

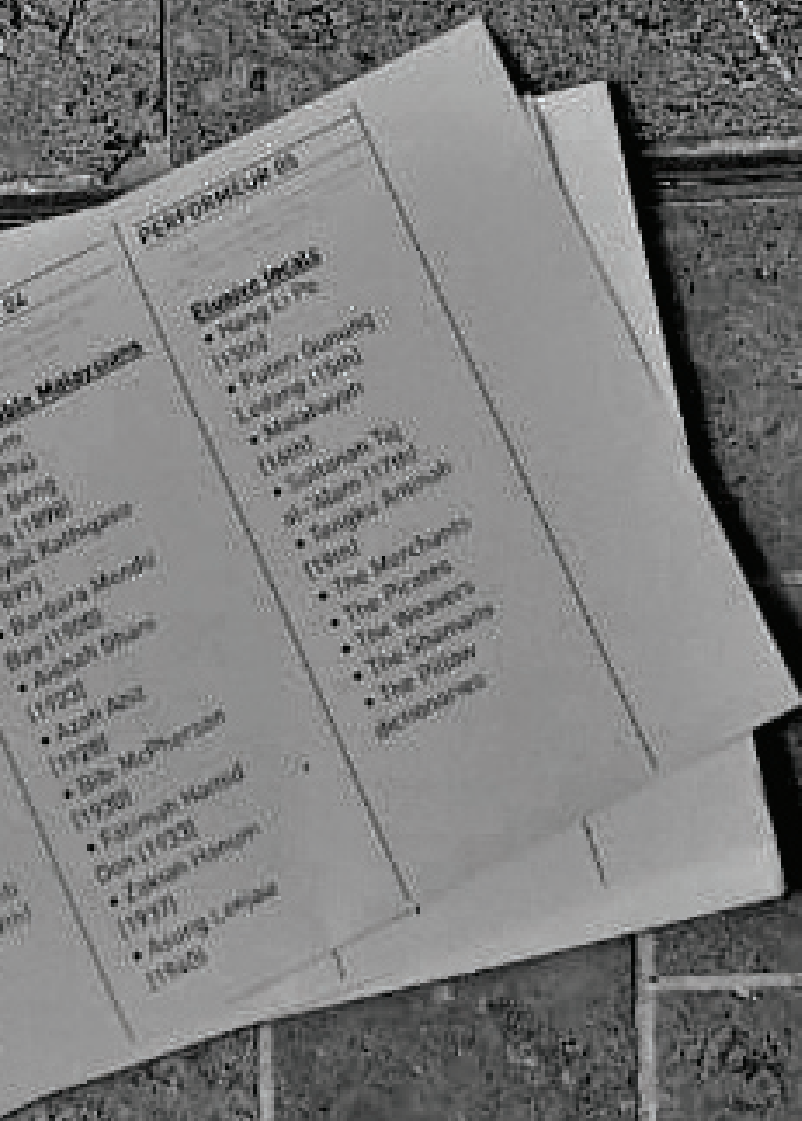
The 'Éclipsées' residency

3 Steps:

Upfront research into local memory with historians

On-site performance in an iconic public space

Public sharing through talks, press, and optional art show



Zoé Vayssières
15 days residency at the invitation of
the French Embassy in Kuala Lumpur

#1 archives

Upfront research into local memory with historians

The first step was to delve into local memory by engaging in teamwork with local historians and librarians. Together, we uncovered the names of 30 Malaysian women — a list made possible thanks to the research and support of Serge Jardin (historian), the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFE0), the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Malaya (Kuala Lumpur), and the Sarawak State Library.

