

In Search of
NORM PARKER
(and Subsequently the Orang Mawas)



Outcomes:

- 1) Archive (Gallery View)
- 2) Book (140 Pages)
- 3) Film (14 mins)

Room 1

A series of tables, arranged with no obvious route through the space.

On the far wall there are two prints labelled 'Photographic Evidence'.

All artefacts are fictional, presented as truth. The aim is that the audience critically engage with the archive.





45 cm x 194 cm

Note: The artefacts can be seen in more detail in the book PDF

1. Portrait of Parker
2. Colour Darkroom Print of warehouse owned by a friend of Parker
3. B&W Darkroom Print of warehouse owned by a friend of Parker
4. Mawas Remains
5. Letter from Physical Anthropologist regarding suspected Mawas bones
6. Postcard from Parker's Mother
7. Note accompanying box of research
8. Mawas Remains (Head)
9. Suspected Mawas Bone
10. Map of Malay Peninsula, annotated by Parker

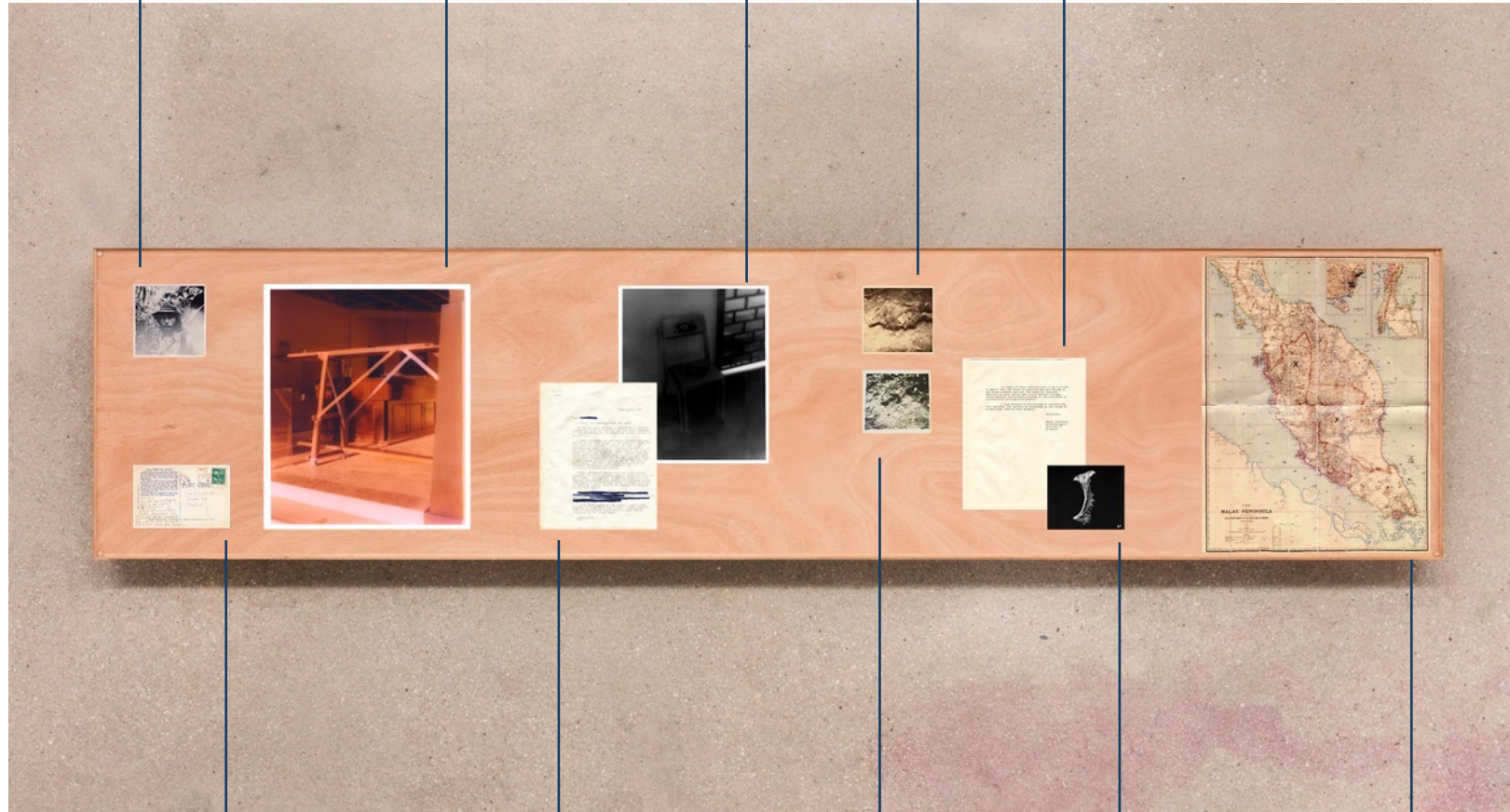
(1) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
70 mm x 70 mm

