

# antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE  
SUMMER 2021  
Volume 2



uncontainable  
natures



# contents



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## Lacquer's ecology, or the swirl

text: **Kevin Chua**  
images: **Oanh Phi Phi**

In this essay, Kevin Chua reads Vietnam-based artist Oanh Phi Phi's lacquer work through the lens of ecology. Instead of the familiar story of lacquer as essential to national belonging and identity, Oanh Phi Phi – in testing the limits and potential of the medium – is engaged in a project of unbinding lacquer's history.



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## How things-in-common hold us together

text and images: **Tintin Wulia**

Through examining her public art interventions since 2014, including within the econo-political ecology of Hong Kong's informal cardboard waste (OCC) trade route, Tintin Wulia conceptualises "stakeholding", "field practice", and "averted vision" in tracing things with Urry's mobile ethnography. These are methodological concepts for cooperating with common things, to stimulate their eclosion into things-in-common.

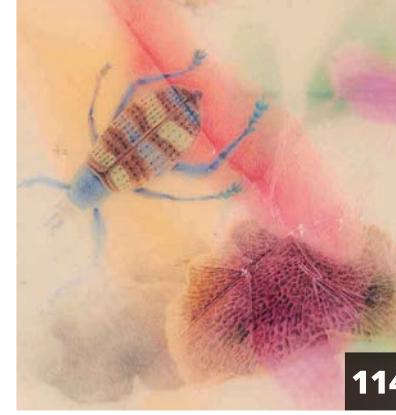


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## Dirt Stories: Cù Chi & Temasek

text and images: **James Jack**

James Jack's work explores the richness of dirt through stories rooted in our immediate surroundings that resist settler narratives of land. While respectfully touching these sensitive sites of trauma and transition encountered in Vietnam and Singapore, voices from the past emerge. As these temporary dirt windows open and their stories unfold, an opportunity for healing opens as well.

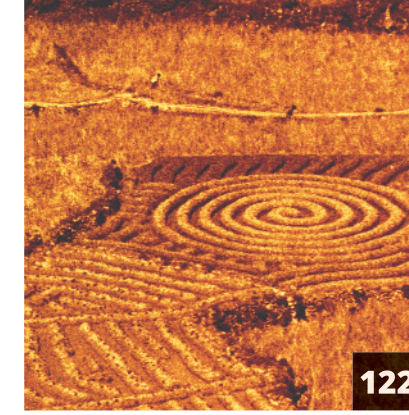


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## Hello darling!

text and images: **Garima Gupta**

*Hello Darling* is a series of drawings situated within a larger research project that aims to read the wildlife market in Southeast Asia through the private and collective imaginations of a post-colonial archipelago. These works are a result of an intimate conversation with a taxidermist in Thailand and offer a tender account of the commodity and its maker.



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## Archetypes: Cordillera's labyrinth

text: **Midori Yamamura**

In 1989, Filipino artist Roberto Villanueva premiered his ephemeral artwork, *Archetypes: Cordillera's Labyrinth*, at Cultural Center of the Philippines. Built with the Ifugao mountain tribe, this giant walk-in maze of *runo* reeds was the artist's postcolonial response to the ecological despoliations that became pronounced during the Marcos regime.



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## Salty as sweat. Red as soil. Soil as blood.

in conversation: **Art Labor and Nguyễn Phương Linh**

After visiting the salt marshes of Camargue, France, where Indochinese laborers during the colonial period, Art Labor collective speaks with artist Nguyễn Phương Linh about her project with salt farmers and rubber plantation owners as a starting point to discuss their interest in the cultivation of natural resources.



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## Plastic nation

text: **Jose Santos P. Ardivilla**

Ardivilla delves into how Filipino contemporary artists recast identity via plastic's materiality. The malleability of the plastic material is reflected on the shifting assertions of place, of ritual, and body.

