet.

*Catch of the Day* (2019) is the ironic title given to the glistening 'pool' accompanying the paintings. It is literally a container for hidden processes of human-induced environmental destruction. It was inspired by another project of Javier's, commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund, that provided her an opportunity to tackle the 'festering problem' of plastic waste in her *barangay*, where "plastic waste of all kind [is] strewn all over the streets, vacant lots, canals, etc." For *Catch of the Day*, Javier wanted to tackle the bigger global issue of plastics in our shared oceanic waters. Indeed, plastic packaging has become a major environmental concern – the ocean is now full of plastic waste affecting marine life because of careless disposal by humans. In one of the most comprehensive studies of plastic pollution to date it was found that up to 12.7 million tonnes of plastic waste fills the ocean each year,<sup>39</sup> with drink bottles being the single most common pollutant.

As with her earlier project, Javier worked with people in her community – her employees, together with their families, friends and neighbours – to help collect plastic trash. This

time, however, they very specifically gathered the blue plastic water bottle seals often found in the vicinity of water re-filling stations in Javier's *barangay*, and which is the same vibrant blue that colours the pool in the exhibition. Following collection, the plastic trash was washed and then cut up into fine pieces by a team of over twenty people until the 'pool' was filled. The communal effort in gathering and cutting the plastics is a reminder of the universal effort that is needed to tackle this planetary problem, transcending the *barangay*, the nation, and the region. "As you gaze into this pool," Javier urges, "I want you to ponder the enormity of the task, gathering up all the plastic that has been dumped into the sea. A task that must be done." The shaping of geography here is an urgent necessity and one that provides hope for the future, but this will necessarily be a different ecological future. Javier reflects, "I believe that despite the seemingly insurmountable environmental disasters, there's hope as the younger generation seems to be on the frontline coming up with very inventive solutions to various ecological problems but things won't be the same again. The natural world lived in by past generations will not be the world of the future." This work then is also Javier's imagining of such an 'unnatural natural world.'

In her work, artist **Fika Ria Santika** reflects that events in the natural world such as cyclical growth, the changing seasons, and the unpredictability of natural phenomena are integral to the worldview of her ethnic group, the Minangkabau or Minang from West Sumatra, Indonesia. This ethnic group is often described as the largest matrilineal society in the world and is also known for their rich oral and literary culture.<sup>40</sup> Santika's Minang identity is intimately connected to her artistic practice and she is interested in the possibilities of translating the Minang worldview into her art. The artist's works in this exhibition, *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi: Sibir 2* (Layers That Reveal Matter: Fragment 2) (2019) and *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi: Laras 8* (Layers That Reveal Matter: Harmony 8) (2019), are examples of such reflections on her Minang cultural background.



