



*Frugal Living - it's Mulberry Season*  
Cheng Yen Pheng



## The rebellious act of stitching: A look into Cheng Yen Pheng's solo, *Frugal Living - it's Mulberry Season*

Resilience may translate into different forms. As an artist who responds to the environment and community that surrounds her, Cheng Yen Pheng shows resilience by placing herself in the liminal spaces between different conditions that shape our nowness; her works embed concepts of 'self-sufficiency' in an age of environmental destruction, 'care' in times of hypercapitalism, and 'craft' in an era marked by machine-mades. Although her perspective tends to be personal, her choices and thoughts are inseparable from our collective realities.

More precisely, through Yen Pheng's new body of work '*Frugal Living - it's Mulberry Season*', resilience is decoded through the act of stitching. In this series, Yen Pheng intersects the common and immediate perception of stitching as something feminine and delicate, with the fragility of mulberry paper as the main medium adopted, as well as the struggles and gains of living. Resilience seems to be reflected by Yen Pheng through negotiations; between art and nature, between softness and hardships, between what we desire and what we must bear. Yen Pheng refrains from completely accepting or refusing the conditions that are given to us, by searching further for something else to offer, which often sees her establishing a symbiosis between contrasting conditions.

The six-meter long work *Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022) perfectly captures Yen Pheng's negotiation with the struggles and choices she must make in life, as she recounts her personal and deeply moving experiences through embroidered illustrations on self-made mulberry paper. In 2017, in search of an equilibrium between urban living and her proximity with nature, Yen Pheng decided to move out of Kuala Lumpur and into the countryside. Embroidered onto the first part of the work are houses accompanied by a sunflower. Serving beyond ornaments however, they are markers of the beginning of a new phase for her and daughter, as they found their new home; a charming traditional semi-wooden house in Batu Arang, which has existed for three generations. The decision was not without controversies, as family members were initially against the idea, and problems kept on



*Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022) close-up view

occurring along the early days of their settlement there. The consequences that come with this decision are symbolised here by figures of snakes. What should be admired however, is the way Yen Pheng transforms the concept of these snakes as danger, and consider them as learning curves instead.



*Land Tortoise in Kampung House (2022) close-up view*

There is a La Fontaine-esque feel to the work *Land Tortoise in Kampung House (2022)*; just like a fable, it is filled with depictions of flora and fauna. Sure enough, as Yen Pheng admitted, animals and plants have been their “best friends” in that home. Yen Pheng pinpointed a scene in which her daughter is surrounded by dogs. The “kampung” (village) dogs have in fact been their guardians all this while. Mulberry trees, which gave title to the series, are featured prominently in the work.



As she explained, “*The more you pluck it, the better it grows; you’ll get more fruits too.*” Subscribing to a ‘frugal’ lifestyle, whereby the artist tries to maximise the resources that are available in her surroundings. Inspired by the use of rice paper in her previous series ‘*It’s been four years since...*’, she started making her own paper, experimenting with different textures as well as natural colouring techniques, and combining them together into a whole.



Dino (2015-2018) Stitching on sandpaper;  
80cm x 110cm x 40cm

Echoing her previous series in which she created a dinosaur-shaped sculpture from a patchwork of sandpapers, Yen Pheng also depicts the figure of a dinosaur in *Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022) - however in a more abstract manner. Ambivalent, the dinosaur figure here consists of delicate floral shapes, repeated and combined together into a monstrous creature.

Indeed, this duality is what Yen Pheng seeks to express; in her role as a (caring) mother, and her daughter's status as (an innocent) child, there are times that they have the urge to release their 'monstrous' emotions, such as anger and sorrow. Even with the closest individual in our life, there is a constant need to self-adjust and find balance amidst the dynamics of human personalities.



*Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022) close-up view

The technique of patchwork also reappears in this new series through three works *Bits by pair* (2022), *Bits by bits* (2022), *Bits and pieces - assembled* (2022), this time combining rectangular pieces of mulberry paper instead of sandpaper. The artist recalls the process as meditative; it is not a form of storytelling, rather an exploration of a repetitive gesture and form. These works were results of her attempt to keep "bits and pieces" of her mulberry paper experimentations together, which then became a continuous habit that she enjoyed.