Singular Malaysian women (from the 15th)

Tun Kudu (15th century)
Tun Fatimah (16th century)
Tok Temong (16th century)
Cik Siti Wan Kembang (17th century)
Puteri Saadong (17th century)
Tengku Tengah (18th century)
Mahsuri, binti Pandak Mayah (19th century)
Wan Fatimah binti Datuk Kayang (19th century)
Datu Menteri Babu (19th century)
Che Mida (19th century)

Remarkable Malaysian women (20th century)

Soo Kim Lan (1894)
Lim Beng Hong (1898)
Sybil Kathigasu (1899)
Barbara Mendu Bay (1900)
Aishah Ghani (1923)
Azah Aziz (1928)
Bibi McPherson (1930)
Fatimah Hamid Don (1933)
Zakiah Hanum (1937)
Asung Lenjau (~ 1940)
Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam (1941)

The elusive

Legendary Malaysians and around
Hang Li Po (15th century)
Puteri Gunung Ledang (15th century)
Malahayati (16th century)
Sultanah Taj al-'Alam (17th century)
Tengku Aminah (19th century)
Untraceable Malaysian Women (The Nameless)
Merchants
Pirates
Weavers
Shamans
and Pillow dictionaries: names given to local women whom the colonist used to learn the language pleasantly and quickly, but whom he did not marry. Let us quote Dayang Mastiah binti Abang Aing: mother of Isaac Brooke (born 1867), eldest son of Charles Brooke, second White Rajah.

To highlight a few stories:

Tun Fatimah (16th century, Melaka region) stands out for her role as Queen Consort of Malacca. It is said that the Portuguese feared the queen more than her sultan husband. After her father and husband were killed, Sultan Mahmud Shah forced her to become his fifth wife — against her will. She famously refused to smile, choosing instead to undergo three abortions before securing the promise that her next son would become Sultan.

Aishah Ghani (1923, Selangor region) became Malaysia's first female senator around 1962. We listed all the firsts: lawyer, doctor, faculty dean, director of the National Archives...

Let's also mention Sybil Kathigasu (1899), often called the Florence Nightingale of Malaysia — an extraordinarily courageous nurse who resisted during the Japanese occupation. She remains the only known Malaysian to have received the George Medal for Gallantry.

In this area, it was stunning to discover Sultanah Taj al-'Alam (17th century). In the region of Aceh, female rulers were relatively common. The sultanate was governed by four sultanahs between 1641 and 1699 — and before that, in the 13th and 14th centuries, by three Muslim women. Apparently, these queens never took part in combat: female leadership did not mean female warriors — quite the opposite. Their reigns marked a shift from military campaigns to intense diplomatic negotiations, as evidenced by several Dutch records.

And most importantly: the untraceable Malaysian women who upheld culture without ever being named — merchants, pirates, weavers, shamans, and the creators of "pillow dictionaries."

Installed in the show: a 6-meter-high copper plate engraved with 100 names, including 30 Malaysians.



#2

performance

On-site performance in an iconic public space

Thanks to the Honorable Dato' Seri Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Mayor of Kuala Lumpur, and the French Ambassador H.E. Mr. Axel Cruau, we were able to perform on the iconic Merdeka Square in Kuala Lumpur. On April 23, 2025, at 3:30 PM, today's women — embodied by 10 performers — inscribed the names of 100 forgotten women, including 30 Malaysians, simply with chalk on the ground. The aim is to engage passers-by along their daily path, inviting memory to awaken as they read the names of women eclipsed from collective history. An ephemeral gesture: these vanished names would be read once more before rain and footsteps gradually erased them. Thus, the artist makes the public the guardians of these names.





“Traces, imprints, silences, and erasures: a poetic and political attempt to restore voice, visibility, and dignity to those whom history has left aside. It was a great pleasure to host a performance in Kuala Lumpur that inscribed these voices into the urban space — so they might echo a little more deeply in our collective consciousness.” The Ambassador of France to Malaysia HE Mr Axel Cruau

Traces, empreintes, silences et effacements : une tentative poétique et politique de redonner une voix, une visibilité à celles que l'histoire a laissées de côté. Ce fut un immense plaisir d'accueillir une performance à Kuala Lumpur qui est venue inscrire ces voix dans l'espace urbain, afin qu'elles résonnent davantage dans nos consciences.