Installation view of paintings and installation by Geraldine Javier

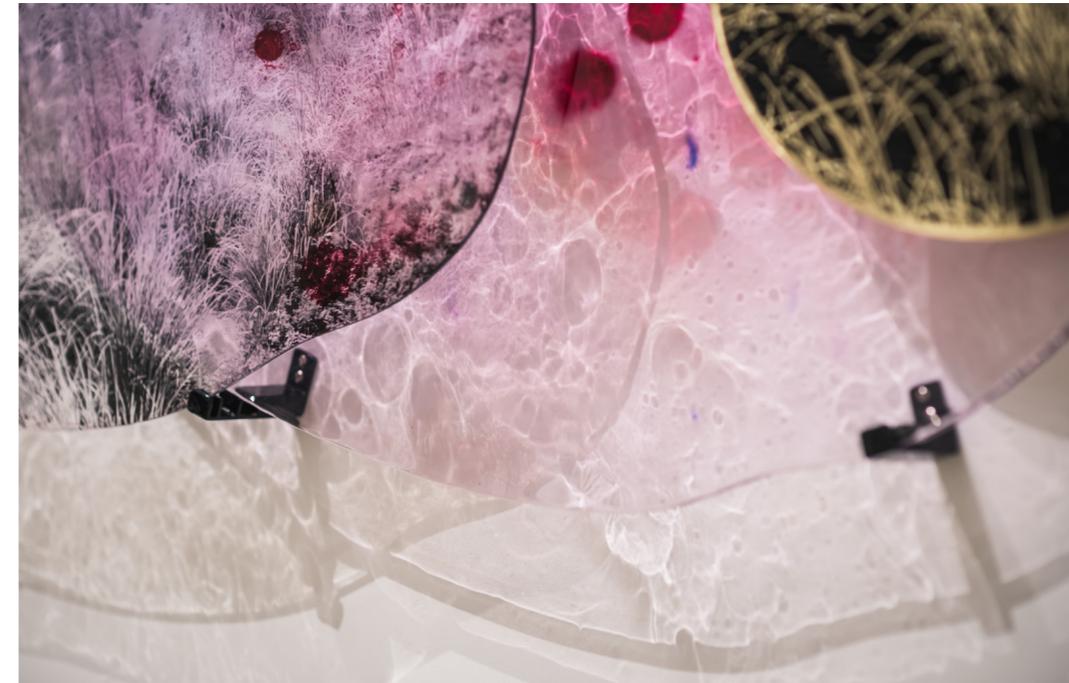
Santika's practice is often inspired by one of the well-known proverbs of Minang culture, "*Alam Takambang Jadi Guru*," that translates as, "nature is the best teacher." As Santika states,

*Alam Takambang Jadi Guru* makes me contemplate the deeper meaning of nature's role as a philosophy of life. This proverb is familiar to most Minang people, but it has left me wondering whether it retains its relevance amongst the youth in today's society.<sup>41</sup>

The proverb is more than just an inspiration to the artist. It is also linked to another well-known aspect of Minang culture, namely, *merantau* – the practice of Minang migration. Traditionally *merantau* is carried out by Minang men that have no claim to familial lands and so migrate to seek better education and economic opportunities. Santika, however, belongs to the younger generation in Indonesia, where both Minang men *and women* now migrate to places outside West Sumatra.<sup>42</sup>

For Santika, the proverb is a point of reflection on her connections to different places since migrating to Yogyakarta in 2010. The artist's practice has recently evolved in new directions by exploring different materials, techniques and also through self-reflection on her cultural identity – developments that she acknowledges have come from *merantau*.<sup>43</sup>

Santika predominantly uses clear resin and glass in her works alongside other manufactured materials, which interestingly seems counter to her interest in nature. The artist's three-dimensional works in *Shaping Geographies* are part of her ongoing series *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi* (2016–) where we can discern the references to nature in her use of hues, shadows, and organic shapes.



Detail of Fika Ria Santika's *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi: Sibir 2*, 2019

In the latest work in the series, the sculptural installation *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi: Laras 8*, Santika still references organic forms from nature, yet in contrast to her previous works, the artist's inclusion of multiple sculpted hand forms, cast from her own hands, suggests a more significant role that humans play in the natural world. The translucent hand sculptures of varying tinted colours dominate the installation. Some are entangled in black threads that hang over the towering pile of circular glass pieces, others are arranged amongst a collection of translucent cylinders at the top of the glass stack, and others still are set on the floor at the base of the tower. As the work catches and reflects light, its effect is not only beautiful but also suggests precarity, due to its fragile and vulnerable materiality, much like the state of our environment today.



Installation view of Kayleigh Goh's *What We Are Seeking to Be*, 2019

*Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi: Sibir 2* further exemplifies Santika's relentless exploration. In comparison with *Laras 8* that focuses on abstraction, the artist here employs images of actual landscapes that she photographed from her local area in Payakumbuh in West Sumatra, which she has transferred onto transparent resin surfaces of varying shapes. Her desire to learn printmaking techniques drives this new approach, and at the same time also reflects her examination of Minangkabau society in contemporary times. In this work, Santika includes a tricoloured flag that symbolises the elements that have shaped Minang society, namely the *alim ulama* (religious leaders), *cerdik pandai* (scholars) and *penghulu* (cultural leaders).

