# Martha Atienza and Yee I-Lann in conversation
# A Deep dive lecture transcript
# 30 July 2025

Kairauhī Curator Robbie Handcock:
Welcome and thank you for coming this evening. It's been really special to have Martha and I-Lann travel to Aotearoa to be with us for the last week or so. It's been super special.

Just a very short amount of context for the exhibition and we will launch into some questions. *The tongue to them* takes as its starting point the Austronesian language family as a group from which to draw artworks and artists to explore what conversations can be had between them. This particular constellation of artworks articulates responses to colonial impact from the distinct vantage point of Aotearoa and Southeast Asia, with each practice drawn to dialogue and collectivity as modes and strategies for resistance and empowerment. As a part of this we have work by Martha Atienza behind us and Yee I-Lann behind you, who we are grateful to have been able to travel here.

Martha has traveled from Bantayan Island, where she lives and works, which is in the Visayas region of the Philippines. Martha is primarily a video artist, documenting and working with the community of Bantayan on issues related to the environment, community and development.
I-Lann has traveled from Kota Kinabalu in the state of Sabah in Malaysia, whose work interrogates intersections of power, colonialism, and neocolonialism in Southeast Asia. We did have a very brief discussion earlier today about the difficulty of contracting a practice into a couple of words, and the bio in particular is a difficult one for that. So that is a couple of words.

It is a real privilege to be able to have the artists here in person to speak to their own work so we will start with the artists speaking to their own works. I-Lann, would you like to introduce *TIKAR/MEJA* and yourself as well?

Yee I-Lann:
Okay. My mum's from Wellington and my father from Sabah, Malaysian Borneo was a Colombo plan scholar. The British established the Colombo Plan Scholarships as part of their decolonisation process in their Southeast Asian territories. My father was one of the students that got his tertiary education in Wellington, where my parents met, and he became first generation civil service back in Sabah. So ideas of colonialism and power are in my very DNA. My mum has been in Sabah since 1969. She's a teacher. She has been part of groups that have founded five schools. So my father's a civil servant, my mum is a teacher. Community has always been part of our family. Also this has been such a special exhibition for me because it's the first real time that I've spent in New Zealand as an artist. It's been utterly stimulating, and I really thank Artspace for this opportunity.

I was, and still am, primarily a photo media artist. I have a book floating around. There's some photographic works. It's a chronological book. A lot of my photo media work dealt with ideas of reading an image, reading a photograph. I very rarely took photographs, but I made photographs, constructed collage, and I used a lot of archives—to read an archive, to read a photographic image. And in the process of doing this and looking at colonial images, I found the table. Basically through a process of questioning how do you colonise someone? How do you do that? What is the process of taking and making power over somebody else? And through that process I kept coming across the table over and over again. The table was like an army of tables, they were map makers, they were surveyors. I include photographers, ethnographic images, educators, school tables, the making of education systems, the making of nation states. My country was formed in 1963, within living memory. I came to realise that the table is this real object of power, of telling you who you are, dictating to you who you are, and the kind of violence that came from administration. So administration may seem innocuous, but to me it's more violent than a gun. With a gun, I shoot you. With a table, with admin, I will tell you who you are. You will tell your children who they are, and their children. There's this perpetuated kind of violence that takes a tremendous amount of will to have a discussion with even. That process of reading photographs, discovering the table, was to me like seeing The Matrix.

I was in the federal capital Kuala Lumpur. After 24 years I moved home to Sabah, which is in the northern part of Borneo Island. Often in Sabah

we feel we're in a kind of state of colonialism from Kuala Lumpur where we're constantly trying to assert our autonomies, our media space, everything. I realised at our traditional marketplace, where people from all the geographies—from the mountain, from the jungle, from the river, from the sea—they meet at the marketplace where you see a lot of these mats. My grandmother used to weave mats. And suddenly I realised the mat was a counterpoint to this table, or a counterpoint of discussion about different forms of power. The whole point of the marketplace is to find someone who is not you. If my grandmother sold rice, she would go to find someone from the sea who would be selling salt. And the person selling salt is not there for more salt. So you're finding someone who is not you, sharing a space. It's a deeply feminist platform, a demarcated space to call people to gather. That became core to what eventually became the *TIKAR/MEJA* project where I'm working with sea peoples from the Sulu-Celebes boundary area. They're predominantly stateless, thus don't have any paper identity. They're not Malaysian, not Filipino, not Indonesian, but they have roamed the seas for a thousand years. They face the table constantly, and the mat is a keystone for their own expressions of self.

