

Yee I-Lann

(Malaysian, born 1971)

Yee I-Lann's work engages with Southeast Asia's turbulent history and its mythology, addressing the socio-political impact of current politics, neo-colonialism, and globalization. *Like the Banana Tree at the Gate* is rooted in two motifs that are iconic in her native Malaysia: the abundant banana tree; and the *pontianak*, a vengeful female spirit with long, black hair. In digital photograph collages, Yee I-Lann combines these legendary tales with mid-20th century feminist movements such as Indonesia's Gerwani organization. The *pontianak* is an evil spirit or ghost in Malaysian and Indonesian mythology and is believed to be a woman who died during pregnancy or childbirth. The *pontianak* is usually depicted as a pale-skinned woman with long, black hair covering her face; red eyes; and a white dress covered in blood stains. The spirits traditionally are thought to reside in banana trees.

The *Like a Banana Tree at the Gate* series consists of three digital photographs that are composed of hundreds of collage elements. Yee I-Lann set up a public mobile studio in the Arts For Grabs market in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The women photographed are playing the role of the *pontianak*; many are well-known activists and artists. The first panel is titled *Ibu or the Beast*, which references an essay by Saskia Wieringa on women's political involvement in Indonesia, and in particular the Gerwani feminist movement. The word *Ibu* is also an affectionate term for mother in Malaysia or woman in Indonesia. The middle photograph, *The Flaming Womb*, refers to one of the artist's favorite books, written by Barbara Andaya, which describes the history of women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. *A Leaf in the Storm*, the last panel, also refers to the Gerwani movement and life during Indonesia's 1965 military coup. It is taken from a biographical account written by Iby Marni about her political beliefs and her involvement with the movement.

"The *pontianak* continues to haunt us in 21st century patriarchal Southeast Asia," Yee I-Lann explains. "She is the woman standing at the gate like the banana tree in full view. She is potential and power and resource. A banana plant lives only briefly, bearing just one bunch of fruit before it dies. Its root structure, however, grows a new plant immediately – and so the cycle continues, ever present with a memory of the past."

Rollins, Tyler. "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate." Gallery brochure. New York: Tyler Rollins Fine Art, 2016.

Yee I-Lann. Personal interview. 20 May 2016.



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Ibu or the Beast, 2016

From *Like the Banana Tree at the Gate*

24 x 80 3/4 in.

Giclée print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag paper, edition of 8 + AP

Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York



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The Flaming Womb, 2016

From *Like the Banana Tree at the Gate*

24 x 91 3/4 in.

Giclée print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag paper, edition of 8 + AP

Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York



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A Leaf in the Storm, 2016

From *Like the Banana Tree at the Gate*

24 x 62 in.

Giclée print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag paper, edition of 8 + AP

Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York