

# 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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**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



# THE ARTISTIC SAILING OF MARINE DEBRIS AND THE RAINBOW WEAVING OF ATAYAL ETHNOGRAPHY: MAPPING THE POLYPHONY IN THE ART WORKS OF RAHIC TALIF AND YUMA TARU

**AUTHOR** Sandy Hsiu-chih Lo

**BIOGRAPHY** Sandy Hsiu-Chih Lo is an artist. Numerous key galleries and museums such as National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts have featured Sandy Hsiu-Chih Lo's work in the past.

**ABSTRACT** Recent philosophical studies have transformed in several ways, including ontology, materiality, and spatiality. Each of these truly reflects a move toward where Indigenous thinking has always been. Many debates on the Indigenous methodology have emphasized Indigenous cosmology, axiology, and epistemology, which are always particular to people and place. To resist the epistemological hegemony and rediscovery/(re)construction of multiple indigenous epistemologies is the top priority to build a fairer society with ecologies of knowledge. Rahic Talif, an artist from Amis, and Yuma Taru, an artist from Atayal, have been creating their epistemologies from the viewpoints of "gatherer" and "female weaver," respectively. We shall hear the polyphonic chants of a flourishing of epistemologies as if praying for a future flourishing era of epistemologies if we are prepared to embrace altering the way we view the world and learn to see things from a different perspective.

**KEYWORDS** Rahic Talif, Yuma Taru, gatherer, weaver, epistemologies, places

Currently, we are living in a situation with many severe challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on our lives in an unprecedented way, and we are still under its threat. The Russian-Ukrainian war has been going on for more than a year since the war started in last February, which has affected the world tremendously. The disasters caused by global warming and extreme climates have become frequent in every corner of the world; wars and climate change have caused an unprecedented wave of refugees; various conflicts extend from the earth to cyberspace and even outer space. Faced with these conundrums, how we think about and respond to the co-existence lifestyle and the common future have become urgent issues.

Several “turns” have occurred in recent philosophical studies, including the ontological, material, and spatial turns. Each of these actually represents “a turn to where Indigenous people have always been.”<sup>1</sup> From Zoe Todd’s perspective, in order for the ontological turn, post-humanism, and world politics to fulfill their potential, it is imperative to pay attention to the teachings of Indigenous scholars around the globe to achieve an “ethical relationality” of reciprocity in an ecological understanding of human relationality which embraces difference<sup>2</sup>. Indigenous cosmology, axiology, and epistemology have been highlighted in many discussions on the Indigenous methodology, which are always specific to people and place<sup>3</sup>. I have been applying the place-based methodology “curating topography” to my curatorial practices since 2005<sup>4</sup>. From my point of view, it is crucial to regard the place as an open art field in which different people and other species can communicate and exchange, a public space that condenses the imagination of a community and can therefore be understood as a critical and liberatory concept of time and space. Furthermore, it functions as a heterotopia between reality and imagination<sup>5</sup>. As a result, the place has become a constantly changing art field. Curating topography provides context for the epistemology of how we envision our future world to be.

As for the other “turns,” Tuck Eve and Marcia McKenzie argue that the active processes of materialization are an essential characteristic of new materialism, particularly emphasizing on the active role played by humans and non-humans in materialization.

Matter, out of which humans are formed and participate, is active “with its own modes of self-transformation, organization and directedness.”<sup>6</sup> Regarding the material turn’s approach to the theory of space and time, they notice that when spatial turn focuses on places, it must also consider the topological issues of boundaries, connectivity, interiority—and exteriority. Their main argument is that places themselves are mobile, changing over time and space through interactions with the fluid of people, other species, and social practices. Reality takes on different forms based on individual differences, such as in relation to culture, geography, gender, race, sexuality, age, or other identifications and experiences, thus determining how people experience but also understand and practice places<sup>7</sup>.

The plural epistemologies that manifest pluriverse are the keynote of polyphony in contemporary art. Through different individuals, according to their different worldviews (related to ontology) and knowledge (related to epistemology), different narratives are created by various individuals based on their experience in places, from a single narrative of a person’s voice to the polyphonic narratives woven by the voices of humans and non-humans. Rahic Talif and Yuma Taru, based on the labor of the gatherer and the weaver, have been collaborating with others, including humans and non-humans, to compose the polyphonic narratives of places with their different worldviews and epistemologies; furthermore, their artistic practices, as a way of producing knowledge, promotes the prosperity and transformation of collective epistemology. The core of this article is the analysis of the epistemologies manifested in the artistic practice of the two artists Rahic and Yuma and their contemporary significance.

Taiwanese indigenous peoples migrated to Taiwan in batches and lived the traditional indigenous way of life. Until around seventeenth century, they lived under different degrees of successive colonial rule from Europe (the Spanish, 1626– 1642; the Dutch, 1624–1662), China (the Chinese Zheng Dynasty, 1662–1683; the Chinese Qing Dynasty, 1683–1895), and Japan (1895–1945). After the Second World War, they were subject to settler’s colonial rule during the national government period. Even now, they still suffer from the political and ideological domination of Taiwanese Han Chinese.

Consequently, Taiwanese indigenous peoples' traditional social and cultural system has completely disintegrated. In the case of the Atayal ethnic group to which Yuma belongs, the legend of the Rainbow Bridge is a projection of the Atayal gaga belief system. However, due to the prohibition of facial tattooing and the practice of the gaga belief system under Japanese rule, the connotation of the legend of the Rainbow Bridge has also been affected and twisted<sup>8</sup>. The disintegration of the gaga spirit at the core of the original Atayal culture and the banning of the custom of facial tattooing made the Atayal people unable to become natural Atayal<sup>9</sup>. The knowledge system of the Atayal tradition teaching how to become a natural person has been cut off, resulting in the loss of the Atayal identity. Moreover, due to the ideological rule of different colonial regimes, Atayal indigenous culture has been distorted and has gradually lost its authenticity.

