

## YEE I-LANN: CITIZEN OF THE FLUID WORLD

by Beverly Yong

[Editorial introduction to *Yee I-Lann: Fluid World*, Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art 2010]

On the cover of this book is an image of the Sulu Sea, from Yee I-Lann's series *Sulu Stories*. It could be the setting of *Barangay*, as the sun rises or falls behind an archipelago of forgotten islands in a time before histories began to be written, as two boatmen on the rim of a jar row out towards us. It could be the watery shallows of *Borderline*, cut by a fence of cement markers stretching to the horizon, through which a green-back turtle swims back towards her birthplace to lay the eggs of the next generation.

In these, as in many of Yee I-Lann's works, there prevails a sense of time and place, both powerful and indeterminate, as if we are caught in the thick of a familiar narrative we cannot quite locate.

Yee's primary medium is photography, or more precisely photographic imagery which she employs as elements of visual text, re-contextualised, stitched together, layered as signifiers of memory, landscape, personal and social histories, emotional and political affiliations. Isobel Crombie writes eloquently on Yee's photomedia practice in the following essay, of how she "uses the ambivalences of the photographic language to address the hybrid nature of contemporary life and, in the process, brings our attention to complex ideas of identity and place".

In Yee's work, the contemporary consciousness is conceived as hybrid, fluid, and permeable. Born in Sabah in East Malaysia to mixed parentage, a Eurasian, Yee grew up in Sabah and Australia, moving to the developing metropolis of Kuala Lumpur to work—as an artist, a production designer in film, and someone actively involved in the cultural fringe. Much of her work springs from a desire to understand and map her own broad cultural consciousness, pursuing a strategy of gathering information, questioning, and learning, beyond the simply reflexive. If to date it has focused on local, or at most regional, subject matter, its impetus has always been to seek and expose resonances, commonalities, to achieve a fluency across perceived cultural differences, both within and between communities. Hence Yee's choice of the photographic image—found, excavated, highlighted, captured, as a universally readable form of visual language, and of other objects and materials that speak easily to mass experience, as well as the essentially narrative impulse of her work. Her aesthetics and visual strategies may at times seem similar to those of a narrative painter, yet they are also geared towards a satellite television generation, often leaning on the pervasiveness of global popular cultural phenomena.

The visual immediacy of Yee's art works belies the complexity of the narratives they contain and the issues that they raise. Over the past five years, her major series have been motivated by and grounded in extensive reading on the cultural histories of Malaysia and Southeast Asia, and are embedded with corollary references and

tensions. Yee's work can engage with viewers on a number of different levels, or rather, at varying degrees of distance. It speaks most passionately to the people of her own country, of the power of a communal consciousness and memory, and of the urgency of self-understanding in a real-life context in which personal faith and culture are deeply polarized and exploited as political commodities, and history is a bugbear. It has explored the network of a Southeast Asian region in which trade and migration have historically created an open and fertile multi-culturalism and strategies of co-existence, well before modern national boundaries and globalization, and perhaps reaches out to a revived sense of regional fraternity. The exoticism of its subject matter may charm the "outsider", but this very flirtation invites a reevaluation of inter-cultural, hegemonic-peripheral relationship dynamics, and asks for a deeper mutual engagement—one that considers colonial histories and the crossover of meanings, as well as the possibility of a shared imaginative consciousness.

An important factor of Yee's work is how and where we locate ourselves in relation to it. Whether in the form of a manipulated image or a site-specific installation, our complicity and the emotional and cultural baggage we bring with us are key in decoding or drawing out the significances of its many-layered narratives. The signs, references and texts and the very aesthetics of Yee's works all provide triggers for us to pull. Story and temperament are means to engage our empathy. The dialogue offered is open-ended, questioning rather than confrontational or coy. The artist is always a participant in that dialogue, and the trajectory of her work in many ways a process of locating herself and her own "baggage" within the cultural scope of her subject matter.

