

Art as Resistance and Reconciliation: Muslim Women's Contemporary Art in Thailand's Deep South

Dr. Huang Xiao

International College of The Arts, Krirk University, Thailand

Abstract: This paper examines the role of contemporary art as a medium for resistance, reconciliation, and cultural representation among Muslim women artists in Thailand's conflict-affected Deep South. Focusing on the works of the *Muslimah* collective -- Arichama Pakapet, Heedayah Mahavi, Kufosiyah Nibuesa, Nuriya Waji, and their mentor Keeta Isran -- the study explores how these artists navigate identity, gender, and socio-political tensions through creative expression. Drawing from two journalistic sources documenting their exhibitions in Bangkok (2017, 2018-2019), the paper analyzes how their art challenges stereotypes, fosters interfaith understanding, and constructs alternative narratives of peace in a region marred by insurgency.

Key Words: Muslim women artists; Peacebuilding through art; Feminist geopolitics; Thailand's Deep South conflict; Decolonial aesthetics; Interfaith dialogue.

1. Introduction

Thailand's Deep South -- comprising the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat -- has, since 2004, been defined in national discourse primarily through the lens of separatist violence and insurgency. Mainstream representations, particularly in Thai-language media, often obscure the rich cultural and religious diversity of the region, portraying it instead as a peripheral zone of unrest. In response, a group of Muslim women artists from the area have come together to form the *Muslimah* collective. Led by artist and professor Keeta Isran, this collective uses contemporary art to subvert stereotypes, narrate untold stories, and create spaces of peace and beauty amid chaos. Through exhibitions such as *Muslimah* (2017) and *Hope And Courage Human Compassion Love And Values Of Beauty In The Way Of Life* (2018 - 2019), the group challenges hegemonic depictions of Muslim women as passive victims and the Deep South as irredeemably violent. This paper explores the artistic practices of the *Muslimah* collective as forms of soft resistance, cultural diplomacy, and feminist narrative-building.

2. Theoretical Framework: Situating the Muslimah Collective's Practice

This study engages multiple intersecting theoretical frameworks to analyze the Muslimah collective's artistic practice as a form of cultural resistance, feminist intervention, and peacebuilding in Thailand's Deep South. The analysis builds upon four primary theoretical foundations:

2.1 Decolonial Aesthetics and Epistemology

Drawing on Walter Dignolo (2011) and the modernity/coloniality school, we examine how the collective's use of indigenous materials and techniques constitutes a decolonial praxis that challenges Western art historical paradigms. Their work exemplifies what Dignolo terms "border thinking" - operating from the margins to decenter dominant narratives. [1] (Dignolo, 2011) The material choices (fishing nets, water hyacinth, batik) perform what Arturo Escobar (2018) calls "ontological politics" [2], asserting alternative ways of being and knowing against the Thai state's homogenizing national imaginary.

2.2 Feminist Geopolitics of Art

Building on Cynthia Enloe's (2013) feminist international relations theory [3] and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) transnational feminism [4], we analyze how these artists reconfigure

the gendered geopolitics of Thailand's southern conflict. Their work embodies what W.J.T. Mitchell (2011) terms "image warfare" [5], contesting the masculinized visual regimes of both state counterinsurgency propaganda and militant Islamist iconography through what the artists call "feminine aesthetics".

2.3 Affective Economies and Cultural Memory

Employing Sara Ahmed's (2004) theory of affective economies [6] and Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of post-memory [7], we examine how the collective's artworks circulate emotional capital and construct intergenerational memory. The smoke imagery in Keeta Isran's photographs and the fragile materials in Heedayah Mahavi's installations materialize what Ann Cvetkovich (2003) calls an "archive of feelings" -- preserving traumatic histories through aesthetic forms that resist institutionalized narratives. [8]

2.4 Relational Aesthetics and Peacebuilding

Through Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) relational aesthetics [9] and John Paul Lederach's (2005) conflict transformation theory [10], we analyze how De' Lapae Art Space functions as what Michel de Certeau (1984) would call a "space of tactics" [11] - creating micro-utopias of interfaith dialogue. The collective's exhibitions perform what Jacques Rancière (2010) terms the "redistribution of the sensible" [12], creating new perceptual frameworks for understanding the Deep South beyond security discourses.

