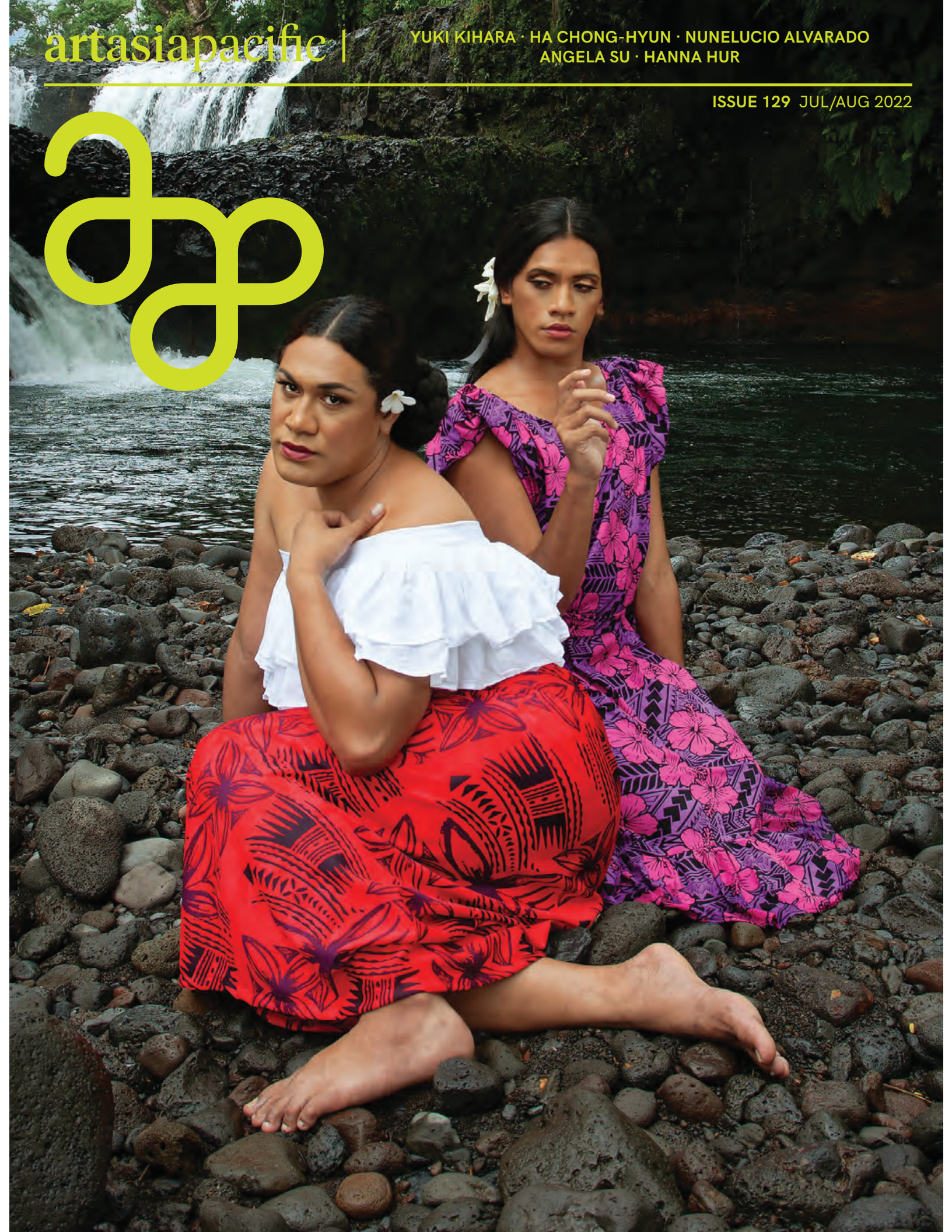


artasiapacific |

YUKI KIHARA · HA CHONG-HYUN · NUNELUCIO ALVARADO
ANGELA SU · HANNA HUR

ISSUE 129 JUL/AUG 2022



Rushdi Anwar on Mulla Sadra Shirazi

The concept of change articulated through the philosophical arguments of the Persian-Iranian philosopher Mulla Sadra Shirazi (c.1571–1640) has greatly shaped my life. He was a Muslim mystic who categorized changes in quantity, quality, place, and position as fundamental to the nature of substance. Sadra states: “In general, every material object, whether it is the material of the stars or the elements, whether soul or body, constantly requires a new identity and its personality and its existence is never fixed.” His philosophy was particularly controversial for his ideas about substance, as, according to the doctrines of Islam, matter cannot change. On this point, Mulla Sadra disagreed with many revered Muslim thinkers and earlier philosophers like Aristotle who advocated that a substance always fundamentally remains the same and is inherently unchangeable. As a consequence of his unorthodox views, Sadra lived a reclusive life. Today, this immovable concept still remains a central tenet of Islam.

I was introduced to Mulla Sadra’s thinking through my friend and mentor Muhammad Kamal, a Kurdish Australian thinker and academic who has translated and written extensively on Sadra’s philosophies. Kamal’s latest book, *A Universe in Constant Change: Mulla Sadra and Transubstantial Change* (2022) analyzes Sadra’s thoughts on the continuous renewal of matter and his impact on philosophical discourses around concepts of identity, values, and truth. Through Kamal, and in turn, via Sadra, I have learned to see that the world of things—the physical realm of matter around us, including humans—is composed of substances in flux, despite perhaps the naked eye being unable to reveal it as such.

Change is fundamental to life. We witness light and darkness, we rise and fall, we care and neglect. For Sadra, matter and form are the basic elements through which change is made evident. Sadra’s articulation of change is classified into

two categories: instantaneous change and gradual change. When a bomb explodes, for instance, people, cities, and livelihoods are immediately destroyed. This instantaneous change takes years to recover from. What interests me is that such immediate destruction can occur so quickly—but that historically we seem ethically and morally unconcerned about how long it will take (the gradual change) to recover and heal, if at all. These two concepts—of instantaneous and gradual change—resonate greatly with the experience of my people, the Kurds, and in turn, the experience of any person displaced, discriminated against, or disenfranchised.

