

## Review

# *Pera+Flora+Fauna: The Story of Indigenusness and the Ownership of History @ 59th Venice Biennale (23 April–27 November 2022)*—An Exhibition Review

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Commissioned by the People of Remarkable Talents (PORT), the Perak state’s creative and cultural agency, the exhibition, entitled *Pera+Flora+Fauna: The Story of Indigenusness and the Ownership of History* was curated as one of the official collateral events in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. It highlights the local inquiries and interpretations of indigenusness, ownership of history and nature through creative expressions of contemporary artists, towards further interrogating the inter-affecting relationships between inhabitants, culture, and nature in the context of Perak state (La Biennale di Venezia 2022; Nabila 2022; PORT 2022a). Through interviews with the stakeholders involved (i.e., organising and management team, curatorial team, and participating artists), this article reviews the curation, the exhibits, and the outreach of exhibition.

The initiative of curating *Pera+Flora+Fauna (PFF)* was led by Khaled Ramadan (Lebanese filmmaker, curator, and scholar; see Khaled n.d.) and Amir Zainorin (Copenhagen-based Malaysian multidiscipline visual artist and curator; see Jambatan n.d.). Both see the potential of presenting Perak, including its identity, contemporary art scene, artists, and art agency to the global art platform. Inspired by Perak’s indigenus population, its local culture and preserved nature, Khaled and Amir jointly decided to feature “indigenusness” or “indigenity” as the theme of the exhibition.

Six participating Perak-based/born artists and art collectives (i.e., Saiful Razman, Azizan Paiman, Kamal Sabran, Kim Ng, Kapallorok Art Space and Ronnie Bahari, Projek Rabak) and a guest Italian artist (i.e., Stefano Cagol) were featured in this exhibition. Artists and/art collectives were given two and a half months to create artworks that reflect the theme of exhibition. Towards enriching the contents, deliverables, and outreach of the project, two associate curators, namely Camilla Boemio (Italian writer, consultant and curator; see Boemio n.d.) and Annie Jael Kwan (London-based curator and researcher; see Annie n.d.) joined in as associate curators. The different areas of expertise and experiences among the curators, in subjects related to minority, indigenity and marginalised issues at different geographical bases, somehow have constructively complemented and enriched the different aspects of the entire process.

*PFF* was featured as one of the eight “must see” exhibitions at Venice Biennale 2022. According to PORT, *PFF* has engaged 15,000 visitors throughout its entire exhibition duration. The team witnessed how the curated contents have, individually and collectively engaged visitors from around the world. The engagement and outreach have been further expanded among different art communities globally at online/offline platforms through satellite events curated by the curatorial team, and some other sessions hosted by other organisers. Overall, *PFF* has successfully opened up platforms to broaden the conversation and the exchange of perceptions about the relationship between human and land. It stirred inquiries, debates, and different interpretations about indigenusness across different cultural entities.

While several other exhibitions were highlighting the subject of indigeneity in relating to different geographic locations and debating the rights of different indigenous populations, Khaled witnessed how *PFF* has become another linking point of visit within the chain of exhibitions to extend the same angle of discourse and debates, for cultural exchange across different arts communities/practitioners. According to Khaled (2022), “Visitors who have been researching issues relating to indigeneity invited us (curators) to talk in public forums. We did that through online platforms as well as physical events in academic institutions or art museums held at different locations or countries.”

A zoom meeting session, entitled “Venice Biennale Eco-Art Review 2022” was held on 21 July 2022, to gather curators of the three main exhibitions (e.g., *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*, *The Sámi Pavilion*, and *PFF*) to discuss their concurrent queries on conservation and reclamation of nature, history, and rights in life across different indigenous populations through aesthetic thinking, towards fostering collective awareness, and expanded constructive discourses. Besides, eight satellite events held online, at venue or hybrid (e.g., live-streamed discussions) have further extended the outreach of *PFF*’s contents through different thematic discourses, ranging from art, community, healing across different groups of art communities, based in different parts of the world. Table 1 briefly illustrates the satellite events.

Overall, the curatorial and management teams witnessed how the individual artistic expression and the collective narratives of *PFF*, which highlighting the local context or unique complexity of Malaysian State of Perak, have broaden viewpoints and inspired cross-cultural discussions pertaining human–nature interrelationship from the global perspectives. *PFF* enables international debates over global issues and challenges through art. Besides, *PFF* opened up international opportunities and exposure to the participating artists and collectives in the contemporary art scene. Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin, General Manager of PORT, particularly appreciates the establishment of collaborative networks with Italian and other international art and cultural institutions as well as art practitioners through *PFF*, for future art and cultural exchanges.