The beginning of the project was actually to document heritage mats, because we were trying to revive memory of the old counting systems. But eventually it became this project. Initially, I went to them with ideas of the table, of my table, colonial tables, government office tables. It's very important to me that we understand what we're making together. And initially it was like, "Oh, I-Lann, these are crazy. What are you doing?" And I realised that I couldn't communicate why the tables were about power. So the moment changed when I was realising that I was learning how to collaborate, actually. The children on the island were doing a survey of the few tables that are on the island. And then they would tell me what the powers were of that table. This is the result of that process. Their understanding of a table—that one over there, the colorful one next to the purple-y one, that one is the lectern that the politicians would put their speech on. And they'd come to me and say, "Is this a table?" And then I would say, "Well do you think it's a table? Why is it a table?" And they said, "Because the politician would put the speech [on it]." And I'd say, "What does this mean?" "Oh, this is where a powerful person puts their speech and then they tell us about the election." So that's in there, for instance.

Robbie:
Thank you. Another interesting thing I really enjoyed hearing about is the body measurements.

I-Lann:
Okay. I'm not from this community. I also work with hinterland, interior people who are Dusun and Murut, from Keningau. My family come from

Tenom, which is next door. That's much more familiar to me. So this community are fairly new to me, but in Sabah, the seas are occupied. In Southeast Asia, the sea is not empty. I think it's true here, too. So it was really important to me that I always work with sea people and interior land people. It's always the sea and the deep land, the interior land, because they're very different. Their points of view of the world are different. But what Robbie is referring to is when I first started working, and we're doing tests, I was being very instructive and table-esque with my language. I was saying five by seven feet, and they'd come back weird sizes. And then I was like, they don't take instruction very well. A very arrogant reaction. And then at least I had the presence of mind to say, Why? And then everything changed again. Because when you weave—I have to stand up, I have to demonstrate—the nominated weaver would put down her foot: "Allom", means life. "Amatai", death. Allom. Amatai. Allom.

So they measure with their body. It's a corporeal engagement with the spatial area in which they, as a group, are engaged with. So you use your body for all kinds of very poignant and powerful ways to describe your relationship with your activity at hand, including weaving and the dimensions of a mat. And I just thought, wow, that more and more as I work with the communities I was finding local philosophies that, to me, were epic in terms of how they explained the world and our interaction with the world.

Robbie:
And one last question before we talk about *Anito*, because I realise you're leaving tomorrow and I might not get the chance again. It's come up several times within the team, certain tables, like the flower, where does that come from? Or the one that we call the pea, or the green and yellow one over there, which looks like a hand mirror. Where are those more abstract ones from?

I-Lann:
These have been designed by the kids. So we have IKEA. The one below the flower is an IKEA table. You may recognise it. Shima is our primary table designer. When I first started working with her, she was about 10. Now she's about 16–17, I think. She took charge in designing a lot of the tables, and they were also looking at tables on the internet, so I think some of these are bar tables and high design tables that they've found on their phones. Not all of them [the table shapes] are from the island, but also some of them are just imaginary tables that they have come up with.

One thing that I learned was the rehal for the Quran, it's shaped like that [gestures with hands] with an open Quran, you don't put the Quran on the floor. You put it on a stand. They asked me, "Is that a table?" And then we discuss it, "Yes, it's table". I always came with the table, in my prejudiced

mind, as this hard patriarchal state power inherited from colonial times. We had no tables during pre-colonial period. Even our word for table, meja, comes from the Portuguese and Spanish word for table, mesa. So I thought of a table as hard, patriarchal, non listening. We were doing a Zoom, and someone asked Roziah [collaborator] , “Is a table ever good?” And she said—and I think it’s profound—“A good table is a table that listens to the mat.” And so something that’s become really important to me through this work and as it travels is to share that philosophy of how to see a table and to see a mat. To decolonise, to me, is to see the table and to see the mat and to be a good table. It’s not that all tables are bad. It’s our behavioral patterns of how we behave at the table or on the mat or bringing the mat to the table.

