

## Press

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## Rolling out the Tikar



A CONVERSATION WITH YEE I-LANN

Tikar-A Gagah (detail), 2019, split bamboo weave, black natural dye, and stitched bamboo weave (pandanus weave and commercial chemical dye on the reverse side), created with assistance from Keringau and Palau Ormabel weavers, 2.5m x 15m. Courtesy the National Gallery Singapore.

BY BEVERLY YONG



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Expanding from her own locus and cultural politics, Yee I-Lann unpacks and shifts understandings of places and histories through her artistic practice. In Kuala Lumpur, over roughly 25 years, she became an active participant in the film industry, punk rock scene, art world, as well as a vocal activist for environmental and sociopolitical issues. At the end of 2016, she returned from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, her birthplace, where she began collaborating with weavers from the Sulu Sea and the Sabah interior, exploring how traditional and contemporary concepts and media might engage, expand, and change the world. In November 2019, she installed a 15-meter-long, double-sided woven mat, *Tikar-A-Gagah* (2019), at the National Gallery Singapore, and held an exhibition of weavings, “ZIGAZIG ahl,” at Silverlens Gallery in Manila. I sat down with the artist to discuss her multifarious work and her journey to “find her mat.”

How would you like to be described as an artist?

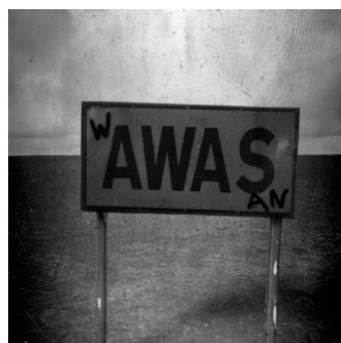
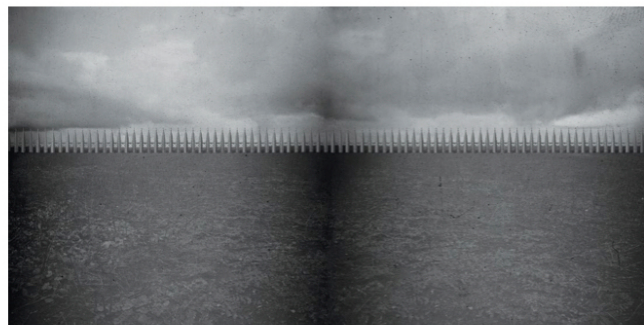
Relevant, multifaceted, a little hard to define, and engaged with the places that I’ve lived in. I’ve always liked the idea of having my finger on some kind of pulse. I hope to be part of communities as an active agent. Whatever you do as an artist helps enable and continue conversations. I don’t see the role of artists as isolated.

You’ve worked across all types of media, from drawings to text, site-specific installations, and tableware, but for the past 15 years or so you’ve been thought of as a photomedia artist. How did you come to focus on photomedia?

I studied photography and cinematography in art school but I never studied the camera itself. I was the queen of the dark room, painting with the chemical process. I love the weight of a found photograph and its baggage so I’ve also worked a lot with photographic objects, whether from an archive or a family album. Eventually I moved my photography-manipulation process from the darkroom to Photoshop.

What’s the power of the photographic object?

Archives are always laden in some manner. The act of making a collection of images in itself often illustrates something, and the image is never innocent. I enjoy the process of unearthing and trying to unpack photographs. Because there are so many images in the world, I think of it like the game Tetris, where you have these multiple components falling and you make an image or a shape with the pieces.



Top: *Fencing*, 2003, from the *Horizon Series*, digital C-type print, 45.5 × 91 cm. Bottom: *Wawasan*, 2003, from the *Horizon Series*, digital C-type print, 45.5 × 45.5 cm. Both courtesy the artist.

The black-and-white *Horizon Series* (2003) was the first instance of your transposing various components onto a landscape, creating a narrative using found images. This was further developed in *Sulu Stories* (2005). Perhaps you could talk about these early photomedia series to illustrate your approach.

*Horizon* was my personal reaction to the news that Mahathir Mohamad was going to retire in 2003. He was the only prime minister I, or anyone of my generation, had really known. A number of his policies and actions during his first tenure were deeply destructive. He exacerbated race politics, nurtured corruption, manipulated the social demographics of Sabah for political ends, and utilized draconian means to suppress dissent. At the same time, his *Wawasan* (Vision) 2020 gave young Malaysians such as myself a directive. We felt we were part of a collective movement going forward.

