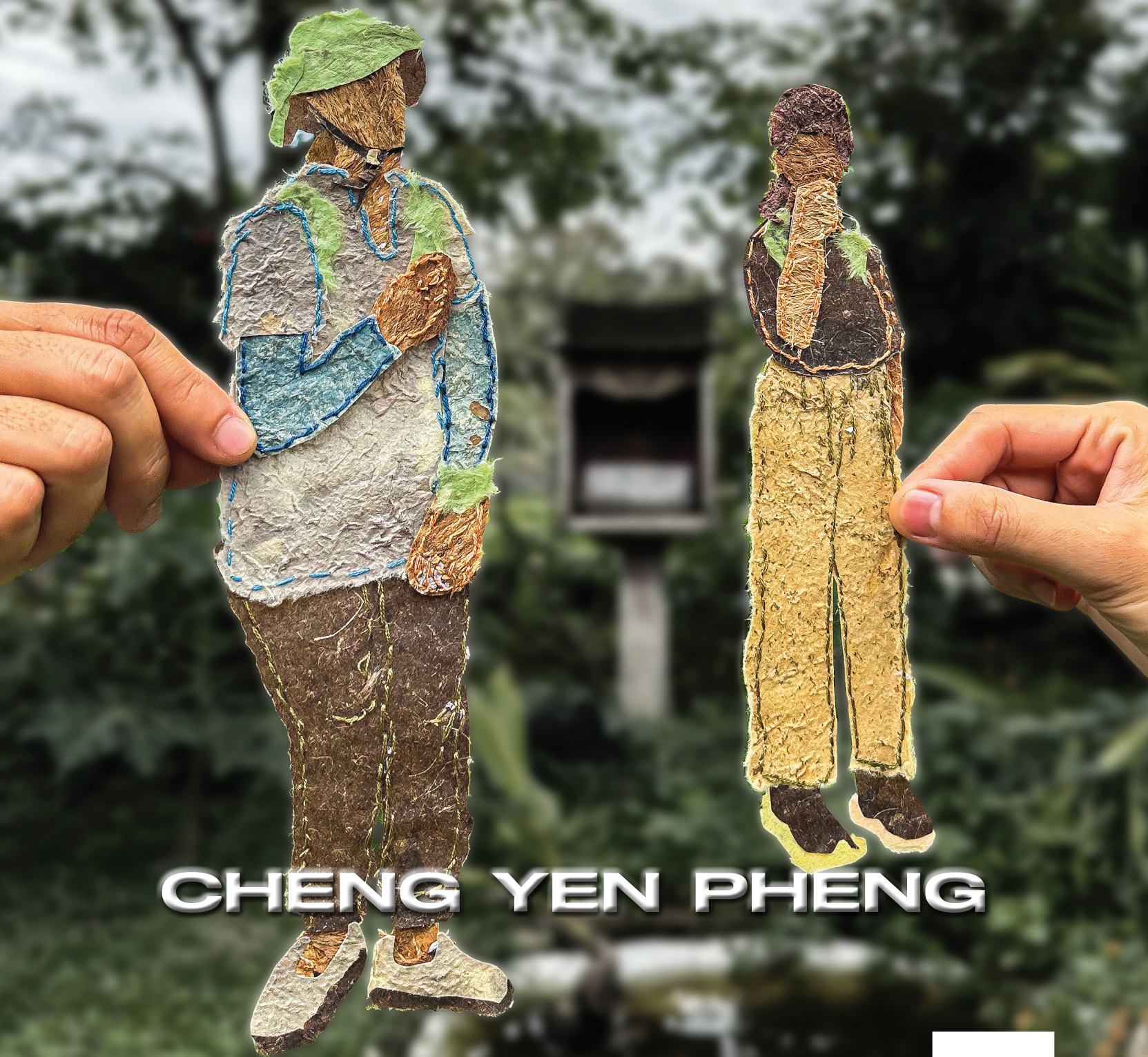


Salt of the Land



CHENG YEN PHENG

Salt of the Land

CHENG YEN PHENG

9 October
—
8 November 2025

Wei-Ling Gallery
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



'Salt of the Land', Cheng Yen Pheng's fourth solo exhibition, takes its name from the phrase "salt of the earth," which suggests humility and resilience. In Chinese culture, salt is one of the seven basic daily necessities, alongside firewood, rice, oil, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea. A grouping that dates back to the Song dynasty. *The Guanzi*, an early text on governance, illustrates the importance of salt, describing it as both vital sustenance and a means of maintaining social order that connects the household to the state.

