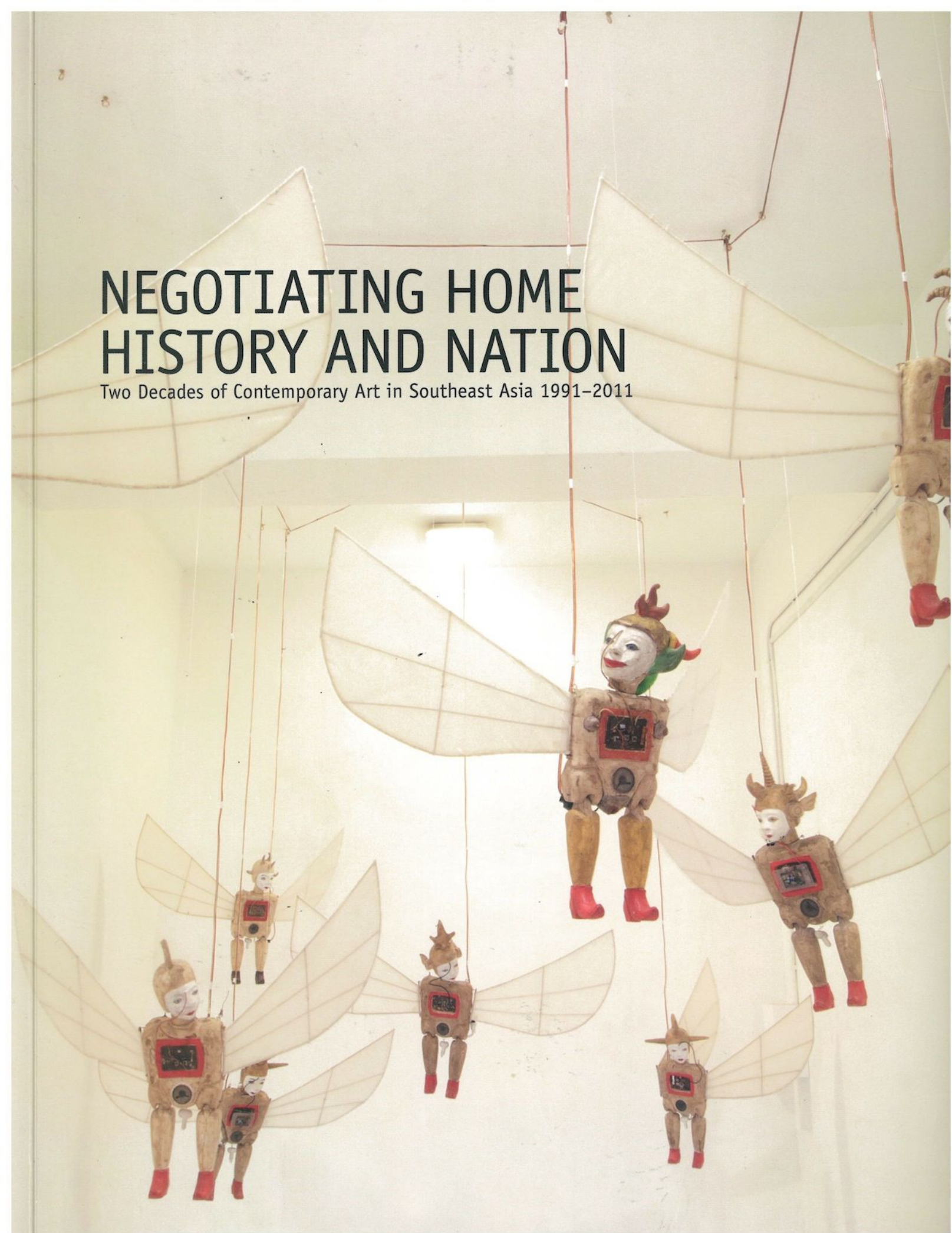


NEGOTIATING HOME HISTORY AND NATION

Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991–2011





Simryn Gill, *Washed Up*, 1993–1995, found glass pieces sandblasted with text, variable dimensions, Singapore Art Museum Collection.

