

# Taiwanese Indigenous Contemporary Art: Polyphony and Mipaliw

Guest Editor: Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu

# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

TAIWANESE INDIGENOUS CONTEMPORARY ART:  
POLYPHONY AND MIPALIW | VOLUME 10, ISSUE 1, 2023

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ISSN 1835 - 2776  
UNESCO E-Journal  
an Openly Published Journal affiliated with  
The UNESCO Observatory at  
The University of Melbourne

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert  
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Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education



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**INTRODUCTION** Polyphony is a musical term referring to multiple melodies, or voices.

“Eight-part-polyphony” is a unique vocal music sung by the Bunun, one of Taiwan’s indigenous nations. Recognized by the UNESCO as world cultural heritage, the Bununs’ complex harmony celebrates the millet harvest and offers respect to the ancestral spirits. It is sung by several singers facing inwards in a circle, arms interlocked, who separately initiate the different notes with the vowels a, e, i, o and u. The diversity of voices and tones is related to M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony as a metaphor for a literary work with a plurality of narrative voices. In the Bununs’ song as in Bakhtin’s theory, no single voice is subordinated or submerged. Rather, each individual voice remains distinct and necessary.

Nowadays, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has made us more aware than ever before of the importance of mutual collaboration among human beings. Yet Taiwanese indigenous culture has long been based upon cooperation in life. For example, the Amis, the largest Taiwanese indigenous nation, uses the word “mipaliw” to describe women’s mutual collaboration in farm labor, and even to cope with sexual harassment on the farm. That same exchange of labor reflects and nourishes works in Taiwanese indigenous art and culture, so that one regional art festival took the word “mipaliw” for its title. The collaboration of labor, the diversity of voices - these are also seen in the work of Taiwanese indigenous contemporary artists. Polyphony and mipaliw are central to cultural diversity in art and life.

For this edition the authors’ essays address issues such as how do the Taiwanese indigenous artists cope with the sociocultural crisis in contemporary art and life through mutual collaboration? How is the metaphor of polyphony demonstrated by the diversity of voices in art and how art reflects the polyphony.

**Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu**

Guest Editor



# RHIZOME AS POLYPHONIC INDIGENEITY: THE FROTTAGE, SCANNED IMAGES AND INSTALLATION OF ELENG LULUAN'S ART

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## BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu is an art historian and a visual cultures critic. She graduated from the art and art history department at the University of Iowa and majored in modern art and contemporary art. She is a professor in the visual arts department at the University of Taipei in Taiwan. She first encountered the Indigenous contemporary artists of Taiwan's Taitung and Hwaliang provinces in 2003 and began writing about the aesthetic, mythology, and human condition of Taiwanese Indigenous art. She regards such art not only as a function of ritual, but also as a bridge between art and life. Taiwanese Indigenous art's intuitive and affective qualities have nurtured her inner strength and helped her rediscover what Gilles Deleuze calls the "immanence" of nature and art.

## ABSTRACT

The art of Eleng Luluan, a Taiwanese Indigenous artist, responds not only to Indigenous culture but also to current events, such as the suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. When she experimented with frottage art, she rubbed, rolled, and twisted hundreds of poisonous and nonpoisonous plants from the mountain forest. The effects of the poisonous plants echo the threat from the COVID-19 virus. On the one hand, she acted as a wise hunter in the mountain forest when investigating the plants. On the other hand, like her ancestors, she used her body as a sacred vessel for experiencing the plants, which resulted in itching, numbness and agonizing feelings, not only physical, but psychological. Therefore, Luluan's repeated images, gestures or rituals connected to nature and reflected Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of "refrain." The idea of refrain originally derived from the bird's song, which is "a territorial assemblage," a rhizome.

## KEYWORDS

rhizome, Indigeneity, Eleng Luluan, art

*... the significance and subjectification are the semiotic system."*

- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*<sup>1</sup>

*A term (text) used today in a very broad sense to cover not only verbal but also other forms of communication. One might encounter the claim that a face, or a city, is a text. A distinctive feature of the newly emerged use of text is that the derivation of the word from the Latin *texere* (to weave) and *textum* ("a web; texture") appears to inform the use. The text is something woven; but now readers join authors or writers as the weavers of texts.*

- Vincent M. Colapietro, *Glossary of Semiotics*<sup>2</sup>

Weaving, hunting and gathering had been associated with the idea of Indigeneity for a long time. The Indigeneity and its semiotics were related to subjectification and significance which were the crucial factors of semiotic system. In terms of semiotics, Eleng Luluan's contemporary Indigenous weaving installation not only relied on totemic pattern, but also was concerned with the responses to the tribal diaspora status. If the Latin word "texere" means "to weave", could Luluan's weaving be regarded as a text? Moreover, if we consider the "textum" to have the weaving function as a web, or a texture, could Luluan's weaving installation be regarded as the textum? That is, could her weaving act be related to the idea of text, textualization or even decontextualization in the contemporary Indigeneity? Thus, if the weaving work is text and "the text is something woven", why would she not convey her art to contribute the contemporary Indigeneity? And the spectator participate in the weaving installation as "the weavers of texts"? In that sense, Luluan revised the idea of Indigeneity: rather than having a fixed meaning, it became a process. Could the process of Indigeneity therefore be polyphonic writings, readings, or weavings?

Eleng Luluan, a Taiwanese Indigenous artist, has created various works of art such as frottage, scanned images and weaving installations. All of them echo her life with the Kucapungane, the tribe in the mountain forest. Her mother was the chief of the tribe, so that the family had the privilege of wearing the wreath headdress and owning mythical ceramic pottery. The ordinary members of the tribe were required to pay money to the noble family for wearing the wreath headdress. The pottery was regarded as the treasure of the tribe because it symbolized the habitation of the Rukai's ancestral spirits. The pots were decorated with the totems of two hundred-pace snakes symbolizing their protection of ancestral spirits. In the Rukai tribe, craftsmen traditionally were there only to serve the noble families. Today, Eleng Luluan humbly says: "My art is to serve for the sake of the tribe," although by custom, she did not need to serve.<sup>3</sup> Luluan's creations were inspired by the art of Indigenous tradition and to contribute to contemporary art.

