

FAMILIAR OTHERS:  
EMIRIA SUNASSA,  
EDUARDO MASFERRÉ  
AND YEH CHI WEI,  
1940s–1970s

Who is “the Other”? What does it mean to represent peoples who are different from one’s own?

For the modern painter and photographer, images of “Others” were often important sources of inspiration. Artworks might emphasise differences between people—by drawing upon exotic stereotypes about so-called “primitive” cultures—but could also be used to assert a position of solidarity with marginalised communities. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, artists from Southeast Asia might also depict peoples familiar to them who shared a stake in emerging ideas of the nation and region.

For the three artists in *Familiar Others*, images of “the Other” within Southeast Asia were a central facet of their work. The photographer Eduardo Masferré (1909–1995) spent his life in the mountainous Cordillera region of the Philippines, home to Indigenous communities with whom he shared a familial connection. His photographs strove for dignity and respect, but also created a romanticised image of Cordilleran life. Painter Emiria Sunassa (1894–1964) represented the diverse peoples of the Indonesian archipelago. Based on her heritage, she asserted that she was the rightful “Queen of Papua,” a claim which affects how we might interpret her images of Papuan peoples. Yeh Chi Wei (1913–1981) was born in Fuzhou, China, but spent some of his childhood years in Sibu, Sarawak. As an adult, working in Singapore and Malaysia, he was especially inspired by his travels back to Sarawak and Sabah, creating works that combined his ideas about Bornean culture, Chinese cultural traditions and his personal history.

How might these artworks look today to the people that they represent? To open up this discussion, this exhibition includes eight commissioned responses to the artworks, written by artists, poets, academics and musicians with community ties to the peoples depicted in the images. These responses are used in place of conventional museum descriptive labels, and they are reproduced in full in this catalogue.



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# DALAM SOUTHEAST ASIA

by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

## PREFACE

Originally authored on 15 July 2021, additional notes are added each time a new project is initiated at Dalam Southeast Asia; these notes are dated accordingly.

It has become almost clichéd to introduce yet another “project space” within the confines of the modern art museum, considering how the model has proliferated globally in the past decade.<sup>1</sup> How did we, in such a short period of time, reach this point of self-referential superabundance? What do these “project spaces” offer? What concerns do they speak to? Several claim to offer insights into lesser studied or suppressed stories within the experience of modern art; or at least begin to acknowledge the silences inhabiting exhibitionary projects due to social prejudice, caused by historical and contemporary biases. Many “project spaces” seek to generate narratives through case studies gathered under a shared curatorial thematic. Some even push the envelope of the modern by resuscitating non-Western cultural objects, which are often bereft of “authorship” (at least in terms of how traditionalist streams of art history register the creator), in innovative ways. Many of these objects had entered museum collections in the former metropolises and colonies via the insults of colonialism. Another approach emphasises engaging contemporary artists who are at the forefront of innovations in their field. These contemporary artists investigate museum collections as a means of bridging the silences of the past with the urgencies of the present. As museums become more willing to interrogate themselves on aesthetic and political grounds, some have even begun to facilitate “takeovers” of their “project spaces” by constituents linked to social justice movements.

No matter the approach, the resulting exhibits are positioned within the modern museum's ongoing attempts at remaining agile in its programming. They also harness the recent upsurge in decolonising narratives, staking a claim for the legitimacy of subaltern knowledge systems. The impulse appears to be the same across varied contexts: curators and museum professionals around the world are no longer able to shy away from addressing inequalities, including that of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and are beginning to recognise the need to be more open to self-critique. Just as the "white cube" proliferated across the world as a method for display in the modern museum of the 1960s and 1970s, the "project space" now replicates on a planetary level. It is part of our collective moment, wherein artists, curators, publics, and other museum constituents are putting forward a set of shared ethical paradigms for a knowledge base that seeks to guarantee shared access and exposure. The "project space" is a node in this constellation of change.

The aim of *Dalam Southeast Asia* (the National Gallery Singapore's "project space" located within its long-term display, *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*) is to contribute to this moment of self-reflexivity from the vantage point of territorial Southeast Asia. By inviting curators at the Gallery to devise questions and then develop strategies to address them, *Dalam Southeast Asia* argues for lesser-known narratives. By directly questioning the ways in which the modern art of Southeast Asia is displayed and written about, *Dalam Southeast Asia* aspires to recalibrate what a long-term collections-based display is, and what it may seek to achieve.



S. Mohdir  
 DALAM  
 1975  
 Acrylic on canvas,  
 92 x 66 cm  
 Collection of National  
 Gallery Singapore

“*Dalam*” is a Malay word meaning “inside.” It is used in everyday parlance to invite someone to enter a place or room. The word also carries esoteric undertones suggesting the “deep,” “within” or “interior,” pointing towards that aspect of the Self which is perceptible but also yet to be revealed. The word has been adopted by several artists. Simryn Gill’s celebrated suite of 260 photographs depicting the interiors of Malaysian homes, titled *Dalam* (2001), offers insights into the visual phenomenon that is the contemporary living room—a place where one seeks refuge from the vagaries of everyday life, but which is also built up part by part as an expression of one’s relationship with popular culture. Likewise, “*Dalam*” is the title of a painting from 1975 by S. Mohdir that surveys the depths of the ocean. The work is a

description of perception, whether directed outwards or inwards, as it announces the indelible realisation that modern man is merely a speck in the universe. Gill and Mohdir remind us that art is not separate from reflexivity, and reflexivity is not separate from art.

Since its inauguration in 2015, *Between Declarations and Dreams* has been an attempt at generating an ideal sort of “provincialism” that refuses to submit to the homogenising effects of the Euro-American master narrative of art. The long-term exhibition features almost 400 works of Southeast Asian art ranging from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and an evolving curatorium has been systematically “rotating” over 100 works every year.<sup>2</sup> In this pursuit, the display has sought to develop its own distinctive capacities (drawing on crucial primary research and fieldwork conducted by the curatorium across Asia, Western

Europe, the United States, and elsewhere) for shaping what is now a shared story of global modernism. In this way, *Between Declarations and Dreams* lays claim to the Euro-American canon and its futures. Curating from this vantage point allow us to strive for decolonising modernism's structures; as a result, allowing for multiple anachronistic worlds to thrive.

The idea of a project space at National Gallery Singapore has been with me for some time. It emerged from three key concerns, discerned from years of sustaining a unique long-term display that focuses on the geographical region of Southeast Asia. Although the concerns I outline below are specific to the Gallery, they may apply to any major collecting institution with a focus on the non-West.

Firstly, we have too often relied on art history to establish the legitimacy of narratives before including them in *Between Declarations and Dreams*. Whilst it may be wiser for curators to follow the art historians hypothesising as a prelude to display, *Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to present works in a format that is first and foremost “contingent on display,” i.e., presenting bodies of work that have not received sustained art historical attention, so that the exhibition becomes a realm for generating perspectives on artistic processes and their relationship with burgeoning concerns in society. In this way, the modern in Southeast Asia registers its relevance to the present, and our collective efforts to forge a future art history that is diverse. This potential is unlocked by suggesting that the process of display—alongside public dialogues, careful captioning, and copious compilations of curatorial notes—is an extension of the didactic role of the museum. *Dalam Southeast Asia* is thus a



rehearsal for a forthcoming art history, and those that experience the exhibition are its first readers.

Secondly, we need to begin challenging the very narratives we have set up since 2015 within the galleries that make up the chronological display of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, and actively resist the singularising effects of such a canon-building venture. By exploring dilemmas and silences that have governed the ability of curators to narrate stories within modern museums, *Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to contribute to a more inclusive but “uneven” narrative of modern Southeast Asian art, one which remains a work in progress. In this way, *Dalam Southeast Asia* aspires to enable our publics to recognise that the stories we offer ought to be understood as contingent and open to revision with the passage of time. This process will need to be undertaken with care, because we also do not want to be seen as turning to the margins as a convenient way to access narratives without fully unravelling the problems of the centre. After all, it is the task of each new generation to revise the narratives that have been handed down by actively addressing the exclusionary practices of the past.

Thirdly, it has become increasingly important to stand outside the vending machine of art. This is a demand being made not by curators and museum professionals, but by publics around the world: that museums become responsive to and reflect the concerns of the communities they seek to serve. Increasingly, museums are being challenged to represent diverse voices, reduce carbon footprints, adopt digital interfaces, and claim a place for themselves as providing essential goods for everyday consumption. As a result, it has become imperative to produce an interior space (*dalam*) that talks about how curated

projects can engage with this trajectory. What does “curating” collections-based displays mean today? In this pursuit, Dalam Southeast Asia prototypes the small format exhibition that testbeds speculative approaches to curatorial research and exhibition design. For instance, the curators developing the various exhibitions have not only engaged artists or artist’s estates in conversations but also consulted a range of constituents to fill gaps in the production of cultural meaning. Curators must actively ask how their work in the field should and must have broader implications. With each exhibition, the hope is to devise more responsive approaches for the display of modern art within the museum.

To reiterate: The inauguration of Dalam Southeast Asia marks a significant turning point in the Gallery’s curatorial efforts to display, acquire and stimulate public dialogues around the dilemmas confronting the modern art of Southeast Asia. By locating Dalam Southeast Asia strategically within the framework of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, we seek to balance the familiar vocabularies with the lesser known, generate public and semi-public conversations, and perhaps create new values around the growing awareness that whatever power museums have is granted to them by the constituents they depend on to do their work.

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

National Gallery Singapore

15 July 2021

**On Curatorial Responsibility, 15 July 2022:**

Exhibition view of *The Tailors and Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, 2021.

It has been a year since we launched Dalam Southeast Asia. During this time, the project space has enabled the curatorium at the Gallery to engage with the challenges that were identified at the outset, ranging from the ability to develop newer sets of ethical paradigms that enable more inclusive measures for accessing art, to allowing the “curatorial” to act as a space for hypothesising an art history that is yet to come. The inaugural exhibition, *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, which ran from 29 October 2021 to 12 June 2022, generated turns that paid homage to the incredible lives both artists led and the array of materials and objects they left behind. *The Tailors and the Mannequins* re-emphasised the role modern art museums must (and will continue to) play in facilitating the circulation of stories that have yet to receive sustained art historical attention. This was achieved through the tireless work of Roger Nelson—my colleague and curator of the show—in engaging the artists and their estates alongside a series of specialists in a number of wide-ranging conversations that not only enabled gaps to be filled in a meaningful manner but also initiated the public into a vast realm of associated histories that pertain to forced migration and the ability of the Southeast Asian artist to display their art in environments where infrastructure was still in the midst of being formed.

Moreover, the exhibition pointed to the manifold lateral links between Southeast Asia and other regions across the decolonising world (collectively known as the Global South), including in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. As this process unfolded in the lead up to and during the exhibition via a series of public conversations, it became possible to reflect upon the sovereignty that curators (and by extension public art institutions) continue to exercise over the artworks they display, especially when curatorial enchantment actively seeks meaning within the painting’s subject matter but also beyond the boundaries of the artwork, whereby circulation and distribution is seen as an endearing facet of how one may consume the work of art today, in our time. This means that the authorial agendas of the artwork may be sublimated into a demonstration of contemporaneity, whereby the curator acts as an agent who resides within and at the edge of the culture that delivers the subject matter and context for the art. As the different Dalam Southeast Asia projects unfold, it will be pertinent to maintain notes on how this phenomenon unfolds and the techniques each curator develops to enhance accountability for the way artworks, materials, archival traces, and most importantly the stories we are entrusted with are used.

To access curatorial texts and programmes associated with *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-tailors-mannequins>

## NOTES

- 1 Examples of “project spaces” located within major European and American museums includes the following: (i) Stedelijk Turns, which is a room within the Dutch museum’s collections display (commonly known as Stedelijk Base). Stedelijk Turns features “new discoveries, commissions, and acquisitions” that have a direct impact on the museum’s collection. (ii) Salle Focus, which the Musée National d’Art Moderne maintains within the Centre Pompidou’s long-term displays. It is meant to present lesser-studied figures within the story of modernism and host contemporary art interventions. (iii) *Minor Histories*, an exhibitionary and discursive programme by the Van Abbe Museum, which features “pieces from the collection that have received less attention over the years, as well as recent acquisitions that uniquely represent the times, we live in.”

In Singapore, the NUS Museum hosts *preproom | things that may or may not happen*, an experimental project platform that features artworks, cultural objects, and archives as they are being accessioned, reworked or revised in relation to the museum’s extensive historical collections of art. The Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, which does not maintain an extensive collection, has hosted MAM Projects, a gallery that attracts similar inquiries. The NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore carved out The Lab, the Centre’s “space for introducing research in process and as an open studio for activation.”

Another recent shift in this genre of space building is the “experimental project lab,” which attempts to bridge visual art with debates in advanced technologies. The LACMA runs The Art + Technology Lab, a joint initiative with Hyundai, YouTube, SNAP Inc and SpaceX for exploring the convergence of art and technology. Similarly, MoMA’s Creativity Lab hosts The People’s Studio, where “visitors can learn about and experiment with artists’ strategies that rely on exchange, shared reflection, and collaboration.”

- 2 The inaugural hang in 2015 of *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* was developed by Cheng Jia Yun, Clarissa Chikiamco, Horikawa Lisa, Phoebe Scott, Syed Muhammad Hafiz, and Adele Tan. Since 2016, the curatorium has also included Goh Sze Ying, Qinyi Lim, Shujuan Lim, Anisha Menon, Roger Nelson, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, Melinda Susanto, and Charmaine Toh. Alongside extensive efforts at surveying the Southeast Asian collections and developing detailed captions, the curatorium has actively sought key long-term loans from institutional and private lenders to address gaps in the chronological displays. For instance, a highlighted gap has been the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century displays, which has benefited from generous loans of works by Raden Saleh and Juan Luna from the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Lopez Memorial Museum respectively.



# FAMILIAR OTHERS: THE ARTIST'S GAZE AND ITS LEGACY

by Phoebe Scott

This exhibition is an attempt to grapple with the thorny and delicate issue of cultural representation, as it appears in the modern art of Southeast Asia. The point of departure is the artist's gaze on those construed as "the Other"—here meaning people or groups who are perceived as being inherently culturally different from a dominant group or population—from inside the modernising nation states of the region. In art, as in other forms of representation, the image of the Other can be a site of fantasy: ethnic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, and communities living in remote terrain or in borderlands far away from the national capitals have been re-imagined into art through a lens of projected desire.<sup>1</sup> In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, the representation of the Other has been a persistent feature in modern art. Within the art history of Euro-American modernism, images of the Other have been stringently critiqued and implicated in the colonial projects of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>2</sup> However, the issue has remained relatively dormant in Southeast Asian art. This may be due to the different ambiguities raised by the internal gaze on the Other from within the region.<sup>3</sup> Southeast Asian artists and the people they represented were not necessarily on opposite ends of a colonial relationship; in fact, they might have been joint participants in anti-colonial movements. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, they often shared a stake in the emerging constructs of nation and region. The three artists presented in this exhibition—the painters Emiria Sunassa (1894–1964) and Yeh Chi Wei (1913–1991), and the photographer Eduardo

Masferré (1909–1995)—were selected because the image of the Other in Southeast Asia was a central facet of their work. Furthermore, these artists did not encounter their Others at a distance, but instead through the lived experience of interacting with people with whom they also shared personal, familial or political ties. In this setting, the hard-edged binaries of self/Other, modern/not-modern, and “civilised”/“primitive” are more fragile than they might appear. Solidarity, intimacy, empathy and familiarity all surface in the artworks, jostling awkwardly with a gaze that can also be distant and exoticising. To evoke this tension and hold it in view, this exhibition uses the phrase “familiar Others.”<sup>4</sup>

Unravelling the idea of “familiar Others” requires more than just an institutional voice. Thus, this exhibition includes eight commissioned text responses from people with ties to the communities represented in the artworks on display. Additionally, the selected writers are all cultural producers themselves, and include poets (Gawani Gaongen and Kulleh Grasi), academics (Els Tieneke Rieke Katmo and Welyne Jeffry Jehom), artists (Rocky Cajigan, Dicky Takndare, Betty Adii and Michael Yan Devis), a musician (Alena Murang) and an anthropologist and curator (Enrico Yory Kondologit). In these enlivening and challenging texts, the writers brought their own bodies of knowledge and experience as they responded to the images. There was no possibility of meeting face-to-face or engaging directly with the exhibition space, as these responses were commissioned and produced during the period of Covid-19 restrictions. However, these texts have influenced how the exhibition was curated—including the placement of the artworks in the space and the presentation of supplementary materials. In the exhibition, extracts of their responses are used in place of conventional descriptive labels. These interventions may not have displaced the curatorial voice of National Gallery Singapore, but they do suggest its incompleteness and partiality. The responses are reproduced in full in this catalogue, and I have also taken the opportunity to write “alongside” them at certain points in this essay.

The museum (National Gallery Singapore in this case) is also implicated in the politics of representation. The

practice of naming and displaying is representational work done by the museum, but its interpretive quality is not always obvious: the frequently unattributed, neutral-toned texts of the museum actively shed the marks of subjectivity. Nowhere is this more evident than the artwork label, whose contents—artist, title, date, medium, size and acquisition information—appear self-evidently factual (as at many other museums, this type of label at National Gallery Singapore is ominously nicknamed “the tombstone label” because of its short-form style). However, behind that label lies the morass that is the museum database: a place where imperfect information, transcription errors, data loss, unconscious bias and outdated or colonial systems of naming linger. Even the act of “cleansing” this data—another inapt and somewhat chilling metaphor—involves a series of subjective interventions and decisions. This is not to criticise the desire for factual accuracy or the people who work towards it, but to invite scepticism towards the authoritative quality of such labels. This is important because the label frames our perceptions of the artwork and its subject in a seemingly objective way, so a factual error or a value judgement can come to have more significant implications. As an experimental space, *Dalam Southeast Asia* offers the chance to consider the act of naming and labelling. Some of the tombstone labels in this exhibition have been re-worked to become more discursive, documenting changes in naming over time—whether at National Gallery Singapore or where the works were previously exhibited or published—based on shifts in research, the correcting of errors or changing interpretive descriptions. As our perceptions of these artworks shift in response to how they are framed, what was initially a banal exercise can turn into a revelatory one. By giving prominence to these layered sets of relations—artist to subject; museum to artwork; artwork to public—*Familiar Others* hopes to open a space for critique, but also for nuance and generosity.



## 1. ARTIST and SUBJECT

The problem of the Other within modern art has frequently been couched in terms of primitivism, which runs like a seam through multiple modern movements, particularly in the Euro-American context. The common idea was that so-called “primitive” cultures—frequently those whose territories were the subject of Euro-American colonial expansion—could offer ideological and aesthetic revitalisation to the rigid and exhausted cultures of the industrializing “West.” Ostensibly, primitivism might celebrate these cultures.<sup>5</sup> However, it also often relied on simplistic, hierarchical and even racist views of what such cultures were like. By re-circulating the perception that these cultures were less “developed” or “civilised,” primitivism created a discourse that justified colonisation. It was so closely tied to the colonial idea that it has been argued that “we should think of the primitive as the product of the historical experience of the West.”<sup>6</sup> What relevance, then, does this idea hold in the history of modern art from Southeast Asia? A previous exhibition project in Dalam Southeast Asia coined the term “encounterism” to propose a non-judgemental form of relation to the Other from a vantage point within Southeast Asia, as part of the Global South.<sup>7</sup> However, the burden of primitivism is not always easily shed, especially when its traces appear not only at a formal level of the artwork, in terms of specific modern styles, but also in the discourses about and around the work. Consider Yeh Chi Wei’s comments on his 1965 visit to the longhouses of Sarawak, in which he draws an explicit comparison to Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), the French artist who set the paradigm for painterly primitivism:

From cultivating the fields, hunting, fishing to dancing, every aspect of the primitive aboriginals’ life was so innocent and, to us artists, truly exciting. No wonder Gauguin wanted to retire and live a primitive life with the Tahitians!<sup>8</sup>

Or these remarks on Emiria Sunassa's work by modernist critic Sanusi Pané, in 1941, as cited by the scholar Heidi Arbuckle:

It could be said that she endeavours to renew the “primitive” arts, Indonesia's ancient arts, and intends to bring an “ethnic” feeling and form (*perasaan dan bentoek “ethnisch”*) of ethnic groups who live in closed societies (*golongan bangsa yang hidup dalam masyarakat tertotoep*) to the “contemporary Indonesian” (*Indonesia masa sekarang*) environment.<sup>9</sup>

Such fragments reveal the persistence of a “primitivist” strain of thinking, even in Southeast Asia. Yet, the scholarly critique of primitivism to date has been based on artists of late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Clearly, artists and audiences in Southeast Asia had a different vantage point. It is the nuances of this relationship between artist and subject that this exhibition aims to explore: the play between intimacy and distance, the tension between exoticism and familiarity. The specifics of each artist and their relationship to the subjects of the works makes these issues more apparent.