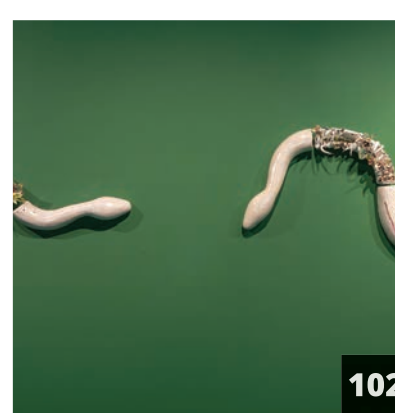


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## Tikar as verb

in conversation: **Yee I-Lann and Lucy Davis**

This conversation resonates with topical themes pertaining to ecologies, materialities, collaborative practices, decolonisation and politics of display of vernacular craft in contemporary art contexts.



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## To speak to the forest

text and images: **Pujita Guha and Abhijan Toto for the Forest Curriculum**

The Forest Curriculum addresses the need for a located cosmopolitical imagination of our current ecological era, rejecting the planetarity of the Anthropocene: a geological project that posits the "human" as a singular species inheriting a damaged planet.



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## A curious teacher

interviewer: **Kevin Chua**  
interviewee: **Isabelle Desjeux**

What does it mean to be an independent artist-researcher teaching in Singapore? Drawing from observations of the environment and the artist's training as a scientist, inspired by children, fuelled by humour and failure, this case study shows how treating the viewer as a scientist can help the artist create meaningful works.



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## The museum survives us all

text: **Jason Wee**

The Taipei Biennial, with its attentiveness to systemically reforming the categorically 'natural' within the museological, names the museum as the metonym and metaphor of natural systems, but also reformulates and redresses what these systems could be.



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## Ecology beyond ethnography?

text: **Samuel Lee**

This article examines the politics of picturing ecological crises in *The Oceanic*, with particular interest in ethnographic discourses and the archive as the main terms of artistic engagement. It also highlights the emergence of the research topic as a curatorial format with expanded temporalities and heightened epistemological stakes.



# Hello darling!

Hello Darling is a series of drawings situated within a larger research project that aims to read the wildlife market in Southeast Asia through the private and collective imaginations of a post-colonial archipelago. These works are a result of an intimate conversation with a taxidermist in Thailand and offer a tender account of the commodity and its maker.

text and images by **Garima Gupta**

The time stamp on our first online chat is from November 2016. I had casually DM'ed him after seeing some process images of taxidermy he had shared on Instagram. A year later, I was standing in his studio in Bangkok. Waiting for him to cut open a bird.

Not too far from the studio is a thriving wildlife market where he usually sells taxidermy specimens. A market that to my eyes has, in flashes, often looked like a modern-day interpretation of the grand 17th c. Flemish paintings, celebrating trade and the wonders of the world brought together in a room. The one that particularly comes to mind is Jan Brueghel the Elder's *The Archdukes Albert and Isabella Visiting a Collector's Cabinet*.<sup>1</sup> In the painting, among the many trade commodities and collectables are the American sunflowers on the left side and a dead Bird of Paradise from New Guinea on the far right. Their uncanny mapping (East to West) seems almost as though by design and making a point.

It was in this very market that he first agreed to meet me for a coffee. After three weeks of missed calls and ignored requests, he finally showed up at the café with a shopping bag full of two beautifully fluffed out bird specimens. In that bustling Sunday market, we sat in the middle of the noisy coffee shop, with two Birds of Paradise on the table. In what can only be explained as a Brueghel-esque chuckle, our world had been reduced to an exotic still-life that could very well evoke the image of a 'tropical paradise'.

A week later at his studio, he now seemed more at ease and wanted to know my interest in the Birds of Paradise. Sitting behind his large work table he remarked "*Bird of paradise is raised in Thailand. But they're brought into Thailand secretly to these farms. Not entirely secretly because you can keep them and raise them*" while making the first incision on the dead peacock carcass. "*It's a decorative item for people who have a lot of money. People who don't have a lot of money will also try to buy it. Maybe they'll have a few items in their house. But for people who have a lot of money, they can never get enough of these things*".

