

q/a

Love and

A Conversation with Anne Samat

by Jan Garden Castro



Anne Samat creates brilliantly colorful totemic sculptures using humble everyday materials. Deeply informed by Malaysian culture, her work combines traditional Pua Kumbu weaving, which she studied at the Mara Institute of Technology in Malaysia, with familiar objects taken from modern life such as gardening and kitchen utensils, plastic ornaments, and hardware. The concept of love is central to her practice, as emphasized by the title of her recent University of Wyoming Art Museum exhibition “Weavings of Love.” Each sculpture is imbued with memories of and feelings for a friend or family member. When viewed together, the anthropomorphism of her abstracted forms becomes clear. Though individual and personal, Samat’s avatars can take on new identities for viewers, allowing us to get closer to each other and the true meanings of love.

Spirits:



Installation view
of "Anne Samat:
Weavings of
Love," University
of Wyoming Art
Museum, Laramie,
2022.



THIS PAGE:
*I Love You for the
Wrong Reasons #1,*
2021.

Rattan sticks, kitchen
and garden utensils,
beads, ceramic, metal,
and plastic ornaments,
98 x 42 x 8 in.

OPPOSITE:
Hypocrite,
2018.

Patterned drafted
weaving, rattan sticks,
washers, decorative
ornaments, household
items, kitchen utensils,
and wooden beads,
74.4 x 60.6 in.

Jan Garden Castro: You commemorated your brother, who died of Covid, along with other people who died in the pandemic, by putting their names on dog tags and weaving them into the works in your 2021 exhibition at Marc Straus Gallery. How did you find the names?

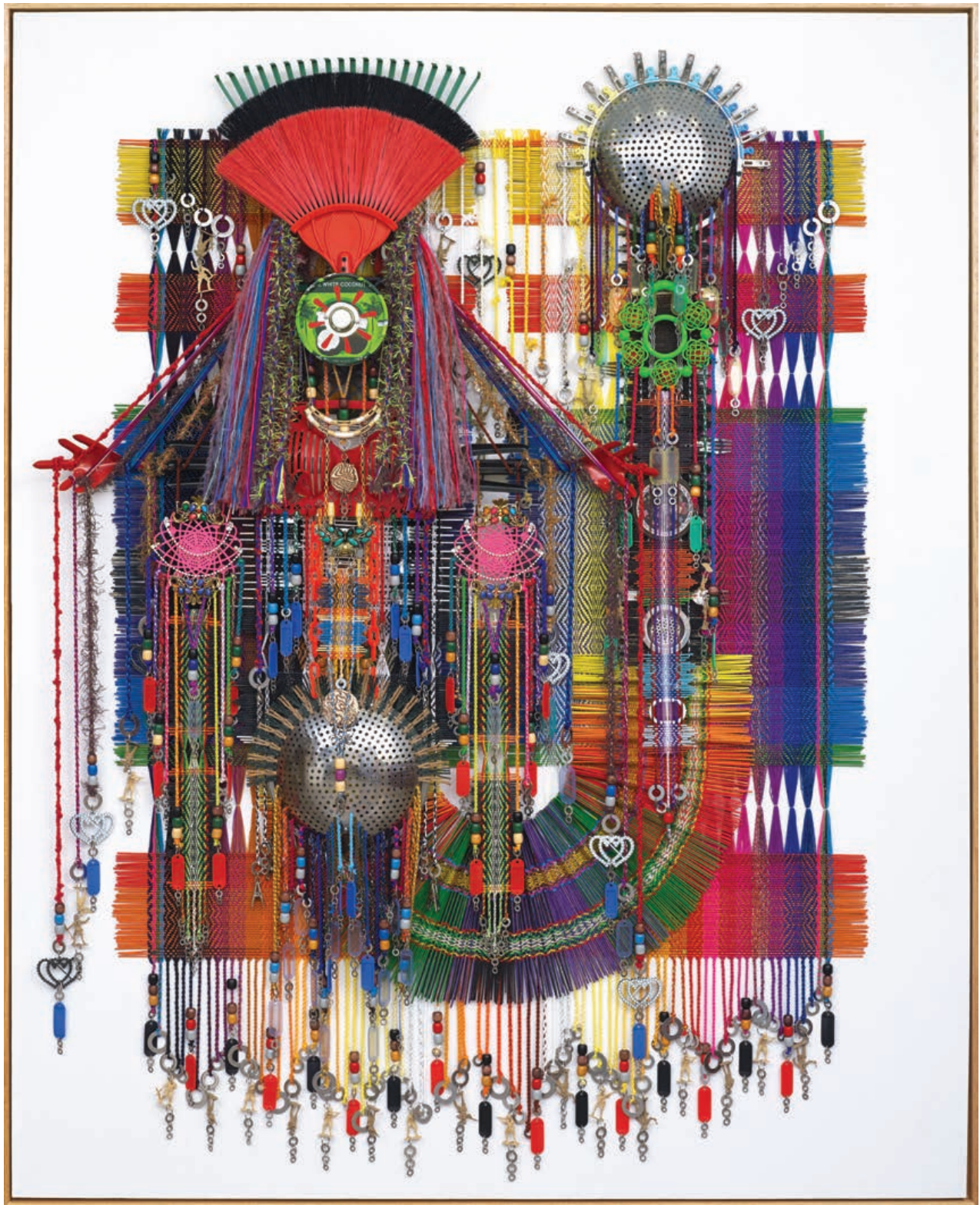
Anne Samat: I searched records on the Internet. When my baby brother was very sick, he told me to pursue my dreams—especially to live in New York. We were really close, and he knew that I wanted to stay after my 2019 residency in upstate New York. When he became ill, I returned to Kuala Lumpur and put my career second, but I made a promise to him to pursue it.