Meifen Lu, a researcher of Taiwanese indigenous art, believes that the development of contemporary Taiwanese indigenous art can be traced in between cultural colonization and artistic independence at a moment when the "day is not yet dawn," and there is an urgent sense of crisis: "The reconstruction of indigenous art is not only built on a weak foundation but, more seriously, a base that is almost hollowed out."<sup>10</sup> From my perspective, this hollowed-out base should mainly refer to long-term colonization and oppression, the traditional culture demolished by epistemicide<sup>11</sup>.

In the face of the extreme injustice caused by epistemicide, calling for a cognitive democracy is a crucial issue. Bonaventura de Sousa Santos argued that we should learn from the direct victims of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. From the perspective of "the global South as resisting victim not only of genocide, but also of linguicide, epistemicide, and sexual oppression," he "calls for other kinds of knowledge to help us understand how our society has the potential to become fairer"<sup>12</sup>. Then, he proposes "the concept of intercultural translation as an alternative to the abstract universalism grounding West-centric general theories, as well as the idea of incommensurability between cultures. He calls this process of discovering and convening different kinds of knowledge for dialogue and intercultural translation "ecologies of knowledge."<sup>13</sup>



Sandra Harding made a similar appeal, claiming that the sexist distortions and perversions in the realms of epistemology, metaphysics, methodology, and the philosophy of science must be rooted out, and insisted “what is desired is the kind of diversity that fully respects the values and interests of all citizens while protecting those of the most economically and politically vulnerable groups.<sup>14</sup>”

To sum up, resistance to the epistemological hegemony and rediscovery/(re) construction of multiple indigenous epistemologies is not only the top priority of all indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, but also the crucial task of building a fairer society with “ecologies of knowledge”.

## REDISCOVERY/(RE)CONSTRUCTION OF EPISTEMOLOGIES

Due to a rupture in epistemology, Taiwanese indigenous art development faces many obstacles. The most important issue is the “rediscovery/(re) construction” of epistemologies.

According to Shawn Wilson, an Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba in Canada, Indigenous Studies begin by the understanding that knowledge is relational<sup>15</sup>. The essence of Indigenous philosophy is relationality—that relations define reality and are themselves defined by it. Indigenous-related research is a ritual that binds relationships together<sup>16</sup>. He believes that Indigenous epistemology and ontology are based on relationships, while axiology and methodology are based on the responsibility to maintain relationships. So, research is a ritual. The purpose of any ritual is to create stronger relationships, or to bridge the distance between aspects of the universe and all living beings. He claims that focusing on decolonization stifles efforts to imagine how Indigenous people might flourish in the modern world. Indigenist research is vital to create this vision, which reflects an Indigenous view of reality and knowledge, as well as the gaining of wisdom that can shape the future of our communities as well as social work education and practice. He uses the word Indigenist to describe “a shared philosophy and its resultant ontology or way of being in the world without claiming ownership or exclusivity.<sup>17</sup>”

He affirms that you don't need to be Indigenous to do Indigenist research— simply put into practice its beliefs about knowledge-making.

Santos claims that in addition to the fact that the world is dominated by three primary forms of domination—capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy—the Eurocentric civilizational paradigm marginalizes and excludes other knowledge systems. Hence, we should explore new and diverse ways of knowing to gain a vision of the world that encompasses all people, while recognizing differences without creating hierarchies and to envision a new society—one that is cooperative, loving, and free of oppression<sup>18</sup>. He eloquently demonstrates the epistemological significance of art. Maria Paula Meneses has challenged mainstream epistemology by suggesting that relationships among taste, aroma, and knowledge<sup>19</sup>, which bring knowledge production closer to everyday lives. In discussing the epistemological politics of contemporary art, Tom Holert asserts that in the curation of contemporary art as well as within writing by artists and critics—knowledge-related research has replaced beauty, style, and genre in past aesthetics and has become the crucial field of debate. He asserts that art, like science, is capable of making objective truth claims<sup>20</sup>. Undoubtedly, art has the same right as science to propose truths about the world and become a basis for constructing an epistemology. But it does so by employing different means than rationalism by opening ourselves up to the cognitive construction of various sensory experiences.

As Da-wei Kuan declares, “All countries with indigenous peoples have an unjust history of plundering land from the indigenous peoples. History cannot be repeated. To face obscure mistakes and implement the value of justice is the direction of joint efforts under the international human rights discourse. Even after regime change, as long as the land has been plundered by colonialism, it is our responsibility to reflect on the landless narrative of the colonial perspective and seek reconciliation and symbiosis. Among them, an important step is to make the indigenous peoples appear in the history of the land.<sup>21</sup>” Willingness to reflect on the fallacies of the colonial perspective and to seek “reconciliation and symbiosis” is the first step not only to “make the indigenous peoples appear in the history of the land” but also to let the indigenous people conduct their own narratives based on indigenous epistemologies.

A struggle for Indigenous self-determination is as much about the land, its integrity, and its relationships with the land as it is about bodily integrity and freedom from all forms of dominance, violence, and coercion<sup>22</sup>. When Indigenous knowledge is understood in ways that fix it by suppressing its dynamic nature, it is easy to ignore the heterogeneity of indigenous voices and worldviews<sup>23</sup>.

The Amis artist Rahic Talif and the Atayal artist Yuma Taru have been developing their unique epistemologies from the perspectives of “gatherer” and “female weaver,” respectively, so as to set their boundaries and draw an artistic blueprint, which is closely related to places. For Rahic, it is the “50-step space” where he traveled along the eastern Pacific coast of Taiwan and where his Amis people live; for Yuma, it was the indigenous and spiritual space woven by her “tongue-like cloth.” The two powerful and unique epistemologies are excellent examples of “rediscovering/(re)constructing” the epistemologies of Taiwanese indigenous peoples and overcoming the intellectual fallacies facing the development of Taiwanese indigenous culture and art.

In order to create a space where new ethical and political ideas can flourish, non-indigenous people can draw guidance from indigenous people, learn from their epistemologies, and construct new relationships.