3. Materiality and Symbolism: Reclaiming Local Identity

A defining feature of the *Muslimah* collective's work is the deliberate use of indigenous and recycled materials to root their art in the physical and cultural terrain of the Deep South.

Arichama Pakapet, a contemporary artist hailing from Pattani province, represents a significant case study in the intersection of material culture and feminist praxis within Thailand's southern conflict zone. Her artistic trajectory exemplifies what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) might characterize as the decolonial potential of situated knowledge production [13] -- transitioning from local joint exhibitions in her native region to seeking broader recognition in Bangkok's art world.

The artist's seminal work, *Truth of Life* (2017), merits particular theoretical attention for its sophisticated material semiotics. Constructed from repurposed fishing nets and water hyacinth -- materials deeply embedded in her familial and community context as the daughter of fishing industry workers -- the installation operates on multiple discursive levels. Following Tim Ingold's (2007) framework of "material entanglement" [14], the work's physical composition embodies the complex socio-economic realities of coastal Muslim women in Southern Thailand.

The grid-like structure of the woven fibers functions as what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would term a "rhizomatic" representation [15] of feminine subjectivity -- simultaneously constrained by patriarchal structures yet demonstrating agentic resistance through its intricate craftsmanship. This aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) conception of gender performativity [16], where the very act of weaving becomes a subversive repetition of traditionally feminine labor.

The work's thematic focus on "mixed emotions" and "facing one's demons" engages with Sara Ahmed's (2014) affective economies [17], illustrating how emotions circulate and accumulate value within specific cultural contexts. The use of natural dyes and locally-sourced materials further exemplifies Mignolo and Vázquez's (2013) decolonial aesthetic [18], rejecting Western art historical privileging of permanent media in favor of organic, ephemeral materials that reflect the precarity of life in conflict zones.

Through this material-semiotic analysis, *Truth of Life* (2017) emerges not merely as an artwork but as what Ariella Azoulay (2008) would call a “civil contract” -- a visual renegotiation [19] of Muslim women’s place in Thailand’s national imaginary. The work’s physical labor (the hand-sewn construction) mirrors the emotional labor required to navigate intersecting identities [20] as described by Hochschild (1983), making visible the often-invisible work of cultural negotiation performed by minority women in contested regions.



Figure 1. *Truth of Life* by Arichama Pakapet, Bangkok Art Biennale (October, 2018 - February, 2019)
Website Source: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1568302/peace-of-art>

Heedayah Mahavi’s artistic practice constitutes a sophisticated engagement with material epistemology and intergenerational memory that warrants careful theoretical examination. The work’s deliberate incorporation of organic, ephemeral materials -- straw, tree bark, sandstone and glass -- operates on multiple discursive levels, articulating what might be termed a material poetics of feminine resilience in Thailand’s contested southern borderlands. Drawing from indigenous knowledge systems while engaging contemporary art practices, Mahavi’s choice of unstable, biodegradable media performs a complex mediation between permanence and transience that mirrors the precarious existence of cultural memory in conflict zones.

The artist’s meticulous process of balancing color and texture through these fragile materials enacts a form of embodied knowledge production that recalls Tim Ingold’s (2007) conceptualization of “making as a process of growth” [21]. Each labor-intensive stroke becomes an act of cultural preservation, where the very instability of the materials serves as a metaphor for the fragility of intergenerational transmission in contexts of political violence. This material practice gains deeper significance when read alongside the artist’s own testimony (Bangkok Post,

2019) regarding her mother's central role as both muse and moral compass -- "My mother has been my biggest inspiration...this exhibit is dedicated to her." [22] Such statements reveal how the work functions as what Marianne Hirsch has theorized as an archive of "post-memory" [23], where second-generation artists inherit and rework traumatic histories through aesthetic practice rather than direct experience.