Traversing different temporalities, from memories of the past to the present, '*Frugal Living - it's Mulberry Season*' opens up a window for audiences to discover a glimpse of the artist's definition of a home. Home as a space that is unmovable, while it witnesses change and growth, presence and absence as days go by. Home as a meditative state. Home as a shelter and protector, as one resiles against all odds that shape today's world.

## Amanda Ariawan

November 2022

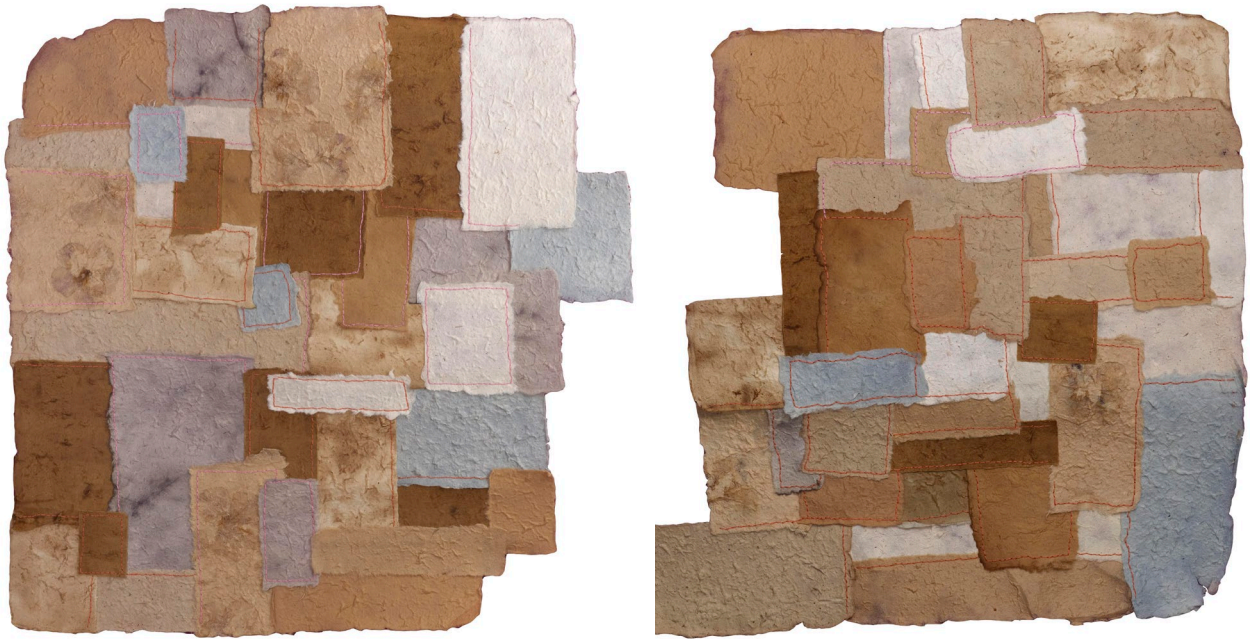
Amanda (B. 1993) is a young curator and writer based in Jakarta. She obtained her MA in Exhibition Production for Contemporary Art from the University of Lille 3, France in 2017, and has since then worked with various institutions as curator or art manager, conducting projects mainly in relation to art in public spaces, socially-engaged art, and net art.





*Land Tortoise in Kampung House*  
Colour ink, coloured thread on mulberry paper  
60cm x 600cm  
2022