After hearing his retirement announcement, I happened to visit the Australian desert. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the horizon. The work became about a new horizon, of a Malaysia post-Mahathir. We don’t see the horizon in Malaysia because we don’t have open spaces and props are used to block our view, for example the KLCC twin towers—a symbol of national prosperity and progress, lulling us into a false sense of security. So in one of the compositions, I multiplied the towers. They appear like a fence, pinning down our horizon. In another image, I incorporated a signboard for danger, “AWAS,” graffitied to say “WAWASAN,” interplaying the ideas of vision and threat.

*Sulu Stories* came about because I wanted to start exploring the Sulu Sea region between east Malaysia and the southern Philippines. But because it was a closed zone, I could only photograph the Sulu Sea from the coast. Then I discovered Manila’s Filipino

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Heritage Library, and so I entered Sulu through the historic viewpoints of Spanish monks, American naval surveyors, and early anthropologists—visiting outsiders. In the resulting images of *Sulu Stories*, the horizon line lies between countries, where objects from across time are placed together, telling tales.

In recent years I've become increasingly aware of the camera as having this intrinsic colonial nature, so I've tried to decolonize the camera. For example, with my recent *tikar* (mats) project, I've given the camera to the communities I work with and they've documented the process of our collaboration. I relinquished that role to them.



How did you start working with *tikar*? It's very different from your previous work with photomedia, which is about the nature of images.

For most of my adult life, I've been involved in activism and many of my friends are activists. By late 2016, in the lead-up to the 14th general election, the political noise in Kuala Lumpur had reached fever pitch and I felt myself losing the ability to think and participate. I decided to come back to Kota Kinabalu.

Despite the euphoria surrounding the change in government, the 2018 election ended up being disheartening for me because of election disputes in Sabah. I immediately felt politicking was going to get in the way of reform. It made me realize that only communities of people could lift each other up. I needed community and thought that maybe communities needed me.

I was looking at old photographs of my Kadazan grandmother, Dorothea Bungal Lunjaim, who wove mats with bundusan plants, which I can't find despite repeated attempts. In my need for community, to become grounded, I started gravitating toward the mat as a mnemonic device—a portal to stories, behavioral differences, architectural environments, and shared memories. When you roll out a mat, it demarcates a space that invites communal gathering, where everyone sits together on the same level. *Tikar* are also feminine in nature, linked with domestic economies and spaces, families, and heritage. My interest grew from there.

Top: *Barangay*, 2005, from the *Sulu Stories* series, digital C-type print, 61 × 183 cm. Bottom: *The Archipelago*, 2005, from the *Sulu Stories* series, digital C-type print, 61 × 183 cm. Both courtesy the artist.

How did you identify the communities you collaborated with to create the *tikar*?

It was important for me to work with a land community and a sea community to represent Sabah's different Indigenous peoples, but also to reflect Southeast Asia generally.

I met the Pulau Omadal community through a conference of Sama Bajau ethnic groups in 2018. Pulau Omadal is in the Sulu Sea near Semporna. My main collaborator, Kak Roziah, is Bajau Tempatan, who are a land-based island people with Malaysian citizenship and identity cards, but we work mostly with the semi-nomadic Bajau Sama di Laut who are based in a water village off the island and don't have paper identities, though they are



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rich in cultural identity. Both groups make crafts using essentially the same weave traditions and patterns.

I also work with a big craft development center run by the Sabah Foundation in Keningau, one of the main inland districts in Sabah. The weaving culture there is dominated by Dusun Murut weavers from surrounding villages. I work with the head of the department, Julitah Kulinting.

One group is physically at the border, stateless; and the other group is at the epicenter of Sabah crafts.



What was the first mat you made together with the Keningau and Omdal communities?

We made two separate mats both featuring the words "Tanah & Air." *Tanah* means "earth," *air* means "water." *Tanahairku* means "my homeland" and is the name of Sabah's state anthem. In Sabah, we've had centuries of animosity between the land peoples and the sea peoples, which continues today. This work emphasizes that both are equally important to our homeland.

A big part of the process has been learning what weaving can or cannot do. I don't participate in the actual weaving myself because I'm not skilled enough.