## **THE ARTISTIC SAILING OF MARINE DEBRIS: THE 50-STEP SPACE FOR THE GATHERER**

In 1962, Rahic Talif was born in the Makota’ay Pangcah village in Hualien on the eastern coast of Taiwan. The unique geographical location attracts typhoons regularly every summer. For Amis of the Makota’ay village, typhoons bring both catastrophic damage and opportunities for rebirth; all kinds of drifting objects that come with the wind, rain, and waves are regarded as gifts from nature to local people who are short of supplies. Therefore, the action of “gathering” is not only a critical survival skill but also the “first move” of Rahic’s artistic creation and epistemology based on this set of experiences. The action of “gathering” for Rahic is a way to perceive and understand the world through physical body movements.

On the one hand, the performance of physical labor is an individual experience that connects recognition, perceptions, and memory; on the other hand, it is a way of communicating with different worlds in different dimensions<sup>24</sup>. These worlds of different dimensions refer not only to the world outside the Makota'ay village but also include all times and spaces covered by the history and tradition of the Amis and other human and non-human.

The epistemology discovered and reconstructed by Rahic from the perspective of the "gatherer" takes the "50-step space" as a place (including both the actual Amis' living space and the abstract imaginary space), and keeps going back and forth without stopping. Turning back is tracing the indigenous tradition and relearning the indigenous wisdom, and going forward is to create spaces for promoting epistemic advances and cognitive progress for the world. He clearly pointed out the difficulties his Amis identity faced while encountering the alien culture or the broader world outside the village. It is really not easy to step out at any time to see what you are doing and remind yourself to keep a sober, objective, and continuous self-reflection<sup>25</sup>. This project 'Continuation of Dreams: The Innovation and Inheritance of Ancient Houses in Cepo', which lasted from 2003 to 2007, included the collection of indigenous myths, oral histories, and investigations of historical sites. Its final outcome was an innovative building that combined Amis traditions and innovations, named after Napololan(The House of the Standing Man), which was eventually destroyed by the typhoon in 2007. The core spirit of the project is: "The position of the Standing Man is the position of gathering, thinking, information, dialogue, decision, communication and execution," which is also the collective action that Rahic hopes indigenous people can participate in together<sup>26</sup>. This project was terminated due to typhoon damage and other reasons; however, his vision was firmly fixed not on some abstract aesthetic idea but rather on the living conditions and Amis philosophy and wisdom.

Facing both the outer world and inner self with a vigilant and alert attitude, Rahic inquires about "who am I?" and "what kind of life do I want to live?" Using the old Amis leader as an example, he pictured the image of the standing man and with a vigilant attitude, described his self-portrait facing the life scene here and now.

From 1991 to 2008, he extracted a linear vocabulary from traditional Amis utensils and took the Amis culture as his very object of creation. Referring to other art knowledge systems, he developed a unique abstract woodcarving that once sparked a discussion about “What is Taiwanese indigenous art<sup>27</sup>”

Since 2008, he has been picking up waste slippers on the beach, not only on the eastern coast of Taiwan but also in the Philippines, Indonesia, and other places. He tries to use these waste slippers to connect past and present Austronesian culture along an ancient Austronesian sea route of migration and cultural exchange that no one remembers and has also developed a contemporary marine debris drifting route that breaks all boundaries. He has held several exhibitions titled “Typhoon Action Project” (2008-2012). Waste slippers drifting around in ocean currents in an era of the global circulation of goods, make it difficult to identify the former owners of the slipper and clarify the route of their travel. The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake severely damaged South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the eastern coast of Africa; it is estimated that more than 300,000 people were killed or missing. This catastrophe casts a sad color on the ownerless slippers Rahic collected in this area.

In “After the Typhoon - The Invasion After Disappearance,” Rahic uses a video composed with still photos and moving images and a song sung in Amis to simulate the personified walking of the slippers to represent the renovation and invasion of Amis culture after the disappearance, the commodities turning into marine debris, and the lives forced to disappear, as well as all the things invading after the disappearance. Since then, Rahic has completely turned his back on the stereotypes of Amis patterns and symbols. Using the waste slippers drifting in from all over the world, Rahic’s “Typhoon Action Project,” with the eloquence and sensibility of the marine narrative, demonstrates the universal characteristics of consuming culture, the global transportation of slippers, and the common environmental issues suggested by marine debris.

It was in the “ruins” of the Amis culture that he gradually shifted from “loneliness, despair, and anger,” and the power he felt made him think about how to realize “standing up” in the history of being constantly forced to assimilate.



What he has learned from the previous “standing man” is not just the inheritance of superficial Amis culture but also the will to survive in the face of massacres (Cepo’ Incident in 1877) and oppression. Looking at the “50-step space” where the “standing man” once also stood, he “rediscovers/(re) constructs” a theory of knowledge developed in this 50-step space extending along the Pacific coast. “Gathering” is a shared experience of ancient peoples.

“Gathering” is a shared experience of ancient peoples. From gathering food and other supplies to collecting marine debris today, it means adapting to environmental changes. In this era of spreading marine debris, gathering this debris also has environmental and ethical significance. Nevertheless, Rahic’s gathering has other profound meanings. He wrote, “I gather my soul (reflections), I gather what I have lost, I gather the neglected ancestors (past)<sup>28</sup>” In the Amis language, the shadow also represents the soul. He wanted to say a lot through the things he gathered: “It’s not just about the environment. There is more about marine culture, about my tribe, and even about the challenges of being a human being..... I am trying to use this action of gathering to clean up these abandoned and forgotten objects, clearing myself and going back at the same time to recall the splendid and sweet memories and to find a balance between the new and the old. I want to mend the mind and spirit by transforming the physical space and ‘recover’ the authentic self.<sup>29</sup>” Hence, we can see that the action of gathering that Rahic performs almost every day is like constant physical labor. This austerity is carried out in order to reclaim his soul and genuine authenticity.

From 2013-2017, he embarked on a 50-step-space-based journey along the Pacific Ocean. He explains the “50-step space”: “I set out a journey along with the Pacific Ocean as the ‘50-step space,’ because this is where my tribe’s story takes place, and it is the foundation of all my cognitions.<sup>30</sup>”

In Taiwan, gathering marine debris to take care of the environment and self-soul simultaneously is rare. The “50-step space” is pitifully small compared to the original habitat of the Amis, not much greater than the distance between the ebb and flow of the ocean. Therefore, the “50-step space” is a metaphor, referring to the “oppressed small living space” or “the space that is about to disappear”.