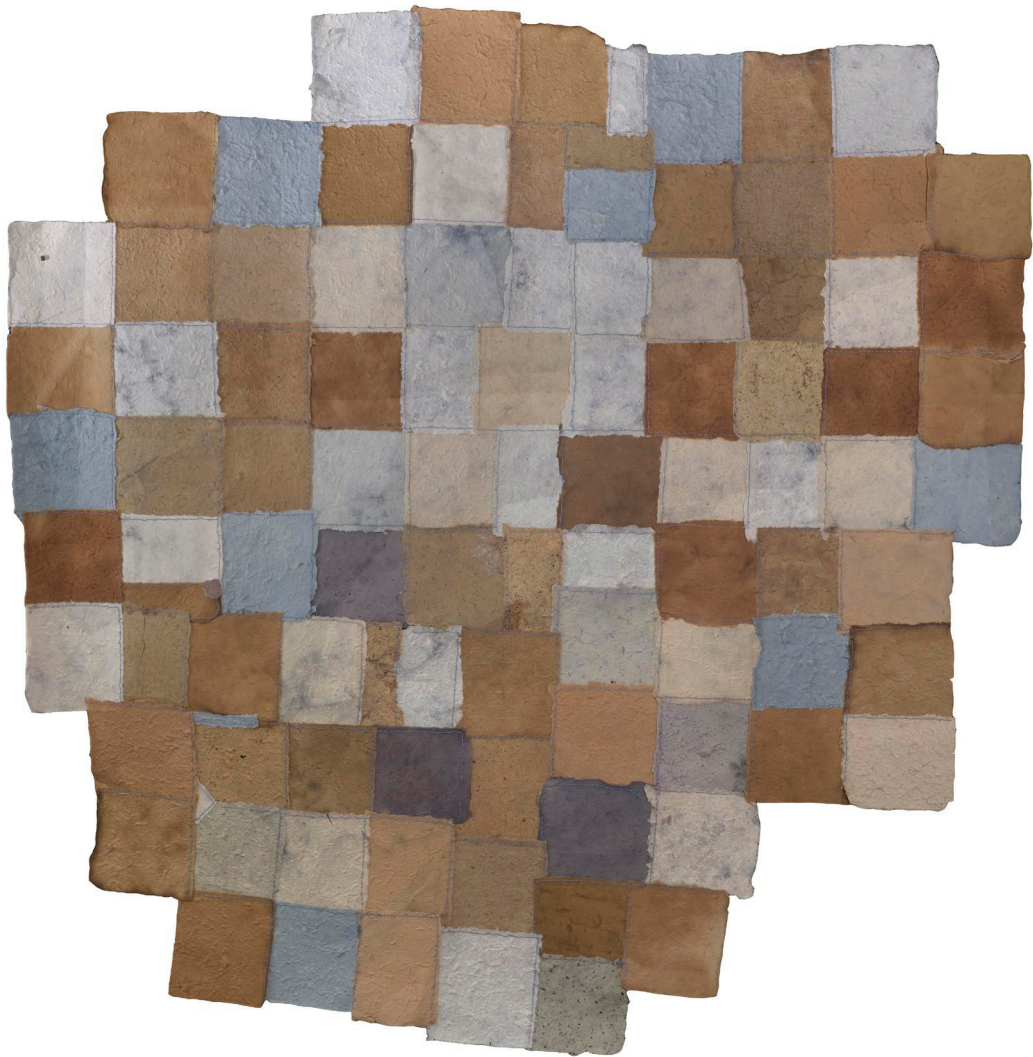


*Bits by pair*  
Colour ink, coloured thread on mulberry paper  
Variable Dimension  
2020-2022





*Bits by bits*  
Colour ink, coloured thread on mulberry paper  
Variable Dimension  
2020-2022



*Bits and pieces II*  
Colour ink, coloured thread on mulberry paper  
Variable Dimension  
2020-2022



*Bits and pieces III*  
Colour ink, coloured thread on mulberry paper  
Variable Dimension  
2020-2022



*Bits and pieces - assembled*  
Colour ink, coloured thread on mulberry paper  
Variable Dimension  
2020-2022



## **CHENG YEN PHENG (B. 1982)**

Cheng Yen Pheng's works are intimate and autobiographical and reflect upon the struggles of life—the difficult decisions, the reconciling of realities, and the overcoming loss.

And despite the uncertainties and the unknown outcomes, what has been a constant, is her unrelenting determination to uphold what she believes in, and to adhere to those principals.

On a trail-blazing path as one of the country's most provocative and brave contemporary voices, Cheng Yen Pheng left a mark on the local art scene, when, as a finalist in the National Art Gallery's Bakat Muda (Young Contemporary) 2014 competition, she stood up for her work entitled ABU, which courted some controversy and was censored from being shown during the final exhibition. Her outspoken, honest, and determined approach towards her life, is mirrored in her art journey. Her work is deeply personal. It is her life laid bare. Through it she composes her own museum of life, looking upon the act of creating as a way of assembling, materializing and conserving life's experiences. The artist places herself as a storyteller, as she connects the dots between different events encountered and major life-changing decisions settled through time. Echoing distinct themes ranging from femininity, maternity, motherhood, life and death, to her transition from the city to the "kampong" life, her work moves beyond expression, as it also serves as the artist's realization of her inner metamorphosis, while unfolding the joy and struggle as an individual, but also a woman, mother, and artist.