JGC: Your intricately woven sculptures include many unusual found materials—toy soldiers, baskets, mandalas, heart and flower jewelry, beads, masks, rakes, chains of all sorts, belts, yarn, twine, and odd round things that are difficult to identify. Do any of these elements contain particular meaning for you?

AS: The round things are mosquito burner containers. You light a coil inside, and the smoke chases away the mosquitos. It's rare to find these objects in the city. I remember them from when I was younger in the village. When I was eight and visited my grandparents, it was my duty to burn the coil. We lived in beautiful Malacca (in southwestern Malaysia), in a wooden house surrounded by rubber trees; there were a lot of mosquitoes. In a way, these objects bring back humble, sweet memories of my childhood.

JGC: Memories seem central to your work. Your symbolism can be read many ways. *No Place for Beginners or Sensitive Heart #1* (2020), for example, features an adult and a baby with wings. The way that you position rakes and swords can make them into headdresses or wings for your figures. In this work, the adult has a stunning peacock headdress, and the baby has turquoise jewelry on its wings.

AS: The title is pretty obvious. When I put together my work, I always deal with gender, so with this piece, there is a man looking after a little girl. In the peacock world, the males are the most beautiful. This symbolizes my father, who was a good-looking man, watching after me. He is spreading his wings or hands, saying, "I am protecting you."



I was very close to my father. When he was young, he worked hard as a security guard to put food on the table for 10 children, himself, and my mother. The only time I had with him was over the weekends. My father loved cars. By that time, he had an old red Ford Cortina Mark 1. He would be busy fixing the engine, and I would clean up the interior. We bonded because of that, and I produced this piece to immortalize my memory of him. I am half Malay, half Chinese. My father is from Baba Nyonya (also known as Straits-born or Peranakan or of noble descent). His great-grandfather was from Mainland China, and he was the second generation of Chinese Malay in Malacca. I think he was in a bikers' group when he saw my mom running a little store by the side of the beach. He pursued her, and they clicked straight away. They were happily married. I love that even though we were poor, I never heard them fighting. We were rich in terms of love. Love is the legacy and foundation of my life and work. Love and spirits are the basis and core of my work.

JGC: *Eyes Are Like Angels but Heart is Cold #1 (2021) represents your mom. Were you equally close with her?*

AS: The title comes from the fact that when I was

“My work is always a personal tribute to a particular person that other people can relate to someone they love.”

