Familiar Others

Scott, Phoebe

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Familiar Others: Emiria Sunassa, Eduardo Masferre and Yeh Chi Wei, 1940s-1970s.

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This exhibition is an attempt to grapple with the thorny and delicate issue of cultural representation, as it appears in the modern art of Southeast Asia. The point of departure is the artist’s gaze on those construed as “the Other”—here meaning people or groups who are perceived as being inherently culturally different from a dominant group or population—from inside the modernising nation states of the region. In art, as in other forms of representation, the image of the Other can be a site of fantasy: ethnic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, and communities living in remote terrain or in borderlands far away from the national capitals have been re-imagined into art through a lens of projected desire.\(^1\) In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, the representation of the Other has been a persistent feature in modern art. Within the art history of Euro-American modernism, images of the Other have been stringently critiqued and implicated in the colonial projects of the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries.\(^2\) However, the issue has remained relatively dormant in Southeast Asian art. This may be due to the different ambiguities raised by the internal gaze on the Other from within the region.\(^3\) Southeast Asian artists and the people they represented were not necessarily on opposite ends of a colonial relationship; in fact, they might have been joint participants in anti-colonial movements. In the mid-20\(^{th}\) century, they often shared a stake in the emerging constructs of nation and region. The three artists presented in this exhibition—the painters Emiria Sunassa (1894–1964) and Yeh Chi Wei (1913–1991), and the photographer Eduardo
Masferré (1909–1995)—were selected because the image of the Other in Southeast Asia was a central facet of their work. Furthermore, these artists did not encounter their Others at a distance, but instead through the lived experience of interacting with people with whom they also shared personal, familial or political ties. In this setting, the hard-edged binaries of self/Other, modern/not-modern, and “civilised”/”primitive” are more fragile than they might appear. Solidarity, intimacy, empathy and familiarity all surface in the artworks, jostling awkwardly with a gaze that can also be distant and exoticising. To evoke this tension and hold it in view, this exhibition uses the phrase “familiar Others.”

Unravelling the idea of “familiar Others” requires more than just an institutional voice. Thus, this exhibition includes eight commissioned text responses from people with ties to the communities represented in the artworks on display. Additionally, the selected writers are all cultural producers themselves, and include poets (Gawani Gaongen and Kulleh Grasi), academics (Els Tieneke Rieke Katmo and Welyne Jeffry Jehom), artists (Rocky Cajigan, Dicky Takndare, Betty Adii and Michael Yan Devis), a musician (Alena Murang) and an anthropologist and curator (Enrico Yory Kondologit). In these enlivening and challenging texts, the writers brought their own bodies of knowledge and experience as they responded to the images. There was no possibility of meeting face-to-face or engaging directly with the exhibition space, as these responses were commissioned and produced during the period of Covid-19 restrictions. However, these texts have influenced how the exhibition was curated—including the placement of the artworks in the space and the presentation of supplementary materials. In the exhibition, extracts of their responses are used in place of conventional descriptive labels. These interventions may not have displaced the curatorial voice of National Gallery Singapore, but they do suggest its incompleteness and partiality. The responses are reproduced in full in this catalogue, and I have also taken the opportunity to write “alongside” them at certain points in this essay.

The museum (National Gallery Singapore in this case) is also implicated in the politics of representation. The
practice of naming and displaying is representational work done by the museum, but its interpretive quality is not always obvious: the frequently unattributed, neutral-toned texts of the museum actively shed the marks of subjectivity. Nowhere is this more evident than the artwork label, whose contents—artist, title, date, medium, size and acquisition information—appear self-evidently factual (as at many other museums, this type of label at National Gallery Singapore is ominously nicknamed “the tombstone label” because of its short-form style). However, behind that label lies the morass that is the museum database: a place where imperfect information, transcription errors, data loss, unconscious bias and outdated or colonial systems of naming linger. Even the act of “cleansing” this data—an inapt and somewhat chilling metaphor—includes a series of subjective interventions and decisions. This is not to criticise the desire for factual accuracy or the people who work towards it, but to invite scepticism towards the authoritative quality of such labels. This is important because the label frames our perceptions of the artwork and its subject in a seemingly objective way, so a factual error or a value judgement can come to have more significant implications.

As an experimental space, Dalam Southeast Asia offers the chance to consider the act of naming and labelling. Some of the tombstone labels in this exhibition have been re-worked to become more discursive, documenting changes in naming over time—whether at National Gallery Singapore or where the works were previously exhibited or published—based on shifts in research, the correcting of errors or changing interpretive descriptions. As our perceptions of these artworks shift in response to how they are framed, what was initially a banal exercise can turn into a revelatory one. By giving prominence to these layered sets of relations—artist to subject; museum to artwork; artwork to public—Familiar Others hopes to open a space for critique, but also for nuance and generosity.
1. **ARTIST and SUBJECT**

The problem of the Other within modern art has frequently been couched in terms of primitivism, which runs like a seam through multiple modern movements, particularly in the Euro-American context. The common idea was that so-called “primitive” cultures—frequently those whose territories were the subject of Euro-American colonial expansion—could offer ideological and aesthetic revitalisation to the rigid and exhausted cultures of the industrializing “West.” Ostensibly, primitivism might celebrate these cultures. However, it also often relied on simplistic, hierarchical and even racist views of what such cultures were like. By re-circulating the perception that these cultures were less “developed” or “civilised,” primitivism created a discourse that justified colonisation. It was so closely tied to the colonial idea that it has been argued that “we should think of the primitive as the product of the historical experience of the West.”