*Tanahairku #1, 2018, split bamboo pus weave with kayu tuber black natural dye and clear PVC glue, created with assistance from Keningau weavers, 160 x 250 cm. Courtesy the artist.*

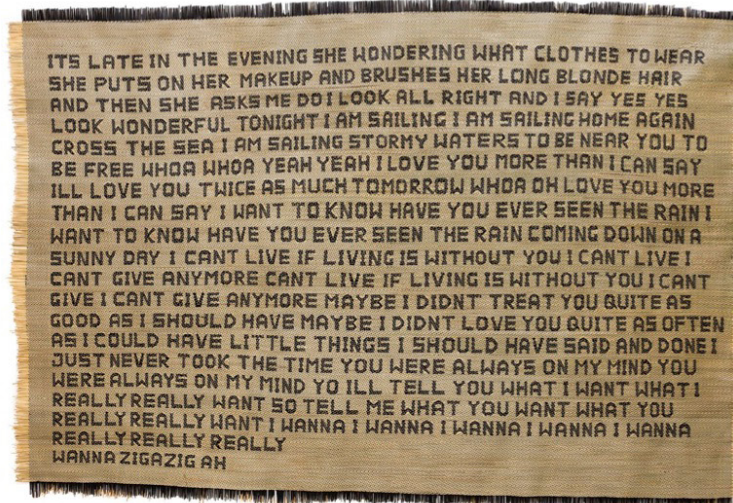
What are some of the differences between the aesthetics and processes of the two groups?

They have very different weaving styles. The pandanus used by the Omdal community is soft, the bamboo used in Keningau is stiffer. Neither group can weave with the other's material.

On Omdal, they use a counting process, and patterns for traditional designs are passed on from mother to daughter. They start the weave from the center and work outward toward an overall pattern. In order for them to weave a design that I invent, I have to derive the counting systems from existing formats.

They're drawn to these really vibrant colors they've been using since the 1960s, created with a commercial chemical dye. You very rarely see natural dyes in the Bajau mats.

In Keningau, they usually use the natural color of the split bamboo, or a black pigment, made from a mixture of tree sap and soot. The Dusun Murut use the + and x weave type, like most land-based Indigenous communities. Typically, there is a repeated motif that begins at the edge.



*whoa whoa yeah yeah, 2019, split bamboo pus weave, black natural dye, and matt sealant, created with assistance from Keningau weavers, 221 x 317.5 cm. Courtesy Silverlens Gallery, Manila.*



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### Can you tell us more about the motifs and designs you have used on the mats you've made so far?

Beyond exploring domestic space, elements such as the common ceiling fan or louvre window speak of sensory conditions that locate memories and stories, and act as signifiers for shared experience. This notion of the familiar is important to me, and is connected, in my mind, with political kitsch. Two influential texts in my life have been Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "The Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986). Kundera argues that political kitsch is a way to emotionally move a mass of people toward a direction. Vision 2020 is a kind of political kitsch. But how does an artist use such tools for their own ends? I'm drawing on this idea of political kitsch alongside personal memories, mnemonic devices, space, and architecture.

There are two bamboo mats woven with song lyrics, *hello from the outside* (2019), and *whoa whoa yeah yeah* (2019), which is where the title of my solo show "ZIGAZIG ah!" came from. The lyrics are from a survey of the English-language karaoke favorites you hear on the jetty, over rice wine, all over the place in Sabah. When reading this text, you can't help but sing them in your mind, thus providing a musical soundtrack. As much as these works are derived from Indigenous cultures, the weavers and weavings exist on a global plane alongside everything else, not in some isolated sanctum.

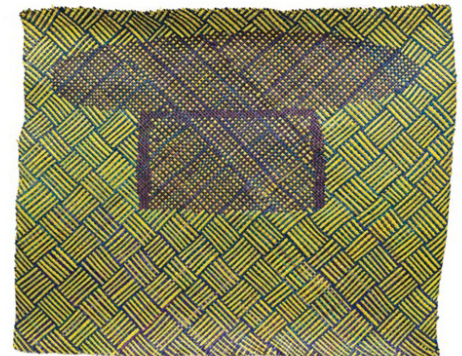
The *Nantuapan* motif is one of the few traditional motifs I've used. The circle in the middle represents the Dusun Murut rice-wine jar with people from all directions meeting around it. It describes the act of *aramaitii*, a social concept in Dusun Murut thinking, where people are invited to come together over rice wine as a form of collective therapy. It's seen under the fan in the center of *Tikar-A-Gagah* on the bamboo side of the work.

