Indelible Marks

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Singapore's reverence for its colonial past has long been a source of tension. Under British rule from the early 19th century until 1959, the city-state was transformed into a vital trading port of the British Empire. This period saw infrastructural growth and economic expansion, shaping modern Singapore in ways still visible today. Yet beneath this progress lay colonial policies that enforced racial segregation, exploited local labour, and erased pre-colonial cultures. The consequences of these systems persist, particularly for those whose histories have been overshadowed by narratives that celebrate the British colonial legacy.

One such narrative is the veneration of Stamford Raffles, often credited with founding Singapore. Monuments like the Raffles Landing Site and Raffles Hotel serve as reminders of a colonial past romanticised in national education and public commemorations. These figures and sites stand as symbols of a colonial legacy embraced as part of Singapore's global identity, yet this selective memory overlooks the violence, exploitation, and displacement endured by pre-colonial communities.

The exhibition provides a platform for engagement and reflection, inviting audiences to interrogate their own relationship to the histories of colonisation. Themes of cultural adaptation, survival, and resistance emerge as the artists respond to both personal and collective experiences, exploring the intersections of identity, memory, and colonial impact. Through diverse artistic practices, the works create a vibrant, multilayered discourse confronting the complexities of postcolonial identity.

As Singapore celebrates its 60th anniversary of independence, this alliance of Australian First Nations and Singaporean artists calls for ongoing dialogue. It asks viewers to reconsider the weight of history, the role of memory in shaping national identity, and the importance of resisting historical erasure. The marks of the past remain indelible, but the futures they shape can still be reimagined through collective, creative action.

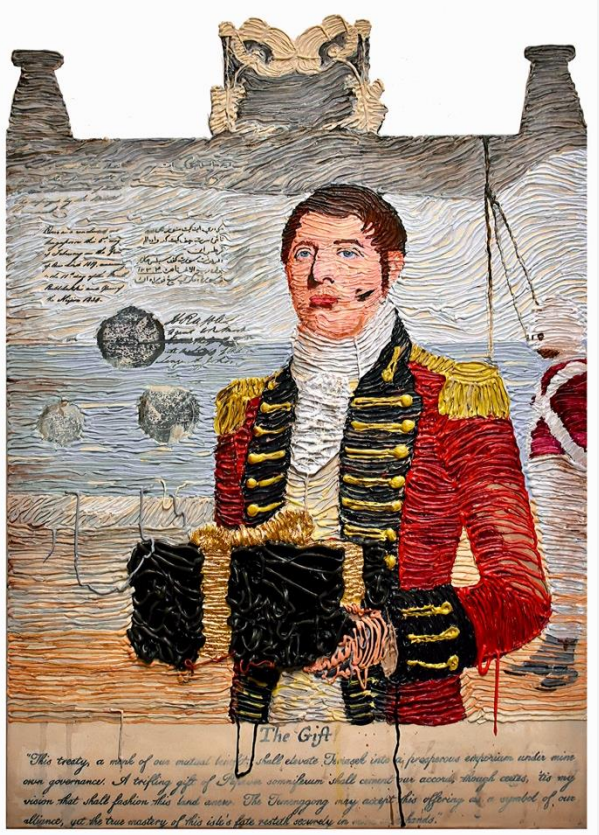
Nazerul Ben-Dzulkefli (1987)
Shackled Economies. 2025
Glazed Earthenware, Gold Plated Jump Rings & Steel
80 x 80 x 1 cm

Shackled Economies examines the economic marginalisation of indigenous Malay and Bugis traders during the 19th century through the lens of two Malay syair (narrative poems) written by Tuan Simi--Syair Dagang Berjual-beli and Syair Potong Gaji. As a contemporary of Munshi Abdullah, the secretary to Sir Stamford Raffles, Tuan Simi offers a rare and invaluable indigenous perspective on the socio-economic conditions of the period. These poetic texts serve not only as literary works but also as historical documents that critique the exploitative trade practices instituted under British colonial rule, particularly by the East India Company (EIC).

The works reveal how the EIC disrupted existing local trade systems by installing foreign middlemen merchant classes, effectively removing indigenous actors' economic agency. Contrary to colonial depictions of Singapore as an undeveloped fishing village, the island was historically an active node in regional and global trade networks, particularly as part of the Johor-Riau-Lingga Sultanate. The syair suggests that a sophisticated indigenous economic infrastructure existed long before colonial intervention, with established systems of commerce and currency circulation involving distant polities. The imposition of colonial economic structures not only curtailed these networks but also left enduring disadvantages for the Malay populace - effects that reverberate into the present.

Desmond Mah (1974). *The Swamp and its Spectre*. 2025. Oil and Mixed Media on Canvas, QR Code to accompanying AI Voice. 84 x 125 cm.