Speaking on whether he was referencing specific artistic ideas, Harsono states: 'At the time it didn't cross my mind that these were readymade or found objects. Neither was I thinking of Duchamp, although I knew of him. My focus at the time was how presenting new forms [can] raise social issues using visual elements from day-to-day life, with the idea that: 1) daily objects (without changing their meaning) would easily be understood by observers, so they would be more communicative; 2) daily objects are visual objects that cannot be identified as a form of fine art; and 3) daily objects can represent the spirit of experimenting and playing around.'¹⁵ This partial reading and translation of external artistic ideas speaks of the 'contact zones' within which contemporary Southeast Asian art (and indeed art outside the Euro-American spheres) has developed. Harsono's response paints a picture, so to speak, of art created in a space of transculturation, where selective reading (including not reading certain aspects) of received ideas originating from without generates wholly new meanings and artistic practices that turn the artist into an active cultural agent 'able to generate new relationships, in particular between the audience and the content of his/her work.'¹⁶

Proposition 3: Migration and the dilemmas of identity

For long stretches of historical time, the movement of people, products and ideas have helped constitute the complex mix of cultures in the region. History and culture have also left their traces on the material landscape of Southeast Asia. Migration and its cultures has been one major theme of contemporary art. The artist Simryn Gill's own personal biography mirrors the fluid nature and constant movement that characterises the region. Born in Singapore, she grew up in Malaysia and now works between Australia and Malaysia. Her installation *Washed Up* consists of 2,000 pieces of glass shards found literally washed up on the beaches during her travels of the Archipelago. Each shard has an English word engraved, such as 'symbolic', 'grasses', 'zipper', 'play' etc. In her own words, she remarks: 'I was interested in the ways language leaves one place and arrives in another and, although the written form is the same something happens to it and the meanings of the words change.'¹⁷ The shards are leftovers, fragments from another life and another place that we can only guess at. In a sardonic level, as the engraved words denote, it is also the English language that has been washed up, through an accident of history, left as a heritage in new countries like Singapore and Malaysia.

In the photographic series, *Standing Still*, the reality that the region's openness also renders it vulnerable to any debilitating forces from without is made manifest in the urban landscape of Malaysia. Shot between mid-2000 and the end of 2003, the 114 photographs document buildings in various stages of decay and destruction. Despite their run-down look, not all the buildings are old. Some are new developments that have fallen victim to the economic crisis that hit Malaysia at the end of the nineties. Large-scale housing developments, shopping centres and private homes are all included alongside older abandoned buildings. The photographs are records of a place at a particular time that has passed and though no people are captured, they still evoke the lingering effects of human presence. An earlier series, *A small town at the turn of the century*, sees Gill returning to her childhood community at Port Dickson, assuming the role of intrepid anthropologist. She photographs the inhabitants of the town in their daily lives, but her subject's faces are obscured by masks of tropical fruit: rambutan, jackfruit, pineapple, bananas etc. Seemingly witty and wry, these photographs also incite the viewer into a guessing game as to who the 'fruithead' subjects depicted are, their economic background, their family background and most tellingly in the context of Malaysia, their ethnicity which can now only

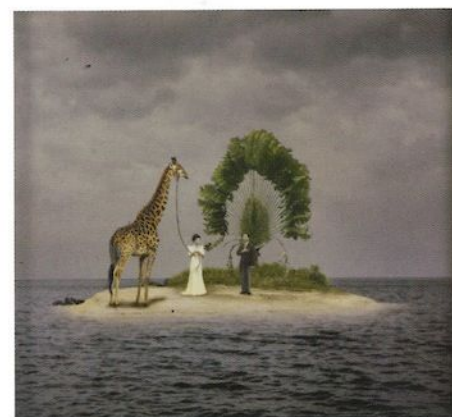
15. Hendro Wiyanto, 'From an Imaginary Plane to Social Dynamics (1972-1974)', in *Re:Petition/Position FX Harsono*, (Magelang: Langgeng Art Foundation, 2010), 75.
16. Jacqueline Millner, 'The Contact Zone: Thoughts on the 2006 Biennale of Sydney', in *Zones of Contact 2006 Biennale of Sydney: A Critical Reader*, ed. N. Bullock and Reuben Keehan (Sydney: Artspace, 2006), 34. For background on the concept of contact zones, please see M.L. Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone' originally published in *Profession*, no. 91 (1991): 33–40, http://www.class.uidaho.edu/Thomas/English_506/Arts_of_the_Contact_Zone.pdf.
17. Wayne Tunncliffe, 'Self Selection', in *Simryn Gill: Selected Work* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2002), 8.

be read not through the colour of their skin or their faces, but through the paraphernalia that surrounds them in each photograph.