Performance performed at
Merdeka Square (Kuala Lumpur)
on April 23, 2025, at 3:30.

Artist: Zoé Vayssières
With heartfelt thanks to the performers:
Anaïs, Calie, Eva, Julia, Lucie, Maria, Mira,
Noémie, Noor and the security team.
And to the facilitators: Thierry D'Anna,
Dominique Husken-Ulbrich, Hisham Bin
Ibrahim Khairul Anuar, Lylia Archane,
and the team at Alliance Française KL.

>> Watch the performance here:
<https://zoevayssieres.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ZOE-Performance-KL-april2025.mp4>

>> Watch the artist interview here:
https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKD_iuolJzB/?igsh=YXZxdzZ4eTg00Dd6
or here <https://zoevayssieres.com/press/>

#3

Public sharing through talks, press, and optional art show

sharing

The 'Éclipsées' by Zoé / April 2025

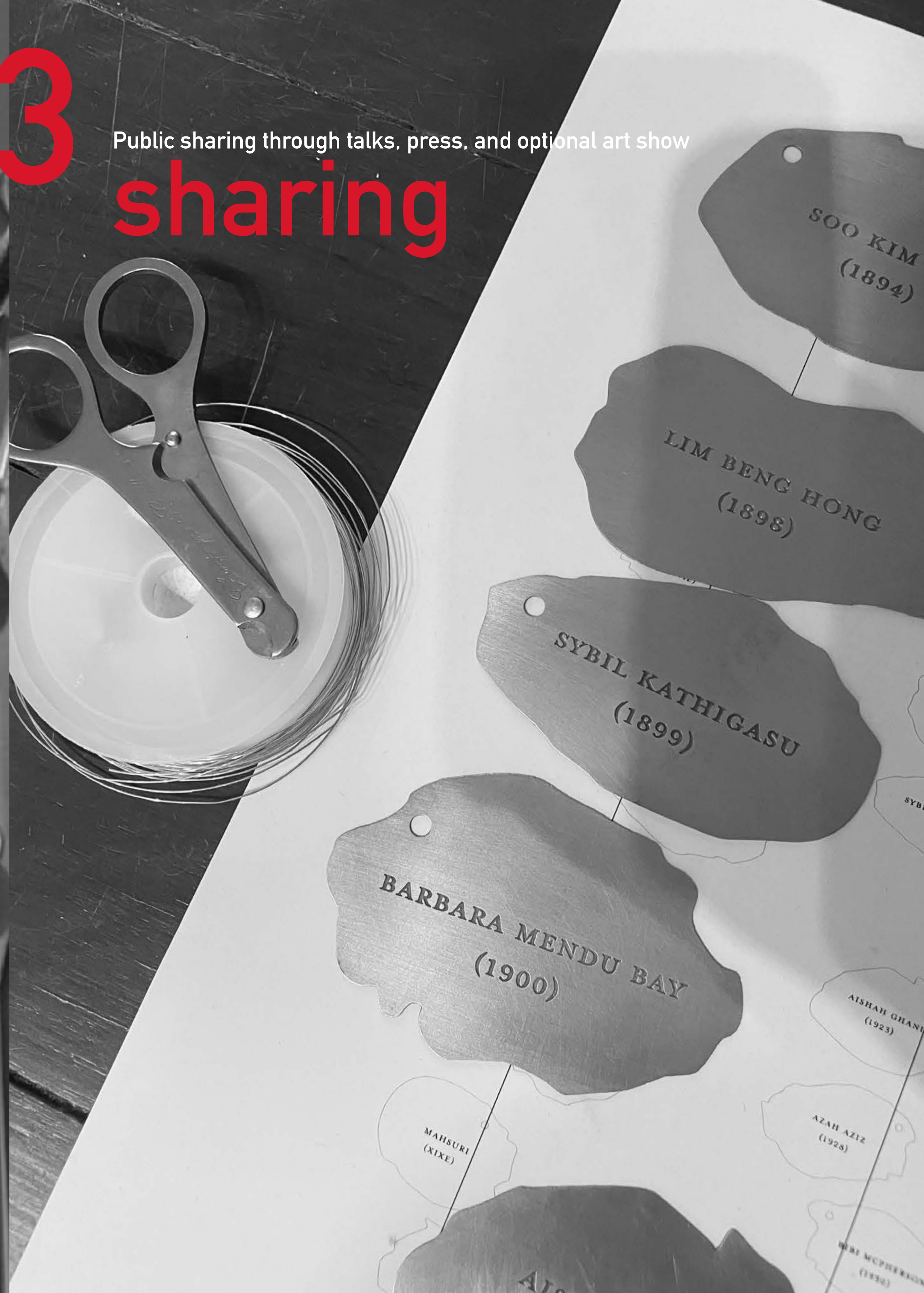
Welcoming Zoé Vayssières for a residency in Kuala Lumpur was an artistic, human, and deeply moving experience. From the very first exchanges, we were struck by the poetic strength and deep commitment behind her project 'Les Éclipsées'. This work, both delicate and powerful, gives voice to women too often forgotten by history. Its adaptation to the Malaysian context, through the integration of local female figures, gave her approach a particularly resonant meaning here in Malaysia.