The last few years, I've been really fascinated with trauma and its physical manifestations and one book in particular that had its grip on me was Bessel van der Kolk's *The body keeps the score*.<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 11, Kolk revisits the history of psychoanalysis and the wards of Salpêtrière where Freud wrote his paper on Hysteria. "*Freud reaffirmed that lack of verbal memory is central in trauma and that, if a person does not remember, he is likely to act out: "[H]e reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without knowing, of course, that he is repeating, and in the end, we understand that this is his way of remembering.*" I'll admit that upon reading these lines my first thought was not that of a human body but the larger wildlife bazaar — a body that ritually celebrates the colonizer's gaze and aesthetics.

Between shuffling the innards of the dead peacock carcass and sipping on the green icy drink which was fast becoming less ice and more water, he said "*If you want to find a Bird of Paradise, you can probably find it in Singapore. My friend said there's quite a bit there, I've seen them bring it here to sell to some stores in the market. They say it's not easy to find, but a lot of the time they bring more than ten birds*".

In the 1900s, one small ad ran repeatedly in *The Straits Times*.<sup>3</sup> It mentions a certain Singapore Naturalist's Store at 177, Orchard Road. On sale are '*Birds and animals mounted etc.*' and then in bold letters, Birds of Paradise, separately. A hundred-plus years later, store no. 177 is not even a stand-alone shop and Orchard Road is a generic rendition of a Western urban shopping mall. But the market for wildlife is very much alive and thriving. On social media, I'd started following the Singapore trader that my taxidermist friend had mentioned. Over the 3 years that I've come to see the multiple photos that he uploads - the new Gucci leather shoes, his watch collection, parties, hotel pools that he visits, baking of the many banana breads during the Covid-19 lockdown, I'll admit I'm still taken aback by the occasional bird-animal carcass photo in the mix.

If there is one species that has garnered the interest of myths and archives, both, it would be the elusive Birds of Paradise that lives on the island of New Guinea. As examined by Pamela Swadling,<sup>4</sup> the first record of their feathers is on the 2000 years old bronze kettle drums and axes depicting the Dong Son, warrior-aristocrats of North Vietnam. And the last legitimate statistical record is from when all of Europe could not stop wearing their iridescent feathers in hats - as many as 80,000 birds were known to be exported each year before trade in wildlife officially started being frowned upon.

In concluding *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*,<sup>5</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo writes, "There was, in fact, no ontology whatsoever to the category of contraband along this colonial Southeast Asian frontier: contraband was whatever those in power said it was, and these designations sometimes changed very quickly...Rice, pepper, betel nuts, newspapers, and porcelain all fit this description at one time or another, as did a host of other items, all of which were considered to be contraband commodities in some contexts but not in others".