**Table 1** *PFF* selected satellite events.

| No. | Title of satellite events  | Date; Venue  | Theme or topics of discussion   |
|-----|--|--|---|
| 1   | <i>Pera+Flora+Fauna</i> Art Talk   | 23 April 2022;<br>Online (Zoom)  | <i>PFF</i> curators and artists talk about <i>PFF</i> exhibition and curatorial approaches  |
| 2   | The Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange 2022 Venice. “Decolonizing Practices: On Art, Care, and Climate Change”<br>Panellists: Annie Jael Kwan and three other scholars/researchers | 14 June 2022;<br>Virtual panel discussion held at exhibition venue, Venice | Curators, scholars, and researchers discuss about <i>PFF</i> artists’ creations and Sámi artists creations; and the interwoven topics concerning community, care, healing, and human–nature relationship  |
| 3   | “Crafting Different Futures”<br>Panellists from Malaysia   | 5 July 2022;<br>PORT Ipoh, Perak   | Artists’ discussion and film screening about crafts, local understandings, and personal experience towards collaboration in acquiring local, cultural, and indigenous knowledge through artistic and ecological actions   |
| 4   | <i>Mestizo Dispossessed</i><br>Exhibitors from U.S., curated by Camilla Boemio   | 18–30 July 2022; Galleria Bruno Lisi, Roma                                 | Exhibition of installations using emerging technologies and media, featuring Brito family farm as lens for shifting history of encounters between indigenous and settling groups; and shifting of geological territory by influences of nature  |
| 5   | 13th Shinano Primitive Sense Art Festival<br>Participants from Japan and Malaysia  | 26–28 August 2022;<br>Nagano Prefecture, Japan                             | Japanese artists, Hiromu Sato and Shinji Asai delivered a performance art based on the documentary work by Kapallorek Artspace and Ronnie Bahari  |
| 6   | “Indigenoussness.” Dialogue between environment, art, and identity<br>Participants from Italy and Malaysia   | 24 September 2022; Archivi della Misericordia, Venezia                     | A talk broadened reflections addressed by <i>PFF</i> ’s artists to all indigenous groups around the world, underlining importance of knowledge, respectful relationship with the environment, and preservation of one’s identity from anthropological perspective                         |
| 7   | <i>Jambatan Stateless Mind—Bodies of Knowledge</i><br>Participants from Nordic region, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Malaysia   | 18–23 October 2022;<br>Archivi della Misericordia, Venezia                 | Live and performance art featuring the entanglements of Southeast Asian cultural and vernacular forms of knowledge held in the body; transmitted over generations, and across national and regional geographies   |
| 8   | <i>Kingorngussaq-arv</i> —meaning “Heritage”<br>Participants from Nanortalik, Ilulissat and Nuuk   | 26 November 2022; Archivi della Misericordia, Venezia                      | A talk discusses the Inuit culture from the Inuit tattoo, mask dance, and beading; and the minority of Greenlandic and Danish<br>Also, a performance expresses vibes from the nature; the hybrid between human, buildings, and nature using body movements, lights, and image projections |

Seven exhibits at venue have constantly captured the global art audiences' attention within the six-month exhibition. Blended in well with the setting of display onsite which has been meticulously incorporated into the existing interior architecture (an old building), each creation presented in its unique form and medium, with its specific expressive narratives and visual languages to engage visitors.

At venue, visitors first reached the video presentation of *Ssegar Angin: The Healing Art Project*, a performance of sound and body movement by Kamal Sabran (Perak-born sound artist, based in Perak and Penang; see Kamal n.d.) in collaboration with Aida Redza (Malaysian contemporary dancer and choreographer; see Aida 2019). Inspired by the Malay traditional healing performances like *Main Puteri* and *Mak Yong*, the performance expressively presented how the combination of soundscapes (produced by recording the sounds collected from nature within Perak) and body movements (choreography inspired by *Main Puteri/Mak Yong*) is applied in Malay culture, to heal the internal psychic and spiritual body or to address different types of ailments. *Ssegar Angin* captured an embodiment of metaphysical relationship between creation and the Creator. Kamal (2022) remarked:

We improvise live performances in a contemporary manner. Healing vibes or ambience generated amid the impromptu sound composition from the combination of traditional and electronic instruments, alongside with dancer's flow of movements. Without a specific duration, performers continue until they sense audiences are receptive to performance stimuli. As a sort of self-reflection, different responses observed from audiences. Different environmental settings inspire different sound composition on site, which eventually engage dancer to perform different choreographies. Consequently, each performance engaged audience differently. During *PFF*'s opening, our onsite live performance engaged audiences in different cultural backgrounds. Some European audiences join in to interact with the dancer during the performance while others felt touching and relief listening to the sound/music. Ultimately, *Ssegar Angin* generates healing vibes and frequency to create healing experiences.