### 1.1. Emiria Sunassa: conjuring the “peripheries”

Emiria Sunassa's surviving body of artistic work is small but compelling, and further enlivened by her complex and somewhat unreliable biography. Scholar Heidi Arbuckle's comprehensive study on the artist concluded that Emiria's identity was essentially performative—she cultivated her own personal and cultural mystique, perhaps even to the point of fabrication.<sup>10</sup> Born in 1894 in Tanah Wangko in North Sulawesi, Emiria was active throughout the then Netherlands East Indies, reportedly as a “nurse, plantation administrator, tiger and elephant hunter, businesswoman, poison-maker and traveler.”<sup>11</sup> With no formal training in painting, Emiria first exhibited in 1940 in the landmark exhibition of PERSAGI (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia, or Association of Indonesian Draughtsmen). This group was known for

their spirited rejection of the hackneyed conventions of painting at the time, as well as their desire to forge a modern Indonesian aesthetic. In 1941, PERSAGI was granted permission to show at the Bataviasche Kunstkring, the leading art venue in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). Emiria was part of the exhibition, with works including *Papuan Archers* (fig. 1). She continued to exhibit throughout the 1940s, often in exhibitions where she was the only female Indonesian artist.<sup>12</sup>

In her paintings, Emiria frequently represented peoples from across the Indonesian archipelago, presumably based on her memories and travels. Her 1946 solo exhibition in Jakarta—in which two of the paintings in *Familiar Others* were displayed—included images of Balinese, Dayak, Bugis, Javanese and Papuan peoples, among others (fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> This exhibition took place during the Indonesian War of Independence from the Dutch (1945–1949), when

1  
Emiria Sunassa  
PAPUAN ARCHERS  
c. 1941  
Oil on board, 40 x 40cm  
Collection of Nasirun



1

2  
Exhibition catalogue for  
*Exhibition of Paintings  
by Emiria Sunassa at Van  
Heutz Boulevard no. 1  
Djarta, 1946*



2

the emerging nationalist imagination was beginning to encompass all the territories which previously made up the Netherlands East Indies. Emiria's personal biography added weight to her presentation of Indonesia's regional diversity. She claimed to be related to a former Sultan of Tidore, an island in the Maluku archipelago of eastern Indonesia which was previously a hub for the spice trade.<sup>14</sup> Historically, the Sultanate of Tidore also asserted its rule over parts of western areas of the island of New Guinea.<sup>15</sup> This familial connection would be the basis of Emiria's claim to be the rightful "Queen of Papua," and to participate actively in the

movement for Papuan independence from the Dutch. While her claim was never officially accepted, her connection to the world of eastern Indonesia clearly impacted the reception of her work in Batavia/Jakarta, as evidenced by this 1948 review:

[Emiria] often felt that sometimes the Westerners' world of feelings is fake, and their *huichelarij* (hypocrisy) pierced her heart. And apparently that's why she turned around, and then opened her eyes to the life and the psyche of primitive peoples, which have not been corrupted by the polish of Western culture [...]

Once the background of her life history becomes clear, it is easier for us to understand why it seems that the objects Emiria chooses in her paintings are the life of primitive peoples (for example, "Dayak Bride", "Papuan Sorcerer") [...].<sup>16</sup>

Emiria's works staged the "peripheries" of the emerging nation for an elite Javanese audience who were at the "centre" (Batavia/Jakarta). Implicated in this staging were her own political claims regarding Papua, which she had begun to make as early as the late 1940s when she became involved with the activist Silas Papare (1918–1978) and his party the Partai Kemerdekaan Indonesia Irian (PKII). The PKII supported Papuan independence from the Dutch as part of the newly-emerging Indonesia. By 1949, the independence of Netherlands New Guinea had become the most hotly-contested issue in the resolution of Indonesia's War of Independence, and remained a sticking point in negotiations. Ultimately, Netherlands New Guinea remained under the administrative control of the Dutch for a further twelve years, before being handed over to Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> Papua had also occupied a powerful space of desire in Dutch colonial consciousness. As Dannilynn Rutherford has noted, the persistent colonial image of Papua as a remote place populated by "stone age" peoples was merged into a desire for Papua to serve as a "blank slate" where the Dutch colonial experiment could be revived and perfected.<sup>18</sup> Papua was also variously proposed as a "promised land" to

absorb rural Dutch migrants, or as a potential homeland for Indonesia's Eurasian populations.<sup>19</sup> Papuan nationalist and independence movements at this time took competing and varied forms, and unlike the PKII, did not always envisage Papuan independence via the new Indonesian nation.<sup>20</sup>

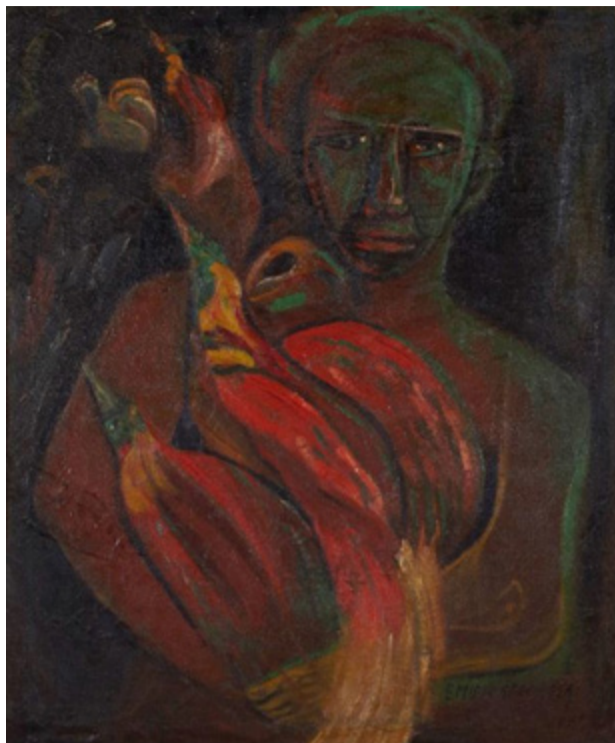
How did Emiria's own paintings of Papua and Tidore relate to this setting? Scholars Heidi Arbuckle and Wulan Dirgantoro have argued that Emiria's images of Indonesia's "internal others" destabilised the dominant discourse of Indonesian nationalism by bringing the marginalised identities of the peoples of the eastern parts of the archipelago into view.<sup>21</sup> However, while Emiria's images were different from the masculinist and Javanese-focused images dominating nationalist art at the time, it is arguable whether her works really challenged this discourse. Several of her paintings seem to replicate the image of Papua as a dark, unknowable space that is close to nature and potentially dangerous—essentially an image of Papua as a "non-modern" Other. This was in stark contrast to the sites where Emiria presented the works to the public, especially in cosmopolitan Batavia/Jakarta.

Take *Bahaya Belakang Kembang Terate* (Danger Lurking Behind the Lotus) for example. The ambiguous work has been variously identified as depicting either a Dayak or Papuan subject, and it conveys a threatening air in terms of the presentation of the impenetrable jungle setting and the archer's lethal skill (fig. 3). Meanwhile, in *Orang Irian dengan Burung Tjenderawasih* (Irian Man with Bird-of-Paradise), the dark palette of the painting makes it difficult to distinguish between the abbreviated, mask-like features of the central figure and the murky background, enlivened only by strokes of electric green. By highlighting the birds-of-paradise, Emiria also emphasised what was one of Papua's most sought-after commodities, already a mainstay of historical tribute and trade, and later a magnet for hunters and traders in the modern period (fig. 4).<sup>22</sup> In his response to this artwork for *Familiar Others* (p. 49), anthropologist and curator Enrico Yory Kondologit reflects that the birds-of-paradise were the first in a chain of desirable natural resources that drew foreign exploitation to Papua, a situation that continues even today. Similarly, the painting



3

**3**  
Emiria Sunassa  
BAHAYA BELAKANG  
KEMBANG TERATE  
(DANGER LURKING  
BEHIND THE LOTUS)  
c. 1941–1946  
Oil on board,  
89.2 x 58.6 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



4

**4**  
Emiria Sunassa  
ORANG IRIAN  
DENGAN BURUNG  
TJENDERAWASIH  
(IRIAN MAN WITH  
BIRD-OF-PARADISE)  
1946–1948  
Oil on canvas,  
67.2 x 54.5 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



5

**5**  
Emiria Sunassa  
PANEN DAMAR  
(ROSIN HARVEST)  
Undated  
Oil on board,  
59.6 x 49.5 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

*Panen Damar* (Rosin Harvest) also presents a site that is critical to the articulation of Emiria’s past and identity—the island of Tidore—via damar, a kind of resin that was also one of the natural commodities traded from the region (fig. 5).<sup>23</sup> The treatment of the figures in heavy, visible strokes of brown paint is mirrored by the verticality of the forest trees, integrating the human figures with nature while also signalling the landscape’s extractive value.

Across all three works, there is a raw immediacy to the painting style that Emiria’s contemporaries interpreted as “primitive,” in the sense that it was untaught or undeveloped.<sup>24</sup> The dual sense of the primitive had the function of situating Emiria as part of the modern avant-garde, against the polished but formulaic approaches of the Mooi Indies painters. Furthermore, her personal biography and political claims made her a privileged interpreter of this “primitive” space, and this is perhaps the reason that led her to make outrageous and possibly tongue-in-cheek statements about life in Papua and Tidore in her public communications.<sup>25</sup> Emiria’s works reinforced her own centrality in mediating Papua as part of the emerging Indonesian nation, whilst also implicitly emphasising its resources, and thus economic potential, for that nation. The ambiguity of her position—as well as her value in creating a kind of “visibility” for Papua within the national discourse—is recognised in the animated dialogue written for *Familiar*

*Others* by Papuan artists of the Udeido Collective (p. 53), who might have the last word here:

**DICKY TAKNDARE:** The historical background shaping the relationship between Tidoreans and Papuans played a major part in forming Emiria's view on Papuans [...] At the same time, Emiria was working when Indonesia was a new Republic, and she was part of an art movement that strove to build a new national awareness after the wave of decolonisation washed over Asia and the Pacific.

**MICHAEL YAN DEVIS:** I appreciate that the chosen subjects for her works were such anomalies within the context of Indonesian art [...] But considering the relationship between Papua-Tidore and how she crowned herself as the Queen, I can say that her works about Papua are manifestations of the Sultanate of Tidore's hegemony over Papua.

**BETTY ADII:** I see Emiria's works as a form of solidarity that was born out of the spirit of camaraderie, and it ought to be appreciated. But I think her works that depict Papuans seem to only narrate Papua superficially [...]. "Exoticism" still constitutes the main reason behind the creation of these works. If we position these works in today's social context in Papua, I think the crucial point is about the value of solidarity that we can interpret as a driver for change.

## 1.2 Eduardo Masferré: "A stranger, but not that strange"

Like Emiria Sunassa, the work of photographer Eduardo Masferré occupies a similar position that straddles familiarity and distance, exoticism and advocacy. His photographs are entangled within a longer history of the representation of peoples of the mountainous Cordillera region in Luzon, the Philippines. "Old photographs are an aggressive cultural item," writes Marion Pastor-Roces, adding that colonial-era photography in the Philippines was "methodical to a cold-blooded extreme, humourless, artless, the enterprise

smacked of a cataloguing instinct.”<sup>26</sup> The exemplar of this practice could be Dean C. Worcester (1866–1924), a scientist who joined an 1887 expedition to the Philippines, where he developed an interest in the different ethnic groups of the population. Worcester became a key architect of the American colonisation of the Philippines, and was appointed Secretary of the Interior in the colonial administration from 1900 to 1913. One of his responsibilities was the “Bureau of non-Christian Tribes,” which oversaw the peoples of the Cordillera. The thousands of photographs he took of the region were used to support his colonialist position, whether in his published books, his touring lantern-slide presentations—where he argued against the Philippines’ capacity for independence—or as part of sensationalist stories published in *National Geographic*.<sup>27</sup> His photographs are aesthetically minimal, with their human subjects staged in profile or frontal views, to be annotated with Worcester’s own detailed typological classifications (fig. 6). In *National*

6  
Photographs reproduced  
in Dean C. Worcester,  
“Head-Hunters of  
Northern Luzon,”  
*National Geographic  
Magazine* XXXIII, no. 9,  
September 1912



*Geographic*, the ethnographic typology was accompanied by lurid accounts of the practice of headhunting, which, Worcester reassured readers has, “since the American occupation, been very effectively checked.”<sup>28</sup> The magazine was significantly implicated in the popularisation of the American colonial project.<sup>29</sup>

It is via *National Geographic* that Worcester’s images intersected with Masferré. Although Masferré spent some



7  
 Eduardo Masferré  
 YOUNG MAN FROM  
 MALEDKONG  
 1953  
 Silver gelatin print,  
 34 x 27 cm  
 Collection of National  
 Gallery Singapore



of his early years in Spain, he largely grew up in the town of Sagada in the Cordillera region. His father was a Spanish former soldier and his mother—who was Kankanaey, one of the Indigenous groups of the Cordillera—was from Sagada. According to biographical accounts, at the age of 15, Masferré encountered one of Worcester’s articles in *National Geographic*, which had a profound effect.<sup>30</sup> Masferré turned to the practice of photography after that, assisting a local priest to learn the technique, ordering a camera from Manila and drawing inspiration from magazines. He was especially productive between 1934 and 1956, photographing the Kankanaey, Bontoc, Kalinga, Ifugao and Ga’dang peoples of the Cordillera. He eventually established a photographic studio in Bontoc, which was patronised by local clients.<sup>31</sup> For his own practice, Masferré also made expeditions into the surrounding regions, sometimes to places which were quite remote from Bontoc. He described himself as “a stranger, but not that strange” as he would enter the villages with some degree of familiarity with their language and culture.<sup>32</sup>

In an extensive interview conducted late in his life, Masferré spoke of the desire to present his Cordilleran subjects and their cultures with respect. This was particularly significant as the initial perception within the Philippines was that these “primitive” subjects should not be publicly shown.<sup>33</sup> As a result of his approach, Masferré’s images of people tend to be individuated and attentive to aesthetics, privileging the expressive subjectivity of portraiture rather than the cold, classificatory quality of “type.” In *Young Man from Maledkong* the most striking aspect of the image is the young man’s arresting and speculative gaze as he looks at the viewer (fig. 7). At the same time, there are details in the image that might be read in a more ethnographic light, as emphasised in the response to the work for *Familiar Others* by Cordilleran artist Rocky Cajigan (p. 66):

It begins with discomfort—to look at this photo, of a man from Maligcong, Bontoc, the Philippines, with the pipe, the *soklong*, and the stare that is meant to satisfy curiosities about who the “savage” is.



8  
 Eduardo Masferré  
 TINGLAYAN  
 1957  
 Silver gelatin print,  
 35.5 x 26.6 cm  
 Collection of National  
 Gallery Singapore

In all his images, Masferré preferred the picturesque aspects of life in the region and avoided any traces of modernity, instead seeing the images as a way to capture a way of life that he thought was disappearing. For this reason, it was perhaps too easy to integrate these images into a pre-existing (even Worcesterian) narrative about the condition of life in that region. Take for instance the image of a young man clothed in a loincloth, standing in a rice field and gazing into the distance as he holds his shield and spear. In the collection of National Gallery Singapore, the registered title of this photograph is *Tinglayan*, which provides a geographical designation (fig. 8). Yet, in earlier publications, the photograph was described in a way that introduced an element of threat, possibly a reminder of the oft-sensationalised practice of headhunting: “On his way to check the water in his rice fields. Men did not leave their villages unarmed.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, Masferré’s photographs in general have been read both as an intervention into a dehumanising colonial practice of photography—as an attempt to offer a respectful form of the photographic gaze—and as a continuation of a romanticisation of the region, feeding directly into the contemporary tourist appetite for the Cordillera.<sup>35</sup>

In attempting to capture the liminal quality of Masferré’s position, one scholar has likened him to the figure of the “native informant.”<sup>36</sup> Yet this term does not seem to adequately capture his role. Masferré’s photographic expeditions were his own, and while his works were initially circulated widely in anthropological texts, as well as postcards and prints, the work done in his studio in Bontoc was often commissioned directly by local inhabitants of the area. The prints from his travels in the Cordillera were also returned to the communities they represented. This approach contrasts significantly with Worcester’s archive, where the photographs have the appearance of, quite literally, having been “taken.” Masferré said of his own practice:

On the first visit [...] they had no way to understand what photography was. We could not explain it. On the second trip, we took proofs and gave them pictures of

themselves. Sometimes if they could afford it they paid. If not, we would find ways of giving them a copy.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, while there was a sense of responsibility and reciprocity ingrained in the practice of making these images, they can also be interpreted as reinforcing a form of romantic “Othering.” Masferré’s work speaks to one of the tensions of the position of the “familiar Other,” namely the persistence of aspects of primitivism, even within a framework of intimacy and respect.

### 1.3 Yeh Chi Wei: primitivism, archaism and the region

For the painter Yeh Chi Wei, it was a regionalist rather than nationalist imagination that informed much of his work, including the representations of peoples of Sarawak and Sabah (now part of Malaysia) featured in *Familiar Others*. In his deployment of a regional gaze on Southeast Asia, Yeh continued down a path that had been made by the earlier generation of artists of the “Nanyang school,” who were artists of the Chinese diaspora active in Singapore and what was then Malaya. Similarly, Yeh was born in Fuzhou, China, and as a child moved with his family to Singapore and then to Sibu, Sarawak.<sup>38</sup> In a biographical essay, he described this period as one of hardship and struggle for the family:

My mother took charge of the household. She cut wood in the hills or worked in the fields every day with me on her back, struggling hard to survive. Nevertheless, we were constantly in want. We were in such great poverty that when I was five, my mother had no choice but to raise a small sum of money by whatever means she could find, take me with her to set sail and come to Singapore to look for my father. When I was seven (in 1921), I lived in a small rural community in Sibu, Sarawak. At dawn, I had to pick up a tapping knife and follow my mother to a rubber plantation to tap rubber.”<sup>39</sup>

As the family’s fortunes improved, Yeh was able to return to China to study art, graduating in Shanghai in 1936. As a

result of the Japanese invasion, Yeh fled to Singapore and settled there, one of several artists to do so in the period. Like many Chinese diasporic artists in the region, Yeh's style combined Chinese and Western painting techniques, but was also the result of a voracious desire to express the experience of living in Southeast Asia. Yeh cultivated a deliberate sense of archaism in his work, turning to Southeast Asian antiquities and local material cultures.

Yeh's works made after his travels in East Malaysian Borneo represent the peak of this tendency. These trips were part of his activities in the Ten Men Art Group, a loose collective of Singapore-based artists who pursued an active programme of travel around the region throughout the 1960s. In 1965, the group travelled to Sarawak and returned for a more extensive trip in 1968 which began in Kota Kinabalu, moving through Brunei, Miri and then to Sibuh. Photographs in the collection of the artist's family from these travels show the artists working in the longhouses, eating and talking with the local communities, as well as recording cultural practices like weaving, ceremonial dances and cockfights (figs. 9 and 10). Yeh also brought back souvenirs and examples of Bornean material culture which, along with the photographs, served as long term points of reference for his paintings. His earliest works produced in the mid-1960s related to Borneo, and used formal aspects of Indigenous aesthetics as a basis for semi-abstract stylisation. *Drummer* (c. 1965), for example, shows a young woman in a longhouse is filled with precious

**9**  
Ceramics collection in longhouse, photograph taken during a Ten Men Art Group trip to Borneo, location not recorded, c. 1965.