The exhibition at the Alliance Française of Kuala Lumpur created a space for reflection and quiet contemplation. We witnessed visitors slow down, read, listen, question. There was a silent power in those red ropes, in the names engraved on the large suspended copper sculpture, and in the act of remembrance that Zoé offered. But perhaps the most striking moment was the urban performance at Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square), carried out with students from the French School of Kuala Lumpur: a suspended moment — simple and powerful. Writing those women's names in chalk on a ground steeped in history, beneath a sky heavy with rain. It was beautiful, fragile, and deeply meaningful. Seeing the students make the gesture their own, with such focus and emotion, was profoundly moving.

Beyond the exhibition and the performance, the school visits, the conversations with students, and Zoé's ability to share her approach with generosity and clarity also deserve recognition. This residency opened a true dialogue between art, memory, education, and society. It will leave a lasting mark on our programming — and in our memories. ■■

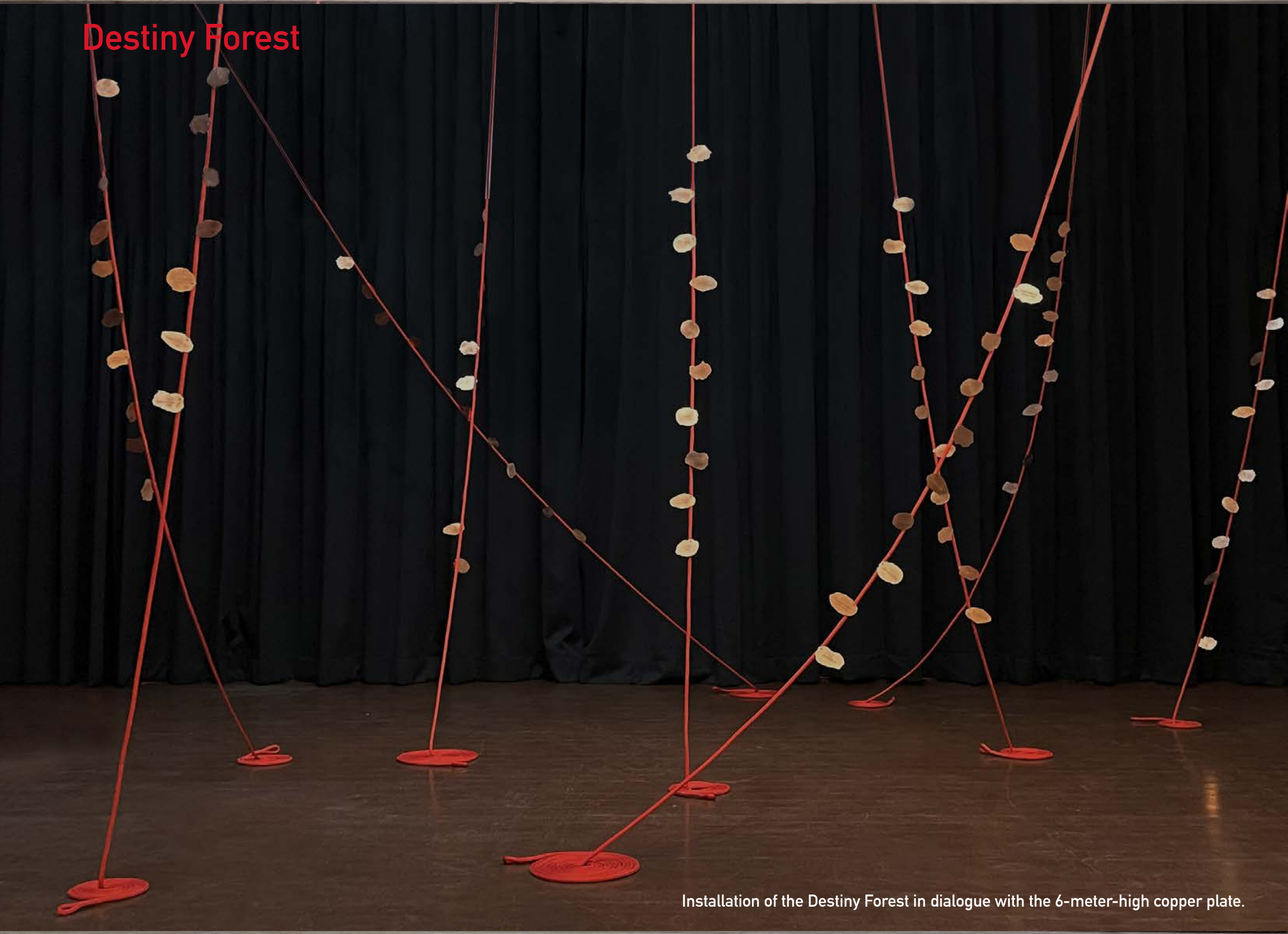
Thierry d'Anna / Counsellor for Cooperation and Cultural Affairs

Hours of stitching with copper wire to install Destiny Forest