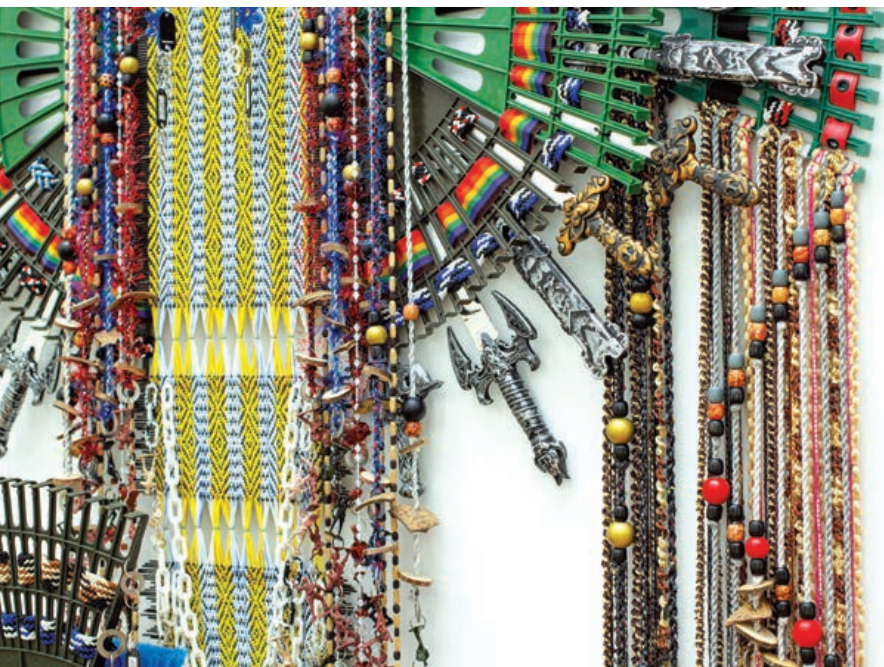
young, my mother was very strict—no bullshit—the opposite of my father. In 1997, I won a young contemporary artist award from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, the highest honor an emerging artist can earn. Then, my father died of a heart attack in 1998, at the age of 54. I was in my early 20s. I felt lost, and I moved to England. For 10 years, from about 2000 to 2010, I was a Formula 1 model in England—one of the girls standing next to the racing cars. Deep inside, I felt unhappy. I also did two or three art shows in London during that time. I had two careers and a partner, but something was missing. Every six months over that 10-year period, I'd spend time with my mom. The more I spent time with her, the more I fell in love with her all over again. She had to look after 10 kids; she had no time to show her feelings—that explains the title. I had originally thought “eyes are like angels but heart is cold” described her, but I had a second chance to get to know her as a sweet, beautiful woman, with the largest heart in the world. Now, I understand the responsibilities on her shoulders, especially after my dad died.

JGC: *Could you explain the color symbolism? Are you the little child at her feet?*

AS: Yes, I am. My work is always a personal tribute to a particular person that other people can relate to someone they love. Red is my favorite color, and my mother's. Green is the color of growth. Hopefully, every day we learn, and we will grow organically together and appreciate the journey with open hearts. The journey will make us stronger as a family.

JGC: *What kind of formal training did you have, and how did you learn Pua Kumbu weaving?*

AS: It's funny because when I was in high school, I was in the science stream. I studied additional mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. Back then, the government selected all smart students for that path. I was one, but deep inside, from age six, I loved art. After





THIS PAGE AND
OPPOSITE:
***No Place for Beginners
or Sensitive Heart #2,
2021.***
Rattan sticks, kitchen and
garden utensils, beads,
ceramic, metal, and
plastic ornaments,
113 x 79 x 5 in.



THIS PAGE,
FROM LEFT:
Daughter (weave through eternity) #2,
2022.

Rattan sticks, kitchen
and garden utensils,
beads, ceramic, metal,
and plastic ornaments,
54 x 28 x 4 in.

Mother (weave through eternity) #1,
2022.

Rattan sticks,
wooden and plastic
ornaments, metal,
beads, and washers,
70 x 38 x 5 in.





THIS PAGE,
FROM LEFT:
*Daughter (weave
through eternity) #1,*
2022.

Rattan sticks, wooden
and plastic ornaments,
metal, beads, and
washers,
54 x 25 x 4 in.

*Mother
(weave through
eternity) #2,*
2022.

Rattan sticks, kitchen and
garden utensils, beads,
ceramic, metal, and
plastic ornaments,
77 x 42 x 5 in.





completing high school, I had two choices: to pursue science or switch to art and design. This was an important moment in my life. My family didn't want me to pursue an art career: "You want to be an artist? What is that? Will it put food on your table?" You know what happened? The night before I submitted the form choosing the option I wanted to take, my father came back from work. He came to my room and told me, "Follow your heart." I used that as the title of my exhibition at the Asia Society Triennial in 2020 to pay tribute to him.