**10**  
Members of the Ten Men Art Group eating a meal in a longhouse, location not recorded, c. 1965.



9



10



11



12

11  
Yeh Chi Wei  
UNTITLED  
Undated  
Oil on canvas,  
91.5 x 104 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore  
© Yeh Toh Yen

12  
Yeh Chi Wei  
THE DAYAK PLAYS THE  
MUSICAL INSTRUMENT  
1975  
Oil on canvas,  
158 x 49 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore  
© Yeh Toh Yen

items of Iban material culture. These are rendered with sufficient accuracy that Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (p. 78), in her response to the work for *Familiar Others*, was able to identify most of the items, and give their Iban names:

The space exhibits wealth with the display of two *tajau* (jars) with the dragon design, highly significant in Iban mythology. The wall also sports a water dragon design, flaunting beautiful craftsmanship, but part of it covered by an older *pua kumbu* (a sacred cloth made with tie-dye) depicting a female figure in one of the tales of Kumang (the mother goddess of the Iban people). This textile is displayed side by side with another *pua kumbu* boasting a design of the warrior Bujang Berani.

After his 1968 trip to Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei, Yeh's approach became further abstracted, and the strong presence of material culture recedes:

In order to convey a sense of archaic simplicity, I turned to repetitive representation, “destroying” the images over and over again until the colours appeared so mottled as to be reminiscent of murals exposed to years of dust and smoke. I wanted to hurl the pictures a bit further back in time, so as to better evoke the primitive aboriginal way of life.<sup>40</sup>

This approach is especially clear in an untitled artwork of the late 1960s, where the painting has been repeatedly re-worked in heavy impasto, creating a textural surface that has the uneven and striated quality of rock (fig. 11). Later works featured abstracted images of family groups, sometimes within womb-like enclosures, often also layered over with impasto. Finally, a set of works made in the mid-1970s returned to Borneo subjects many years after Yeh's travels there. These works have a narrative quality, and also include inscriptions in archaic Chinese “oracle bone” script, of either descriptive prose or quotations from classical Chinese poetry (fig. 12).<sup>41</sup> The inclusion of colophons in archaic script—and visual references to the ink rubbings used to study ancient Chinese inscriptions—were elements

developed by Yeh some years earlier, and appear in his works on various Southeast Asian subjects.

In many respects, the Borneo body of work conforms to the conventions of modernist primitivism. The cultures depicted are mined for their picturesque qualities and the formal elements of their art, but are presented in a timeless state, implicitly “Other” to the modernity of the painter. The references to Chinese antiquity seem to compound this quality: siting the Indigenous cultures of Borneo into a distantly-past state of “before.” However, a number of factors also complicate this reading. First is Yeh’s own personal history and childhood in Sarawak, which appears to have been layered into the works, especially the repeated subject of familial relations (fig. 13). In his 1969 catalogue, some of these works have a text commentary, such as: “pitiful woman labouring in the fields. The poor child is starved,” or “It’s a long wait for mother’s return. After breastfeed [sic], mother has to hurry for farming.”<sup>42</sup> These texts have a striking resonance with Yeh’s own biographical essay, quoted above, about his early years with his mother in Sarawak, and suggest an intimacy and solidarity with the subject rather than distance or exoticism.

It is also possible to interpret Yeh’s deployment of the signs of Chinese antiquity as a gesture of familiarity, or perhaps even recognition. In *Drummer*, Yeh includes the image two storage jars of a type prized the Bornean context as *pusaka*, or sacred heirlooms (fig. 14). Historically, such jars arrived in Borneo from production sites across Southeast Asia and South China. Yeh had two similar large brown-glazed jars, purchased from Sarawak, in his personal collection (fig. 15).<sup>43</sup> In the longhouses of Borneo, imported ceramics and storage jars in particular were revered: to handle them required respectful behaviour, and they might be used in burials or at the centre of special festivities.<sup>44</sup> In their origin stories, such jars were shape-shifting and had an animate and mutable presence in Indigenous thought and practices. In addition, a sophisticated body of connoisseurship had evolved around them on the appreciation of form, glaze and decoration, and provenance and authenticity.<sup>45</sup> As Stanley O’Connor noted in a text that has become a classic of Southeast Asian art history, this was a realm in which the



13

**13**  
Yeh Chi Wei  
MOTHER AND CHILD  
1969  
Oil on canvas,  
77 x 97 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



14

**14**  
Yeh Chi Wei  
DRUMMER  
c. 1965  
Oil on canvas,  
112.5 x 99 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



15

**15**  
Exhibition view of ceramics  
of possibly Southeast Asian  
and Chinese origin, dating  
unknown, purchased in  
Sarawak by Yeh Chi Wei,  
c. 1960s  
Collection of Yeh Toh Yen

taste and standards of the Western art historian and (for example) an Iban elder in Sarawak seemed to miraculously align.<sup>46</sup> The same could perhaps be said of Yeh, who, as an artist of the Chinese diaspora, also avidly pursued an interest in traditional Chinese material culture and antiquarianism—collecting rubbings of stele inscriptions, ink paintings, as well as ceramics. According to his family, much of his ceramics collection was acquired in Sarawak via a personal connection. Did Yeh, like O'Connor, experience the “shock of recognition” when encountering the respect for these objects also held by communities in Borneo? While the argument is speculative, the conflation of Chinese archaism and contemporary Bornean culture in certain artworks suggests that some form of recognition or mutual intelligibility is consistently being proposed by the painter. If primitivism is a binary that relies on oppositional, even categorical difference, then we can look to Yeh’s gestures of solidarity as markers of recognition or identification, which work against the distancing qualities of the works.

A final register in which the work of Yeh Chi Wei and the Ten Men Art Group must be assessed is the diplomatic. In a period when the borders within Southeast Asia—and the former British territories of Singapore and Malaya in particular—were especially fluid, the regionalist activities and aspirations of the group held special significance. This

is evident, for example, in the text written by S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's then Minister of Foreign Affairs, in the Group's 1965 catalogue following their trip to Sarawak. Written only one week after Singapore had formally become an independent nation, Rajaratnam commented that the exhibition would "make a positive contribution to art and in the context of an independent Singapore serve to bring about international goodwill and understanding," while also emphasising Singapore's position as a new, multi-racial society.<sup>47</sup> At the time, the controversial status of the former territories of British Borneo had also barely been settled, and debate had raged over their status in the early 1960s: would they become an ethnic counterweight to the majority Malay population in the new national unit of Malaysia? Or might parts of Borneo be re-linked to their historical position under the Sulu or Brunei Sultanates?<sup>48</sup> Indonesia's initial hostility to the formation of Malaysia, reflected in the policy of *Konfrontasi*, was also enacted primarily in this ambiguous territory in the form of border raids along the Sarawak/Kalimantan divide.<sup>49</sup> Representatives of Borneo's diverse populations were part of the debates and deliberations over how Malaysia or alternative political units might be constituted. As Ooi Keat Gin writes, "Borneo, then, mattered."<sup>50</sup> While the paintings might evoke an unchanging traditional culture, the image of Borneo more broadly had a striking political currency. In depicting Bornean peoples at that time, Yeh Chi Wei was painting peoples who were also active in imagining the contours of a nation in which the artist himself might live and work.

## 2. WHOSE TURN IS IT TO SPEAK NOW?

These broad sketches above can suggest the complexities of the gaze on the "familiar Other." However, the artists' own intentions and contexts do not limit the meanings of their works, especially as they continue to be shown in new settings and within new narratives. The images generate their own legacies, or accrue different implications as values shift over time. Regarding these artworks today, we might



ask, as Gawani Gaongen (p. 58) does in her poem written for this exhibition, “*sinu ‘dwani nan mensos-owa?/whose turn is it to speak now?*” Perhaps in an unconscious echo of Gayatri Spivak’s famous question “can the subaltern speak?”, the poem weaves a complicated answer. Gaongen, as a contemporary writer, when placed in the position of representing or speaking for the woman captured by Masferré’s image, cannot and will not replicate the voice of an Ifugao Elder of the 1950s. Instead, she interweaves her own perspective as a modern Kankanaey woman with a speculative and descriptive dialogue with the image. Gaongen confronts the impossibility of speaking for the past, as well as the awkwardness of speaking as a “representative.” By inviting participants who are cultural producers in their own right and asking them to respond to the work based on their own knowledge and expertise, the commissioning process for *Familiar Others* was intended to mediate this to some degree. Nonetheless, there is inevitably a process of representation at work, as well as a sense that speaking on behalf of the image is yet another kind of appropriation. The tension and potential limitations of such a project, including its institutional setting, are gamely reflected in the text by artist Rocky Cajigan (p. 66), also responding to an image by Masferré:

It begins with questioning—to look at this photo of an Indigenous, taken by an Indigenous as an Indigenous, within arbitrary definitions of Indigeneity.

It begins with self-assessment—to look at this photo in an institution that is perhaps on a mission to understand decolonial museology or itself, genderless and holding power.

[...]

It begins with a conundrum—to participate in a decolonial project while anticipating that the institution cannot separate itself from continuing colonial habits, and thereby enabling the tradition of examining Indigenous peoples as photographed objects.

Despite this hesitance, the eight responses commissioned for *Familiar Others* have opened up new lines of thinking in relation to the artworks. Within the critical and reflexive frameworks of their texts, Gaongen and Cajigan also unpack certain narratives of the Cordillera encoded by Masferré's photographs. Meanwhile, in a very personal response to Yeh's *The Dayak Plays the Musical Instrument*, singer-songwriter and *sape'* player Alena Murang (p. 81) speculates about the instrument that is represented, as well as addressing the limitations of the painter in naming and presenting what he observed. Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (p. 78) performs an act of re-appropriation of even retrieval, by meticulously giving each of the represented objects and icons in Yeh's *Drummer* their Iban names. Iban language is also critical to the response by Kulleh Grasi (p. 71), whose prose plays with the idea of knowledge concealed and revealed, creatively speculating on what an encounter between Yeh Chi Wei and the Elders in Sibu might have been like. In what is perhaps a demonstration of the "right to opacity"—theorist Édouard Glissant's contention that cultural difference should not be reduced to complete transparency or commensurability—Kulleh Grasi's text retains its own obscurity with the inclusion of particular, untranslatable Iban terms.<sup>51</sup> Emiria Sunassa's artworks representing Papua and Tidore have been interpreted in the long arc of their relationship, looking back into history as well as at the contemporary situation. For curator and anthropologist Enrico Yory Kondologit (p. 49), Emiria's representation of the bird-of-paradise is a trigger to discuss the long-term expropriation of Papua's natural resources. Meanwhile, for Dr Els Tienieke Rieke Katmo (p. 45), Lecturer in Socio Economics of Agriculture, the birds become a metonym for the man who holds them, as well as for Emiria herself, also an "Other" in the gendered hierarchy of colonial relationships. Dr Katmo's interpretation that the man holding the birds is "enslaved" is also a reminder of the historical trade in enslaved persons in this region, paralleled by the captivity of the birds. Finally, the lively discussion held by the Papuan artists of Udeido Collective (p. 53) also ranges over gender and history, and introduces the important note of "solidarity" in interpreting Emiria's legacy.

All the responses have been written in the spirit of generosity, critical awareness and considerable trust. The exhibition *Familiar Others* is in many respects an exercise in vulnerability. It is always difficult to speak of issues of cultural representation and appropriation, of the fraught and entangled relationships between people. This is perhaps exacerbated in the current environment, where the discourse has tended to rapid judgements and unequivocal binaries. Thus, to attempt to explore such topics involves vulnerability on the part of the artists who made the works, the institution which owns and displays them, the curator who writes about them and presents them, and the community which engages and responds to them. This exhibition is intended to allow that vulnerability to emerge, and to facilitate different voices and perspectives to appear. This is in keeping with the spirit of the Dalam Southeast Asia project space, and its function as a self-reflexive and critical space in the Southeast Asia permanent galleries, resonant with the implications of the Malay-language term *dalam*, or “inside.” By attending with depth and nuance to our work “inside,” perhaps we may be better prepared to face the expanded challenges posed by such issues “outside”.

## NOTES

- 1 The term “Indigenous Peoples” is a contested concept in Southeast Asia, as has been reflected in a number of recent scholarly works on the subject. Due to its significant ethnic diversity, histories of migration and mobile populations, the concept of Indigeneity as developed within a white-settler colony model maps poorly onto Southeast Asian realities—including in areas where the majority of the population can be understood, in different ways, as Indigenous. However, as Chua and Idrus have acknowledged, the idea of Indigeneity is also “out there” in Southeast Asia, meaning that the English-language term is also used as a self-identifying term by various communities. In this essay, the term is used selectively for areas where the English term is in common usage. It should be noted that there are also Southeast Asian language terms for concepts related to Indigeneity which have their own political and cultural implications. See Liana Chua and Rusaslina Idrus, “Introduction: Unpacking Indigeneity in Southeast Asia,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 37 (March 2022), no. 1: 1–26. Other recent discussions include Micah F. Morton, “The Rising Politics of Indigeneity in Southeast Asia,” *Trends in Southeast Asia* 14 (2017), and Ian G. Baird, “Introduction: Indigeneity in Asia: an emerging but contested concept,” *Asian Ethnicity* 17, no. 4 (2016): 501–505.
- 2 For some formative texts in the field, see Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888-1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism,” *Art in America* 77 (July 1989): 118–129 and Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin’s Skirt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997). For a critical overview of the term, see Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, “Primitive,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 217–233.
- 3 The exception might be the Singapore-based Nanyang painters, where some critical analysis of the primitivism of the internal gaze has emerged. See Rawanchaikul Toshiko, “Nanyang 1950–65: Passage to Singaporean Art,” trans. Horikawa Lisa, in *Nanyang 1950–65: Passage to Singaporean Art*, ed. Rawanchaikul Toshiko, (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2002), 34–36 and Ong Zhen Min, “Nanyang Reverie,” in *Siapa Nama Kamu: Art in Singapore Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 42–51.
- 4 The term “Familiar Others” owes a debt to the research of Heidi Arbuckle, whose concept of the “internal Other” in the work of the artist Emiria Sunassa has been influential for this project. See Heidi Arbuckle, “Performing Emiria Sunassa: Reframing the Female Subject in Post/colonial Indonesia,” (PhD Diss., The University of Melbourne, 2011): 145–185.
- 5 Antliff and Leighton, *op. cit.*, 227–228. Based on this aspect

of modernist primitivism, Ruth B. Philips has also argued for a more robust distinction between “a negative sociological primitivism and a positive aesthetic primitivism,” in Ruth B. Phillips, “Aesthetic primitivism revisited: The global diaspora of ‘primitive art’ and the rise of Indigenous modernisms,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015): 1–25. However, the validity of this position is difficult to accept, given that the celebratory aspects of aesthetic primitivism were often supported by or even reiterated the same stereotypes that made up the elements of sociological primitivism. It is thus difficult to support any revisionist position on primitivism per se, and perhaps the most that can be proposed is to review its specific functions in contexts other than the Euro-American.

- 6** Antliff and Leighton, op. cit., 217.
- 7** Roger Nelson, “The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin,” in *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2021), 20; available at <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/sites/default/files/The-Tailors-And-The%20Mannequins.pdf>
- 8** Yeh Chi Wei, “Artist’s Preface”, trans. Ng Kum Hoon, as reproduced in *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei*, vol II, ed. Yeo Wei Wei, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Art Gallery Singapore, 2010), 62. First published in *Ye Zhiwei huaji* [Yeh Chi Wei Exhibition Catalogue], exh. cat. (Singapore, 1969).
- 9** As cited and translated in Arbuckle, op. cit., 169.
- 10** Arbuckle’s complex and comprehensive research on Emiria’s contested biography appears throughout Arbuckle, op. cit.
- 11** Arbuckle, op. cit., 1.
- 12** Ibid., 5.
- 13** *Exhibition of Paintings by Emiria Sunassa at Van Heutz Boulevard no. 1 Djakarta, 1946*, unpublished exhibition brochure, as found in RKD—Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Amsterdam. Many thanks to Horikawa Lisa for sharing this document from her own research.
- 14** Arbuckle assessed, based largely on oral history research and some published interviews with Emiria, that there were two competing narratives of Emiria’s history: that she was descended from the Sultan of Tidore, or that she was from the Manoppo-Parera family in Minahasa, See Arbuckle, op. cit., 146–150. However, in documents newly uncovered by Anissa Rahadiningtyas during the research for this exhibition, Emiria herself actually reconciled these two narratives in her correspondence with the Dutch government, sent from Singapore on 21 July 1960. There, Emiria claimed that her mother was Patimah Poetri Al ‘Alam, a descendant of Sultan Nuku (Sultan Mabus Aminuddin Syah, r. 1797–1805), and that her father was Sahajuan Alting or Iskandar Sahajuan (Sultan of Tidore, r. 1894–1905). Emiria’s letter further explained that after her mother passed when giving birth to her, Emiria was

adopted by the family of F.J. Parera-Manoppo and was given the name Emma Wilhelmina Parera. See correspondence in the file *Aanspraken van Emiria Sunassa op Nederlands Nieuw-Guinea, 1960*, inv. number: 14857, Collection 2.05.118, Inventaris van het code-archief van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1955–1964, Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Netherlands. While these narratives are reconciled in her letter, it does not necessarily mean that these claims are substantiated.

- 15** These claims by the Tidore Sultanate were also accepted by the Dutch, who recognised them by treaty in 1828. Rutherford, however, suggests that these claims were “somewhat dubious” and that the authority of the Sultanate was not always apparent in practice. See Danilyn Rutherford, *Living in the Stone Age: Reflections on the Origins of a Colonial Fantasy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9–11.
- 16** Rosa, “Emiria Soenassa,” trans. Arif Bagus Prasetyo and Anissa Rahadiningtyas, in *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2022), forthcoming publication. First published in *Sedar/Onwaken* 1, Year 1 (11 September 1948): 12–14.
- 17** C.L.M. Penders, *The West New Guinea Debacle: Dutch Decolonisation and Indonesia, 1945–1962* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), 49–55; 83–6.
- 18** Rutherford, op. cit., 1–23; Danilyn Rutherford, *Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 29; 69–89.
- 19** Penders, op. cit., 55–87; Rutherford, op. cit., 69–89.
- 20** Penders, op. cit., 140–160 describes the generally diverse mixture of Koreri movements, anti-colonial movements and claimants to the territories of Netherlands New Guinea in this period, all of which can be linked to an nascent sense of Papuan nationalism. See Pender, *The West New Guinea Debacle*, 120–148. On the long-term implications of these divisions and different imaginations of Papuan nationalism, see Richard Chauvel, “Papua and Indonesia: Where Contending Nationalisms Meet”, in *Autonomy and Disintegration in Indonesia*, eds. Damien Kingsbury and Harry Aveling, (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 115–127.
- 21** Wulan Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017) 78–98; Arbuckle, op. cit., 145–185.
- 22** On the impact of bird of paradise hunters in New Guinea in the Muju region in the early 20th century, see Penders, op. cit., 110–111. On the significance of the birds in historical trade and tribute, see Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1993) 78, 99.
- 23** In the case of Emiria Sunassa’s works, the painting *Panen Damar* (Rosin Harvest)—a title of unknown origin that was used at the

point of acquisition—was revealed during conservation to have a title written on the back of the artwork, apparently inscribed by the artist: *Mengoempoel Damar Tedore*, or *Gathering Resin at Tidore*. This also allows the artwork to be conclusively identified as one of the paintings shown in Emiria’s 1946 solo exhibition in Jakarta. That resin was a trade good in the Tidore-Papua region is mentioned by Penders, *op. cit.*, 107.