Desmond Mah (1974)
Dear Right Honourable Lord Hastings
2024
Oil on Mixed Media on Canvas
60 x 90 cm



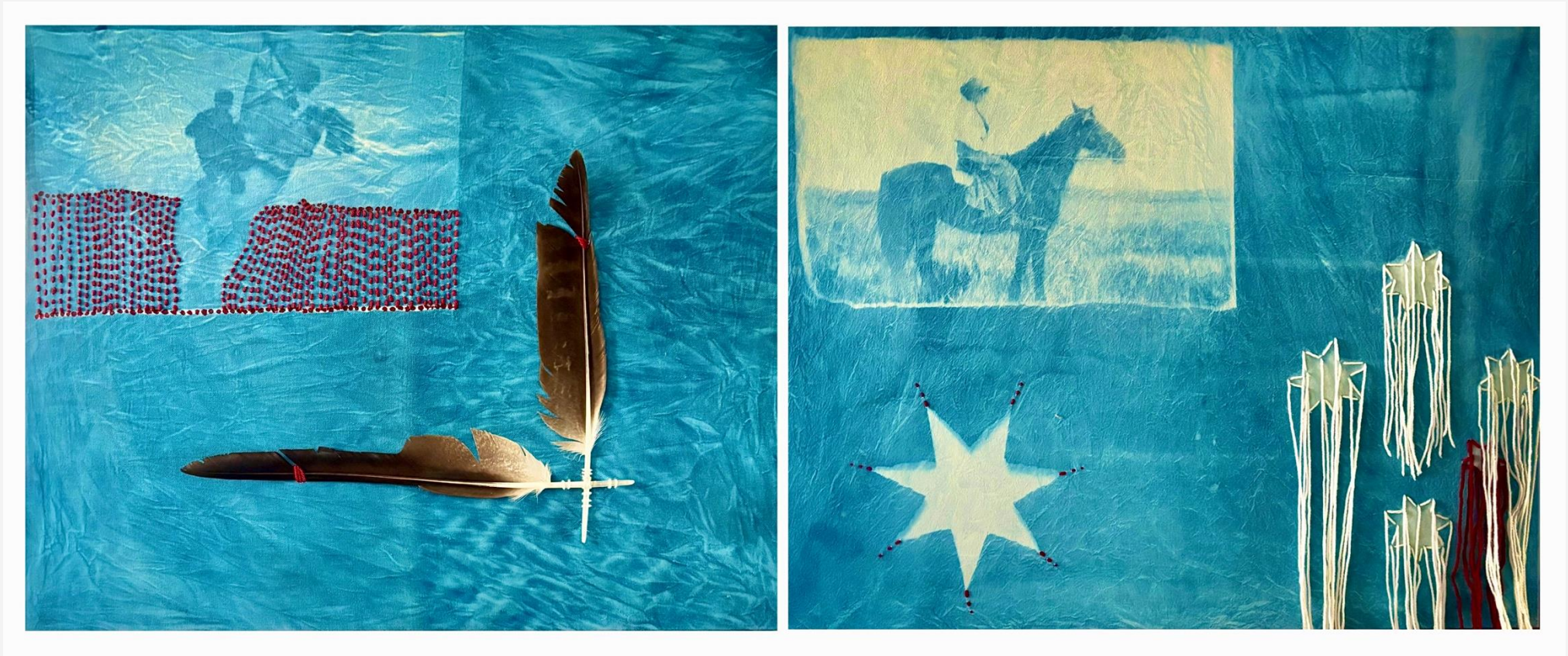
Desmond Mah (1974)
The Gift
2024
Acrylic Paint & Print on Canvas
71 x 50 cm

The swamp and its Spectre interrogate the colonial narratives that continue to shape Singapore's collective consciousness. Set against the murky backwaters of a 'once-primitive Singapore,' a Malayan tiger (Panthera tigris jacksoni) now extinct in the country faithfully carries the name Raffles in its mouth. The work addresses the erasure of pre-colonial histories and the presence of a constructed colonial legacy, highlighting how these narratives persist in shaping the national history and identity.

Dear Right Honourable Lord Hastings reinterprets George Francis Joseph's portrait of Stamford Raffles. This version captures a moment of intense rivalry, with Raffles, quill pen in hand, poised to inscribe his disdain onto the skull of William Farquhar. The piece speaks to Raffles' relentless pursuit to secure his legacy as the sole founder of Singapore, even at the expense of discrediting Farquhar.

The title of the work hints of a complaint letter that Raffles might have penned against Farquhar. The text within the artwork is a speculative narrative, adding intrigue and tension, and further highlighting the contentious relationship between the two men. By delving into the historical discord between Raffles and Farquhar, the artwork invites viewers to question the established narrative of modern Singapore's founding. It underscores the significant yet often overlooked contributions of Farquhar as the Resident of Singapore. In doing so, it challenges the dominant narrative that celebrates Raffles as the singular founder, prompting a re-evaluation of Singapore's history.

The Gift. On 6 February 1819, Stamford Raffles, together with Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor, signed a treaty granting the British East India Company (EIC) the right to establish a trading post in Singapore. On the same day, the British flag was officially raised, marking the beginning of Singapore as a British settlement (National Library Board, Singapore). This painting playfully re-examines that historic day, exploring not just the visible political agreements but also EIC's hidden motives, including the gift of Papaver somniferum (opium poppy).