Robbie:
Something that makes sense to me as well in the week that you’ve been here, using that as a framework for understanding your own situation and relationships, has just made sense to me to be like, “Oh, I’m a table in this situation. Who is the mat in this situation?” Can you move into different spaces and then be a mat and be a table depending on where you are? I’ve felt like that’s a helpful framework that I’ll take away from the conversations that we’ve had since you’ve been here.

Let’s move on to the work behind us. Whenever I’m not facing it, or whenever someone comes into the gallery, I’m always really curious to check in and to see where it’s at. We have two video works back to back on the screen behind us, *Anito 1* and *Anito 2*, that both depict the Ati-Atihan festival. Would you like to speak to and introduce the work behind us?

Martha Atienza:
Thank you Robbie, and thank you I-Lann. I-Lann is a wonderful storyteller. I’m really nervous, so Robbie, I-Lann, help me. But I’ll start with my parents as well, because it’s very connected to this work. My father is from Bantayan Island and he became a seafarer, an international seafarer, and that’s how he met my Dutch mother while he was traveling in England. And years ago I found super 8-film footage of them travelling on boats. And a lot of questions came up, especially about my father, this Filipino seafarer, and how he was seeing the world, and how he was looking back at his island. I remember he was telling me that my grandfather used to ask him, Why do you want to leave the island? We’re so rich, we have so much fish. But he really wanted to see the world. I mean, it was a time of Armstrong getting on the moon. The Philippines was under American rule until the 1950s. I think he had a very romantic idea of getting into the world. And that time, especially 60–70s, when you would work on ships, you actually had a couple of weeks of loading and unloading that you could actually get into another country and learn

something of a culture.

What happened to me in 2010 was that I got my very first grant, and I jumped on ships to follow men that I grew up with from Bantayan. The first person I filmed was my younger brother working on riverboats in the Netherlands, going to Germany carrying coal. And I then went from Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia on a cargo vessel. The last boat that I went on was the transatlantic going through the Mississippi River, Florida and up to Newfoundland, and then crossing the transatlantic and then Baltic, Russia, and then Sweden. I filmed everything. My main excuse for being on board was really to work on manuals, to create a manual for Filipinos and Europeans on the ship. So mostly officers are European and the Filipinos are more technical. Anyways, I went back to Bantayan and I brought all this footage. I would just visit the seafarers home and then show the family, and then realising when I got home that I should really also focus on fishermen. Our island is really a fishing village, and the reason that there's so many international seafarers coming from our area is because our sea is so damaged and everybody wants to leave the island. So everyone's dream is to become an overseas worker.

It was really that project that I feel like was the never-ending project, because I realised the power of the video camera that I use as a way for us to look at each other and see ourselves and start difficult conversations about what issues we face, and perhaps looking at ourselves for solutions. That's where we are now. But that's why *Anito* came about, because the footage that I had brought from working at sea were so serious and the kinds of conversations were so intense that we needed breaks in between, something we could laugh at. And so these are my neighbors and friends. I have family in this Ati-Atihan festival. When I'm filming it actually I'm laughing so hard, that's why I had to do something with the sound. I laugh very loud, by the way.

Robbie:
If you haven't watched it yet, the audio is quite ominous.

Martha:
Yeah, I reverse the drums and the trumpets and slow it down, because I really needed to distance myself when I first wanted to do something with just this footage. So it was kind of an eye opener. And I never really looked deep into what the Ati-Atihan festival really was. It was just always there. It's always once a year on the last Sunday of January. Ati-Ati is to pretend to be an Aita, the Ati indigenous. So this festival is actually pre-colonial, and I actually, shamefully, I never dove into it. But I was just telling I-Lann about it, it actually goes back to our Borneo connection, because it was ten Datus [chiefs] that were fleeing Borneo that ended up in Panay Island, that's next to us. That started this celebration to thank the Aitas.