Yet, it is difficult to identify the flag in the image if the artist has not pointed it out to us. Because of the quirk of the artist's transfer technique, the flag resembles the shape of *Amorphophallus titanum* or the Titan Arum, the large flowering plant notorious for its rotting smell that is also endemic to West Sumatra. Thus, incidentally, instead of an overt marker of cultural identity and values, the flag is subsumed, becoming one with the sign of nature.

Shifting from natural worlds, to the constructed environments of human habitation, the artworks of **Kayleigh Goh** reflect the relational effect between architectural spaces and human interactions. As the artist splits her work time between Johor Bahru in Malaysia and Singapore, Goh's regular travel attunes her attention to the different yet similar spatial environments between the two cities, states, and people.<sup>44</sup>

Goh's delicate and quiet tonal paintings provide an emotional counterbalance and anchor to the destabilising experiences in her everyday life. According to the artist, the architectural

elements that regularly appear in her works are shaped by and for the senses. She explains, “The element of space in my work is a vessel to communicate a certain set of moods, feelings and experiences ... to retame, to reorganise, and to rebalance the emotions that run loose.” Since 2018, the artist has begun to use concrete and cement mixes in her paint to create depth and texture on her canvas. For the current series titled *What We Are Seeking To Be* (2019), Goh incorporates elements of wood from found objects such as old chairs. Goh describes the coming together of cement and wood as “cold and warm, side by side,” complementary yet different.

Goh is also drawn to *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic philosophy centred on the acceptance of impermanence and humility, as another driving force for her practice. *Wabi-sabi*'s popularity is often associated with imperfection and appreciation of rustic or natural beauty. However, the philosophy that began in thirteenth-century Japan, in fact, combines appreciation of beauty with an awareness of one's own mortality. The duality means that *wabi-sabi*'s aesthetic appeal also lies in its underlying element of melancholy. Following from *wabi-sabi*, in Goh's depictions of architectural spaces, the artist is less interested in a literal reading of architecture and instead seeks to invoke emotions and feelings through the affective and even cathartic potential of architectural forms and objects.<sup>45</sup>

Goh's installation for this exhibition is her latest reflection on place-making drawn from her travels in Asia. The artist creates two separate yet connected spaces; an exterior and an interior space that are delineated by a constructed wall. On the exterior, the artist juxtaposes her latest explorations in medium and materiality by adding graphite lines, paper, and found wood objects on and with her paintings, to create geometric shapes and architectural spaces. The careful arrangement of these different materials is again attentive to the potential of each work to invoke *wabi-sabi*.

In comparison, the inside space, in which we encounter a single painting, is much closer to Goh's notion of home. In finding their way to the painting, the viewer is encouraged to walk through an entrance to this inner space. For the artist, the familiar medium and size of the constructed inner space provides a contemplative energy. It also invites the viewer to reflect on the possibilities of architectural space to transform the body and emotions.

Goh notes how each of these objects, images, and paintings have travelled with her during her exhibitions and residencies in Fukuoka, Kyoto, Seoul, Bangkok, Taipei, and Shanghai. The collection of these elements represents a sense of home that she carries with her as she travels. Goh reflects, “However we make the Journey. We are redefining home. And that home is redefining us.” The installation is thus not only an index of Goh's travel, but also registers how Goh redefines her own sense of place in the world.

Alongside Goh's work, there is a remarkable attention to the affective power of art across other works in the exhibition, which may be framed as a kind of critical affective regionalism. As with works by Muslimah Collective, there is a power in beauty and in intimate aesthetics across many of the artworks, which might be read as a feminist strategy for engaging us affectively on a range of concerns. We are consistently compelled by markers of beauty and aesthetic strategies of intimacy, whether the affective potential of architectural spaces to enable calm in us that is explored in Goh's paintings, the small gestures of the human face up close in Nguyễn's film, the intricate hand weave of Yee I-Lann's collaborative work, Victor's meticulously detailed and overflowing portrait, the beautifully patterned footsteps of the Nigatsu-do in Vongpoothorn's installation, or the strong belief in the reparative power of beauty to heal trauma and suffering as seen in works by the Muslimah Collective artists.