Ilona Mcquire (1997). *Bound by Blood*. 2025. Cyanotype on Cotton, Wool and Eagle Feathers. 67 x 85 cm (Diptych)

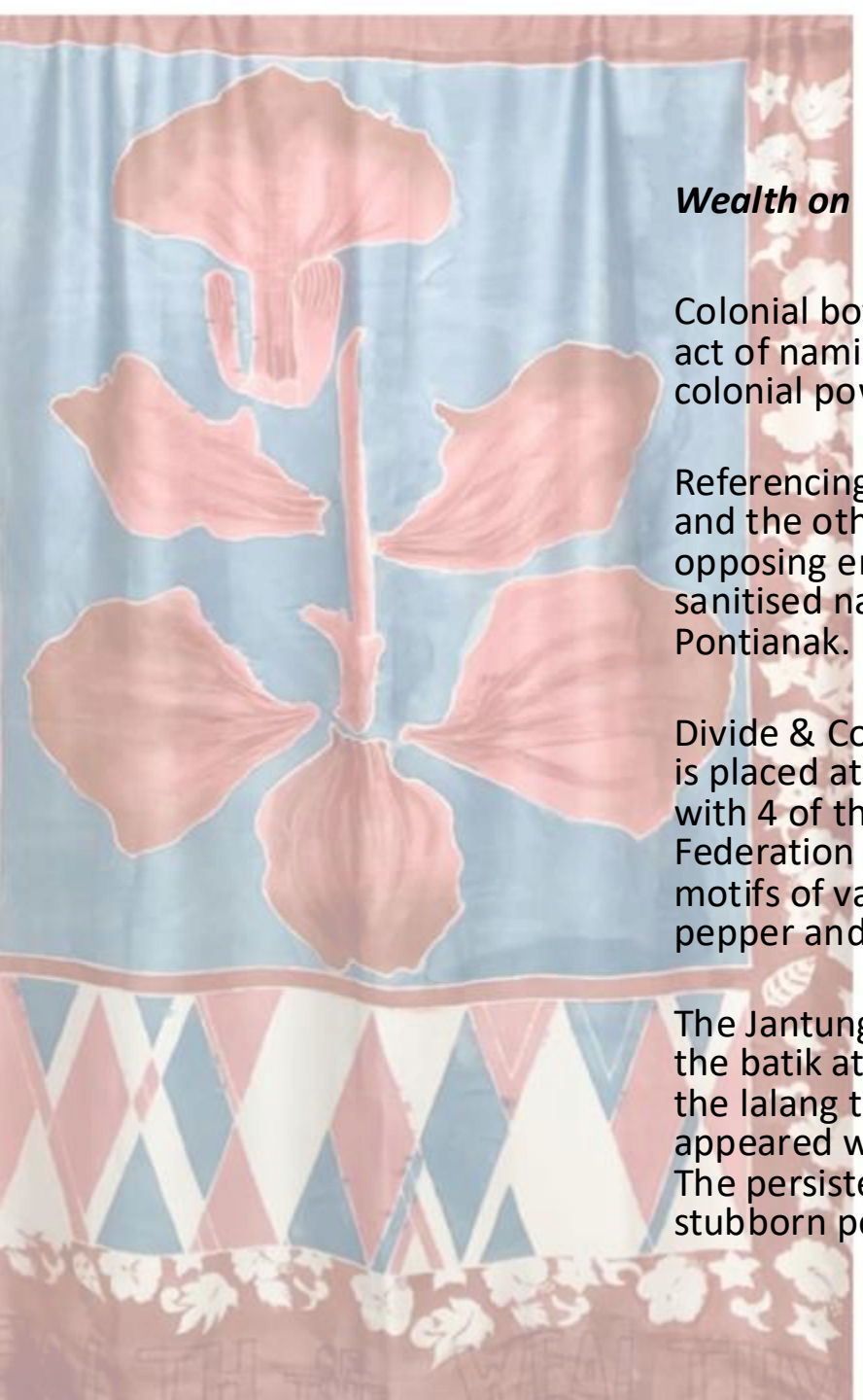
Bound by Blood. Two flags cut of the same fabric sit shoulder to shoulder. An image of a young Aboriginal man rearing a white horse and a founding white woman on a subdued black horse on the other side is depicted. The horses are representative of the power dynamics between white and black Australians. Horses and guns were not present in Australia until colonisation and were major advantages for the early settlers who took the upper hand in massacres and overall control through grim forms of intimidation.

Harnessing sun exposure, these two images speak to the dual Australian perspectives of our shared histories. The pride and shame of our shadowy past. *Bound By Blood* explores conflicting Australian identities of the oppressed and the oppressor, through its pastoral history.

The Southern Cross, a common symbol of national Australian identity, is threaded with white sheep's wool. The Australian wool industry was revolutionised by an Aboriginal man, David Unaipon who was also a preacher and activist, having invented the electric hand-shearer. The Southern Cross constellation is the same as what Ilona's ancestors saw for thousands of years before colonisation. Red stained wool is threaded throughout to connect the bloodshed of the innocent, making reference to that of Jesus Christ and reflective also of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. The eagle feathers form the symbol of the cross signifying the resilience, hope and strength found in faith.

