

A text by Shubigi Rao in response to artworks by  
Tuan Mami, Maryanto and Cole Sternberg

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# UNTETHERED LANDSCAPES





# **Untethered Landscapes**

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We think of land, whether scape or mass, as fixed, plottable and firmly tethered to our Earth. We think of land as thing, not phase. But our planet is a microcosm of densely packed time, holding in its strata every accident, incident, upheaval, motion, and collision.



Tuan Mami  
 Frozen Lakes, 2017  
 Soil, rock dust, cement, wild plants  
 Various dimensions

Current continents were once islands, vast floating landmasses breaking

apart, Pangea becoming Gondwanaland, the latter becoming India, pushing smaller unfortunate island strings out of its way, on its inexorable drift northwards to ram into Asia.

The scar of that prehistoric collision is the Himalayas, which is where I grew up and where I found my first ammonite. Imprint, fossil of a prehistoric marine animal carried on that remorseless migration, 50 million years ago, marooned 3000 metres above sea level.



Tuan Mami  
In One's Breath, 2017  
Six-channel video installation  
30 seconds on loop

I remember reading about it as a child, being fascinated with its annihilation in 1883. Too young to fully comprehend the dreadful loss of life, I was captivated instead by the factoids that accompanied it, like the way its explosions were heard halfway around the world; that weather patterns were disrupted by clouds of dust, ash that orbited the globe, and that the shock waves circled the planet seven times; that spectacular sunsets were visible all around the Earth for a year, and in the British Isles, those sunsets would be captured by landscape painters.



The summit of Everest, the highest point on Earth, is composed of marine corals and limestone. The tectonic plates are still moving, and they were what triggered the deadly explosion of Krakatoa, which in turn sent its dust to circumnavigate the globe. Volcanic eruptions destroy in an instant, as they did in this case.

Cole Sternberg  
a quick dive to a decent depth, 2017  
Mixed media on linen  
183 x 203 cm

Untethered Landscapes



Untethered Landscapes

Charles Darwin recognised that in the Tahitian reefs, and wrote his first scientific treatise on it. But before him was Johann Reinhold Forster, who had a century earlier recognised that the atoll rings that lay just below the surface of the ocean, visible and fragile, were built solely of tiny animalcules, coral and other calcareous creatures that lay their foundations on the ocean floor, miniscule organisms growing in rings as bulwark against the ocean, tenaciously growing in layer upon layer, endeavouring for millennia to reach the light.



Cole Sternberg  
2017  
Production still  
Photo credit: Sujo Offield



Cole Sternberg  
are the green fields gone?, 2015  
Production still  
Photo credit: Cole Sternberg

The highest mountains on earth were once shoreline. The Great Barrier Reef is mountain, submerged. *Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru.* Even dust, piled up, becomes a mountain.



Tuan Mami  
Breath – In & Out, 2018  
Automatic engine, rock dust  
40 x 60 cm (height x diameter)

If the geology of a landscape is compressed time, then its creatures are the offspring of migration and place. Breeding on its surface are the peculiar offshoots of its self-containment in space, bombarded by cosmic radiation, and whatever stray embryonic pods the wind and waves, deposits of guano and even a spade may bring.

In a book from my childhood, I read an account by Sir John Hooker who, leading an exploration party on “a lonely uninhabited land at the other side off the world”, found some common English chickweed. Following the patches of the plant, they came upon a mound covered in it. The mound was the grave of an English sailor who had died at sea; and Hooker realised that the chickweed seeds had probably been carried across vast oceans and transplanted by the gravedigger’s spade. Whether teeming or barren, the animated inhabitants of a landscape are as much a product of its anomalous inner geography, its latitude and the ceaseless transplanting of dispersed seeds, carried on the waves and the wind, on the soles of shoes and blades of spades, radiation both cosmic and terrestrial.



Maryanto  
Karimun Jawa Mangrove, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
180 x 120 cm



Maryanto  
Terragouging, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
100 x 200 cm

Every one of us born after the 1950s, the age of intensive nuclear testing, carries in our bodies the memory of those tests. During the eight-year period between 1955 and 1963, atomic bomb tests resulted in a doubling of carbon-14 in our atmosphere, to be

absorbed by the soil, then into plants, and on into animals and humans, becoming quite ironically, a way to map our modern Achilles heel. Every single tree, everywhere on this planet, that existed in 1954 carries a ‘spike’, a memory of those atomic bombs. There is no inviolable landscape. The inner landscape of our planet is essentially a fission reactor, slowly releasing radioactive isotopes, the energy from its slow decay keeping its core molten, sustaining all life. This dense globe holds within it the knowledge of the progression of all life, extinct and extant. It is totality hot-housed, a blip in the immensity of time, an oddity floating in immeasurable space.