*Fluid World* is presented as a storybook of Yee's work over the past 17 years, charting the narratives she has developed in its exploratory course. It also introduces deeper readings and contextualisations from other disciplines of the issues raised in these narratives, and includes the artist's own glossary of the culturally specific terms and motifs she uses, for the reader and viewer seeking a greater understanding of the territory.

The book begins with a series of photomedia works made during Yee's time in Australia, which were exhibited as part of a first two-person show in Adelaide after graduation<sup>1</sup>. *Snapshot I, II and III* (1993) are blown-up images of Yee's cousins in Sabah, taken by her father, stuck on with sellotape, collaged with the backside of other family photos with story-telling captions, painted around with housepaint. These early works explore the emotional currency of the snapshot, as a record of personal story, and at the same time the international language of Kodak culture—from the flower in a girl's hair to a boy making the peace sign. Against the backdrop of Paul Keating's "big picture" of Australia as part of an Asia-Pacific neighbourhood,<sup>2</sup> these works by an Asian national in an Australian system also raise questions of otherness and sameness.

The photographic portrait recurs time and again in Yee's work as an important point of dialogue, in different guises, whether as a literal interface for addressing notions of identity and cultural otherness or as a simple expression of empathy. *Malaysian Vintage* (1997), a work shown at the 3rd Asia-Pacific Triennial<sup>3</sup>, juxtaposes four found

images—“Malay”, “Chinese”, “Indian” stereotype the three major ethnic groups that dominate the Malaysian population, and the “Alien” other <sup>4</sup>. Where is Yee here, is she an Alien? Huzir Sulaiman in his notes to the catalogue writes that:

“To decode [Yee’s] work one must come to terms with the fact that, for all Malaysians, the act of seeing itself is fraught with significance. As a result of four decades of government policies that ostensibly promote racial harmony while effectively perpetuating the British colonial strategy of divide and rule, to look at the world through Malaysian eyes is to see a world segregated, compartmentalised, and stratified by ethnicity and nationality. In Malaysia, the human image is arguably less inflected by considerations of gender and class than by those of racial identity... By using found photographs and illustrations and recontextualising them, Yee multiplies the number of times that this phenomenon of the charged Malaysian gaze comes into play”<sup>5</sup>.

This broad assessment of Yee’s local context — a nation in perpetual crisis about its identity, which at the same time advertises its multi-culturalism <sup>6</sup>, might help to set the stage for any outside viewer.

Much of the artist’s early work on her return to Malaysia from Australia in the 90s is intensely reflexive, if playful, dipping in and out of a plethora of media —aside from photographic media, also printmaking, painting, found paintings, found objects, embroidery, and text. A frankly reluctant start in a career as an artist is made from very personal points of reference, asking basic questions like “where do I belong, what category do I fit into, what action or stance do I take in relation to what is going on around me?” It cleaves immediately to the popular aesthetics of mass culture, from the party Polaroid to commercial goldfish paintings to the fax and the X-Ray, and plays off childhood memory, the fairytale, personal stories, often making use of intimate, diary entry-like text in scrawled handwriting, old-fashioned type or ink-block printing, an attempt perhaps to locate the “me” within the “we”, or vice versa, to locate the personal within its social fabric. The *Game Series* and *Apathy* (both 1997) both centre on text, and form the core of a first two- man show in Kuala Lumpur called *Con+Fuse*.<sup>7</sup> The cynicism and violent satire of these two works are never seen again in later works, but even here they are offset by a tiny artist’s book *C*, which homes in on a portrait of Bajau Laut children<sup>8</sup> from off the coast of Sabah, a simple visual treatise on innocence and the human gaze. In a sense the three works posit three possible approaches to a dangerous world of confusing signifiers — apathy, caution and engagement.