My grandfather, Walter (pictured, 1947), was working on a farm in regional Western Australia in the 40's and 50's. He was expelled from school around age 11 because he had no shoes. This was a reality for Aboriginal people who were mostly living on government-sanctioned settlements called reserves. Many were only allowed to leave the reserve to work amongst many other oppressive laws. My grandfather worked the farm throughout his childhood until he was a young man. The farm owner offered rations and to sleep in the horse stables in the warmth of the hay as compensation for his work. The owner claimed to pay my grandfather by safekeeping his earnings in a "trust fund". This fund was his own pocket and my grandfather never saw a cent from it. The wealth of Australia was built on the back of this common occurrence now known as the Stolen Wages, a historical exploitation of Aboriginal workers through intentional withholding and mismanagement of their earnings by government and private employers.

Alya Rahmat (2002)
Wealth on the Wealthy Springs from the Poverty of the Poor
2025
Batik
145 x 106 cm (Diptych)



Wealth on the Wealthy Springs from the Poverty of the Poor

Colonial botany was not merely research sketches to understand the flora and fauna of a land; the act of naming, classifying, and representing nature was intertwined with the broader project of colonial power.

Referencing colonial botanical sketches, Alya presents 2 batik pieces, one with the Jantung Pisang and the other with Singapore's national flower, the Vanda Miss Joaquim. Each flower represents opposing ends of national identity; the Vanda Miss Joaquim as the idealised, well-curated and sanitised national identity and the Jantung Pisang an antithesis to the ideal, the fallen woman/ the Pontianak.

Divide & Conquer: The Vanda Miss Joaquim is presented on its 'head', as the head of the batik motif is placed at the bottom section of the cloth, rather than the top. The orchid is dissected into 8 parts, with 4 of the petals layered with a stitching of the outline of the countries that made up the Federation of Malaysia; Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Malaysia. This batik piece is decorated with motifs of various cash crops that were brought into Singapore during British rule, such as gambier, pepper and nutmeg.

The Jantung pisang, on the other hand, is presented as a whole 'standing' upright, with the head of the batik at the top. The cash crop motif also accompanies this piece, with the additional motif of the lalang that creates the border of the batik. The lalang was seen as a "persistent nuisance that appeared wherever land had been burnt or under cultivation and then abandoned" (Barnard, 2016). The persistence of the lalang mirrors the jantung pisang, in which both represents the undying and stubborn persistence of the marginalised to continue existing.

Brian Robinson (1973). *Bedhan Lag: Land of the Kaiwalagal.* 2025. Linocut Black Ink Print on Paper, Mounted on Board. 100 x 185 x 5 cm. Edition Artist Proof.

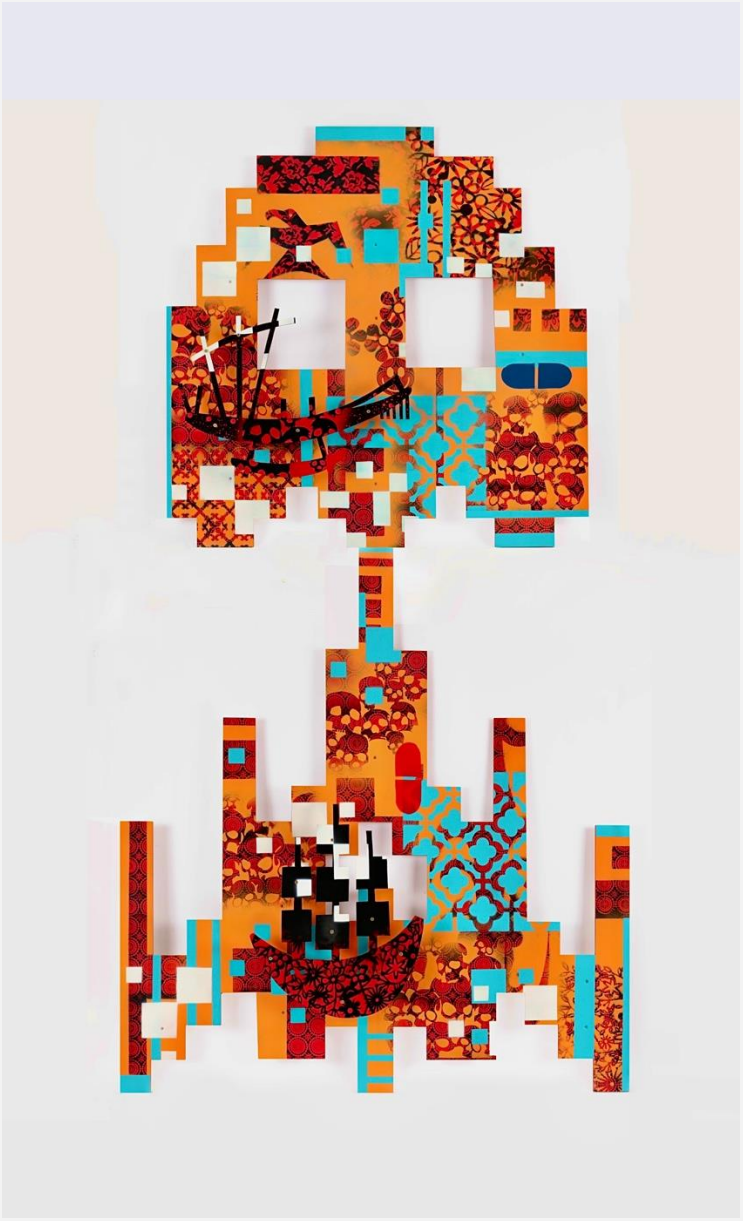
Bedhan Lag: Land of the Kaiwalagal. It is ironic that the place of possession for the Australian Mainland was a small island in the north of the country, a place called *Bedhan Lag*. From this island all of Australia's recent land control battles started. Elder and spokesperson for the *Kaurareg* people Mr Isaac Savage said in a recent interview, *Ip only em bin kasa sidaun lor ailan mat!*