(2) RA4 Darkroom Print
250 mm x 300 mm

(3) B&W Darkroom Print
200 mm x 250 mm

(4) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
60 mm x 60 mm

(5) Typed Letter
150 mm x 240 mm



(6) Physical Postcard
150 mm x 100 mm

(7) Typed Letter
150 mm x 240 mm

(8) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
60 mm x 60 mm

(9) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
80 mm x 60 mm

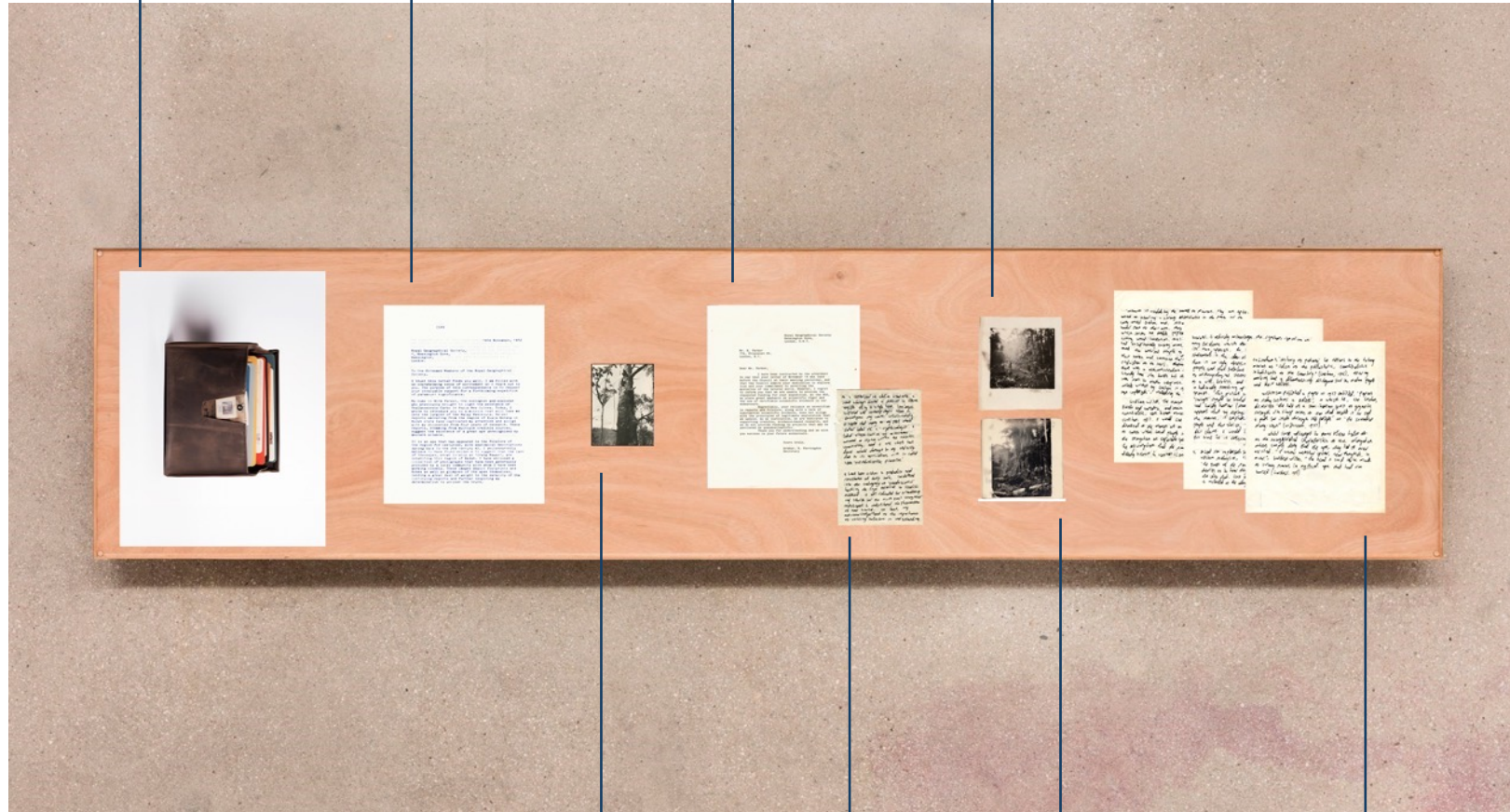
(10) Reworked Archival Image
Xerography Printed
300 mm x 420 mm

(11) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
240 mm x 350 mm

(12) Typed Letter
220 mm x 260 mm

(13) Typed Letter
200 mm x 250 mm

(14) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
70 mm x 75 mm



- 11. Box of work and research
- 12. Parker's request for funding
- 13. Response from RGS denying application
- 14. Photograph from a search for the Mawas by the Japanese in 1944
- 15. Photograph of two suspected Mawas
- 16. Partial letter from Parker to a colleague
- 17. Photograph from a search for the Mawas by the Japanese in 1944
- 18. Unpublished, handwritten essay of Parker's on misrepresentations of the Mawas