Yee’s early years in Kuala Lumpur were, however, marked by the massive change in political consciousness brought on by the Anwar crisis,<sup>9</sup> which for Yee, as she says in her interview with Huzir Sulaiman, led to “a national loss of innocence, myself included”. In her work as part of *labDNA*, a collaboration with architect Nani Kahar, we see the artist turn activist, a willful voice in a new movement for change. Early *labDNA* projects ranged from rave parties to multimedia performances and art installations, mainly targeted at a young local urban audience. The *Spacebar* installation and event (1998) is a specific response to the sacking of the Deputy Prime Minister and the mass protest and judicial farce which followed.

Another labDNA project, *BUY* (2002), a plastic bag installation at The Substation in Singapore, uses disparate texts — advertising slogans, pop song lyrics, media buzzwords, sociological discourse to bring its audience face-to-face with the spectre of global cultural consumerism, and its impact on how we think about the world. The strategy is extended in *BUY ME* (2002), a handbag installation by Yee for ARCO '02 Madrid. This simple interfacing of “Third World” children, global popular culture, an audience of sophisticated European art-shoppers and Yee herself as an “Asian contemporary artist” brings into play the question of how meanings might be appropriated at different ends of a cultural spectrum, and not just in terms of the nature of contemporary material desire and consumption.

The discovery of an archive of photo studio portraits from the 1970s provides material for *Through Rose-Coloured Glasses* and *Malaysiana* (both 2002). If Yee has been looking for a place to belong, she finds it here in what was to become a poignant celebration of a shared communal history, of individuals and groups who have chosen to document themselves and the trajectory of their lives. The installation and series of photographs present a human history of a Malaysian generation, which might seem in spite of the political and social engineering, and historical erasure imposed on it. The sentimental lens of nostalgia pulls us back from and reframes our very different contemporary reality. This is also where Yee discovers the horizon line, in the common line of the tiled photo studio floor, in the birthday cake props and tropical beach backdrops that tied a people together in a shared context — an odd and accidental, somewhat kitsch horizon of hope, which finds its physical, tangible statement in the linoleum flooring of *Matching Patterns* (2002), lining the rooftop of a new cultural centre, the Singapore Esplanade, for its opening celebrations.

From this point, it would seem that Yee is ready to create the grand narratives that mark her later development as an artist, compelled to piece together the unheard, forgotten, glossed-over stories of her world. In 2003, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed resigns after 22 years in power. For Yee and her generation, this is the only Prime Minister they have ever known, and his regime, with all its achievements and failures, has very much shaped the nation as we know it today. *Horizon* (2003) attempts to capture a national consciousness at a crossroads, anxious or perhaps excited at the great unknown beyond it, yet seeking its comfort zone in the narrative written by its lost leader. Surreal and cinematic, the empty landscape is punctuated by iconic objects and more abstract symbols. The outsider tourist will recognize the twin towers lined up as a fence, or the dolls in national costume; all can identify with the metaphors for birth, growth, thirst, dilemma, or the phenomenon of low-cost housing. And is it only the “natives”, after all, who will understand the meaning of the warning signs? It is in *Horizon* that Yee first makes use of digital manipulation as a form of picture-making, or “painting” — here the horizon line becomes her canvas, a point of negotiation of what is possible or might be imagined.

We shift into a broader geography in *Sulu Stories* (2005), where that horizon line forms a fluid border. The Sulu Sea becomes a nexus through which shifting concepts of time,

place, history, identity power criss-cross to build a preliminary imaginative narrative of what an idea of what we call today Southeast Asia might represent to the contemporary consciousness. This series of work was enabled by a Goethe Institut exchange programme based on the notion of connectivity in Southeast Asia,<sup>10</sup> allowing Yee to spend time researching archival texts and images in Sabah and the Philippines, although entering the Sulu region itself was discouraged.<sup>11</sup> One of the artist's first steps was to photograph the Sulu Sea from Palawan in the Philippines and then from Sandakan in her native Sabah — at the outset *Sulu Stories* is an attempt to find her own geographical and historical connections to the region as a whole. Yee chooses deliberately to situate herself here, a place she cannot physically enter, in an arena which has a long experience of globalizing forces, through its history of trade, migration and colonization, and has negotiated constantly with a changing world within and without, “a zone of trade and transit, of cultural and social contact and transformation” where “pre-modern state boundaries were not fixed, religious identities were deep but fluid, and ethnicity was both important and subject to change.”<sup>12</sup>

