

OUR GRANDFATHER ROAD: **THE (GENDERED) BODY AND PLACE IN** **CONTEMPORARY SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART** ART FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

EDUCATION KIT **STAGE 5 & 6**



Sam Lo, *My Grandfather Road* 2016, photographic print on sihl textured artistic archival paper, 90 x 160 cm, ed. 5/5

My Grandfather Road: The (gendered) body and place in contemporary southeast Asian art.

Our Grandfather Road presents seventeen artists whose work is as diverse as the region itself. Sixteen women artists and one trans-masc artist from Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines explore themes of gender, cultural and social history, and spatial/temporal experiences. Inevitably in this complex contemporary world, tensions emerge. Local issues are refracted through their global implications, whether that be the impact of the pandemic, the loss of orangutan habitat in Borneo, the alienation of public and private spaces at the hands of property developers in Singapore, access to education for women and girls in Indonesia, defiance towards the military junta in Myanmar, gendered power relationships in Thailand, or abuses of power in both private and public settings everywhere. These are personal narratives of joy and sorrow as the artists navigate past and present geographies of space and time.

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Restu Ratnaningtyas, *Temple of gloom* 2020, cloth, cotton, polyester, natural dye, 200 x 125 cm

THE EXHIBITION

Our Grandfather Road develops its conceptual premise along the intersecting axes of gender and geography. Yet, in more ways than one, the diversity of artists represented in the show trouble and reimagine the entangled, contentious concepts of 'gender', 'womanhood', and 'southeast Asia'.

To even attempt to categorise the exhibition as a "woman's show" reveals the limitations of gender as a thematic descriptor. Sam Lo (Singapore), for example, whose photographic series *Our Grandfather Road* (2012–16) inspired the exhibition's title, has since transitioned to a trans-masculine identity, despite being memorialised in popular culture as Singapore's 'Sticker Lady'. Other artists, who have already experienced considerable success in the international art world, such as Arahmaiani Feisal (Indonesia) and IGAK Murniasih (Indonesia), have rejected attempts to label them as feminists, considering the term to be part of a Eurocentric, neoliberal discourse which oversimplifies the conceptual richness of their practices. It is also worthwhile to note the inclusion of more recent works produced within the last three years. The Burmese artist Emily Phyō's striking photograph of a three-finger salute, transposed from a dystopian fiction trilogy to become a real symbol of protest in contemporary Myanmar, documents the imbrication of human lives in a landscape of political turmoil and repression. Fitri DK (Indonesia) records the presence of Indigenous women's bodies at the frontlines of land disputes in Indonesia in a series of black-and-white woodcut prints; and, although visually distinct, Kasarin Himacharoen's (Thailand) vibrant, miniature prints of women's bodies in rest, contemplation, and motion, and Ipeh Nur's (Indonesia) largescale black-and-white batik, each speak to the impact of a global pandemic on (women's) bodies, minds, and spaces of interiority.

The exhibition takes its title from a work by Singaporean artist Sam Lo. Lo's photograph records the words "My Grandfather Road" spray-painted onto a street in Singapore's Central Business District. The Singlish phrase, used colloquially to berate people for obstructing others in a public space (*'you think this is your grandfather's road?'*), is repurposed here as a way of reasserting a sense of place, heritage, and belonging in the face of rapid urban development—a phenomenon particular to Singapore but common to all major cities of southeast Asia, and often a source of alienation or regret for local populations. The title, then, which substitutes "our" for "my", serves a dual purpose. Lo's work asks us to imagine that what is "mine" could very possibly be "ours".



Olga Rindang Amesti, *Mind and Boxes* 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable

FOR TEACHERS

Our Grandfather Road presents exciting opportunities to integrate new works by artists from the Asia Pacific region into existing curricula and case study investigations. This resource presents information, questions and suggested activities in relation to the exhibition as a whole and in more detail to five of the seventeen artists. They can be accessed before, during or after a visit to the gallery.

The five artists selected for particular focus indicate the rich diversity of practice among contemporary artists in southeast Asia. They employ media ranging from painting, drawing and printmaking to photomedia, video, installation and street art, revealing aspects of their personal, social, cultural and political worlds. Questions and activities invite students to engage with the material and conceptual practice of the artists, to consider the themes that emerge from the exhibition's curation, and to make significant connections with their wider study of contemporary art.