There's different stories about why exactly they were thanking but that's another story. But you can see like the children are mostly painted black because the Aitas are short, dark skinned and have curly hair. But also the word anito is ancestry of spirit. It's like the spirit of the water, the sea, of mountains, of forests. And if we look, this is the Santo Niño that William is carrying. It's the Jesus child.

And then something else is happening too. This work really came about when somebody was asking me, How would you show where the Philippines is now? And it really made me think of the Ati-Atihan festival. I mean, it's a fiesta, so it's a week-long celebration and this is the last Sunday. That's when the parade is. You know, they've already been drinking for a few days, maybe. So the costumes come very spontaneously. What's happening now is that they are putting in their own interpretation and they are telling their own story. For example, the 2017 [festival] was the drug war here. You can also see the Yolanda survivor, who's drinking the Emperador [brandy].

Robbie:
So this is *Anito 2* now that we have moved into. Anito 1 was shot over several years. Is that right?

Martha:
Yeah, so the first film is 2011–15, and the other film is only 2017. It was because of the drug war. I mean, it really hit us for a few years. So when they did this, I was shocked myself that everyone actually joined in the costume, and most of the costumes were really connected to the drug war. It was very brave.

Robbie:
Just some context for that here, President Duterte campaigned on a very intense war on drugs. In that time, he publicly announced that if you kill a drug dealer, even an alleged drug pusher, the police won't target you. So basically sanctioned extrajudicial killings. Very intense time in the Philippines.

Martha:
That's why he's in the Hague now.

Robbie:
He has this year been arrested for crimes against humanity. But this in 2017 was filmed during that presidency.

Martha:
Like I said, I started to look at the parade differently. I wanted to give you the context of what we were working on while filming this in the beginning,

because this is actually very different than the other works that I make. My other videos or installations are quite quiet and very slow moving.

Robbie:
There's a frenzy to this. For me watching it, I feel like a lot of places in The Philippines will have some kind of parade or procession which feels like this. I definitely have memories of childhood, of being swept up in a parade, being one of the kids, possibly getting my hands on a bottle of Red Horse [beer] while mum's back home somewhere else.

Martha:
They're pretending, though. [Laughs]

Robbie:
I think what strikes me about *Anito 2*, and one of the things that's maybe hard to translate here, is the presence of guns. These are toy guns. Guns have much more of a visual presence in The Philippines. You can go to the bank and the guards will have M16s. That's an everyday thing.

Martha:
During covid, it was when we had all the checkpoints, you'd be amazed at the guns that came out. But everybody reacted just so normal, and I think also me having lived in the Netherlands as well I was confronted by it. Perhaps I'm an outsider, but an insider at the same time.

Robbie:
I think one of the things that's important for me about these works is it's really the people responding to what's happening in their world and its current events. I mean, as much as this feels stylised it's really a documentary film, right?

Martha:
Yeah, it's not acted. It is exactly how we are. I think documenting has really been my obsession. I like that this work is here because it has so many layers. It has comments on so many different things and done by people themselves. In 2017 I made a work with the same people except that we did the parade underwater. And, of course, when it's underwater, it became very slow. But still the same costumes and almost all of the same guys. We won a prize at Art Basel in Switzerland. I had no idea that there was a jury and a prize there. We had a great celebration outside of the country, great conversations, and people really got the message. But when I got home, I was so frustrated that nothing's changing, and actually even getting worse. These fisherfolk are being moved off their land. With the excuse of climate change and extreme weather, they're being moved inland into national housing projects. They're actually put in areas where they're flood prone, where people are getting sick, and it's actually very

violent how they're being removed.