(15) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
60 mm x 80 mm

(16) Handwritten Note
C-Type Print
80 mm x 110 mm

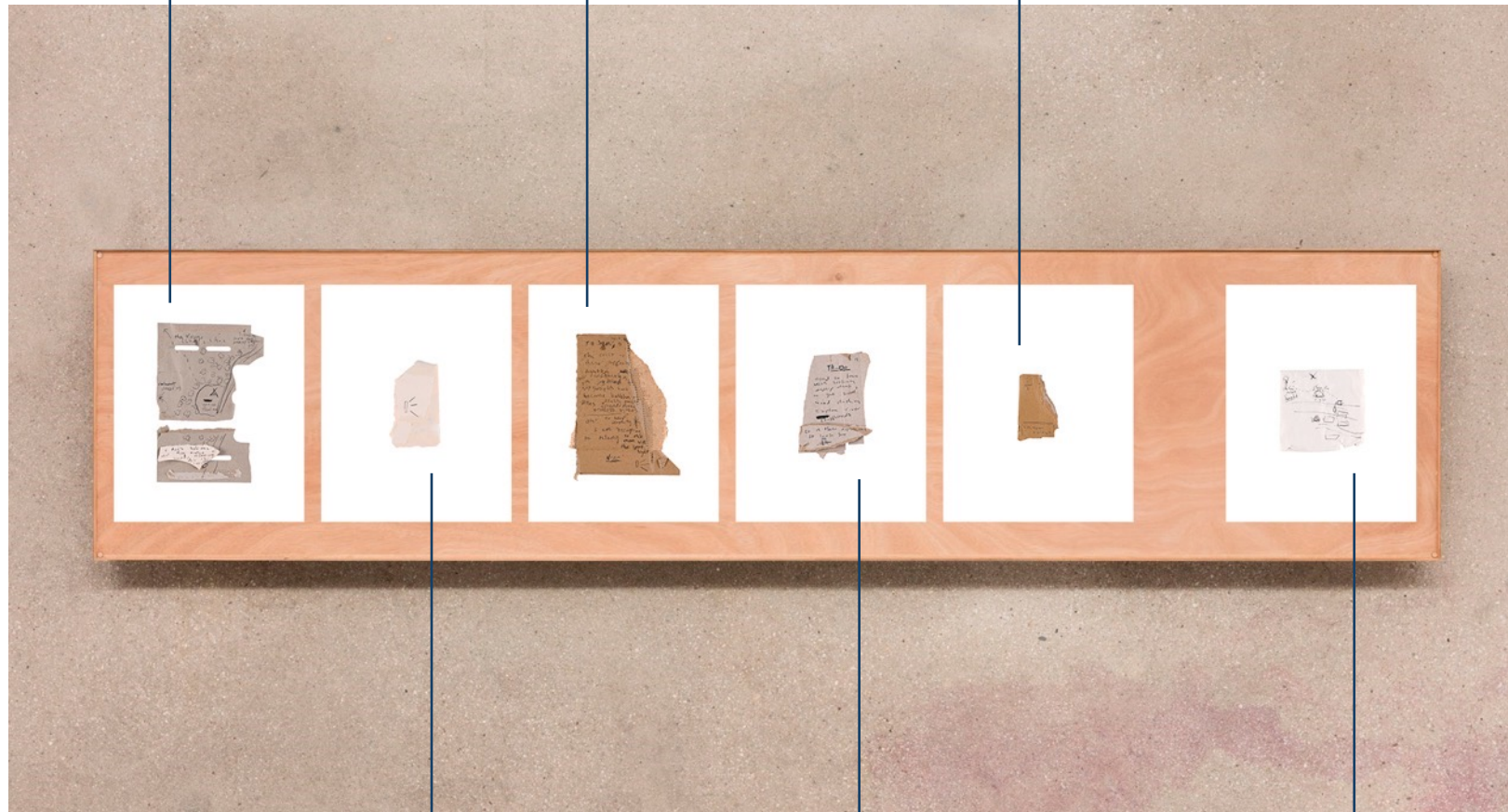
(17) Re-worked AI Generation
C-Type Print
70 mm x 75 mm

(18) Handwritten Documents
3 x 190 mm x 235 mm

(20) Pencil on Cardboard
80 mm x 120 mm

(21) Pencil on Cardboard
85 mm x 115 mm

(22) Pencil on Cardboard
35 mm x 55 mm



- 20. Parker's map of the clearing
on scrap of cardboard
- 21. Letter to Sani, detailing
Parker's next move
- 22. Cardboard compass
- 23. Symbol on cardboard
- 24. 'To Do List' on cardboard
- 25. Map on napkin leading to
Parker's grave