Consider examining the exhibition as an in-depth focus study within a broader investigation of Art & Place, Art & Identity, Art & Gender, or Art & Feminism. Alternatively, select one or more artists or artworks for a close analysis, examined through a particular theoretical lens (e.g., Artist's Practice, the agencies of the Conceptual Framework, one of the Frames or from within the artist's particular local context).

CURRICULUM LINKS AND SYLLABUS OUTCOMES

Teachers are encouraged to adapt this education resource for their curriculum, in and outside NSW. This education kit makes the following connections to:

Visual Arts Syllabus:

- *Artists' Practice* – ideas and inspiration / choice and discernment / curatorial techniques and the role of galleries in supporting artist intentions.
- *Conceptual Framework (Artist/Artwork/World/Audience)* – Art as a reflection of society and contemporary culture / the relationship between artists, subject matter, artwork, world events and audience.

Art Criticism and Art History Outcomes:

Stage 5 Course: 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.10

Stage 6 Year 11: P7, P8, P9

Stage 6 HSC Year 12: H7, H8, H9

International Baccalaureate Diploma Syllabus:

Focus: *Visual Arts in Context*

- *Theoretical Practice*: Students examine artists working in different cultural contexts.
- *Curatorial Practice*: Students develop an informed response to work and exhibitions they have seen and experienced.



Ipeh Nur, *THE CHRONICLE OF TWENTY TWENTY: Pagor 2020*, hand drawn batik, 110 x 150 cm, 1 of 6 batiks

CASE STUDY: ART & FEMINISM

Students investigate the Western history of feminist art in Euro-America, including the work of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, and the pioneering 1971 essay by Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*

They consider this history in relation to the survey exhibition of Australian artist Vivienne Binns at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and/or the two iterations of *Know My Name* at the National Gallery of Australia in 2021, and/or to historically significant exhibitions of women artists such as *Wack!* (2007, MoCA, Los Angeles) or *Global Feminisms* (2007, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum).

They might look comparatively at works by artists such as Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Louise Bourgeois, Barbara Kruger, the Guerrilla Girls, Martha Rosler, Wangechi Mutu, Lorna Simpson, Lin Tianmiao, Tao Aimin and/or Liu Xi. They might consider the work of non-binary or gender non-conforming artists such as Lu Yang, Kent Monkman or Juliana Huxtable in relation to the work of Sam Lo.

Finally, students select one artist from *Our Grandfather Road* and examine their practice in detail.

QUESTIONS

Questions for Years 9 – 12

The questions provided in this resource may be used for written responses, examination preparation, or for open-ended discussions in the gallery or the classroom.

- What is feminist art?
- Why do some artists in this exhibition – and others – reject a feminist identity?
- Does an artist have to be a feminist to make feminist work?
- Does gender still matter in the artworld?
- Is there a role for women-only exhibitions?
- Is contemporary art local or global?
- Can/should artists be activists?

Questions for Written Response Years 11 – 12

Conceptual Framework:

Examine the work of two artists in *Our Grandfather Road* who explore issues of place and/or gender in their work.

How do *Our Grandfather Road* artists offer different interpretations of the world in their artworks?

Frames:

Investigate how *Our Grandfather Road* artists visually process their personal experiences.

How do contemporary artists explore ideas about identity in their artworks?

Practice:

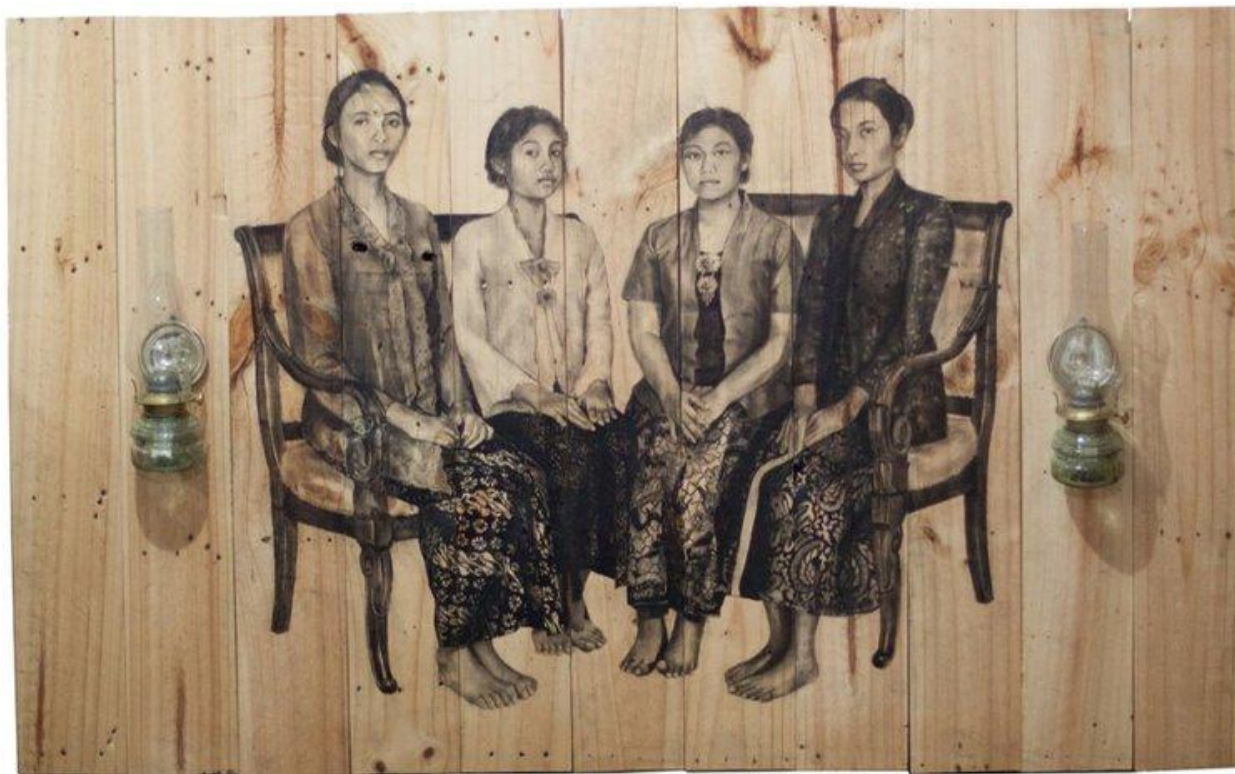
Explain how *Our Grandfather Road* artists have transformed ideas into sophisticated and challenging works of art.

'An artist's practice is still shaped by their gender.'

Discuss this statement, referring to specific artists and artworks from *Our Grandfather Road*.

FOCUS ACTIVITIES

Here you will find brief information and some focus questions about 5 artists from *Our Grandfather Road*. You can deep dive into researching individual artists, or compare and contrast their work with others, considering how they respond to local and global issues.



Maharani Mancanagara, *Rekonstruksi Daun Semanggi #2* 2014, charcoal & assemblage on pinewood, 100 x 150 cm

About The Artist:

Indonesian artist Maharani Mancanagara was born in 1990 in Padang. She now lives and works in Bandung, West Java. Her works explore and reinterpret Indonesia's complex and sometimes sensitive issues of modern socio-political and cultural history through fictional storytelling, turning political histories into fables or allegories. She studied printmaking at Institut Teknologi Bandung where she began to utilise drawing, printmaking, and installation, often using wooden surfaces.

When Mancanagara discovered her grandfather's diary, she began a journey to explore personal histories intertwined with larger socio-political dynamics of 20th century Indonesia. Having discovered that her grandfather was imprisoned on Baru Island in 1965 for "re-education" during the terrible purge and massacre that followed an abortive coup, she began to collect people's unrecorded stories that often presented an alternative view of the history she had been taught at school. Working with archival sources, she is particularly interested in education and the position of women in Indonesian history. *Rekonstruksi Daun Semanggi* is a homage to Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879–1904), an activist and advocate for women's rights who protested against the limited opportunities for women to receive education. Kartini's letters were published in 1911 as *Out of Darkness to Light, Women's Life in the Village, and Letters of a Javanese Princess*. The artist views Kartini as an authentic role model for both women and the younger generation in Indonesia. She says, "Women portrayed in the artwork illustrate individuals in their traditional background, striving to learn".