Maryanto preparing his wall mural for Europalia, International Arts Festival held in 2017 at BOZAR, Brussels

*“In the continuum of landscape, mountains are discontinuity—culminating in high points, natural barriers, unearthly earth.”<sup>23</sup>*

The general instability of our planet is reflected in the mutability of landscapes, rendering them risky propositions, even when deemed to be of strategic importance. “Every [North Korean] artist at some time in their life paints two mountains”<sup>24</sup>—Mount Paekdu, homeland of the Korean revolution, and Mount Kungangsan, which overlaps the borders of North and South Korea, a symbol of schism and sameness. The territorial claims of nations can find easy scapegoats on even rocky outcrops barely large enough to hold a flag-wielding human. We creep closer to our enemies with our reclamations and reshaping of shorelines, foreign sand and soil suffocating coral reefs that never emerged to make it to island status, terraforming the sea into temporary submission. Ours is the story of terrestrial warring with the planet, gouging it with our quarrels and quarries, as restless, shiftless and mutable as our landscapes.



Tuan Mami  
Mountain No. 2, 2018  
Soil, rock, moss, automatic motion sensor  
25 x 27 cm  
Photo by: Phan Ngoc Tho

All lands are in flux, and this is evident in our attempts to map them. No site is measurable with absolute certainty, politically, geographically and cartographically speaking. From the earliest maps that charted the vanities and yearnings of its cartographers and empires, to the failure of our familiar Mercator’s map to measure continents with comparative accuracy, all atlases are poor attempts to fix, to pin down the shape-shifting landscape. The Mercator projection may depict rhumb lines and equatorial masses with fair accuracy, though it distorts greatly as we move towards the poles. The Gall-Peters map is more accurate, with Peters going so far as to label the Mercator projection a form of “cartographic imperialism”. However, even the Gall-Peters map fails at distance fidelity. Currently, no known map can accurately preserve distance and size uniformly; and so all our projections, our plots and plans, our charts and cartographies are ultimately futile, leaving us with only the poetic and the painted.

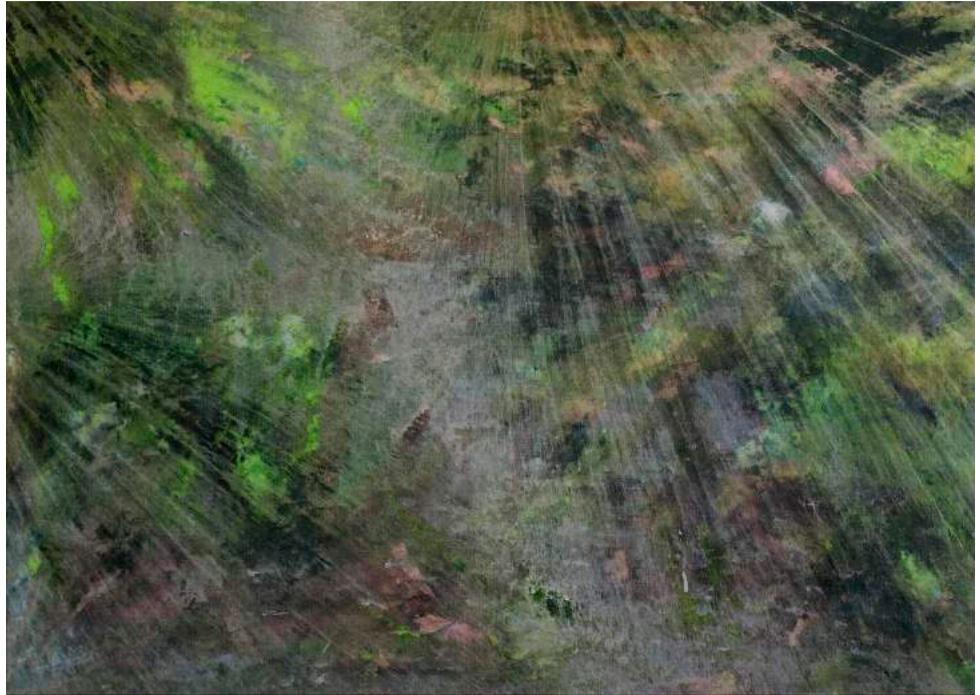


Tuan Mami  
Mountain No. 1, 2018  
Soil, rock, moss, automatic motion sensor  
25 x 24 cm  
Photo by: Phan Ngoc Tho



Tuan Mami  
Mountain No. 3, 2018  
Soil, rock, moss, automatic motion sensor  
30 x 30 cm  
Photo by: Phan Ngoc Tho

Landscape painting then becomes a way to tether, to create a fixable frame in which the landscape is bounded, yet sublime, and is also appreciate-able. As a genre, it is one of inheritability, where the real is not necessarily relevant, but the tradition of awe, sublimity, form, mass, lightness and reflection are paramount. It carries within it the burden of our grappling with the natural realm, the tempestuous and the tamed, the pastoral and the modern. Embedded within it are all the connotations of ownership—whether that of home, nation or colonising souvenir. To see the landscape in the singular is to be aware of the racialist, ethnographic and anthropologic device employed when speculating upon the unfamiliar and unknown.