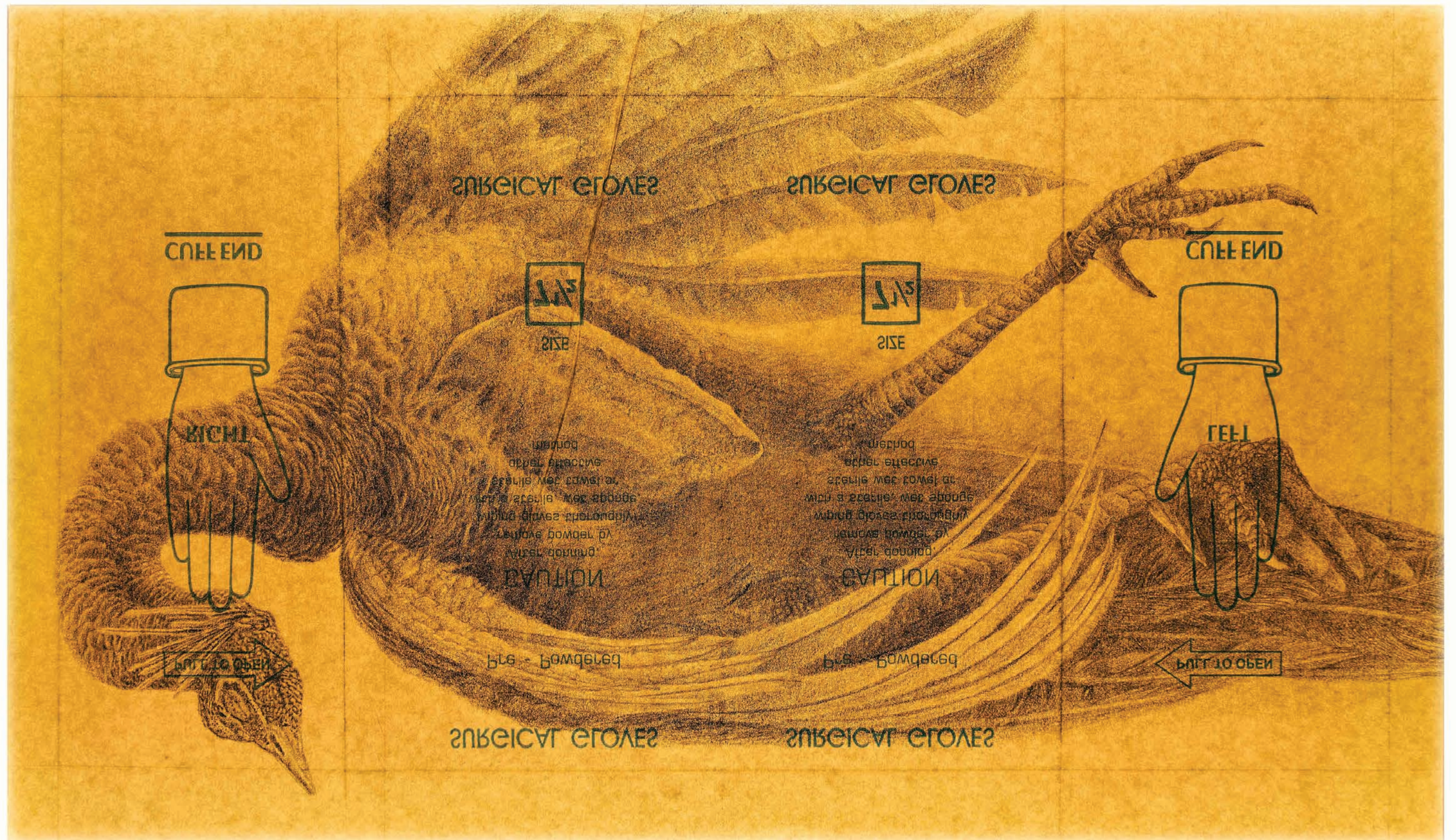
Downstairs, the evening food market had started to pick up the beat of increasing footsteps. The smell of fried foods had started to fill in the studio where the carcass was now emptied out - bones and organs laid out on the table. "*You draw?*", he asked. "*Yes! I do*", I said. "*There's such a small amount of people doing it (taxidermy), it's kind of strange and it requires skill. I guess it's kind of like artists, like drawers and painters. Like when 10 different artists paint the same flower. Even though in reality it's one flower, it's 10 different paintings*".

It's been 3 years since we sat at that table, a dead peacock in between. We still talk via social media, albeit not very regularly. Just a month after the Covid-19 pandemic hit Southeast Asia, he posted a Boomerang video of himself on a motorcycle holding a bird of paradise specimen that looped incessantly, making the dead bird look like it really could be flying. It was the last I spoke to him, and he said that he had found two Birds of Paradise at a small zoo in Malaysia and was on his way to sell them. The chat was left off at three consecutive smiley emojis.