In 1770 the British navigator Lieutenant James Cook sailed northwards along the east coast of Australia in the Endeavour. The ship was seriously damaged when it ran aground on a shoal of the Great Barrier Reef on 11 June so repairs were carried out on the beach at the mouth of the Endeavour River near modern day Cooktown. While there, Joseph Banks, Herman Spöring and Daniel Solander collected their first major specimens of Australian flora. The crew also encountered the *Guugu Yimidhirr*, the Aboriginal custodians of the area who taught them about *gangurru*, which later entered the English language as *kangaroo*.

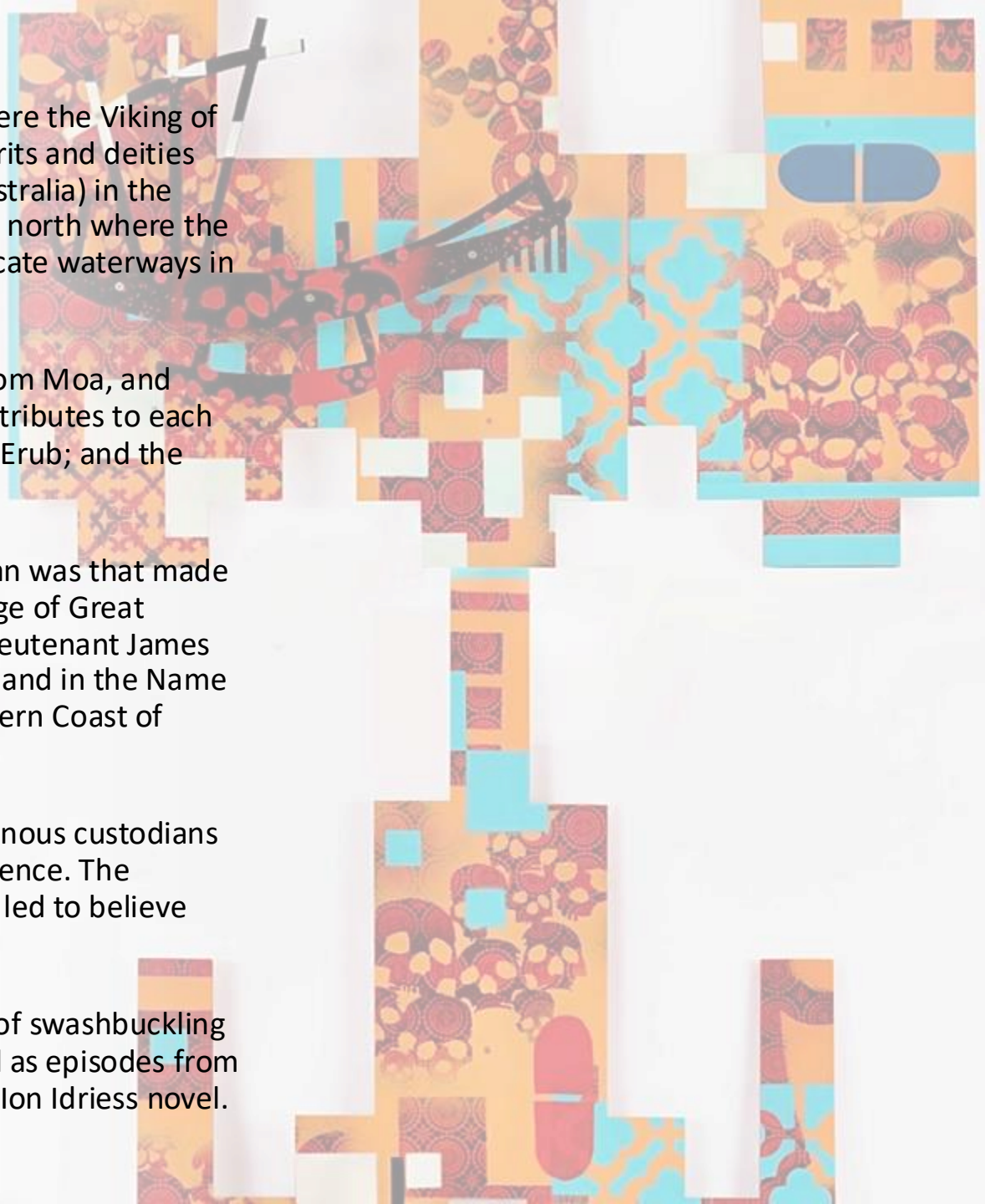
After repairs were complete the Endeavour once again headed north along the coast anchoring at about midday on 22 August at the northernmost tip of the coast. Without leaving the ship he named it Cape York. Having completed his survey of the east coast, it was time to go home and so Cook turned west and nursed his damaged ship through the treacherous waters of Torres Strait, which had been earlier navigated by Luis Váez de Torres in 1606. The ship's company had been at sea for two years so they were hoping to find a navigable passage, instead of spending many weeks sailing round New Guinea.

