FAMILIAR OTHERS: EMIRIA SUNASSA, EDUARDO MASFERRÉ AND YEH CHI WEI, 1940s–1970s
Who is “the Other”? What does it mean to represent peoples who are different from one’s own?

For the modern painter and photographer, images of “Others” were often important sources of inspiration. Artworks might emphasise differences between people—by drawing upon exotic stereotypes about so-called “primitive” cultures—but could also be used to assert a position of solidarity with marginalised communities. In the mid-20th century, artists from Southeast Asia might also depict peoples familiar to them who shared a stake in emerging ideas of the nation and region.

For the three artists in *Familiar Others*, images of “the Other” within Southeast Asia were a central facet of their work. The photographer Eduardo Masferré (1909–1995) spent his life in the mountainous Cordillera region of the Philippines, home to Indigenous communities with whom he shared a familial connection. His photographs strove for dignity and respect, but also created a romanticised image of Cordilleran life. Painter Emiria Sunassa (1894–1964) represented the diverse peoples of the Indonesian archipelago. Based on her heritage, she asserted that she was the rightful “Queen of Papua,” a claim which affects how we might interpret her images of Papuan peoples. Yeh Chi Wei (1913–1981) was born in Fuzhou, China, but spent some of his childhood years in Sibu, Sarawak. As an adult, working in Singapore and Malaysia, he was especially inspired by his travels back to Sarawak and Sabah, creating works that combined his ideas about Bornean culture, Chinese cultural traditions and his personal history.

How might these artworks look today to the people that they represent? To open up this discussion, this exhibition includes eight commissioned responses to the artworks, written by artists, poets, academics and musicians with community ties to the peoples depicted in the images. These responses are used in place of conventional museum descriptive labels, and they are reproduced in full in this catalogue.