Set against anthropologist Dave Lumenta's portrait of ASEAN today, and its limitations, *Sulu Stories* might be seen to represent, or even internalise, that original “fluid world”, a necessary and helpful construct in a more immediate reality so hostage to hegemonies both economic and political. *Sulu Stories'* dioramic narrative encompasses myths and legends about the making of polities, its compromises and excesses, from the Sultan of Sulu to white colonialism to the Marcoses, but it places them in a timeless continuum that also includes representations of a more human history, of connection, continuity and resistance. Perhaps *Sulu Stories* takes its inspiration from the worldview of the persisting sea-faring communities of Southeast Asia, like the Moken<sup>13</sup> who “understand the concept and function of contemporary political boundaries and borders” yet “have several conceptual levels of reality that orientate them towards seeing these boundaries as transient”,<sup>14</sup> for whom “on land and during the rainy season, time is a historical and ritual phenomenon; at sea, and during the dry season, time is mythical.”<sup>15</sup>

The engagement with history and constructions of place that begins with *Sulu Stories* in fact leads Yee back to address her own immediate roots, to notions of her homeland — Sabah, and its wider context of Malaysia. The *Kinabalu Series* (2007) is a mythographic homage to Sabah in three chapters, in which the dioramic format of *Horizon* and *Sulu Stories* gives way to full-blown painterly compositions that compound a powerful feeling of place and shifting historical time.

We enter a scenario of history being written. Yee's work has consistently held up a mirror to the social context and the community in which she operates, and it begins now to examine the systems in play. The question is no longer “where do I belong?” but rather “where and what is this place I/we belong to?”, “how do we look at the social and political forces that have shaped us?”. Central metaphors enter her narratives. Yee's humorous gathering of water buffalo, marginalized, obstinate creatures, breaking through traffic cones, with their soft, fixed gaze in the massive tarpaulin *Kerbau* (2007) takes on a political force in the wake of a series of mass

demonstrations staged in Kuala Lumpur in 2007,<sup>16</sup> symbolizing for many the unheard voice of the *rakyat*, the people.<sup>17</sup> The *kerbau* appears again in *Kopivosian* in the *Kinabalu Series*, a thinly disguised characterization of the artist herself, perhaps, standing square in the avenues of power, asserting the power of her roots.

The Malaysian context Yee addresses is one governed by taboo, a nation ruled by compromise, constantly negotiating, or even averting, a sense of its own identity, its consciousness kept in check by an amorphous trepidation of what that identity might entail. The notion of resistance is taboo, since this can lead to social disharmony, which might in turn lead to the total fragmentation of society.<sup>18</sup> Reflexivity is taboo, since surely any sustained study of Malaysia's past and present and future possible, cultural, ethnic, or political would reveal significant cracks in the firmament, poorly put together in the first place and which seems to exist sometimes by default. Yee is interested in these cracks as entry points, in breaking through these taboos, not to advance the agenda of any group vying for power in a fundamentally fractured community, but to understand her place, our place, in it. Politics is personal, and it is to ideas of person and its role in the body politic that she turns to in her most recent works.

A small transitional study, *Study of Lamprey's Malayan Male* (2008), begins this process by re-examining the anthropological gaze. It probes the uncomfortable notion of a naked physical ethnic identity, pictured by the artist herself, through the frame of colonial scrutiny and classification.