### Endnotes

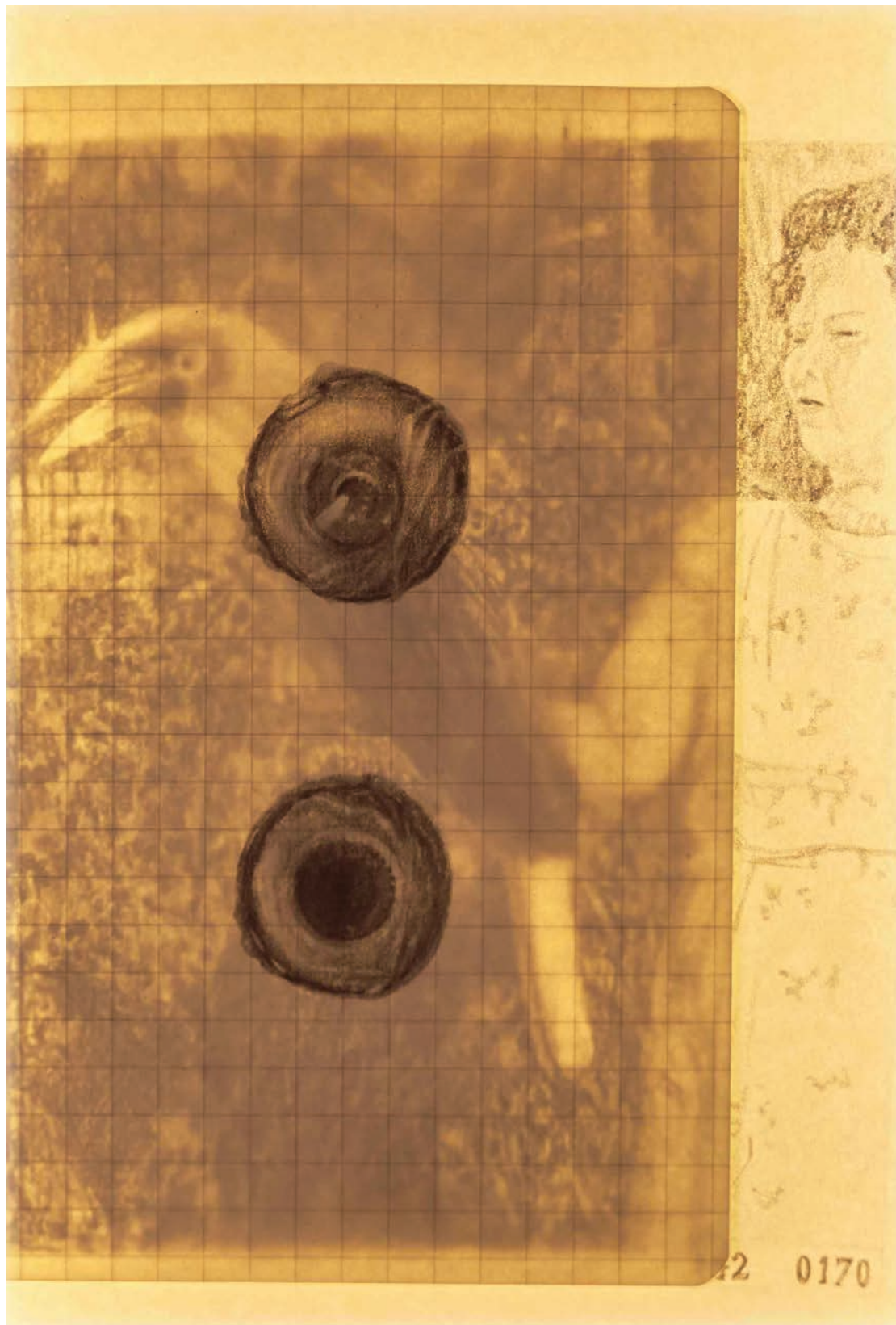
[1] Hieronymus Francken II, European, Flemish, 1578-1623, Jan Brueghel I, European, and Flemish, 1568-1625. *The Archdukes Albert and Isabella Visiting a Collector's Cabinet*; Baltimore, Maryland, USA, The Walters Art Museum. Accessed March 1, 2021; <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/14623/the-archdukes-albert-and-isabella-visiting-a-collectors-cabinet>  
[2] Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. 2014.  
[3] *The Straits Times*, 1911. Accessed March 1, 2021 <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/strait-times19110708-1.2.113.5>  
[4] Swadling, Pamela. *Plumes from Paradise: Trade Cycles in Outer Southeast Asia and Their Impact on New Guinea and Nearby Islands Until 1920*. Sydney University Press, 2019  
[5] Tagliacozzo, Eric. *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*. Yale University Press, 2005.