What relevance, then, does this idea hold in the history of modern art from Southeast Asia? A previous exhibition project in Dalam Southeast Asia coined the term “encounterism” to propose a non-judgemental form of relation to the Other from a vantage point within Southeast Asia, as part of the Global South. However, the burden of primitivism is not always easily shed, especially when its traces appear not only at a formal level of the artwork, in terms of specific modern styles, but also in the discourses about and around the work. Consider Yeh Chi Wei’s comments on his 1965 visit to the longhouses of Sarawak, in which he draws an explicit comparison to Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), the French artist who set the paradigm for painterly primitivism:

> From cultivating the fields, hunting, fishing to dancing, every aspect of the primitive aboriginals’ life was so innocent and, to us artists, truly exciting. No wonder Gauguin wanted to retire and live a primitive life with the Tahitians!
Or these remarks on Emiria Sunassa’s work by modernist critic Sanusi Pané, in 1941, as cited by the scholar Heidi Arbuckle:

It could be said that she endeavours to renew the “primitive” arts, Indonesia’s ancient arts, and intends to bring an “ethnic” feeling and form (perasaan dan bentoek “ethnisch”) of ethnic groups who live in closed societies (golongan bangsa yang hidup dalam masyarakat tertutup) to the “contemporary Indonesian” (Indonesia masa sekarang) environment.9

Such fragments reveal the persistence of a “primitivist” strain of thinking, even in Southeast Asia. Yet, the scholarly critique of primitivism to date has been based on artists of late 19th and 20th century Europe. Clearly, artists and audiences in Southeast Asia had a different vantage point. It is the nuances of this relationship between artist and subject that this exhibition aims to explore: the play between intimacy and distance, the tension between exoticism and familiarity. The specifics of each artist and their relationship to the subjects of the works makes these issues more apparent.

1.1. Emiria Sunassa: conjuring the “peripheries”

Emiria Sunassa’s surviving body of artistic work is small but compelling, and further enlivened by her complex and somewhat unreliable biography. Scholar Heidi Arbuckle’s comprehensive study on the artist concluded that Emiria’s identity was essentially performative—she cultivated her own personal and cultural mystique, perhaps even to the point of fabulation.10 Born in 1894 in Tanah Wangko in North Sulawesi, Emiria was active throughout the then Netherlands East Indies, reportedly as a “nurse, plantation administrator, tiger and elephant hunter, businesswoman, poison-maker and traveler.”11 With no formal training in painting, Emiria first exhibited in 1940 in the landmark exhibition of PERSAGI (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia, or Association of Indonesian Draughtsmen). This group was known for
their spirited rejection of the hackneyed conventions of painting at the time, as well as their desire to forge a modern Indonesian aesthetic. In 1941, PERSAGI was granted permission to show at the Bataviasche Kunstkring, the leading art venue in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). Emiria was part of the exhibition, with works including Papuan Archers (fig. 1). She continued to exhibit throughout the 1940s, often in exhibitions where she was the only female Indonesian artist.12

In her paintings, Emiria frequently represented peoples from across the Indonesian archipelago, presumably based on her memories and travels. Her 1946 solo exhibition in Jakarta—in which two of the paintings in Familiar Others were displayed—included images of Balinese, Dayak, Bugis, Javanese and Papuan peoples, among others (fig. 2).13 This exhibition took place during the Indonesian War of Independence from the Dutch (1945–1949), when

the emerging nationalist imagination was beginning to encompass all the territories which previously made up the Netherlands East Indies. Emiria’s personal biography added weight to her presentation of Indonesia’s regional diversity. She claimed to be related to a former Sultan of Tidore, an island in the Maluku archipelago of eastern Indonesia which was previously a hub for the spice trade.14 Historically, the Sultanate of Tidore also asserted its rule over parts of western areas of the island of New Guinea.15 This familial connection would be the basis of Emiria’s claim to be the rightful “Queen of Papua,” and to participate actively in the
movement for Papuan independence from the Dutch. While her claim was never officially accepted, her connection to the world of eastern Indonesia clearly impacted the reception of her work in Batavia/Jakarta, as evidenced by this 1948 review:

[Emiria] often felt that sometimes the Westerners’ world of feelings is fake, and their huichelarij (hypocrisy) pierced her heart. And apparently that’s why she turned around, and then opened her eyes to the life and the psyche of primitive peoples, which have not been corrupted by the polish of Western culture [...]

Once the background of her life history becomes clear, it is easier for us to understand why it seems that the objects Emiria chooses in her paintings are the life of primitive peoples (for example, “Dayak Bride”, “Papuan Sorcerer”) [...].