Think About/Discuss:

Many artists have explored alternative painting surfaces, often using surprising found materials. In the early twentieth century, for example, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso made collages using newspaper, wallpaper and sheet music. Robert Rauschenberg painted over a quilt and pillow for *Bed* (1955). In the 1980s Julian Schnabel's neo-expressionist works were painted over shards of broken crockery glued to the canvas. Compare Mancanagara's use of found timber in this and other works with any of the following:

- Sun Xun's practice of making ink paintings over newspaper
- Yuken Teruya's tiny sculptures created inside paper shopping bags
- Guan Wei's series of works painted on recycled file folders
- Ekaterina Panikanova's installations of paintings and drawings on old books
- Vernon Ah Kee's *Shield* surfboards – his response to the Cronulla riots
- How does an artist's choice of materials embed meaning/s that may be understood by audiences? What specific meanings are communicated in the artworks you have explored?
- How does the artist's use of wooden boards as a painting surface and the addition of oil lamps suggest ways to read and interpret the work?
- How do the imagery and the artist's techniques evoke a sense of nostalgia?
- How would the emotional impact of the work be different if the artist had painted it on a canvas using bright colours?

Artist website: <https://mancanagara.com/>



Wawi Navarroza, *Self-Portrait for My Grandfather, the Photographer* (after Frida Kahlo's *Portrait of My Father/ Retrato de Mi Padre* 1951) 2007, Lambda C-print, 61 x 45.7 cm

About The Artist:

Wawi Navarroza is an Istanbul-based Filipina multidisciplinary artist known for her works in photography. Her images navigate self and surrounding as seen in her works in constructed tableaux and self-portraits, as well as landscape and installation. She is informed by tropicality within the dynamics of post-colonial dialogue, globalisation, and the artist as a transnational agent. As a female artist, southeast Asian and Filipino, her works transmute lived experience to the symbolic while probing materials and studio practice, exploring the hybridity of identity, photography and place.

Navarroza is a graduate of Communications Arts at De La Salle University, Manila. Shortly after, she received continuing education at the International Center of Photography in New York City with a Fellowship Grant from the Asian Cultural Council. She completed a Masters in Contemporary Photography (Master Europeo de Fotografía de Autor) in Spain with a scholarship awarded by Instituto Europeo di Design in Madrid.

Think About/Discuss:

“The artist’s identity is plural” says Navarroza. Filipina, female, Asian, global she is a “worldly trans-national sponge”. Her photographs are constructed, staged tableaux in which she is both artist and subject, controlling the lighting and mise-en-scene. She “disrupts the continuity of seamless photographic image by quick imprecise digital cuts-and-pastes on selected areas of the image, reminding viewers that ultimately, we are looking at a constructed image.” The work is also a homage to her grandfather.

Compare this work with the Frida Kahlo painting she has appropriated and discuss similarities and differences.
<https://www.fridakahlo.org/portrait-of-my-father.jsp>

What techniques has the artist used to convey a sense of nostalgia, loss or memory?

Look at Navarroza's self portrait series on her website. In what ways might her work be characterised as a "conversation with art history"?

Think About/Discuss:

Why do you think an artist might choose to focus on the self-portrait in their work? Historically, and still today, many women artists have explored the subject of their own image – what reasons might there be for this?

Artist website: www.wawinavarroza.com



Bussaraporn Thongchai, *The Dress* 2013, crayon and acrylic on paper, 75 x 145 cm

About The Artist:

Bussaraporn Thongchai was born in 1985. She grew up in a small town located along the Mekong River, in the northeast of Thailand. She now lives and works in Berlin, Germany. Thongchai completed her bachelor's and master's degree at the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art, Silpakorn University, Bangkok. Bussaraporn Thongchai's drawings, paintings and collages reveal the lived experiences of women. She takes aim at institutions and behaviours that subordinate women and reinforce gendered structures and systems of power. Basing many of her works on her own experiences of male violence and coercive control in her family and in subsequent relationships with men, her work is a powerful critique of the effects of what has come to be called toxic masculinity. Most of her early works consisted of drawing and painting, often depicting the naked body in a grotesque form. She critically examines issues of gender and systemic abuses of power in Thai society. More recently she has focused on issues such as the status of refugee women in Germany, and the horrors of sexual abuse and human trafficking.

Think About/Discuss:

Bussaraporn Thongchai says *The Dress* evokes in symbolic form her memories of the animosity between her abusive father and her mother, whose life was devoted to caring for the family.

Why do you think the artist has drawn the female figure enveloped in a garment covered in drooping, distended breasts?