### TRANS-REGIONAL CONNECTIONS AND CROSS-CULTURES

Bringing together Buddhist traditions stemming from both Southeast Asia and Japan, the large-scale wall installation, *Footsteps to the Nigatsu-do*, emerged from a creative cross-cultural collaboration between two women artists – the Lao-Australian visual artist **Savanhdary Vongpoothorn** and the Japanese poet and calligrapher Noriko Tanaka.<sup>46</sup> Ideas for the work began during Vongpoothorn’s residency in Japan in 2017, which was also the first time she met with Tanaka, sparking the important friendship and connection that would be the basis for developing *Footsteps to the Nigatsu-do* (2017-19).

The title of the work makes literal reference to the architectural and spiritual site of the Nigatsu-Do hall at the Todai-ji temple complex in Nara, Japan. In particular, it is the often overlooked patternings that adorn the fifty-three steps leading to the Nigatsu-Do hall and which are references to Buddhist scriptures that the work visually draws our attention to, through its sequence of ‘rubblings’ on paper. The rubbings are literal and intimate physical tracings of the six different engraved patterns on the steps: the top three steps are engraved with interlocked waves, net, and lattice patterns, and the bottom three steps, with moving water, hexagon, and foliage patterns.

An accompanying film by Anthropologist and Filmmaker Jamie Coates documents the rubbing process, with Vongpoothorn and Tanaka seen kneeling at the steps in the early hours of the morning, laying down sheets of paper and working purposefully and efficiently together to produce as many rubbings as they could in the restricted time they had permission to do so; they were able to make three such visits over the three-year period 2017-2019. The public process of making the work together on site, at the steps to the Nigatsu-do, also attracted interest from passers-by, many of whom would have made countless visits to the Todai-ji complex never noticing the patterned details of the



Installation view of Savanhdary Vongpoothorn's *Footsteps to the Nigatsu-Do*, 2017-2019

steps nor realising their significance to ancient Buddhist scriptures. As with the rubbings, Vongpoothorn and Tanaka’s collaboration makes visible the histories of Buddhism that lie even on the humble steps to the Nigatsu-do, and that we are only able to notice if we redirect our gaze from monumental worship, to the sacredness of the prerequisite footsteps that must be trodden, on the physical and spiritual path to enlightenment.

It was in March 2017 that Vongpoothorn first witnessed the annual *Omizutori* (water-gathering/drawing) ceremony at the Nigatsu-do hall, accompanied by Tanaka and her friend and woman priest Monka Nakata. In recounting the experience, Vongpoothorn tells the story of how the steps came to be of interest to her:

One freezing cold evening in March 2017 I was privileged to attend, on its 1,162th iteration, the secret Shuni-e Ceremony at Nigatsu-do (the Second-Month Hall) in the great Todai-ji Temple in Nara. The Shuni-e ('ceremony of the second month') at Nigatsu-do is now popularly called Omizutori (the water-gathering). ... We did not want to miss the first glimpse of the eight-metre-long fire torches, each weighing 70 kilograms, carried by temple monks up the stone steps and into the temple. ... Days after, I could not stop reflecting on my experience of the Omizutori, the symbolic meaning of fire and water, of renewal and cleansing. ... [In particular,] what stayed in my mind's eye, curiously, were the ancient engravings on the stone steps leading up to Nigatsu-do. .... I made an outrageous proposal to Noriko—that I wanted to make rubbings of the ancient patterns on the stone steps. At first, Noriko was adamant that we would never be allowed to do this, that Todai-ji has a reputation for being very strict about outsiders and their activities. But I was persistent and Noriko gave in. One week later, both of us and our Japanese friends were very surprised to learn that we'd been granted permission from the High Priest to make rubbings of the engravings on the steps.