Ten red ropes stretch from floor to ceiling, like creepers in a forest or lines of fate. Dotted along these red threads are copper plates — the result of hours of stitching with copper wire to attach all 100 plates — on which the names of 100 women are engraved. Each rope corresponds to a theme: adventurers, authors, composers, scientists, doctors, artists — with three ropes dedicated to Malaysian women. Singular Malaysian women from the 15th century. Remarkable Malaysian women from the 20th century — each a pioneer in her field: the first doctor, the first senator, the first lawyer, ect. And elusive figures — the legendary, like Hang Li Po or Puteri Gunung Ledang. These sequences of women intersect like a network.

Destiny Forest



(1706) / LAURA BASSI (1711) / SOPHIA

ADA LOVELACE (1815) / SOFIA KOVA

MILEVA MARIC-EINSTEIN (1875) / LI

EMMY NOETHER (1882) / MARY K

MALAISIENNES SINGULIÈRES // TUN KUD

(XVIE) / TOK TEMONG (XVIE) / CIK SITI W

PUTERI SAADONG (XVIIIE) / TENGGU

MAHSURI (XIXE) / WAN FATIMAH BINTI D

DATU MENTERI BABU (XIXE) / CH

MALAISIENNES REMARQUABLES // SO

LIM BENG HONG (1898) / SYBIL KA

BARBARA MENDU BAY (1900) / AISH

AZAH AZIZ (1928) / BIBI MCPHERSON (19

DON (1933) / ZAKIAH HANUM (1937

(~ 1940) / NIRMALA DUTT SHANMUG

DES INSAISSABLES // HANG

PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG (XVE) / MA

"I'll never forget writing the names of 10 forgotten adventurers on the stones of Merdeka. In that moment, I was in my own world — calm, imagining their lives and wondering why they were erased. I learned so much... about them, and about our strength as women."