Eleng Luluan inherited her princess name from the noble family. She was born in 1968 in a stone slab house in Kucapungane in Pingtung County in southern Taiwan. When the sunshine came through the sun roof of the stone slab house and smoke - from the fire was they'd lit for heat - filled the house, the scene was theatrical. It evoked the Rukai myth that the "sacred pot" produced the first baby through the enlightenment of sunshine. The stone slabs kept the house warm in winter; when a fire was lit in the center of the house, the hot air circulated. However, in summer, the gaps in the stone slab walls released some of the hot air. The design of the stone slab house made it a "breathable" house. Luluan's mother was skilled at weaving and young Luluan quietly imitated her.

Because of the customs of the Rukai nation, her father married into and lived with her mother's family. He was a wise man who encouraged Luluan to pray and to study the words of the Bible. Like most of the men of the tribe, he was also a good hunter. In Luluan's childhood, she was also a shepherdess; she took care of the sheep, decorated herself with polyanthus, and played with her older brother in the mountains forest. In summer, she would jump into the pool near the house to enjoy the cool water.

When she was ten years old, the tribe was forced to move from the mountains to the riverbed called New Kucapungane, and Luluan had to give a melancholy wave to her childhood. She later studied home economics and worked at various jobs, living the urban life. However, she felt called to search for the soul of Kucapungane; and in 2002, she made the crucial decision to work on art. For a long time, she lived in a secondhand van and worked at several part-time jobs like a bohemian - "Wherever it goes, wherever it counts" she said.<sup>4</sup>

August 8, 2009, was a turning point in Luluan's life when Typhoon Morakot made landfall on Taiwan. The floods washed over everything from the mountain to the sea; the mountain became debris, and Luluan's tribe at New Kucapungane was covered in mud, stones and sand in the creek. Many people of the tribe were missing. Hundreds and thousands of driftwoods accumulated at harbors and seashores, like disastrous scenery. The countless driftwoods were like dead bodies. Luluan felt that she was able to smell the odor of the corpses all the time. The physical and psychological trauma were difficult to recover from. Luluan's works of art reflected the tribe's trauma; yet she learned to heal herself and her tribal people through the vital force of art.

In 2011, she finished the piece "Falling" (Figure 1), which was collected by the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts. "Falling" was composed of the leaves of the betel nut tree, knitted delicately with purple threads. Purple was an important color in Rukai tradition; she selected the leaves of the betel nut tree to explore the daily lives of plants. "Falling" was like a rhizomatic encounter in that the embroidery stitches appealed not only to the spectators' eyes but also to the minds that radiated the sense and sensibility because of the flower's falling. Luluan recalled to the urgent moments during Typhoon Morakot: "When the helicopter came to rescue the female elders, they abandoned everything except the textiles."<sup>5</sup> The tradition of weaving thus became the most precious treasure in her heart. She identified with the Indigenous culture by cherishing the weaving.

In 2011, she had her first solo show "The Fractures in the Memories of Life - Silently Await." (Figure 2) The subtitle "Silently Await" suggested that she missed her mother and cherished her memory; she expressed that feeling by using various weaving methods that she had learned from her mother.



Luluan created the work “The Fractures in the Memories of Life” - a huge piece hung on a long wood log - by knitting colored threads, weaving the barks of palm trees, and braiding seashells and pebbles. The work also echoed to the idea of “fractal” by being composed of textiles and fragmentary organic pieces. One of her best friends as Bunun Nation activist Nabu Husungan Istanda believed that “fractal philosophy” or “fractal mathematics” reflected Indigenous thoughts. Fractal mathematics uses a simple shape, reproducing through infinite iterations of that same shape. In nature, one can also find fractal patterns. Likewise, the fractal pattern can be found in Luluan’s work; the braiding seashells and pebbles were not “fractures,” but they were “fractal.” Furthermore, “fractal” expression was regarded as the character that reflected Taiwanese Indigenous art and was close to nature. The fractal patterns of nature also evoked Deleuze’s philosophical term “refrain” which referred to the birds’ singing of repetitious melodies. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain was the “markers of human or animal territory as observed in ethology or ethnography.” In addition, “even in a territorial assemblage, it may be the most deterritorialized component, the deterritorializing vector, in other words, the refrain, that assures the consistency of the territory.”<sup>6</sup>

It is a rhizomatic way of thinking; art is becoming everything. Deleuze wrote:

*We are not in the world; we become with the world; we become by contemplating it. Everything is vision, becoming. We become universes. Becoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero. This is true of all the arts. ...Art does not have opinions. Art undoes the triple organization of perception, affection, and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects, and blocs of sensations that takes the place of language. It’s about listening... This is precisely the task of all art.*<sup>7</sup>

After Luluan’s first solo show, she was nominated by a museum director for the tenth Taishin Arts Award competition in 2011. The following year, she was invited to attend an art residency at the Tjibaou Cultural Center in New Caledonia in 2012. Later, she was nominated as a candidate for the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2014.

To prepare for the competition, she went back to Kucapunange to do field study she went to visit the Rukai nation writer Auvinni Kadresseng, who had returned to live by himself at Kucapungane. He planted vegetables and hunted, and kept writing. He shared with Luluan his thoughts on mulberries: that the mulberry was nutritious, given that it was a food supplement of women in ancient times and that its shape resembled female private parts. He also told with Luluan about the ancient legend of the Formosan clouded leopard. Kadresseng's imagination for literature and the myths of the Kucapungane inspired Luluan's creativity.<sup>8</sup>

In 2016, Luluan won the biennial Pulima Art Award, the highest honor in Indigenous art. She presented two companion works: "Sharing, Hunter, Mother" (Figure 3) and "The Last Sigh before Vanishing." They revealed the semiotic significance of Indigeneity. "Sharing" "Hunter," and "Mother" was a triptych of scanned images. The first image, "Sharing," (Figure 3-1) showed a wild boar's skull covering up a face. In the second scanned image, "Hunter," two hands held the wild boar's skull. The third scanned image, "Mother," (Figure 3-2) showed the hands caressing the hair. In fact, the hair of the model was taken from Luluan's long hair. She wanted to be reconnected with her mother, her mother's love was memorable, although her position as chieftain kept her busy. Luluan elaborated that when she was a child, her mother would comb her hair again and again before she went to bed.

Luluan had settled on the models first, then used the scanner with a flash. The process was too fast for thought. Sometimes she played with intuition. Therefore, the play between ancient ideas and modern machines became an organic effect. It should be said that the higher grade the contrast, the more striking the result. Rather, she made the scanned images more like a light box with harmony.

