



Maryanto, Coal port 2023, scratching on photo paper, 20 x 25 cm

แผ่นดิน/Tanah/Land

Surajate Tongchua and Maryanto

10 June – 22 July 2022

Curated by Haisang Javanalikhikara and John Cruthers

16albermarle Project Space acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We pay our respects to elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

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Haisang Javanalikhikara

The joint exhibition *แผ่นดิน/Tanah/Land* presents recent bodies of work by two southeast Asian artists, Surajate Tongchua (b 1986) from Chiang Mai, Thailand and Maryanto (b 1977) from Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Both artists critically engage with ideas of land, the environment and political authority in the region.

Chiang Mai and Yogyakarta share several similarities. Both are small cities surrounded by stunning nature, and each has a nationally prominent art school – Chiang Mai University and Institut Seni Indonesia – producing many artists coming from all over each country. They are cities with strong artistic communities that have matured greatly in recent decades, and each is known as a pioneer in socially-engaged art practices. Even though they are small cities, artists are drawn to them from all over the world as places where art is central to life.

Surajate Tongchua is becoming recognised in the Thai art scene for his application of contemporary artistic craftsmanship to the task of interlinking the socio-political with personal narratives. *แผ่นดิน/Tanah/Land* opens with a work from his previous series, *PRICELESS*, leading to works on paper and digital prints on rayon from his current series, *Lying Mountains*. *PRICELESS (DayDay) No 1 2021* is a mixed media work on canvas outlining a black mountainous landscape at the base of the painting which anchors a field of criss-crossed shredded paper. The shredded and collaged sheets of paper used were originally documents completed by Tongchua's own family to account for their daily living expenses, a Thai government requirement for all citizens. In the work Tongchua enacts a silent protest against this government and their seizure of power in 2014, using their own documents as ammunition. What does the government do with taxpayers' money?

Mountains themselves have become more clearly the main visual motif in the *Lying Mountains* series. One of the inspirations for the series was 'Common Sense', a pamphlet written in 1775-1776 by Thomas Paine that advocated strongly and directly for America's independence from Great Britain. Asked about mountains and their meaning to him, Tongchua comments that from a distance they look grand, majestic and powerful. But climb a mountain and at the top you will find not grandeur but simple earth, similar to that found at any other location.

Their material quality is an important aspect in Tongchua's works. His prints on rayon of mountainous landscapes were first exhibited in a group exhibition *Panic World*, an initiative of the 'Art for Air' project that explored the issue of smog in Thailand, especially in the north. He sourced these landscapes from Google Earth, where the images are still green – although as Tongchua drily observes, not anymore in reality. Most mountains in the *Lying Mountain* series do not directly refer to existing mountains as comparisons. However, in the rayon prints, the mountains are those of the Shan State in Myanmar, which is closely connected to the north of Thailand. Smog in Thailand comes from agriculture in Myanmar, supported by Thai investors, where farming practices involve burning fields every year. These works have the sub-title of "Visit your Neighbour every Summer" – whatever we do will always come back to us. When first exhibited, the transparency of the rayon material suggested curtains that can be looked through to the windows behind, the transparency encouraging the viewer to see the situation more clearly.



Lying Mountain no 18 2023, 200 x 100 cm, (installation view) mixed media drawing on handmade paper



The simplicity and connectedness of mountains and drawings are central to these works. A mountain is one of the earliest images a child learns to draw. Draw two straight lines joined at the top and a mountain appears. Therefore, mountains on paper are a basic form going back to the fundamentals of drawing.

The papers used in the *Lying Mountains* series were developed by the artist working with a paper studio to get the right texture and absorbency of paint. The resulting works include both small scale drawings and large two-metre high works, complex and textured. Each work has its own visual impact that the artist has thought through regardless of the size. While stories lead, visual images also come through the materials he experiments with. The two-metre high works echo Asian art, particularly the Chinese way of depicting landscape vertically instead of horizontally. This visualisation suggests the belief that power comes from the sky to the ground.