Figure 2. *The Feeling Of A Loved One* by Heedayah Mahavi, Bangkok Art Biennale (October, 2018 - February, 2019)
Website Link: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1568302/peace-of-art>

Mahavi's portraits of elderly women, particularly the recurring representation of her mother, construct what might be understood as a counter-narrative to dominant representations of Muslim women in southern Thailand. The works refuse both the orientalist trope of the passive victim and the state-sponsored image of the threatening insurgent, instead also presenting what Sara Ahmed (2004) would call an "affective economy" [24] of feminine strength and endurance just as stated previously. The material choices here are profoundly significant -- the incorporation of glass fragments amidst organic matter suggests what Diana Taylor (2003) has described as the "repertoire" of embodied cultural knowledge [25] that exists alongside, and often in tension with, official historical archives.

The technical challenges Mahavi describes in preserving these organic materials - their tendency to decay, the difficulty of achieving color balance -- become allegorical of the broader struggle to maintain cultural continuity in the face of political erasure. This resonates with Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualization of cultural translation, where the very process of material transformation in the artwork mirrors the necessary but fraught negotiations between tradition and modernity, between local identity and national belonging. [26] (Bhabha, 2011) The work's

material instability thus performs a kind of resistance to what Ariella Azoulay (2008) has critiqued as the “imperial shutter” of dominant historiography [27], insisting instead on the right to ephemerality and processual becoming.

What emerges from this analysis is an artistic practice that refuses easy categorization. Mahavi’s work exists at the intersection of material ethnography and contemporary art, of personal memoir and collective history, of traditional craft and avant-garde experimentation. The fragile equilibrium she achieves between these competing demands -- both materially and conceptually - - offers a powerful model for how art might articulate complex identities in contexts of political conflict, not through didactic statements but through the very texture and substance of its making. In this sense, Mahavi’s work constitutes what might be termed a “material testimony” -- one that speaks through its fibers and pigments as much as through its representational content, and in doing so, reconfigures our understanding of both artistic practice and cultural memory in Thailand’s Deep South.

Keeta Isran’s artistic practice and curatorial work articulate a sophisticated framework of aesthetic resistance and communal healing that demands critical examination through multiple theoretical lenses. Her conceptualization of art as “part of the healing process” resonates profoundly with trauma theory, particularly Dori Laub’s assertion that artistic creation can serve as a “testimonial process” (Laub & Felman, 1992) for communities experiencing chronic violence. [28] The monochromatic photographic series featuring veiled women enveloped in atmospheric haze operates as what Michel Foucault might term a “counter-memory” - challenging the dominant mediascape’s representation of Southern Thailand’s Muslim communities through what Keeta describes as a visual “journal” of everyday existence.



Figure 3. *A Muslimah* by Keeta Isran, Bangkok Art Biennale (October, 2018 - February, 2019)

Website Link: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1568302/peace-of-art>

The symbolic deployment of smoke in her work performs complex semiotic labor, simultaneously evoking and subverting the region's association with violence. This artistic strategy aligns with Jacques Rancière's (2010) concept of the "redistribution of the sensible", where aesthetic choices reconfigure what can be perceived and understood about a community. [29] Keeta's insistence that the smoke represents "memories and hope" rather than destruction constitutes a deliberate act of what W.J.T. Mitchell (2011) calls "image warfare" -- contesting hegemonic visual regimes through subtle re-signification. [30] Her metaphor of "planting flowers in a war zone" powerfully encapsulates this approach, recalling Gilles Deleuze's notion of art as resistance through the creation of "minoritarian" spaces of becoming. [31] (Yu, 2015) The establishment of De' Lapae Art Space in 2015 represents a significant intervention in what Pierre Bourdieu (2002) would term the "field of cultural production" [32] in Southern Thailand. Operating without institutional support, this initiative embodies Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "third space" -- an interstitial site where new cultural meanings and social relations can be negotiated. [33] Keeta's observation about shifting attitudes toward art in the region reflects a gradual transformation in what Raymond Williams (2006) might call the "structure of feeling" [34] among local communities, suggesting the emergence of alternative cultural imaginaries that transcend rigid religious interpretations.