For Luluan, her noble blood was not a privilege; instead, it created pressure for growth. It was assumed that Luluan might be one of the candidates to inherit the position of chieftain when her mother passed away, if her brothers refused to do it. Therefore, Luluan had not been raised as a little girl in an ordinary family; she had been educated and trained to be the leader of the tribe.<sup>9</sup>

She always needed to take responsibility within herself. Thus, she decided on the title “Sharing” for one of the images in the triptych. For the sake of the tribe, “sharing” was not only a virtue, but also essential for the survival and the collective will of the tribe. When the hunters returned from the fields with wild boars and Formosan Reeves’s muntjacs, they had to share with the tribe. More importantly, the hearts were the most precious part of the animals, so the hunters would be given exclusively to the chieftain, Luluan’s mother, for her nobility. Luluan’s scan images of hunting were repeated gestures; they reflected a fractal philosophy because it was the refrain, the process of “territorializing” and “improvising.”

The second companion work was “The Last Sigh before Vanishing.” (Figure 4) Luluan used black baskets and braided the black plastic ropes to sculpt a group of trees that symbolized a withered mountain forest. Therefore, her “sigh” was in response not only to the vanishing Kucapungane, but also to vanishing Indigenous traditions and ancestral spirituality. In Kucapungane, there was no tap water, no electricity, and no gas. However, the Kucapungane people could drink the mountain spring water; they gathered sticks and used rubbing stones to light fires; and they cooked millet, taro and red quinoa (*Chenopodium formosanum*). That simple life was the happiest time of Luluan’s childhood. Yet due to economics and education, the tribe was forced in 1978 to move to the riverbed of I-Liao Creek. She recalled that although there had been no modern conveniences in Kucapungane, it had still been a paradise for her. When the tribe moved from the high mountains to the riverbed, she lost her paradise.

Luluan’s works of art are based not only on the individual fantasy but on the reality of the Indigenous communities. When she worked on weaving or knitting, she was thinking of the elders of the tribe. Luluan often recalled the floods and landslides from Typhoon Morakot, which caused many of the Indigenous tribes to lose their land and homes, and even their lives. Although she luckily fled before the landslides, she felt sorrow that many Indigenous people suffered, especially elders and children. She recalled how the elder women abandoned everything except their traditional textiles because the weaving tradition - its value and dignity - was as important as their lives.

When they first moved down from the mountain forest to New Kucapungane (Shin Ho Cha), the elders warned the tribal people, “The water will remember the roads once it has passed by.”<sup>10</sup> That is, the riverbed could not be their home forever because the flood would return. Therefore, the Luluan’s family moved up to Wu Tai plateau, on the mountain just next to Kucapungane; that was Luluan’s father’s hometown. However, the other tribal people stayed at the riverbed, and many of them were missing after the typhoon. Their diaspora was not a due to fate but to social, political and economic struggles as well as ecological imbalance.

When the typhoon passed, the treasures were almost all lost. Many people even lost their families. Most of the refugees were forced to move from New Kucapungane to MaChia country, which was an Indigenous community in the high hills close to the suburb of Pingtung city. The land of MaChia country belonged to the Taiwanese Government. Luluan observed the female elder next door, working hard, planting red quinoa and taro at the corner of the house. She still cherished the small space at the corner of the house for planting. The elders displayed endurance and resilience.

The work “A Map Carved into the Soul” (Figure 5) was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei in 2017 - replicated the hut Luluan had created as a temporarily living space for five years: a cargo container covered with straw with a toilet outside, beside an iron sheet entangled with plants. In “A Map Carved into the Soul,” there were two bundles of straw that could symbolize the field from the sacred place outside of DuLan tribe where she resides. She had extraordinary sensibility for space that was not urban, but natural. To create the installation, she enlarged the bundles of straw to be taller than human size; the straw was as smooth as her mother’s hair. The lighting created a theatrical effect. A spectator could walk in the path between the bundles of straw and smell the aroma, affected by the power of infiltration that reflected a mix of new and past experiences. The past experience occurred when Luluan was a shepherdess, herding sheep into the tall prairie. The new sensory experience was the theatrical space that allowed the spectator to be released from the pressure of urban.

At the Kacalisiyan Art Festival of 2018, Luluan arranged the room as a bamboo house and covered it with pure red weavings. In the tribe, it was a ritual ceremony - as well as a part of the lifestyle - to light fires using tree branches and straw, making smoke rise to the sky. When the fire started and the smoke rose, it demonstrated a connection between the tribal people and their ancestors that was both worshipful and affirming. In her installation, Luluan wove textures of pure red to cover all the rooms of the bamboo house, recalling the ritual of making a fire. The installation reflects several layers of psychological meanings. First, its red color symbolizes the connected passion about the ritual ceremony of lighting a fire. Second, the red also reflects the symbolic color of the tribe. Third, when the sunshine pierces the gaps in the bamboo roof and illuminates the pure red textiles, it creates a theatrical aura. When Luluan said, "My art serves for the tribe," she was speaking of her willingness to serve the Indigenous people. At the same time, the ritual ceremony could be the signifier of Indigenous culture with which she connected her work to the ancestral spirit and the process of the sacred return.

Luluan's work "Between Dreams" (Figure 6) was finished in 2019 and was exhibited at the Queens Museum of New York and later at the National Gallery of Canada's International Indigenous Exhibition *Abadakone/Continuous Fire/ Feu continue/*. For this work, she wove white plastic ties, which were usually used for the betel vine (*Piper betel*), with recycled Styrofoam nets used to protect fruit. These elements recall the idea of "bricolage" coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a method of rearrangement and regeneration. Luluan attempted not only to apply recycled materials, but also to regenerate Indigenous culture.

According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of "code" and "flow," they regarded art as a flow, rather than a code. Likewise, Luluan's work of art was not based on the code of the totem, but on the flow of process. When Luluan had created "The Last Sigh before Vanishing - taking the plastic basket and braiding it with black ropes - she understood labor was flow.<sup>11</sup> Luluan's landlord was a fruit farmer, so she used the plastic baskets intended for the Buddha's head fruit. The Buddha's head fruit, also known as sakyamuni, or sugar apple, was the most popular fruit in Taitung, eastern Taiwan.



Luluan's landlord also protected her fruit with small Styrofoam nets, Luluan then hook-weaved hundreds of the fruit-sized Styrofoam nets to construct a white draperylike sculpture. The beautiful drapery showed that Luluan empathized with the fruit farmers' hard labor. Furthermore, she again employed the white plastic tie from betel vines - this time to install the iron line that lifted up the drapery like sculpture. The presence of the white plastic ties implied connection to the betel nut.

