



'Fluid World' cover

**REVIEW // YEE I-LANN : Fluid World**  
*Monograph review by Dr. Anne Kirker.*



SULU STORIES 'High Noon'

There seems to be a turn in the tide regarding the publishing of books on contemporary Asian photographers. While these practitioners are now regularly included in survey publications (accompanying international biennales and triennials, for example) there is little “out there” for tracing an artist’s practice across time. The monographs that have mostly appeared, have concentrated on “big names”, Japanese photographers Hiroshi Sugimoto and Yasumasa Morimura, for instance, at the exclusion of other practitioners working in Japan and elsewhere in the region. It is true that Song Dong from China and Manit Sriwanichpoom from Thailand have had partial survey books devoted to them and Malaysian/Australian Simryn Gill has

recently been treated to a catalogue covering a comprehensive show on her at Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, but that is all I can readily think of. Mostly photographers whose upbringing has been Euro-American are those favoured with substantial books devoted to them alone.

That is why it was such a joy to see a full – page advertisement in **Flash Art** (February 2009) of Yee I-Lann's *Song of the Keris* from her 2005 photographic series 'Sulu Stories'. It had been placed by Primo Marell Gallery in Milan, used to showcase its commitment to Contemporary Southeast Asian artists. Then in late 2010, Valentine Willie Fine Art, in conjunction with Malaysia's Rogue Art published 'Fluid World', which through 170 pages of excellent essays and full-page colour illustrations traced the work of mid-career artist Yee I-Lann.

While I have spent time in Kuala Lumpur during the past decade, I have never fully appreciated the complexity of Malaysia's distinctive cultures. And aside from the "Anwar affair", this territory hardly registers in the press in Australia as being socially and politically complex and at times contested within its borders. That is why the reader of conversations with Yee on "identity" and "place" published in 'Fluid World' are so revealing of not only the constructed nature of her imagery but by extension of Sabah (where she grew up), and of Malaysia as a whole (where Malay, Chinese and Indian co-exist). She is herself a cross-cultural individual having a white New Zealander mother and a Sino-Kadazan father. Furthermore, she took her art school training in Australia and from time to time returns here.

Therefore not surprisingly, Yee works with digitally manipulated photographs, and more recently photo-mediated batiks, that construct her multi-cultural identity in relation to the globalised world. Her memories of Sulu (the land opposite where she grew up) are realised through seascapes peopled with men and women in traditional dress, and through animals that evoke ancient legends as well as colonial infiltration. The surreal juxtapositions of local and colonial customs in these 2005 'Sulu Stories' photographs came to prominence in the following year's Singapore Biennale. However, earlier, in 1999 she represented Malaysia in the third APT in Brisbane with her 'Malaysian Vintage' portraits of 1997.

'Fluid World' is an apt title for this artist as Yee has also freely involved herself with work that is hybrid in the multi-media sense. For instance, this book addresses Yee's involvement in the late 1990s and early 2000s with The Substation in Singapore through her collaborative installations. One was with labDNA called 'BUY'. Here she explains, "In October 2001 Singapore was at the height of their worst-ever recession. We wanted to make a project that addressed the culture of consumption and the consumption of culture." Rather than photographs, Yee and her collaborators constructed an environment of hanging white plastic bags with the word "consumption" printed on each. A sound-track of street sounds infused the space.



'A Rousing Account of Migration in the Language of the Sea'



'Kopivosian'

Yee's 'Kinabalu Series' (2007) of constructed digital photographs in colour once again shows how the artist both engages with the socio-political realities of the moment with memories of the past, in connection with Malaysia and its near neighbours. Here Sabah's landscape is articulated through the placement of various familiar "characters" posed going about their daily affairs in front of Mount Kinabalu, the only fixture in a rapidly changing scenario for this particular place. To my mind, this artist's passionate engagement with the impact of competing interests in the region she lives in

born out most persuasively, and with highly original artistic flair, in her 'The Orang Besar Series' of 2010. The sarong-sized cloths with their crackled batik-like surfaces are presented towards the end of the book, one work per double spread. Imbedded in the web of these hairline cracks are C-type prints of a turbulent sea where men carry on their shoulders a mass of other men, topped by one holding an umbrella. These composite figures stand for the Orang Besar, or Big Person, a common term in the Southeast Asian archipelago to denote a person of elite socio-political-economic standing in the community.

For countries that have a history of maritime trade, the sea horizon has been a constant *leitmotif*. That is why it dominates Type C photographs (also from last year) that comprise the water buffalo battling for space and survival in works such as the triptych titled *a rousing account of migration in the language of the sea*.

In summary, I urge those readers interested in contemporary culture and identity as much as photography to get hold of a copy of "Fluid World". You will find the Introduction by Beverly Yong especially informative as much as you will the writings of Yee I-Lann and others.

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*YEE I-LANN : Fluid World*

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e-mail: info@vwfa.net

Dr. Anne Kirker is an independent art consultant, curator and writer. She held senior curatorial positions at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane from 1988 to 2006 following work at major art museums in New Zealand as a curator specialising in "works on paper". Currently she has a specific interest in artists from Southeast Asia who operate in a cross-cultural manner.

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