I think the question has always been how could art become useful in that sense? How could we not just complain about the system, but how could we perhaps look at ourselves. While we were having all of these conversations, it always ends up with, What can we do? What can we do together? How can we bring our community back? I think it's really easy to talk about community, but I think a big problem that we're having is that we're losing community. I started looking at the art practice really being the methodology of us identifying issues and finding ways to find solutions. Solutions is a big word, but to try to find solutions together. I'm happy my partner Jun is here, and that's why we started an organisation. That's how GOODland came about. It's really about not just giving us a voice, but to put ourselves at the table with decision makers.

So later on, in 2022 we organised a celebration called Fisherfolks Day. It was pandemic time and we were only allowed to bring fisherfolk leaders. We did a big parade on water and it was a celebration. We did it in collaboration with a local government unit, really to create a day not just to celebrate and to recognise fisherfolk and give them importance, but to have the conversation about our future and the protection of our sea. Through that process, we did a radio podcast of programmes on explaining ordinances to fisherfolk in our own language. Our ordinances are in English, and a type of English that even I can't understand. We put that in our own language and explained what the laws or ordinances are. We got together on that day, and it was very powerful. What's left of it? I bring the documentation of the parade. But actually that whole process of all of the work at home on the ground is really slow cooking. That's why I am so happy to be here, because it connects me and I-Lann, it connects us again to the conversation here. It's a reminder again of how important the conversation and the connections are and to really look at how similar we are instead of how different we are. I think it's powerful back home to look at who we are through, for example, the lens of the film, but perhaps here in this exhibition we can have a similar conversation.

Robbie:
You touched on what my next question was, which was about both of your work with community and being really embedded with the people that you work with. I think something that we've said a few times over the course of the week is the difference of making with rather than making about. There was something that you said the other day, I-Lann, talking about Cian Dayrit's practice where the artwork seemed like a byproduct of this other community work that was happening. I like the idea that the work and the practice is so much bigger than the artwork outputs, where the drive and the engine incorporates so much more than artwork. It incorporates people and incorporates things like GOODland and incorporates some of

the governance work that you do as well, I-Lann. I was curious to hear you speak about what the relationship is between that practice and an artwork practice, and whether there is hierarchy? Is there a hierarchy that you need to resist or push against that tries to creep in when you're dealing with a community practice and an art practice?

I-Lann:
That's a big question. There are so many questions: questions of authorship, questions of building long relationships that, of course, now cannot end because once you start you must also continue. There's a responsibility. I like to think that what we're really making on the island is confidence and we're making circular economies. Which is very unsexy in the art world to talk about economy, right? For example, this area, which is next door to your area, is part of the Coral Triangle containing 76% of the world's coral species. It's the spawning site of fish life and important to our healthy oceans. The frontline gatekeepers of that are communities and their relationship with their seas and their islands. We hear about it all the time. My focus is deep, deep local. I'm so local. But it's not about just the deep local, it's a much more connected thing that everyone here knows about, of climate crisis and this epoch change, this time that we're in, right? So to me, one of the big, major epoch changes that needs to happen is a shift in economic systems. Politics from the Greek is housekeeping, it's women's business. Politics is how you order your house. How do you sort out your affairs? That is the original meaning. So in my mind, it's a question of how do you partake in politics and how do you shift away from a capitalist, extractive type of economy into circular economies based on restorative and regenerative principles.

So the pandanus medium that these mats are woven from are plants grown by the women weavers to help against coastal erosion, for instance. Those pandanus plants, of which there is a very major heritage here as well, are also little ecologies unto themselves. When they harvest those plants, they don't kill the plant, they're just taking off leaves. One group of women are planting, another group of women are processing—the drying, the dying—another group of women are weaving. So one bit of money travels a lot. And in that process, we are remembering old weaves. We're remembering pride. We're remembering cultural heritage. All the weavers are named in all my works. I will never claim to be a weaver, nor will I ever claim that these designs come from me. They don't. They are the heritage from that community. So what we're really working on is we're building economic and political confidence, as well as working on domestic economies.

