

## Legends, ghosts and feminism: Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann at Tyler Rollins Fine Art – in pictures

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### In her latest exhibition, the Malay artist explores female power.

Closing on 17 June 2016, Yee I-Lann's latest show in New York takes inspiration from two iconic motifs of her native Malaysia: the banana and the *pontianak*. Through her photomedia works, she explores legendary tales and notions of female power.



Yee I-Lann, "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate" (April 28 – June 17, 2016), installation view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Yee I-Lann's latest solo exhibition in New York entitled "[Like the Banana Tree at the Gate](#)" (28 April – 17 June 2016) continues on the artist's interest in exploring archipelagic Southeast Asia's turbulent history.

In the show at [Tyler Rollins Fine Art](#), Yee takes inspiration from two iconic motifs from Malaysia and Southeast Asia: the banana tree, which can be found anywhere in the region, and the *pontianak*, a vengeful female spirit with long black hair, who is said to reside in that tree.

[Yee I-Lann](#)'s primarily photomedia-based practice, as Tyler Rollins Fine Art writes, "addresses, with wit and humanity, the socio-political impact of current politics, neo-colonialism, and globalization". Her previous works have also dealt with her multicultural identities in relation to the globalised world, as well as explored a range of legends and mythologies from the Malay region that have shaped history, local identity and culture.

Yee was born in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, East Malaysia in 1971 to a New Zealander mother and a Sino-Kadazan father, but has always identified herself as strongly Sabahan. Her multicultural upbringing was also marked by studies at the University of South Australia in Adelaide and at the Central Saint Martin's School of Art in London, United Kingdom. Today, she resides in Kuala Lumpur, where she has established herself as one of the most influential Malaysian artists of her generation.

Yee is known for her multi-layered digital photomontage series that reference history, popular culture, archives and everyday objects. Her oeuvre engages with issues of culture, power and the role of historical memory in social experience, and often focuses on themes and motifs that reference Borneo's indigenous cultures.



Yee I-Lann, "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate" (April 28 – June 17, 2016), installation view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

### **The banana tree at the gate**

In the oeuvre featured in the New York exhibition, Yee feeds her fantastical tableaux with legendary tales enriched by the memory of mid-20th century feminist movements, such as Indonesia's Gerwani organisation, popular in the 1950s and 1960s before being suppressed by the military. As the press release reveals,

*With a series of her characteristic digital photcollage works, along with a three-channel video, Yee captures the potency of female power derived from local knowledge and folkloric traditions, reframing it in a contemporary context informed by an active socio-political engagement.*



Yee I-Lann, 'Ghost in the Banana Tree', 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, 238 pieces, 27 x 14.5 cm each, 107.5 x 950 cm full installation, edition of 3 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

The title of the exhibition comes from the story of a 17th century sultan in southern Borneo, who advised his subjects not to plant a banana tree near their front gates in order to hide their wealth to potential colonial exploiters. Yale professor Michael Dove's academic study, *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo*, cited this story as an early example of anti-colonial resistance in the region.



Yee I-Lann, 'Landscape', 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, 50 x 168 cm, edition of 8 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

In a dark room, the video montage *Pusaka Pontianak (The Accursed Heritage)* presents scenes featuring the *pontianak*, with excerpts of films from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The *pontianak* is a vampiric, evil spirit or ghost in Malaysian and Indonesian mythology. They are said to be women who died during pregnancy or childbirth, although early Malaysian folklore also talks about them as originating from stillborn children. The *pontianak* is usually depicted as a pale-skinned woman with long black hair covering her face, red eyes and white dress covered in blood stains. The ghost is also believed to take on a beautiful form to prey on men. The spirits traditionally are said to reside in banana trees.

*Poster: Like the Banana Tree at the Gate* is made in the local old movie style with 19th century French lithograph elements of scenes from Southeast Asia and a stereotypical image of a *pontianak* with long black hair covering her face. *Landscape* takes the image of the spirit to a more abstracted yet terrifying form, with a row of heads with dishevelled long black hair forming an image akin to a dark landscape.