In an important ritual ceremony, the Taiwanese Indigenous people prayed for the ancestors and the universe, by displaying tributes such as cigarettes, cups of wine, and betel nuts on green leaves. The betel vine with white plastic ties recalled Luluan's daily life, when the farmers in southern Taiwan planted the betel vine and used plastic white lines to tie it up. Luluan believed that her friends and families would understand that when she used the betel nut as basic material for her works of art, it symbolized the meaning of daily snacks. The daily object had an ordinary character but was transformed into art. The metamorphosis had the power of sensation for inner change. When, back in 2012, Luluan wove thatched grass for a work of art, it was in response to her sadness that fields of thatched grass were gradually being replaced by asphalt roads. Thus, since then, Luluan started to create new meanings for the disappearing daily objects, in order to comfort herself. She emphasizes neither the technique or craftsmanship of weaving or hook-weaving, nor the form. Rather, she attempts to create the idea of becoming an Indigenous woman. She recognized the significance of being in the process of becoming.

The documentary Sabau, Kucapungane was crucial for inspiring Luluan's works on Indigeneity. Auvinni Kadresseng organized the project in 2019 to restore stone slab houses at Kucapungane.<sup>12</sup> The film showed the reconstruction of four stone slab houses in the high mountains of Kucapungane, beginning with the Indigenous Rukai carrying logs up the mountain; the logs would be the lintels of the houses. They went to the mountain to select the stone slab and drilled the top of each stone slab and pushed it to split it into two halves. Then they cut them to into square shapes and carried the squares on their backs, piece by piece, to the house location. Together they piled the irregular rough stones to make stone slab walls.

Each stone slab house was built through the cooperation of the whole team.

The four restored stone slab houses contained encrypted messages offering insights into Indigenous history. They proclaimed on decolonizing experiences and showed that the people were releasing themselves from repressive and oppressive trauma. Many of them had worked as hard laborers to support their families. For example, some worked for the Forestry Bureau. Or, they worked for seagoing ships, trawling with fishing nets. Some were construction workers on skyscrapers, climbing up and down the scaffoldings.

Elong's nephew Pasulange Luluan was also one of the workers on the project that he helped build the houses. To find to their own stone slab house, they had to follow the goats' trails in the mountain forest because their own paths had been covered by wild grass. The roof of Luluan's house had all collapsed except for the kitchen portion. In fact, the stone slab house did not consist of rooms but instead was a single unit with a kitchen portion, a bed portion, a living portion and a sacred portion. They cleaned the floor and made a fire. The ceremony of "lighting a fire" is emblematic of making fires in daily life. Then Pasulange used boards to repair the windows and the door of the stone slab house.

When they returned to their stone slab house, they understood the meaning of the ritual of reconstructing it, and the significance of the reunion between themselves and the ancestors. Beneath the stone slab houses, in accordance with tradition, were their ancestors' tombs. In ancient wars, the enemy used to dig up the tombs, so the Rukai developed the tradition of preserving, and protecting, their ancestors' bodies jars under the floor of the house. However, the meaning of this practice was beyond the physical; their belief reconnected their lives to their ancestors' spirits, and they recognized the value of their acts as sustainable and resilient. They were the readable and writable rhizomatic characteristics of Indigeneity.

It was said that the mountain forest of Kucapungane was the homeland of the Formosa clouded leopard. The Formosa clouded leopard was almost extinct. The Kucapungane people identified with the spirit of the Formosa clouded leopard. Thus, the precious animal survived in encrypted legends in oral folk literature.

In particular, it was said that the Formosa clouded leopard led people to Kucapungane, so that was where they settled.<sup>13</sup>

In 2019, Luluan's work "Are you trapping now?" (Figure 7) (Figure 7-1) was one of the works in the Kaohsiung Container Art Festival. The Kaohsiung Container Art Festival was held in the outdoor field of the Museum of Kaohsiung, and the opening was in the evening. The Kaohsiung Container Art Festival symbolizes both the business of the shipping carriers and the prosperity of Kaohsiung. Conversely, in Luluan's art, she implied that the cargo container was common as temporary habitation in Taiwan. Luluan made a fantastic, and huge rope, twisted from pink and red ropes, that passed through a cargo container from inside to outside and then back inside. It was made to resemble a hundredpace snake, which is pink considered the protector of the tribe's ancestral spirit. The most amazing moment was when the lighting struck the woven ropes of this hundredpace snake. The snake was Luluan's attempt to convey the experience of the hunter and the animals. She used Walkman headphones to lure the spectator to listen, as a hunter sets a trap for animals. However, the animal trap that Luluan created had sharp, gearlike iron chains in which one ring linked with another, reflecting the critical moment of life or death. (Figure 7-2) The critical moment captured not only the spectator's eye but also the mind's eye.

She created both "The Clue of Mata" (Figure 8) for the Lantern Festival in 2019 and "Austronesian Eye" for the Lantern Festival in 2022. The word *mata* means "eye" in Rukai, Amis, and Atayal and as well as in many other Indigenous languages in Taiwan. *Mata* is also a word in the language of the Maori of New Zealand. Thus, the word *mata* became one of the significant clues of linguistic roots in the Austronesian language and played a key role in connecting various locations that shared the same linguistic roots. That is, Taiwan's Indigenous people in the Northern Pacific could communicate with the Maori in the Southern Pacific to do business, both sides used basic numbers that had very similar pronunciations. More importantly, perhaps, the traditional house of the ancestral spirit that the Amis have preserved for ritual ceremonies shares an architectural style with Maori structures used for similar purpose. The word *mata* also has an extended cultural meaning: "The ancestor's eye is always watching for us."

There is a similar Indigenous saying that runs, “The ancestral eye is watching me.” It is both a myth and a belief. The eye is not God’s eye but the ancestor’s. In the art world, the ancestral eye represented not only singularity but also deterritorialized reterritorialization. Likewise, Luluan’s creation of the ancestral eye with her woven sculpture demonstrated the idea of deterritorialized reterritorialization; in one sense it was ambiguous, but in another it was facialization, as Deleuze describes it.

**Even a use-object may come to be facialized: you may say that a house utensil, or object, an article of clothing, etc., is watching me, not because it resemble a face, but because it is taken up in the white/black hole process, because it connects to the abstract machine of facialization. . . in painting , when a utensil becomes a face-landscape from within, or when a cup on a tablecloth or a teapot is facialized, in Bonnard, Vuillard?<sup>14</sup>**

In the history of modern art, artists such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard have attempted to hide faces or eyes in their works.