And also we make art. The great thing about the contemporary art world is that it feeds this. I call it money laundering and I'm very grateful for it. Freedom is really, really expensive. We don't apply for any Malaysian

grants. These women ask, “Why don’t you apply for grants?” I say, No, we don’t need to apply for a grant because you’ve got the product of your own hands so we will raise our own money. We’re supposed to be building a making hall but we haven’t because we’re going through a process with local government and all the rest of it, but the women are going to hire their husbands to build our making hall. So one piece of money really is at work in building community and building pride, building all kinds of things, and shifting from extractive systems. The more people stop fishing, another seahorse will live another day, another lobster will live, rather than end up at one of those seafood restaurants for tourists.

The artwork is embedded in there to talk about important ideas, to gain pride showing it here. I’ve been WhatsApp-ing the weavers images of the other works. They’re really fascinated by this kelp from Heidi [Brickell]. So, yeah, I’m not sure if I quite answered that, but there’s a lot going on that is not directly about making artwork.

Robbie:
One thing I’ll just add, this is something I didn’t know before inviting both I-Lann and Martha to see if they wanted to be part of this exhibition, is that both of them knew each other and are very good friends. You may have picked up on a dynamic.

I-Lann:
We both also have NGO work, so we talk a lot about stuff that’s nothing to do with art. Well, it has to do with art but it doesn’t.

Martha:
We said we don’t need any slides but maybe I will. [Martha shares images on her tablet]. We’re working on heirloom seeds so we’re really in the process of them documenting themselves. It’s the discovery that all these seeds are being passed generationally and the richness of that. Through the work and creating art comes this archive, right? This is part of the archive. Then people themselves start putting their own information into the archive. The next step is the question of, what would you like to do with this archive? When working in Bantayan, it’s always moving very fast and there has to be income. That’s survival. There has to be either shelter or food. And so in a very short span of time, the project turned into not just looking at seeds, but now they’re starting a garden where all of them are going to work together so that they can share their knowledge of farming and to revive this knowledge. Because, of course, our area is being taken over by mono farming and GMO seeds and so on. So it’s companies coming in.

It’s really exciting because, for example, now we’re in the phase where it’s the last generations of children of farmers. All of a sudden, through

working on this archive together, they are really interested in that aspect of it. So I love seeing the collecting of stories and then very practically start thinking about, how can this archive become useful? So actually, today, they are doing a blessing. The goat blood is being spilled on the floor of their communal space where their farm is going to be. It's a really exciting day.

In 2015, I sold my first artwork and I was like, wow, this is the formula. Freedom! I could just sell work, I could have the money, and then to do whatever you wanted with it. I've been operating that way with GOODland, but also with a kind of insecurity about it because we're experimenting. We're not like an NGO because we are figuring it out. This is actually the first year that GOODland has gotten its own funding. This farming project that they're doing, they did the proposal themselves, and then they got their first funding. So it's really exciting, like a new phase in their economy.

Robbie:
I'm going to try and fold in a couple of questions into one because we're running out of time. I had a couple of questions about translation, place, and scale. In terms of place and travel, these works have traveled quite a bit. I'm curious to hear about how they're received and how they act when they are in different places and in different contexts. And in terms of scale, which is related to the work that you do with community, the correlation between this local scale of exchange and then translating it or travelling it and existing in these broader global infrastructures. How might you maintain the village dynamic? How do you housekeep a village, and then how do you maintain that sense of housekeeping when you expand, travel, or operate under different infrastructures? Did I successfully condense that, or did I just ask three different questions?

I-Lann:
[Laughs] Your questions are huge.

Robbie:
Maybe to simplify it is you have the relationship with the communities which you care and tend to and make empowering, how do you retain that sense of empowerment in larger infrastructures for yourself and for the communities you're representing on behalf of when you step out with their work and their likeness?