(23) Pencil on Cardboard
50 mm x 70 mm

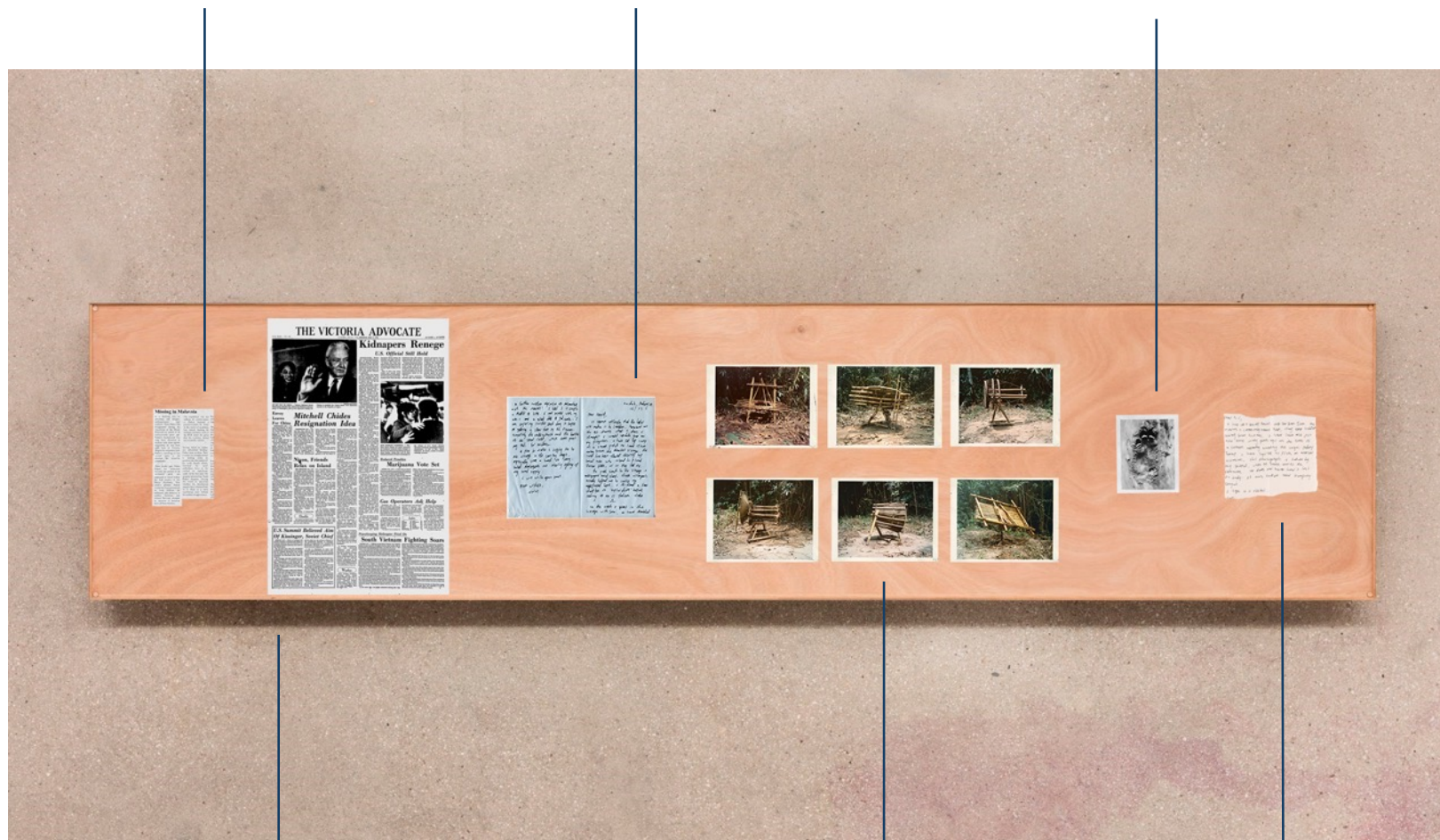
(24) Pencil on Cardboard
70 mm x 100 mm

(25) Biro on a Napkin
75 mm x 75 mm

(26) Typed Clipping
Xerography Print
65 mm x 100 mm

(27) Handwriting on Paper
240 mm x 170 mm

(28) Re-worked AI Generation
Xerography Print
50 mm x 65 mm

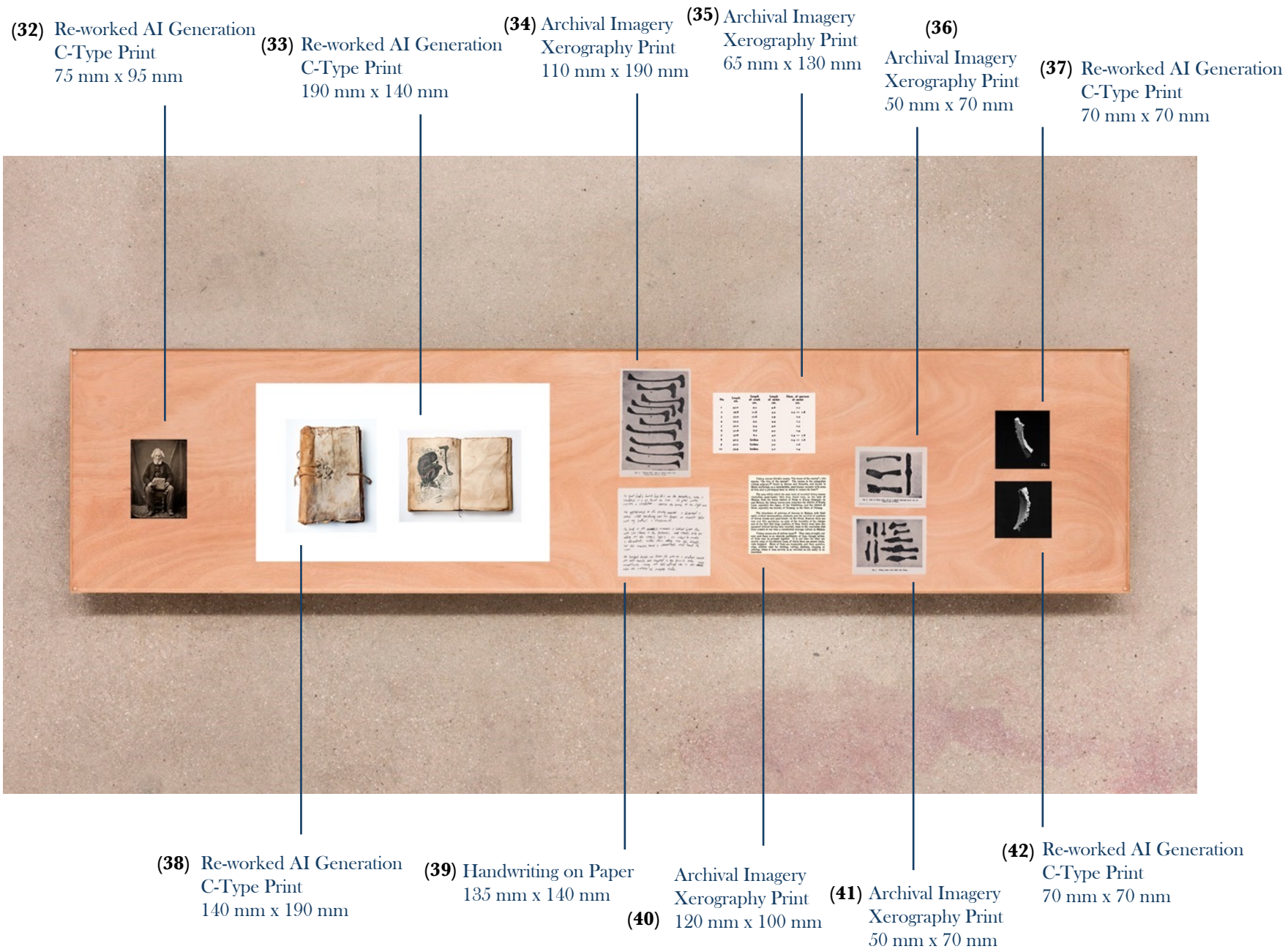


- 26. Newspaper clipping after reported disappearance
- 27. Parker's final correspondence
- 28. Mawas footprint
- 29. The Victoria Advocate on the date of disappearance
- 30. Bamboo equipment built in the jungle
- 31. Note detailing Mawas sighting