Le souvenir d'avoir écrit sur les dalles de Merdeka les noms de 10 femmes aventurières oubliées restera dans ma mémoire. En écrivant leurs noms j'étais dans ma bulle et j'ai ressenti un calme profond, imaginant leurs vies et leurs exploits et me demandant pourquoi elles avaient été oubliées. J'ai appris tellement de choses qui m'ont montré notre force à nous les femmes. **Julia**

"This performance was a moment to reflect on how these women vanished over time or through discrimination. By writing their names, I brought them back to life — for others, and for myself. I didn't know them before. Now I'll never forget them."

Cette performance était un moment pour réfléchir et comprendre comment ces femmes ont disparu avec le temps ou à cause des discriminations. Pendant ce cours moment, j'ai pu considérer leur histoire et leur importance. En écrivant leur nom je leur ai redonné vie aux yeux des autres. Avant je ne les connaissais pas, maintenant je ne peux plus les oublier. **Noémie**

"Just by writing names on the ground, I saw how many extraordinary women have been hidden in men's shadow. I only knew four out of the hundred. Now I carry some of their names with pride — and I'll help others discover them too."

Je me suis rendue compte en écrivant tout simplement des noms de femmes sur le sol le nombre de femmes extraordinaires qui ont été cachées par l'ombre des hommes. J'ai été surprise de ne connaître que 4 noms parmi la centaine que nous avons écrit. Après avoir fait cette performance, je suis prête à porter plusieurs prénoms de ces femmes qui méritent autant de reconnaissance que celles des hommes, et faire de mon mieux pour que d'autres personnes les découvrent. **Maria**

Amazing team from the Lycée Français of Kuala Lumpur: The performers — Anaïs, Calie, Eva, Julia, Lucie, Maria, Mira, Noémie, and Noor — and the other students who ensured security, all guided by their teacher.

"Discovering Zoé Vayssières' work, the names — some familiar — illuminated my thoughts as a woman, a mother, and a teacher. I immediately wanted my students to access these stories that shape History. My tenth-grade students were genuinely intrigued by the performance. Even some typically restless boys told me the topic resonated with them, echoing their mothers' words. I was deeply moved: personal, familial, educational, and historical threads were all coming together. For the performance, my group of students aged 11 to 16 worked together to inscribe these names onto a historic square. Everything merged — names, the histories of France and Malaysia, centuries and generations. As a teacher, I felt we stepped beyond traditional learning into a space of deeper transmission. Beneath the visible words and gestures, there was the invisible — the unconscious, the bond. We later spent a full day on this work of memory: high schoolers in the morning, middle schoolers in the afternoon. Zoé's stories revealed the persistence of struggle, the strength of these women, and the obstacles they faced. These were no longer just individual lives, but a collective vision. When 60 eighth graders immersed themselves in these past stories, I felt their attention, curiosity, and sensitivity made them part of Les Éclipsées — linked to this chain of transmission."