In such a space, speaking in the language that “is bound to disappear” and saying, “These two eggs have given me great inspiration. I walked nearby before the bird flew away. The bird was very comfortable in this place and bred the next generation. There were no fences. Although there were wild dogs here, life would disappear anytime, but it was there, trusting this land, showing the strength of life.<sup>31</sup>” This description captures the survival philosophy of the Amis people and what Rahic rediscovered/(re)constructed with the Amis spirit as the core. This epistemology focuses on contemporary living situations.

Rahic’s topographical description of the “50-step space” between Provincial Highway 11 and the Pacific Ocean is also an inward journey for gathering his own soul. He invites everyone: the “50-step space” does not only refer to this place. Everyone can start from where they are standing and try to explore 50 steps outward to open up a unique perspective or even several new perspectives to see what they think of a place that has seemed all too familiar. He cares for all things in nature, inherits the traditional Amis beliefs, and regards marine debris as a gift. Due to the lack of material resources and the Amis’ optimistic character, Rahic transforms them into caring for the environment and opening up a new kind of epistemological thinking.

On the Pacific coast along Taiwan Highway 11, we see a “standing man”, standing proudly and independently on the shoulders of the former “standing man”. The 50-step space is where his contemporary “House of the Standing Man” is located, where he perfects his soul with an act of “gathering” and summons the next standing man. With the gatherer’s epistemology initiated in the 50-step space, Rahic adds new ecological thinking to Taiwanese philosophy. He not only rebuilds and defends the development of indigenous epistemologies but also promotes the cognitive progress of the overall spirit of society.

Epeli Hau’ofa, a Tongan and Fijian writer and anthropologist, shared similar thoughts on the ocean with Rahic. He stated that conflicting land rights had caused some of the most intractable problems in virtually all of our communities, as most of the dry land surfaces on our islands have been divided and allocated. It was open water that belonged to no one until very recently.

A sea-centric identity should transcend all forms of insularity and become open, inventive, and welcoming, as the sea is a genuine, ever-flowing reality. Metaphorically, the ocean is our route to the rest of the world, as it has been our waterway to each other for centuries. We should act as custodians of the ocean, and it is our duty to reach out to similar groups elsewhere in the world to work together on the common cause of protecting the seas<sup>32</sup>.

In 2018, the “Marine Museum of Art” project was launched. This “Marine Museum of Art” is a “House of Standing Man” built by Rahic from the perspective of a gatherer. In his art form and his epistemology, he places this intangible spiritual form of the “House of Standing Man” in the 50-step space. The “House” represents contemporary Amis culture as a precious artistic asset in Taiwan and the world. The “Marine Museum of Art” in a tangible architectural form is Rahic’s artistic reminder that the living space of the Amis, an ocean nation, is under severe threat and that marine ecology is facing catastrophic destruction. However, he is also telling us about the tenacity of life with the Amis spirit inherited from the “standing man,” and the epistemology developed by his gatherer’s practice and 50-step space. He paid tribute to the ocean in the tone of the ocean nation: “Ocean. ! It is you who gives my life’s meaning, Ocean! It is you who gives me a way of life, Ocean! You make all of my life’s work from the beginning until today.<sup>33</sup>” The gift of the ocean, “marine debris” in the hearts of the standing men who cultivate themselves by gathering, is his as well as the Amis people’s shadows, the mirror of the destiny of this ethnic group, and the epitome of the souls of all those who cherish the earth. He laments that people are gradually losing respect for the ocean, allowing the garbage generated by the civilized world to flow into the ocean and block the place where life is created. For the ocean facing the challenges of severe climate change and the flood of garbage, as well as an unknown future, the standing man cultivates an epistemology based on the 50-step space by gathering, not only for healing himself but also for providing us with a philosophy of how to live together in the present and in the future, as well as a new path to release art from the museum’s herbarium and white cubes. If you learn from the gatherer, take the 50-step space as the scale where you are, and observe and feel in the form of a gatherer or in some other way.

Perhaps you can develop your own way of understanding the 50-step space.

In addition, Rahic's artistic practice liberates the traditional perception of ethnic identity. The liberation of Amis woodcarving art is not only delivered in terms of material and form but also in terms of caring far beyond the scope of ethnic identity and situation. From the aspect of ethics, politics, and aesthetics, it shows a broad vision and large mind, opening up infinite possibilities for the development of Taiwan's indigenous art.

## **THE RAINBOW WEAVING OF ATAYAL ETHNOGRAPHY: THE TONGUE OF THE CLOTH WOVEN BY ATAYAL FEMALE WEAVERS**

Yuma Taru was born in Tai'an Township, Miaoli County, in 1963. In 1992, she was shocked by the rapid disappearance of indigenous culture, so she returned to the tribe from the city to reconnect with her maternal Atayal culture and to take a concrete course of action to save the dying culture. In order to study Atayal weaving and dyeing culture, she attended the Graduate Institute of Textiles and Clothing of Fu Jen Catholic University to learn about fabric-related expertise and train herself to reconstruct historical materials scientifically. After graduating from the Institute in 1997, she quit her civil service job to return to the tribe to learn traditional Atayal weaving in an attempt to revive Atayal culture<sup>34</sup>.

As soon as she returned to the tribe, Yuma decided to dedicated herself to serving the tribe for fifty years. The first decade of "rehabilitation" projects focused on reviving traditional materials and technologies. Therefore, she actively engaged in field research, studied Atayal weaving collections in major museums and private collections worldwide, and systematized this traditional weaving knowledge. The work of the second decade was "remaking". The fully trained female weavers wove the traditional cloth that was "restored" in the previous stage in a "remaking" way. The third decade was launched in 2011, in which Yuma founded the "Sewurao Ethnic Education Academy" to promote the Atayal New Craft and Ethnic Education Movement with homemade teaching materials in her mother tongue, Atayal<sup>35</sup>.