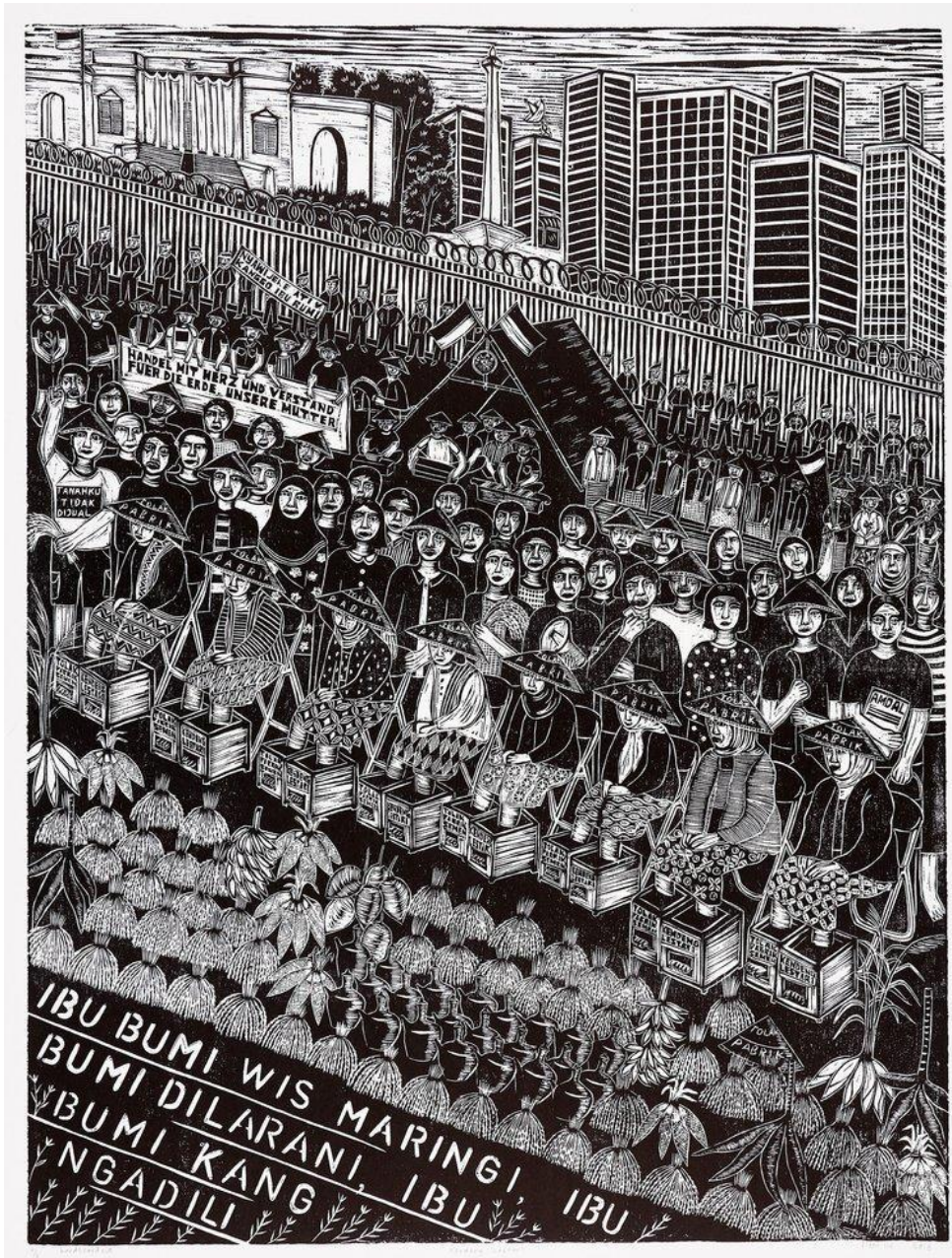
What is the visual and emotional impact of the repeated curved forms, the monochrome palette and the positioning of the tall, elongated figure in the pictorial space of the composition?

Multiple breasts have often been associated with powerful Goddess figures in the ancient world – but here they become an all-enveloping garment. How would you interpret meaning/s in this work?