The exhibition at Wei-Ling Gallery gently shifts away from her earlier series, *'Frugal Living – it's Mulberry Season'* (2022), which focused on daily rituals, her daughter's drawings, hand-stitched embroidery, and the mulberry trees she grew at home. This time, she looks beyond her doorstep, exploring the natural forces and fragile ecosystems that shape the world outside.

In this series, salt functions as a subtle symbol of continuity. Cheng engages with the four classical elements: water, fire, earth, and air. Each stage reveals a deliberate, attentive approach, reflecting the artist's ongoing relationship with her materials. Water becomes pulp for handmade paper. Fire and wormwood ash purify and stabilise materials. Earth, mixed with plant fibers, is shaped into bricks. Air aids in drying paper and lifting feathers.

Cheng produced these works in Batu Arang, Selangor, a former mining town that continues to exhibit evidence of its industrial history while confronting land repossession. In response to these conditions, the artist cultivates materials in her garden, thereby integrating acts of care into her artistic practice. The evolving environment and the community's adaptation directly inform her creative process.

By sourcing materials from her immediate surroundings, the artist foregrounds traditional craft techniques and situates them within a contemporary context. The use of pulp, clay, ash, and fiber demonstrates the transmission of artisanal knowledge and the preservation of cultural memory. For her, continuity signifies renewal, a living link between the past and what is still to come.

Salt of the Land

Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery





Close-up of 'Salt of the Land' (2020–2025)

Salt of the Land



Salt of the Land

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, banana stem papers, threads, color pencils, ramie, gold leaf

Variable dimension

2020–2025

This work is made up of many pieces of handmade paper sewn together. The paper comes from mulberry bark grown at home, each sheet personally made by hand, carrying traces of sweat, earth, and sunlight.

Slowly, stitch by stitch, I sew the fragments together, piecing them back like the small debris of daily life. It does not seek perfection, but rather continuation and endurance, each piece supporting another, forming a whole.

The work is installed upside down, so viewers must bend down to see its details, and lift their heads to see the whole. It mirrors our everyday lives, we bow our heads to work, and sometimes lift them to think.

“Firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, tea”, the simplest yet truest parts of life.

Under the theme *Salt of the Land*, it is like salt, ordinary, but giving life its flavor. It is a tribute to all who labour, and to everyone striving to keep order in their daily lives.

Feathers on the Floor, but we stand firm and tall



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery

Feathers on the Floor, but we stand firm and tall

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, banana stem papers, threads, color pencils, ramie, mud bricks, cardboard, bamboo stick

Variable dimension

2023–2025

An approximately 8 x 8 x 8 space, its walls coated in black charcoal, its floor covered with handmade mud bricks composed of red clay, sand, and plant fibres. Some bricks are laid flat to form a surface; others are stacked into uneven shapes. Their surfaces are rough and incomplete, with fibres exposed and sand seeming ready to crumble at any moment.

Discarded cardboard has been stitched and collaged into the forms of demonstrators, leaning and embedded among the piles of mud bricks. On the walls, silhouettes appear, figures walking toward the placard.

Over the past two years, my life has been deeply influenced by community movements. Regardless of how systems change, people should never forget their right to democracy and self-determination. It is not a gift granted from above, but a voice reclaimed brick by brick, from the soil itself.

The walls are covered in black charcoal, the floor laid with self-made mud bricks, a mix of red clay, sand, and fibre. They are fragmented and incomplete, yet continuously rebuilt. Cardboard is sewn into the form of a placard, with figures emerging from the walls, moving toward it. To fight for our right to democracy and self-determination is an inseparable part of life.