The set of *tanka* poems in calligraphy are contributions from Tanaka, whose poetry and calligraphic talents are an essential contribution to the overall work. *Tanka* are a genre of Japanese classical poetry consisting of unrhymed verse of thirty-one syllables and traditionally written as a single, unbroken line. In *Footsteps to the Nigatsu-do*, the *tanka* run in vertical columns separating each of the rubbing patterns, and in their form echo the wooden columns of the temple's architecture. Alongside the rubbing patterns, the *tanka* offer a rhythm and progression, directing our reading of the overall installation from the right column and across to the left, in the tradition of Japanese calligraphic narrative style.

Their content speaks to the stairway at the Nigatsu-do that “connects the human world with the realm of the Bodhisattva”:

within the long stairway linking the heavens and the earth  
the timeless state of nothingness<sup>47</sup>

In spite of their different Asian connections and Buddhist lineages – Theravada Buddhist traditions via Laos in the case of Vongpoothorn, and Japanese Mahayana in the case of Tanaka – *Footsteps to the Nigatsu-do* reflects the connective possibilities of Buddhism and the generative potential of cross-cultural creative collaboration.

Again linking with the Japanese cultural context and cross-cultural experience is **Anida Yoeu Ali's** photographic series *White Mother* (2014), in which the artist explores the intimate relationship between mother and child within public spaces in Fukuoka, Japan. Ali is a Muslim Khmer artist who currently lives and works in the US. Her works span performance, installation, video, and 'political agitation.' She sees her public performance and storytelling as “a bridge for the interior and exterior space of self as well as [a means for] initiating critical dialogues between communities and institutions.”<sup>48</sup>

During her artist residency with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in 2014, Ali was juggling her roles as both artist and mother and feeling the challenges of doing so. The artist was inspired to speak to Japanese mothers whom she found often felt unwelcome when travelling with their children in public spaces. Ali's photographic series and related film were inspired by these conversations and document her performance as an artist-mother intervening in public spaces in Fukuoka.



Installation view of Anida Yoeu Ali's *White Mother*, 2014

For the project, Ali takes on the persona of a 'White Mother.' Her face is covered in white makeup and she is dressed in a white costume that is not unlike a traditional Japanese *shiomuku* wedding dress; two of the portraits show the artist/White Mother under a white hood that is typical of the *shiomuku* bridal costume. The colour white traditionally symbolises the purity of the bride and her openness (as a 'blank canvas') to taking on or absorbing her husband's 'colour' or values. The hood's symbolism is less clear, but it is commonly believed to hide the bride's face from public eyes. Far from the image of a pliant bride, however, the series depicts the artist/White Mother as a highly visible and active subject, pushing her young daughter around in a stroller and breastfeeding her in a variety

of locations, from the subway to the busy streets of Fukuoka. Ironically, while the White Mother's face is covered up by means of make-up and costume, she becomes all the more visible through her unusual appearance and incongruity in the context of contemporary urban Fukuoka settings. This can be read as a deliberate strategy by Ali – a 'strategic otherness' – to draw attention to mothers' usual public *in*visibility in Japan. Additionally, the prominent use of red alongside white in the series invokes the national colours of Japan, presenting rich imagery and a visual narrative on cultural attitudes to mothering in the public sphere in Japan.