A very different male archetype forms the premise of *The Orang Besar Series* (2010). The *Orang Besar* (lit. "big person") might go by various names in different societies — he is the man on top, holder and negotiator of power, his status built by accumulating dependants. He is central to traditional political structures throughout the Nusantara, and the culture of dependency fostered is one which continues to dominate modern Malaysian politics and society. *The Orang Besar Series* looks at the construction and dynamics of power in this context.

In *Orang Besar*, Yee moves away from the panoramic format of *Horizon* and *Sulu Stories*, presenting instead a narrative in several parts, one that attempts to locate our relationship with the subject in different dimensions of experience. At its widest point, it begins with a geography of political consciousness: the networks within Southeast Asia and its links North, East and West form the map of *Fluid World*, a Google-map satellite image of terrain that has long been an arena of political struggle—between Western colonial and trading powers, of new-born nations negotiating a place in a global hierarchy, but also of shifting identities, the sharing and exchange of culture and knowledge. These networks, their connectivity, and their volatility are expressed in the arbitrary crackle of batik, which the artist has introduced here and in other works from the series. The process of batik involves dye and resist, and is traditionally, like other textile arts in the region, the domain of female artisans. Here, Yee adopts this strategy, as a female contemporary artist, to signify a rising, alternative narrative of resistance, of fluidity, breaching a predominantly male hierarchical system. This concept of resistance to borders is brought into direct contemporary experience in *A Rousing*

*Account of Migration in the Language of the Sea* where the familiar buffalo swim with and against the tide, like the mostly silent massive migrant workforce who have moved through the region with little personal power or security, fuelling the development of nations like Malaysia.

We look backwards (and forwards) into a searing history of maritime Southeast Asia in *Empires of Privateers and their Glorious Ventures*. Its contrived islands of fabric, its human ships and stormy sea seem to animate earlier more static European China-trade picturings of the subject, which tend to exclude the pivotal role of “native” seafarers in the spice trade, often regarded as dangerous pirates on the region’s waters. Yee deliberately re-invents the notion of piracy as privateering, highlighting the ambiguity of practices in the struggle for influence and dominion, both yesteryear and today. The image, *The Great Game of Congkak* extends the analogy, reducing the play for power between modern political parties to a numbers game.

Central to *The Orang Besar Series* is the three-part *Kain Panjang* series in batik and photomedia.<sup>19</sup> Adopting the design of the traditional *sarong*, with its *kepala* (head) and *badan* (body), it explores natural and human metaphors of the body politic, directly referring to the pyramidal societal structure around the *Orang Besar*, at turns parasitic, carnivorous and petulant. Anthony Milner, a historian of the Malay world, engages at length with the artist on the inference of these works in relation to modern-day Malaysian politics in their conversation towards the end of this book. Ostensibly, the images in *Kain Panjang* warn of the pitfalls of a culture of political dependency, as a culture of stagnancy, breeding corruption, and yet they also underline the potential power of the human mass, the *rakyat* in its physical bodily manifestation, and its potential for change. As Milner remarks, “It may not be the most democratic country on earth but it’s possibly the most political country I’ve ever been to in my life, Malaysia.”

As a somewhat humorous closing note to *The Orang Besar Series*, Yee offers us *YB* — a gathering of wilting corsages on the uniforms of officialdom—the safari jacket, the not-so-sharp suit, batik shirt, white-collar, in the style of the *vanitas* still-life. The *YB*, or Yang Berhormat (“the Honorable”) are the *Orang Besar* of modern-day Malaysia — the Ministers, Deputy Ministers, and assorted dignitaries enjoying leverage in its political realm. Here we come face to shirt with the sartorial sensibility of political aspiration, the overweening physical presence of power, however begotten. *The Orang Besar Series* places us, with the artist, at different distances to the political structures that assume to rule and divide us. It offers a range of approaches in which we can identify ourselves in relation to place and political hierarchy, an inroads into ways in which we might negotiate our political landscape. For Malaysians, the imperative should be clear, and yet Malaysia as a construct can also operate as an example of any nation or community in the making, for all communities today, and at any point in time, can be seen as such. Issues of hegemony, piracy and migration surely dog the personal-political consciousness the world over to varying degrees.