Each work contrasts the massive forms of mountains with ephemeral clouds and freeform linear outlines. They are intimate and human, and the hand of the artist is strongly felt. The mountains have no ground, they become detached and float on the white ground, suggesting a certain rootlessness or dissolution of structures. Mountains in all the works seen here are without the ground. Tongchua stated that in a way, these floating mountains represent the authorities who abuse their power and recognise themselves as being above all beings. They find themselves getting away from both moral and legal codes.

Another reading of the mountains and the land represented in his works can be about equality. At times, some Thai people liken themselves to earth when referring to the monarchy with the phrase “ใต้ฝ่าละอองธุลีพระบาท” meaning the dirt underneath one’s feet. However, this saying might be misinterpreted by people. It may come from a Buddhist root instead and has nothing to do with the hierarchy.¹ Regardless of this, land can be reckoned as the highest of all. When asked “What does แผ่นดิน mean to you?” Tongchua replied “Equality: everything comes from land”.

Image above: Surajate Tongchua, *Lying Mountain (Visiting Neighbours in the Summer)* 2023, 150 x 900 cm, computer graphic illustration (mixed details from original drawing) digital print on chiffon (installation view Numthong Project Space, Bangkok)



Surajate Tongchua, *Lying Mountain no 18* 2023 (detail), 200 x 100 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper

Maryanto is an Indonesian artist with a background in printmaking, with which he continues to work closely but not exclusively. Most of the artworks in *แผ่นดิน/Tanah/Land* are from a new body of work, *When the Tree Falls*, that featured in the platform 'Bawwaba/Against Disappearance', curated by Vipash Purichanont at Art Dubai in February 2023. In this series, he created paintings and installations that examine socio-political structures through the depiction of the landscapes of Kalimantan and the distress wrought on it by the introduction of palm oil.

Expanding on his past research into sites of exploitation in Indonesia such as volcanic sand mining around Mount Merapi and oil dredging in Wonocolo, East Java, Maryanto continues to bring attention to environmental issues in his country. In the series he explores the rampant development of palm oil plantations in South Kalimantan and the gradual encroachment onto its forests as a result. At the same time, he touches on the themes of transmigration, ownership and capitalism. While Maryanto does not set out to frame his practice as environmental activism, his works can be considered as aspirational: bringing public awareness to issues that he is otherwise not able to change on his own.

Extensive on-site research is crucial for Maryanto's artistic practice. When he takes an interest in an issue, he starts working with the story, collecting narratives and information. He stays with communities for days; some research projects need more than one trip to be realised. He hikes and camps at ground level to see and experience forests, mangroves, mining and agriculture to put together a full picture. In addition he interviewing local people as well as gathering additional archival materials. Often he starts first with drawing, then digs deeper into his collected research, news and other documentation. Along the way he composes and works on selected images and the shape of his story gradually emerges.

Maryanto's interest in issues around landscape, nature and humanity comes from the influences of friends and community. But it is also personal: he loves being surrounded by nature and is fascinated by what he calls its charisma. Maryanto does not recognise himself as an activist but he has been involved in community activism. It began during his early years as an artist, when he worked with NGOs in programs with children in communities. He saw problematic situations developing with the landscape, and became curious about how the landscape was changing. What was the story before and after the disruption? What pushes humans to do such things to interfere with the environment much too violently?

Maryanto uses a range of media and techniques for the series *When the Tree Falls*. Primarily he employs a black scraperboard technique to create large scale paintings depicting the devastation of the landscape cleared for palm oil, and smaller scraperboard works tellingly contrasting traditional lifestyles in the area with the palm oil development itself. As mentioned, he has years of practice in printmaking and was one of the initiators of print studios in Yogyakarta. Mediums like black scraperboard painting employ a trace of his printmaking skills, related to woodcut or etching, of taking out the surface instead of adding in. The small black scraperboard works are developed from black photographic paper he has specially made, then dampens so the surface is easily scratched.