The pedagogical dimension of Keeta's practice -- her emphasis on using art to "educate society about the similarities between differing cultures" -- demonstrates what Paulo Freire (1970) would recognize as a practice of "cultural action for freedom". [35] This is particularly significant given the geopolitical context, where art becomes what Nato Thompson (2018) terms "seeing power" - a means of making visible alternative narratives that challenge both state and insurgent discourses. [36] The intergenerational impact Keeta notes, with younger artists gaining recognition beyond the region, suggests what Arjun Appadurai (2013) might characterize as the development of new "cultural flows" that bypass traditional centers of artistic legitimacy. [37] Through this multilayered practice encompassing creation, curation, and community-building, Keeta articulates what might be termed a "poetics of everyday resilience" -- one that transforms aesthetic production into what James C. Scott (2012) would call an "infra-political" tool of subtle resistance. [38] Her work ultimately constructs what Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) might describe as a "relational aesthetics" of coexistence [39], where artistic practice becomes both testimony to present struggles and speculative blueprint for alternative futures in Thailand's contested southern borderlands.

4. Subverting Stereotypes: Muslim Women as Agents, Not Victims

Through their art, the *Muslimah* collective confronts and subverts dominant representations of Muslim women in Thai society. Their works directly engage with the prejudice they face, especially when traveling outside their home provinces.

Kufosiyah Nibuesa's artistic practice emerges as a compelling case study in the intersection of aesthetic production, identity politics, and postcolonial representation in Thailand's contested southern borderlands. Her works *Border Peace* and *Lifestyle in Transition* articulate what Homi K. Bhabha (2011) might term a "narrative of counter-globalization" [40] -- one that simultaneously engages with Western artistic traditions while remaining firmly rooted in local epistemologies. The artist's bas-relief technique, employing locally-sourced recycled papers folded into intricate three-dimensional forms, enacts what Tim Ingold (2007) describes as a

“textility of making” [41], where the very materiality of the work embodies the social fabric of Pattani’s communities.

Kufosiyah’s meticulous documentation of quotidian scenes -- the vegetable vendor, the elderly woman in a rickshaw -- constitutes what Michel de Certeau (1984) would recognize as a “practice of everyday life” [42], challenging the spectacularized violence that dominates media representations of the Deep South. Her artistic methodology recalls Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) concept of “grassroots globalization” [43], where the painstaking accumulation of material details serves to reconstruct what Edward W. Said (2009) might call an “imaginative geography” [44] of Pattani that resists both orientalist and nationalist narratives. The artist’s personal encounters with prejudice in Bangkok - being treated as a potential terrorist -- reveal what Sara Ahmed (2004) terms the “stickiness” of racialized affect [45], where bodies become inscribed with pre-existing narratives of threat and suspicion.

The structural complexity of Kufosiyah’s bas-relief technique merits particular attention. By literally folding two-dimensional surfaces into three-dimensional forms, the artist performs what Gilles Deleuze (1995) might describe as a “deterritorialization” of conventional artistic media. [46] This formal innovation mirrors the conceptual work of her practice - transforming flat stereotypes into nuanced, embodied representations. Kufosiyah’s observational acuity enables what Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) would call a “right to look” -- the power to determine how her community is represented visually. [47]