Overall, *Ssegar Angin* reflects the interaction and interdependency between human and their surrounding environment. The self-reflection process leads human, despite his cultural background, to surrender their physical and psychic self to the stimuli from the surroundings (i.e. sound and movement). That eventually empowered self-healing or self-revitalisation.



**Figure 1** Video presentation of *Ssegar Angin: The Healing Art Project*.

Source: Photo provided by PORT.



**Figure 2** Live performance of *Ssegar Angin*.

Source: Photo provided by PORT.

Next, visitors were led to a collection of exhibits produced by Projek Rabak (an artist collective founded in Ipoh, Perak), entitled *Hik Bersamak: Indigenous Pop!* Working in collaboration with their Semai (an indigenous tribe in Peninsular Malaysia) friend, namely Yahya Torek and the Semai community at Kampung Ras, Perak; Projek Rabak produces a collection of exhibits, including video presentation, photography works, drawings, and live performance (during opening). The exhibits showcase their outsider's perspective on creative process based on their participatory observation at Kampung Ras. The exhibits highlight the living practices, heritage, and culture of Semai community, as collaborating artists in the project. Projek Rabak invites visitors to explore, interact and immerse in Semai's unique cultural identity. The team applied different approach in fieldwork and presentation, particularly the narrative of findings, to highlight the contemporary life of indigenous peoples in the context of the Perak Semai community. As explained by an artist of Projek Rabak, Dhan Illiani Yusof (2022):

*Hik Bersamak* in Semai language, means "let's all together." We focus on community participation and social relationship. With Yahya Torek's involvement, it becomes an active collaborative friendship-based initiative. Yahya guided us the approach to portray his community. Throughout the process, we learn to adapt and adjust ourselves to be more approachable and concerned with the community's acceptance. To bridge the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous, instead of seeing them from an anthropological perspective, we wanted them to co-create with us to tell the world their stories in their preferred way. Rather than showcasing them as subject, we highlight the friendship between the Semai indigenous community and us (outsiders), and the outcomes of sharing through our friendship. We offer the community a platform to ask us questions during the filming of our fashion show. Some of their questions really push us to think deeply. For example, they asked whether we were friends with them simply because of the Venice Biennial.

Projek Rabak's informal methodology through friendship, conversation and collaboration has somehow facilitated the intersection between art and social responsibility. Using art, particularly pop (popular) art in simple forms such as drawings and fashions as the universal visual language for effective communication and understanding, the collective has managed to change the distrust of the Kampung Ras community towards outsiders due to their past negative experiences. Instead, they managed to establish a good rapport with the community for co-creation and collaboration. As the project's collaborator, Yahya Torek (2022) shares his perspectives:

It represents my village and the people in my village. I am proud to have this opportunity to tell stories about the Semai people, about our life, our working environment and cultural practices to the outside world. Through the fashion show, we clarified the indigenous community's emphasis on the model's personality in representing our Semai's identity. Semai communities in different villages across Perak may practise traditions and culture in different unique ways. The most significant uniqueness is our speech or language and ritual practices.

According to Yahya, the reasons of Semai people no longer wearing clothes made from tree bark is rather straightforward. It is because they are now restricted to harvest raw material from forests, with many reserved and protected forests across Perak. Without forestry harvesting, indigenous communities cannot continue to produce what they produced for their daily lives or for their income, including clothing, crafts, and so on. Yahya Torek (2022) said: "That's actually part of our cultural identity. That's what outsiders ought to know. We are losing not only our land, but also our source of income and our identity and culture."