Amidst the disorder and fragments of everyday struggle, there is still collective strength, a fragile unity, yet steadfast as a wall built from many hands.



Close-up of 'Feathers on the Floor, but we stand firm and tall' (2023–2025)



Close-up of 'Feathers on the Floor, but we stand firm and tall' (2023–2025)

The corners were wet



The corners were wet

Acacia bark, wooden chair

Variable dimension

2023–2025

A shirt and a pair of trousers made from plant bark. The shirt hangs vertically, its damp corners bearing traces like the marks left after washing and roughly drying one's hands from labour. The trousers rest over the back of a chair, their folds still intact, as if just taken off. The chair quietly bears the weight, as though it, too, is taking a brief rest. Between the garments lingers the warmth and humidity of a body that has just moved and worked.

This work stems from the artist's attention to the "labourer", whether in the kitchen or the workshop, whether white-collar or blue-collar, these bodies share the same moment after work: the damp corners, the hung garments, the breath that hasn't yet dried. The bark fibres are processed by hand, soaked, pounded, and dried. Time seeps into the material, shaping its temperament. There are no shortcuts, no way to rush it. Only time can soften the fibres and allow the work to take form.

Perhaps this evokes a quiet sense of body heat. The work does not dwell on the hardship of labour, but holds on to the pause that follows it, the moisture after washing, the still-wet corner of cloth, the breath of a body momentarily at ease. Even the chair seems to rest in that instant. Within this pause, the labourer is no longer defined or divided. What remains are humidity, air, and time, simple and real, like life itself. A shirt and a pair of trousers made from plant bark: the shirt hangs vertically, its corners damp like traces left by freshly washed hands; the trousers drape over the chair, their folds intact, as if just removed. Both garments retain their moisture and form.



Close-up of *'The corners were wet'* (2023–2025)

One Ringgit chicken



One Ringgit chicken

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, banana stem papers, threads, color pencils, color ink pens

55cm x 104cm

2023

In Malaysia, “One Ringgit Chicken” is a colloquial phrase for something cheap or insignificant.

This work reimagines the one-ringgit banknote, remade by hand with paper pulp, plant fibres, and natural dyes, transforming the printed logic of monetary value into the tactile language of labour, land, and daily life.

At the centre, a chicken sits as if hatched from the currency itself, a humble creature of the kitchen and the market, of care and consumption. Here, it becomes a metaphor for survival, for the unnoticed labour that sustains a home, and for the quiet humour of living under an economic system that prices everything, yet values so little.

One Ringgit Chicken asks: When value is measured only in money, how much is life’s labour, and laughter, still worth?



Close-up of 'One Ringgit chicken' (2023)

Light Holds the Wind



Light Holds the Wind

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, bamboo, thread

Variable dimension

2023–2025

Over the past two years, I have learned to make traditional lanterns and Malay kites. The two crafts unexpectedly share the same foundation — both are built upon bamboo. In Southeast Asia, bamboo is one of the most common materials, but to me, it feels more like a personality. Bamboo is light, yet strong. Its strength does not come from force, but from judgment, patience, and the sensitivity of the hands. I often feel it resembles a woman — flexible, resilient, and requiring care, understanding, and gentle guidance.

Lantern-making taught me about support and unity. Each thin strip of bamboo connects with another, forming a structure that can hold light. It is not only illumination, but also a form of collective strength. Kite-making taught me the language of wind — how to tie, balance, release, and let the wind become part of the form itself. This work combines both experiences. Bamboo forms the backbone, holding up fragments of life; paper, like skin, breathes with light and air. It sways gently — not entirely stable, yet deeply real. Like our daily lives, it is held together by hands, wisdom, and a small measure of resilience, as we piece life together bit by bit.