The recent work of Indonesian artist Jompet has been haunted by the ghost of his native Java's syncretistic culture. Java has been the Indonesian island where the 'grand' traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have been absorbed, contested and recontextualised. The resulting blend of Javanese culture has become the engine and machine that drives Javanese civilisation, according to Jompet. His installation *Java's Machine: Phantasmagoria* (2008), now in the collection of the Singapore Art Museum, is a visual expression of this synthesised blend that is Javanese culture. Jompet's haunting installation features a band of soldiers, whose presence is physicalised by their uniforms—themselves a mix of Javanese and Dutch military attire. Through the magic of electronics, each of the 'figures' plays different sounds, which collectively merge into an orchestral 'score', the clashing rhythms and harmonies somehow sounding oddly melodious—a symbol of the sedimented collage of cultural ideas that is Java. In *Java's Machine*, the syncretism of Java attempts to reconcile the clash of native and foreign ideas, like the discordant harmonies produced by the soldiers in the work. From the eighteenth century onwards, as Dutch colonialism established itself on the island, the militaries of the central Javanese courts no longer went into battle, instead, their role became basically symbolic. That the installation chooses to mark the presence of the soldiers by their attire alone is a sign of the ambivalence that characterises this work.

The fluidity and slippery nature of identity and culture in the region is often a consequence of the presence of the sea. Borders on the waters are invisible and the seas of the region more often than not unite and draw people together rather than separate and mark differences. Yee I-Lann's *Sulu Stories* (2005) is the emblematic work that raises the issue of the problematics of identity in the region. The Sulu zone currently marks the intersection of two polities—Malaysia and Indonesia. The 12 images in the series have the horizon as a constant, a dividing line between sky and sea that yet obliterates the difference. In this ocean of sameness, it is features like the coastlines of the Bahala cliffs in Sandakan depicted in the image 'The Archipelago' or Mount Tumatangis in 'Awn Hambuuk Sultan' that have been physical markers for the travellers, traders and dwellers of the region. Above all, it is the stories of the sea, shared between peoples of the region that unite the communities and histories of these waters stretching all the way to the present-day Philippines. From a stint in the Philippines, she writes: 'Whilst in the Philippines I was constantly asked, "Where are you from?" "I am from Sabah," I would answer. "Ah, a Filipina" was the common response. I smile but am thinking difficult surf, troubled waters, dive in the deep end, not drowning, waving... But I am welcomed with a knowing embrace; we know we are connected; our histories, fate and horizon line is shared.'¹⁸ The *Sulu Stories* also highlights the particularly Sabahan locale that the artist originates from and from which she also identifies herself with, rather than the purely national i.e. Malaysian.

The migrations of people in the region and its effects on culture and identity are expressed in a humorous and wry way by Navin Rawanchaikul's sculpture *Where Is Navin?* A Thai citizen of South Asian descent who speaks the northern Thai dialect fluently, Navin's darker skin and curly hair set him apart physically from other Thais. The term used by other Thais to refer to Indians is *khæk*, which means stranger or guests, implying that the person is not a Thai. That migration has brought many cultures and communities together in the same geographical



Jompet Kuswidananto, *Java's Machine: Phantasmagoria*, 2009, mixed media installation, variable dimensions, Singapore Art Museum Collection.

Yee I-Lann, *Sulu Stories*, 2005, 13 digital prints on Kodak paper, variable dimensions, edition 2 of 8, Singapore Art Museum Collection (illustrated: *The Archipelago*, 61 x 183 cm).

Navin Rawanchaikul, *Where is Navin?*, 2007, Painted fiberglass, cloth and wood, 176 x 67 x 45 cm (figure only), Edition 3 of 3, Singapore Art Museum Collection.