Notably, the striking imagery of the *White Mother* is consistent with Ali's training in the Japanese dance theatre of Butoh – both through the white make-up she wears and in her controlled performance movements. Ali offers, "she could be someone not from this world and/or a marker of someone performing a larger than life character." The white makeup and eccentric clothing also highlights the White Mother's otherworldliness – as Ali relates, "[the Japanese phrase] 'from this world, not of it' is a metaphor for how displaced some Japanese moms feel even though they bear the burden of keeping the nation alive." While serving a vital role in nurturing and caring for young children of the next generation, mothers are still often circumscribed and marginalised by patriarchal structures in Japan, and indeed elsewhere. Ali's use of performance art as a "hypervisible space" helps to bring forward issues mothers face in society that are often pushed aside or repressed to the point of invisibility, such as breastfeeding in public. In a more personal sense, the *White Mother* series also examines Ali's own transforming and gendered identity as an artist-mother, exploring and challenging how others respond to her body and role as mother .as she goes about her caregiving activities and art-making in different public and professional contexts.

## GENERATIONS AND TRAJECTORIES OF WOMEN: CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

In *Shaping Geographies* we have asked how the coming together of ‘art’, ‘woman’ and ‘Southeast Asia’ may be configured to acknowledge the complexity of contemporary women’s art practices today, and to notice the ongoing but also new ways that these terms bear significance for Southeast Asian contemporary women artists and art practices now, on the cusp of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

This includes how the artists in this exhibition have shown some continuity with their predecessors such as the persistence of the radical female body, but at the same time but at the same time their different interest in topics beyond self-exploration, investigating shared issues and concerns in the region as well as those affecting humanity globally. Relatedly, the affective dimension of many of the art works is significant. In discussing the latency of affect, the philosopher Brian Massumi suggests that affect is the angle where we can participate in something that is larger than ourselves. As many of the artworks reflect, with intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life, a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and place.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time as attending to what is unique about the region, we have not wanted to limit our investigations and instead have adopted an attitude of openness to how Southeast Asian art and artists relate to other kinds of geographies or maps of connection and belonging, including ones that are not strictly or literally geographical. Similarly, we have been interested to pursue the ‘intimate’ through a geographical lens, where the notion of *intimate geographies* is an intervention into Southeast Asia’s broader structural processes and relations – through proximities and the personal.

The journey of this exhibition has been supported by the women artists who became our further collaborators in producing this exhibition, and whose art inspired us to imagine the region in all its complexity. Further, in our collaboration as two art historians to curate *Shaping Geographies*, we have found ourselves in dialogue with other women writing and curating Southeast Asian art in the past and the present, shaping geographies of this region from women’s perspectives. Beyond the scope of this essay is another history waiting to be written, to connect the histories of women’s critical contributions to shaping Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art history. We think it is time for such a history to begin to be written and crucial to do so. We urge such an undertaking.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 *La Cachucha* was revived following research undertaken by dance scholar, Ann Hutchinson Guest. The memory of the dance survived through illustrations by visual artists, and dance notation that Guest subsequently restored through her research in 1967. See Ann Hutchinson Guest (2008) *Fanny Elssler's Cachucha*, Dance Books Ltd, United Kingdom.
- 2 The ban was finally lifted in 2001 under Abdurrahman Wahid's short presidency (1999-2001). However, despite the lifting of the ban, Wulia reports that she still experiences legal discrimination. She offers that when she lost her passport in 2005, Indonesian immigration officers insisted that they still needed her parents' proof of citizenship documents (SBKRI – *Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia*) as part of the paperwork for issuing passports for Chinese-Indonesians. The officials argued that they were not aware that regulations had changed and therefore still required Wulia to produce her parents' SBKRI.
- 3 *Global Feminisms* a feminist art exhibition of 2007 (first shown at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, in New York City) included Southeast Asian women artists in its survey approach. Notably, of the 88 women artists represented in the exhibition, Southeast Asian women artists included were the Indonesian artist Arahmaiani, the Thai artist Skowmon Hastana, and the Filipina artist Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen. See Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (eds) (2007) *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, Merrell Publishers.
- 4 For this early history of Western feminist rediscovery projects see, for example, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin (1977) *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 1976–March 1977); Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981) *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*; Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (eds.) (1982) *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*; Griselda Pollock (1988) *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*.
- 5 Binghui Huangfu (2000) "Contemporary Art and Asian Women." In *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women*, Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore, p. 157.
- 6 One of the most recent examples of this at the level of major cultural institutions is *Sunshower: Contemporary Art From Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, held in Japan in 2017 and commemorating the 50th Anniversary of ASEAN. See also Michelle Antoinette (2014) *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990*, Brill | Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York.
- 7 Pamela Corey (2014) "Metaphor as Method: Curating Regionalism in Mainland Southeast Asia." In *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 13, No.2, pp. 72–84.
- 8 Susie Lingham (2000) "The Crisis of Context: What Holds Heterogeneities Together." In *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Woman*, Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore, p. 167.
- 9 Jasmine Nadua Trice (2019) "Gendering National Histories and Regional Imaginaries: Three Southeast Asian Women Filmmakers." In *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p.16. See also Gayatri Gopinath (2013) "Who's Your Daddy? Queer Diasporic Framings of Region." In *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power*, ed. Vivek Bald et al. New York University Press, New York and London, pp. 274–300.