Emiria’s works staged the “peripheries” of the emerging nation for an elite Javanese audience who were at the “centre” (Batavia/Jakarta). Implicated in this staging were her own political claims regarding Papua, which she had begun to make as early as the late 1940s when she became involved with the activist Silas Papare (1918–1978) and his party the Partai Kemerdekaan Indonesia Irian (PKII). The PKII supported Papuan independence from the Dutch as part of the newly-emerging Indonesia. By 1949, the independence of Netherlands New Guinea had become the most hotly-contested issue in the resolution of Indonesia’s War of Independence, and remained a sticking point in negotiations. Ultimately, Netherlands New Guinea remained under the administrative control of the Dutch for a further twelve years, before being handed over to Indonesia. Papua had also occupied a powerful space of desire in Dutch colonial consciousness. As Dannilynn Rutherford has noted, the persistent colonial image of Papua as a remote place populated by “stone age” peoples was merged into a desire for Papua to serve as a “blank slate” where the Dutch colonial experiment could be revived and perfected. Papua was also variously proposed as a “promised land” to
absorb rural Dutch migrants, or as a potential homeland for Indonesia’s Eurasian populations. Papuan nationalist and independence movements at this time took competing and varied forms, and unlike the PKII, did not always envisage Papuan independence via the new Indonesian nation.

How did Emiria’s own paintings of Papua and Tidore relate to this setting? Scholars Heidi Arbuckle and Wulan Dirgantoro have argued that Emiria’s images of Indonesia’s “internal others” destabilised the dominant discourse of Indonesian nationalism by bringing the marginalised identities of the peoples of the eastern parts of the archipelago into view. However, while Emiria’s images were different from the masculinist and Javanese-focused images dominating nationalist art at the time, it is arguable whether her works really challenged this discourse. Several of her paintings seem to replicate the image of Papua as a dark, unknowable space that is close to nature and potentially dangerous—essentially an image of Papua as a “non-modern” Other. This was in stark contrast to the sites where Emiria presented the works to the public, especially in cosmopolitan Batavia/Jakarta.

Take Bahaya Belakang Kembang Terate (Danger Lurking Behind the Lotus) for example. The ambiguous work has been variously identified as depicting either a Dayak or Papuan subject, and it conveys a threatening air in terms of the presentation of the impenetrable jungle setting and the archer’s lethal skill (fig. 3). Meanwhile, in Orang Irian dengan Burung Tjenderawasih (Irian Man with Bird-of-Paradise), the dark palette of the painting makes it difficult to distinguish between the abbreviated, mask-like features of the central figure and the murky background, enlivened only by strokes of electric green. By highlighting the birds-of-paradise, Emiria also emphasised what was one of Papua’s most sought-after commodities, already a mainstay of historical tribute and trade, and later a magnet for hunters and traders in the modern period (fig. 4). In his response to this artwork for Familiar Others (p. 49), anthropologist and curator Enrico Yory Kondologit reflects that the birds-of-paradise were the first in a chain of desirable natural resources that drew foreign exploitation to Papua, a situation that continues even today. Similarly, the painting
Panen Damar (Rosin Harvest) also presents a site that is critical to the articulation of Emiria’s past and identity—the island of Tidore—via damar, a kind of resin that was also one of the natural commodities traded from the region (fig. 5). The treatment of the figures in heavy, visible strokes of brown paint is mirrored by the verticality of the forest trees, integrating the human figures with nature while also signalling the landscape’s extractive value.

Across all three works, there is a raw immediacy to the painting style that Emiria’s contemporaries interpreted as “primitive,” in the sense that it was untaught or undeveloped. The dual sense of the primitive had the function of situating Emiria as part of the modern avant-garde, against the polished but formulaic approaches of the Mooi Indies painters. Furthermore, her personal biography and political claims made her a privileged interpreter of this “primitive” space, and this is perhaps the reason that led her to make outrageous and possibly tongue-in-cheek statements about life in Papua and Tidore in her public communications. Emiria’s works reinforced her own centrality in mediating Papua as part of the emerging Indonesian nation, whilst also implicitly emphasising its resources, and thus economic potential, for that nation. The ambiguity of her position—as well as her value in creating a kind of “visibility” for Papua within the national discourse—is recognised in the animated dialogue written for Familiar Others.
Others by Papuan artists of the Udeido Collective (p. 53), who might have the last word here:

**DICKY TAKNDARE:** The historical background shaping the relationship between Tidoreans and Papuans played a major part in forming Emiria’s view on Papuans [...] At the same time, Emiria was working when Indonesia was a new Republic, and she was part of an art movement that strove to build a new national awareness after the wave of decolonisation washed over Asia and the Pacific.

**MICHAEL YAN DEVIS:** I appreciate that the chosen subjects for her works were such anomalies within the context of Indonesian art [...] But considering the relationship between Papua-Tidore and how she crowned herself as the Queen, I can say that her works about Papua are manifestations of the Sultanate of Tidore’s hegemony over Papua.

**BETTY ADII:** I see Emiria’s works as a form of solidarity that was born out of the spirit of camaraderie, and it ought to be appreciated. But I think her works that depict Papuans seem to only narrate Papua superficially [...]. “Exoticism” still constitutes the main reason behind the creation of these works. If we position these works in today’s social context in Papua, I think the crucial point is about the value of solidarity that we can interpret as a driver for change.