Searching for a high vantage point, Cook saw a steep hill on a nearby island from the top of which he hoped to see a passage into the Indian Seas. Cook climbed the hill with a small party, including the naturalist Joseph Banks. Upon reaching the top he sighted a navigable passage so he signalled the good news down to the men on the ship by raising a hand-held flag and firing a gun into the air.
Later, Cook would record that, when he was on that hill, he once more hoisted English colours and in the Name of His Majesty King George lll took possession of the whole Eastern Coast under the name of New South Wales, together with all the bays, harbours, rivers and islands located along the coast. However, it is unlikely that any such possession ceremony occurred when Cook was in Australia. He was not authorize to annex New Holland (Australia) because the authorisation was limited to the mythical Southern Continent and to islands not previously discovered by any Europeans.

The *Kaurareg* people of the *Kaiwalagal* nation have maintained links with *Bedhan Lag* through traditional lore and customs since *Bipotaim*, the time before. They have continued to live on or close to their traditional country, despite forced removal to Moa Island in 1922, and make use of the land and sea resources, according to their traditional customs and knowledge.



Brian Robinson (1973)
Odyssey:
Colonial Encounters in Zenadth. 2025
Enamel Spray Paint on PVC Plastic
230 x 120 x 5 cm (Diptych)



Long before the white man came to the islands, the Islanders were the Viking of the Zenadth Kes, a narrow waterway created by the zugubal spirits and deities that lies between the land masses of Zey Dagam Dhawdhay (Australia) in the south and Naygay Dagam Dhawdhay (Papua New Guinea) in the north where the Coral and Arafura Seas meet in one of the most fragile and intricate waterways in the world.

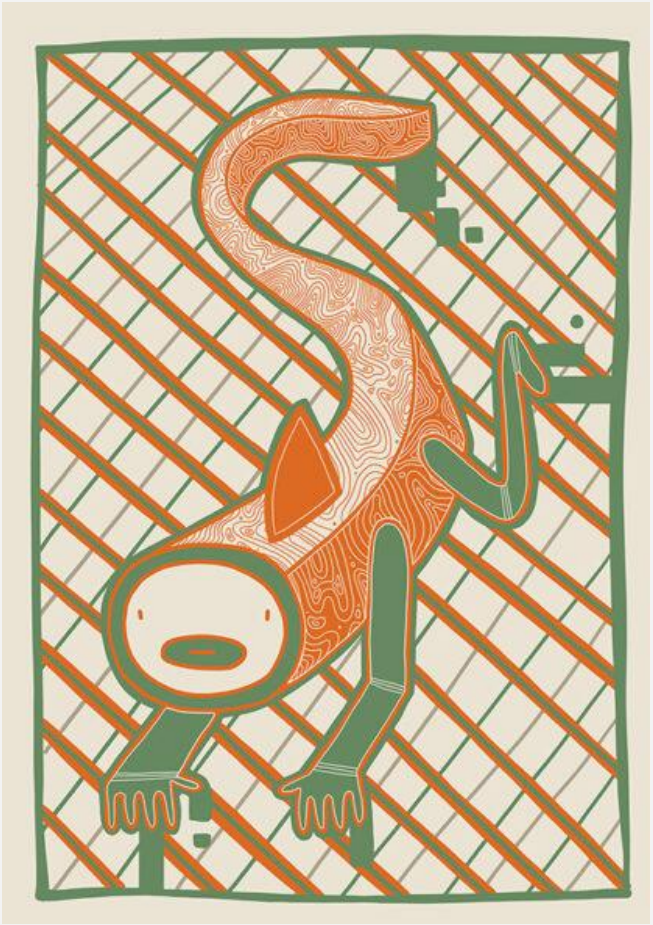
These deities, including Sida from Papua New Guinea, Gelam from Moa, and Waiet from Mabuiag, are recognised for imparting distinctive attributes to each island – the abundance and fertility of Mer; the inland water of Erub; and the rocky foreshore of Moa.

The first recorded voyage through the Torres Strait by a European was that made by the Spaniard Luis Vaes de Torres in August 1606 during the age of Great Navigations that led Europeans to Oceania, 164 years prior to Lieutenant James Cook aboard the Endeavour (1770) who hoisted English colours and in the Name of His Majesty King George lll took possession of the whole Eastern Coast of Australia under the name of New South Wales.

That defining moment in Australia's history propelled the indigenous custodians of the land into oppression, into a world unnatural to their existence. The colonists who came with the first influx of settlers in 1788 were led to believe that the land was terra nullius, no one's land.