Kak Julitah, Lilli, Shahrizan, and I also invented an entirely new weave together. It's not a repeated motif or pattern, but a kind of serialized action—you keep going. No two square inches are going to be the same. It meanders. We named it *mansau ansau* in the Dusun language, which means to walk and walk, or to keep journeying without knowing where you're headed. This is being used as the base background for many of the bamboo works.

*Tikar-A-Gagah's* pandanus side is bookended with Sama di Laut motifs used by the Omadal weavers—the *nikeutan* (*udang besar* or lobster) and the *sambulayang* (the *lepa lepa*, or houseboat, sail). In the middle is my design of lines representing movements to match the *mansau ansau*—they're like the planks between stilt houses, or sea routes, traveling, fluid, multidimensional, and also about the *tikar* as a portal.



*Tikar Meja 32*, 2018–19, Bajau Sama di Laut pandanus weave with commercial chemical dye and matt sealant, created with assistance from Pulau Omadal weavers, 122 × 147 cm. Courtesy Silverlens Gallery, Manila.



*Tikar Meja 25*, 2018–19, Bajau Sama di Laut pandanus weave with commercial chemical dye and matt sealant, created with assistance from Pulau Omadal weavers, 87 × 106 cm. Courtesy Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

### With the Omadal weavers, you've made *Tikar Meja* (2019), a series of mats featuring images of tables. Why the table?

We need to go back to two works, *Picturing Power* and *Tabled* (both 2013). *Picturing Power* came about during a workshop led by critic Alex Supartono at Yogyakarta's Langgeng Art Foundation, when we were looking at old photographs of the sugarcane industry in Java under colonial rule. I homed in on general colonial representations of administration—map-making, surveying, photography, and the table. *Picturing Power* is about the violence of administration—I tell you what your land is, I tell you what your history is, I tell you who you are. The series ends with a native looking at another native through a theodolite, evoking how we impose learned colonial ways on ourselves.

At around the same time I was invited to take part in the show "Suspended Histories" curated by Thomas Berghuis at Amsterdam's Museum Van Loon, which was formerly the family home of the Dutch East India Trading Company's founders. I was interested in the table in the dining room because heads of state and corporate powerbrokers still hire this venue for private functions, which all happen under the gaze of the family's portraits.



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These paintings and the surrounding blue-and-white porcelain period pieces were like ghosts, and it made me think of us as zombies today—products of history. For *Tabled*, I made blue-and-white ceramic plates showing images of people I photographed walking around the streets of Indonesia and Malaysia. The zombies of the now meet the ghosts of the past at the table.

The table in *Tikar Meja* represents colonial and contemporary powers, official histories, education systems, censuses, trade treaties, passports, and administrative governments. The word for table in Malay is *meja*, in Tagalog it's *mesa*, both from the Portuguese and Spanish *mesa*—that's a neat etymological illustration of colonial power. I also associate the symbol with patriarchal power, which either invites or excludes you from the table. The mat, by comparison, is egalitarian, democratic. It's referred to in different languages by a range of names with various roots—*tikar*, *tikam*, *tepo*, *banig*. The motifs found in the woven mat also contain vernacular meanings. In precolonial Southeast Asia, we did not have tables. Only sultans sat on table-like elevated platforms. People communed on the ground, on the woven mat. I am interested in this behavioral and architectural difference.

In "The Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction," Ursula K. Le Guin builds on writer Elizabeth Fisher's idea that humanity's first tools weren't weapons but rather containers, suggesting that, to address the Anthropocene, we must "carrier-bag" on a mat together to find solutions—not at the patriarchal table. *Tikar Meja* juxtaposes colonial, patriarchal power with feminine Indigenous power.

I'd like to understand more about your process with the weavers. How much did you control the image and design of the mats for *Tikar Meja*?

Initially, I issued instructions to the weavers—this kind of shape, this table. But I realized I wasn't being collaborative, not trusting their instincts and not learning what I might find through them, so I let go. When they were making their own choices, it became easier and more enjoyable, and they would come up with interesting ideas.