- 24** See comments of this nature by the important writers on Indonesian art, like Kusnadi and Sudjojono, cited in Dirgantoro, *op. cit.*, 82–83.
- 25** See press clippings in *Aanspraken van Emiria Sunassa op Nederlands Nieuw-Guinea, 1960*, inv. number: 14857, Collection 2.05.118, Inventaris van het code-archief van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1955-1964, Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Netherlands.
- 26** Marion Pastor Roces, “Old Photographs, *Recuerdos Tristes*,” as reprinted in Marion Pastor Roces, *Gathering: Political Writing on Art and Culture* (Manila: De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, Inc and Hong Kong: ArtAsiaPacific, 2019), 1, 6.
- 27** *National Geographic* had a key role in articulating America’s burgeoning imperialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Worcester’s articles were significant within it. See Mark Rice, “Dean Worcester’s Photographs, American National Identity, and *National Geographic* Magazine,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 2 (December 2012): 42–56. On Worcester’s role in *National Geographic*, his ethnographic typology and other uses of his photographs, see Mark Rice, *Dean Worcester’s Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film and the Colonial Philippines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).
- 28** Dean C. Worcester, “Head-Hunters of Northern Luzon,” *The National Geographic Magazine*, Vol. XXIII, No. 9 (1912): 930.
- 29** Rice, *Dean Worcester’s Fantasy Islands*, 82-4 and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, “Headhunter Itineraries: The Philippines as America’s Dream Jungle,” *The Global South*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall 2009): 144–172.
- 30** Biographical information on Masferré here is based on the extensive interviews with the artist and biography by Gladys Montgomery Jones, “Eduardo Masferré,” in Jill Gale de Villa, Maria Teresa Garcia Farr and Gladys Montgomery Jones, eds., *E Masferré, People of the Philippine Cordillera, Photographs 1934–1956* (Manila: Devon IP Inc., 1988), 6–11.
- 31** Montgomery Jones, *op. cit.*, 9–10.
- 32** Montgomery Jones, *op. cit.*, 9.
- 33** Montgomery Jones, *op. cit.*, 10. This was likely linked to the pejorative uses that images of Cordilleran peoples had been put to by the previous generation of colonial photographers like Worcester, see Rice, *Fantasy Islands*, 62-117.
- 34** Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr and Montgomery Jones, *op. cit.*, 152–3. A similar caption is also given in the later catalogue, emphasising

- that the figure is “armed”: *In Search of the Native: Photographs by Max Dupain and Eduardo Masferré and their contemporaries* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2001), 2.
- 35** The emphasis on the respectful quality of Masferré’s approach is present throughout in Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr and Montgomery Jones, op. cit. More critical assessments can be found in Ma. Luisa B. Aguilar-Cariño, “Eduardo Masferré and the Philippine Cordillera”, *Philippine Studies* 42, no. 3 (Third Quarter 1994): 336–351 and Vicuña Gonzalez, “Headhunter Itineraries,” which specifically mentions the link to Sagada-based tourism.
- 36** Vicuña Gonzalez, op. cit., 159.
- 37** Montgomery Jones, op. cit., 9.
- 38** Biographical information here is as compiled in Low Sze Wee, “Introduction: Rediscovering Yeh Chi Wei,” in *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei*, ed. Yeo Wei Wei, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2010) 12–71.
- 39** Yeh Chi Wei, “Artist’s Preface”, trans. Ng Kum Hoon, as reprinted in *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei*, Vol. II, ed. Yeo Wei Wei, 60. First published in *Ye Zhiwei huaji* [Yeh Chi Wei Exhibition Catalogue] (Singapore, 1969).
- 40** Yeh Chi Wei, “Artist’s Preface”, , 62–63.
- 41** Lee Kean Yau, “The Oriental Allure of Yeh Chi Wei’s Oils: Painterly Elements of Traditional Chinese Literati Paintings,” in ed. Yeo Wei Wei, op. cit., 104–111. It can also be noted that Yeh Chi Wei’s interest in archaic scripts and antiquarianism was not isolated: this was a rising cultural preoccupation in Chinese culture during the Republican Period. In fact, the structure and approach of this kind of antiquarianism ran parallel with and can be connected to an internal discourse of primitivism in China, see Sarah E. Fraser, “Antiquarianism or Primitivism: The Edge of History in the Modern Chinese Imagination”, in, *Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung, (Chicago: The Center for the Arts of East Asia, University of Chicago, 2010), 342–67.
- 42** *Ye Zhiwei huaji* [ Yeh Chi Wei Exhibition Catalogue] (Singapore, 1969) n.p. The English translation is taken from the original publication.
- 43** According to Yeh Chi Wei’s son, Yeh Toh Yen, the ceramics were purchased from Sarawak via a cousin who was a trader in the area. This is consistent with remarks made by ceramics scholar Barbara Harrison, who wrote that many communities in Borneo had begun to trade their ceramics with outsiders by the 1960s and 1970s. See Barbara Harrison, *Pusaka: Heirloom Jars of Borneo* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1.
- 44** Harrison, op. cit., 23–27.
- 45** Stanley J. O’Connor, “Art Critics, Connoisseurs, and Collectors in the Southeast Asian Rain Forest: A Study in Cross-Cultural Art Theory,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (September 1983): 400–408.



- 46** O'Connor, op. cit., 402, 405. O'Connor uses the phrase "the shock of recognition" in describing this affinity.
- 47** S. Rajaratnam, "Message," in *Ten Men Art Exhibition Tour of Sarawak 1965*, unpublished exhibition brochure, Singapore, 1965, n.p.
- 48** The contentious status of Borneo at this time is outlined by Ooi Keat Gin, *Borneo in the Cold War 1950–1990*, Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia (Routledge: Abingdon and New York, 2020), 200–36.
- 49** Ooi, op. cit., 215.
- 50** Ibid., 231.
- 51** See Édouard Glissant, "For Opacity", in Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–194.



# Artworks and Responses

## About the artwork labels and descriptions

*Familiar Others* is an opportunity for National Gallery Singapore to reflect on its own practices of representation in a museum context.

Many of the descriptive texts presented alongside the artworks in the exhibition were not written by the exhibition's curator, but are extracts of texts commissioned from writers, artists, academics and musicians with community ties to the peoples represented in the artworks. The full responses commissioned for the exhibition appear in the following pages.

To present the artwork information, this catalogue captures the current information currently registered in the database of the Singapore National Collection. However, also listed are titles under which the works have been previously exhibited or published. This information is sourced from significant research publications or catalogues on the artists, and where possible, also exhibition catalogues from during the artists' own lifetime. The catalogue also captures information recorded on the artworks, including information uncovered during the process of conservation for this exhibition.

The intention in showing these variations in the artwork information is to challenge the objectivity of the artwork label, as well as to experience how our perceptions of the artwork might shift according to different naming information.

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Emiria Sunassa  
**Title:** Panen Damar  
(Rosin Harvest)  
**Date:** Undated  
**Medium:** Oil on board  
**Size:** 59.6 x 49.5 cm  
**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:** 2017-00241

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**Inscribed artist name on  
reverse side of artwork:**  
Emiria S. W.P.A. A.M.T

**Inscribed title on reverse  
side of artwork:**  
Mengoempoel Damar Tedore

**Title as in *Exhibition of  
Paintings by Emiria Sunassa,*  
Jakarta, 1946:**  
Mengoempoel damar di  
Tidore—Gathering Damar  
(Gum) at Tidore-island—  
Damar-inzamelning op Tidore





National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Emiria Sunassa  
**Title:** Orang Irian dengan  
 Burung Tjenderawasih  
 (Irian Man with Bird-  
 of-Paradise)  
**Date:** 1948  
**Medium:** Oil on canvas  
**Size:** 67.2 x 54.5 cm  
**Collection:**  
 National Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:**  
 2017-00236

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**Title as published in *Mimbar  
 Indonesia* magazine, 1948**  
 (Source: Heidi Arbuckle,  
 "Performing Emiria  
 Sunassa," 2011): Dukun  
 Papua (Papuan Shaman)

Dr Els Tienieke  
Rieke Katmo,  
responding to

*Orang Irian dengan  
Burung Tjenderawasih*  
(Irian Man with Bird-of-  
Paradise) by  
Emiria Sunassa



Nama Emiria Sunassa baru bagi saya, saya tercengang mengetahui ada seorang perempuan Indonesia pelukis hebat dimasa yang sulit bagi perempuan, yakni masa kolonial dimana perempuan dan alam adalah objek yang dihasrati, ditaklukkan dan dikuasai.

Walaupun Emiria sebagai perempuan adalah “the other” dalam hirarki alam-manusia-perempuan-budaya, ia mengagumi keindahan yang detail walaupun keindahan itu dicabut dari tempatnya lalu disajikan untuk diperlihatkan, dipersiapkan untuk dilekatkan pada otoritas semu lainnya, bangsa Eropa. Emiria di dalam lukisan Cenderawasih ini membuat objek lukisannya hidup sehingga mereka adalah subjek. Emiria, seorang feminis yang telah menjelaskan relasi kuasa yang timpang antara manusia dan alam dalam sebuah hirarki pada lukisannya. Emiria begitu berani, tanpa menyamar membeberkan kerakusan kolonial lewat eksploitasi alam di dalam lukisannya. Emira memiliki kedekatan dengan Papua karena konektivitasnya dengan Kesultanan Tidore. Saya rasa Emiria tidak berada di Papua untuk melukis Cenderawasih karena keempat Cenderawasih itu berada dalam dekapan laki-laki budak. Tetapi lukisannya menceritakan bahwa Emiria baik secara langsung maupun tidak di dalam imajinasinya seolah berada dalam satu lokus dengan subjek dalam lukisannya. Sekali-pun demikian Emiria tentu memiliki kuasa atas laki-laki dalam lukisannya. Secara bebas Emiria mengamati, mendalami laki-laki budak yang adalah objek dari tuannya. Laki-laki budak ini dilukiskan sedang berusaha memperlihatkan keindahan Cenderawasih kepada tuannya yang tepat berada di depannya.

Posisi Emiria yang tepat di depan laki-laki budak ini menjelaskan Emiria mungkin saja merepresentasikan tuan budak ini. Artinya Emiria memiliki kedekatan dengan tuan budak atau Emiria adalah tuan budak itu sehingga memiliki kuasa untuk secara bebas melakukan pengamatan atas laki-laki budak dan Cenderawasih dalam dekapannya, lalu menyimpan ingatan itu dalam lukisannya.

Cenderawasih di dalam lukisan Emiria adalah Cenderawasih endemic Papua, *paradisaea apoda* yang dilukisnya sangat detail. Cenderawasih adalah Papua. *Paradisaea apoda* adalah Cenderawasih jantan yang dilukiskan keindahannya tetapi sekaligus kesengsaraannya karena dieksploitasi. Cenderawasih didalam lukisan Emiria adalah Cenderawasih yang masih hidup, entah untuk berapa lama karena telah ditarik keluar dari habitat mereka. Lekuk dan warna hijau pada leher burung, jumbai kekuningan mendekati *ivory*, sayap merah kecoklatan dan paruh keabuan sangat jelas digambarkan Emiria. Cenderawasih di dalam dekapan laki-laki budak sedang dipersiapkan untuk diberikan kepada seseorang yang sangat menginginya. Betapa sekuat tenaga burung surga itu didekap erat supaya tidak terbang. Kepala keempat Cenderawasih yang digambarkan oleh Emiria mengarah ke atas dan membelakangi pengamat telah menceritakan keinginan mereka untuk bebas, keinginan untuk melepaskan

diri, sekaligus juga ketakutan bahkan mungkin kebencian kepada manusia dihadapan mereka. Cenderawasih dalam habitatnya dibiarkan bebas terbang menghiasi hutan Papua untuk dinikmati oleh orang Papua dalam keaslian keindahannya. Eksploitasi burung surga ini di Papua dilakukan untuk membantu tuan si budak laki-laki (Sultan Tidore) memenuhi fantasi laki-laki Eropa akan keindahan.

Laki-laki budak di dalam lukisannya bukanlah laki-laki Papua, walaupun berkulit gelap. Dimasa itu tidak banyak orang Papua melakukan perjalanan keluar Papua. Hanya orang Biak yang melakukan pelayaran, mereka memang suku bangsa pelaut yang hidup di pesisir utara Papua. Tetapi berbeda dengan laki-laki dalam lukisan Emiria, laki-laki dari suku Biak tidak menggunakan kain untuk menutup kepala mereka, rambut mereka dibiarkan terbuka menghambur tegak ke langit. Ia mungkin seorang budak Alifuru.

Saya berterimakasih kepada Emiria, seorang feminis yang telah melakukan visualisasi cerita leluhur saya, menyambung koneksi untuk memperjelas banyak tanya di dalam hati.

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The name Emiria Sunassa is new to me. I am astounded to know that there was a great Indonesian woman artist during a time that was difficult for women—the colonial period—when women and nature were objects to yearn after, conquer, and control.

Even though Emiria, as a woman, is “the other” within the hierarchical structure that creates a ranking for nature-human-woman, she admired the bird’s beautiful detail—even as it was being yanked from its place for its beauty to be shown off, even as it was being prepared to be attached to another false authority, the Europeans. Emiria managed to give life to the objects in this painting depicting the bird-of-paradise, turning the objects into subjects. As a feminist, she illuminates the unequal power relations between human and nature in her painting. Emiria was remarkably brave, revealing the colonial greed behind the exploitation of nature, without any guise, in her painting.

Emiria was familiar with Papua due to its connection to the Sultanate of Tidore. However, I believe she was not in Papua to paint the bird-of-

paradise; as the birds are shown in the arms of an enslaved man. We can tell he is a slave because he is shown naked, and presenting the birds as if he is serving someone. This reveals that in her imagination, Emiria, either directly or indirectly, existed in the same locus as the subject of her painting: the enslaved man and the captured bird. Even so, Emiria certainly would have had power over the man in the painting, as she was a member of the family of the Sultan of Tidore. Emiria could have observed him freely, studying the enslaved man who was the object of his master. In my interpretation, she painted the exact moment that the enslaved man was showing the beauty of the birds-of-paradise to his master, who stood just in front of him.

The way Emiria positioned herself in front of this enslaved man illustrates that perhaps Emiria represents his master. It means that Emiria might have had a close relationship with the master or Emiria might have been the master of the enslaved man, allowing her the power to freely observe the man and the birds-of-paradise in his arms; she memorialised this in her painting.

The bird-of-paradise (*paradisaea apoda*), painted in such detail in this artwork, is endemic to Papua—the bird-of-paradise is Papua. *Paradisaea apoda* is a male bird-of-paradise, shown by the colour of its feathers, especially the green area around the neck. It is often painted for its beauty, yet this beauty is also the cause of its misery and exploitation. The birds-of-paradise in Emiria's painting were still alive, but it is not certain for how long, because they had been taken out of their habitat. Emiria painted in great detail the curve of the bird's neck in green, its feathers in yellowish ivory color, its wings in brownish red, and its beak in grey. These birds, held by the enslaved man, were being prepared to be given to someone who yearned for them. They were held so strongly so that they could not fly away. The heads of the four birds were painted by Emiria looking upward, turning away from the observer—this shows the birds' aspiration to be free, their desire to break away, and their fear and even hatred toward the human in front of them. Birds-of-paradise should roam freely in their habitat of the Papuan forests, so that the Papuans themselves could appreciate their original beauty. [I assume] that the exploitation of these birds-of-paradise was done to help the master of the enslaved man (the Sultan of Tidore) fulfill the desire of European men for beauty.

The enslaved man in this painting may not be a Papuan man, despite his dark skin. At the time, there were not many Papuans who traveled out of Papua. Only the Biak people were known to travel by sea, and they were always known as the sailors residing in the northern coast of Papua. However, Biak men did not wear a cloth to cover their heads, as the man in Emiria's painting seems to; they left their hair open toward the sky. Perhaps he is a slave of the Sultanate of Ternate, from Seram (Alifuru at that time).



This painting speaks to me about the history and relationship of Tidore and its periphery, Papua. I am thankful to Emiria, a feminist who visualised the story of my ancestors, establishing connections that clarify the many questions in my mind.

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Translated from Indonesian by Anissa Rahadiningtyas. Certain sections in the English text have been expanded for clarity, with the consent of the author.

**Dr Els Tienieke Rieke Katmo** is a Lecturer in Socio Economics of Agriculture at the Universitas Papua in Manokwari, Indonesia. She has participated in several projects with NGOs such as Oxfam, UNDP and AUSAID on projects and research related to women's empowerment, gender and development issues in Papua. She holds a PhD in Women's Studies and Gender from Flinders University, where her thesis was on the subject of "Decolonising Thinking about HIV/AIDS in West Papua: Colonialism, Sexuality, and HIV Prevention among Kamoro People."

Enrico Yory Kondologit,  
responding to

*Orang Irian dengan  
Burung Tjenderawasih*  
(Irian Man with  
Bird of Paradise)  
by **Emiria Sunassa**



### Identitas, Perdagangan dan Ekspansi

Tanah Papua sejak dahulu dikenal dengan kekayaan sumber daya alam, keindahan alam, keanekaragaman hayati dan kemajemukan masyarakatnya. Salah satunya adalah burung Cenderawasih yang juga disebut burung surga atau birds-of-paradise. Burung Cenderawasih dikatakan sebagai burung surga bukan hanya keindahan warna bulunya namun di dalam berbagai *mithe* suku-suku di Papua, burung ini dipercaya sebagai burung yang turun dari surga dan merupakan simbol kebesaran yang sakral sehingga tidak boleh ditangkap, dibunuh dan digunakan sebagai hiasan oleh manusia. Untuk itulah pada masa lalu tidak pernah ditemui bulu burung Cenderawasih digunakan oleh suku-suku di Papua sebagai aksesoris maupun hiasan pada tubuh mereka, baik sebagai hiasan kepala atau mahkota, kalung dan lain sebagainya.

Namun demikian sesuai sejarahnya dimana sejak terjadinya kontak dengan orang luar seperti Cina, Tidore dan Ternate maka dimulailah proses pertukaran benda – benda termasuk burung Cenderawasih sang burung surga tersebut. Ketertarikan akan bulu burung Cenderawasih yang cantik dan indah itu membuat banyak orang luar terutama dari Eropa seperti Belanda dan Portugis mulai memesan dalam jumlah banyak sehingga terjadi perburuan besar-besaran di Tanah Papua oleh orang Ternate, Tidore bahkan oleh orang Papua sendiri. Burung yang tadinya sakral bagi orang Papua telah jadi alat tukar bahkan perdagangan antara orang luar dengan orang Papua yang berkeinginan untuk mengenal dunia luar tidak bisa membendung arus perubahan dalam hidup mereka.

Pencarian dan penangkapan burung Cenderawasih yang meluas di Tanah Papua tersebut mulai berkembang menjadi ekspedisi mencari kekayaan alam lain seperti kulit kayu masohi, buah pala, kulit kerang, kulit penyu dan lainnya, yang akhirnya meningkat menjadi pencarian terhadap isi dalam perut bumi Papua, berupa emas, tembaga, besi dan minyak bumi serta gas alam. Sehingga bagi kami orang Papua kehadiran orang luar baik dari Cina, Ternate, Tidore (Indonesia), Belanda dan Eropa lainnya yang mula-mula untuk mencari bulu burung surga sang Cenderawasih yang terkenal itu menjadi pintu masuk perdagangan dan ekspansi besar-besaran untuk menguasai tanah kami tanpa mempedulikan kami Orang Asli Papua.

Hal ini yang menjadi kesan saya ketika melihat gambar Emiria Sunassa yang berjudul *Orang Irian Dengan Burung Tjenderawasih* (Irian Man with Bird-of-Paradise), sebagai antropolog, kurator dan orang Papua melihatnya sebagai simbol identitas kami orang Papua, dimana tanah kami adalah tempat hidupnya burung cenderawasih sang burung surga / burung emas yang saat ini semakin punah karena perburuan yang sudah dilakukan sejak dahulu. Burung Cenderawasih tersebut kemudian diperdagangkan sampai ke Cina dan Eropa yang akhirnya membuat orang

Eropa terutama Belanda dan Amerika melakukan ekspansi ke tanah kami dengan alasan mencari burung Cenderawasih dan kemudian menemukan emas, tembaga di Timika dan minyak bumi serta gas di Sorong dan Bintuni yang menguasainya sejak 1960-an sampai sekarang.

Pendapat saya seandainya burung Cenderawasih ini tidak pernah ditemukan dan diketahui orang Indonesia, Eropa dan Amerika, maka saat ini pastilah kami orang Papua yang berkulit hitam dan berambut keriting ini “hidup dalam damai dan sejahtera diatas tanah kami sendiri dengan semua kekayaan yang kami miliki.”

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### Identity, Trade and Expansion

The land of Papua has long been known for its rich natural resources, natural beauty, as well as its bio- and social diversity. One of its [riches] is the Cenderawasih bird. It is known as the bird-of-paradise not only because of its beautiful plumage, but also because the bird is believed to be descended from heaven in Papuan myths. Hence, the bird is a sacred and regal symbol, and it is forbidden for humans to capture it, kill it or use it as a decoration. For that reason, there has never been an instance when Papuans used the feathers of the Cenderawasih to accessorise, whether in a crown, necklace, or anything else.

However, history shows that the trading and exchange of objects, including the Cenderawasih, has been taking place ever since contact was established with outsiders from China, Tidore and Ternate. The beautiful feathers of the birds-of-paradise generated high demand from Europeans, such as the Dutch and the Portuguese, to the point that there was large-scale hunting in Papua carried out by people from Ternate, Tidore and even by Papuans themselves. The bird, previously sacred to the Papuans, became a commodity in trade relationships between outsiders and the Papuans, who desired to know the outside world and could not resist the waves of change in their lives.