Odyssey: Colonial Encounters in Zenadth Kes conjures up tales of swashbuckling piracy and high seas adventures that could easily be interpreted as episodes from Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean, an Indiana Jones movie or an Ion Idriess novel.

Tyrown Waigana (1996)
Flop Drop. 2025
Digital Print on Paper
110 x 77.5 cm
Edition 1 of 3



Tyrown Waigana (1996)
Shark Legs. 2025
Digital Print on Paper
110 x 77.5 cm
Edition 1 of 3

Tyrown Waigana (1996)
Enter Face Ethel. 2025
Digital Print on Hemp Paper
110 x 77.5 cm
Edition 3 of 3

Tyrown Waigana (1996)
Heavy Bottom John. 2025
Digital Print on Hemp Paper
110 x 77.5 cm
Edition 3 of 3

Flop Drop and Shark Legs, Tyrown uses the metaphor of the fish trap to examine how contemporary life—particularly in Western capitalist societies—entraps individuals within systems designed to appear open, but which narrow into inescapable structures. Fish swim freely into the wide end of the trap, unaware they will be caught as the exit tightens behind them. Waigana uses this mechanism to expose how large societal ideals—such as health, productivity, or digital connection—are undermined by small, omnipresent barriers: junk food at every checkout, addictive technologies engineered for constant use, and the illusion of personal responsibility within corporate ecosystems.

Rendered through digital prints, Waigana's visual world features 'fish people' and netted patterns that mirror entrapment and disorientation. These hybrid figures embody the tension between agency and control, survival and fatigue. His work confronts the psychological weight of navigating systems rigged against the individual, echoing Indelible Marks' larger themes of structural oppression, the legacy of colonial discipline, and the exhaustion that arises when resistance is expected but tools for liberation remain inaccessible. By surfacing these contradictions, Waigana asks: how do we assert autonomy in a world engineered to ensnare?

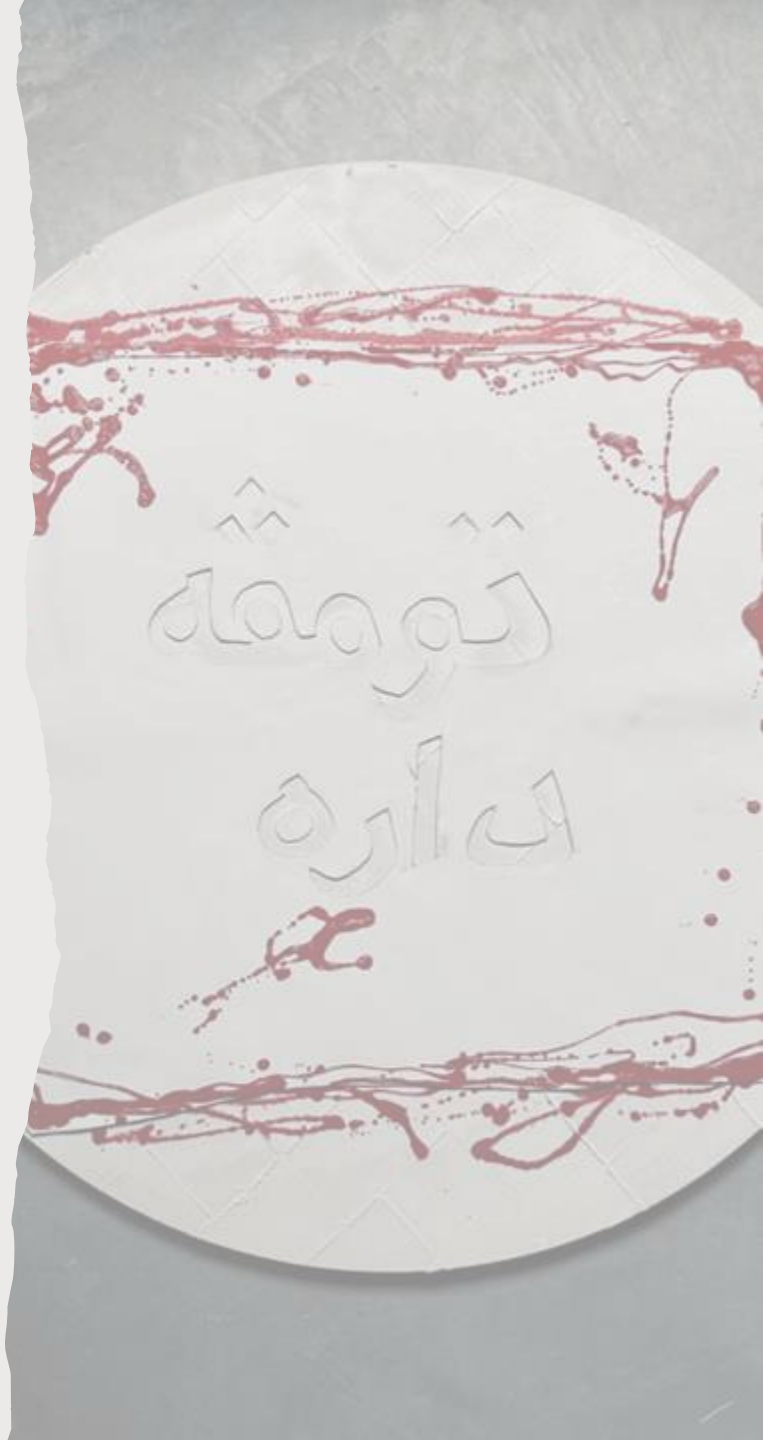
***Enter Face Ethel and Heavy Bottom John*.** Tyrown's illustrative series confronts the colonial legacy of erasure through a striking visual language that centres anonymity, absence, and collective memory. Created digitally and printed on poster paper, the works recall the Carrolup Collection, a body of drawings by Aboriginal children made during the mid-20th century in government-run institutions. Waigana's faceless black figures set against pink fields reflect the many nameless artists whose identities were once known within their communities but ignored by colonial record-keeping. By referencing the way these children's artworks were undervalued until deemed profitable, Waigana critiques the systems that commodify Indigenous creativity while denying its origins and voices. His work speaks to a shared experience of dispossession, the flattening of individuality under colonial regimes, and the enduring strength of community expression. In the context of Indelible Marks, this series resonates with broader themes of historical omission, resilience, and the reclaiming of suppressed narratives through allied, intergenerational reflection.