Yuma positioned herself as a female weaver, not as an artist. She said, “I actually would like to bear nutrients for the next generation. I have to be patient to wait for the seed to sprout, blossom, and bear fruit for a group of people whose history has been completely erased so there is no sense of history, time, or space. In fact, this is what I would like to build to let tribespeople see the position of their ancestors, their own positions at the coordinates of time and space, and to learn to use their present accomplishments to set a location at the same coordinates.<sup>36</sup>” She always bears in mind how to make something a nutrient for the next generation to set a self-position at the coordinates of time and space. Moreover, she extends the target of nutrient supply beyond her own tribe to other ethnic groups such as Kananavu, Kavalan, SaySiyat and, Paiwan, spending her efforts to help them recover their weaving skills. It is her greatest wish to bring the weaving skills and memories preserved in museums back to the daily life of indigenous peoples<sup>37</sup>.

In 2020, Yuma Taru’s “Fifty Years of Atayal Culture Renaissance Project” officially entered its fourth decade. She set the central axis of the next ten years on indigenous sustainability and international cultural exchange.

Looking back on the more than 30 years since returning to the tribe, she has completed the tasks of the past three decades as she has wished. As a female weaver, she used “weaving” as the starting point of her action and weaved the memory of Atayal with the warp and weft threads of the loom. She used the “tongue-like cloth” to speak the language of female weavers, responding to the call of the ancestral spirit and weaving her own destiny together with that of the Atayal nation. Atayal people believe in the existence of ancestral spirits and deities in the universe. These spirits are called “Utux” (deities). The Atayal believe that everything in the universe is woven by those Utux (deities), and destiny is compared to the weaving project of ancestral spirits, called “tninun na Utux” (spirit weaving), in Atayal’s words, which means that it is woven by deities. Therefore, when Atayal women weave cloth and men weave rattan, they are also experiencing the weaving work of the deities<sup>38</sup>.



In one piece of Lmuhuw, the classical Atayal ballad symbolizing the flow between the literal and the figurative in this way of singing, a woven tongue metaphorizes the common language: “From this point forward, we part here on this rock. I give you the woven tongue and the joint of the stick. Wherever you choose to go, don’t live a foolish life. Don’t lose your roots. Remember that your offspring would be like stars.<sup>39</sup>” If a woven tongue represents the common language. Yuma has been weaving “the Tongue of the Cloth” to revive the Atayal culture and considers the weaving as means to conduct epistemology.

For a nation without a written language, the woven cloth is a unique language that carries the nation’s memory and culture. For example, the rhombus pattern is most closely related to the Atayal beliefs of gaga, symbolizing the ancestral eye.

According to legend, the Atayal people have to cross over a rainbow bridge after death to return to the place where their ancestors permanently live. In order to require the tribespeople always to realize and not violate the teachings of the ancestral spirits, they must be reminded in various ways. For example, they must be engraved on people’s faces (facial tattoos) and woven into people’s clothes (weaving patterns). Therefore, colored horizontal stripes usually represent the ancestral spirit bridge (Rainbow Bridge), and the diamond patterns below represent the ancestral spirit’s eyes. This set of patterns means that under the protection and supervision of many ancestral spirits, people can cross the ancestral spirit bridge and reach the blessed land.

These patterns were once understood by everyone and passed on to generations by generations, but now even the elderly can no longer read them. Yuma uses the revival of traditional weaving methods to find a way for indigenous women to connect to both the traditional and the contemporary, especially from a material perspective, to link the old objects of the museum and the day-to-day work in daily life, to retrieve lost memories, and to find specific clues in the specific coordinated. Yuma’s epistemology has developed with a tongue-like cloth by weaving as the starting point of a unique historical narrative, which can not only correct some mistakes in historical research but may even fill in some long-blank chapters.

The Atayal clothing collected in the museum exists as a clear and specific “object,” lying quietly in the showcase, telling in whispers what only those who understand the language of weavers can understand.

Yuma embraces her Atayal identity firmly, especially as a “weaver.” She has chosen to revive the foundation of traditional art, a pioneering path for artistic practice. While facing the demise of culture, she decided to re-weave piece by piece the traditional Atayal costumes that were sealed in the museum. Her biggest goal is to re-use weaving to connect the tradition with current daily life, so that the ethnography of weaving can continue to be written page by page.

As for the works of art that we generally recognize as being available for display, they are not the focus of Yuma’s practice. Even so, her first public artwork in collaboration with the female weavers of Lihan Workshop, “The Wing of Dreams” (2008), was highly acclaimed and won the first Public Art Awards granted by the Ministry of Culture. This work consists of over 3,600 pieces of off-white ramie fibers weighing up to 500 kilograms, bundled in rainbow-like brilliant multi-colored threads, presenting a spectacular waterfall-like visual effect. Yuma said, “After the disintegration of tradition in this difficult life, we dye the wings of our dreams with rainbow colors.”<sup>40</sup> Another work, “Four Seasons of the Island,” also loved by many people, is displayed at Taoyuan International Airport. At a total length of 58 meters and a height of 3.5 meters, the giant work uses traditional ramie and wool, combining traditional Atayal weaving and contemporary techniques to present the beauty of the four seasons in Taiwan. In “Metaphors about Islands” (2021 Jakarta Biennale #Ring Project), which I co-curated with gudskul, Yuma Taru and the Indonesian group Komunitas KAHE collaborated on the work “Linking.” By linking the shell beads in the museums, the archaeological pit of Austronesian culture, and the marine species in the ocean, they created a connection between Taiwan and Flores.

The theory of knowledge developed by Yuma Taru with the weaver’s tongue-like cloth begins with the labor of “weaving”; just like the “gathering” of Rahic, it is both a unique physical labor and an artistic action. In the art world, she and the weavers produced countless new ideas for the “Rainbow Bridge”.

In addition to Gaga's teaching, the Rainbow Bridge plays the role as the metaphor of ideal life and Atayal philosophy, which develops a richer artistic imagination through weaving as a means of relational epistemologies. Yuma has been conducting a safe and free space in the world where female weavers can speak for themselves and build a knowledge system.