The following exhibit showcase ceramic sculpture installation by Kim Ng (born in Johor and based in Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur, see Kim n.d.), entitled *Bunyi Senyap Benih* (The Silent Sound of Seeds). Making use of 12 different types of clay collected from places within Perak, Kim created an installation of long handcrafted strings of mixed coloured fired clay beads as a display onsite. As the clay beads are made out from different types of clay, each turn into different natural earth colours/tones after being fired. Through his installation and taking the fired clay beads to symbolise flora "seeds." Kim attempts to address how mankind lives within nature and how nature grows into a flora form/plants, coexisting with mankind symbiotically. The material, form and structure of the installation portray the interrelationship between nature, environment, and the people who live on the land. In the conceptual manner, Kim uses "seed" to imply the origin or the beginning of the life form, including flora and fauna, which indirectly reflect or symbolise the emergence of issues in society, that are always rooted deep inside the ground, awaiting to sprout or surface and develop. The installation may trigger reflection and contemplation towards further discourse, debates for compromise or mutual agreement towards settlement of certain issues or conflicts on a shared ground. Kim (2022) explained:

Due to the limited space onsite, I have adjusted my original idea of presentation in order to fit in to the space provided. My initial planning is to install my work in the middle of a space in a suspended manner where visitors could have a 360-degree view on my work (the display was finally installed near the wall). While the clay beads are strung up with two different types of wires, the hard and the soft type, each string of beads can be twisted and adjusted to form the different shapes of lines cutting across each other in different directions. In that manner, instead of a still sculpture, the whole installation will present movements and rhythms within stillness. I imagined it as a kind of circular-shaped installation which look bigger in size. The final displayed work has not able to interact with its surroundings in order to generate energies or force within the space. Nevertheless, given our limitations and challenges in structuring the entire exhibition in order to effectively mobilise visitors to engaged in an interconnected flow of visit, I think the existing display works well in a way.



**Figure 3** Exhibits produced by Projek Rabak and Semai community in Kampung Ras.  
Source: Photo provided by PORT.



**Figure 4** *Bunyi Senyap Benih* (The Silent Sound of Seeds).  
Source: Photo provided by PORT.

Next, visitors were seeing another collaborative production, entitled *Karog Kiha Nyep—Rapuh Kian Lenyap* (Fragile and Disappearing), a video documentary produced by Kapallorek Art Space (an independent art space based in Seri Iskandar, Perak; see Kapallorek 2014) and Ronnie Bahari (Selangor-born Semai photographer; currently based in Ipoh, Perak; see Ronnie n.d.). The video captured cave paintings found in caves around Kinta Valley and its neighbouring indigenous villages. Besides the video, Ronnie's photography work of cave drawings was printed in large scale and installed on the two side walls at a narrow walkway within the exhibition venue. Blended in well with the interior architectural elements of the old building, the cave drawing installation on the wall by some means created an ambience where visitors could relevantly experience a visit to the cave. Fadly Sabran (2022), the founder of Kapallorek Art Space mentioned:

These endangered cave paintings are valuable artefacts for our future generations. No initiative of documenting the disappearing cave paintings so far. For the public awareness, we take this opportunity to document what we have seen during field trip and relate those prehistoric drawings created by the indigenous people on the cave walls, thousands of years ago, to the indigenous culture in Perak. We attempt to discuss the contributing factors and consequences that relevantly reflect the interconnection between human, human activities, and our nature. Capturing the actual and current situation onsite, we wish to raise public attention and awareness on the importance and urgency to protect and preserve such fragile and meaningful heritage assets.

Furthermore, Ronnie (2022) added:

Each painting on wall has its interesting story and historical value for indigenous communities. By interviewing indigenous elders, I can relate the drawings and traditional cultural practices and the ritual ceremonies practised by our indigenous ancestors. Each is meaningful to us as indigenous people. Yet, they are currently fading and vanishing over the time. In Gua Tempurung, a cave excursion destination in Perak, tourists and cave management do not even aware of these prehistoric paintings. Some seen it as graffiti and began to add new drawings or marks on it. This reflects the critical need for local attention and efforts to foster local appreciation and protection.

Highlighting Perak's cave paintings in *PFF* at Venice has somehow triggered cross-cultural sharing and discourse on issues and challenges encountered by indigenous populations, in different regions, towards reclaiming rights and justifications to safeguard the sustainability of indigenous cultural heritage. They are essential evidences of human origin, the valuable archival record, and references for future generation.



**Figure 5** *Karog Kih Nyep—Raph Kian Lenyap* by Kapallorok Art Space and Ronnie Bahari.  
Source: Photo provided by PORT.