I asked the kids if they'd like to do a survey of the tables on the island, and their drawings provided some of the table designs for the mats. They are about to make a documentary about the tables they found.

Was it a similar situation in Keningau?

Keningau is different in that many of the weavers have their own private businesses and are used to people commissioning large orders for the tourist market. My feeling is that, because they're so professional, they're also bored. I wanted to know what would happen if we really tried to innovate with their amazing skills. At every single test, they thought we couldn't do it, and I would say, come, let's just play and see what happens. And it happens. We're still finding out what we might be able to do.



Pulau Omdal weavers with the in-progress *Tikar-A-Gagah* (2019) at Sama di Laut water village. Courtesy the artist.



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So then what happens to these craft aesthetics and materials when they are shown in contemporary art contexts?

I hope they join conversations. In the last few months, two of the oldest cave paintings in the world have been discovered in Sulawesi, and Kalimantan on Borneo. The 44,000-year-old cave paintings depict *kerbau* (water buffalo). My project company is called Kerbauworks, and I celebrate the *kerbau* in my own practice. I see the significance of the buffalo in our society while 44,000 years ago someone else did too. Does that not illustrate a continuity in what is important? How do we use that in the age of climate change? People who are not at the table but on the mat need to start directing and be listened to, especially in tipping-point geographies. The Coral Triangle is home to 76 percent of the world's coral species, and Borneo has the oldest rainforest in the world. Issues of ecology and sustainable incomes are linked. When a woman can make a good livelihood from her weaving, she doesn't need to fish in the Coral Triangle. I think art can change the world—specifically through these means of engaging and empowering communities, improving perceived self-worth, changing attitudes, and valuing the natural world and ancient storytelling.

We haven't given due regard to what we can learn from traditional media, aesthetics, concepts, and the communities that they come from. We have to engage with people, look at knowledge production with broader perspectives, and find common languages.

What's the difference between an emoji and a motif? Some motifs really are sacred and shouldn't be used, but other ancient, traditional motifs functioned like emojis and are as precious as emojis are to us. Which is why I place all of this in contemporary art. I'm hoping to piece together different vocabularies that encourage issues to speak for themselves.



Yee I-Lann (center) with her collaborators (left to right, back to front): Kak Runggu, Kak Ebbuh, Kak Nurbaya, Makcik Bilung, Kak Sulman, Kak Budi, Kak Bagai, Makcik Burah, Kak Sanah, Kak Roziah, Kak Endik. Courtesy the artist.

Tell us about *Tikar-A-Gagah* at the National Gallery Singapore. How did you approach this commission?

I wanted the work to locate the National Gallery Singapore in Southeast Asia. The goal was to highlight an Indigenous medium such that the Indigenous histories of the region were reflected. Hence the two-sided *Tikar-A-Gagah*, made with the Keningau inland weavers on one side, and the Pulau Omdal sea-based weavers on the other.

At the gallery, there is a cleaner from Semporna who I'm told almost cried when she saw herself represented via the work. Among a group of visiting Good Shepherd sisters were a number who used to be weavers in Keningau. To me that's key. You're reflected. You're important. Your people add to our visual culture, knowledge, and languages. We need to recognize that it is (perceived) peripheries that give shape to political and cultural centers.

*Gagah* in Malay means "valiant." It is about a masculine bigness. I'm sharing this word with female crafters working in a traditional medium. Can't a woman be valiant?

Your practice has made quite a turn. In your photomedia works there is always a certain antagonism. For example, in *Sulu Stories* and *Picturing Power*, you use a deliberately ethnographic or colonial gaze in a political way. Has working with weaving communities changed your own way of working?

There's a lot of letting other important things come into play beyond the final art product. For example, working with Sabah Parks on replanting pandanus plants along denuded coastlines, or the female weavers no longer having to fish at sea, or bringing innovation to a tired craft industry that has pandered to tourists. All these things make the project bigger and that's become an important consideration in my art-making.

In *Sulu Stories* and other earlier works, the image stems from my position and is constructed based on a particular perspective: the vanishing point is on the horizon line. With these collaborative works, I am no longer the center. The point of view does not come just from me. It has also become about letting go and no longer trying to pin down the teasing horizon line. *Mansau ansau*—we're on a new journey exploring and working together, freed from bound perspectives, going with the flow, ready to roll out and share our *tikar*.