Garima Gupta  
16/11/17, 5:23 pm, graphite on surgical gloves wrapping sheet, artwork inside light box. 2020 © Garima Gupta





**Garima Gupta**

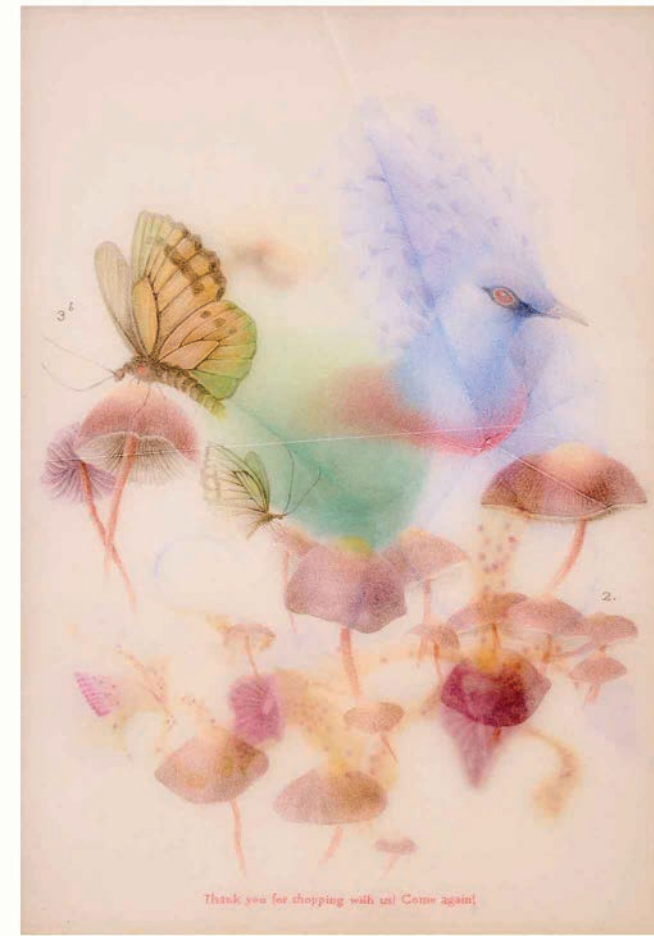
16/11/17, 6:25 pm, graphite on paper, artwork inside light box. 2020 © Garima Gupta



**Garima Gupta**

07/11/16, 1:35 pm, Colour pencils on paper. 2020 © Garima Gupta





### Garima Gupta

Clockwise from the left: *Thank you for shopping with us! 01,02, 03*. Colour pencils on gateway paper. 2020 © Garima Gupta

**Garima Gupta** is an independent researcher and artist. For the past five years she has been documenting micro stories in the Southeast Asian wildlife markets. Her ongoing work with hunters in the rainforests of New Guinea, wildlife sellers in the Indonesian archipelago and taxidermists in Thailand draws a layered image of environmental concerns. Gupta presented an intermediate stage solo show, *Minutes of the Meeting* at Clark House Initiative in 2017 from her ongoing research in New Guinea. The show is currently travelling and exhibited at Dhaka Art Summit (Bangladesh), Para Site (Hong Kong), Museum of Modern Art (Poland), MAIIM, (Thailand). Her latest work from New Guinea and Southeast Asian archipelago culminated into a show at Tarq, Mumbai in October, 2020.