## THE POLYPHONY IN THE FLOURISHING OF EPISTEMOLOGIES

Both Rahic and Yuma started from the "collective interests of the tribe" and led the "collaboration" project, "rediscovered" traditional culture and local knowledge, and developed a unique epistemology based on the understanding of the past and personal experience of current living situations. From an ethical point of view, they all proceed from the collective common interests; perhaps due to the sense of urgency of time facing the disappearance of indigenous culture, they have a strong sense of mission for the continuation of the tribe's destiny and collective interests. The core of their developed epistemologies are concerned with environmental ethics and sustainable ecology and depicts a philosophy of life and cosmology that promotes living symbiotically with all things in the universe. From a political point of view, Rahic, squarely facing the existence of marine debris, cares not only about the survival of living others but also the meaning of the existence of inanimate objects and pays attention to the most inconspicuous marginal things with an appreciation of equality of all things; Yuma began to regenerate the culture of Atayal weaving by rebuilding the field of ramie, helping other Taiwanese indigenous peoples to recover traditional weaving cultures gradually and regarding herself as nourishing the development of future cultures. Both are taking actions to expand the mind to practice the highest meaning of the politics of interdependence and symbiosis. Starting from the 50-step space where he is, Rahic collecting the sea waste that drifting with the ocean currents and can be found everywhere. As a source of life on earth and a means of connecting all places, the ocean plays a crucial role in the life cycle of the planet; by using the ramie grown on the land as raw material, tracing the source of other weaving materials such as shell beads, Yuma weaves the circle of personal and collective life.

In weaving, warps and wefts are interconnected, and individual threads can move entire bodies. As discussed at the beginning of this article, ontology, material, and space all three “turn” to the place where Indigenous people have always lived. Additionally, it emphasizes the “relationality” of Indigenous knowledge and its relational ontology, material, and spatial practice. Rahic and Yuma are both excellent examples.

If culture is derived from the ancient Roman word, “colère, (to take care)<sup>41</sup>” which has the connotations of cultivating, dwelling, taking care, and preserving, the concept of creating a livable place by caring for nature from the perspectives of Taiwanese indigenous peoples strongly resonates and is eloquently expressed in both Rahic and Yuma’s works. When we look down and see the marine debris everywhere on the beach, if we know the story of Rahic’s “artistic sailing of marine debris,” perhaps it will bring us infinite hope; when we look up and see the rainbow in the sky if we know the story of Yuma’s “rainbow weaving,” perhaps, we will attend every moment of our lives more attentively. However, the premise is that we have to learn from Rahic about being a gatherer to write topography in the “50 space” and from Yuma about being a “weaver” to use the “tongue-like cloth” to write a new narrative not only for Ataya ethnography but also for the place where different ethnic people and other species live together. In art, we are more easily attracted by different stories and different narratives which are open to the perspectives and viewpoints provided by different epistemologies; however, in the real world, while facing issues related to global governance or differences of rights, the rights and interests of the disadvantaged are often ignored, and the epistemologies by which they live upon are always dismissed by mainstream epistemology. If we are willing to change the way we perceive the world, to learn to see everything from a different perspective as Indigenist research shows us, and to listen carefully with an open mind, we will hear the polyphonic chants of a flourishing of epistemologies, as if praying for a future flourishing age of epistemologies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith et al eds, *Indigenous and decolonizing studies in education*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Zoe Todd, "An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism." (*Journal of historical sociology* 29: 1, 2016), p.18.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Shawn Wilson, *What is indigenous research methodology?* (*Canadian Journal of Native Education*. 25, 2, 2001), pp.175-179; Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008); Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2009; Chilisa, Bagele. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Sage Publications, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For example: 'Street Theatre' I curated for "Utopia of Togetherness, the 2nd Taipei Public Art Festival" (<https://moxie-tw.com.tw/taipeiart/d-3.htm>) in 2005, "A Revelation from Ponso no Tao" in 2014 (See FB <https://www.facebook.com/2014Lanyuworkshop>) and "Topography of Mirror Cities" I collaborated with curators based in six different Asian cities ([www.topographyofmirrorcities.org](http://www.topographyofmirrorcities.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Sandy Hsiu-chi Lo. "Curating Topography", *Curatography Issue 2 Curator's Living Room* (2021), <https://curatography.org/curating-topography/>, access Feb. 25, 2023. The first draft of this article in Chinese was published in the 32nd issue of "Journal of Taipei Fine Art Museum", 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie. *Place in research: Theory, methodology, and methods*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>8</sup> Yuwei Su, *Gaga Beliefs in the Oral Literature of Pan Atayal Groups*, (New Taipei City: Bo Young Cultural Enterprise, 2017), p.62.

<sup>9</sup> Daxiwulawan Bima ( Tze I Tien ), *Taiwanese Indigenous People-Atayal*, (Taipei City: Taiyuan, 2011), p.62.

<sup>10</sup> Meifen Lu, *It Is Not Yet Dawn · Development of Contemporary Taiwanese Indigenous Art*, (Taipei: Artists Publishing, 2007), p.11.

<sup>11</sup> The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos used the term “epistemicide” to refer mainly the violence against indigenous knowledge of the world in the context of colonization in his book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Maria Irene Ramalho, *What’s in a Name? Utopia-Sociology-Poetry*, in Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses ed., *Knowledges Born in the Struggle: Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), p.131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Harding, *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.xi.

<sup>15</sup> Shawn Wilson, ‘Using Indigenous Research to Shape Our Future’, in *Decolonizing Social Work*, Mel Gray, John Coates, Michael Yellow Bird and Tiani Hetherington ed., first published by Ashgate Publishing in 2013, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p.311.

<sup>16</sup> Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008, p.7.

<sup>17</sup> Shawn Wilson, ‘Using Indigenous Research to Shape Our Future’, pp.313-314.

<sup>18</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Epistemologies of the South: Manifesto in Twenty-Two Theses*, in *Knowledges Born in the Struggle: Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*, p.124.

<sup>19</sup> Meneses, Maria Paula, *Tastes, Aromas, and Knowledges: Challenges to a Dominant Epistemology*, in *Knowledges Born in the Struggle: Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*, p.162-180.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics*, (London: Sternberg, 2020), p.14.