- 10 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1996) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Athlone Press, London.
- 11 Elizabeth A. Grosz (1995) *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of the Body*, Allen & Unwin, New South Wales.
- 12 Imelda Cajipe Endaya (1993) "Examining Our Roles as Women and as Artists." In *Identity, Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of the Asian Pacific Region, 17-20 September 1993 (The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia, 1993; unpublished conference papers & list of attendees)* Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, p. 7.
- 13 Trice, "Gendering National Histories and Regional Imaginaries," pp. 11-38.
- 14 Joan Kee (2016) "The Scale Question in Contemporary Asian Art." In *The Japan Foundation Asia Center: Art Studies 2: The 1990s: The Making of Art with Contemporaries*, eds. Furuichi Yasuko and Hoashi Aki. The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 2016, pp. 34–41; and Joan Kee (2014) "What Scale Affords Us: Sizing the World Up through Scale." In *Art Margins*, Vol 3, No 2, pp. 3–30.
- 15 Kee, "What Scale Affords Us."
- 16 Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli (2014) "Introduction: intimacy-geopolitics and violence." In *Area*, Vol. 46, Issue 4, pp. 344-60.
- 17 Ibid, pp.344-46.
- 18 Trice, "Gendering National Histories and Regional Imaginaries," p. 30.
- 19 Ibid, pp.29–30.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Nguyễn Hoàng Quý Hà (2018) "Song to the Front and Eleven Men: Handcrafting History, Refining Memories and Contesting Women's Sexuality." In *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 31, Nos 4-5, p. 456.
- 22 Victor's first use of lenses dates back to 1997, for her installation *Third World Extra Virgin Dreams* shown at the 6th Havana Biennale.
- 23 Shimizu Toshio (1995) "Visions of Happiness," in *Visions of Happiness – Ten Asian Contemporary Artists*, ed. Furuichi Yasuko, The Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, Tokyo, pp. 15–24.
- 24 The proscriptions followed a major public controversy and subsequent legal trials concerning a performance art piece by Josef Ng carried out during the Artists General Assembly of 1993-94, jointly organised by 5th Passage and The Artists Village. Victor was a founding member and artistic director of 5th Passage and felt the repercussions of the controversy deeply and directly when 5th Passage was also forced to close down as a result of the controversy. *His Mother is a Theatre* was a creative reply to the Singapore State's new policies following the controversy, specifically regarding artists' compulsory submission of performance art scripts in order to secure the necessary license for public performances.

