



# GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

*Pioneering culture-building networks*

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

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# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur  
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**ABOUT THE  
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

# Editorial

## Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of  
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

### BIOGRAPHY



**Shalini Ganendra's** impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

## FOREWORD

### **Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur**

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

# An interview with Edric Ong

## AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

## BIOGRAPHY

**Edric Ong** is a multi-award-winning Malaysian designer of natural dye textiles, fashion and crafts. He is the President of Society Atelier Sarawak, the Arts and Crafts Society of Sarawak in East Malaysia. An architect by training, Ong has designed landmarks such as the Sarawak Cultural Village and the Kuching International Airport in Sarawak.



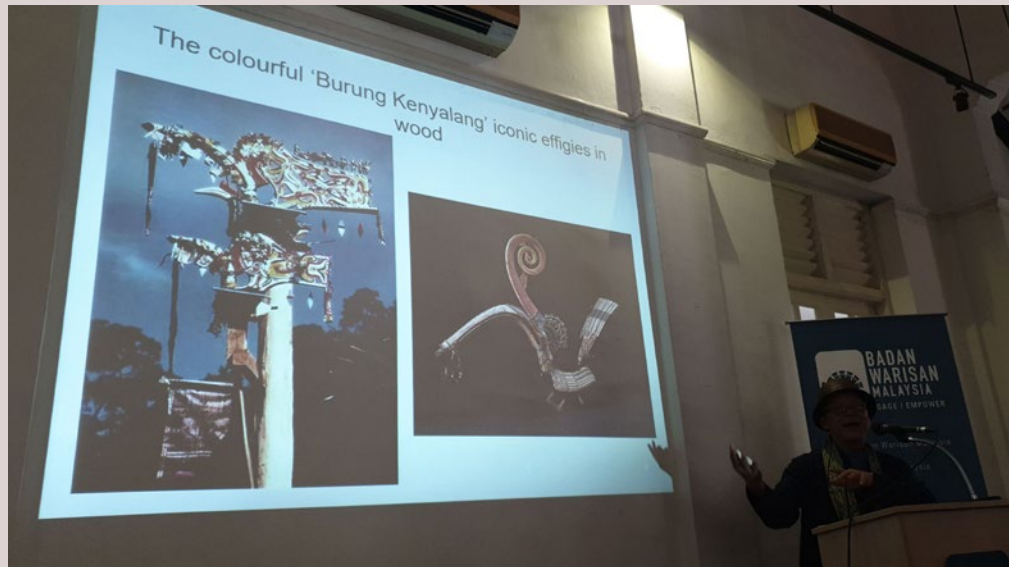
His passion for Malaysia's heritage inspired him to author several books, including *Woven Dreams - Ikat Textiles of Sarawak*. This same passion led him to be elected in 2017 as the President of the ASEAN Handicraft Promotion and Development Association (AHPADHA), an organisation that has administered the UNESCO-AHPADA Craft Seal of Excellence since 2000.

Currently, Ong serves as Advisor of the World Crafts Council Asia Pacific, as well as being an Honorary Member of the World Crafts Council. He presented on Craft Practices for the Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) Luminary Programme 2019, at the National Heritage House.

*GWKL's inclusion of craft and heritage, recognising both as integral cultural artforms, makes it a truly pioneering platform for this region and Malaysia, in particular. I was so glad to participate and to have my curated exhibition Crafting Artistry at Petronas Gallery, be a recommended destination.*

- Edric Ong.

Figure 1: Edric Ong presenting on Craft Practices at the National Heritage House, as part of the GWKL Luminary Programme 2019. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.





We interviewed Edric Ong during the unprecedented period that is the COVID-19 pandemic, just a few months after he participated in the GWKL 2019 Luminary Programme. He delves into his journey thus far as a notable figure in the Malaysian and global handicraft scene, while reflecting on its future.

Q: Would you recap briefly the focus of your presentation, in which you covered the important craft projects that have been developed and featured locally and internationally?