Maryanto, *Sand Miner Bivouac* 2021, scratching, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 200 cm



Maryanto, *On the ground under the trees* 2020, acrylic on canvas, dimensions variable (installation view, Yeo Workshop, Singapore)



Maryanto agrees that his technique is nothing new. In fact, he found this technique when he was a child in the age of analogue photography. For his larger works on canvas, he starts with layers of white gesso on blank canvas to build up a thick surface, then paints over it with black acrylic paint to create the 'ground' into which he scratches the design by a reduction technique. For Maryanto, removing areas of the black surface to reveal the white gesso below is like adding light to the dark. Using this process, he discovers something and brings it to light. At the same time he has conversations in his mind, in dialogue with himself in the process of drawing. The finished works are all black and white; even the grey is not grey, but a stipple of tiny lines and dots he painstakingly creates by scratching away the black surface.

Primarily Maryanto's artworks are in black and white. To him, black and white images somehow tell a story more directly, without the distraction of colour. Also, black and white is the basic palette of drawing and some printmaking techniques. Having said that, he also explores other mediums, and with some he works with colour. In *When the Tree Falls*, he also employs embroidery, video and poster to reveal different aspects of his subject. There are different narratives in

each work he makes in a series. The way stories are read is also different. Smaller works are put together to be a part of a larger composite work, various stories to express the whole idea. For bigger works, the whole story is already there.

แผ่นดิน/Tanah/Land shows not only how both artists explore authoritarian structures like monarchy, government and capitalism and their abuse of the land, but also raise an important question - who owns the land? Individual land is owned by individuals. But what about public land, or land in general? How can it be protected, how can it be lifted up, how can it be useful to people equally? Visually, works here convey positive and negative criticism. They heighten the collected sense, burden and heaviness but speak with multiple voices which somehow enrich and empower the viewers.

¹<http://blog.bru.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/%E0%B9%83%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%9D%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%98%E0%B8%B8%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B5%E0%B8%9E%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%97.pdf>

Image above: Maryanto, *Customary forest area* 2023, scratching on photo paper, 20 x 25 cm

Surajate Tongchua



Surajate Tongchua (b 1986, Thailand) is currently based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He graduated from the Department of Print Making, Faculty of Fine Art at Chiang Mai University in 2010. Tongchua's practice focuses on social power relations that affect state structure (the Organic crisis). Such critical concepts and philosophy of praxis challenge the existing world view, inviting the audience to step away from seeing under the common perception's filter. His conceptual enquiry, which is based on cross-disciplinary knowledge, art, social science, political science and government, has informed his work over the past decade. Tongchua's work reflects sharply on the political situation in Thailand by leaving traces of contention in the field of thought.

Tongchua is interested in contemporary art, conceptual art and installation art, resulting in most of his works utilising multimedia and techniques depending on the issues and content expressed. He applies a strategy of incorporating ready-mades or converting the material into another dimension to openly describe current social phenomena. Alongside his career as an artist, Tongchua lectured at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University from 2011-2015, and co-founded the Bubble Art Space in Chiang Mai in 2018, with the aim of reinforcing participatory and socially engaging art within the site. He is also on the committee for The Land Foundation, which was founded by fellow artist Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Image above: courtesy of the artist