Her materials and choice of medium are varied and diverse, and reverberate with the provocative messages intertwined within them. This deliberate use of different mediums and textures are intrinsic to her work, as they act as metaphors to emphasize her state of mind and feelings that she can only convey through these forms.

Cheng Yen Pheng was the recipient of the 2018 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia) competition. She also received the 2020 CENDANA Visual Arts Inspire Funding Programme, which she uses to conduct research on the local arts, crafts, and community in Terengganu, Malaysia.

## **EDUCATION**

2004 Diploma in Fine Art, Dasein Academy of Art, Malaysia

## **SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 2022 Frugal Living – it's Mulberry Season, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2020 SEA FOCUS, Gillman Barracks, Singapore  
2018 It's Been Four Years Since..., Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2012 Pricked, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 2022 WLG IGNITE, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Art Expo Malaysia 2022, GMBB, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2021 100 Pieces: Art for All, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2018 Teh Tarik with The Flag, curated by Wei-Ling Gallery, in association with The National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2017 Through Rose-Tinted Glasses, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
18@8 RIGHT HERE! RIGHT NOW!, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2016 Dasein Gallery Group Exhibition, 10th International Art Expo Malaysia, MATRADE Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2015 Stories of 11 Artworks, HOM Art Trans, Malaysia  
2014 Breaking Down The Wall, Young Artist's Group Exhibition, 8th International Art Expo Malaysia, MATRADE Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
The Good Malaysian Woman: Ethnicity, Religion Politics, Black Box, MAP KL, Publika, Malaysia  
Freedom Under Construction, Malaysia-Myanmar Exchange Program, HOM Art Trans, Selangor, Malaysia  
2013 Measuring Love, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2012 A Decade of Collecting Contemporary Art, Wei-Ling Gallery  
18@8 KUL-SIN, ION Art Gallery, Orchard Road, Singapore  
2011 18@8 Save The Planet, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
The Garden of Hidden Desires, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Asia Art Link, Philippines  
2010 Absolut 18@8, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Artist in Residence, HOM Art Trans, Selangor, Malaysia  
Young Malaysian Artist: New Object (ion), Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2009 MEA (Malaysian Emerging Artist Award) Exhibition, Soka Gakkai, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Sasaran International Art Workshop (Part II), Mutiara Gallery, Penang, Malaysia  
Hanoi Welcome, Vietnam Fine Arts Museum  
2008 Swash to Swarm, Findars Space @ Annexe Central Market, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
No Big Size, Findars Space @ Annexe Central Market, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2007 Mekar Citra, Shah Alam Gallery, Selangor, Malaysia  
30 Finalists of Pact Max Malaysian Art Awards, Foodloft Art Gallery, Penang, Malaysia  
Floral Kaleidoscope, Isetan Lot 10, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2005 Open Show, National Art Gallery Malaysia  
Pameran Terbuka (Open Show), Shah Alam Gallery, Selangor, Malaysia  
Seoul International Art Festival, Seoul City Art Centre, South Korea  
Sejong Culture Art Centre, South Korea

#### **AWARDS**

2013 Bakat Muda Sezaman (Finalist), National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2010 Artist in Residence, HOM Art Trans, Selangor, Malaysia

#### **PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

Galeri Petronas, Malaysia  
Aliya & Farouk Khan Collection, Malaysia





Installation view at Wei-Ling Contemporary



Wei-Ling Gallery presents an interview with Malaysian artist Cheng Yen Pheng on her current solo show, '*Frugal Living - it's Mulberry Season*', where she describes intricate work processes and her inspiration.

Watch full video on [YouTube](#).



Wei-Ling Gallery

**Produced by Wei-Ling Gallery**

To accompany the exhibition entitled '*Frugal Living - it's Mulberry Season*' by Cheng Yen Pheng from 27th October - 25th November 2022

**Wei-Ling Gallery & Wei-Ling Contemporary**

No. 8 Jalan Scott, Brickfields  
50470 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.  
T: +603 2260 1106  
E: [info@weiling-gallery.com](mailto:info@weiling-gallery.com)  
W: [www.weiling-gallery.com](http://www.weiling-gallery.com)



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PROJECT DIRECTOR | Lim Wei-Ling

DESIGNED BY | Lim Siew Boon

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