Edric Ong: My talk was on the Endangered Arts of Sarawak, Malaysia. I shared how some of the art forms in wood sculpture, carving, weaponry, metalwork, ceramics, fibre and weaving have been lost, or are being lost. Also, I talked about the resurgence and revival of some embroidery such as Malay '*keringkam*', kain songket weaving, and the continuity of Iban textile weaving. I then focused on the Rumah Garie Iban weavers of Sungai Kain, Ulu Kapit and my work with them over the past 35 years. Finally, I showed some current beautiful works woven by master weavers of

Rumah Garie.

Figure 2: The process of 'pre-mordanting' the cotton threads, known as 'Ngar' (photo provided by Edric Ong).



Q. What can be done to invigorate quality craft and sustain its development?

EO: The right pricing for the craft is important, and makers must receive fair wages and prices for their product. Over commercialisation (for instance, ‘cheap tourist craft’) destroys the quality sometimes. Innovation and contemporary design input to make certain crafts relevant to today’s lifestyle can also be a key to the sustainability of the craft technique

Figure 3: Bangie Embol Ngar ceremony (photoprovided by Edric Ong).



Q: Would you elaborate on your initiatives for developing and preserving the Pua Kumbu weaves? Has the practice been saved? Are there effective sustainability measures in place?

EO: There are two local Iban organisations concerned with the preservation of the Pua Kumbu as their cultural material. These are the Tun Jugah Foundation (which has a private old collection and a teaching workshop in Kuching) and the NGO, Sarakup Indu Dayak Sarawak. However, the continuity of the weaving art depends more on the marketing of the textiles by weavers, since most of them weave to sell, rather than to wear or for their family collection and festival use.

I am encouraged that with the group at Rumah Garie longhouse, which I have been supporting for the past 40 years, there are some younger weavers now who have become quite good at their craft. Nevertheless, like all other crafts, marketing is inconsistent.

Q: The natural pigments used in the traditional weaves are almost as precious as the techniques themselves. Have you documented the recipes? What is the best publication source on Pua Kumbu and traditional Sarawakian Textiles?

EO: The natural dyes used for Iban Pua Kumbu weaving has been well documented. But the mystery of the process of ‘pre-mordanting’ of the cotton threads (known as ‘*Ngar*’) with ingredients such as natural palm salt, various types of gingers, ‘*kepayang*’ candle-nut oils and more, although already documented, has to be scientifically researched. The traditional cultural significance of such *Ngar* ceremonies is truly an important Intangible Cultural Heritage of the world in need of preservation! In that case, I guess I should work on a new edition on Pua Kumbu textiles combining knowledge and records from my previous two books and include a new section on contemporary Iban weavers!

Q: Insofar as bringing traditional craftsman into the global sphere, how should this be done whilst protecting their interests, authentic culture and having them benefit economically? Are any specific safeguards needed? What should we all be mindful of?

EO: As far as I am concerned, one must earn the right or get permission from the traditional craft artist to represent their work in the world outside their community. Much better too, if they can themselves participate in promoting their works. For example, our Iban master weavers travel overseas to London, Paris, Sweden, USA, Japan and Canada to show their weavings and demonstrate the process as well. Nowadays, the topic is on cultural appropriation and how, too often, designers use motifs out of context, especially for fashion and graphic art. [During my GWKL session,] I gave the example of an international hotel in Kuching taking a sacred animal motif, chopping it up and using it for their hotel stationary! There are processes of International Property Rights policies (IPR) or copyright. But for craftsmen, this is well beyond their comprehension and ability to implement.

Q: What has your experience been insofar as organising international exhibitions (for example, in the Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies) and what was the reception to the objects?

EO: I have two curated exhibitions that are currently travelling internationally; namely, *Tree of Life* and *World Ikat Textiles*. The *World Eco-Fibre and Textile (WEFT) Art* was shown at Brunei Gallery, SOAS in 2014, after it premiered at Galeri Petronas in Kuala Lumpur. That exhibition has also been in Delhi and Taiwan.