The first year that I was in art school, I had to learn everything. The second year, we got to pick our department—fine art, textile design, fashion design, ceramics, graphics. I decided to venture into the textile department, even though by that time, most people were choosing or pushing me toward fine art. Again, my lecturers questioned me. I said, "There are enough good students in fine art."

In the textile department, I found that I was pretty strong with color and color combinations. But when I looked at the loom for the first time, I said, "What the heck is that?" I had zero knowledge of weaving. After deciding on textiles, I had to choose a major—fiber textile, batik, or silkscreen printing. I did a little batik in high school and thought silkscreen printing quite interesting, but I wanted to challenge myself to try something that I didn't know anything about. That's why I took weaving. I learned how to "dress up" the loom and the pattern drafting process. I wanted a motif to refer to. My housemate, who was from Sarawak in Borneo, on other side of the island, suggested Pua Kumbu. He gave me a pencil box with that motif on top. I was willing to do further research about Iban, the largest ethnic group in Borneo. They use Pua Kumbu.

We are talking about two things here. I had zero knowledge of weaving and zero knowledge of my chosen motif. I said to myself that the best thing was that I knew nothing about it. I thought it would be a pleasure for me to get to know it, to engage with the loom, to engage with the motif, and to start a long relationship. And it has continued from that time up to now. No regrets. The only thing is that I adapt that style of weaving and make it more contemporary by adding unconventional materials into my work. I mix modern materials—all these mundane everyday objects—with old-fashioned



OPPOSITE:
Every Man For Himself,
2018.

Patterned drafted weaving, rattan sticks, washers, decorative ornaments, household items, kitchen utensils, and wooden beads, 74.4 x 60.6 in.

THIS PAGE:
Anne Samat at the
University of Wyoming
Art Museum, 2022.

weaving, marrying the old and the new. By putting them together, I'm trying to elevate the status of weaving to the highest level. That is my trademark.

JGC: When did the pieces begin to stand on their own? A few of the smaller ones have feet—even toenails made of bolts and other materials. How do you construct them?

AS: I always begin making them on the floor. I don't know how big each piece will get. Along the way, the work starts to speak to me: "Hey, Anne, it's time to put me on the wall so you can see the actual size." When I'm about half-way through, I do the finishing with the work on the wall.

JGC: Do you do everything by yourself?

AS: In the past, yes. For my 2021 show at Marc Straus,

which included about 10 pieces, I invented a new technique—a combination of beads, plastic bobbins, name tags, and a real coconut shell. My niece Erin helped me put everything together in a long string. She and my brother-in-law are my elves.

JGC: What was your 2019 residency in Peekskill like?

AS: Working in New York was beyond my wildest dreams. In December 2018, Richard Koh of Richard Koh Fine Art, based in Kuala Lumpur, asked me if I had a visa for America. When I said no, he replied, “You’d better apply because you’re going to do a residency in Peekskill, New York.” I had no idea where Peekskill was. I applied for and got an American visa and arrived in February 2019. Frankly speaking, I’m an Asian girl, and Peekskill was too cold for me. I was sick for the first two weeks with a high fever. The last 10 weeks, I worked like hell to create a solo show. The final week, for the first time, I got to walk along the Hudson River. I fell in love with the place. I told myself and told Marc and Livia Straus, “In the future, somewhere, somehow, if I have the opportunity, I want to come back here.”

Then my brother got sick, and I was back in Malaysia. That’s when he said, “You didn’t have much time in Peekskill. One day when everything is fine, go and chase your dream in New York. Give that chance to yourself. If you don’t like it, you can always go back to Malaysia.” That’s why I love the artist lofts and the Peekskill community.

JGC: Could you talk about *I won’t go speechless*, a title that you ended up not using? How hard is it for people to speak up when they live in countries where there is censorship?

AS: Unfortunately, a lot of things in my country are taboo and never discussed. I believe in freedom of speech, but Malaysia is an Islamic country, and I am Muslim myself. It is not a light thing. I could be banned from my country. In many countries, certain issues are not discussed. I went through many trials and tribulations to be in the United States, in New York. My dream is to make it happen. My exhibitions here have been about being wide awake and unafraid. ■■■

Anne Samat’s work is currently featured in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kerala, India, through April 10, 2023. Her solo show at MASS MoCA opens later this year.

Installation view of
“Follow Your Heart
Wholeheartedly,” the Asia
Society, New York, 2020.



“ I mix modern materials— all these mundane everyday objects— with old-fashioned weaving, marrying the old and the new. ”