(29) Print on Newspaper
260 mm x 420 mm

(30) Re-worked AI Generations
C-Type Print
6 x 90 mm x 70 mm

(31) Handwriting on Paper
75 mm x 70 mm



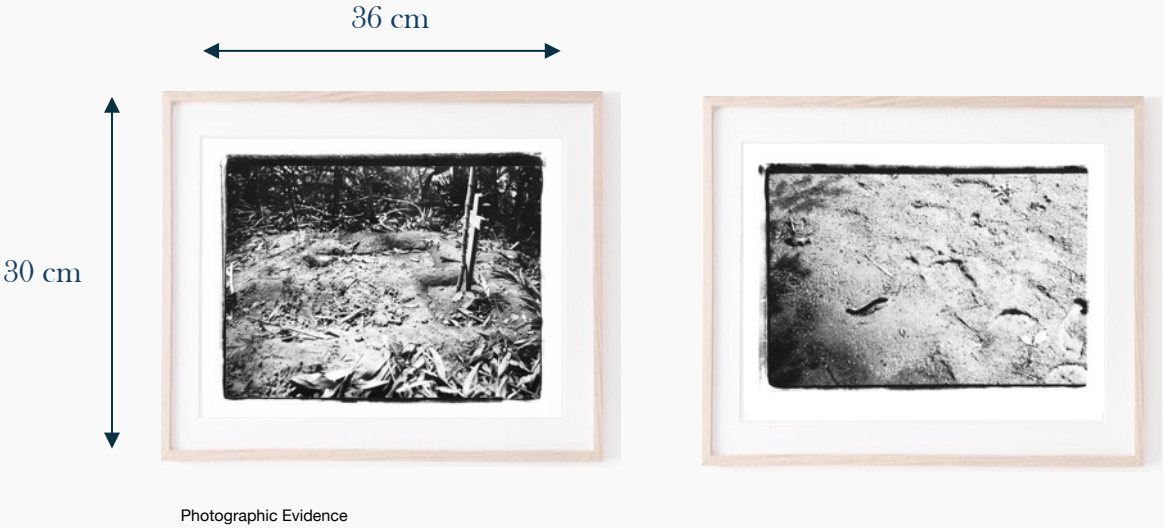
- 32. Reginald Ashcroft, the missionary who uncovered 'Secrets of the Keris Craftsmanship', holding the manuscript
- 33. Inside spread of 'Secrets of the Keris Craftsmanship'
- 34. Hockey Stick 'Tulang Mawas'
- 35. Dimensions of the previous
- 36. 'Tulang Mawas' found in Klang
- 37. Suspected Mawas bone
- 38. 'Secrets of the Keris Craftsmanship'
- 39. Translation of Manuscript
- 40. Writing on the 'Tulang Mawas'
- 41. 'Tulang Mawas' found in Klang
- 42. Suspected Mawas bone

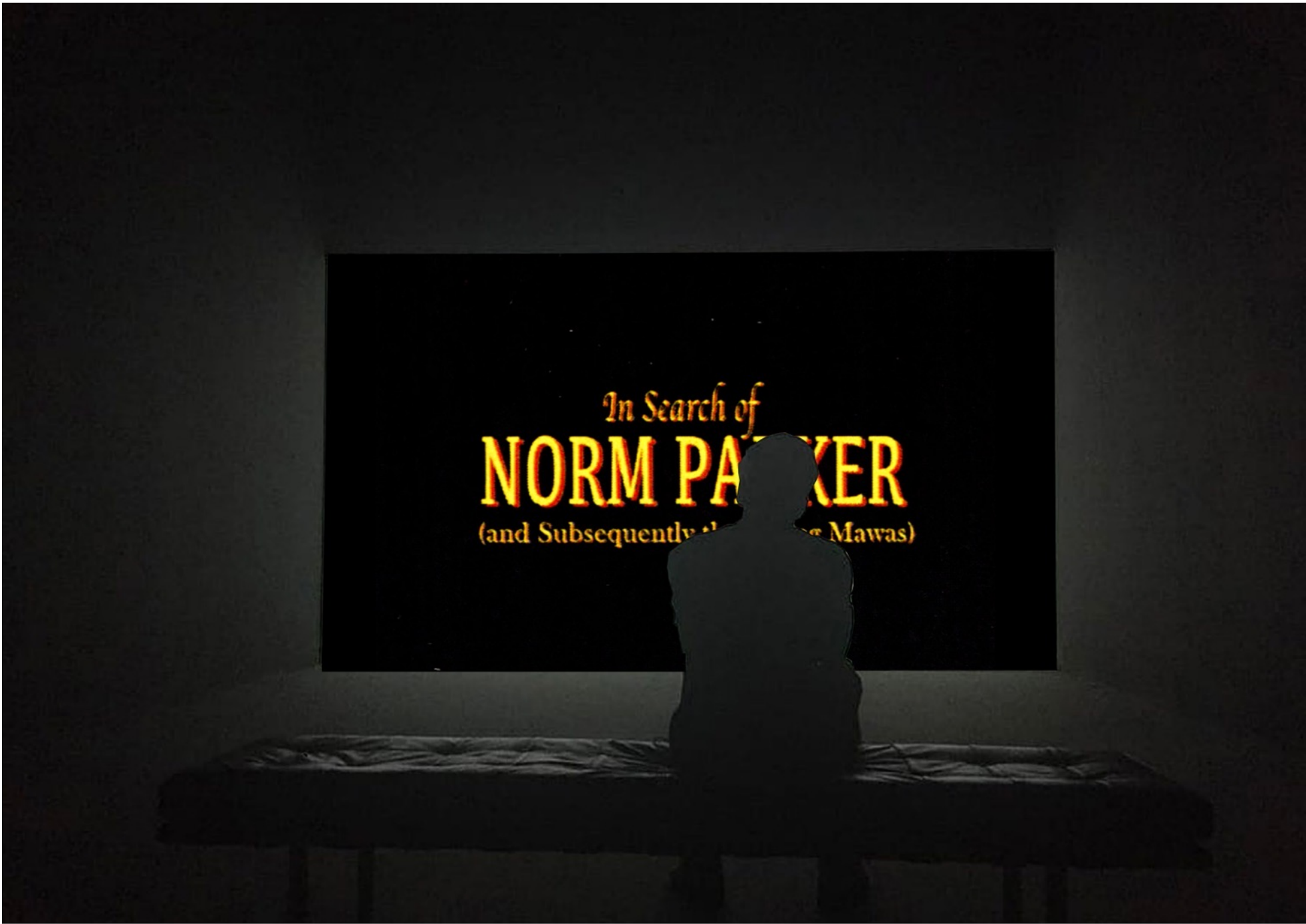
Framed Prints

Evidence 1
Reworked AI Generation
C-Type Print
10x8 Inches

Evidence 2
Black and White Darkroom Print
10x8 Inches

Black Wall Vinyl Text





Room 2

A darkened screening room. Here, the 14-minute accompanying film will loop.