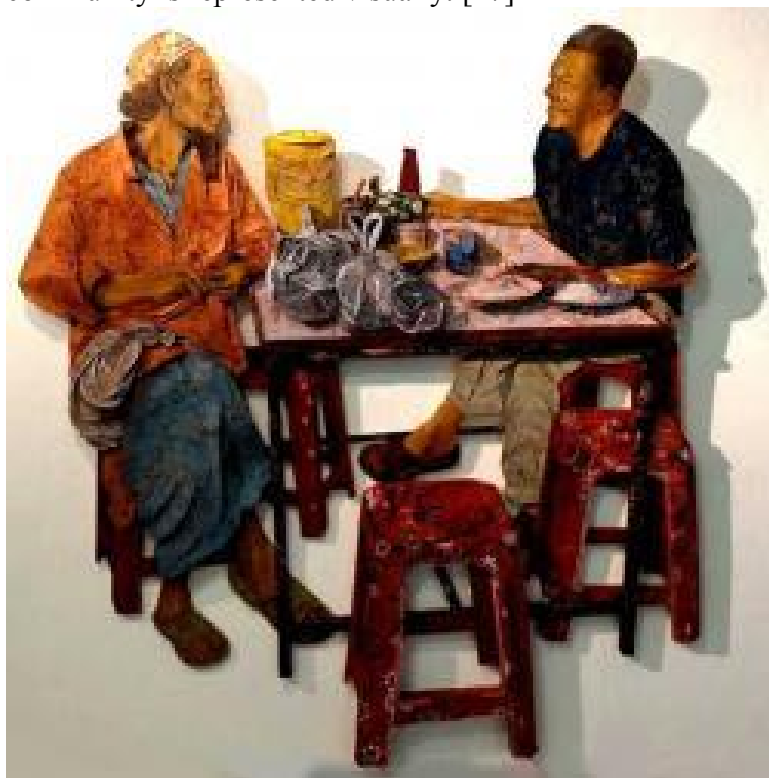


Figure 4. *A Conversation in Pattani* by Kufosiyah Nibuesa, Bangkok Art Biennale (October, 2018 - February, 2019)

Website Link: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1568302/peace-of-art>

Kufosiyah’s transnational aspirations - her desire to exhibit abroad while pursuing graduate studies -- suggest an awareness of what Nestor García Canclini (2006) terms “hybrid cultures”, where local traditions engage in dialogic exchange with global artistic discourses. [48] This positioning resists both parochial isolation and uncritical assimilation, instead articulating what

might be called a “critical regionalism” in contemporary Southeast Asian art. The recycled materials in her work perform double duty: materially, they reference environmental sustainability; symbolically, they represent what Ann Laura Stoler (2016) calls “imperial debris” - the remains of colonial and postcolonial histories that artists must work through and reconfigure. [49]

Ultimately, Kufosiyah’s practice constitutes what Ariella Azoulay (2008) terms a “civil imagination” - using aesthetic means to renegotiate the terms of citizenship and belonging [50], just like what Arichama Pakapet did in her *Truth of Life* (2017).

Her works also create what Rancière (2010) would call a “redistribution of the sensible” [51], making visible the ordinary lives that official narratives of conflict render invisible, just as Keeta Isran’s works.

In this sense, her artistic journey - from Pattani to Bangkok and potentially beyond -- mirrors the conceptual trajectory of her work: folding local particularities into global conversations, while maintaining what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) might term the “texture” of situated knowledge. [52] The “long road ahead” that Kufosiyah references becomes not just a personal artistic journey, but a metaphor for the difficult work of cultural translation in postcolonial contexts.

Nuriya Waji’s artistic practice constitutes a profound engagement with the phenomenology of emotional experience and the politics of representation in Thailand’s contested southern borderlands. Her batik works, which document fluctuating affective states through diurnal variations in technique and palette, exemplify again what Sara Ahmed (2004) terms “affective economies” [53], share the “common function” with the artworks of Arichama Pakapet and Heedayah Mahavi.

The artist’s methodological approach of using her own body as primary subject, recalls Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity [54] too, wherein the repeated artistic inscription of self becomes an act of both personal expression and political signification.