1.2 **Eduardo Masferré: “A stranger, but not that strange”**

Like Emiria Sunassa, the work of photographer Eduardo Masferré occupies a similar position that straddles familiarity and distance, exoticism and advocacy. His photographs are entangled within a longer history of the representation of peoples of the mountainous Cordillera region in Luzon, the Philippines. “Old photographs are an aggressive cultural item,” writes Marion Pastor-Roces, adding that colonial-era photography in the Philippines was “methodical to a cold-blooded extreme, humourless, artless, the enterprise
smacked of a cataloguing instinct.”26 The exemplar of this practice could be Dean C. Worcester (1866–1924), a scientist who joined an 1887 expedition to the Philippines, where he developed an interest in the different ethnic groups of the population. Worcester became a key architect of the American colonisation of the Philippines, and was appointed Secretary of the Interior in the colonial administration from 1900 to 1913. One of his responsibilities was the “Bureau of non–Christian Tribes,” which oversaw the peoples of the Cordillera. The thousands of photographs he took of the region were used to support his colonialist position, whether in his published books, his touring lantern–slide presentations—where he argued against the Philippines’ capacity for independence—or as part of sensationalist stories published in *National Geographic*.27 His photographs are aesthetically minimal, with their human subjects staged in profile or frontal views, to be annotated with Worcester’s own detailed typological classifications (fig. 6). In *National Geographic*, the ethnographic typology was accompanied by lurid accounts of the practice of headhunting, which, Worcester reassured readers has, “since the American occupation, been very effectively checked.”28 The magazine was significantly implicated in the popularisation of the American colonial project.29

It is via *National Geographic* that Worcester’s images intersected with Masferré. Although Masferré spent some
of his early years in Spain, he largely grew up in the town of Sagada in the Cordillera region. His father was a Spanish former soldier and his mother—who was Kankanaey, one of the Indigenous groups of the Cordillera—was from Sagada. According to biographical accounts, at the age of 15, Masferré encountered one of Worcester’s articles in *National Geographic*, which had a profound effect.\(^3\) Masferré turned to the practice of photography after that, assisting a local priest to learn the technique, ordering a camera from Manila and drawing inspiration from magazines. He was especially productive between 1934 and 1956, photographing the Kankanaey, Bontoc, Kalinga, Ifugao and Ga’dang peoples of the Cordillera. He eventually established a photographic studio in Bontoc, which was patronised by local clients.\(^3\) For his own practice, Masferré also made expeditions into the surrounding regions, sometimes to places which were quite remote from Bontoc. He described himself as “a stranger, but not that strange” as he would enter the villages with some degree of familiarity with their language and culture.\(^3\)

In an extensive interview conducted late in his life, Masferré spoke of the desire to present his Cordilleran subjects and their cultures with respect. This was particularly significant as the initial perception within the Philippines was that these “primitive” subjects should not be publicly shown.\(^3\) As a result of his approach, Masferré’s images of people tend to be individuated and attentive to aesthetics, privileging the expressive subjectivity of portraiture rather than the cold, classificatory quality of “type.” In *Young Man from Maledkong* the most striking aspect of the image is the young man’s arresting and speculative gaze as he looks at the viewer (fig. 7). At the same time, there are details in the image that might be read in a more ethnographic light, as emphasised in the response to the work for *Familiar Others* by Cordilleran artist Rocky Cajigan (p. 66):

> It begins with discomfort—to look at this photo, of a man from Maligcong, Bontoc, the Philippines, with the pipe, the *soklong*, and the stare that is meant to satisfy curiosities about who the “savage” is.
In all his images, Masferré preferred the picturesque aspects of life in the region and avoided any traces of modernity, instead seeing the images as a way to capture a way of life that he thought was disappearing. For this reason, it was perhaps too easy to integrate these images into a pre-existing (even Worcesterian) narrative about the condition of life in that region. Take for instance the image of a young man clothed in a loincloth, standing in a rice field and gazing into the distance as he holds his shield and spear. In the collection of National Gallery Singapore, the registered title of this photograph is *Tinglayan*, which provides a geographical designation (fig. 8). Yet, in earlier publications, the photograph was described in a way that introduced an element of threat, possibly a reminder of the oft-sensationalised practice of headhunting: “On his way to check the water in his rice fields. Men did not leave their villages unarmed.”34 Thus, Masferré’s photographs in general have been read both as an intervention into a dehumanising colonial practice of photography—as an attempt to offer a respectful form of the photographic gaze—and as a continuation of a romanticisation of the region, feeding directly into the contemporary tourist appetite for the Cordillera.35

In attempting to capture the liminal quality of Masferré’s position, one scholar has likened him to the figure of the “native informant.”36 Yet this term does not seem to adequately capture his role. Masferré’s photographic expeditions were his own, and while his works were initially circulated widely in anthropological texts, as well as postcards and prints, the work done in his studio in Bontoc was often commissioned directly by local inhabitants of the area. The prints from his travels in the Cordillera were also returned to the communities they represented. This approach contrasts significantly with Worcester’s archive, where the photographs have the appearance of, quite literally, having been “taken.” Masferré said of his own practice:

On the first visit [...] they had no way to understand what photography was. We could not explain it. On the second trip, we took proofs and gave them pictures of
themselves. Sometimes if they could afford it they paid. If not, we would find ways of giving them a copy.  

Thus, while there was a sense of responsibility and reciprocity ingrained in the practice of making these images, they can also be interpreted as reinforcing a form of romantic “Othering.” Masferré’s work speaks to one of the tensions of the position of the “familiar Other,” namely the persistence of aspects of primitivism, even within a framework of intimacy and respect.