There is a bench for accessibility.

Film

4K Digital Film, 4:3
13mins

Full Film

<https://youtu.be/mh3MdgNMRUQ>

Book

Hardback Swiss Bound (Embossed), with Coptic Stitch

Xerography Print on 150gsm (white) and 100gsm (off-white) paper

140 Pages

210 mm x 270mm





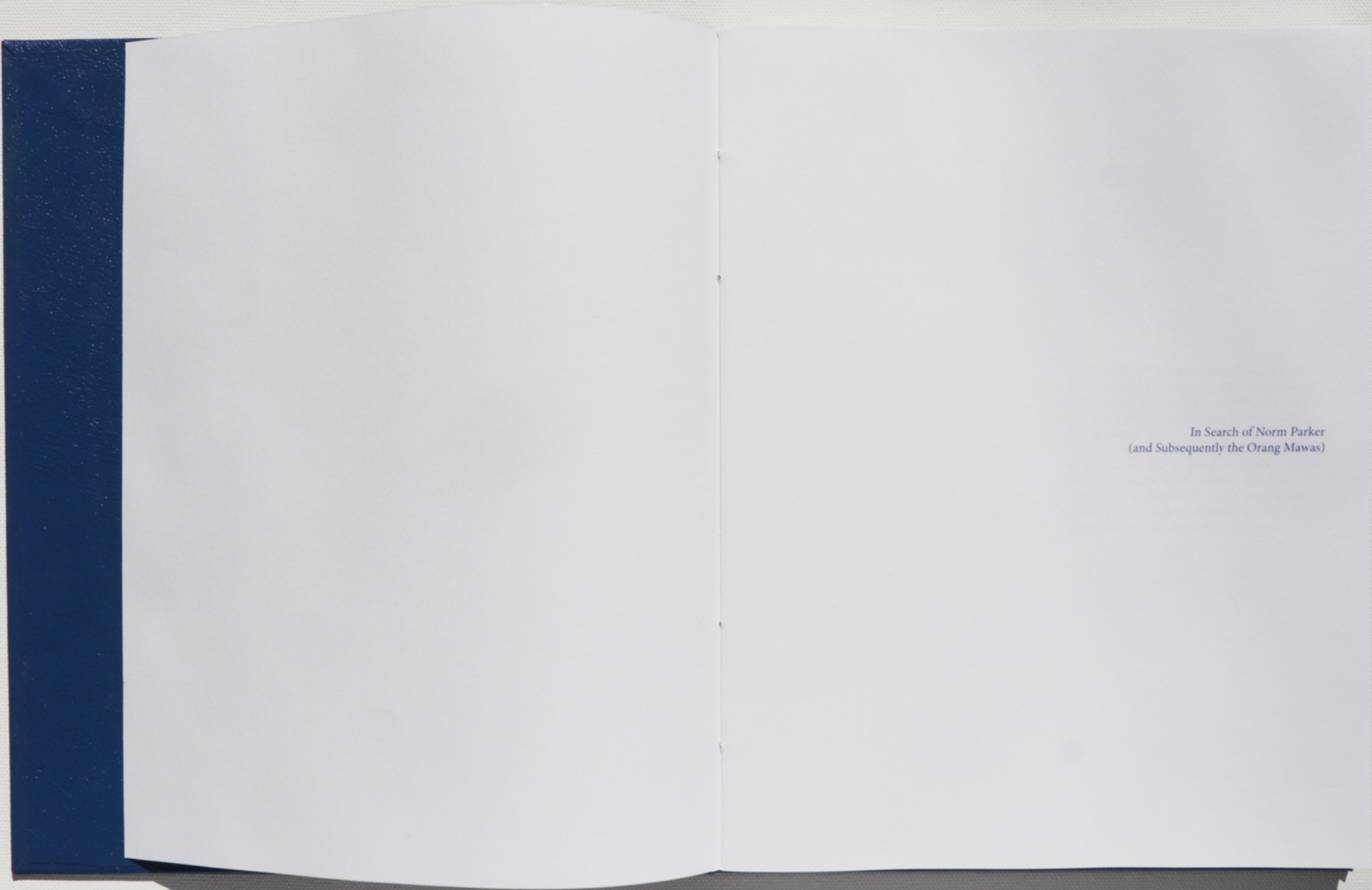
[View Online](#)

[Full PDF](#)

[Video of Book](#)

<https://freight.cargo.site/m/T1758781888610820860826349750746/In-Search-of-Norm-Parker-3.pdf>

https://youtu.be/cX7vy4R0900?si=_79ZwdDGCWla214u



by Jack Sproston

On May 6th, 1973, the renowned zoologist Norm Parker was declared missing. His disappearance occurred 18 days into his mission to observe and document an elusive great ape, known as the Orang Mawas.

In January 2023, I acquired, by way of online auction, a large selection of Parker's work, filed haphazardly within a leather box. The collection contains letters, essays, photographs, books, and painstaking research compiled over a 4-year period prior to his disappearance.



Foreword

I do not intend for this foreword to be long; however, I must provide a little context for both Norm Parker and the Orang Mawas. I will begin with the latter.