- <sup>21</sup> Preface by the author, in Da-wei Kuan, *The Li Dongshan Incident*, in *The Li Dongshan Incident*, (Taipei City: Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2019), p.14.
- <sup>22</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, *Restructuring relations: Indigenous self-determination, governance, and gender*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), p.235-236.
- <sup>23</sup> Sarah Hunt, "Ontologies of Indigeneity: The politics of embodying a concept." *Cultural geographies* 21:1, 2014, p.30.
- <sup>24</sup> Rahic Talif, "Fifty-Step Space" solo exhibition artist statement, 2016.
- <sup>25</sup> Preface, Editor-in-Chief Rahic Talif, *Continuation of Dreams: The Innovation and Inheritance of Ancient Houses in Cepo'*, (Hualien County: Rahic Studio, 2008).
- <sup>26</sup> Editor-in-Chief Rahic Talif, *Continuation of Dreams: The Innovation and Inheritance of Ancient Houses in Cepo'*, p.77.
- <sup>27</sup> When most Taiwanese indigenous artists focus on self-identification or symbolic patterns that can please the colonial vision, Rahic Talif took the initiative to take off the symbolic skin of the stereotype of indigenous culture. On the contrary, his profound thinking and introspection on the connotation of the indigenous culture received more real respect, causing echoes from both the indigenous peoples and Han Chinese in Taiwan. See Mien Lu, *It Is Not Yet Dawn · Development of Contemporary Taiwanese Indigenous Art*, p. 154.
- <sup>28</sup> Rahic Talif, *Traveling in the fifty-step space*, (Taitung County: Toko Studio, 2019), p. 263.
- <sup>29</sup> Rahic Talif, *Traveling in the fifty-step space*, p.305.
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> Rahic Talif, *Traveling in the fifty-step space*, p.239.
- <sup>32</sup> Epeli Hau'Ofa, *We are the ocean: Selected works*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2008), pp.41-58. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, on 12 March 1997, and subsequently published in *Dreadlocks in Oceania* 1 (1997):124-148.

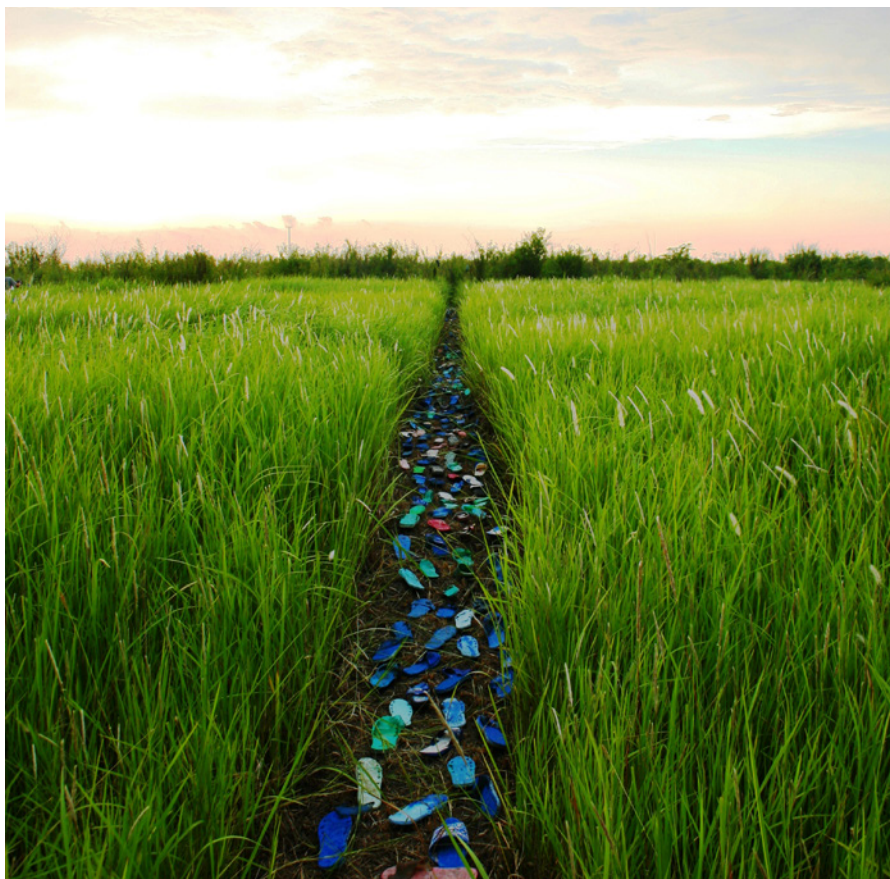


- <sup>33</sup> Rahic Talif, *Traveling in the 50-step space*, p.283.
- <sup>34</sup> Hsiaodai Huang, *The Restoration and Rebirth of Atayal Dyeing and Weaving: Yuma Taru's Weaving Circles for Traditional Life*, pp.24-53.
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Jingying Huang, *Weaver: Yuma Taru, Sound of Footsteps of the Island: Contemporary Austronesian Art Highlights in Taiwan*, (Kaohsiung: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 2018), pp.143-51.
- <sup>37</sup> Yuma Taru, *Meeting and Waiting: Remembering "Memories of Other Place"*, Cuiping He and Yuma Taru ed., *Collaboration: Remembering "Memories of Places" - Tribal Exhibition of Old Atayal Objects*, (Taipei: Institute of Ethnic Studies, Academia Sinica, 2019), p. 48.
- <sup>38</sup> Bussing Dali, *Beliefs and Culture of the Atayal: A Theological Perspective*, (Taipei: National Prospect Cultural and Educational Foundation, 2007), pp. 30-31.
- <sup>39</sup> Daxiulawan. Bima (Zheyi Tien), *Taiwanese indigenous Peoples—Atayal*, (Taipei: Taiyuan, 2011), pp. 81-2.
- <sup>40</sup> Da-Wei Khan, "Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Watershed Governance: A Case Study of the Human-river Relations in Mrqwang, Taiwan," *Journal of Geographical Science*, No.70, 2013, p.76.
- <sup>41</sup> Huimei Zheng, *Weaving the Dressed-Up Costumes of Ancestral Spirits: Atayal Daughter Yuma Taru*, "Source" Magazine, No. 66, (Taiwan Institute of Comprehensive Research ed., November 12, 2007), pp. 32-43.
- <sup>42</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, (New York: Viking, 1961. First published 1954), pp. 211-12.