18. Yee I-Lann, *Fluid World* Yee I-Lann, ed. Beverly Yong and Adeline Ooi (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2010), 91.



space is indisputable, however, the challenges that migrant communities often face is one of assimilation or maintaining difference, the result is sometimes an uncertain mix between the two. The work *Where is Navin?* expresses the contradictions that can occur using the artist's own biography as a source material. In an interview, he has said that: 'I live in Thailand, but my family is Indian, I was born here and grew up here. Most of my relatives are here. I'm Indian but sort of not. I'm Thai, but sort of not, either. I have a Thai passport, but if people just look at me, they won't think I'm Thai. This is the kind of experience I've had since I was a child.'¹⁹ The sculptural figure is of Navin himself holding a sign that says 'Navin' in Mandarin. All over the floor around him are similar signs that say the same in various languages like Thai and English, for instance. An accompanying video, *Navins of Bollywood* was presented in Singapore as part of the docu-performance *Diaspora* (2006) that explored the question of what personal identity meant in a globalised world. In a sequence of the video, a foreigner, played by Navin, searches for the word 'navin' on the internet. The search tells him that 'navin' is Sanskrit for 'new' but subsequently he finds many Navins from all over the world, including women, popping up in his internet search. It tells him that he is not alone in the world but also leaves him wondering who are these other 'Navins' and what are their lives like?

Proposition 4: The embrace of tradition and the vernacular

The development of modern and contemporary art in the region did not simply involve a critique of their own traditions and cultures, often artists used the new techniques and concepts made available to defend their own traditions in the face of modernisation. These are often strategic choices, given that the specific ways in which they have approached elements of tradition and the vernacular have shaped their artistic practices. One of the strategies involves the recuperation of traditional techniques and materials of the local artisan, which are turned into viable ways for artistic creation. The Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich originally studied painting in the USA. Upon his return however, he discovered that the traditional rattan weaving techniques of his homeland could connect and communicate his intentions, as well as have meaning for his local community. Since 2005, he stopped painting and concentrated on his practice of making complex sculptures out of rattan and wire.

In works like *Cycle* (2004–2008), Pich has made a large scale rattan sculpture consisting of two connected stomachs to suggest the movement of family ties, how young and old nourish each other. Pich's biography as a child displaced from his homeland to the United States by political upheavals has been a source of generative ideas for his work. The sense of cultural, linguistic and political displacement experienced has been 'made manifest in his work and shaped the specific media of his artistic expression'.²⁰

The exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* had as one of its key objectives the desire 'to demonstrate that tradition should not be interpreted as the opposite of contemporaneity'.²¹ Instead, tradition and specifically vernacular tradition are important conceptual devices for contemporary artists of the Asian region (not just Southeast Asia) as they are explicit markers of identity with a community or culture and hence can be used as a foil to highlight tensions, linkages and ruptures with contemporary cultural issues.²² In this vein, the Indonesian artist Nindityo Adipurnomo's sculptures such as *Hiding Rituals and the Mass Production II* interrogates the artist's Javanese background by invoking the symbol of the women's *konde* or traditional hairpiece. Worn by Indonesian women during ceremonies

e, 2004–2008, rattan and wire,
Singapore Art Museum Collection.

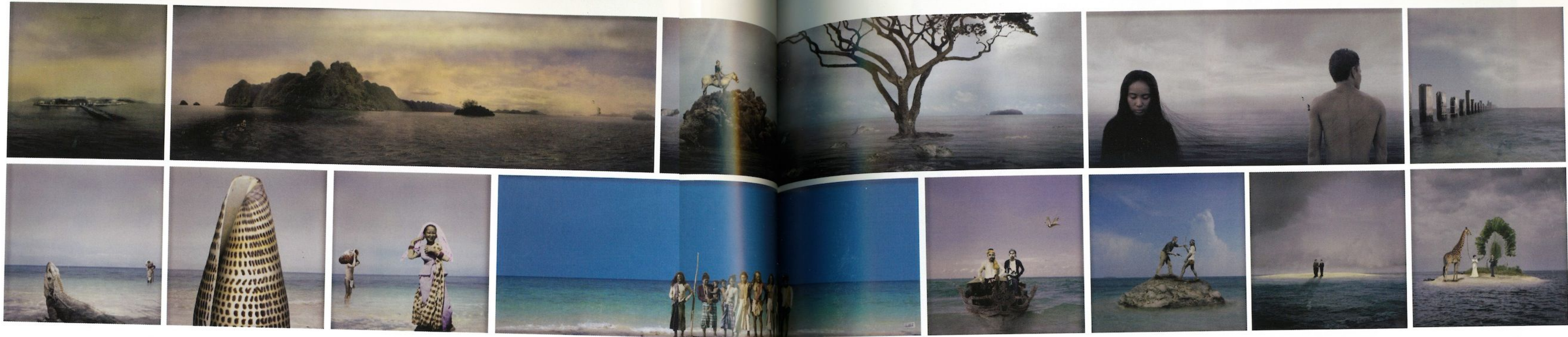
no, *Hiding Rituals and the Mass Production*
n, human hair, plastic bag, paper, string,
Singapore Art Museum Collection.