En découvrant l'œuvre de Zoé Vayssières les noms, parfois familiers, ont ébloui ma pensée de femme, de mère, de professeure. J'ai aussitôt souhaité que mes élèves puissent eux aussi accéder à ces histoires qui font l'Histoire. J'ai vu mes élèves de Seconde intrigués, sincèrement réceptifs aux récits de vie portés par la performance. J'ai félicité certains garçons, d'ordinaire bavards et agités, qui m'ont confié que le sujet les touchait, faisait écho aux paroles de leur mère. Ce moment m'a bouleversée : tous ces fils, personnels, familiaux, scolaires, sociaux, historiques, se rejoignaient. pour la performance, mon groupe, composé de jeunes de 11 à 16 ans, a œuvré collectivement pour inscrire ces noms sur une place historique. Tout se mélangeait : les noms, l'Histoire de France et de Malaisie, les siècles et les générations. En tant qu'enseignante, j'ai senti la transmission prendre une dimension nouvelle. Nous sortions des sentiers classiques de l'apprentissage. J'ai alors pensé qu'au-delà des mots et des gestes visibles, il y avait l'invisible, l'inconscient, le lien. Nous avons ensuite partagé une journée entière autour de ce travail de mémoire et de transmission : les lycéens le matin, les collégiens l'après-midi. Les récits racontés par l'artiste ont mis en lumière la constance des combats, la force et les actions extraordinaires de ces femmes, les obstacles et oppositions auxquelles elles se sont heurtés. Ce n'était plus seulement des histoires individuelles, mais une vision d'ensemble. Puis les quatrièmes (60 élèves) ont écouté, regardé, questionné, se sont immergés dans ces récits du passé, qui résonneront pourtant dans leur avenir. J'ai eu le sentiment que, par leur écoute, leur curiosité et leur sensibilité, ces jeunes eux aussi participaient à l'histoire des Éclipsées, entraînés dans cette chaîne de transmission.

Lylia Archane / professeure de lettres / Literature Teacher

testimonies

BY TAN GIM EAN

Throughout history, many talented and powerful women who made an impact in their time have been overshadowed and forgotten. They should be known and their stories heard, says French artist Zoé Vayssières, who showcases their names through sculptures and performance that also prompt questions about what we choose to remember and why.

Currently on show at Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur (AFKL), *Les Éclipsées* — French for “the eclipsed” — wraps up Vayssières’ two-week artistic residency in Malaysia. It reveals the names of 100 women spanning 43 centuries, among them 30 from the country, engraved on a copper plate. Another piece of work has names strung to red ropes, signifying the strong lines that connect women.

Les Éclipsées, an ongoing series Vayssières started eight years ago, is so called because, like the shadow cast on Earth when the Moon gets in the way of the Sun’s light, eclipsed women have had their contributions or achievements obscured or omitted from records altogether. Driven by her obsession with memory and time, Vayssières brings the overlooked stories of poets, authors, composers, scientists, doctors, artists, photographers, activists and local women to life through her art.

At performances in public spaces, women are invited to trace a list of names of those who came before them in chalk. Kneeling on the streets to do so is akin to unearthing the sediment of memory, she says. But the medium is a reminder of how unrecognised achievements and contributions to society and beyond can easily be distorted or wiped out.

Inscribing names on copper installations is meaningful because the convective material used in telephone lines denotes the idea of communication, she adds. Also, shine a strong light on copper and words on it will “disappear”. But when the light changes, they reappear, like what happens during an eclipse.

Before any residency, Vayssières will approach archivists, historians and librarians to ask, “Who are the important women in your history?” From the traces, imprints and memories she gathers, she then opens new lists that have grown little by little.

For input on Malaysian women from the 15th to 20th centuries on her list, she is grateful to Melaka-based historian Serge Jardin, Daniel Perret of the French School of the Far East, author Heidi Shamsuddin and Salina Zawawi from the Sarawak State Library, among others.

“I am inspired by women. When I do my lists, very often one woman leads to another, who then leads to [the next]. These lines already exist. I think we are just one long thread, and we need to think about the women of before and transmit their stories to those of tomorrow.”

She hopes that talking about the remarkable things those from yesteryear did will inspire people to “open their minds a bit” and realise there are all sorts of ways to achieve what one wants. “The way women think is really different and super interesting.”