**Figure 1, 2, 3. Rahic Talif. “Typhoon Action Project - Objects of Love”. 2012.**  
Discarded flip-flops from the seashore, Fishing net. Dimensions variable. The 9th 2012  
Shanghai Biennale. Photo by Cheng She Li. Courtesy the artist and Toko Studio.





**Figure 4, 5. Rahic Talif. “Typhoon Action Project - The Invasion After Disappearance”. 2010.**

Discarded flip-flops from the seashore. Video 7'44" / Dimensions Variable. Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by Tsai, Meng-wu. Courtesy the artist and Toko Studio.





**Figure 6. Rahic Talif**

In the journey of the “50-step Space”. Photo Credit by Toko Studio. Courtesy the artist and Toko Studio.



**Figure 7. Rahic Talif. “Line”. 2014.**

Discarded Plastic from the seashore, Fish Shuttle, Nylon Fishing Line, Stainless Steel Wire, Iron. Dimensions variable. Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts.

Photo by Wu, Shin-ying, Courtesy the artist and Toko Studio.





**Figure 8. Rahic Talif. “The Museum of Marine Art/Indifference”. 2018.**  
Marine debris (plastics, bricks, fishing line, steel rebars, driftwood, bamboo), wood, rattan, ceramic, stones. 280 (l) x 280 (w) x 260 (h). National Museum of Marine Science and Technology. Photo by Yan, Lin-jhao. Courtesy the artist and Toko Studio.



**Figure 9. Ramie field harvest, Yuma Taru and Lihan Studio**  
Photo by Baunay Watan. Courtesy the artist and Lihan Studio.





**Figure 10. Work process. Yuma Taru /Lihan Studio**

Photo by Baunay Watan. Courtesy the artist and Lihan Studio.



**Figure 11. Yuma Taru. “Convolution of Life VI: The Tongue of the Cloth”. 2022.**

Stainless steel yarn, ramie, wool, rayon fiber. 5800 x 350 x 150 cm.

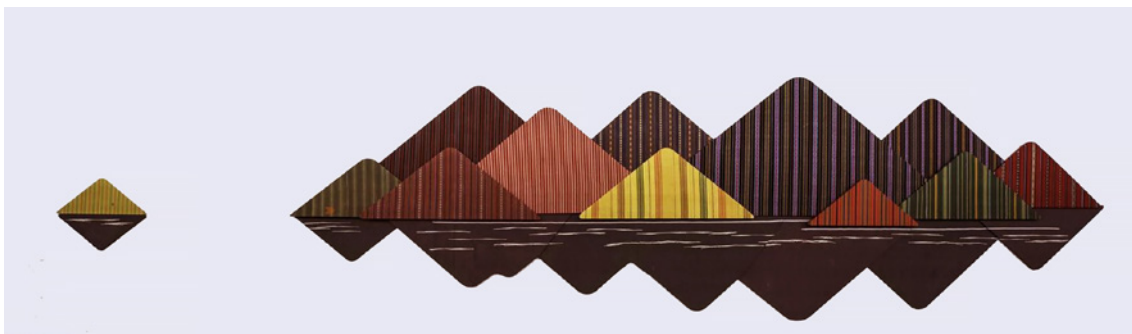
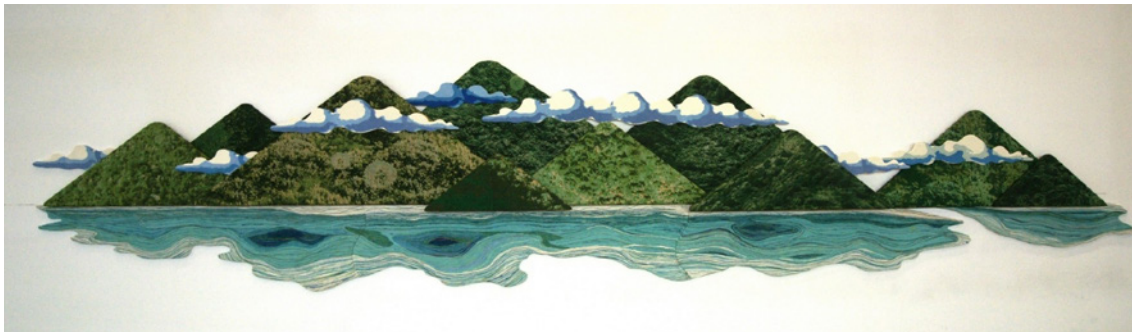
Photo by Baunay Watan. Courtesy the artist and Lihan Studio





**Figure 12. Yuma Taru. "The Wings of Dreams." 2002.**

Wool and ramie. Dimensions Variable. 380 x 1000 x 50 cm. Permanent installation at the National Museum of Prehistory, Taitung, Taiwan. Photo by Baunay Watan. Courtesy the artist and Lihan Studio.



**Figure 13, 14. Yuma Taru/Lihan Studio. "Island Four Seasons". 2017.**

Mix dyed and woven media, wood. 5800 x 350 cm. Permanent installation at the Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport Terminal 1, Taiwan. Photo by Baunay Watan. Courtesy the artist and Lihan Studio.





**Figure 15. Yuma Taru/Komuntias KAHE. “Linking”. 2012.**

Stainless steel yarn, ramie, wool, rayon fiber, shell, mix media. Dimensions variable.  
Installation view, 2021. Jakarta Biennale, Jakarta, Indonesia. Photo by Sandy Hsiu-chih Lo.



**Figure 16. Yuma Taru/Lihan Studio. “The Age of Dreams”. 2017.**

Ramie fiber, wool, linen, natural dyed, wood. 5800 x 350 cm. Work in progress.  
Permanent installation at Kaohsiung MRT Kaisyuan Station, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.  
Photo by Baunay Watan. Courtesy the artist and Lihan Studio.