**Figure 6** Installation of cave paintings on the walls by Ronnie Bahari.  
Source: Photo provided by PORT.

Another exhibit that caught visitors' attention is the video created by Stefano Cagol (born in Trento, Italy) entitled *Far before and after (us)*. As his third participation in the Venice Biennale, Stefano presents his new video production completed in the last days of the winter of 2022 at the Dolomites—a mountain range in the Northeastern Italian Alps (stefanocagol.com n.d.). Relevantly, Stefano's work reflects on human–nature relationship evolved over time, on divination and the indigenous symbiosis. Furthermore, it attempts to connect the past (and future) experiences in the absolute nature (e.g., the Arctic) and the visions of indigenous peoples (e.g., Sápmi and Inuit, two Arctic indigenous communities) with the sensitivity that united the native populations, as an ecological model. According to Stefano (2022):

In darkness, I work with minimal technological mediation by controlling a drone, to capture my solitary interaction with the surroundings onsite. A fire ritual between darkness and light triggered dialogue between human and nature, reflections on myths of the past and the unpredictable futures beyond time and space. Thousands of metres high, these mountains arose 200 million years ago, just like the one surrounding Malaysia. Although the Alps and Malaysia, apparently so different and yet, beyond the ages, so close and similar. Pertaining to nature and indigeneity, we are in fact facing the same issue, a crucial and complicated subject.

Stefano takes art as a global universal communication medium to symbolically convey complex messages or heavy subjects such as sustainability of nature through simple forms of visual languages, towards raising civic awareness of the global warning issues more impactfully.

Subsequently, visitors met the installation of *Stesen Jana Kuasa Dari Sumber Alam (SJKDSA)* (Power Generator Station from Natural Resources). Inspired by his research on Malaysian political history including the historical transformation encountered by Perak State, Azizan Paiman (born in Malacca and currently based in Perak) completed this installation work within limited time and budget (PORT 2022b). Exploring the concept of Duchamp's *La Boite-en-Valise* (i.e., box in a valise created by Marcel Duchamp in 1941), Paiman created two units of hot oven-shaped like power generator station units (61×61×210 cm). The display of both reflects *Yin* (bad or negative) and *Yang* (good or positive). Interiorly, each unit has constructed into two levels. Each level representing one element of the fourfold natural elements of earth, fire, water, and wind/air. Every level accommodates an interior space that resembles a gallery space in which occupied displays of miniatures and paintings, showcasing the very important persons related to the socio-political history of Perak over the course of 182 years (1840 till 2022).



**Figure 7** *The Far before and after (us)* by Stefano Cagol.  
Source: Photo provided by PORT.



Through his mindfully curated miniature exhibitions within the hidden gallery spaces inside the two units, Paiman narrates Perak's stories, covers its natural resources; foreign migrants, business tycoons, civil war, secret societies, presence of the British, leaders of nationalist movements, and political parties that interrelatedly shaped the local political landscape in Perak. Quoting Azizan Paiman (2022):

Instead of addressing issues about indigenous culture directly, I attempt to highlight the originality of Perak's community and Perak formation. Within the tiny gallery spaces that I have constructed, I showcase different groups of the very important persons (VIPs) who have been playing a part in paving the modern history of Perak. At one point, *SJKDSA* reflects how I have empowered myself to curate my own exhibitions within my constructed units, to present my own creative narratives within my constructed nature.



**Figure 8** *SJKDSA* by Azizan Paiman.

Source: Photo provided by PORT.



**Figure 9** Interior of *SJKDSA* from one of the peepholes around the unit.

Source: Photo provided by PORT.



**Figure 10** *Rumah Saya dan Angkasa* by Saiful Razman.

Source: Photo provided by PORT.

To complete the visit, visitors encountered installation and video presentation created by Saiful Razman (born in Teluk Intan, Perak and currently based in Kuala Lumpur), entitled *Rumah Saya dan Angkasa* (Saiful n.d.). It was a video installation, set against a wall collage, highlighting the wall or roof structural patterns/textures of a traditional Rumah Kutai (a traditional form of Malay house native to Perak since 1800). Saiful attempts to present a visual poem that relates hopes and aspiration of city dwellers for an ideal modern home in contrast with the living in a traditional village home in Perak. Through series of captured scenes, his video compares the living of his 72-year-old uncle, an unsung hero in village who has struggled and survived through life challenges but insists building his own house using his informal carpentry skills, in contrast with the living of his friend in the city of Kuala Lumpur who has recently own and renovated his home in a city. Although Saiful's creation does not directly reflect *PFF*'s theme, his works relevantly depict the interrelations and interactions between human and his living environments towards achieving personal goals, priorities, or identities in life.

Overall, *PFF* has not only created platforms for cross-border cultural exchanges, but also offered common grounds for international exchange and sharing of knowledge, understanding and awareness among global publics towards constructive discourses in addressing global challenges.

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