Ezzam Rahman (1981)
Tanah Air (Homeland). 2025

Ezzam Rahman (1981)
Tumpah Darah (Bloodshed). 2025

Used Anti-inflammatory Plasters, Repurposed Scrap Genuine Leather, Adhesives, Industrial Enamel and Epoxy Resin on Canvas.
80 x 80 x 1 cm (a series of 2).

Ezzam Rahman is known for using unconventional materials such as his own skin he harvests in most of his autobiographical artworks. In this proposed artwork by using materials from and off his own body and meticulously carving them in Jawi. Ezzam is relearning, researching, and focusing on borrowed and colonized languages, Jawi is the Arabic alphabet or writing system used for Malay or related languages. Through the spreading of Islam in the Malay Archipelago, the native Malays adapted Jawi scriptures as Bahasa Melayu. By using these materials Ezzam is questioning his own self-identity, highlighting his experiences as a minority, Muslim, cis male, queer brown body born in Singapore, and how his body has been colonized by both eastern and western influences. By repurposing used anti-inflammatory plasters, arranged in grids as the background, it is to represent constant healing for the body. These materials may be abject to most, materials that are meant to be discarded but to Ezzam, they are evidence to his existence.



Participating Artists

Ilona McGuire (Aboriginal Australian, Whadjuk, Ballardong, Yuat and Kungarakan heritage): McGuire's work focuses on the use of traditional Aboriginal colours to highlight the ongoing cultural resilience of her people. Her art is a powerful commentary on sovereignty and land rights, critiquing the structures that have long sought to silence Aboriginal voices.

Brian Robinson (Torres Straits Islander Australian of the Maluyligal and Wuthathi tribal groups of the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula and a descendant of the Dayak people of Malaysia): Robinson draws on traditional Torres Strait Islander motifs while challenging the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems. His work reflects on the survival of his culture in the face of colonial suppression.

Tyrown Waigana (Aboriginal Australian of Wadandi Noongar and Ait Koedal peoples): Waigana's use of humour and contemporary Indigenous aesthetics critiques colonisation while inviting audiences to engage with complex themes of identity, displacement, and resilience.

Nazerul Ben-Dzulkefli (Malay-Singaporean-Australian): Ben-Dzulkefli creates sculptural works exploring themes of longing, belonging, and colonisation, as he navigates his identity as a Singaporean Malay-Javanese migrant in Perth. Using clay, he re-imagines folk Malay and Javanese rituals, spirits, and writing systems of the Nusantara, preserving personal memories and stories of growing up in Singapore.

Ezzam Rahman (Malay-Singaporean): Rahman's multidisciplinary practice is defined by his use of ephemeral materials such as skin and talcum powder to explore the transient nature of life, the fragility of the body, and personal identity. His works, which range from performance art to delicate sculptures, reflect on mortality, decay, and the passage of time, while also challenging societal norms around beauty and the body. Through these investigations, Rahman critiques the lingering colonial frameworks that continue to shape perceptions of physicality, race, and identity in contemporary Singapore.

Alya Rahmat (Malay-Singaporean): Alya's multidisciplinary practice includes assemblage and batik making, exploring themes of nation building, colonisation and reclamation through a feminist centric lens to speculate counter-narratives. The nature of her works explores the female identity and the concerns within the Malay-Muslim community, addressing it through appropriation of Nusantaran myths and folklores.

Desmond Mah (Singaporean-Australian): Mah reinterprets colonial archives, reconstructing, critiquing, and deconstructing historical narratives to challenge problematic representations and ongoing colonial legacies—including cultural erasure, bias, and the glorification of empire. He employs a textile-like painting technique and, at times, incorporates AI-generated voices to foster deeper engagement and interaction.

About ART SEASONS

ART SEASONS is a contemporary art gallery in Singapore and Beijing that represents Asia and Southeast Asian contemporary artists. ART SEASONS is today a leading art gallery in Singapore and has made its presence felt in Singapore, the region and beyond.

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