1.3 Yeh Chi Wei: primitivism, archaism and the region

For the painter Yeh Chi Wei, it was a regionalist rather than nationalist imagination that informed much of his work, including the representations of peoples of Sarawak and Sabah (now part of Malaysia) featured in Familiar Others. In his deployment of a regional gaze on Southeast Asia, Yeh continued down a path that had been made by the earlier generation of artists of the “Nanyang school,” who were artists of the Chinese diaspora active in Singapore and what was then Malaya. Similarly, Yeh was born in Fuzhou, China, and as a child moved with his family to Singapore and then to Sibu, Sarawak. In a biographical essay, he described this period as one of hardship and struggle for the family:

“My mother took charge of the household. She cut wood in the hills or worked in the fields every day with me on her back, struggling hard to survive. Nevertheless, we were constantly in want. We were in such great poverty that when I was five, my mother had no choice but to raise a small sum of money by whatever means she could find, take me with her to set sail and come to Singapore to look for my father. When I was seven (in 1921), I lived in a small rural community in Sibu, Sarawak. At dawn, I had to pick up a tapping knife and follow my mother to a rubber plantation to tap rubber.”

As the family’s fortunes improved, Yeh was able to return to China to study art, graduating in Shanghai in 1936. As a
result of the Japanese invasion, Yeh fled to Singapore and settled there, one of several artists to do so in the period. Like many Chinese diasporic artists in the region, Yeh’s style combined Chinese and Western painting techniques, but was also the result of a voracious desire to express the experience of living in Southeast Asia. Yeh cultivated a deliberate sense of archaism in his work, turning to Southeast Asian antiquities and local material cultures.

Yeh’s works made after his travels in East Malaysian Borneo represent the peak of this tendency. These trips were part of his activities in the Ten Men Art Group, a loose collective of Singapore-based artists who pursued an active programme of travel around the region throughout the 1960s. In 1965, the group travelled to Sarawak and returned for a more extensive trip in 1968 which began in Kota Kinabalu, moving through Brunei, Miri and then to Sibu. Photographs in the collection of the artist’s family from these travels show the artists working in the longhouses, eating and talking with the local communities, as well as recording cultural practices like weaving, ceremonial dances and cockfights (figs. 9 and 10). Yeh also brought back souvenirs and examples of Bornean material culture which, along with the photographs, served as long term points of reference for his paintings. His earliest works produced in the mid-1960s related to Borneo, and used formal aspects of Indigenous aesthetics as a basis for semi-abstract stylisation. *Drummer* (c. 1965), for example, shows a young woman in a longhouse is filled with precious
items of Iban material culture. These are rendered with sufficient accuracy that Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (p. 78), in her response to the work for *Familiar Others*, was able to identify most of the items, and give their Iban names:

The space exhibits wealth with the display of two *tajau* (jars) with the dragon design, highly significant in Iban mythology. The wall also sports a water dragon design, flaunting beautiful craftsmanship, but part of it covered by an older *pua kumbu* (a sacred cloth made with tie-dye) depicting a female figure in one of the tales of Kumang (the mother goddess of the Iban people). This textile is displayed side by side with another *pua kumbu* boasting a design of the warrior Bujang Berani.

After his 1968 trip to Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei, Yeh’s approach became further abstracted, and the strong presence of material culture recedes:

In order to convey a sense of archaic simplicity, I turned to repetitive representation, “destroying” the images over and over again until the colours appeared so mottled as to be reminiscent of murals exposed to years of dust and smoke. I wanted to hurl the pictures a bit further back in time, so as to better evoke the primitive aboriginal way of life.  

This approach is especially clear in an untitled artwork of the late 1960s, where the painting has been repeatedly re-worked in heavy impasto, creating a textural surface that has the uneven and striated quality of rock (fig. 11). Later works featured abstracted images of family groups, sometimes within womb-like enclosures, often also layered over with impasto. Finally, a set of works made in the mid-1970s returned to Borneo subjects many years after Yeh’s travels there. These works have a narrative quality, and also include inscriptions in archaic Chinese “oracle bone” script, of either descriptive prose or quotations from classical Chinese poetry (fig. 12). The inclusion of colophons in archaic script—and visual references to the ink rubbings used to study ancient Chinese inscriptions—were elements...
developed by Yeh some years earlier, and appear in his works on various Southeast Asian subjects.

In many respects, the Borneo body of work conforms to the conventions of modernist primitivism. The cultures depicted are mined for their picturesque qualities and the formal elements of their art, but are presented in a timeless state, implicitly “Other” to the modernity of the painter. The references to Chinese antiquity seem to compound this quality: siting the Indigenous cultures of Borneo into a distantly-past state of “before.” However, a number of factors also complicate this reading. First is Yeh’s own personal history and childhood in Sarawak, which appears to have been layered into the works, especially the repeated subject of familial relations (fig. 13). In his 1969 catalogue, some of these works have a text commentary, such as: “pitiful woman labouring in the fields. The poor child is starved,” or “It’s a long wait for mother’s return. After breastfeed [sic], mother has to hurry for farming.”

These texts have a striking resonance with Yeh’s own biographical essay, quoted above, about his early years with his mother in Sarawak, and suggest an intimacy and solidarity with the subject rather than distance or exoticism.