Martha:
So maybe I can talk about a specific work. I'm not so used to bringing *Anito* [overseas]. I've brought the next work of this, of the same idea underwater. I've traveled that one quite a bit. I really have to bring people into the fact that everybody has a name and that everybody has a credit, but I also have to be conscious of the bigger picture that I'm trying

to explain. When I'm talking about fisherfolks and what is happening generally, I have to be quite conscious. For example, I had a work when we were in New York where it's really one individual. Antonio is standing on his boat. How do I even explain to him where he has been? Last year was kind of wild, because when we did this underwater work it came to Times Square. And that was finally a work that people at home back on the island could understand where it went. Everybody somehow understood Times Square. Everybody gave me a handshake, and we did a lechon, a roasted pig, before we left, but the celebration really came after when they saw it on the news. I think that was a good example of bringing my community out there. Most people I don't think really cared about what I was trying to say, because if they would perhaps listen maybe things would change more, like our leaders. But it was just the fact that Bantayan Island was there on Times Square. But at least it's giving me power by being on that kind of stage or winning an art award. It gives me more power when I come home where people will listen to me. The reason why we set up the organisation was because when I said, I'm a visual artist, nobody wanted to engage, like the government. So that's why if I could say I'm the executive director of GOODland, I would be invited. [Laughs]

I-Lann:
So these weavers are from the sea community and most of them are stateless, so they can't travel because they can't get a passport. But from that community, there's two women that have traveled with me. There's Kak Roziah and Kak Sitti. There's a few from the inland community too. In Southeast Asia, I've been supported by the Sabah Tourism Board and the Sabah Trade and Tourism Office Singapore to cover the weavers' travel costs. So it's about being able to bring as many weavers with me as possible. In Singapore, we had 12 weavers and two women who wrote our Kadazan language dictionary. Also when we won a prize at [ANTEPRIMA x CHAT Contemporary Textile Art Prize], which is a weaving prize, there's no way in hell that I'm going to receive that. I didn't do the weaving.
I brought one person from the sea community, one from the interior community, to represent their communities so we won it together. And then we split the prize money. So things like that are ways that I can live with myself, because otherwise I feel like I'm using them. I don't physically make the work. It's their heritage and knowledge. Perhaps the question is for you what you encounter, but this is our Indigenous medium. I never use the word Indigenous to people so much. I use it with our mediums.

To me, these are really conceptual works. I think of them as conceptual works, rather than 'just' as weaving works. Not that I'm belittling weaving. I love weaving, and I love the textile arts, but you end up getting stuck there. Whereas, to me, these are about philosophies, right? These are about ways that you can look at power structures. There's a part of

me that really loves bombastic manifestos, and a part of me that hates bombastic manifestos, so I'm torn. But I want to mat-ify the world with my mat-isms. The world right now needs to share a mat. How can we start putting those ideas into actionable practice to make healthier societies? That's how I think of it.

Robbie:
I have really taken on board the mat/table philosophy. Thank you for bringing it to Artspace and thank you for bringing it to Aotearoa. Lee Weng Choi talks about the exhibition as a situation, and how you might make it a situation for encounter. I was thinking of your analogy of bringing the mats to the market where you set up for exchange, you set up to encounter difference. So thinking now, how can an exhibition be a mat to facilitate all of those exchanges, differences, and conversations? I'll take that with me. Thank you.

I-Lann:
Flatten the box, make a mat. So we tend to live in our silos. This is actually a bit un-PC, perhaps, but I really can't stand identity politics. Even though people think that's what I'm doing, actually I'm not doing identity politics. For me, it's really important that people have their community, their safe space, their people. Everyone needs their people. But finish the sentence. You have your people, then what? The world right now needs to flatten the box and make a mat. It's to go in search of someone who's not you. It's so that we share a space. And by sharing a space, I'm going to shift from one bum cheek to the other and in the end, my head is going to lie on your lap and we might connect on something, and then maybe we can be friends. And I feel now that identity politics has given rise to what we're witnessing in the US, for instance, of this really aggressive silo-isms of people who just can't relate to each other on a really basic level.

