

Yee I-Lann and Sabahan weavers' artwork *Tanahairku* #002 (2020). — ANDY CHIA



## From the heart, for Sabah

Contemporary artist Yee I-Lann's exhibition in Kota Kinabalu celebrates tradition, people and what it means to be home.

By **ROUWEN LIN**  
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

IF there is going to be a soundtrack for contemporary artist Yee I-Lann's *Borneo Heart* exhibition in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, a Top 20 list of local karaoke favourites would certainly hit the spot.

In fact, it feels like we already have one foot in the door, with one of the large-scale *tikar* (woven mats) works here featuring lyrics pieced together from well-loved tunes like Kimin Mudin's *Sayang Kinabalu*,

Jokteo Akang's *Proton Saga Kelabu* and Justin Lusah's *Jambatan Tamparuli*.

This particular artwork is titled *Dusun Karaoke Mat: Ahaid Zou Noh Doiti (I've Been Here A Long Time)*, a split bamboo pus weave mat by Lili Naming, Siat Yanau and Shahrizan Juin, three weavers from Keningau in Sabah.

"When you read the words, they recall very popular songs and you can't help but sing them in your head – or out loud. These hugely popular songs act as a form of resistance to the homogenising influ-

ence of West Malaysian popular culture," says Yee, 49, in an email.

"There was a time in the 1970s when these songs, and local vernacular languages, were discouraged from airplay in an effort to 'Malaysianise' Sabah popular culture. I want to celebrate the diversity we bring to Malaysian sounds," she adds.

The Sabahan artist lived and worked in Kuala Lumpur from 1994 to 2016, before returning to her hometown in KK, where she is currently based.



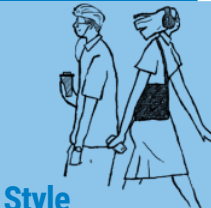





She relates how her time in KL was an

"incredibly enriching" period, in terms of experiences, learning and friendships, but the call home only became stronger with time.

"I have travelled back and forth for over two decades, but by 2016 I was buying one-way tickets home and finding less and less reason to be in KL. Eventually, I just didn't return to KL; it was time for me to re-learn being at home in Sabah," she shares.

> SEE PAGE 3

### WHAT'S IN STARLIFESTYLE

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	Enquiries
 <p><b>Tech</b> Editor <b>Madhavan M</b> madhavan@thestar.com.my</p>	 <p><b>Culture/ Ecowatch</b> Editor <b>Daryl Goh</b> daryl@thestar.com.my</p>	 <p><b>Style</b> Editor <b>Dzireena Mahadzir</b> dzireena@thestar.com.my</p>	 <p><b>Showbiz</b> Senior Editor <b>Gordon Kho</b> gordon@thestar.com.my</p>  <p><b>CarSifu</b> Editor <b>Hong Boon How</b> hong@thestar.com.my</p>	 <p><b>Family/ Living/Senior</b> Editor <b>S. Indramalar</b> indra@thestar.com.my</p>	 <p><b>Travel</b> Editor <b>Melody L. Goh</b> mulau@thestar.com.my</p>	 <p><b>Food/Spaces</b> Assistant Editor, Food <b>Abirami Durai</b> abirami@thestar.com.my Chief Reporter, Spaces <b>Wong Li Za</b> wongliza@thestar.com.my</p>	<p><b>Enquiries</b> <b>Ivy Soon</b> Deputy Executive Editor, StarLifestyle ivy@thestar.com.my</p> <p><b>Advertising</b> <b>Belinda Lim</b> adv@thestar.com.my</p> <p>@StarLifestyleMy @StarLifestyleMY</p>





Left: Yee and weavers' *Tepo Aniya Nombor Na (Mat With A Number)*, a Bajau Sama DiLaut pandanus weave with commercial chemical dye. – ANDY CHIA

A close-up of the *7-Headed Lalandau Hat* (split bamboo pus weave with kayu obol black natural dye, matt sealant, 2020). – ISAAC COLLARD

> FROM PAGE 1

As a global Malaysian, Yee has an extensive international profile, exhibiting widely in museums in Asia, Europe, the United States, and Australia. This includes two retrospective exhibitions: *Fluid World*, a 2011 survey of her major works at Adelaide's Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia; and *Yee I-Lann: 2005-2016* at the Ayala Museum in Manila, the Philippines.

In this "homecoming" show in KK, Yee returns – very lovingly – to her roots. The works in *Borneo Heart* draws on the local concepts of the "tamu" (farmer's market) and the "tikar" (mat) – one a place where communities from the hills, plains, river and sea meet to trade resources and stories, and the other a shared everyday object, made communally and often used in much the same spirit.

Yee notes that while traditionally, most weavers are women, the men do also weave, especially heavier bamboo for architectural use. There are two men in the team of weavers she works with – Shahrizan and Juraen Sapirin.