Cole Sternberg  
algae exploration, 2017  
Mixed media on linen  
122 x 173 cm

It is a reduction of the disorder and divergence of teeming, unruly life to a signifying specific as representation of the native, the observed, the other. But all our conquered lands eventually fall, and all the great monuments are but melancholic memorials of crumbled civilisations. Our lands are loams of dead cells, compostheaps and graveyards. Every mountain, monument of man, comes to dust.



Maryanto  
Story of Space, 2017  
Installation view at Yeo Workshop,  
Gillman Barracks, Singapore



Maryanto at work on a wall mural

Our described landscapes are dangerous, embodying all the markers of our identities, whether mapped, walled, plotted or painted. Every described landscape betrays our blind spots, our ideological entanglements and knotted roots, the vicious thickets of our jostling existence on a surface that is never ours. More than borrowed time, our species exists on borrowed lands, and though we bury deep that knowledge, instead laying our claims with deeds and records, songs, anthems, pledges and paintings, no land is truly ours, and we are of no land.

### **Cole Sternberg**

Cole Sternberg (b. 1979, United States of America) creates poetic paintings, installations, video works, and texts that focus on a range of social issues. His subtle and subversive works elegantly address humanity and its impact on social progression and development. They demonstrate an interest in current issues surrounding human rights activism and its relationship to the law, the plight of the environment, as well as the media and concepts of content overload.

Sternberg graduated with a BA from Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA, followed by a JD from the American University, Washington College of Law, Washington DC, USA. He recently completed a residency at Art Lab 21, Bonn and Berlin, Germany, and was awarded the GSM Artz Acquisition Award, Zona Maco, Mexico in 2017. Sternberg has recently presented solo exhibitions at MAMA, Berlin, Germany (2017); LAXART, Los Angeles, California, USA (2016); MAMA, Los Angeles, California, USA; ARTed House and MAMA, East Hampton, New York, USA (2015); ARTed House, Wainscott, New York, USA; David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, Colorado, USA (2013); Primary Projects, Caruso Art and Flaunt Magazine, Miami, Florida, USA (2012). He has also recently participated in notable group exhibitions at the Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, Orange, California, USA; the Praz-Delavallade, Los Angeles, California, USA (2018); El Segundo Museum of Art, El Segundo, California, USA (2017); Art in Odd Places, New York, USA; Los Angeles Nomadic Division, Los Angeles, California, USA (2016); MAMA, Los Angeles, California, USA (2014); e105 Gallery, Berlin, Germany (2013); Deutsche Telekom (Detecon), Cologne, Germany (2012); Hochhaus Hansa (Ruhr.2010 Museum), Dortmund, Germany; and Transparenz, Detecon International GmbH (presented by e105 Gallery), Bonn, Germany (2010). Sternberg lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

<sup>1</sup>New Zealand's Custom Control still checks the soles of hiking boots of all tourists at its airports for inadvertent colonising contraband—seeds, burrs and insect eggs.

<sup>2</sup>An adult human tendon doesn't easily regenerate tissue—most of us have tendon tissue from our teens. “What we see in (human) tendons is that they actually have a memory of the bomb pulse,” says Katja Heinemeier, senior researcher at the University of Copenhagen. See ‘Lack of Tissue Renewal in Human Adult Achilles Tendon is Revealed by Nuclear Bomb <sup>14</sup>C’, Katja Maria Heinemeier, Peter Schjerling, Jan Heinemeier, Stig Peter Magnusson and Michael Kjaer. Published online in *The FASEB Journal*, 11 Feb 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1096/fj.12-225599>

<sup>3</sup>Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Verso: 2002

<sup>4</sup>Nicolas Bonner, *Made in North Korea: Graphics from Everyday Life in the DPRK*, London: Phaidon. 2017

## Maryanto

Maryanto (b.1977, Indonesia) creates evocative, black and white paintings, drawings, and installations that undermine the romantic language of traditional landscape painting to examine socio-political structures in the physical spaces that he depicts. Through fable-like and theatrical settings, these landscapes are subjected to the whims of colonisers and capitalists through technological development, industrialisation, pollution of the land and exploitation of its natural resources.