Deleuze raised the following questions: “When does the abstract machine of facility enter into play?”... “When is it triggered?”<sup>15</sup> He answered and explained that it was the power of the face that engendered and explained social power. Another example of facilitation in Luluan’s work can be found in “Meaningless Whispers” (Figure 9) of 2020: a woven textile that showed natural patterns and displaced ambiguous faces on the wings of butterflies, or eyes on the flower leaves, for example. She might have ambiguously memorized face - perhaps the lost faces of the disastrous landslide. Or perhaps she subconsciously left the face like pattern as a riddle. This work, too, showed that “The ancestral eye is watching me.” Luluan’s weaving works are similar to Bonnard’s paintings in that they share layers of psychological meanings.

For the Rukai, the wings of the butterfly may also have two holes or even implied eyes on wings. The totem of the butterfly may be connected to the force of the soul. “The ancestor’s eye” created a new power of the soul in Eleng’s art. Both the motifs of *mata* and butterfly represented deterritorialized reterritorialization in the art and culture; they first encountered modern art and film; they had reconnected to the invisible power of the soul.

In Eleng Luluan's weaving installation, she secretly hid the ancestral spirit's "*mata*" which was visualized as the invisible spirit. That is, she renewed the totem of premodern society and made it into a crucial element of contemporary art. Thus, the singularity of "*mata*" was regarded as the floating signifier in the relationship of semiotics with Luluan's works.

One more classical motif - the "lily"- was revealed in Eleng Luluan's works. She attempted to bridge the gap between traditional and modern art. For example, she created the "Avai for Long Departed" (Figure 10) in 2012. The work was transformed from the food Avai, a kind of traditional food, from the harvest festival. The Avai was also prepared for travelers on long journeys. The elongated shape of Avai might have been transformed from the petals of the lily. During the tribe's diaspora - from Kucapungane in the high mountains down to riverbeds, then to the plateau named Wutai or the hill named MaChia - they not only lost their property, but also their traditional lives. As the cultural anthropologist James Clifford said, "In fact their subsistence rights - hunting, fishing and gathering - constructed the traditional 'Indigeneity' from the past to the present."<sup>16</sup> The dynamic relations, rapture, and even synthesis reveal the discursive relationships of the floating signifiers. The Indigenous signifier "*mata*" became the implication of vital forces. That is, in Luluan's weaving works, the signifiers of *mata*, butterfly and lily were clues to traditional Indigenous culture, literature and myth.

Luluan has also contributed to the current Indigeneity by means of both new issues and the tribal elders' concerns. For example, the issue of climate change affected their lives when the typhoon brought floods and landslides. Another example lay in the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic medical care became more important than ever. Even the provincial tribes still lacked of basic necessities and the clinic services. Luluan's works offer the process of Indigeneity in both past and present.

Luluan's art is not only for the visual pleasure; it also serves a role as the voice of her tribe. So, she has spent much time on the public art. Luluan understands that visual pleasure bridges social desire and the needs of the minority, rather than "art for the art's sake." She has not been silent, but rather provoked viewers with vocal and diverse forms of art.



The significance of the butterfly in the Rukai tradition, and its connection to the power of the soul, appeared again in Luluan's 2021 "Secret Garden." (Figure 11) "Becoming butterfly" was one of the themes for this public project, for which she used shining aluminum wire to construct a little garden in a semicircle. She planted plants that look like purple butterflies. At the top of the two-layer tall garden, she placed many lovely butterfly patterns. Thousands of purple butterflies flew through the "Secret Garden" because she fully understood the knowledge of the plants and the routes of the butterflies' flight. The butterfly is one of the most important themes in the traditional art not only of the Rukai but also the Paiwan nation. Luluan presented modern perspectives even as she adopted her ancestors' idea of human beings' cohabitation with animals and the insects. She engaged in these acts to look for sustainability and resilience. In her earlier work "Meaningless Whisper," the butterflies were presented with flowers, in a pattern of interweaving nets. However, Luluan secretly hid the eyes in the primary pattern, and even in facial patterns. At the same time, she preferred to use the effects of lights and shadows to reveal whispers. The whisper may imply the the force of the ancestor's soul in the butterfly through the facial patterns. Although the facial patterns showed one sort of butterfly, Luluan intentionally emphasized both nature and the ancestor's spirit. Why, though, is the work "Meaningless Whisper" called meaningless? Perhaps the riddle is in the title "Secret Garden," which was located in the Butterfly Valley trail. The number of purple butterflies has decreased year by year because so many flowers were damaged or destroyed during the landslides and floods. As in the Bonnard's work "Nude in Bathtub" (1940-46), Luluan presented a critical issue by using a sweet voice that was secretly hiding sadness. It seems that the Butterfly Valley welcomes the purple butterfly again because of their return.

Eleng Luluan presented the sculpture "Far Away from the Sea, Mountains Near the Sea" on the campus of Chen-Kung University in 2009, right after the disastrous Typhoon Morakot. She brought with her a gigantic driftwood, which she carved into the icon of a whale. Perhaps, she carved the totemic icon in an attempt to explain the natural violence and heal a suffering people. Yet she encountered another traumatic event eleven years later.

At the end of 2020, Luluan was invited to join the “Inside/Out” exhibition at the Art and Culture Center of Chen-Kung University. At this time, she was suffering from fear of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many people, she was very anxious about becoming contagious. People became very cautious, and Luluan was as hysterical as everyone else. People were careful about social distancing; they wore double masks all the time; they kept washing their hands with alcohol-based hand rubs. Luluan kept checking whether she had gotten a fever. Life and death were always on her mind. To heal herself from the hysteria, she started to create a series of frottage pieces. (Figure 12) (Figure 13) She got drawing papers, then collected thatched grass, foliage, leaves, branches of trees, and other materials, and used them to create rubbings of the different textures. She found it relaxing that while she was eating noodles soup with one hand, she was doing frottage with the other hand. She went even further, pouring soy sauce, beer, wine, and vinegar on the paper when she was eating and doing frottages. The whole process was as fast as the mayfly’s moment of life. At the same time, Luluan learned to heal her feelings of fear by sipping noodle soup and practicing art.