It is also possible to interpret Yeh’s deployment of the signs of Chinese antiquity as a gesture of familiarity, or perhaps even recognition. In Drummer, Yeh includes the image two storage jars of a type prized the Bornean context as pusaka, or sacred heirlooms (fig. 14). Historically, such jars arrived in Borneo from production sites across Southeast Asia and South China. Yeh had two similar large brown-glazed jars, purchased from Sarawak, in his personal collection (fig. 15). In the longhouses of Borneo, imported ceramics and storage jars in particular were revered: to handle them required respectful behaviour, and they might be used in burials or at the centre of special festivities. In their origin stories, such jars were shape-shifting and had an animate and mutable presence in Indigenous thought and practices. In addition, a sophisticated body of connoisseurship had evolved around them on the appreciation of form, glaze and decoration, and provenance and authenticity. As Stanley O’Connor noted in a text that has become a classic of Southeast Asian art history, this was a realm in which the
taste and standards of the Western art historian and (for example) an Iban elder in Sarawak seemed to miraculously align. The same could perhaps be said of Yeh, who, as an artist of the Chinese diaspora, also avidly pursued an interest in traditional Chinese material culture and antiquarianism—collecting rubbings of stele inscriptions, ink paintings, as well as ceramics. According to his family, much of his ceramics collection was acquired in Sarawak via a personal connection. Did Yeh, like O’Connor, experience the “shock of recognition” when encountering the respect for these objects also held by communities in Borneo? While the argument is speculative, the conflation of Chinese archaism and contemporary Bornean culture in certain artworks suggests that some form of recognition or mutual intelligibility is consistently being proposed by the painter. If primitivism is a binary that relies on oppositional, even categorical difference, then we can look to Yeh’s gestures of solidarity as markers of recognition or identification, which work against the distancing qualities of the works.

A final register in which the work of Yeh Chi Wei and the Ten Men Art Group must be assessed is the diplomatic. In a period when the borders within Southeast Asia—and the former British territories of Singapore and Malaya in particular—were especially fluid, the regionalist activities and aspirations of the group held special significance. This
is evident, for example, in the text written by S. Rajaratnam, Singapore’s then Minister of Foreign Affairs, in the Group’s 1965 catalogue following their trip to Sarawak. Written only one week after Singapore had formally become an independent nation, Rajaratnam commented that the exhibition would “make a positive contribution to art and in the context of an independent Singapore serve to bring about international goodwill and understanding,” while also emphasising Singapore’s position as a new, multi-racial society. At the time, the controversial status of the former territories of British Borneo had also barely been settled, and debate had raged over their status in the early 1960s: would they become an ethnic counterweight to the majority Malay population in the new national unit of Malaysia? Or might parts of Borneo be re-linked to their historical position under the Sulu or Brunei Sultanates? Indonesia’s initial hostility to the formation of Malaysia, reflected in the policy of Konfrontasi, was also enacted primarily in this ambiguous territory in the form of border raids along the Sarawak/Kalimantan divide. Representatives of Borneo’s diverse populations were part of the debates and deliberations over how Malaysia or alternative political units might be constituted. As Ooi Keat Gin writes, “Borneo, then, mattered.” While the paintings might evoke an unchanging traditional culture, the image of Borneo more broadly had a striking political currency. In depicting Bornean peoples at that time, Yeh Chi Wei was painting peoples who were also active in imagining the contours of a nation in which the artist himself might live and work.

2. WHOSE TURN IS IT TO SPEAK NOW?

These broad sketches above can suggest the complexities of the gaze on the “familiar Other.” However, the artists’ own intentions and contexts do not limit the meanings of their works, especially as they continue to be shown in new settings and within new narratives. The images generate their own legacies, or accrue different implications as values shift over time. Regarding these artworks today, we might
ask, as Gawani Gaongen (p. 58) does in her poem written for this exhibition, “sinu ‘dwani nan mensos-owa?/whose turn is it to speak now?” Perhaps in an unconscious echo of Gayatri Spivak’s famous question “can the subaltern speak?”, the poem weaves a complicated answer. Gaongen, as a contemporary writer, when placed in the position of representing or speaking for the woman captured by Masferré’s image, cannot and will not replicate the voice of an Ifugao Elder of the 1950s. Instead, she interweaves her own perspective as a modern Kankanay woman with a speculative and descriptive dialogue with the image. Gaongen confronts the impossibility of speaking for the past, as well as the awkwardness of speaking as a “representative.” By inviting participants who are cultural producers in their own right and and asking them to respond to the work based on their own knowledge and expertise, the commissioning process for Familiar Others was intended to mediate this to some degree. Nonetheless, there is inevitably a process of representation at work, as well as a sense that speaking on behalf of the image is yet another kind of appropriation. The tension and potential limitations of such a project, including its institutional setting, are gamely reflected in the text by artist Rocky Cajigan (p. 66), also responding to an image by Masferré:

It begins with questioning—to look at this photo of an Indigenous, taken by an Indigenous as an Indigenous, within arbitrary definitions of Indigeneity.

It begins with self-assessment—to look at this photo in an institution that is perhaps on a mission to understand decolonial museology or itself, genderless and holding power.

[...]