The widespread pursuit and capture of the Cenderawasih birds led to expeditions in search of other natural resources, such as Masohi bark, nutmeg, seashells, sea turtle shells. This escalated into excavations deep into the Papuan earth for gold, copper, iron, and oil and gas. Therefore, for us Papuans, the presence of outsiders from China, Ternate, Tidore (Indonesia), the Netherlands and other European regions, who came initially for the famous Cenderawasih feathers, paved the way for massive trade and expansion; these outsiders gained control of our land without regard for us, the *Orang Asli Papua* (Papuan Indigenous People).

These were my reflections when I look at the painting by Emiria Sunassa titled *Orang Irian dengan Burung Tjenderawasih* (Irian Man with Bird-of-Paradise). As an anthropologist, curator, and Papuan, I see the symbol of Papuan identity, as well as our land—the habitat of the Cenderawasih, or birds-of-paradise/the golden birds. These birds are now more endangered than ever because of the long history of hunting. The Cenderawasih were traded all the way to China and Europe, which eventually led the Europeans, particularly the Dutch and the Americans, to travel to our lands with the excuse of finding the Cenderawasih birds. Instead, they found and seized control of the sources of gold and copper in Timika, and of oil and gas in Sorong and Bintuni. This has been happening from the 1960s until today.

I think that if the Cenderawasih birds had never been found and became known to people in Indonesia, Europe, and the United States, then certainly we, the Papuan people with our dark skin and curly hair, would “live in peace and prosperity on our own land with all the riches that we have.”

—

Translated from Indonesian by Anissa Rahadiningtyas

**Enrico Yory Kondologit** was born in Jayapura, Indonesia. He is Curator of the Loka Budaya Museum in Cenderawasih University, the Secretary of the Papua Regional Museum Association (AMIDA) and the Secretary of the Center for Papuan Culture and Society Studies at Cenderawasih University. He has worked at the Museum since 2005, and has been active in many different areas of cultural research, including in the areas of traditional art, spirituality and ethnography in Papua.

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Emiria Sunassa  
**Title:** Bahaya Belakang  
 Kembang Terate (Danger  
 lurking Behind the Lotus)  
**Date:** c. 1941–1946  
**Medium:** Oil on board  
**Size:** 89.2 x 58.6 cm  
**Collection:** National  
 Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:**  
 2017-00237

—  
**Title as in exhibition at  
 NatuAyu Gallery, Bali, 1994**  
 (Source: Heidi Arbuckle,  
 “Performing Emiria Sunassa,”  
 2011): Dayak

**Title at *Exhibition of  
 Paintings by Emiria Sunassa*,  
 Jakarta, 1946:** Bahaya  
 Belakang Kembang Terate  
 - Lurking Danger behind  
 the Lotos [sic] - Het gavaar  
 achter de Lotos\*

—  
 \*Note: There are slight  
 discrepancies between the  
 artwork as photographed  
 in the 1946 exhibition  
 catalogue, and the extant  
 version of the artwork now  
 in the collection of National  
 Gallery Singapore. Heidi  
 Arbuckle (“Performing  
 Emiria Sunassa,” 2011)  
 has speculated that the  
 artist might have painted  
 a second version. Another  
 possibility is that a  
 section of the artwork was  
 repainted at some point. At  
 National Gallery Singapore,  
 the work is exhibited as the  
 1946 version, as no other  
 version of the work is known  
 to exist.



**Udeido Collective:  
Dicky Takndare,**

in conversation  
with **Betty Adii** and  
**Michael Yan Devis**

responding  
to

Works by  
**Emiria Sunassa**

Kolektif Udeido melakukan obrolan singkat tentang Emiria Sunassa. Obrolan ini melibatkan tiga seniman mereka, Dicky Takndare, Betty Adii, dan Michael Yan Devis. Ketiga anak muda Papua ini memberikan pandangan mereka terkait sosok Emiria Sunassa, karyanya, praktek keseniannya, dan bagaimana mereka mengaitkan itu dengan konteks sosial di Papua.

**Bagaimana anda melihat sosok Emiria Sunassa?**

**MYD:** Papua dan Tidore mempunyai relasi panjang dalam sejarah, nenek moyang saya masyarakat Biak dalam banyak kesempatan telah menjadi bagian dari armada pasukan Kesultanan Tidore dalam perang-perang krusial mereka. Relasi ini melahirkan memori kolektif yang harmonis dan ‘mesra’ bagi kedua belah pihak dan hal itu masih terus terjaga hingga generasi-generasi berikutnya. Boki Emiria atau yang lebih dikenal dengan Emiria Sunassa sebagai seorang Putri Kesultanan Tidore tentu sangat menyadari hal ini.

**BA:** Emiria pernah mengklaim dirinya sebagai “Ratu dari Nederlands Nieuw-Guinea” (Papua saat ini) yang jika dimaknai secara harfiah akan tergolong sebagai klaim politik yang sangatlah subjektif dan sempit. Tapi bisa jadi ini merupakan salah satu bentuk aspirasinya sebagai resistensi atas kolonialisme Eropa. Bagi saya hal itu justru menunjukkan bahwa Emiria adalah seorang yang memiliki daya integritas yang kuat akan otoritas dirinya sendiri. Hal ini juga terlihat jelas dalam karya-karyanya, bagaimana ia menggunakan warna-warna yang terkesan lebih gelap dan menjadikannya berbeda dengan gaya para seniman ‘Mooi Indie’ saat itu. Saya tertarik akan komentar Emiria yang mengatakan bahwa Indonesia masih harus mencari bentuk seninya sendiri yang sekiranya sejalan dengan pandangannya bahwa seni itu diciptakan dari ketiadaan. Makna “ketiadaan” (bentuk seni rupa Indonesia) inilah yang mungkin saja membawanya untuk melakukan pendekatan seninya pada kaum pribumi yang memegang teguh nilai-nilai kearifan lokal mereka.

**Dalam beberapa karyanya, Emiria Sunassa melukis sosok orang Papua. Bagaimana tanggapan anda?**

**DT:** Kita harus memahami bahwa latar belakang sejarah relasi orang Tidore dan Papua memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk cara pandang Emiria terhadap orang Papua yang pada masanya mengalami gejolak politik yang melahirkan konflik berkepanjangan hingga saat ini. Pada saat yang sama, diawal berdirinya Republik Indonesia, ia menjadi bagian dari gerakan seni rupa yang disebut ikut berupaya membangun kesadaran nasionalisme baru setelah arus dekolonisasi baru saja melanda wilayah-wilayah Asia dan Pasifik. Saya pikir latar belakang ini menjadikan Emiria sosok yang cukup kontroversial karena bagi saya kita tidak dapat secara sepihak menyatakan karya-karyanya yang menggambarkan manusia dan alam Papua hanya merepresentasikan satu dari latar belakang di atas belaka.

**BA:** Saya melihat karya-karya Emiria sebagai salah satu bentuk solidaritas, lahir dari semangat persaudaraan yang patut untuk diapresiasi. Namun soal karya-karyanya yang menampilkan orang-orang Papua, saya pikir karya-karya itu terkesan menarasikan Papua sebatas permukaannya saja, ia belum mampu menyentuh realitas orang Papua yang pada zamannya juga telah memiliki gejolak sosial, sehingga dapat dikatakan bahwa “eksotisme” masih menjadi alasan utama yang mendorong karya-karya ini dibuat. Jika kemudian karya-karya ini ditempatkan pada konteks sosial Papua saat ini, saya pikir poin krusialnya adalah tentang nilai solidaritas yang dapat kita maknai sebagai penggerak perubahan.

**MYD:** Saya mengapresiasinya, dalam konteks seni rupa Indonesia ia menjadi anomali soal pemilihan objek karya. Ia menyentuh objek-objek yang sebelumnya tidak tersentuh seniman-seniman Belanda maupun Indonesia awal. Namun mengingat latar belakang relasi sejarah Papua-Tidore dan bagaimana ia menobatkan dirinya sebagai Ratu, dapat saya katakan karyanya tentang Papua adalah manifestasi hegemoni Kesultanan Tidore atas Papua.

**Menurut anda apakah praktek kesenian Emiria dapat dikategorikan sebagai bentuk upaya perjuangan kesetaraan Perempuan?**

**BA:** Saya pikir hal yang penting darinya soal kesetaraan adalah bahwa ia berusaha untuk bukan lagi menjadi “perempuan yang dilukis” melainkan “perempuan yang melukis”.

**Sebagai seniman Papua yang hidup di era ini, menurut anda bentuk pendekatan seni seperti apa yang tepat untuk konteks sosial Papua saat ini?**

**DT:** Di dalam Udeido kami menggali kembali kearifan-kearifan lokal dari masa lampau lalu merekonstruksinya dalam bentuk yang baru dan menggunakannya untuk menarasikan isu sosial kontemporer Papua yang penuh konflik. Pendekatan seperti ini dapat menghasilkan kerja-kerja yang kolaboratif dan partisipatif, yang pada titik tertentu dapat dimaknai sebagai kontra-narasi akan konsep-konsep lama yang menempatkan suatu komunitas dan hasil kebudayaannya sebagai objek.

**MYD:** Saya pikir kita dapat menggunakan seni sebagai investasi peradaban yang bentuknya berubah-ubah untuk mengekstraksi nilai-nilai yang dapat diwariskan kepada generasi selanjutnya kendati bentuk konkritnya akan berbeda.

Udeido Collective conducted a short conversation about Emiria Sunassa with three artists, Dicky Takndare (DT), Betty Adii (BA), and Michael Yan Devis (MYD). These three young Papuans gave their perspectives on Emiria Sunassa, as well as her works and artistic practice, and how they relate to Papua's social context.

**How do you perceive Emiria Sunassa?**

**MYD:** Papua and Tidore have a long relationship in history. My ancestors in Biak had been part of the armies of the Sultanate of Tidore in many of their crucial wars. This created a collective memory of a harmonious and “intimate” relationship for both sides that continued with the following generations. *Boki* Emiria or Emiria Sunassa, who is known as the Princess of the Tidore Sultanate, was surely aware of this.

**BA:** Emiria once made a claim to be the “Queen of the Netherlands New Guinea” (today Papua)—this can be understood as a rather subjective and narrow political claim if we take it literally. But from another perspective, this could be a form of aspiration of her resistance towards European colonialism. To me, it shows that Emiria is someone who has strong integrity and authority. It shows in her works as well—in how she employed darker colors to distinguish her works from the style of *Mooi Indie* artists at the time. I am interested in Emiria's comment stating that Indonesia still has to find its own style, fitting in with her idea that art is created from absence. This meaning of “absence” (of Indonesian art) might be what drove her to create art inspired by the Indigenous communities that firmly hold onto the values of their local wisdoms.

**In some of her works, Emiria Sunassa depicted Papuan people. What do you think about that?**

**DT:** We have to understand that the historical background shaping the relationship between Tidoreans and Papuans played a major part in forming Emiria's view on Papuans, who were at the time experiencing a political turbulence that resulted in a long conflict, which has lasted until today. At the same time, Emiria was working when Indonesia was a new republic, and she was part of an art movement that strove to build a new national awareness after the wave of decolonisation washed over Asia and the Pacific. I think this background made Emiria a rather controversial figure because I don't think we can say that her works depicting Papuans and Papua's natural world relate to only one of those contexts.

**BA:** I see Emiria's works as a form of solidarity that was born out of the spirit of camaraderie, and it ought to be appreciated. But I think her works that depict Papuans seem to only narrate Papua superficially; they have not touched upon the realities of the Papuan people, who at the time already experienced social turmoil. It can be said that “exoticism” still constitutes the main reason behind the creation of these works. If we position these works in today's social context in Papua, I think the crucial



point is about the value of solidarity that we can interpret as a driver for change.

**MYD:** I appreciate that the chosen subjects for her works were such anomalies within the context of Indonesian art. She worked on subjects that were previously untouched by Dutch artists or early Indonesian artists. But considering the relationship between Papua-Tidore and how she crowned herself as the Queen, I can say that her works about Papua are manifestations of the Sultanate of Tidore's hegemony over Papua.

**Do you think that Emiria's practice can be categorized as a fight for women's equality?**

**BA:** I think that what is important about her in terms of equality is that she strived to be a "woman who paints" and not "the woman who is painted."

**As Papuan artists today, what kind of artistic approach that is appropriate for Papua's social context?**

**DT:** In Udeido, we are re-exploring past local wisdoms in order to reconstruct them in new ways and use them to narrate contemporary social issues in Papua, which is laden with conflicts. This approach results in collaborative and participatory works, which can be interpreted as a counter-narrative against old concepts that located a community and its culture as a mere object.

**MYD:** I think we can use art as an investment in civilization, which consists of ever-changing forms, to extract values that can be transferred to the next generation; this is even though the concrete forms of art will certainly change and evolve.

—

Translated from Indonesian by Anissa Rahadiningtyas

**Udeido** is a contemporary visual art collective founded by a group of young Papuan artists in 2018. Their work seeks to reconstruct ancient, traditional local concepts in their communities, using them to discuss contemporary socio-cultural issues. "Udeido" comes from the word "ude," a kind of leaf in Papua that is often used to bandage wounds and stop bleeding.

Udeido has held several important exhibitions related to Papuan issues, such as *Mairi* (2019) and *Tonawi Mana* (2020). In 2021, they collaborated with Asia Justice and Rights to hold the exhibition *Sa Pu Kisah*, which focused on women's rights in Papua. They participated in the Jogja Biennale XVI in the same year, and were featured in the *Present Continuous* exhibition at MACAN Museum Jakarta in 2022.

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Eduardo Masferré

**Title:** Banaue

**Date:** 1947

**Medium:** Silver gelatin print

**Size:** 34.5 x 26.5 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:**  
2019-00153

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**Title as published in**  
*E Masferré (1988)*, edited  
by Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr  
and Montgomery Jones:  
Kambulo woman wearing  
a *giniling* (bracelet of  
coiled brass). Banaue,  
Ifugao, 1949.



Gawani Gaongen,

responding  
to

*Banaue*  
by Eduardo Masferré

Both Kankanaey and English language versions are the work of the author.



Akin biyang?

Sinu 'dwani nan mensos-owa?  
Nan kainudiyang ay anak di sin-asawa'y binay-an di layus  
Ay nangtaynan sin ili ta teknen na'y kikwaniyana,  
Nangsukat is ngadan na ya na kali na.  
Nan inmuana ay nang-isikog as duwa ay mensas-pe ay ili,  
Ay nenpadara ay mang-idya's biag, baken tetey,  
Ay mangipabala's an-ak ay an-anawa nan kuk'wa da.  
Nan nang-unod issan mallusan di ginawang,  
Nagdas-an sin baybay ay widan,  
Ay mang-unog sin amin ay danum, ya mangipabala kasin.  
Nan nang-unod issan magapuwan, nan menlugyan di menlayog,  
Ta bubuyaen na'y mensilpuwan di maid ya wada,  
Nan pengpeng ay menlugyan di waned.

Sinu 'dwani nan mensos-owa?  
Nan mendadaan sin luta,  
Nan menlulugan ay umey sin umayan na, nan makatayaw.  
Nan gumdang sin kad-an di maleng-ag ay makituya's natey.  
Nan nasasaminto nan dad-daanen na,  
Nan matatago ya masiksiken nan wanwan'den da  
Ay masapul makepkepatan kanayun, amed nu panag-uudan.  
Nan nendaan ay saka-saka is namingsan  
Nan nensasaka-saka ay nendaan is masin-agew  
Nan nendadapan sin matatagowan, nan nabengasan.  
San nensisinilas as naidya wennu linakwan na,  
San wada sinilas ya sapatos na, san nangina,  
San makap'nu's kwalto nan gameng di iki na.

Sinu 'dwani nan mensos-owa?  
Nan menleletek as wising,  
Ay mangbasa is timpo sin agew, sin alin-ew, sin buwan  
Nan menbugawan di bisbisting, nan kail-an di kuyat.  
Nan menlelo sin kanigid ay ledeng na,  
Nan nagegedwa'y agew na's oras, minuto ya segundo,  
Ya nang-ngadan sin ka-age-agew.  
Nan mengege-en is suwako, naidatdateng wennu naisukat,  
Tay mabalin mensuwako nan lalaki ya babai,  
Ya maliklato'y nenge-ge-en is suwako.  
Nan mangpepetpet is lapis sin makanawan  
Sha's nawaya'y duwa'y ima na,  
Nan maid nawayaan ay ima na.

Sinu 'dwani nan mensos-owa?  
Nan mabilang nan tawen sin angas na,  
Nan ad-adu nan ammeng ya ngisiyet na,

Mang-it-ek is linyan di moging na.  
 Sha'y mangpintor is subil na, sin angas na,  
 Nan umegyat ay ma-eteng,  
 Nan maid ngoto na.  
 Sha'y mangkuti's subil na ta men-ayag,  
 Wennu sumungbat, ta mensuot,  
 Nan menpaginek sin men-aga wennu men-ngaba.  
 Sha'y men-ikiyat et maidnge,  
 Nan mang-iyaga is adu ay kayat na'y kanan,  
 Nan mang-iipe as aga da.

Sinu 'dwani nan mensos-owa?  
 Sha'y mangtek is kalin di nanudtudo,  
 Nan mangtek is kalin di teken ay ili,  
 Nan makakali as duwa, tulo ya ulay pay epat ay kali.  
 Sha'y mangtek sin kalin di batawa  
 (Ta baken kedeng di ginmasingan di ipogaw nan magtek,  
 Ay nu ginmasing es nan batawa ken datako).  
 Nan makatuya's disik ya ginawang, mangtek is kalin di danum,  
 Amed nu lumiget, wennu sakbay men-ipukay,  
 Sakbay maudi nan babawi.  
 Sha'y makaawat as kalin di kuyat, wennu alingo,  
 (Ta masuot nan kad-an da, ya nu intu'y ib-a da)  
 Nan makaibaga nu apay nga adi umado nan payen.  
 Nan makaawat sin adi maka-ikwani,  
 Nan makaawat uray maid kali,  
 Ya nan mensardengan sin baet di kankankanan.

Sinu 'dwani nan mensos-owa?  
 Nan in-ina, nan men-ngingisiyet ay ong-onga,  
 Nan ap-aptik ya men-ngitit ay lalaki, ay ma-am-amed nu misned  
 Sin lalaki'y menpulaw ya pidwa'y kaatakdag na, kega pulgadela.  
 Nan in-a ya am'a da, nan anan-ak da  
 Nan ap-o da, nan ap-o da's tumeng ya dapan,  
 Ya nan puli da'y nanglipat ken daida.  
 Nan nanglaylayad ken daida, nan egay,  
 Nan mangmangtek ken daida, nangpakpakan ken daida  
 Wa'y nanglagbu ken daida, wennu wa'y nenlagbu.  
 Nan nangsuet ya nendedenge sin dad-dad-at da,  
 Nan egay pulos nangsagsagang ken daida,  
 Nan nakaila ken daida sin dingding.

### Whose Turn?

Whose turn is it to speak now?  
The last child of the couple who survived the flood,  
Who left the village for a different story,  
Changed her name and spoke another language.  
The first who carried two warring villages in her womb,  
Who shed blood to give life, not death,  
And brought forth children to a wider territory.  
She who followed the river downstream,  
And found the sea a wide porch,  
Where all waters end, and begin again.  
She who went upstream, where the flow begins,  
To see where nothing becomes something,  
Where the dot becomes a line.

Whose turn is it to speak now?  
She who walks on earth,  
Who rides to get where she has to go, who flies,  
Who crosses the spirit world to talk with the dead.  
She who walks on paved roads,  
Who walks on pathways that are alive and growing,  
That have to be trimmed regularly, especially on rainy months  
She who walked barefoot once,  
Who walked barefoot for a day,  
Who walked barefoot for a lifetime, whose heels have cracked.  
She who wears slippers that were given, or that she bought,  
Who has expensive slippers and shoes,  
Who has a roomful of footwear.

Whose turn is it to speak now?  
She who wears a bracelet made of brass,  
And tells time with the sun, the shadows, the moon,  
The sound of crickets, the sight of birds.  
She who wears a watch on her left wrist,  
Whose days have hours, minutes and seconds,  
Who has names for the days of the week.  
She who holds a pipe, given or bartered,  
When men and women owned pipes,  
And were photographed with pipes.  
She who grips a pen with her right hand,  
Who has both hands free,  
Who has no hands free.