Maryanto graduated from the Faculty of Fine Art, Indonesia Institute of the Art, Yogyakarta in 2005, and completed a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 2013. Maryanto has recently presented solo exhibitions at Yeo Workshop, Singapore (2017 and 2015); Art Basel Hong Kong, Discoveries Section (2016); the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam; ArtAffairs, Amsterdam; and Heden, Den Haag (2013). He has also recently participated in notable group exhibitions at the Koganei Art Spot Chateau, Tokyo (2018); the Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide; the Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju; the Bozar Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels (2017); the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2015); and the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Amsterdam (2013). Maryanto has also been featured at international biennials such as the 2nd Industrial Biennale, Labin, Croatia (2018); the Setouchi Triennale, Naoshima, Japan (2016); the Jakarta and Jogja Biennales, Indonesia (2015); and the Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia (2013). Maryanto lives and works in Yogyakarta.

## Shubigi Rao

Shubigi Rao (b. 1975, India) is an artist and writer who makes layered installations of books, etchings, drawings, pseudo-scientific machines, metaphysical puzzles, video works, ideological board games, and archives. These often immersive and tongue-in-cheek works demonstrate her diverse interests in subjects such as archaeology, neuroscience, libraries, archival systems, histories and lies, literature and violence, ecologies, and natural history. Since 2014, Rao has been visiting libraries and archives globally to gather research for a decade-long film, book, and art project about the history of book destruction, entitled *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*. The first portion of the project, 'Written in the Margins' won the Juror's Choice Award at the APB Signature Prize 2018. The first book from the project has been shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize 2018.

Shubigi Rao graduated from Delhi University, India, in 1996, with a BA (Hons) in English Literature, followed by a BA and MA in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, in 2006 and 2008 respectively. She recently completed a residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany. Rao has recently presented solo exhibitions at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany; National Museum of Singapore (2017–2018); Grey Projects, Singapore; and the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. She has also recently participated in notable group exhibitions at the Villa Vassiliev, Paris, France; Objectifs Gallery, Singapore (2016); DUCTAC, Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore; Curating Lab, NUS Museum, Singapore; Bermondsey Gallery, London, UK (2015); and the Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore. Rao has also been featured at international biennials and festivals such as the 10th Taipei Biennial, Taipei, Taiwan (2016); 3rd Pune Biennale, Pune, India (2017); Singapore en France–Le Festival, France (2015); Digital Arts Festival, Copenhagen, Denmark (2013); 2nd Tehran Annual Digital Art Exhibition (2012), Tehran, Iran; and the 2nd Singapore Biennale, Singapore (2008). Her numerous publications include *Written in the Margins* (2017); *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book; Vol. I of V* (2016); and *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul* (2013). Rao lives and works in Singapore.

## **Tuan Mami**

Tuan Mami (b. 1981, Vietnam) is a multidisciplinary artist who creates installations, video works, as well as performances and conceptual situations. His meditative experiments, daringly performed in both public and private spaces, draw attention to his interests in observing and taking part in dynamics of human encounters. Mami also critiques elements of society and challenges its perceptions.

Tuan Mami studied Graphic Design at the Hanoi Open University in 2002 and graduated from the Hanoi Fine Art University in 2006. He has recently completed residencies at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2016) and the Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju, South Korea (2015). Mami has recently presented solo exhibitions at the Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (2018); Framer Framed, Rotterdam, Netherlands; Heritage Space, Hanoi, Vietnam, (2017); Snail Night, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2016); Nha San Collective, Hanoi, Vietnam; Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery, Chicago, USA; PØST, Los Angeles, USA (2013); Halle 6, Munich, Germany; and Hooyong Performing Arts Centre, Gangwon-do, South Korea (2011). He has also recently participated in notable group exhibitions at Medo Art Space, Vienna, Austria; the Taipei Culture Foundation, Taipei, Taiwan; Art in the Forest Flamingo, Vinh Phuc, Vietnam (2017); Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, UK; MONA Inner Spaces, Poznan, Poland; Meta House, Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2016); and Videotag, Los Angeles, USA (2015). Mami has also been featured at international biennials and festivals such as the Coovum Art Festival, Chennai, India (2015), Changwon Sculpture Biennale, Changwon, South Korea (2014); In-Act International Performance Event, Hanoi, Vietnam (2011); the 3rd Beyond Pressure Performances Festival, Yangon, Myanmar (2010); and the National Contemporary Art Festival, Hanoi, Vietnam (2007). Mami lives and works in Hanoi, Vietnam.