*The Orang Besar Series* was exhibited as the centrepiece of the artist’s most recent solo exhibition, *Boogeyman* in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>20</sup> Its opening was deliberately timed to

coincide with the 47th anniversary of Malaysia Day, 16th September 1963, only this year “remembered” into the narrative of the nation’s history as the true date of its inception as a nation state, haunted as it is by the political compromises which followed<sup>21</sup>. Yee approached the most national of brands, Royal Selangor, to create a set of commemorative pewter plates to celebrate this occasion on which four signatory territories joined to form the new nation Malaysia—the Federated States of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, for the exhibition. For historical revisionists, this might seem a bold act of hijacking the ceremonial to popularise the awkward truth. For Yee, it was an opportunity to be part of reclaiming, “correcting” part of the nation’s story.

The exhibition as a whole, including also the *Kinabalu Series* and the work *Kerbau*, asserted itself conceptually as a confrontation of basic taboos about Malaysian nationhood, pressing for greater and deeper engagement with that concept, and its inherent mutability. On the most personal level, for Yee, it is an attempt at closure on a narrative which has obsessed her for much of her adult life.

“All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives... The photograph... is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence... which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity... which, because it cannot be “remembered”, must be narrated.” (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*)<sup>22</sup>

In her work to date, Yee has sought, not just an awakening of national consciousness, although this is an overt aspect of her agenda, but in more general terms, a deeper and broader understanding of experience through an exploration of its texture and context, its many possible and hidden narratives. She is interested in the hybridity of contemporary intelligence, the plethora of information available to us in the everyday and in the archived. She is artist and citizen, trying to make sense of the powers that purport to move all our worlds, at all points of existing hierarchies. Her work invites us to become part of her “us”, that fluid world in which the act of self-imagination, self-mapping, and of empathy, is more crucial than ever, where to be culturally aware of ourselves and the history of all that surrounds us can be an act of liberation and even an agent of change. Her work proposes the possibility of our personal investment in a shared imaginative potential, a deeper and wider consciousness of human experience, against the blinded short-term nationalisms and globalizations we are so often invited, or compelled, to subscribe to.



## FOOTNOTES/REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> with Sally Foster, Contemporary Photography at Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 1993

<sup>2</sup> "Paul Keating painted a 'big picture' of Australia's future as a republic of equal citizens bound not by old ties to Britain, but by new alliances and attitudes that would create an economic, strategic and cultural future in its Asia-Pacific neighbourhood." <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/primeministers/keating/in-office.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Art Gallery, December 1999–January 2000

<sup>4</sup> All manner of application forms in Malaysia — whether for a government loan, or a new bank account, require applicants to state their ethnicity.

<sup>5</sup> Huzir Sulaiman, "I-Lann YEE", *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery 1999

<sup>6</sup> The advertising tagline of Tourism Malaysia is "Malaysia, Truly Asia". "To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia. A bubbling, bustling melting pot of races and religions where Malays, Indian, Chinese and many other ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony." <http://www.tourism.gov.my/en/about/default.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> with product designer Khamal Hamdan, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, 1997

<sup>8</sup> The Bajau Laut are an ethnolinguistic group of sea nomads traditionally operating in the Sulu Archipelago of the Philippines, Eastern Borneo, Sulawesi and the islands of eastern Indonesia. Cynthia Chou, "Southeast Asia through an Inverted Telescope" in Paul Kratoska, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Remco Raben (eds), *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*, Singapore University Press 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim was sacked in September 1998 following charges of corruption and sodomy. Yee describes the events in detail in this publication. For a BBC view of the crisis, see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special\\_report/1998/10/98/malaysia\\_crisis/204632.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1998/10/98/malaysia_crisis/204632.stm).