The Orang Mawas remains unacknowledged by Western science despite its prominence within local folklore. The first documentation of the animal was made by the ancient people of Sungai Batu, a civilisation of iron smelters located in what is now Kedah, Malaysia. 'Secrets of the Keris Craftsmanship', more commonly known as the 'Mawas Manuscript', dates back to the second Century AD and contains, to my knowledge, the oldest written descriptions of the Mawas. It describes an ape, four-feet-tall with a coat of rusty brown fur, abnormal strength, and feet which appear to face backward. Perhaps it is these peculiar feet which allowed the Orang Mawas to navigate a plethora of terrains, from "the lowlands of Kampung Lambor Kiri, to the mountains of Jala and in the jungle-covered areas surrounding Sungai Batu" (Parker, 1973). The manuscript also details the collection of its bones (specifically from the forearm), found at mount Jala and the surrounding areas. These bones would be combined with iron in an alloy, and fashioned into swords known as Keris (or Kris). Parker translated a large portion of this manuscript himself.

During the 50s, a large amount of mysterious iron-age tools were uncovered in the northwestern regions of the peninsula. The tools are known as Tulang Mawas, translating literally to 'Bones of the Mawas'. These tools were wrought not cast, and there is no absolute uniformity of type, nor, in fact, unanimous agreement on their usefulness or the origins of their name. One of Parker's many theories regarding the Tulang Mawas was that these particular tools did not contain bones like the Keris, but that they were shaped to resemble the strong forearm bone of the Mawas. After all, it had become legend that 'instead of having a bone in the lower part of the arm, [the Mawas] has a piece of sharp iron which serves the double purpose of an arm and a cleaver for cutting wood'.

In 1971, two years before he would set out to search for the Mawas, Parker suspected that an orangutan skeleton collected on the Malay Peninsula and displayed in the British Museum contained some anomalous bones. He was denied access to examine the skeleton; however, he was provided with detailed photographs of two bones he suspected of belonging to the Mawas. Parker

forwarded the photographs to a friend and colleague, Henry Churchill, a physical anthropologist specialising in primates. Churchill concurred that the bones in question may not belong to any known primate. After initial correspondence, the British Museum thwarted the pair's attempts to gain access to the specimen to undertake a thorough analysis of the bones. Eventually, for reasons unstated, the specimen was removed from public view in 1977.

In recent years, largely due to Western influences, depictions of the Mawas have begun to warp, resulting in the original description being all but erased and replaced with the image of a ten-foot-tall 'Malaysian Bigfoot' which is said to roam the jungles of Johor in the south. Parker believed firmly, however, that the Mawas, in its original description, was neither cryptid nor extinct. He set about collecting empirical evidence to prove its existence. Parker received his first photograph of the Orang Mawas in the spring of '71. The photograph, which depicts the head of a Mawas, was accompanied by a note from a man named Sani. Over the next 2 years, Parker and Sani stayed in close contact, working to assemble a collection of photographic evidence from the state of Kedah. Eventually, Parker presented a selection of these photographs to the RGS, alongside a letter requesting funding for an expedition to search for the animal. He was refused funding under the guise that his theories lacked the required scientific rigour and was accused of pseudoscientific practices.

Parker was no stranger to these accusations. As a self-proclaimed 'pursuer of truth', Parker often found himself drifting down lines of inquiry beyond expected modes of scientific research, placing emphasis on folklore and local stories in his calling to observe and document animals unbeknown to the Western world. As a result, he was subject to relentless attempts to discredit his findings and tarnish his name.

Parker kept the early years of his life somewhat guarded, resulting in confusion amongst friends and colleagues regarding his roots. The story I presently believe began in 1935 in the Valley View Hospital of Victoria, Texas. It would appear that sometime between 1942 and 1943 Parker would cross the Pond with his mother to spend his youth in London, eventually immersing himself in the academic environment of University College London's renowned Department of Anthropology. It was his education at UCL that fuelled Parker's passion to understand the intricacies of human behaviour and cultural evolution. More importantly, it would inspire a lifelong obsession with folklore. An obsession that

some argue tainted his credibility in the eyes of Western academics when Parker eventually moved into the world of zoology. Nevertheless, he made a name for himself after a notable breakthrough in 1965 when he published research which led to the discovery of an unknown species of sea bird on the coast of Papua New Guinea, subsequently named 'Thalasseornis Carbo'.

I do not know what initially sparked Parker's interest in the Orang Mawas, nor what inspired him to undertake the task of searching for it alone having been denied funding. It is, however, true that had he been successful in his mission to prove its existence, it would have sent shockwaves through the world of natural science, uprooting the very foundations of accepted knowledge. His subsequent disappearance is therefore both unfortunate and ironic in that the Orang Mawas is still construed as a cryptid, and Norm Parker has become almost as arcane and shrouded in mystery as the animal he set out to find.

In January 2023, I learned that Henry Churchill, Parker's friend and colleague, had passed away in 2014. After reaching out to his son, I was able to acquire a copy of the last letter Churchill received from Parker. Dated 25th April 1973, I believe it was Parker's final correspondence. The letter was the final piece of a puzzle that would allow me to locate the exact spot Parker had set up camp 50 years ago. The land is now owned by a man named MD and is located 2 hours east of Alor Setar. With this starting place and a box of unpublished research, the following summer I set out to uncover what became of Norm Parker.