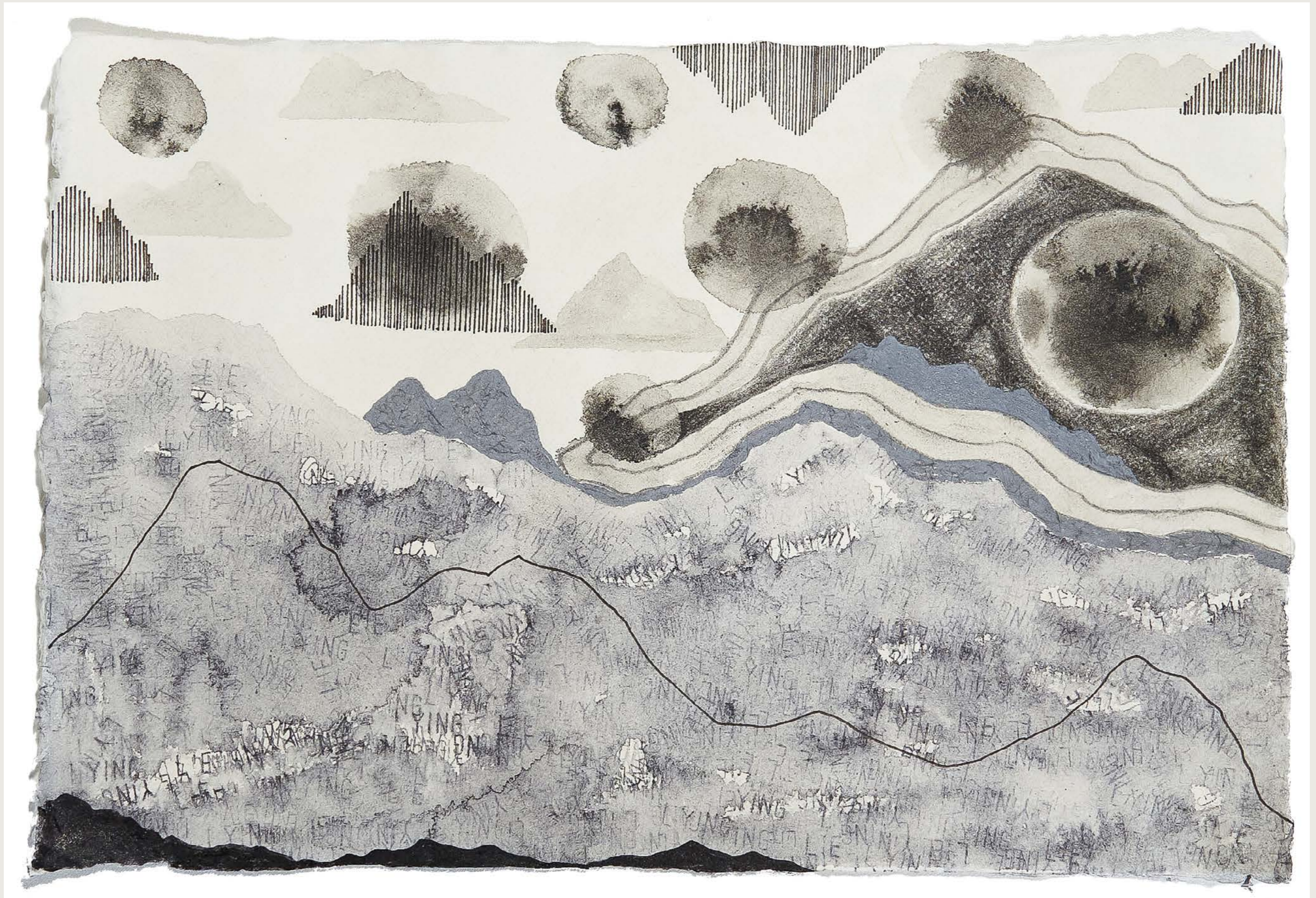


Surajate Tongchua, *Lying Mountain no 17 2023* (detail), 200 x 100 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper

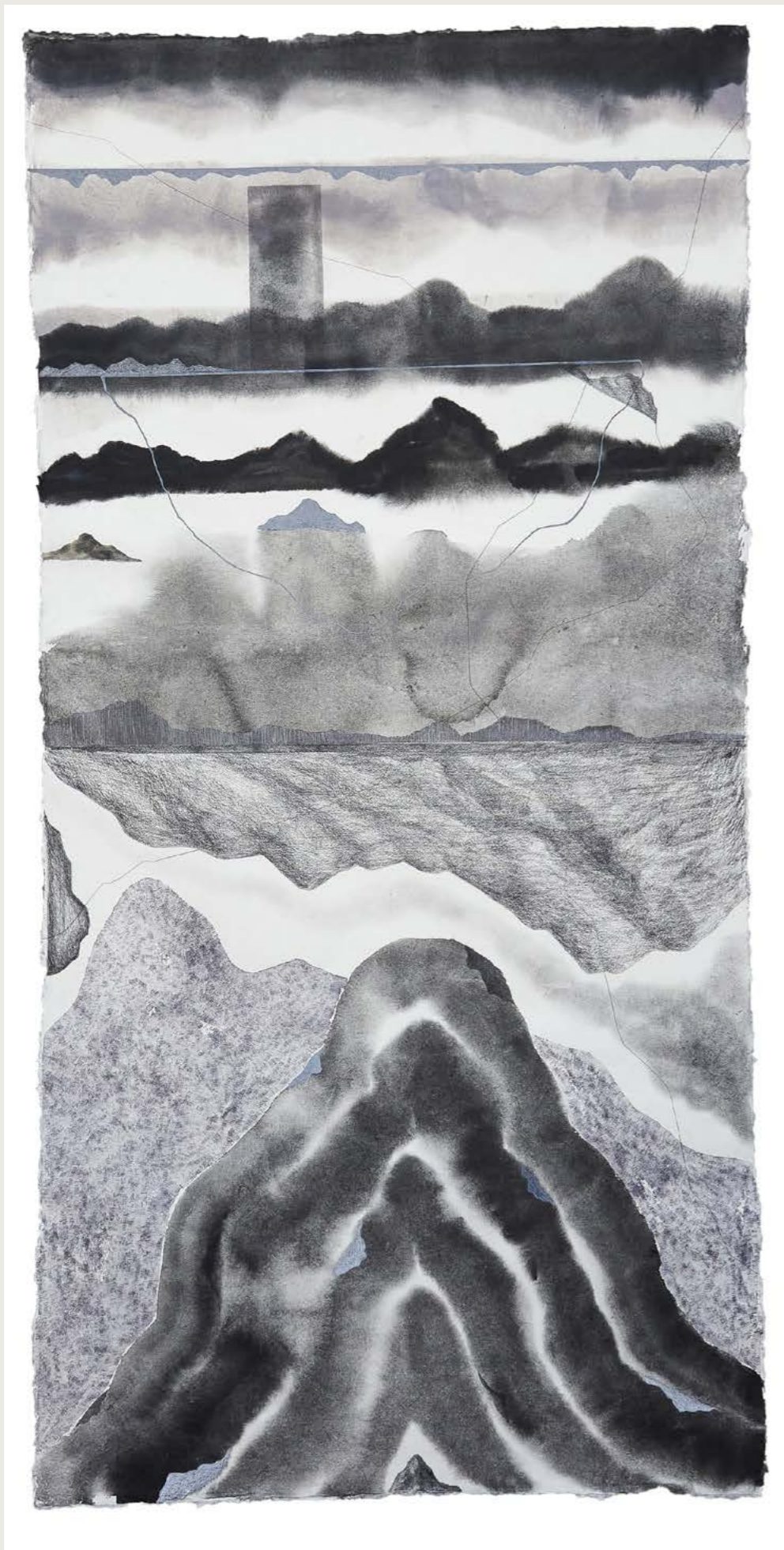


Lying Mountain no 1-9 2023, 31 x 21 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper

Lying Mountain no 17 2023, 200 x 100 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper



Lying Mountain no 14 2023, 21 x 31 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper



Lying Mountain no 18 2023, 200 x 100 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper



Lying Mountain no 13 2023, 21 x 31 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper



Lying Mountain no 16 2023, 21 x 31 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper



Maryanto (b 1977, Indonesia) is an Indonesian artist who creates black and white paintings and installations that examine socio-political structures through the depiction of landscapes. His work often explores the impact of technological development, industrialisation, pollution, and resource exploitation on the natural world.

Maryanto graduated from the Faculty of Fine Art, Indonesia Institute of Art, Yogyakarta in 2005, and completed a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 2013. Maryanto has 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.

