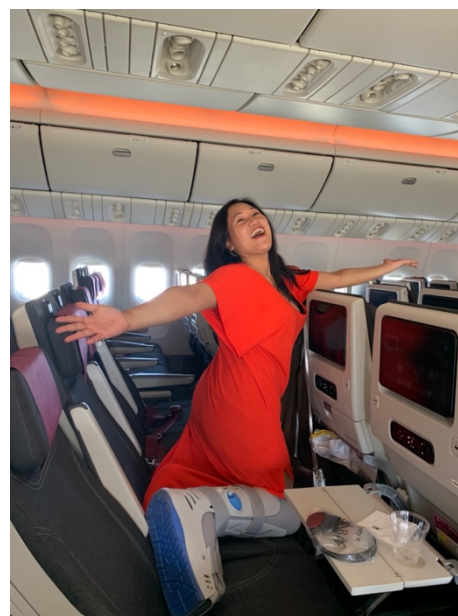


Initially, I had grand plans of writing this report from London. I have been trying to get back there since September 2020, after a ruptured Achilles in February last year intervened with my PhD studies. Despite the initial difficulty of travelling with a broken leg at the beginning of a pandemic, the decision to come home to Poneke proved to be a lifesaver. It was being numbered 6535 in an online queue for groceries in the UK that really helped cement my decision to return to Aotearoa!

After spending some time in managed isolation and getting my bearings again, I was relieved to be at home with my family and to have the mental clarity to focus on finishing my PhD. Initially, this seemed like a final year PhD dream scenario - being somewhere safe with no distractions to write! Serendipitously, the timing of my studies meant that the pandemic fell at the introverted tail end of my studies. However, increasing uncertainty about Universities opening up and Covid-19 accelerating the crisis in [academia](#), it became apparent that even though I was in the writing up stage of my PhD journey, the existential questions around the value of an arts education as well as precarity around the future weighted heavily on my mind. Going from working in a tight-knit PhD office community at SOAS to working at home alone really began to take its toll. Every time I planned to return to London, a new lockdown was announced, pushing my return date further and further out. While we had incredible freedom and relative normality over here, I found the experience of teaching part-time online quite brutal given the time difference meaning that my classes were often held in the middle of the night New Zealand time. Not to mention the difficulty of boosting morale to my students based in the UK and Europe.

After being awarded a GWNZ fellowship in July 2020, I have been working solidly on the final year of my PhD in the History of Art & Archaeology at the School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), University of London. I began my studies in 2016 after several years working as an art curator and curating exhibitions in museums and galleries in New Zealand, Bangkok, Paris, Phnom Penh, Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo. Over the past four years, I have been working on ideas of critical regionalism in art from Southeast Asia during the Cold War era. SOAS is the leading institute for the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East in the world. It is located in the heart of Bloomsbury, a stone's throw away from the British Museum and many museums, galleries, libraries and archives making it a dream for a humanities researcher. As grateful as I am to have lived through this pandemic in Aotearoa, some key cultural conversations shook London, which I sadly missed. The Black Lives Matters movement and activism in the UK centred much-needed attention to the demand for racial justice and



*Figure 1: The relief of flying back during a pandemic with a broken leg. The plane only had about 60 passengers on the whole flight meaning my friend and I had a whole section to ourselves.*



*Figure 2: The SOAS Doctoral School building specifically for PhD students. Located at 53 Gordon Square its directly opposite where Virginia Woolf used to live and is a very inspiring area to study and write.*

how cultural institutions also needed to change to become much less neutral and much more political in addressing history.

Within my research, I centre the historical event known as the Bandung 1955 Asia Africa Conference, which was the first time Asia and Africa met on a political stage in solidarity. This event changed not only the dynamics of power, but also how representation addressed who was powerful. Scholar Vijay Prashad claims that “the colonized world had now emerged to claim its space in world affairs, not just as an adjunct of the First or Second worlds, but as a player in its own right. Furthermore, the Bandung Spirit was a refusal of both economic subordination and cultural suppression—two of the major policies of imperialism. The audacity of Bandung produced its own image” (2007: 45- 46). As part of my research, I look at how racialised depictions shifted, towards becoming more complex and more empowered within this period of independence in Southeast Asia between 1948 - 1988. In 2017 – 2018, like all SOAS PhD students, I was required to conduct a year of fieldwork which, given my area of study was mainly in Southeast Asia, something that with Covid-19 would be impossible now. I have heard many heartbreaking stories of my colleagues and friends getting caught in the political crossfire and fallout that the pandemic accelerated. I heard of friends being arrested in Myanmar. We are all at a loss on what to do. Laterally, all these political urgencies have stressed a particular urgency to the research I’m conducting.



*Figure 3: In rural Cambodia in 2018 where I was conducting fieldwork with my father acting as my translator and interlocutor.*

While my life at the tail end of this PhD journey has been in the calm skies of the land of the long white cloud, the rest of the world is still turbulent. I am unsure where my research will lead long term, but I am grateful to have had this opportunity to study when the world changed dramatically. I plan to return to London in September 2021, to submit my thesis and to round off the life changing experience of studying in London during a time when the foundations of power are being forced to re-examine itself. The support from GWNZ during this uncertain time has been invaluable in giving my a sense of security and empowerment to finish my PhD.