Compare *The Dress* with any of these works, noting differences and similarities in material practice and conceptual intention:

- Louise Bourgeois, *Blind Man's Bluff* – or the photograph shot for Vogue magazine showing Bourgeois wearing a latex tunic of multiple breast forms
- Pinaree Sanpitak, *Breast Stupa Topiary* or the installation of soft sculpture breasts, *Noon Nom*
- Lin Tianmiao, *Here? Or There?* – See <https://www.luxartasia.com/2012/09/lin-tianmiao-asia-society-new-york.html>
- Zhen Guo, *Mother* installation – See <https://www.zhenguoart.com/momma>

Do you think *The Dress* could be considered a feminist artwork? Why/why not?



Fitriani Dwi Kurniasih (Fitri DK), *Kendeng Lestari* 2019, hardboard cut on paper, 80 x 60 cm

About The Artist:

Indonesian artist Fitri DK describes herself as “an art worker from Yogyakarta”. She uses printmaking and graphic art techniques to critique and dialogue on social and environmental issues. Fitri is committed to raising women’s issues through art and music and consistently provides a strong female voice in an extremely patriarchal culture. Her work is a vehicle through which she documents events and aims to generate dialogue and debate. Fitri is a member of SURVIVE!Garage community, Taring Padi art collective, and a vocalist in the band Dendang Kampungan. Fitri also runs @democrafty, an online store of her handmade craft, embroidery, jewellery and prints.

Fitri DK’s works are directly connected to social issues. *Kendeng Lestari*, or ‘Women’s Feet in Concrete’ references action taken by mothers who shackled their feet with cement as a symbol of their resistance to a cement factory that was polluting the air and water. The artist says: “I made this work for solidarity with the Kendeng peoples who continue to fight for their land from the threat of a cement factory that damages the environment in Kendeng, fight for Kendeng to be sustainable, they fight not for their own sake but for future generations, their children and grandchildren to continue to enjoy clean air, clean water, mountains, land & sustainable forests.” The text in the foreground refers to the women chanting about Mother Earth.

Think About/Discuss:

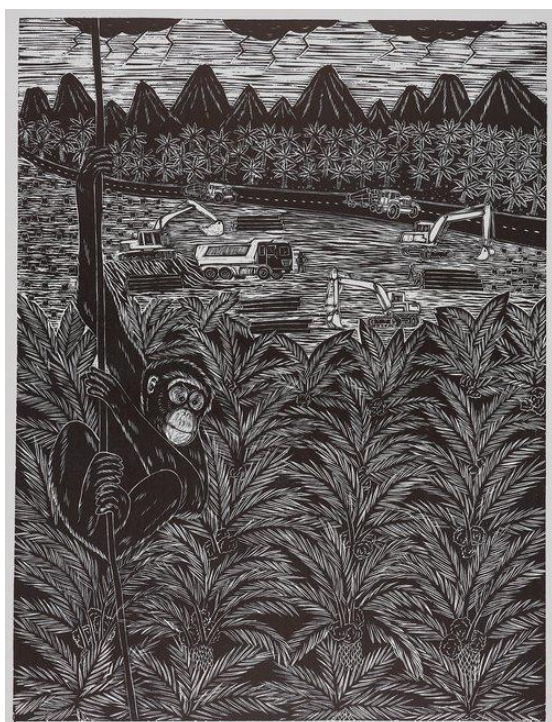
Many artists have used printmaking – woodblock printing and screen-printing in particular – as a form of dissent, social activism, and as propaganda. Examples to look at include the prints of Goya and Hogarth, the early twentieth-century woodblock prints of Käthe Kollwitz in Germany and the New Woodcut Movement in China, or the screen-prints of the Earthworks Poster Co-operative in Sydney in the 1970s.

Why do you think printmaking is a successful medium for communicating a social message?

Analyse how Fitri DK has used graphic qualities of shape, line, contrast and text to make visually compelling images.

Would these prints be as visually and emotionally powerful if they were produced in full colour rather than black and white? Why/why not?

Look at Fitri DK's other prints in the exhibition, or the examples shown here, and explain how she uses a language of signs, symbols and visual codes to convey powerful messages that extend beyond her situated Indonesian context to resonate globally.



Ruang hidup yang dirampas (Robbed living space) 2019, hardboard cut on paper, 80 x 60 cm



Kendeng Lestari (Everlasting Kendeng) 2018, wood cut print on paper, 80 x 60 cm

REFERENCES

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/feminist-art>

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<https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/feminist-art>

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<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-feminist-artists-whose-work-you-need-to-know/AQURUC6SwwhEKw?hl=en>