Maryanto is represented by Yeo Workshop, Singapore.

Image above: courtesy of the artist and Yeo Workshop



Palm Oil in Daily Life 2023, silk screen print on paper, edition 100, 51 x 35.5 cm



Illegal Loggers 2023, scratching on photo paper, 20 x 25 cm



'Mulung' In Belian Ritual 2023, scratching on photo paper, 20 x 25 cm



Palm Oil District 2023, embroidery, 21 x 15 cm x 11 pcs



Palm Oil District 2023, embroidery, 21 x 15 cm x 11 pcs (installation view Yeo Workshop, Singapore)



Sand Miner Bivouac 2021, scratching, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 200 cm



Palm harvest 2023, scratching, acrylic on photo paper, 20 x 25 cm



Land clearing 2023, scratching, acrylic on photo paper, 20 x 25 cm

Exhibition Personnel

Haisang Javanalikhikara CURATOR & ESSAY CONTRIBUTOR

Haisang Javanalikhikara is a Bangkok-based academic and curator. She is currently positioned at Chulalongkorn University where she is the director of the Masters in Curatorial Practice (International) programme. Since 2019, she has been appointed as the director of faculty-run-space, Art4C, Gallery and Creative Learning Space. Javanalikhikara's curatorial projects focus on socio-political issues, especially environmental and sense of belonging within the urban landscape. Javanalikhikara is also a co-founder of art and cultural collective zeroprojectspace, an initiative that aims to support and promote the artistic community in Thailand.

John Cruthers CURATOR

John Cruthers is one of Australia's most respected art advisers, and since 2019 director of 16albermarle Project Space in Sydney. Working from 1974 with his mother Sheila Cruthers, he assembled the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. It was gifted to the University of Western Australia in 2007 and is Australia's largest stand-alone collection of women's art. In 1985 he began working with Australian private collectors. His enthusiasm for southeast Asian art was kindled in 2013 and he's travelled widely in the region learning about its art and artists. He opened 16albermarle Project Space to share his passion for southeast Asian art with Australian audiences.

Iyada Mooksadee PROJECT MANAGER

Iyada Mooksadee is a passionate individual enthralled by the world of art management. She currently serves as a freelance Art Manager and is also pursuing a master's degree in Art Theory at Silpakorn University. Prior to undertaking her master's degree, Mooksadee was the Business Development Manager at 333Gallery, Bangkok and was the Project Manager for 16albermarle Project Space's 2022 survey exhibition, *Other Possible Worlds: Contemporary art from Thailand*. Iyada proudly stands as the esteemed co-founder of zeroprojectspace—an inspiring and transformative initiative committed to advancing visual arts knowledge and nurturing a profound appreciation for the arts in Thailand.

16albermarle Project Space COORDINATION & GALLERY

Established in October 2019 by Australian art adviser/collector/curator John Cruthers, 16albermarle presents contemporary southeast Asian in an intimate space in inner-city Sydney. Our aim is to connect Australian audiences to southeast Asia through art and encourage their deeper engagement with the countries of the region. Alongside this broad cultural agenda, we also promote the artists showing here and sell the artworks we exhibit to return funds to the artists, most of whom live from the sale of their work. As such, 16albermarle is a semi-commercial space.

We have staged 13 exhibitions to date, with artists and artworks from Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines and Singapore. The focus is on younger and mid-career artists with established practices and reputations in their home countries whose work has not been seen in Australia. Exhibitions are accompanied by public programs, catalogues and educational materials for HSC and IB students. School visits are encouraged. Artworks are available to view on our website and all catalogues can be downloaded for free.

Published in association with the exhibition

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16albermarle Project Space

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Acknowledgements

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Educational resource materials

Mary-Anne Cornford

Exhibition installation

Marian Simpson



Surajate Tongchua, *Lying Mountain no. 17 2023 (detail view)*, 200 x 100 cm, mixed media drawing on handmade paper

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Thu - Sat, 11 am - 5 pm, or by appointment.

16albermarle.com