



- 38 Yee I-Lann  
(b. 1971, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia)

*Study of Lamprey's Malayan Male I & II*  
2009

Digital print on paper  
60 × 42 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Silverlens

In her work, Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann confronts an image of a naked Malayan man taken by 19<sup>th</sup>-century British photographer John Lamprey. The man was posed in front of a grid system composed of a wooden frame with threads stretched behind the subject, so that his body could be scientifically measured. This system was invented by Lamprey so that humans could be photographed for observation and comparison, in line with 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropological theories that argued all past and present societies could be arranged in an evolutionary order. Peoples who were physically different were regarded as “primitive” remnants of the early stages of human development, whilst Europeans apparently represented the height of human civilisation. Such ideas of European racial superiority were then used to justify the marginalisation and enslavement of many indigenous peoples in the colonies.

Lamprey’s images resonated with Yee, a Sabahan artist of mixed descent and an ethnic minority in a country that enacts affirmative policies. Using digital editing software, Yee altered the first photograph so that the man was no longer holding a spear or looking away with one hand open. She also gave the man the eyes of the former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. However, the more she manipulated the image, the more she became uncomfortable with the “violence” that she was inflicting upon the original image—a kind of new “colonialism” created by her own act of looking. In order to keep the memory of the image intact, her eventual solution was to remove his image from the second photograph altogether. To highlight the tension in the relationship between the viewer and the viewed, she eventually inserted an image of herself looking at the man into the final composition.