Yee I-Lann, 'Ghost in the Banana Tree', 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, 238 pieces, 27 x 14.5 cm each, 107.5 x 950 cm full installation, edition of 3 + 1AP. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Referencing the Cambodian name for *pontianak*, *Ghost in the Banana Tree* is an installation of 238 photos of banana trees shot by Yee and her assistants in cities and villages throughout Malaysia. Among them is also the banana trees outside the bedroom window of her childhood home as well as her grandfather's banana estate in Sapong, Tenom.



Yee I-Lann, "Conference" series, 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, three panels, edition of 8 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

As if in contrast to the focus on the faceless, hair covered spirits, the "Conference" series features three digital photocollages (*Panel 1*, *Panel 2*, and *Panel 3*) combined into a continuous frieze. The images were all shot in the artist's hometown – Kota Kinabalu in Borneo – and feature men and women of different ethnicities and walks of life, only their legs visible.



Yee I-Lann, "Conference" series 'Panel 1', 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, 61 x 122.5 cm, edition of 8 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

In her new 13-minute three-channel video entitled *Imagining Pontianak: I've Got Sunshine on a Cloudy Day* a group of women appear with their faces covered by long black wigs like a pontianak's hair. Some sing excerpts of popular folk songs, while others recite poems or chat about topics as varied as relationships and sex and the possession by ghosts and spirits. Through this work, Yee breaks an important 'tradition' in Malaysian culture and society, where intimate conversations between Malay women are usually relegated to the private sphere and are rarely shown in the media and popular culture.



Yee I-Lann, 'Imagining Pontianak: I've Got Sunshine on a Cloudy Day', 2016, three-channel video, 13m:11s, edition of 3. Image courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

In **a short review** on *Art Review*, Pimrapee Thungkasemvathana writes: *By hiding their source, the individual voices speak not just for themselves but for women the world over. Yee reimagines these folkloric creatures to retaliate against the myths of the horrific maternal body. That "demon" is made considerably more human through dialogues that puncture those misogynist stigmas: "A good day is when my daughter wakes up and makes her own breakfast," says a woman. "I should have the right to say, 'I want an abortion,'" declares another. Fear, perpetuated by the hiding of faces—and lives—of women, is defused, leaving only unruly manes due for a haircut.*



Yee I-Lann, "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate" series, 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, three panels, edition of 8 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

With the same title of the exhibition, the "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate" series of three digital photographs are composed of 100-200 photocolled elements. The women portrayed in the photos as playing the role of the *pontianak* responded to a public mobile studio set up in the Arts For Grabs market in Kuala Lumpur. Many of them are well known activists and artists. The series includes *Ibu or the Beast*, *The Flaming Womb* and *A Leaf in the Storm*.



Yee I-Lann, "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate" series, 'Ibu or Beast', 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, 61 x 205 cm, edition of 8 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

The titled of *Ibu or the Beast* references an essay by Saskia Wieringa entitled "IBU OR THE BEAST: Gender Interests in Two Women's Organizations", which talks about women's political involvement in Indonesia, and in particular the Gerwani feminist movement, at the time of the military coup in 1965. 'Ibu' is an affectionate term for 'mother' in Malaysia or 'woman' in Indonesia.

*A Leaf in the Storm* also refers to the Gerwani movement and life during Indonesia's 1965 coup, and is taken from a biographical account written by Iby Marni "I Am a Leaf in the Storm", in which she talks about her political beliefs and her involvement with the movement.



Yee I-Lann, "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate" series, 'A Leaf in the Storm', 2016, Giclee print on Hahnemühle PhotoRag© paper, 61 x 160 cm, edition of 8 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

The final photograph, *The Flaming Womb*, refers to one of the artist's favourite books, written by Barbara Andaya, which describes the history of women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

Quoted in the exhibition press release, Yee says about the *pontianak*:

*The pontianak continues to haunt us in 21st century patriarchal Southeast Asia. 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.*

**C. A. Xuan Mai Ardia**