The technique of frottage, a type of fractal representation, had been used by the surrealist Max Ernst, who also rubbings from natural materials like leaves and bark. However, Luluan purposefully made use of her needs in daily life, such as soy sauce, hot pepper, vinegar and beer. In Luluan’s creative process, she depicted hundreds of the poisonous and nonpoisonous plants from the mountain forest. On the one hand, she was a fantastic artist, and like a hunter in the mountains. She used her body as a sacred vessel to experience the natural power of following the ancestor’s path. On the other hand, she used the technique of frottage that was similar to Ernst’s experiments in surrealism, while affirming herself as an Indigenous woman and expressing her own suffering in the global pandemic. Her involuntary acts in daily life could have reflected the emergence of this subconsciousness.

Frottage was a novel experience created by the avant-gardists of modern art. However, the contemporary artist Eleng Luluan conveyed hundreds of plants, wine and hot pepper, vinegar and soy sauce to create a type of frottage.

She experimented with the process of creation, but her skin was attacked by numbness, itching, and even agonizing pain. When she was suffering, she was also aware of the “self-indulgent” feeling in the sensation. The sense and sensation were not comfortable but real. At the same time, the process of creation was not a result, but a metamorphosis. Therefore, the agony would be a metaphor - not of the sublime but one of displacement. Perhaps the feeling of self-indulgence and displacement were a response to her tribe’s - and her own diaspora.

Luluan created various images of life and death as well as love and fear. She used black nets to tie charcoals together to create a small sculpture that could demonstrate the dead branches of the tree. Then, she created a weaving of a wreath by hemp ropes that is one of the strongest ropes in the world, placing charcoals in black nets between the hemp ropes. (Figure 14) A gigantic wreath headdress was intertwined with sisal ropes and charcoals. The wreath headdress is like a message of love from her family. In her Rukai’s tradition, the noble family has the privilege of wearing the wreath. For Luluan, having the privilege was the same as taking responsibility for leading the Rukai. Therefore, she presented the huge wreath as a companion work for a series of frottage paintings in the same exhibition.

It was not filiation, but alliance that presented the relationship between Max Ernst’s and Luluan’s frottage works. Perhaps Ernst’s frottage was one of the best examples to illustrate his fear in his childhood that turned into a transformation into his fantasy of an unpredictable life. Ernst was recognized as one of the representative Dada and surrealist artists and poets. He had studied psychology, philosophy and literature and became a self-taught artist. He used the frottage to break through the boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness. That is, he used rubbing techniques rather than any realistic drawing, and revisiting his memories of childhood. He recalled that he played and got lost in the woods when it was getting dark in the evening. For example, one of his works was “Forest and Dove” (1927). Another work related to childhood was “Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale” (1924).

Although Ernst was a surrealist, he did not follow Andre Breton's manifesto of surrealism based on the unconsciousness of Freud's dream theory. His work was like the Indigenous divination by bamboo leaves with which the wizard illuminates divination through dreams.<sup>17</sup>

Luluan recalled her life as a shepherdess in the mountain forest, as a lovable and joyful experience. The ancestor's eye was protecting her from the evil spirits. Luluan was an Indigenous artist, but she traced neither the dream of divination nor based to Freud's theory. Rather, Luluan's art became enclosed by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic thinking; her first solo exhibition, "The Fractal in Memories in Life: Silently Await" (2012), was not filiation, but an alliance with the frottage works and the huge wreath in the exhibition "Inside/Out" in 2020.

Elang Luluan presented the public project "The Starting Point" in 2021. Situated along the South Link Highway between Taitung and Pingtung. "The Starting Point" is a bridge Luluan constructed of bamboo. Lining the sides of the bridge are orange traffic cones, and underneath the bridge Luluan wove red ropes into the shape of a huge heart shape as well as white ropes into large bench or chair.

Luluan has driven back and forth between Taitung and Pingtung counties on the South Link Highway for almost twenty years. In one sense, the bamboo bridge and the traffic cones express her memory of the trips on the South Link Highway, her memory of bumpy spots and where turning corners must be treated cautiously. Yet for Luluan, the traffic cones were not only a sign of caution; there was always something else. Luluan had been touched by the story of Dr. Jao-Ping Hsu. Dr. Hsu, an Indigenous doctor working in the Chime Hospital, a well-established hospital. Hsu had decided to quit his hospital and to spend most of his lifetime working in the provincial clinic in poor neighborhood off the South-Link Highway. Luluan was touched by the story of Dr. Hsu's medical care and healing, and by his patients' descriptions of his trustworthiness.

Luluan decided to pay homage to Dr. Hsu through “The Starting Pointing” by using a double QR code as a hint inside the huge woven heart shape beneath the bridge. One of the QR codes’ meanings was linked to carrying the secret message through a cell phone, and another meaning was the simulacrum to decipher Dr. Hsu’s mercy, which was the power of love. The white bench she wove, as if for Dr. Hsu, a symbol in a white robe.

Still, she partially hid the woven hearts and weaving white chair under the bamboo bridge to imply the rescuing sign. Dr. Hsu himself suffered a stroke because of his excessive fatigue. Fortunately, he survived the stroke and continued to treat the poor patient. Doubtless, Luluan identifies with Dr. Hsu’s desire for unselfish love.

The bright orange traffic cones lining the bridge are also an important symbol for Luluan. She sees a relationship between the southern highway and her memories of difficulties. She’d found it to be a dangerous long-term journey back and forth on the southern highway because there were several tribes of Paiwan along the highway. For one, they did not welcome strangers to interrupt their life. As well, the Paiwan tribes have different ancestral spirits from the Rukai. Luluan felt the awe-inspiring spirits when she tried to stop by the various tribes on the southern highway. She recognized stranger should be very careful not to disturb the unknown spirits but to behave properly. Most of the time, when a visitor comes from a different tribe, he or she should be led by local people; otherwise, a solitary visitor may encounter an unknown evil spirit. Luluan believed that the triangle cones on the bamboo bridge represented a warning sign of the spiritual world.

She recalled the year when the Kucapungane tribe planned to move to the riverbed of I-Laio Creek. The elder cast a stone to the unknown new land to determine whether it satisfied the ancestral spirits. The act of stone casting not only carried traditional knowledge of the environment but also showed an inherited respect for the ancestral spirits.