In this work, *light and wind* are not merely natural phenomena, but two invisible yet tangible forces in everyday life. Light symbolizes awareness, knowledge, and hope; wind represents movement, unseen labour, and emotion. The bamboo frame and paper surface relate like body and breath — light yet resilient, separate yet mutually sustaining. “*Light Supports Wind*” is a reversal of common thought. We often say wind lifts light or fans the flame, but here, light instead supports the wind. It suggests an inner strength — that amid the turbulence and drift of life, what sustains us may not be power itself, but awareness and warmth.

Bamboo, an everyday material across Southeast Asia, is shaved, bent, and tied by women’s hands into the skeletal frames of lanterns and kites. Lanterns carry light; kites borrow wind — both depend on their frames, those seemingly delicate yet enduring structures, like the interdependence among family, community, and labourers. This installation, together with the previous work “*Firewood, Rice, Oil, Salt, Soy Sauce, Vinegar, Tea*,” belongs to the same life system — both are stitched together from handmade paper. But this time, the structure is more spatial, like a breathing space being held up. The bamboo pole stands like the spine of life, supporting two curtains pieced together through labour, while the colours of the paper — earth, rice, grey, and pale yellow — extend like the tones of body and land.

Feather mother, feather home



Feather mother, feather home

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, barks, ramie, bamboo,
color ink pens, color pencils

Variable dimension

2023–2025

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, barks, ramie, bamboo,
color ink pens, color pencils; Variable dimension

A hen sits in fullness, her body swelling like a quiet queen. Her feathers are not just plumage, they are home. The chicks live, hide, and grow within her warmth.

After the lockdown, I began raising chickens for eggs, the most basic source of protein in our family. From five to more than thirty, they have become part of our domestic world. One remarkable hen bred four or five generations, her daily walks with her chicks became our quiet joy.

In this work, the mother hen embodies the cycle of care and domestic labour. Her body is a house, her feathers are its walls, a shelter of tenderness and endurance that sustains everyday life.



Close-up of 'Feather mother, feather home' (2023–2025)

I thought I could fly



I thought I could fly

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry papers, barks, ramie, bamboo, sack bag with straw and fiber, mud ball, color ink pens, color pencils

Variable dimension

2023–2025

I'm not entirely sure why I made this work. One day, I simply felt an urge to hang up something that looked like, and yet didn't quite look like, a chicken. That impulse to suspend something felt both absurd and strangely light. The bamboo pole seems to embody a supporting force; the lump of clay below it serves as grounding, as an anchor. And the suspended form in between, it looks as though it might take flight, yet is also caught mid-air, frozen in motion.

Beside the work stands an archery target, struck, marked, and bearing traces of impact. Perhaps there's a kind of dialogue between the two: one suspended in the tension of air, the other absorbing the force of being hit. I never intended to explain it. It feels more like a memory stored in the body: when I no longer need a reason, my hands simply know what to do.



Close-up of 'I thought I could fly' (2023–2025)

Play, Pause, Stop



Play, Pause, Stop

Installation on-site, bamboo-made arrows, sack bag with straw and fiber
Variable dimension
2024

This installation art piece features a suspended archery target, crafted from a burlap sack filled with straw and natural fibers. At its center is a striking red “play” button-shaped bullseye, surrounded by marks from previous attempts—some arrows hit the target, while others miss their mark—capturing the repetitive nature of this action.

Using archery as its theme, the work explores its rich history as a skill, game, and art of precision. The act of aligning focus, effort, and intent to hit a target parallels the modern behavior of repeatedly pressing the “play” button on digital platforms. Through this metaphor, the piece raises a critical question: are we actively choosing to engage, or are we guided by media design to act?

The “play” button, a universally recognized symbol, traditionally invites us to start or participate. Yet, in the digital era, it has evolved into a habitual interaction. By juxtaposing the ancient art of archery with the modern digital interface, Play, Pause, Stop reflects on how our behaviors have shifted over time.

In the past, “play” was a tactile, physical activity, rich with sensory engagement. Today, it is often reduced to the mechanical act of pressing a button—a habit requiring neither skill, physical effort, nor deep focus. The arrows represent our daily actions: are these actions driven by intrinsic motivation, or are they shaped by external forces? The target, marked by countless attempts, visually represents the monotony and repetitiveness of modern interactions.