The women she has met from digging through archives and the spectrum of what they represent is astounding, not least the many firsts they charted. After an uprising drove Enheduanna (2285-2250 BCE), daughter of Sargon of Akkad and priestess of the Sumerian capital in Mesopotamia (today’s Iraq) out of her homeland, she wrote *Sumerian Temple Hymns*, the oldest text by a known author.

Madeleine Brès (1842-1921), the first French female doctor, faced one obstacle after another in her pursuit of medicine, from legal



From shadow to light

Zoé Vayssières unearths the names and stories of forgotten women in history so they can be known and recognised

barriers to resistance from a faculty dean, needing her omnibus driver husband’s consent to register for a course, and being called “a dubious being, sexless ... a monster”.

Laskarina Bouboulina (1771-1825), a naval commander and owner of a shipping company, raised the Greek flag, which she created herself, up the mast of her warship, *Agamemnon*.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) who, despite chronic depression, wrote classics such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *The Waves*, also left readers this profound quote: “Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer!”

Among the singular Malaysian women on Vayssières’ list is Tun Fatimah (16th century), the first Malay woman to rule her people as a sovereign queen, who reputedly was more feared by the Portuguese than her husband, Sultan Mahmud Shah.

Che Siti Wan Kembang, the legendary warrior queen of Kelantan, fought on horseback with a sword. She never married and abdicated after ruling for 57 years from 1610, passing the mantle to her adopted daughter, Puteri Saadong.

Che Mida, the Perak entrepreneur who owned mines in Salak, may be lesser known than Mahsuri, who cursed Langkawi Island for seven generations before her execution after being wrongly accused of adultery, but one can just imagine these ladies holding their own among men in the 19th century.



Participants writing out the names of overshadowed women at Dataran Merdeka, KL, in a performance that is part of Vayssières’ *Les Éclipsées* exhibition

Press: The Edge Malaysia
april 28, 2025 cultural index



Thirty Malaysian women’s names are among the 100 engraved on Vayssières’ copper plate

Women who made significant imprints more recently include Lim Beng Hong (aka B H Oon, 1898-1979), the first Malayan woman admitted to the English Bar and first female representative in the Federal Legislative Council; war hero Sybil Kathigasu (1899-1948), who fed information to the underground Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army during WWII; Aishah Ghani (1923-2013), the country’s first female senator; and Zakiah Hanum Abdul Hamid (1937-2019), who served as the first female director-general of the National Archives Department and helped set up various museums.

Besides legendary figures such as Hang Li Po and Puteri Gunung Ledang (both from the 15th century), Vayssières has “nameless”, untraceable pirates who sailed from the Strait of Malacca to the coasts of Borneo; merchants who manned market stalls from Kota Bharu to Kota Kinabalu; shamans who passed their knowledge from one generation to the next, and “pillow dictionaries” — local women from whom colonists learnt the language but did not wed.

“Even if it’s legend, if people wrote those stories, there is some truth in them, I’m sure. I think these are very important women too, specifically in Malaysia, [who] carry the knowledge and important values of the country,” the artist says.

Asked why she chooses to focus on women in her work, she says: “I think I do this because I had, like, a duality at home. My mother was a feminist from the May 1968 protests in France, a revolution [centred around] the status of women: They wanted to have bank accounts, go to work, to school and have more freedom.”

Vayssières’ maternal grandmother, on the other hand, was a woman of her time with no bank account, unable to work and had to have her husband sign papers for her. “So, I had these two women and two different cultures. I love them both and think I’ve taken the middle ground, with one leg in each.”

What she grasps with both arms is knowing that “nothing is impossible. What those forgotten women went through, their crazy stories ... I think if all the little girls knew what a woman like paediatrician Brès did in her time, they would say, ‘Well, I can do it too’. It gives you strength, opens your mind and you start thinking everything is possible”.

Les Éclipsées runs until May 9, Mon to Sat
(9am to 5pm daily), at AFKL,
15 Lorong Gurney, KL. Free entry upon RSVP.