Figure 5. The Life of Daeya Doloh by Nuriya Waji, Bangkok Art Biennale (October, 2018 - February, 2019)

Website Link: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1568302/peace-of-art>

The technical challenges Waji describes in controlling watercolor flow and brushstroke intensity reveal what Tim Ingold would characterize as a “dwelling perspective” on artistic practice - where mastery emerges through sustained, embodied engagement with materials rather than abstract technical knowledge. This material praxis takes on added significance when considered alongside her cross-cultural upbringing in Pattani, where daily interactions with Buddhist neighbors created what Homi K. Bhabha might term a “third space” of intercultural negotiation. [55] Waji’s observation about asymmetrical cultural knowledge -- that Muslim residents understood Buddhist traditions more thoroughly than vice versa -- illustrates what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) identifies as the epistemic violence inherent in colonial and postcolonial power structures. [56]

Waji’s transnational educational trajectory, from Pattani to Bangkok with aspirations toward Japanese and European galleries, also enacts what Arjun Appadurai (2013) describes as the “global cultural flows” [57] that characterize contemporary artistic production, which echoes Keeta Isran’s artistic experiment.

However, her work resists homogenizing globalization through its steadfast engagement with traditional batik techniques - a strategic essentialism that recalls Stuart Hall’s (2017) conceptualization of cultural identity as both “being” and “becoming”. [58] The artist’s rhetorical question - “Just how much does our society understand the Thai Muslim woman?” - exposes what Michel Foucault would identify as the regimes of knowledge/power that construct minority subjectivities within nationalist discourses.

Her vision of interfaith friendship as cultural pedagogy aligns with Paulo Freire’s (2005) model of dialogic education [59], where reciprocal learning becomes an antidote to what Edward Said

analyzed as orientalist constructions of Islamic cultures. The batik medium itself, with its wax-resist process of layered coloration, serves as an apt metaphor for Waji's conceptual framework - where cultural preservation and transformation occur simultaneously through a process of selective permeability. In this sense, her artistic practice performs what Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) terms "relational aesthetics" [60] creating spaces for intercultural encounter that challenge the sectarian divisions plaguing Thailand's Deep South, similar with Keeta Isran's artistic practice.

5. Conclusion: Art as Peacebuilding - Healing through Creativity

More than resistance, the *Muslimah* collective views their work as a form of healing. Keeta Isran likens it to "planting flowers in a war zone" -- a poignant metaphor for creating beauty and hope amid uncertainty. As part of the 2018 - 2019 Bangkok Art Biennale, their exhibition titled *Hope And Courage Human Compassion Love And Values Of Beauty In The Way Of Life* embodied this ethos [61] (Bangkok Post, 2019). The collective's message was deliberately universal, appealing to shared values and emotions.

Their focus on feminine aesthetics -- stitched cloth, woven nets, delicate etchings -- offers a quiet but powerful counter-narrative to the masculine-coded violence that dominates news about the Deep South. By centering women's experiences and creating artworks that resonate emotionally and culturally, the collective contributes to a grassroots form of peacebuilding.

Their community initiatives, particularly the De' Lapae Contemporary Art Space in Narathiwat, co-founded by Keeta and fellow artist Prach Pimarnman, function as incubators for young talent and intercommunal dialogue. By offering workshops, exhibitions, and open studios, De' Lapae becomes a sanctuary of creativity that resists the fear and fragmentation bred by conflict [62] (Bangkok Post, 2019).

The *Muslimah* collective exemplifies how contemporary art can serve as a transformative medium in contexts of conflict and marginalization. By grounding their work in local materials, articulating complex emotional and cultural experiences, and reclaiming visual narratives, these Muslim women artists resist both the violence of insurgency and the violence of misrepresentation. Their art bridges personal pain and collective memory, offering viewers not only a glimpse into life in the Deep South, but also a hopeful vision for the future.

Through their exhibitions in Bangkok and beyond, the *Muslimah* artists challenge audiences to move beyond simplistic binaries of victim/terrorist, peaceful/violent, Muslim/Buddhist. They instead offer textured portrayals of humanity, creativity, and coexistence. Future studies might expand on the role of such grassroots art movements in shaping national reconciliation and interfaith understanding. What is clear, however, is that these women have already succeeded in planting seeds -- of beauty, resistance, and hope -- where few had thought to look.

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