This work invites viewers to pause and reflect: are we truly “playing,” or are we merely following cues designed to prompt our habitual responses?

**Untitled**

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry bark

Variable dimension

2023-2025

**Untitled**

Self-made & natural color dyed mulberry bark

Variable dimension

2023-2025



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery



Installation view at Wei-Ling Gallery

ABOUT THE ARTIST



CHENG YEN PHENG (B. 1982)

Cheng Yen Pheng, born in Penang, now lives and works in Selangor. Having graduated from Dasein Academy of Art with a Diploma in Fine Arts in 2004, Cheng's works are deeply personal and autobiographical, reflecting the struggles and decisions that have shaped her life. Her art examines the process of reconciling conflicting realities, overcoming loss, and navigating the unknown, while remaining steadfast in her beliefs. Despite life's uncertainties, her determination to stay true to herself and her principles remains a constant throughout her journey. This commitment to authenticity is mirrored in the powerful and intimate nature of her art, which captures her emotional and personal experiences.

Recognised as one of Malaysia's most daring contemporary voices, Cheng made a significant impact in 2014 when her provocative work 'ABU' was censored as a finalist in the National Art Gallery's Bakat Muda competition—a moment that underscored her boldness and refusal to compromise her vision. She was awarded the 2019 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia) and received the 2020 CENDANA Visual Arts Inspire Funding, which supported her research into local arts, crafts, and communities in Terengganu. In 2023, she was selected for the prestigious UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum's Artists Residency Programme.

Her art serves as a visual narration of her life, with the act of making becoming a means of organising, materialising, and preserving experience. Through themes such as femininity, maternity, motherhood, death, and the shift from urban to rural life, Cheng reflects on her personal transformation; capturing both its joys and hardships. Her thoughtful use of materials and textures enhances this emotional landscape, with each medium chosen to express different facets of her identity and journey.

Cheng Yen Pheng's exhibitions, such as 'PRICKED!' in 2012 and 'It's Been Four Years Since...' in 2020, continue to explore themes of identity, gender, and societal expectations. In the 'PRICKED!' series, she used balloons as symbols of gender and sex to examine the fluidity of identity and the challenges of societal norms, especially from the perspective of a woman seeking empowerment. Her 2020 exhibition marked a transformative period, with her work addressing her personal struggles, the complexities of motherhood, and the search for self-discovery. In 'Frugal Living – it's Mulberry Season' (2022), she explores resilience through the act of stitching, using mulberry paper as a symbol of fragility. This series reflects her journey from city life to the countryside, capturing personal growth and the challenges of transitioning into a more sustainable, nature-based lifestyle.



CHENG YEN PHENG (B. 1982)

EDUCATION

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

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2025 Salt of the Land, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 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

- 2024 18@8 pLAy, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2023 HansaeYes24 Foundation International Culture Exchange Exhibition "Embrace Malaysia, Insa Art Center, Seoul, Korea
- 2022 A Paradigm Shift - Reflecting on Twenty Years of The Malaysian Art Scene, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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

RESIDENCY

- 2023 UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum's Artists Residency Programme, Fukuoka, Japan

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Galeri Petronas, Malaysia
Aliya & Farouk Khan Collection, Malaysia

To accompany ***Salt of the Land*** by **Cheng Yen Pheng** from **9 October — 8 November 2025**

Gallery Information

Free Admission for visitors with appointments.

Walk-ins permitted upon registration, otherwise a RM10 fee will be imposed.

(Applicable to individuals aged 12 years and above.)

Operating Hours:

10 AM – 6 PM (Tuesday to Friday)

10 AM – 5 PM (Saturday)

Closed: Sundays, Mondays, and Public Holidays

Image courtesy: Wei-Ling Gallery & the artist, Cheng Yen Pheng

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Artwork photos photography : Kamarudin Diran

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