- 25 On *karayuki-san*, see for instance, Bin Mihalopoulos (1994) "The making of prostitutes: The *Karayuki-san*." In *Social Justice*, July 1994, Vol. 21, pp.161–84.
- 26 Shaun O'Dwyer, "Korean nationalism and the 'comfort women' issue," *The Japan Times*, September 2019, accessed 21 November 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/09/23/commentary/japan-commentary/korean-nationalism-comfort-women-issue/#.XdUoOS1L3OQ>
- 27 Victor offers that in 1995, when the show *Visions of Happiness* was presented, the emergence of the previously hidden history of comfort women issue came to the fore, creating the impetus for her artwork *Promise* to be made.
- 28 For instance, the Aichi Triennale 2019 art festival exhibition – ironically titled *After 'Freedom of Expression?'* – was cancelled for two days after its opening following audience protest to the work *Statue of a Girl of Peace* (2011) by Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, a sculpture of a young girl symbolising comfort women.
- 29 Wulan Dirgantoro (2017) *Feminisms and Indonesian Contemporary Art: Defining Experiences*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.
- 30 Hendro Wiyanto (2000) "Lamunan Tubuh Murni [The Dream For a Pure Body]." In *Fantasi Tubuh I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih* [I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih's Fantasy of the Body], exhibition catalogue, Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, pp. 22–23.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid, p. 23.
- 33 Carla Bianpoen, Farah Wardani and Wulan Dirgantoro (2007) "I GAK Murniasih." In *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, Indonesian Fine Art Foundation, Jakarta, pp. 141–46.
- 34 Thanet Aphonsuvarn (2007) *Rebellion in Southern Thailand: Contending Histories*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. See also Matt Wheeler (2018) "Thailand's Southern Insurgency in 2017: Running In Place." In *Southeast Asian Affairs*, January, pp. 377–88.
- 35 Hannah Ellis-Petersen (2018) "Risk-Taking Artists Defy Thai Taboos at Bangkok Art Biennale." In *The Guardian*, accessed 30 October 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/21/risk-taking-artists-defy-thai-taboos-bangkok-art-biennale>
- 36 Heedayah Mahavi, in *Muslimah Collective Thailand: Bangkok Art Biennale 2018*, accessed 30 October 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANBzqaK-034>
- 37 Flaudette May Datuin (2019) "The Wind in the Trees: From Tradisexion to Womanifesto." Keynote lecture presented at *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories* symposium, The University of Sydney, Sydney 18–19 October 2019.

- 38 Donna Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- 39 See Jenna R. Jambeck, Roland Geyer, Chris Wilcox, Theodore R. Siegler, Miriam Perryman et al. (2015) "Marine Pollution: Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean" *Science* Vol. 347, Issue. 6223 (13 February 2015), pp. 768- 71.
- 40 Jeffrey Hadler (2008) *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca. See also Jane Drakard (1999) *A Kingdom of Words: Language and Power in Sumatra*, Oxford University Press, Selangor Darul Ehsan.
- 41 Fika Ria Santika, in Katherine L. Bruhn (2018) "Fika Ria Santika." In *Efflorescence: Chong Wei Xin & Fika Ria Santika*, exhibition catalogue, Gajah Gallery, Singapore, p. 15.
- 42 See Katherine L. Bruhn (2018) "Community and the Rantau: West Sumatran Artists and Indonesia's Art World." In *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, Vol. 2, No.1, pp. 119–42.
- 43 Katherine L. Bruhn (2018) "Fika Ria Santika," pp. 15–23.
- 44 Object Lessons Space, "Kayleigh Goh On Constructing Quiet Spaces, Using Humble Materials and A Sense of Balance." In *Creative Conversations*, accessed 6 November 2019, from <https://objectlessons.space/posts/2018/kayleigh-goh>
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Its inaugural showing was part of the artist's solo exhibition *All that Arises* held in Australia in 2019, curated by Chaitanya Sambrani. See Chaitanya Sambrani (2019) *Savanhdary Vongpoothorn: All that Arises*, exhibition catalogue, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, Australia.
- 47 See Noriko Tanaka (2019) "Songs of Todajji." In *Darkness-Fire-Sutra*, translated by Carol Hayes & Noriko Tanaka, Noriko Tanaka Tanka Collection.
- 48 Anida Yoeu Ali (2018) "The Buddhist Bug: My Creation Mythology." In *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 31, pp. 149–51.
- 49 Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015.