"This body of work is deeply collaborative, made primarily with Dusun Murut weavers in Keningau and Bajau Sama DiLaut weavers in Pulau Omadal near Semporna. It is hard to convey the experience of

three, nearly four years, of collaborating with the weavers with words. It has been life changing. I feel like they have given me the gift of a mat and thus a community," she says.

*Borneo Heart*, held at the newly opened Sabah International Convention Centre in KK, is spread across two two annexes connected by a wide plaza in front of the main building. This is Yee's first major presentation in her hometown since her return.

Selected works will travel to a larger solo exhibition at the Centre For Heritage, Arts And Textile (CHAT) in Hong Kong, from August to November.

While there are plans to bring the exhibition to KL (later in the year, or early 2022), it is vital to Yee that it is first shown to a home audience in Sabah.

"It is very much about homeland and coming home. I made this for Sabah. I want to celebrate 'us' and the immense creativity and skill I have had the privilege of encountering here.

"Conceptually, the exhibition also

draws from local knowledge, local philosophies and local socio-political structures. Sabah is culturally and historically rich with storytelling for an artist like me to draw from.

"Sabah has always been present in my art practise but with this exhibition, my homeland is front and centre," she says.

Prior to *Borneo Heart*, Yee's last major show in Malaysia was *Boogeyman*, which was held at Black Box at MAPKL in 2010.

In 2019, Yee's *Tikar-A-Gagah* project, with the help of Sabahan weavers, was one of National Gallery Singapore's *Outbound* series of unique artwork commissions by leading artists from around the world.

### It takes a village

The *Borneo Heart* exhibit, produced by Yee with curatorial and project management support from the RogueArt team, includes a multi-mat installation, large-scale mats, photo-media based works and video performance works.

There is *Rasa Sayang*, a photo-media essay that was a decade in the making. Yee, primarily known for her photomedia-based practice, has added several more compelling layers to her storytelling told through art.

This project, which ended up being Yee's take on making "slow art", commenced in 2012 and was completed this year. It is made up of images of hugs, with each denoting a letter in the alphabet. Collectively, the "text" spells out messages that march across the wall.

Another highlight at the exhibition is the colourful *Tikar Reben*, measuring over 62m in length and looping from floor to ceiling. You can also watch a video that shows it being unfurled across and above the ocean, like a bridge that connects people, knowledge and tradition.

Stretching across one wall is *Tikar/Meja*, comprising 60 Bajau Sama DiLaut mats, each with the image of a table woven into the motif.



Yee conducting a tour of the *Borneo Heart* exhibition. – INTAN MUNIRAH HAMZAH

## Staying connected, virtually

EVEN if the pandemic and the movement control order have stopped many art lovers nationwide from flying over to Sabah to catch Yee I-Lann's *Borneo Heart* exhibition, there is always the virtual option of the show to give you a taste of the action.

The recently launched website [borneoheart.yeeilann.com](http://borneoheart.yeeilann.com) offers the masses a glimpse of the colourful exhibition, with curatorial notes, artist reflections, videos,

archive material and also an online shop called Kedai KerbauWorks, which has a range of community-based products – tepo Pulau Omadal, "topi" Keningau, KerbauWorks T-shirts, aprons and patches, products by AVVASI, WAPO and Venice Foo. There's also a guest stall by KeTAMU selling rice by Wagas Dati – to give visitors a contemporary/traditional Sabahan arts and culture fix.

In front of *Tikar/Meja* is a woven sculpture of a seven-headed "lalandau", linked by woven tubes. On its own, this headgear is part of the ceremonial dress for the Murut men, traditionally known as fierce, brave headhunting warriors.

The accompanying performance video, *Pangkis*, is a collaboration with Tagaps Dance Theatre, with choreography by Mohd Azizan Danial Abdullah. It was shot by Al Hanafi Juhar of Huntwo Studios.

"It is a dramatic sci-fi-esque performance-based video artwork that rocks my world," says Yee.

The name *Pangkis* comes from the triumphant warrior cry, which can be found in traditional Kadazan Dusun rituals and dance.

"Linguistics plays a major role in my approach in making these works, whether through local vernacular languages, legible motifs, iconic song lyrics or even the call of a gong and yell of the 'pangkis'.

"Despite the diversity of medium, all these works draw on a kind of guttural local knowledge, meaning quintessential knowledge that comes from deep familiarity of a place and ancestral 'mother-tongue', if you like," she adds.

For visitors to *Borneo Heart*, which ends on May 30, Yee runs an exhibition tour three times a week: every Wednesday (2pm), Saturday and Sunday (11am).

"Each tour is about two hours long and in many ways, like a performance lecture as I talk about each artwork, the context of the artwork and the collaborators. It covers very broad ground," she says.

Yee is currently a board member of Forever Sabah and Tamparuli Living Arts Centre (TaLAC) and a co-founding partner of KOTA-K Studio in Tanjung Aru in KK.



Yee's exhibition is a testament that the arts, no matter where, belongs to everyone and needs everyone's support to thrive. – CHRISTA UNGKAS