Luluan also shared an uncanny story about when she and the hunters of the tribe revisited the ancient Kucapungane area. The hunters were very experienced in exploring there, yet they just kept going around in the forest, unable to find a way out. Fortunately, they eventually returned safely. Luluan could not clearly explain what happened in the forest - unless they had encountered mountain gods. Perhaps the ancestral spirits lived in the explorers' minds, perhaps the mountain Gods tried to mislead their spirits. Luluan believes animism is her traditional heritage. As well, she and her tribe encountered repression and oppression as a type of colonialization. Perhaps animism is a way of freeing the mind - as part of the process of releasing colonialization. Luluan believes that the ancestral spirits would have hope for the future life, and she believes she will meet the ancestors.

At the end of 2021, Eleng Luluan exhibited her work "Ali Sa be Sa be/Rugged Rock Cliffs, I Miss Everything in The Future" (Figure 15) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei. "Ali sa be sa be" refers in the Rukai language to the massive rock cliffs where stone slabs have caused deadly accidents. She portrayed the rugged rock cliffs using black stamping and flexible black plastic fencing and used aluminum bars to represent ecological construction and engineering methods. She regarded plastic and aluminum as new materials for her creation, as in Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the space of singularity. The plastic fencing used to depict the cliffs contained small hexagonal shapes. Luluan often weaves her traumatic memories through a hexagonal structure, expressing the real and reality. The hexagonal structure is similar to a honeycomb shape, which can continue without limit.

Luluan also used a video projector to show the digitized photos photographer Wang Shin took of Luluan's family. The first photograph showed Luluan's mother leading a herd of sheep. The second showed Luluan as a child, playing with other children on the roof of a stone slab house. (Figure 15-1) The third was of the chief's old stone slab house at Kucapungane. The images were looped to help the spectator to experience the looping memories in a similar way to how Luluan may remember them repeatedly.

All in all, she was thinking of a long journey home-duration. In Deleuze's book *Bergsonism*, he elaborated the idea of duration and wrote the following:

According to Bergson, we first put ourselves back into the past in general: He describes in this way the leap into ontology. We really leap into being, into being in-itself, into the being in itself of the past. It is a case of leaving psychology altogether. It is a case of immemorial or ontological Memory. It is only then, once the leap has been made, that recollection will gradually take on a psychological existence: “from the virtual it passes into the actual state...”<sup>18</sup>

Luluan’s work “Ali Sa be Sa be/Rugged Rock Cliffs, I Miss Everything in The Future” made the spectator “leap into ontology” when she presented the repeating projection of the three images. She emphasized the idea of being which enabled memory and recollection to be transformed from the virtual state into the actual. Therefore, artwork reflected a Deleuzian image of thought. The passage of time in the repeating images echoes Deleuze’s idea for the famous metaphor of the Bergsonian cone and “represents this complete state of coexistence.”<sup>19</sup> According to Deleuze, Bergsonian duration is “defined less by succession than by coexistence.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, when the Kucapungane images were repeated, Luluan’s memory and recollection were coexisted.

The repeated images, gestures, and rituals in Eleng Luluan’s works can be seen as constituting a Deleuzian “territorial assemblage” connecting ecological consciousness and psychological existence. During her twenty years as an artist, she used traditional weaving, knitting, and braiding techniques to create installations with natural and synthetic materials; mingled scanned images and videos with her weaving installations; and returned to the tradition of gathering natural materials to experiment with frottage. The development of her art represents the rhizomatic idea. Her art presents fractal thinking and the territorialization and deterritorialization of Indigeneity. When Luluan’s artworks respond to the idea of Indigeneity, she connects to the ancestral spirits and revises the idea of Indigeneity. For Luluan, who draws on her ancestors’ wisdom about the natural world, Indigeneity does not have a fixed meaning but is a process like the rhizome. Indigeneity is traditional knowledge and a refrain, the “territorial assemblage.” Eleng Luluan’s rhizomatic works demonstrate polyphonic Indigeneity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans, Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 181.

<sup>2</sup> Colapietro, Vincent M. *Glossary of Semiotics*. (New York: Paragon House, 1993),193.

<sup>3</sup> Luluan, Eleng. Interview by Ching-yeh Hsu. 2021.06.26. Eleng Luluan is a name only for a princess of a tribe that have hierarchical institutions. Some of the ordinary people have even attempted to use money to buy the authorized names from the royal family in the contemporary times. They could pay the taxes so that the ordinary people can wear the wreath headdress.

<sup>4</sup> Luluan, Eleng. Interview by Ching-yeh Hsu. 2021.07.02

<sup>5</sup> Young, Eugene B., Genosko, Gary and Janell Watson. *The Deleuze & Guattari Dictionary*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 254-55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid..

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 170-77.(Qtd in Golding, Johnny. "Fractal Philosophy," ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan. *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*. (London: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 133.

<sup>8</sup> Kadresseng, Auvinni.. Interview by Eleng Luluan. 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Luluan, Eleng. Interview by Ching-yeh Hsu. 2021.07.01

<sup>10</sup> Luluan, Eleng. Interview by Ching-yeh Hsu. 2021.07.15.

<sup>11</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. op. cit..491-92.

<sup>12</sup> The documentary "Sabau, Kuncapungane." 2019. m.youtube.com

<sup>13</sup> Luluan, Eleng. Interview by Ching-yeh Hsu. 2021.07.03

<sup>14</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. op. cit..175.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid..

<sup>16</sup> Jame Clifford. Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 269.

<sup>17</sup> Kan, Yao-Ming. Becoming the Bunun. (Taipei: Bao-Ping Culture Press, 2021), 270.

<sup>18</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. Bergsonism. tran. Tomlinson, Hugh and Barbara Habberiam. (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 60.



**Figure 1.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Falling". 2011. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 2.**  
Eleng Luluan. "The Fractures in the Memories of Life - Silently Await". 2011.  
Photography by Lui, Yao.





**Figure 3.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Sharing, Hunter, Mother". 2016. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 3-1.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Sharing". 2016. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 3-2.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Mother". 2016. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 4.**  
Eleng Luluan. "The Last Sigh before Vanishing". 2016. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 5.**  
Eleng Luluan. "A Map Carved into the Soul". 2017. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.





**Figure 6.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Between Dreams". 2019. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 7.**

Eleng Luluan. "Are you trapping now". 2019. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 7-1.**

Eleng Luluan. "Are you trapping now". 2019. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 7-2.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Are you trapping now". 2019. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.





**Figure 8.**  
Eleng Luluan. "The Clue of Mata". 2019. Photography by Eleng Luluan.



**Figure 9.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Meaningless Whispers". 2020. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.





**Figure 10.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Avai for Long Departed". 2012. Photography by Lai, Kao-Ray.