It begins with a conundrum—to participate in a decolonial project while anticipating that the institution cannot separate itself from continuing colonial habits, and thereby enabling the tradition of examining Indigenous peoples as photographed objects.
Despite this hesitance, the eight responses commissioned for *Familiar Others* have opened up new lines of thinking in relation to the artworks. Within the critical and reflexive frameworks of their texts, Gaongen and Cajigan also unpack certain narratives of the Cordillera encoded by Masferré’s photographs. Meanwhile, in a very personal response to Yeh’s *The Dayak Plays the Musical Instrument*, singer–songwriter and *sape’* player Alena Murang (p. 81) speculates about the instrument that is represented, as well as addressing the limitations of the painter in naming and presenting what he observed. Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (p. 78) performs an act of re-appropriation of even retrieval, by meticulously giving each of the represented objects and icons in Yeh’s *Drummer* their Iban names. Iban language is also critical to the response by Kulleh Grasi (p. 71), whose prose plays with the idea of knowledge concealed and revealed, creatively speculating on what an encounter between Yeh Chi Wei and the Elders in Sibu might have been like. In what is perhaps a demonstration of the “right to opacity”—theorist Édouard Glissant’s contention that cultural difference should not be reduced to complete transparency or commensurability—Kulleh Grasi’s text retains its own obscurity with the inclusion of particular, untranslatable Iban terms.51 Emiria Sunassa’s artworks representing Papua and Tidore have been interpreted in the long arc of their relationship, looking back into history as well as at the contemporary situation. For curator and anthropologist Enrico Yory Kondologit (p. 49), Emiria’s representation of the bird-of-paradise is a trigger to discuss the long-term expropriation of Papua’s natural resources. Meanwhile, for Dr Els Tieneke Rieke Katmo (p. 45), Lecturer in Socio Economics of Agriculture, the birds become a metonym for the man who holds them, as well as for Emiria herself, also an “Other” in the gendered hierarchy of colonial relationships. Dr Katmo’s interpretation that the man holding the birds is “enslaved” is also a reminder of the historical trade in enslaved persons in this region, paralleled by the captivity of the birds. Finally, the lively discussion held by the Papuan artists of Udeido Collective (p. 53) also ranges over gender and history, and introduces the important note of “solidarity” in interpreting Emiria’s legacy.
All the responses have been written in the spirit of generosity, critical awareness and considerable trust. The exhibition *Familiar Others* is in many respects an exercise in vulnerability. It is always difficult to speak of issues of cultural representation and appropriation, of the fraught and entangled relationships between people. This is perhaps exacerbated in the current environment, where the discourse has tended to rapid judgements and unequivocal binaries. Thus, to attempt to explore such topics involves vulnerability on the part of the artists who made the works, the institution which owns and displays them, the curator who writes about them and presents them, and the community which engages and responds to them. This exhibition is intended to allow that vulnerability to emerge, and to facilitate different voices and perspectives to appear. This is in keeping with the spirit of the Dalam Southeast Asia project space, and its function as a self-reflexive and critical space in the Southeast Asia permanent galleries, resonant with the implications of the Malay-language term *dalam*, or “inside.” By attending with depth and nuance to our work “inside,” perhaps we may be better prepared to face the expanded challenges posed by such issues “outside”.

Curatorial Essay

Familiar Others
The term “Indigenous Peoples” is a contested concept in Southeast Asia, as has been reflected in a number of recent scholarly works on the subject. Due to its significant ethnic diversity, histories of migration and mobile populations, the concept of Indigeneity as developed within a white-settler colony model maps poorly onto Southeast Asian realities—including in areas where the majority of the population can be understood, in different ways, as Indigenous. However, as Chua and Idrus have acknowledged, the idea of Indigeneity is also “out there” in Southeast Asia, meaning that the English-language term is also used as a self-identifying term by various communities. In this essay, the term is used selectively for areas where the English term is in common usage. It should be noted that there are also Southeast Asian language terms for concepts related to Indigeneity which have their own political and cultural implications. See Liana Chua and Rusaslina Idrus, “Introduction: Unpacking Indigeneity in Southeast Asia,” Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia 37 (March 2022), no. 1: 1–26. Other recent discussions include Micah F. Morton, “The Rising Politics of Indigeneity in Southeast Asia,” Trends in Southeast Asia 14 (2017), and Ian G. Baird, “Introduction: Indigeneity in Asia: an emerging but contested concept”, Asian Ethnicity 17, no. 4 (2016): 501–505.


The term “Familiar Others” owes a debt to the research of Heidi Arbuckle, whose concept of the “internal Other” in the work of the artist Emiria Sunassa has been influential for this project. See Heidi Arbuckle, “Performing Emiria Sunassa: Reframing the Female Subject in Post/colonial Indonesia,” (PhD Diss., The University of Melbourne, 2011): 145–185.
of modernist primitivism, Ruth B. Philips has also argued for a more robust distinction between “a negative sociological primitivism and a positive aesthetic primitivism,” in Ruth B. Phillips, “Aesthetic primitivism revisited: The global diaspora of ‘primitive art’ and the rise of Indigenous modernisms,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015): 1–25. However, the validity of this position is difficult to accept, given that the celebratory aspects of aesthetic primitivism were often supported by or even reiterated the same stereotypes that made up the elements of sociological primitivism. It is thus difficult to support any revisionist position on primitivism per se, and perhaps the most that can be proposed is to review its specific functions in contexts other than the Euro-American.