And I know that's not the full story of identity politics, and I understand that people need their people, and I absolutely agree and respect that. For me, the second half of the sentence is to then find someone who's not you and to make conversation and to make encounter and to make exchange. In the age of climate crisis, to work against extractive economies, as a methodology of housekeeping, don't go in your own room. We have to share a space. We have to be in a hall. The architecture of what politics and power might look like, or how the architecture of how people can make action or make confidence, make pride, in not a prideful way, but in a way that there's an ownership. One of the things I'm most proud of from 2017–18 is that a lot of the weavers I'm working with now are realising there's a world of art. Now they're becoming artists in their own names and making exhibitions. To me, that's linguistic. The linguistics of art was never really an option. So they didn't know that the art world exists, right? So now that they've seen it, that they've travelled, and people are

looking at the labour of their hands. It's an option. And what can I say to the world? How do I want to answer back? And to me, that is also why we need to claim our space.

We were talking earlier about scale. I always like women communities because I think women drive communities, at least from where I am. To look at my grandmother, inland people, she's Kadazan-Dusun. Women plant the paddy. Always women that plant the paddy. Women harvest the paddy. Women sell the paddy at the marketplace. And women are the bobohizan high priestesses, spiritual specialists who look after the spiritual wellbeing of paddy and thus communities. Historically, women looked after agriculture, economy, and spiritual wellbeing. I'm very interested in economies. So that's how they made a healthy community, through agriculture, economy and spiritual connectedness to the environment. The scale of that was either the family or, in a wider sense, the village community, the immediate. What happened through the colonial process that people very rarely talk about is that scale changed. It's the advent of the monocrop. First sugar cane, then rubber, then oil palm. So when people talk about the environmental impact of oil palm, they're really worried about the orangutans. But what about the women? Because the women are no longer working in the estates. They're no longer in charge of agriculture and economy and the spiritual wellbeing of their communities. So that scale, to me, is also what's happening aesthetically globally within the arts.

I have to slide this in—the oldest figurative artwork in the world, 40–50,000 years old, of buffaloes and pigs, were found in a cave on Borneo island. Figurative artwork. So I love to bombastically tell the artworld that us Borneans invented art.

[Laughter]

Which always gets a response like that.

So when you talk about art mono cropping, you're talking about the world of art and aesthetics and ideas and philosophies. You need to speak Global North-speak in order to be validated. I was telling you yesterday, when we're making our black and natural bamboo artworks, we're taking from international art-speak words like "tints" and "shades" and "perspective". It's something that they never dealt with in weaving. We're talking about "dimension". That's global art-speak actually. But what we're also doing is we're bringing our linguistics, our aesthetics, our knowledge systems, our philosophies, like measuring spatial planes with the body, and if people pay attention, it adds dimension both in the spatial but also philosophical knowledge sense. To me, I'm so excited because it's so multilingual, rather than monocrop art, you know? Is that rude? [Laughs]

Robbie:
No, if you put it in that way, maybe it is disproportionate scale is what the danger is, not just scale. But I will wrap it up now. Thank you all three for your generosity and sharing with us the background around the work that we're invited to look at here in the show, but also your practice in general.

**Martha Atienza** lives and works in Bantayan Island, Philippines. Atienza is a Dutch-Filipino video artist exploring the format's ability to document and question issues related to the environment, community, and development. Her video is rooted in both ecological and sociological concerns as she studies the intricate interplay between local traditions, human subjectivity, and the natural world. Atienza won the Baloise Art Prize in Art Basel in 2017 for her seminal work *Our Islands* (2017). Recent biennales and triennials include the 17th Istanbul Biennial (2022), Istanbul; Bangkok Art Biennale: *Escape Routes* (2020), BACC, Bangkok Honolulu Biennial: *To Make Wrong / Right / Now* (2019), Oahu, Hawaii; and the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2018), QAGOMA, Brisbane.

**Yee I-Lann** lives and works in Kota Kinabalu. Yee is a leading contemporary artist recognised for her ongoing research into the evolving intersection of power, colonialism, and neo-colonialism in Southeast Asia. Often centering on counter-narratives or 'histories from below,' she has recently begun collaborative work with sea-based and land-based communities, as well as indigenous mediums in Sabah, Malaysia. Yee has exhibited widely in museums in Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. Notable retrospectives include *Fluid World* (2011), Adelaide's Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, and *Yee I-Lann: 2005-2016* (2016) Ayala Museum in Manila, Philippines.