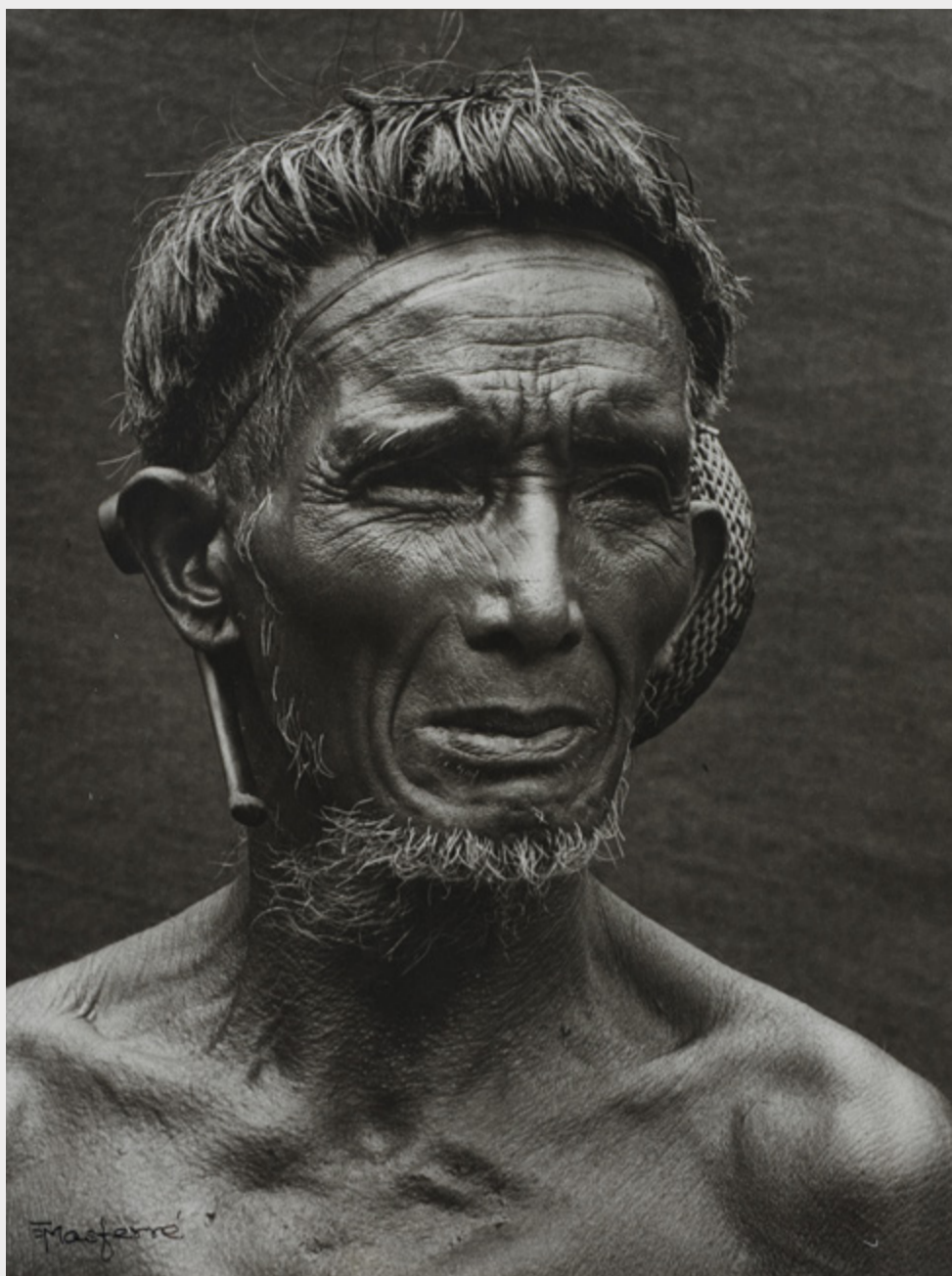
Whose turn is it to speak now?  
She, whose age is counted on her face,  
Who laughs and smiles a lot,  
Who shows off the lines on her forehead.

She who paints her lips, her face,  
 Who is afraid of getting old,  
 Who is unafraid of getting old, and doesn't care.  
 She who moves her lips to call,  
 Or to answer, to ask,  
 Who hushes the crying and the noisy.  
 She who glares and commands compliance,  
 Whose tears speak volumes,  
 Who holds back their tears.

Whose turn is it to speak now?  
 She who knows the language of her ancestors,  
 Who knows a foreign language,  
 Who speaks two, three, even four languages.  
 She who knows the language of the earth  
 (For we can only say if we were happy here on earth,  
 But not if the earth was happy with us).  
 She who speaks with creeks and rivers, knows the language of water,  
 Especially when its angry, or before it lets go,  
 Before regrets are too late.  
 She who knows the language of the birds, of wild pigs,  
 (To ask them where they are now, where their kin have gone)  
 Who can tell why the oak trees don't reproduce.  
 She who understands those who cannot talk,  
 Who understands silence,  
 And the pauses between words.

Whose turn is it to speak now?  
 The old lady, the smiling younger woman,  
 The short, dark-skinned man, more so when he is next  
 To the fair-toned man twice his size, standing like a meterstick.  
 Their mothers, their fathers, their children,  
 Their grandchildren, their great grandchildren,  
 And their descendants who forgot about them.  
 Those who loved them, those who didn't,  
 Who knew them, fed them,  
 Who paid them, who earned.  
 Those who asked and listened to their stories,  
 Who never met them at all,  
 Who saw them on a wall.

**Gawani Domogo Gaongen** is Kankanaey Igorot, from Sagada, the Philippines. In 2015, she won a Writer's Prize from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) for her poetry in Kankanaey. She has also contributed writings to anthologies of literature in regional languages published by the NCCA. She is a participating poet in the Agam Agenda, an initiative for creatives towards urgent climate change action. She has also been active in grassroots research and community development work. She now works as Project Development Officer for the Department of Agriculture.



National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Eduardo Masferré  
**Title:** Butbut Man  
**Date:** 1949  
**Medium:** Silver gelatin print  
**Size:** 32.6 x 24.5 cm  
**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:** 2019-00154

**Title as published in**  
*E Masferré* (1988), edited by  
Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr  
and Montgomery Jones:  
While waiting for another  
photograph, Masferré turned  
and took a candid picture of  
this man, who then agreed  
to pose for his portrait.  
Tinglayan, Kalinga. 1953.

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Eduardo Masferré  
**Title:** Calaccad, Kalinga  
**Date:** 1953  
**Medium:** Silver gelatin print  
**Size:** 35.1 x 26.6 cm  
**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:** 2019-00156

**Title as published in**  
*E Masferré (1988)*, edited by  
Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr  
and Montgomery Jones:  
Gaddang man in his  
finery. Calaccad, Natonin,  
Mountain Province, 1952.







National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Eduardo Masferré

**Title:** Tinglayan

**Date:** 1957

**Medium:** Silver gelatin print

**Size:** 35.5 x 26.6 cm

**Collection:** National

Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:**

2019-00155

**Title as published in *In Search of the Native* (2001):**

Man on the way to check his rice fields, armed with spear and shield. Ngibat, Tinglayan, Kalinga, 1949.

**Title as published in *E Masferré* (1988), edited by**

**Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr and Montgomery Jones:**

On his way to check the water in his rice fields. Men did not leave their villages unarmed. Ngibat, Tinglayan, Kalinga, 1950.



National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Eduardo Masferré  
**Title:** Young Man  
from Maledkong  
**Date:** 1953  
**Medium:** Silver gelatin print  
**Size:** 34 x 27 cm  
**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:** 2019-00152

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**Title as published in**  
*E Masferré* (1988), edited by  
Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr  
and Montgomery Jones:  
The ornate cap is worn  
only by bachelors.  
Malegkong, Bontok,  
Mountain Province, 1956.

Rocky Cajigan,  
responding  
to

*Young Man from  
Maledkong*  
by Eduardo Masferré



It begins with discomfort—to look at this photo, of a man from Maligcong, Bontoc, the Philippines, with the pipe, the *soklong*, and the stare that is meant to satisfy curiosities about who the “savage” is.

It begins with fiction—to look at this photo that is meant to reveal a parched history of the subjugated. The photo assumes the tradition of power that dignifies collective representation with a single image, like that of the Afghan girl, and to look at it is to assume giving a voice to the voiceless.

It begins with indifference—to look at this photo of an Indigenous, one among so many others who have been taken by colonisers. Perhaps it’s staged: the frown, the smokeless pipe perched to the side of the mouth, the *soklong* holding part of the hair to reveal the forehead, ready for a calliper.

It begins with frustration—to look at this photo is to be confused about who is material specimen, and what is object or being objectified.

It begins with questioning—to look at this photo of an Indigenous, taken by an Indigenous as an Indigenous, within arbitrary definitions of Indigeneity.

It begins with self-assessment—to look at this photo in an institution that is perhaps on a mission to understand decolonial museology or itself, genderless and holding power.

It begins with symbolism—the tattoo of a bird on the chest, which has been copied from a colonial coin, itself patterned after the American Eagle, and now mixed with real and manufactured origin stories of traditional tattoos as material culture.

It begins with a conundrum—to participate in a decolonial project while anticipating that the institution cannot separate itself from continuing colonial habits, and thereby enabling the tradition of examining Indigenous peoples as photographed objects.

It begins with irony—to go inside the Bontoc Museum, a museum for the Indigenous built by colonial missions, then passed on to Indigenous missionaries. Inside this museum, a young Indigenous discovers objects that are no longer used beside photographs of Indigenous history, people and rituals. He takes note of the objects that identify him as Indigenous. He does not have family photos, or photos of his grandparents, save for those taken by and with missionaries. The colonial gaze is neglected as he passes one photo after another; it is hiding beneath the shadow of the photographs that are studied as mere objects, arranged on the walls, carefully curated. The young Indigenous will soon be put to task. He will explain what it means to be Indigenous today. He will explain what it means to decolonise, a word that used to mean something more than a hashtag.

It begins with a truth—to efficiently traverse the rice paddies, one must understand the idea of imbalance before balance. One has to be careful not to slip into the paddy, especially when it is muddy and the rice has just been planted. At the same time, one has to be careful not to fall off the retaining wall. It is the only way to move forward.

It begins with another truth—to understand the idea of balance when one has mastered his way around narrow rice paddies that are only meant for one person to traverse, one also needs to know how to make way when another must pass the same precipice from the opposite direction. It is like a dance where there is no need to touch each other, and yet no one falls and both are able to move forward.

**Rocky Cajigan** was born in Bontoc Mountain Province, the Philippines. Rocky is currently based in Benguet, the Philippines where he continues to examine his Bontoc and Kankanaey history. He is part of AX(iS) Art Project, a non-profit artist collective focused on programming events that study access to contemporary art in communities in the Cordillera Region. In his paintings, installations and assemblages, Rocky explores material culture, Indigeneity, and museology as entanglements in or possibilities for decolonisation. His work is largely focused on identity questions and transitions in Indigenous cultures.

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** Untitled

**Date:** Undated

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 104.5 x 92 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:** P-0753

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Title as published in *The  
Story of Yeh Chi Wei* (2010),  
exhibition catalogue  
by The National Art  
Gallery, Singapore:  
Untitled (Three Figures)  
无题 (三个人物)



National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** Portrait of  
a Dyak Lady

**Date:** 1969

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 95 x 62 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:**  
1993-01348

—  
**Title as published in**  
*Yeh Chi Wei 葉之威畫集*  
(1969), exhibition catalogue,  
Singapore: The Dayak.  
That Indian-red skirt,  
simple face, tattooed  
neck, prove the difference  
of a Dayak.

達雅克人  
那紅棕色的圍布，純樸的臉龐，  
喉部的紋樣，都是達雅克人的  
特色。





National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威  
**Title:** Untitled  
**Date:** Undated  
**Medium:** Oil on canvas  
**Size:** 91.5 x 104 cm  
**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:** P-0751

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**Title as published in *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei* (2010),  
exhibition catalogue by  
The National Art Gallery,  
Singapore:**  
Untitled (Two Women  
with Two Children)  
无题 (妇女与小孩)

**Kulleh Grasi,**

responding  
to

*Untitled*  
by **Yeh Chi Wei**

Iban version by Kulleh Grasi;  
translated from Iban by Pauline Fan



**Nilik**

Enda alah diseliah ka penumbuh pisang unai, ditaban ka nyumboh rauh-rauh enda makai selemai-lemai. Diak kitak ninga, sedan-sedan Kupa nandu Ampang Tengkebang sebedau ari malik nyadi siang.

O wai Ah Yeh, nama nuan nusi utai belalai baka nengah mungu madang lemba, palan peneleba kena ngaga Ampang Tengkebang.

Ngetu dulu kitak melit uyut ngena temeran, enggai ka tersintak wie semambo ba ujong tanju. Ngetu dulu kitak muchau ka semadak naban ka upak, enggai ka enda ampit emperan besai tumbuh rian belansai, lemai bebungai, pagi bekeberai muai ketupang.

Angkat dulu kitak, berati ka mata cina nengalih ka ari lemai nyadi petang. Bedau temu semaya, tang sigi ampit dirintai ka turai ngelingi singapura. Pia ia nusi ujan betemera labuh ngayah ka mata, nyepi ka nyamai belalai ari penjan sa menua.

Tusi baru dini nuan nyintak tatum seduai engkudu. Begelumu sida sebuat nganti penatai nendak nusoi cherita baru. Pia ya rekau-rekau anak patu balu, ngining buah sibau nating ruai sida apui panglima orang kaya sibu, suah nepan entukar langit biru.

Lalai ka magang Ah weh, sigi bedau temu randau seduai tuai ari sibu. Kadanya utai seruri nuan maya sindau-sindau ba rantau jalai pakan. Taupan semangat lelang nuan dikalih ka bunsu malam jenak tinduk bepenapan tilam kerangan.

Raya pengelama nuan nela jerita sida nengeri nyadi lambar pica, ukai enggai nengalie kediri laban semaya tuk bedau bisi kebuah ya nuan lesi, aku bedau ada. Amat pan mayuh sida landik jauh sekula nengeri jauh Amerika, tang bedau mayuh anak uchu inik sida Enturan rinduk ngecuk lambar emperaja mata.

Raya pengelama nuan ngangau lalu nesau. Baka mepat bemban nyadi ka tikai sandau ari, nela ati janik enda tau ransi baka anak mit terjun ke pendaik. Tang pia pan lama, enda mantah enda nujah laban mata nuan enda bula nusi ka dengah, nya alai enda temu kemaya ari penembu nuan rebah, mantang kajari ba sukut dilah.



## Glance

You can't elude the grove of *pisang unai*—forbidden fruit seized by squawking macaques ravenous since evening. Then you hear Kupa weeping without end, as the bastard child *Ampang Tengkebang* appears, before the day dies to return to the dawn.

*O wai* Ah Yeh, why do you tell of hidden things—like crossing the *lemba* highlands, where we gather the blood-sap of *Ampang Tengkebang*.

Stop for a while, all of you, coiling your baskets with *temeran* so that you won't get snagged by *semambo* rattan at the edge of the verandah. Stop grumbling, for a while, about the black jungle ants scavenging morsels of bamboo shoots; there may be still time for the empty earth to bear *durian belansai*, its dusk blossoms scattering at daybreak towards the mouth of the *ketupang*.

Get up, all of you, let's look at the eyes of this Chinese guest turning day to dark. Who knows when, but there will be time to wind the *turai* script around Singapura. Like erratic rainfall leading our eyes astray, he finds himself at ease, glancing from the window of a world.

Tell us again, where you forage for *tatum* and *engkudu*. Everyone is gathered here, awaiting the arrival of the *nendak* omen bird with another fable—the orphan pleading for rambutans hanging in the *ruai*; or Apui the commander, rich man of Sibu, who rides on metal birds in the blue sky.

Conceal it all, Ah weh—we know nothing of the words you exchanged with the elders of Sibu. Perhaps you encountered something as you roamed, sleepless, somewhere near Pakan Road. Or your lost soul was transformed by the night of the sun, as you slept soundly upon stones and shells.

How long you watched their stories unfolding into paper images. It's not that I wish to keep this pleasure for myself, but before this there was no reason, for you are departed and I was not yet born. Many of them are clever, schooled far away in America, yet there are so few who inherit the path of the true artist. Enturan paints the layers of a rainbow.

What took you so long to find me and proclaim yourself? Like harvesting *mengkuang* leaves to weave *tikar* for *sandau ari* offerings, the divination of the pig's heart, one can't be sullen; let's be like children diving from a cliff. Though it took a long time, there's no resistance, no clearing away the jungle, because your eyes do not lie to express our noble narratives; that's why we don't know when your creations will vanish—you anoint your canvas with fingers blessed by your tongue.

## GLOSSARY OF IBAN TERMS

**pisang unai** – A rare, wild banana that appears as a forbidden fruit in the soul’s journey before it enters the Iban underworld Sebayan.

**Ampang Tengkebang** – A *pua kumbu* (Iban ceremonial textile) motif of a “bastard child” or “orphan,” considered to be one of the most sacred and used rarely.

**lemba** – The leaf fibers of the *lemba* plant are traditionally used to weave and make fishing nets, ropes and twine.

**temeran, semambo** – Species of rattan found in Sarawak traditionally used to weave baskets.

**durian belansai** – A forbidden fruit that symbolises good luck and prosperity; when a *tukang sabak* (traditional chanter) describes *durian belansai* while sending off a departed soul, it means that the family of the departed will have good fortune.

**ketupang** – One of the seven omen birds of Iban augury.

**turai** – The ancient Iban script and alphabetic system.

**tatum, engkudu** – Plants traditionally used to make natural dyes for *pua kumbu*.

**nendak** – One of the seven omen birds of Iban augury.

**ruai** – A communal area that runs the length of an Iban longhouse.

**sandau ari** – An Iban ritual of divination and offering

**Kulleh Grasi** is a poet, singer-songwriter and visual artist of Iban descent from Sarawak, Malaysia. Kulleh writes poetry primarily in Malay, interwoven with several Indigenous languages of Sarawak, including Iban, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and Bidayuh. His first full-length poetry collection, *Tell Me, Kenyalang* (Circumference Books, 2019), translated by Pauline Fan, was shortlisted for the 2020 National Translation Award in Poetry and longlisted for the Best Translated Book Award 2020. Kulleh Grasi has been featured at several literary festivals including Singapore Writers Festival and George Town Literary Festival. He founded and curates Nusi Poetry, a creative platform for Borneo Indigenous poets, and is the co-founder of avant-garde Sarawak music group Nading Rhapsody. He recently led an Indigenous music project called Kulleh Comrades to perform at Aabaakwad, Sámi Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022.

**Pauline Fan** is a writer, literary translator, and creative director of cultural organisation PUSAKA. Her translation of poems by Sarawak poet Kulleh Grasi, *Tell Me, Kenyalang* (Circumference Books, 2019), was shortlisted in the United States for the 2020 National Translation Award in Poetry, and longlisted for the Best Translated Book Awards 2020. Pauline’s literary translations from German to Malay include works by Immanuel Kant, Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Celan. Pauline is director of the George Town Literary Festival, Malaysia’s largest international festival of literature.



National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** Untitled

**Date:** c. 1966

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 100 x 79 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:** P-0757

—  
Title as published in *The  
Story of Yeh Chi Wei* (2010),  
exhibition catalogue by  
The National Art Gallery,  
Singapore:  
Untitled (Figures)  
无题 (人物)

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** India I

**Date:** c. 1971

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 80 x 61 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:**  
1993-01350

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**Title as published in**  
*The Story of Yeh Chi Wei*  
(2010), exhibition catalogue  
by The National Art Gallery,  
Singapore: It's a Long Wait  
for Mother's Return  
喂奶

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**Title as published in** *Yeh  
Chi Wei* 葉之威畫集 (1969),  
exhibition catalogue,  
Singapore: It's a long wait  
for mother's return. After  
breastfeed [sic], mother has  
to hurry for farming. It's a  
break of another 7-8 hours  
for another feed

餵奶  
媽媽餵飽了奶, 把孩子交給  
爸爸, 就得趕緊下田去耕  
種。要過七八小時後, 媽媽  
回來, 孩子才再有奶吃。





National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** Mother and Child

**Date:** 1969

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 77 x 97 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:**  
1993-01349

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**Title as published in *The Story of Yeh Chi Wei* (2010),  
exhibition catalogue by  
The National Art Gallery,  
Singapore: Mother and  
Children 母与子**

National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** Drummer

**Date:** c. 1965

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 112.5 x 99 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:** P-0754



Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom  
responding to

*The Drummer*  
by Yeh Chi Wei



The painting highlights a staging of an event in an Iban longhouse in Sarawak during a *gawai* (festival) or celebration. The space exhibits wealth with the display of two *tajau* (jars) with the dragon design, highly significant in Iban mythology. The wall also sports a water dragon design, flaunting beautiful craftsmanship, but part of it covered by an older *pua kumbu* (a sacred cloth made with tie-dye) depicting a female figure in one of the tales of Kumang (the mother goddess of the Iban people). This textile is displayed side by side with another *pua kumbu* boasting a design of the warrior Bujang Berani.

