



Master weavers preparing their warp for weaving.

PHOTO: TANOM

TEXT: REENA DEVI

Rise of Indigenous Art

From artists in Malaysia and Singapore collaborating with indigenous communities to ancient craft-making inspiring a social enterprise, ecological sustainability and indigenous cultures are becoming increasingly resonant.



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This September, London's internationally renowned museum, Tate, announced the appointment of two new curators, Marleen Boschen and Kimberly Moulton, who specialise in art and ecology as well as First Nations and Indigenous art, respectively.

Across the pond, museums in the United States put on exhibitions showcasing indigenous art through works by emerging and established artists. For one, the famous Whitney in New York held the city's first retrospective exhibition of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's artwork, an artist from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

Closer to home, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts organised its latest edition of the Southeast Asian Arts Forum 2023, Sustainability 2.0: Coding The World That Will Remake Itself.

The hybrid forum ran from August 3 and 4, 2023, featuring artists and speakers across the region, such as Wen Di Sia, a Malaysian writer and researcher who launched the Gerimis Art Project in 2018, an artistic and archiving collective co-producing artworks and cultural content with indigenous Malaysian (Orang Asli) artists and artisans.

COLLABORATING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Sia said she works with key community members who are "already leading their own efforts to recognise, restore, and preserve their arts, culture, and traditions" in several villages across various states, such as the Seletar in Johor, Temuan in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, Mah Meri in Selangor, Semai in Pahang and Perak, Temiar in Perak, and Batek in Pahang.

"The key learning point is putting aside all my understanding of how the world works (from what school and society taught me) and living with the Orang Asli and understanding how they



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PHOTOS 01:04 TANOTI, (WEN DI JIA & 02) NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

"Indigenous communities hold with them precious wisdom that could be applied in the modern or contemporary world."

JACQUELINE FONG, OWNER OF TANOTI, A SARAWAK-BASED SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

01 Pua Kumbu Weavers Undergoing the Ngar Threads Mordanting Ritual (Rumah Gare, Ulu Kapit).

02 An indigenous man with a flower arrangement in a house built for the shaman's spirit.

03 Portrait of artist Wen Di Sia.

04 Songket weavers at Tanoti House.

or books, the 31-year-old was compelled to simply sit and listen to their stories and follow them on their daily activities like gathering natural produce, planting in their kebun, or just swimming in the river.

"The most memorable experience is getting a nickname in the village because I am there so often and also because I would leave for a while when I went back to my life in the city, so they gave me a name that meant 'longing' when I was gone," she added.

ART BORNE FROM ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

Sia is also working as a co-artist and researcher on a project exploring ecological grief by UK-based artist Youngsook Choi, titled "In Every Bite of The Emperor", supported by Heart of Glass UK, Arts Council England, and British Council Malaysia.

One of the questions posed by the project during the ongoing climate crisis is: How do we — through a process of grieving, gathering, storytelling, collective healing, and solidarity — imagine new ways to recover our lost connections and move towards a shared future?

Her attempt to answer this question led to a digital publication calling for everyone, be it individuals, state agencies, or corporates, "to start listening to our indigenous people and their traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom, as the solutions to the crisis that our planet is facing are within their practices."

Jacqueline Fong, owner of Tanoti, a Sarawak-based social enterprise working to preserve the ancient Malaysian skill of songket weaving, agreed.



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PHOTOS SYAHMIN HUDA & NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

“Indigenous communities hold with them precious wisdom that could be applied in the modern or contemporary world. For instance, the way weaves are executed has contributed to many modern day applications — from construction to medicine to fashion and interior design; the many methods of food preparation have contributed to how kitchens of today are built. Indigenous practices are fully aligned with the environment, as they have allowed populations to co-exist with nature for millennia,” she explained.

Sarawak has a higher population of indigenous groups compared to immigrant communities, yet many of its ethnic groups are well established in urban settings already. This is one of the reasons Fong treasures the work she does at Tanoti, as it allows her to “venture into very remote areas of Sarawak to work on crafts with communities that still tap resources from the rainforest”.

“I find each trip into these areas and each visit very life-enriching as I extract more nuggets of knowledge to understand their social, economic, and cultural capital,” she said.

THE APPEAL OF THE PAST

While Fong observed that there is

05 Syahmin Huda’s artwork titled *Perubahan Pasang Surut* is inspired by our relationship with the sea.

06 A reengineered river in Perak.

07 Southeast Asian Arts Forum 2023.

enhanced interest in indigenous cultures, artists, and artisans in Southeast Asia these few years, Syahmin Huda, a 23-year-old Singaporean artist, noted that there is an increasing curiosity, specifically amongst the younger generation of Southeast Asian artists and arts practitioners.

Syahmin recently showcased a video work at the Southeast Asian Arts Forum 2023 titled *Both Dead and Alive*, a re-imagination of our shared relationship with the sea via sequences alluding to notions of destruction and renewal.

“Growing up in an urban city where constant changes in our environment have become normalised, I do believe many sacred traditions or esoteric beliefs existing in these spaces have been forgotten. As a result, a huge part

of my practice does involve researching the past and present of indigenous cultures and communities,” she said.

On the topic of the proliferation of artists and curators exploring indigenous art and ecology, Dr Bridget Tracy Tan, director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Arts and Art Galleries at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, attributed the inescapable onslaught of technology in our daily lives as a possible factor.

“We live in a world where we think our whole lives are on the internet and in cities with shopping malls, public transport, and paved roads. More often than not, we are compelled to acknowledge that there is so much of life and culture that remains vitally in the spaces, the lands, and the practices of those who we know less or little about,” she said.

“Beyond how we look at art practices, traditions, and education in the arts, the arts are about people, and people are relevant. There is a truth to this that relates to how we have always sustained ourselves and our humanity; the viability of the living landscape and all its resources, through the arts and through cultural connections. And how we can actively nurture that for generations to come,” Tan added. ㊦



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