**Figure 11.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Secret Garden". 2021. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.

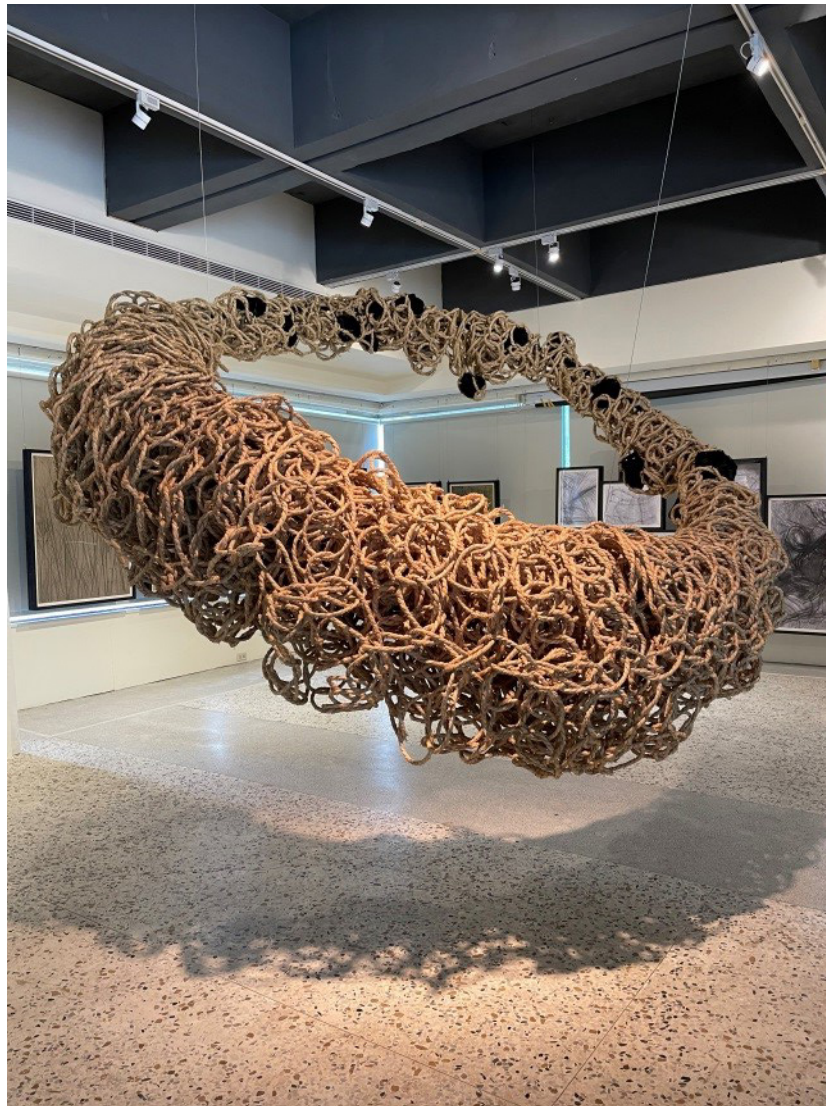


**Figure 12.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Frottage piece". 2020. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 13.**  
Eleng Luluan. "Frottage piece." 2020. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



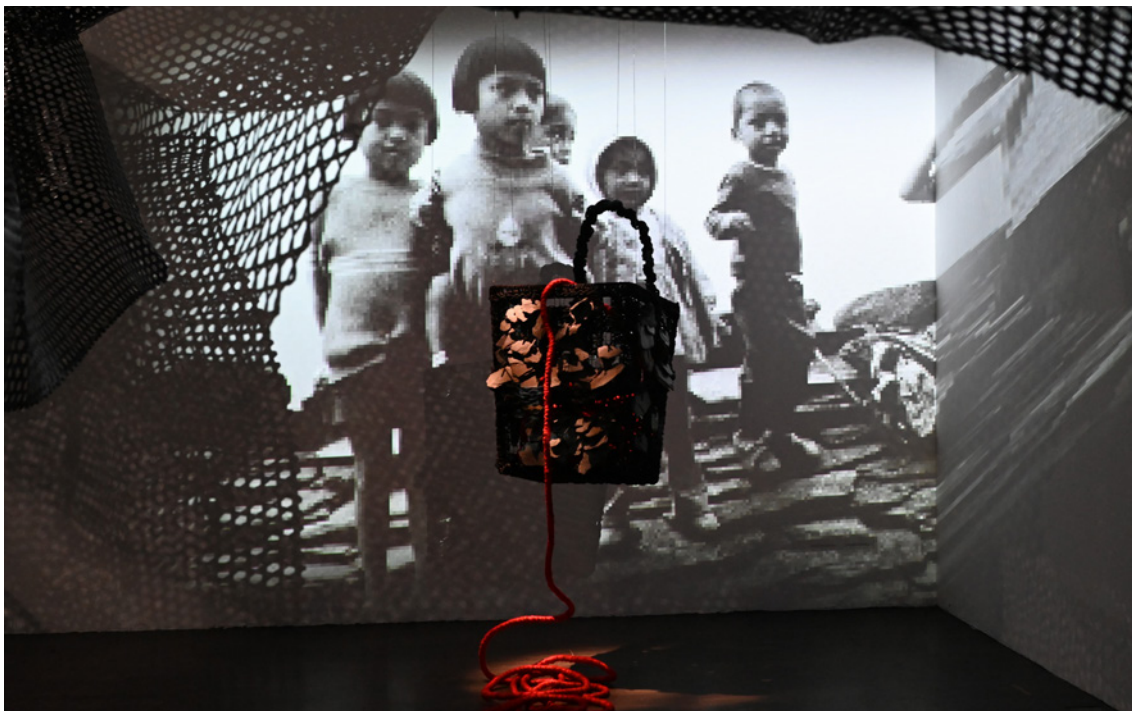


**Figure 14.**  
Eleng Luluan. "InsideOut." 2020. Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 15.**

Eleng Luluan. "Ali Sa be Sa be/Rugged Rock Cliffs, I Miss Everything in The Future." 2021.  
Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.



**Figure 15-1.**

Eleng Luluan. "Ali Sa be Sa be/Rugged Rock Cliffs, I Miss Everything in The Future". 2021.  
The photograph showed Eleng herself as a child, playing with the other children on the roof  
of a stone slab house. (Original photograph by Wang, Shin). Photography by Ching-yeh Hsu.