Holding the *tabuh* (a type of drum), a maiden with a shy yet confident expression is adorned with earrings. Her bun is ornamented with a little flower; later on, maidens would replace this flower with *sugu tinggi* (silver headgear). Bare-breasted without *marek empang* (beaded shoulder cap) or *selampai* (sash) across the chest, the maiden is simply dressed in a woven *kain kebat* (skirt). It is topped with a *rawai* (silver corset) that embraces her slim waist; her figure is enhanced by a *sementing* (coin corset with dangling coins).

Sitting in a delicate manner, she exudes elegance, while her hands, which are embellished with a few *tumpa pirak* (silver bangles), rhythmically hit the *tabuh*. The *tabuh* is a drum made from deer skin stretched over a hardwood frame. It is played rhythmically with other instruments such as the gong, producing a distinct yet harmonious sound.

The absence of *marek empang*, *sugu tinggi* and *lampit* (silver belt) on the maiden indicates that this depiction evokes the culture in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The painter has intelligently captured an Iban maiden in her magnificent epoch.

**Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom**, a social and development anthropologist, is currently a Senior lecturer at the Department of Anthropology & Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya. Dr Welyne is also the founder and coordinator of a community-based enterprise on traditional textiles in Sarawak, a partnership with the Iban community emphasising the development and conservation of Indigenous knowledge. She is also a curator for heritage material for educational exhibitions emphasising digital media and polysensory concepts.



National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威  
**Title:** Untitled  
**Date:** 1975  
**Medium:** Oil on canvas  
**Size:** 92 x 104.5cm  
**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore  
**Accession number:** P-0752

Information published  
in *The Story of Yeh Chi  
Wei* (2010), exhibition  
catalogue by The National  
Art Gallery, Singapore

**Title:** Untitled (Dayak  
Men Love Cockfights)  
无题 (热爱斗鸡的达雅克人)  
**Inscription:** 达雅克少男之乐  
者,斗鸡也。乙卯年十月,之威。  
**Seal print:** 之  
**English translations:**  
The past-time for young  
Dayak men is cockfights.  
Zhiwei in the 10th lunar  
month of the *yimao* year  
(1975). Seal: Zhi.



National Collection  
registered information

**Maker:** Yeh Chi Wei 叶之威

**Title:** The Dayak Plays the  
Musical Instrument

**Date:** 1975

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Size:** 158 x 49 cm

**Collection:** National  
Gallery Singapore

**Accession number:**  
1993-01351

Information published  
in *The Story of Yeh Chi  
Wei* (2010), exhibition  
catalogue by The National  
Art Gallery, Singapore

**Inscription:** 古调虽自  
爱，今人多不弹。乙卯年  
十月七日，之威画。

**Seal print:** 之

**English translations:**

Although I love the ancient  
melodies, most people  
today do not play them.  
Painted by Zhiwei in  
the 7th day of the 10th  
lunar month of the *yimao*  
year (1975). Seal: Zhi.



Alena Murang,  
responding to

*The Dayak Plays  
the Musical Instrument*  
by Yeh Chi Wei



A man is sitting on the floor, holding a lute instrument as if he were playing it. He is leaning on a patterned wooden pole. With his back towards us, he wears a loin cloth and circular brass earrings on his elongated ear lobes, as well bracelets on his wrist. The artist painted in shades of grey. The man's body is in dark grey, contrasting with some vague patches of lighter grey. These lighter grey patches are tattoos. The lute instrument which is the furthest away in the composition, is in the lightest / brightest shade of grey as compared to the man and the pole.

I'm drawn to this piece immediately because of the musical instrument. As a *sape'* player my immediate thought was that this man is playing *sape'* (a lute instrument of the Orang Ulu people of Borneo). But upon closer look, his tattoos are more typical of Dayak Iban men of the time, and his instrument could very much be a *belikan* (a lute instrument of the Iban people which looks similar to *sape'*). *Belikan* is not played very much today and wouldn't be recognised by many, and is likely to be mistaken for a *sape'*. I wonder if this is really how they held *belikan*, as it doesn't seem ergonomic to me, but maybe it's a stylisation by the artist. It's interesting that the man's tattoos have been reduced / blurred. I can have a guess at some of his tattoos—on his right shoulder is a cockerel, and on his right buttock a *bunga terung*.

I think it is a powerful painting in that it doesn't give everything away, and raises many curiosities. The dark and grey-toned colours draw me more into the composition. The composition of the painting, with the man leaning against the pole and his back facing the viewer, made me wonder: Was the man posing for this painting? Did he know he was being observed? (Does it even reference a real life person?)

The presence of the pole is a gamechanger. It changes the feel of the image. For one, it echoes the long, narrow and vertical dimension of the canvas, enhancing its visual appeal. Secondly, it acts as a barrier between the viewer and the subject (the man), building a distance. As a viewer, I feel like I'm watching a private moment between man and instrument.

The inscription in Chinese characters—"Although I love the ancient melodies, most people today do not play them"—adds to the curiosity of the piece. What does the music sound like? Why aren't people playing it today? It's nice to know that *belikan* was played in the 1970s (if this is indeed a *belikan*—it's my best guess). It means that there are people today who would still remember the instrument, and there is still a space to remember it.

It's amazing how the sentimental feelings of the artist from back then still echo in the same way today. Even though I am a Dayak myself (rather than an outsider looking in), I do look at my elders with a similar sentiment—that many parts of our heritage are fading fast, and the elders are their only keepers. There is a sense of longing in me that wishes

that the pole could be removed, that the distance between past and present (and future) could be shortened. And yet we cannot forget that the pole is a pillar that keeps the longhouse standing. The longhouse is what keeps community together. That maybe, in order to move forward, it's not the pole that needs removing. What is required is the allowance for a collective culture to continuously evolve, as it always has done.

To share a very personal reflection, I was initially frustrated at the title of this piece. I tend to get frustrated when portraits of our people and our objects are given a generic label, e.g. “the Dayak,” “the musical instrument.” If one is so drawn to the way we look, the things we wear etc., it wouldn't hurt to learn our names (such titles for such paintings are not uncommon). It makes me feel like we are an exotic object to be looked at for our tattoos, “costumes,” etc. If we were without our cultural paraphernalia, would you still be interested? I'm no less Dayak if I'm only in jeans in and a plain t-shirt. Would you still call me a Dayak?

But, having gone through the process of writing this response, I empathise with the painter—perhaps there was a language barrier, perhaps it is intentionally without name, or perhaps this is a painting from his mind and of no one in particular. We are not sure. But the title does leave an elusiveness and creates greater mystery around the image.

Something to think about.

**Alena Murang**, hailing from Sarawak and of Kelabit heritage, is the first professional female player of the *sape*, a stringed lute instrument from Borneo. She was part of the revival movement of the *sape* twenty years ago, in the first batch of students from the *sape* master and living heritage Mathew Ngau Jau. As a singer-song writer as well, Alena receives songs, music and stories from her Kelabit and Kenyah elders and presents them in contemporary ways, as well as writing original songs. She read visual arts at the LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.



## Timeline

# Emiria Sunassa

**1894**

Emiria Sunassa is born in a Tidorese settlement on 5 August in Tanah Wangko, North Sulawesi.

**1914**

Emiria trains as a nurse at the Cikini Hospital in Batavia. She reportedly spends the following year travelling in Europe, studying music in Brussels and Austria.

From 1914 to 1926, hunters for birds-of-paradise begin to swarm areas of south New Guinea. While travellers' accounts of birds-of-paradise had long fascinated Europeans, newfound access to the area results in a burgeoning trade of the animal in the European continent.



**LEFT**

Nicolas Sanson  
MAP OF THE MALUKU  
ARCHIPELAGO  
1652

Copperplate print with  
added colour on paper,  
29.4 x 25.1 cm  
Collection of Asian  
Civilisations Museum

**RIGHT**

Unknown photographer  
RETURNING FROM  
HUNTING BIRDS OF  
PARADISE  
Reproduction of a  
c. 1910–1940 photograph

**1920s**

Emiria may have been a singer and pianist at a Dutch *société* (social club) in Ternate, the region neighboring Tidore.

She reportedly travels throughout the archipelago in the 1920s and 1930s, working on plantations, mines and factories, as well as living with communities in Papua, the Dayak in Kalimantan, and the Kubu in South Sumatra.

**1938**

S. Sudjojono and Agus Djaja establish the progressive modern artists group PERSAGI (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia—Union of

Indonesian Draughtsmen). Members include Emiria Sunassa, Otto Djaja, Herbert Hutagalung, Suromo, Abdulsalam, and a few other Indonesian artists active at the time.

**RIGHT**  
Members of PERSAGI posing for a group photo, 1940.



**1940**

Emiria shows her works in the first exhibition of PERSAGI artists at the Kolff Bookstore in Batavia.

**RIGHT**  
Emiria Sunassa  
PAPUAN ARCHERS  
c. 1941  
Oil on board,  
40 x 40cm  
Collection of Nasirun

**1941**

Emiria participates in the second exhibition of PERSAGI artists at the Bataviasche Kunstkring. Focusing on the history of modern Indonesian art, it is the first ever exhibition at the Kunstkring to only include Indonesian painters. One of Emiria's exhibited works is *Papuan Archers*.



**1942**

Japanese military occupying forces take over the Netherlands East Indies.

Emiria exhibits her works with S. Sudjojono, Agus Djaja, Kartono Yudhokusumo, Mochtar Apin and 19 other Indonesian painters.

**1943**

The Japanese administration establishes Keimin Bunka Shidōsho (Institute for People's Education and Cultural Guidance). Emiria is known to be an active member and is recorded as its secretary.

Emiria participates in an exhibition of Indonesian artists at the building of Keimin Bunka Shidōsho from 29 April to 8 May. Subsequently, she holds her solo exhibition at PUTERA (Pusat Tenaga Rakyat – Center of People's Power). Emiria receives awards from the Japanese administration for her paintings.

**1945**

Japanese imperial forces surrender, bringing World War II to an end.

Indonesia declares independence, and a four-year War of Independence commences against the Dutch.

**1946**

Emiria holds a solo exhibition in Jakarta, wherein she exhibits 50 paintings representing peoples from throughout the different regions of Indonesia. Two of the paintings included are *Danger Lurking Behind the Lotus* and *Gathering Damar (Gum) at Tidore-island*.

A group of Indonesian political detainees arrives in Serui, on the island of Yapen, Netherlands New Guinea. The group includes the prominent republican and former Governor of Sulawesi, Dr G.S.S.J. Ratulangi. One of the most important Papuan activists to link up with Ratulangi was Silas Papare, who would later live with Emiria in Jakarta.

Ratulangi and Papare establish the Partai Kemerdekaan Indonesia Irian (PKII), which aims to encourage Papuan independence from the Dutch as part of Indonesia.



**ABOVE**  
Emiria Sunassa  
ORANG IRIAN DENGAN  
BURUNG TJENDER AWASIH  
(IRIAN MAN WITH BIRD-  
OF-PARADISE)  
1948  
Oil on canvas,  
67.2 x 54.5 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

### 1948

Emiria exhibits *Irian Man with Bird-of-Paradise*.

Emiria may be the only artist of her generation to paint Papuan subjects. Prior to this, external images of Papua were largely produced through ethnographic photographs by foreigners, as well as drawings from the colonial military and anthropological expeditions.

### 1949

After a series of wars and treaties during the revolutionary period from 1945 to 1949, the Dutch colonial government transfers sovereignty of the Netherlands East Indies to Indonesia. The transfer excludes Netherlands New Guinea. The situation of Netherlands New Guinea becomes a major sticking point in the negotiation, and the area would ultimately remain under Dutch control for 12 more years.

According to articles published in the magazine *Star Weekly*, Emiria submits her claim to be the rightful ruler of Papua to the 1949 Round Table Conference, with support from Silas Papare and the PKII. Her claim is never officially supported.

### 1950

Emiria holds a solo exhibition at the Indische Instituut in Amsterdam.

### 1952

Emiria exhibits one painting, *Dayak Wedding*, at the exhibition *Modern Indonesian Paintings*, a group show for modern Indonesian artists in New York.

### 1960

Emiria travels to Singapore, where she stays for over a month to obtain legal advice for her claim to be the rightful monarch of Papua. Her claims are reported in *The Straits Times* and other newspapers.

Emiria also sends letters to the government of the Netherlands in



**RIGHT**  
Exhibition catalogue  
for *Modern Indonesian  
Paintings*, 1952.



The Hague to make the case for her claim. She also requests to go to the Netherlands to negotiate directly with the Prime Minister ; and for the Dutch government to accept her as a citizen of the Netherlands. Both requests seem to be rejected.

**1962**

The Dutch hand over the territory of Netherlands New Guinea to Indonesia as stipulated by the New York Agreement, a result of the meeting between Indonesia and the Netherlands engineered by the United States during the Cold War period.

**1964**

Emiria dies in Lampung, South Sumatra, on 7 April, at the age of 70.

## Timeline

# Eduardo Masferré

**1898**

Spain cedes the Philippines to the United States.

**1904**

Over a hundred Indigenous Peoples of the Cordillera mountainous region are brought to St. Louis, Missouri, to be shown as “live exhibits” at the international exposition held to celebrate the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase in the United States. From then on, the negative stereotypes of “mountain people” of the Philippines circulate widely in the United States and in the Philippines.

**1909**

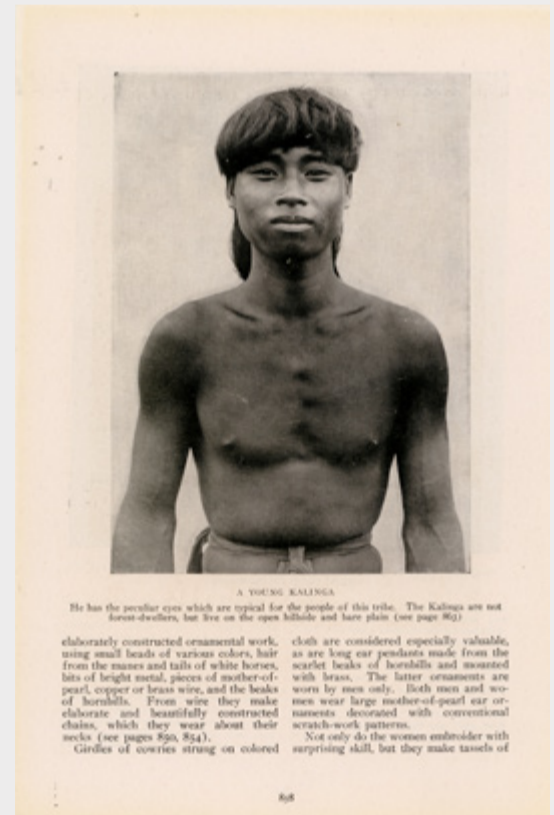
Eduardo Masferré is born to a Kankanaey mother and a Spanish father (a former soldier in the Spanish colonial army). For the first few years after Eduardo is born, his family lives in a missionary complex in Sagada in the Cordillera mountainous region.

**1911**

In 1911, 1912 and 1913, *National Geographic* carries a series of articles and photographs by Dean C. Worcester, Secretary of the Interior in the American colonial administration of the Philippines. They feature his images of peoples of the Cordillera. Masferré would later view a copy of the magazine kept by his family, and be inspired to photograph the peoples of the region himself.

### RIGHT

Photographs by Dean C. Worcester, reproduced in Dean C. Worcester, “Head-Hunters of Northern Luzon,” *National Geographic Magazine* XXXIII, no. 9, September 1912



**1924**

Masferré has his first practical experience with photography during his first year of high school at St Mary the Virgin in Sagada, helping the Episcopal priest, Father Leonard Wolcott. He takes black and white photographs of the mission and develops the negatives.

**1933**

Masferré begins to pursue photography more seriously and mail-orders equipment from Manila.

**1934**

Masferré takes and develops his first picture in Sagada that he finds to be good, an image of a woman transplanting rice.

**1935**

Masferré's mother dies after a three-year illness. He states that his focus on local people is a tribute to his mother.

**1942–1945**

The Philippines falls under the Japanese occupation during World War II.

The Imperial Japanese Army occupies the town near Sagada. Masferré enlists in the United States army. Amidst the war, Masferré experiments with color tinting, hand done with pastels, watercolors, and sometimes oil paint. After the war ends, he moves from Sagada to Bontoc, where he opens his photography studio.

**1946**

The Philippines gains independence from the United States.

**1949**

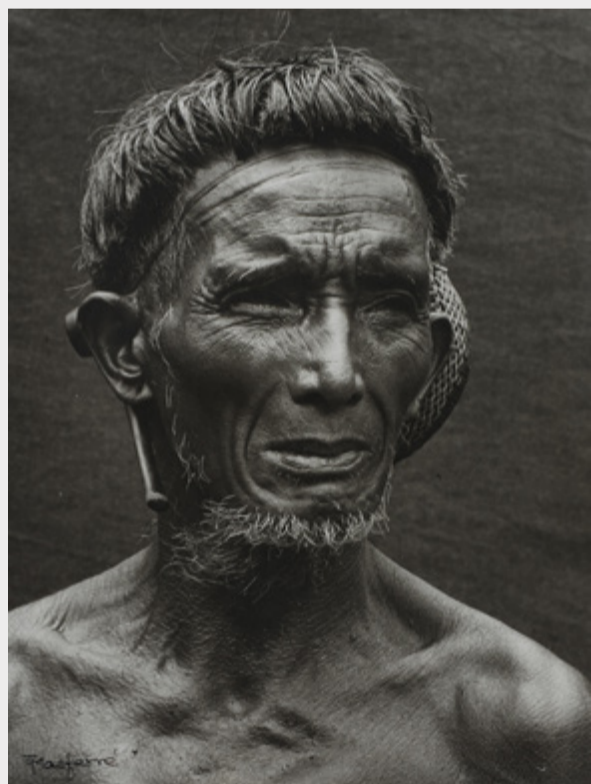
Masferré arrives at Kalinga Province for the first time to photograph the community's daily life there. He would later return to the area to share the developed photographs.

**1960**

The first postcard versions of Masferré's works begin to be sold. His

**BELOW**

Eduardo Masferré  
BUTBUT MAN  
1949  
Silver gelatin print  
32.6 x 24.5 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



photographs are mostly acquired by a few anthropologists, foreign travellers, and friends.

### Late 1970s—early 1980s

The town of Sagada becomes the centre for a countercultural group of artists in search of new ways of expressing Filipino identity and Indigeneity. Masferré's photographs become re-circulated by this group.

### 1970s—1986

Communities of the Cordillera, especially the peoples of the Kalinga area, wage a decade-long struggle against a government project to dam the Chico River, which would submerge their ancestral lands. In 1980, Filipino artist Santiago Bose paints a mural on the walls of the St Mary the Virgin school. One part of the mural depicts Macli-ing Dulag, a *pangat* (village elder) of the Butbut people of Kalinga, who was assassinated by the military for leading the resistance movement. Dulag's death galvanizes the resistance across the wider Cordillera region, and the violent struggle ends in 1986 when the government abandons the project. Santiago Bose's 1981 painting, *Drown My Soul at Chico River*, commemorates the indigenous struggle against this government project.

#### RIGHT

Santiago Bose  
DROWN MY SOUL  
AT CHICO RIVER  
(BURY MY SOUL IN  
CHICO RIVER)  
1981  
Pearlite, wood,  
aluminium tubes,  
wire mesh and acrylic  
paint, 124 x 122 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



**1982–1986**

Exhibits of Masferré's photographs are held in Baguio and at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila in 1982, followed by international exhibits in 1984 in Copenhagen and in Japan in 1986 and 1989.