radit quoted in 'Changing Clothes, Changing Faces', in *Navin's Sala: Navin*
International Art and Life Magazine, ed. Navin Rawanchaidul (Chiang Mai:
ion Co. Ltd/Galerie Enrico Navarra, 2008), 67.

Texture and Tactile Memory: Situating Sopheap Pich's Work
Local Perspective', in *The Pulse Within: Sopheap Pich*
er Rollins Gallery, 2010).

nanda, *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*
a Society Galleries, 1996), 15.

enfeld, 'Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World', in *Asian Art*
Twentieth Century, ed. N. Vishakha Desai (Williamstown, Massachusetts:
ancine Clark Art Institute, 2007), 196.



Yee I-Lann
 Sulu Stories; 2005
 Digital print, 13 pieces, edition 2 of 8
 Variable dimensions
 Singapore Art Museum Collection

VU DAN TAN (1946–2009)

A self-taught artist, Vu Dan Tan was born into a literary family in Hanoi. Influenced by his father, he studied art and music and later travelled to the Soviet Union where he honed his skills as a painter. Returning to Vietnam, Vu Dan Tan took interest in found objects and detritus, transforming these into whimsical and fantastical creations. These practices were at odds with the conventional modernist painting of his contemporaries. Visually seductive and playful, his installation, performance, prints and musical creations are global in their iconographic references while also providing sharp critique of Vietnam's evolving socio-political landscape. Important exhibitions include 8th Sculpture Triennial Fellbach (1993), 10th Osaka Triennale (2001), *Gap Viet Nam* at the House of World Cultures in Berlin (1999), *Inside* at Documenta X (1997), and the 2nd Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (1996). The artist has participated in numerous shows and residencies in Japan, the United States, Germany, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and China. Vu Dan Tan is represented in several public collections including those of the Queensland Art Gallery, Singapore Art Museum, and the World Bank in Washington, DC.

WONG HOY CHEONG (b. 1960)

Born in Penang, Malaysia, Wong Hoy Cheong is a member of the first post-independence generation of Malaysian artists. He studied abroad, returning from the USA in 1987 with a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Brandeis, a Masters in Education from Harvard and a Masters in Fine Arts from University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Wong Hoy Cheong's artworks are interdisciplinary, exploring politics, culture and ethnicity through the use of materials such as plants, text and food. He has exhibited widely in major exhibitions globally, showing at the 3rd Liverpool Biennial in 2004, 2nd Guangzhou Triennial in 2005, 10th International Istanbul Biennial in 2007, 6th Taipei Biennial in 2008, 10th Lyon Biennale 2009 and most recently at the 4th Fukuoka Art Triennial 2009. Besides being an artist, Wong Hoy Cheong is a vital part of the Malaysian arts community acting as a teacher, critic, curator and writer.

YEE I-LANN (b. 1971)

Born in Sabah, Malaysia, Yee I-Lann graduated with a degree in visual arts in 1992 from the University of South Australia, Adelaide, and later studied painting at Central St. Martins School of Arts in London. Incorporating various media including photography, installation and video, her practice seeks networks between history, landscape, memory and cultural identity drawn from historical archives, popular culture and everyday objects. Yee I-Lann has exhibited widely within Malaysia and internationally, participated in the 3rd Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (1999); *The Independence Project* and *Out of the Mould* (2007) at Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur; and the 'Global Photography Now' seminar (2006) at Tate Modern, London.