6 Antliff and Leighton, op. cit., 217.
9 As cited and translated in Arbuckle, op. cit., 169.
10 Arbuckle’s complex and comprehensive research on Emiria’s contested biography appears throughout Arbuckle, op. cit.
11 Arbuckle, op. cit., 1.
12 Ibid., 5.
13 *Exhibition of Paintings by Emiria Sunassa at Van Heutz Boulevard no. 1 Djacarta, 1946*, unpublished exhibition brochure, as found in RKD—Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Amsterdam. Many thanks to Horikawa Lisa for sharing this document from her own research.
14 Arbuckle assessed, based largely on oral history research and some published interviews with Emiria, that there were two competing narratives of Emiria’s history: that she was descended from the Sultan of Tidore, or that she was from the Manoppo-Parera family in Minahasa, See Arbuckle, op. cit., 146–150. However, in documents newly uncovered by Anissa Rahadiningtyas during the research for this exhibition, Emiria herself actually reconciled these two narratives in her correspondence with the Dutch government, sent from Singapore on 21 July 1960. There, Emiria claimed that her mother was Patimah Poetri Al ‘Alam, a descendant of Sultan Nuku (Sultan Mabus Aminuddin Syah, r. 1797–1805), and that her father was Sahajuan Alting or Iskandar Sahajuan (Sultan of Tidore, r. 1894–1905). Emiria’s letter further explained that after her mother passed when giving birth to her, Emiria was...
adopted by the family of F.J. Parera-Manoppo and was given the name Emma Wilhelmina Parera. See correspondence in the file Aanspraken van Emiria Sunassa op Nederlands Nieuw-Guinea, 1960, inv. number: 14857, Collection 2.05.118, Inventaris van het code-archief van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1955–1964, Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Netherlands. While these narratives are reconciled in her letter, it does not necessarily mean that these claims are substantiated.

15 These claims by the Tidore Sultanate were also accepted by the Dutch, who recognised them by treaty in 1828. Rutherford, however, suggests that these claims were “somewhat dubious” and that the authority of the Sultanate was not always apparent in practice. See Danilyn Rutherford, Living in the Stone Age: Reflections on the Origins of a Colonial Fantasy (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9–11.


19 Penders, op. cit., 55–87; Rutherford, op. cit., 69–89.


23 In the case of Emiria Sunassa’s works, the painting Panen Damar (Rosin Harvest)—a title of unknown origin that was used at the
point of acquisition—was revealed during conservation to have a title written on the back of the artwork, apparently inscribed by the artist: *Mengoempoel Damar Tedore*, or *Gathering Resin at Tidore*. This also allows the artwork to be conclusively identified as one of the paintings shown in Emiria’s 1946 solo exhibition in Jakarta. That resin was a trade good in the Tidore-Papua region is mentioned by Penders, op. cit., 107.

24 See comments of this nature by the important writers on Indonesian art, like Kusnadi and Sudjojono, cited in Dirgantoro, op. cit., 82–83.


30 Biographical information on Masferré here is based on the extensive interviews with the artist and biography by Gladys Montgomery Jones, “Eduardo Masferré,” in Jill Gale de Villa, Maria Teresa Garcia Farr and Gladys Montgomery Jones, eds., *E Masferré, People of the Philippine Cordillera, Photographs 1934–1956* (Manila: Devon IP Inc., 1988), 6–11.


33 Montgomery Jones, op. cit., 10. This was likely linked to the pejorative uses that images of Cordilleran peoples had been put to by the previous generation of colonial photographers like Worcester, see Rice, *Fantasy Islands*, 62-117.

34 Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr and Montgomery Jones,, op. cit., 152–3. A similar caption is also given in the later catalogue, emphasising
that the figure is “armed”: In Search of the Native: Photographs by Max Dupain and Eduardo Masferré and their contemporaries (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2001), 2.

35 The emphasis on the respectful quality of Masferré’s approach is present throughout in Gale de Villa, Garcia Farr and Montgomery Jones, op. cit. More critical assessments can be found in Ma. Luisa B. Aguilar-Cariño, “Eduardo Masferré and the Philippine Cordillera”, Philippine Studies 42, no. 3 (Third Quarter 1994): 336–351 and Vicuña Gonzalez, “Headhunter Itineraries,” which specifically mentions the link to Sagada-based tourism.

36 Vicuña Gonzalez, op. cit., 159.


40 Yeh Chi Wei, “Artist’s Preface”, 62–63.

41 Lee Kean Yau, “The Oriental Allure of Yeh Chi Wei’s Oils: Painterly Elements of Traditional Chinese Literati Paintings,” in ed. Yeo Wei Wei, op. cit., 104–111. It can also be noted that Yeh Chi Wei’s interest in archaic scripts and antiquarianism was not isolated: this was a rising cultural preoccupation in Chinese culture during the Republican Period. In fact, the structure and approach of this kind of antiquarianism ran parallel with and can be connected to an internal discourse of primitivism in China, see Sarah E. Fraser, “Antiquarianism or Primitivism: The Edge of History in the Modern Chinese Imagination”, in, Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture, ed. Wu Hung, (Chicago: The Center for the Arts of East Asia, University of Chicago, 2010), 342-67.

42 Ye Zhiwei huaji [ Yeh Chi Wei Exhibition Catalogue] (Singapore, 1969) n.p. The English translation is taken from the original publication.

43 According to Yeh Chi Wei’s son, Yeh Toh Yen, the ceramics were purchased from Sarawak via a cousin who was a trader in the area. This is consistent with remarks made by ceramics scholar Barbara Harrison, who wrote that many communities in Borneo had begun to trade their ceramics with outsiders by the 1960s and 1970s. See Barbara Harrison, Pusaka: Heirloom Jars of Borneo (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1.

44 Harrison, op. cit., 23–27.

46 O’Connor, op. cit., 402, 405. O’Connor uses the phrase “the shock of recognition” in describing this affinity.


49 Ooi, op. cit., 215.

50 Ibid., 231.