The concepts of change are of fundamental importance to my art practice in my consideration of materiality, content, and context. For example, in my video work *Facing living past in the present* (2015), two hands tear into fragments a black-and-white digitally printed photograph of the former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. And then the two hands collect these fragments in an attempt to make this image whole again using black tape. Over the course of the video’s 12 minutes, the two hands again tear up this photograph and again attempt to reconnect its pieces. This process is continually repeated until the image of Hussein becomes nothing but black tape, mirroring the violent impacts of his authoritative regime and the history of

colonial strategies that attempted to restore the substance of Iraq using ideas of the past.

The impact of Sadra’s philosophy can also be seen in my artwork *Irhal (Expel), Hope and the Sorrow of Displacement* (2013–19), in which I meditate on the experience of displacement as a form of instantaneous change through the burning of wood—which irrevocably becomes charcoal and ash. Here in this installation, I stacked discarded chairs in a chaotic, teetering fashion, relying on weight and gravity to prevent their collapse. Positioned as if cascading into the oblivion of destruction represented by the charcoal that lines the floor, these transformed wooden chairs, for me, stand in for the countless people who are violently forced from their homes. Though we may claim that they have survived, their substance, their being, is utterly and undeniably altered by these experiences.

The impact of instantaneous change and our negligence toward its gradual renewal are tied to the societal ills that particular artists expose, and in so doing take responsibility—in ethical and moral terms—for the way art can record and reflect. This I see evident in the work of Anselm Kiefer, Doris Salcedo, and Kader Attia, and many other artists today whose work about the impacts and legacies of violence and trauma has also been of great inspiration to my artistic practice.



RUSHDI ANWAR, *Facing living past in the present*, 2015, still from single-channel digital video with sound: 12 min 30 sec. Courtesy the artist.