**1988**

An exhibit of Masferré's photographs is held in Manila, and then tours the Philippines. A major monograph titled *E. Masferré, People of the Philippine Cordillera: Photographs 1934–1956* is also published.

**1989**

Masferré is invited to exhibit at world's premier photographic exhibition: *Les Recontres Internationales de la Photographie* in Arles, France. His works are widely acclaimed and win several awards.

**1992**

Masferré's photographs are exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C., which later acquires many of his works.

**1995**

Masferré dies aged 86.

## Timeline

# [ Yeh Chi Wei ]

**1913**

Yeh Chi Wei is born in Hongwei village in Fuzhou, China.

**1919**

Yeh's family moves to Singapore, to join his father who had left earlier to find work.

**1920s**

Yeh's family moves to the village of Lobaan in Sibuan, Sarawak, to work at a rubber plantation.

**1933–1937**

Yeh is sent back to Fuzhou by his family for his studies in 1925. He then enrolls at an art academy in Shanghai. While Yeh would later recall that he studied at the Shanghai Art Academy, his graduation certificate is from the Western painting course at Xinhua Art Academy.

**1935**

The Society of Chinese Artists is established. It is one of the earliest art associations in Singapore.

**1937**

Yeh moves to Singapore during the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War.

**1939**

Yeh participates in the *Fourth Annual Exhibition by the Society of Chinese Artists*.

**1941**

World War II spreads to the Pacific.

Sarawak, which the Brooke family had been governing as hereditary "White Rajahs" since 1841, comes formally under the control of the British.

**1942**

British Malaya surrenders to the Japanese imperial forces.

**1949**

The Singapore Art Society is founded. It aims to foster artistic practice and art appreciation in Singapore, and is later considered to be the first multicultural art society in Singapore. The Society organises regular painting exhibitions, overseas painting tours and grants awards.

Yeh and his family move to Malaya.

**1952**

Yeh begins working as an art teacher at Chung Cheng High School in Singapore, initiating their art society and organising painting expeditions for the students.

**1957**

Malaya becomes independent from British rule. Sarawak and North Borneo remain as British Crown Colonies, while the Sultanate of Brunei continues as a British protectorate.

Hedda Morrison, the wife of a colonial official who had been residing in Sarawak since 1947, publishes her first book of photographs, *Sarawak*. Previously, photographic books featuring Iban communities were sensationalist, and reinforced colonial stereotypes by depicting the Iban people as violent, “savage” or sexualised. Morrison’s book significantly departs from this perspective, showing a more intimate side to life in Iban communities.

**1960s**

The Ten Men Art Group is formed. They are an informal group with a loose line-up of members including Chen Cheng Mei, Lim Tze Peng, Seah Kim Joo, Choo Keng Kwang, Lai Foong Moi, Tan Choh Tee, Tan Teo Kwang, Lee Sik Khoon, Yeo Hwee Bin, Shui Tit Sing and Cheah Phee Chye.

Yeh begins to organize painting trips for the Ten Men Art Group to various Southeast Asian countries. His involvement with the group and their various trips would bring a radical change to his artistic style. He begins to delve into abstraction, rejecting his earlier realistic and Impressionist approaches.

Well-known Sarawak-based photographer K.F. Wong, proprietor of Anna Photo, publishes a book of his photographs of Sarawak under the title *Pagan Innocence*.

**1961**

Yeh joins Ten Men Art Group's first trip to the east coast of Malaya with ten other painters. Their works are subsequently shown at the *First Ten Men Art Exhibition* at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

**1962**

The Ten Men Art Group travels to Java and Bali, Indonesia.

The artworks from the trip, including those by Yeh, are shown in the *Second Ten Men Art Exhibition* at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

Hedda Morrison publishes the photography book *Life in a Longhouse*, about the peoples of Sarawak. The descriptive texts used in Morrison's books are similar to those Yeh uses later in his exhibition catalogues.

**RIGHT**

Photographs as published in Hedda Morrison *Life in a Longhouse*, trans. Huang Juen Hien (Chinese), Abang Bohari (Malay), Michael Buma (Iban), Borneo Literature Bureau, 1962



This man is playing a two-stringed guitar called a sape, an instrument the Iban learned to use from the Kayan.

這個男子正在吹奏二弦琴，這種「沙新」樂器是伊班人從加央族學來的。

Satang peman bunyian, selang bermain sape, ia itu gitar berati dua, perkakas yang mana orang Iban pelajari dari orang Kayan.

Orang bujang siko nya seringak telah sape. Main bunsa nya di-pelajar ka Iban dari bunsa Kayan.



Chinese jars are useful heirlooms. They are used for brewing rice beer, and for storage; the old ones are very valuable. The wall above may be covered with magazine advertisements.

中國外製是有用的傳家寶，它們可以用來釀酒及儲蓄之用。古老的價是很貴的。牆壁上貼著許多雜誌的廣告畫。

Taju china adalah beza yang berguna. Ia nya diguna membuat anak dari beras dan menyimpan barang2 dari taju yang lama sangat berguna. Dinding disebelah atas penuh dengan e'lan dari majalah2.

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**1963**

Yeh participates in the *Third Ten Men Art Exhibition* after the group's trip to Thailand and Cambodia.

The Federation of Malaysia is formed on 16 September, comprising what was previously independent Malaya, and the British Crown Colonies of Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo.



**1965**

Yeh visits Sarawak with the Ten Men Art Group and stays in a longhouse. As a result of this visit, Yeh produces a number of paintings depicting the life of the communities in Sarawak. He collects objects on his trips—baskets, textiles, ceramics, weaponry and sculpture—later referencing them in his artworks as well.

On 9 August, Singapore separates from the Federation of Malaysia and becomes an independent nation.

On week after the establishment of independent Singapore, the works from the Sarawak trip are shown in the *Ten-Men Art Exhibition Tour of Sarawak 1965* show at Victoria Memorial Hall.

**BELOW**

Exhibition catalogue for *Ten-Men Art Exhibition Tour of Sarawak, 1965*.

**ABOVE**

Yeh Chi Wei, drawing at a longhouse in Borneo, c. 1965.

**FAR LEFT**

Ceramics collection in a longhouse, photograph taken during a Ten Men Art Group trip to Borneo, location not recorded, c. 1965.

**LEFT**

Yeh Chi Wei  
*Drummer*  
c. 1965  
Oil on canvas, 112.5 x 99 cm  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

**1968**

Yeh travels to Borneo again, this time to Kota Kinabalu, Brunei, Miri and Sibiu with the Ten Men Art Group. Yeh becomes the President of the Society of Chinese Artists for one year.

**1969**

Yeh holds his first solo exhibition. It contains 125 works from over 30 years of practice. Held at the Victoria Memorial Hall, it is organised and supported by the Society of Chinese Artists and the Singapore Art Society.

The catalogue contains many images of Borneo, and includes descriptive glosses about what is represented in each work.

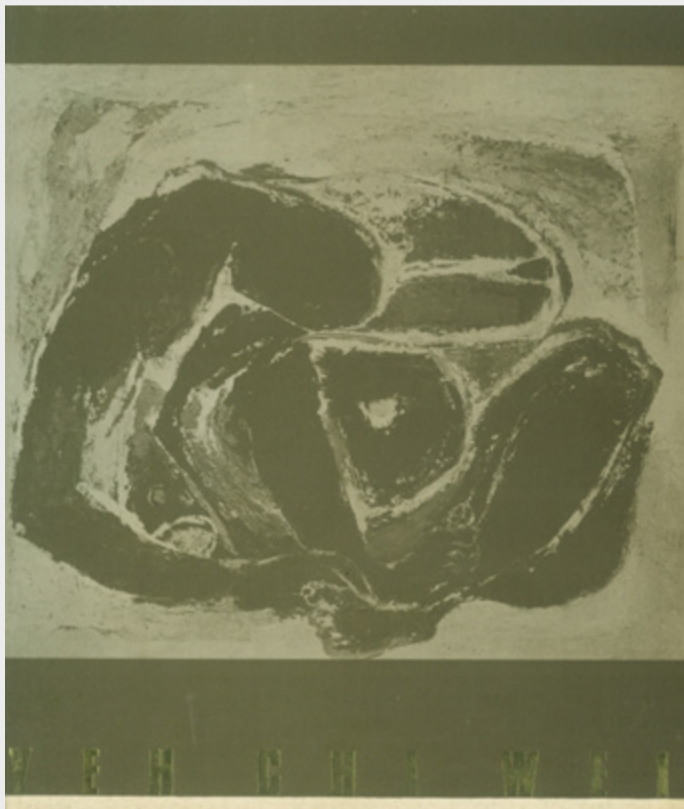
**RIGHT**

*Yeh Chi Wei*, exhibition catalogue for Yeh Chi Wei's solo exhibition, Singapore, 1969.

**FAR RIGHT**

Image from the exhibition catalogue for Yeh Chi Wei's solo exhibition, Singapore, 1969.

Inscription: Paternal Love: In whichever family of whatever country, paternal love is all alike; but I believe that in the longhouses, love here is deeper than anywhere else.





**RIGHT**  
 Yeh Chi Wei  
 THE DAYAK PLAYS THE  
 MUSICAL INSTRUMENT  
 1975  
 Oil on canvas, 158 x 49 cm  
 Collection of National  
 Gallery Singapore

### 1970—1977

During this period, Yeh travels with the Ten Men Art Group to Sumatra, Nepal, India, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines. During this time, he continues to paint works with Borneo subjects, such as *The Dayak Plays the Musical Instrument*, often with a personal component to the work.

Yeh helps establish the Southeast Asian Art Association, and would serve as its president until 1977.

Yeh also travels to Vietnam, Taiwan and Hong Kong together with artists including Chen Cheng Mei, Choo Keng Kwang and Shui Tit Sing, and the artists subsequently exhibit their works.

### 1981

Yeh passes away in Singapore.

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Rocky Cajigan, Kankanaey and Bontoc heritage, La Trinidad, Benguet, the Philippines, 2018

It begins with discomfort—to look at this photo, of a man from Maligcong, Bontoc, the Philippines, with the pipe, the soklong, and the stare that is meant to satisfy curiosities about who the “savage” is.

It begins with questioning—to look at this photo of an Indigenous, taken by an Indigenous as an Indigenous, within arbitrary definitions of Indigeneity.

It begins with symbolism—the tattoo of a bird on the chest, which has been copied from a colonial coin, itself patterned after the American Eagle, and now mixed with real and manufactured origin stories of traditional tattoos as material culture.

It begins with a conundrum—to participate in a decolonial project while anticipating that the institution cannot separate itself from continuing colonial habits, and thereby enabling the tradition of examining Indigenous peoples as photographed objects.

Rocky Cajigan, artist, Kankanaey and Bontoc heritage, La Trinidad, Benguet, the Philippines



Whose turn is it to speak now?  
 She who wears a bracelet made of brass,  
 And tells time with the sun, the shadows, the moon,  
 The sound of crickets, the sight of birds.  
 She who wears a watch on her left wrist,  
 Whose days have hours, minutes and seconds,  
 Who has names for the days of the week.  
 She who holds a pipe, given or bartered,  
 When men and women owned pipes,  
 And were photographed with pipes.  
 She who grips a pen with her right hand,  
 Who has both hands free,  
 Who has no hands free.

Sinu 'dwaní nan mensos-owa?  
 Nan menleledek as wising,  
 Ay mangbasa is timpo sin agew, sin alin-ew, sin buwan  
 Nan menbugawan di bisbisting, nan kail-an di kuyat.  
 Nan menlelo sin kanigid ay ledeng na,  
 Nan nagegedwa'y agew na's oras, minuto ya segundo,  
 Ya nang-ngadan sin ka-age-agew.  
 Nan mengege-en is suwako, naidatdateng wennu naisukat,  
 Tay mabalin mensuwako nan lalaki ya babai,  
 Ya maliklato'y nenge-ge-en is suwako.  
 Nan mangpepetpet is lapis sin makanawan  
 Sha's nawaya'y duwa'y ima na,  
 Nan maid nawayaan ay ima na

Gawani Gaongen, poet, Kanikanaay heritage,  
 Sagada, the Philippines



*[Small, illegible text]*

*[Small, illegible text]*







#### Glance

You can't elude the grove of pisang unai —forbidden fruit seized by squawking macaques ravenous since evening. Then you hear Kupa weeping without end, as the bastard child Ampang Tengkebang appears, before the day dies to return to the dawn.

O wai Ah Yeh, why do you tell of hidden things—like crossing the lemba highlands, where we gather the blood-sap of Ampang Tengkebang.

What took you so long to find me and proclaim yourself? Like harvesting mengkuang leaves to weave tikar for sandau ari offerings, the divination of the pig's heart, one can't be sullen; let's be like children diving from a cliff. Though it took a long time, there's no resistance, no clearing away the jungle, because your eyes do not lie to express our noble narratives; that's why we don't know when your creations will vanish—you anoint your canvas with fingers blessed by your tongue.

#### Nilik

Enda alah diseliah ka penumbuh pisang unai, ditaban ka nyumboh rauh-rauh enda makai selemal-lemal. Diak kitak ninga, sedan-sedan Kupa nandu Ampang Tengkebang sebedau ari malik nyadi siang.

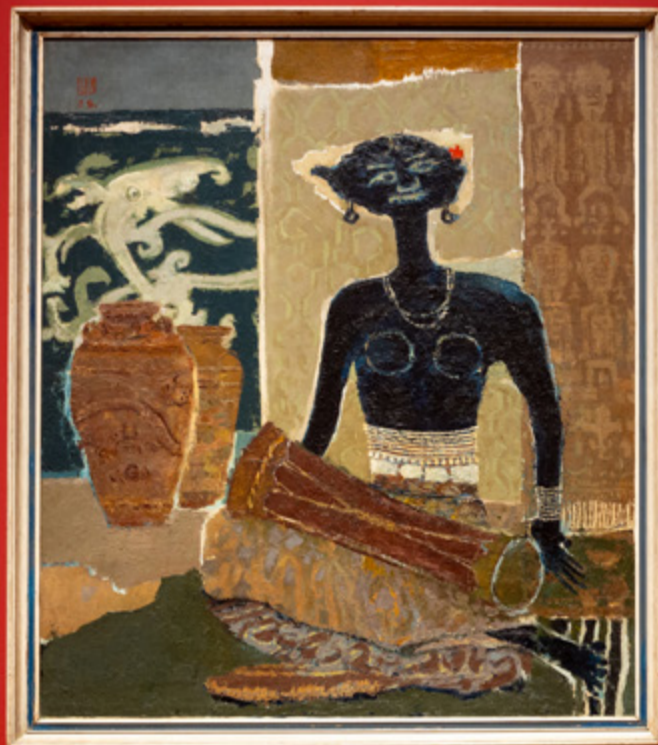
O wai Ah Yeh, nama nuan nusi utai betalai baka nengah mungu madang lembe, palan peneleba kena ngaga Ampang Tengkebang.

Raya pengelama nuan ngangau lalu nesau. Baka mepat bemban nyadi ka tikai sandau ari, nela ati janik enda tau ransi baka anak mit terjun ke pendaik. Tang pia pan lama, enda mantah enda nujuh laban mata nuan enda bula nusi ka dengah, nya alai enda temu kemaya ari penembu nuan rebah, mantang ka jari ba sukut dilah.

Kulleh Grasi is a poet, singer-songwriter and visual artist of Iban descent from Sarawak, Malaysia. Translated from Iban by Pauline Fan.







The painting highlights a staging of an event in an Iban longhouse in Sarawak during a gawai (festival) or celebration. The space exhibits wealth with the display of two tajau (jars) with the dragon design, highly significant in Iban mythology. The wall also sports a water dragon design, flaunting beautiful craftsmanship, but part of it covered by an older pua kumbu (a sacred cloth made with tie-dye) depicting a female figure in one of the tales of Kumang (the mother goddess of the Iban people). This textile is displayed side by side with another pua kumbu boasting a design of the warrior Bujang Berani.

Holding the tabuh (a type of drum), a maiden with a shy yet confident expression is adorned with earrings. Sitting in a delicate manner, she exudes elegance, while her hands, which are embellished with a few tumpa pirak (silver bangles), rhythmically hit the tabuh.

The painter has intelligently captured an Iban maiden in her magnificent epoch.

Dr Welyne Jehom, anthropologist and specialist in Iban textiles, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Small text at the bottom left of the page, likely a page number or reference.



Alena Murang, singer-songwriter and sape' player of Kelabit heritage, Sarawak, Malaysia

As a sape' player myself, my immediate thought was that this man is also playing sape': a lute instrument of the Orang Ulu people of Borneo. But upon a closer look, his tattoos are more typical of Dayak Iban men of the time, and his instrument could be a belikan (an instrument of the Iban people, similar to sape'). Belikan is not played much today. It's nice to know that belikan might still have been played in the 1970s.

Alena Murang, singer-songwriter and sape' player of Kelabit heritage, Sarawak, Malaysia

It's amazing how the sentimental feelings of the artist from back then still echo today. Even though I am a Dayak myself, I do look at my elders with a similar sentiment—that many parts of our heritage are fading fast, and the elders are their only keepers.

I tend to get frustrated when portraits of our people and our objects are given a generic label, e.g. "the Dayak," "the musical instrument." It makes me feel like we are an exotic object to be looked at for our tattoos, "costumes" etc. But, having gone through the process of writing this response, I empathise with the painter—perhaps there was a language barrier, perhaps it is intentionally without name, or perhaps this is a painting from his mind and of no one in particular. We are not sure. But the title does leave an elusiveness and creates greater mystery around the image.







EMIRIA SUNASSA  
BIRD OF PARADISE  
1980  
OIL ON CANVAS  
100 x 100 cm

The name Emiria Sunassa is new to me. I am astounded to know that there was a great Indonesian woman artist during a time that was difficult for women—the colonial period—when women and nature were objects to yearn after, conquer, and control.

Even though Emiria, as a woman, is “the Other” within the hierarchical structure that creates a ranking for nature-human-woman, she admired the bird’s beautiful detail—even as it was being yanked from its place for its beauty to be shown off, even as it was being prepared to be attached to another false authority, the Europeans.

The birds are shown in the arms of an enslaved man. We can tell he is a slave because he is shown naked, and presenting the birds as if he is serving someone. This reveals that in her imagination, Emiria, either directly or indirectly, existed in the same locus as the subject of her painting: the enslaved man and the captured bird.

Emiria managed to give life to the objects in this painting depicting the bird of paradise, turning the objects into subjects. As a feminist, she illuminates the unequal power relations between human and nature in her painting

Dr Els Tienke Rieke Katmo, Lecturer in Socio Economics of Agriculture, Universitas Papua, Manokwari, Indonesia





Emiria, 1970s  
Oil on canvas  
100 x 100 cm  
Collection of the artist

Dicky Takndare: The historical background shaping the relationship between Tidoreans and Papuans plays a major part in forming Emiria's view on Papuans. At the same time, at the beginning of Indonesia as a new Republic, she was part of an art movement that strove to build a new national awareness after the wave of decolonisation washed over Asia and the Pacific. I think this made Emiria a rather controversial figure because her works depicting Papuans and Papua's natural world don't relate to just one of those backgrounds.

Betty Adli: I see Emiria's works as a form of solidarity that was born out of the spirit of camaraderie, and it ought to be appreciated. But I think her works seem to only narrate Papua superficially, they have not touched upon the realities of the Papuan people, who at the time already experienced social turmoil. "Exoticism" still constitutes the main reason behind the creation of these works. If we position them in today's social context in Papua, I think the crucial point is about the value of solidarity that we can interpret as a driver for change.

I think that what is important about her in terms of equality is that she strived to be a "woman who paints" and not "the woman who is painted."

Dicky Takndare and Betty Adli are members of the Papuan artist collective Udeido, based in Yogyakarta and Jayapura, Indonesia.



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Page 41. Detail of *India 1* by Yeh Chi Wei. c. 1971. Oil on canvas, 80 x 61 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board. © Yeh Toh Yen

Page 83. Detail of *Orang Irian dengan Burung Tjenderawasih* (Irian Man with Bird-of-Paradise) by Emiria Sunassa. 1948. Oil on canvas, 67.2 x 54.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Page 115. Detail of *Drummer* by Yeh Chi Wei. c. 1965. Oil on canvas, 112.5 x 99 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board. © Yeh Toh Yen

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