The response to these exhibitions has been tremendous and well attended, bringing attention and prominence to the artists and communities behind the works. I am blessed to have very good host galleries and staff to work with. Artists, communities and craft organisations are supportive, but I have to raise monetary sponsorship myself through my network and associations!

Figure 4: Edric Ong showcasing traditional Iban silk Pua Kumbu ikat textiles (photo provided by Edric Ong).



Q: Have you seen a growing interest by museums to collect craft from SE Asia and how has this manifested?

EO: Most museums say that they have little budget for acquisitions within Southeast Asia or globally; and several will receive bequests or donation of collections. Though even in donations, they are selective for pieces that are exceptional and not already in their collection (I suppose because of storage space too). A collector friend recently donated part of his previous antique Sarawak beadwork costumes to the Seattle Asian Arts Museum (his home city), which had been in a major exhibition on beadwork in the US. Another Asian dealer had over the recent years been successful in selling collections of textiles to museums in China.

In my own experience, three prominent Chinese embroidery artists who we featured in the WEFT art exhibition at the SOAS Brunei Gallery, London in 2014, had their exhibited works donated by their government to the British Museum (whose curators personally selected and confirmed the artists' work). These were worth 500,000 British pounds! A landmark value for contemporary embroidery art! Much earlier on, after the *Pua Kumbu- Ikat Textiles of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo* (2000) exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum in Gothenburg, Sweden, the museum purchased the entire collection.

Figure 5: A handwoven silk Pua Kumbu wrap (photo provided by Edric Ong).



Q: You are a multi-disciplinary practitioner. How have your architectural sensibilities influenced your curatorial and collector initiatives and vice versa?

EO: I guess the way in which I look at theme subjects from the macro and micro perspective, especially when researching for exhibitions. One tends to get so engrossed in the subject and is constantly on the lookout for exhibits, especially when the exhibition is international, say for *Tree of Life* (covering over 40 countries) and *World Ikat Textiles* (over 30 countries).

Figure 6: (Left) Ejah Anak Jepon weaving a large silk Pua Kumbu

Figure 7: (Right) Mula Jama with an extra- large cotton Pua Kumbu. (Photos provided by Edric Ong).



These exhibitions then became events that included a related forum on their subjects, along with a fashion/cultural presentation. For the *Tree of Life* exhibition opening in Galeri Petronas [Kuala Lumpur], international designers who were invited showed collections with the motifs in the outfits. In Taipei, we then focused on Four Seasons as theme collections. And in Chiangmai, the theme was the 5 Elements of Nature (which will also be the theme for the show in Bhutan next).

Q: How effective are world organisations, like the World Craft Council, in representing the interests of artisans and sellers? How does the WCC in particular operate?

EO: The WCC and the WCC-APR [Asia-Pacific Region] are NGO organisations and are institutions that have been established for over 50 years. They can only carry and relay the concerns related to craft artists and their plight to the international platforms (i.e. – UNESCO, to which it is aligned) and regional and/or national governments. Two programmes under WCC (the Award of Excellence for Crafts and the World Crafts Cities certification) are both important accreditation; they are now quite widely recognised as such across the five world regions. WCC is structured geographically following the UNESCO framework into five regions: Asia-Pacific, Europe, North America, Latin America and Africa. There is an International President, as well as presidents for each region.

Q: What do you see for craft in the next 5 years in Malaysia? Globally?

EO: When I gave the talk last year, my answer would have been more hopeful! Now to talk about post-COVID-19, the future is going to be bleak. As the world economy slumps, international exhibitions and folk-art markets will suffer. Tourism will take a few years to recover. The domestic market will focus on the essentials for daily living rather than on Arts and Crafts.

Q: Any last comments?

EO: I hope that at this ‘low’ season, my master weavers can take the time to create and weave the exceptional designs that can be showcased in the future (since large cotton or silk pieces will take at least more than a year to complete). Atelier Sarawak, AHPADA, WCC-APR and everyone is now thinking of ways and means to go digital and online in marketing. We hope too that this is the season to record, document and share craft stories and information!