<sup>10</sup> Art ConneXions — a Goethe Institut programme involving exchanges between artists working in photographic media from cities in Southeast Asia, Germany, Australia and New Zealand in 2005. Works made as a result of the exchanges were toured to venues in a selection of the respective cities.

<sup>11</sup> The Goethe Institut advised against and could not support the artist entering the Jolo and Tawi-Tawi provinces in Sulu, which had been the site of recent kidnappings and violence.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth McVey, "In Praise of the Coelcanth's Cousin" in *Locating Southeast Asia*

<sup>13</sup> The Moken are one of three distinct ethnolinguistic groups of sea nomads operating in the Southeast Asian region, together with the Orang Suku Laut and the Bajau Laut. The Moken operate mainly in and south of the Mergui Archipelago of Myanmar. Cynthia Chou, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Jaques Ivanoff, *Moken: Sea-Gypsies of the Andaman Sea Post-war Chronicles*, Bangkok: White Lotus Press 1997, cited in the above essay.

<sup>16</sup> On 26 September, the Malaysian Bar Council organised a Walk for Justice to submit memoranda urging the government to set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry to probe the state of the judiciary and the establishment of a judicial appointments and promotion commission to the Prime Minister's office. See [http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/bar\\_news/berita\\_badan\\_peguam/walk\\_for\\_justice\\_when\\_lawyers\\_walk\\_something\\_must\\_be\\_very\\_wrong.html](http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/bar_news/berita_badan_peguam/walk_for_justice_when_lawyers_walk_something_must_be_very_wrong.html). On 10 November, BERSIH (bersih in Malay means "clean"), a coalition of Malaysian opposition political parties and NGOs organised a rally in Kuala Lumpur calling for clean elections. On 25 November, HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force) staged a rally to hand over a memorandum to the British High Commission to petition Queen Elizabeth II to appoint the Queen's Counsel to represent poor Malaysian Indians. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007\\_HINDRAF\\_rally](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_HINDRAF_rally) and footage at <http://www.hindraf.org/node?page=103>.

<sup>17</sup> Yee's *Kerbau* finds an interesting parallel in *Waiting for the King* (2006), Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom's panoramic portrait of Thai subjects lined up for the ceremonial procession of their King on the 60th anniversary of his coronation, before the onset of the 2008 riots.

<sup>18</sup> Both the previous and incumbent Prime Ministers of Malaysia have maintained that "demonstrations" and "public protests" "are not part of our culture". See <http://www.darndmalaysia.com/2008/03/15/so-are-street-demonstrations-our-culture-now-answer-us-badawi/>. The spectre of the racial riots of May 13 1969 is often raised as a deterrent to outspokenness on racial issues and public demonstrations ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May\\_13\\_incident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_13_incident)).

<sup>19</sup> The *Kain Panjang* series and *Empires of Privateers and their Glorious Ventures* were produced as both photographic prints and works in batik. In a complex process of integrating traditional craft and new media technology, the batik crackle elements were integrated into earlier drafts of the printed silks and then embedded into the final photographic images. The batik works then incorporated batik canting, and in *Empires...*, batik chop for the skull-and-crossbones motif along the borders.

<sup>20</sup> Black Box, MAP, Kuala Lumpur, organised by Valentine Willie Fine Art in collaboration with RogueArt, September 2010

<sup>21</sup> Merdeka Day, the anniversary of the Federation of Malaya's independence from the British on 31 August 1957 has since been celebrated as Malaysia's National Day, precluding the actual formation of Malaysia in 1963 as a nation, and the participation of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. Reasons for this "gloss" on history might include Singapore's break from Malaysia in 1965, as well as an attempt at a peninsular bias in the national narrative. The belated acknowledgement of Malaysia Day can be read by the more cynical as a concession to the voters of resource-rich Sabah and Sarawak, as the political opposition strengthens.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso 2006

Note: All internet citations accessed 9/10/2010