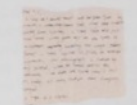
Selected Works and Artefacts of Norm Parker



p.12



p.13



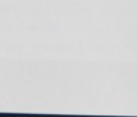
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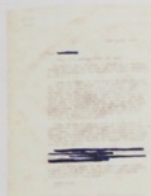
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Missing in Malaya

p.38



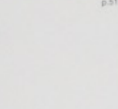
p.40



p.42

A photograph of a document or a piece of paper with some text and a small illustration.

p.44



p.46



p.48



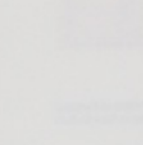
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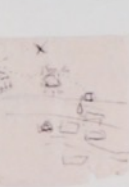
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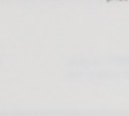
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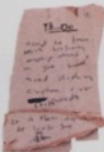
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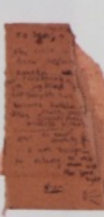
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p.76



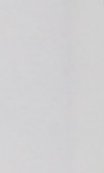
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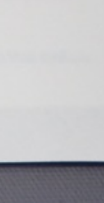
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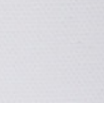
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Date: 12/07/1965

Author: Norm Parker

Object: Portrait of Parker in
Papua New Guinea



Date: Unknown

Author: RGS
Annotated by: Norm Parker

Object: Map of Malay Peninsula

1000 April 13, 1973

Dear [REDACTED]

I trust this message finds you well.

If all has gone to plan, I intend to be halfway across the globe by the time you see this. Immersed in the wilderness of the Malaysian jungle, I intend to be precise.

I must apologise for the weight of this package, for it is not just weight in the physical sense. You see, this box contains a weight of significance: a towering Bantennell, if you will. For contained in these folders is a collection of work and research, which require just one final push before tipping over, crushing the world of natural science. For use for the last four years I have become obsessed with an ape of the name of Orang Mawas. One which has been prominent in the folklore of Malaysia for centuries, and yet the existence is vigorously denied.

I have by now, of course, built up a convincing argument for its existence, however currently this is all I have - an argument. I have reviewed multiple credible photographs and reports of sightings within the region of Bukit Brangas, which is where I intend to begin my search, despite my request for funding having been denied.

[REDACTED] However, as I shall [REDACTED]

I will write again at the earliest opportunity, however it is my hope that I shall return promptly, with scientifically verifiable evidence for the existence of the Orang Mawas.

Yours truly,
S.P.

Date: 10/04/1973

Author: Norm Parker

Object: Note to Safekeeper

It is unclear what led the anonymous seller to part with the work, or how it fell into their possession, for I do not believe that a friend of Parker's would be so reckless as to risk his work fall into the hands of one of his (many) critics. It is also unclear as to whether the alterations in this note are intentional attempts at redaction or incompetent attempts at highlighting by whoever possessed these works before me.



Penang Botanical Gardens,
Kedah



Date: Unknown

Author: Unknown

Object: Mawas Remains

This photograph was collected by Parker in 1959,
however the date the photograph was taken is unknown.

Royal Geographical Society
Kensington Gore,
London, S.W.7.

Mr. N. Parker
17A, Princelet St.
London, E.1.

Dear Mr. Parker,

I have been instructed by the president to say that your letter of November 16 was laid before the Council at their meeting yesterday, and that the Council admire your dedication to exploration and your commitment to unveiling the mysteries of the natural world. However, I regret to inform you that we are unable to provide the requested funding for your expedition. At the RGS, we place great emphasis on scientific rigor and the use of verifiable scientific evidence in our endeavours.

Regrettably, your reliance on unverifiable reports and folklore, along with a lack of substantial scientific evidence, does not align with the principles of legitimate exploration that we uphold. As an institution, we are dedicated to supporting credible, evidence-based research, and we do not provide funding to projects that may be perceived as pseudoscientific.

Thank you for understanding and we wish you success in your future endeavours.

Yours truly,

Arthur. R. Farrington
Secretary

Date: 06/12/1972

Author: Arthur Farrington

Object: Response to Funding
Request



Alor Setar Train Station,
Kedah



Date: 2nd Century AD

Author: Unknown

Object: Secrets of the Keris
Craftsmanship



Date: 2nd Century AD

Author: Unknown

Object: Secrets of the Keris
Craftsmanship



The Jungle Clearing.
Kedah



Equipment Item No.2



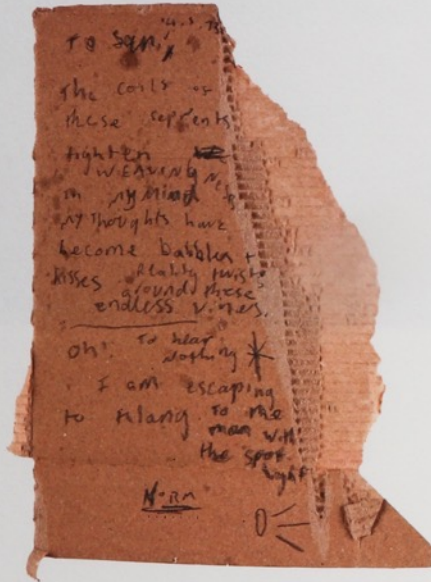
Equipment Item No.3



Photographic Evidence of Mawas Print



This symbol is featured on a scrap of cardboard earlier found at the site. Confirming these were also made by Parker.



Date: 14/05/1973

Author: Norm Parker

Object: Letter to Sani

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Klang is mentioned numerous times in Parker's research, namely for the large amount of mysterious iron-age tools, found in the region. These tools are known as Tulang Mawas, translating literally to 'Bones of the Mawas'.

Tulang mawas literally means, "the bones of the mawas"; *bei mawas*, "the iron of the mawas". The *mawas* is the orang-utan (*Pithecus satyrus*),²⁸ found in Borneo and Sumatra, and known to Malay mythology as a cannibalistic, semi-human monster with arms of iron and a pot-shaped head in which it cooked its food.²⁹

The area within which the main body of recorded *tulang mawas* (including spear-heads) have been found runs, on the west of Malaya, from the Kinta district of Perak to Klang, Selangor; in east Malaya, the *tulang mawas* area comprises the district of Kuala Lipis, especially the region of the Tombeling, and the district of Raub, especially the locality of Tersang, in the State of Pahang.

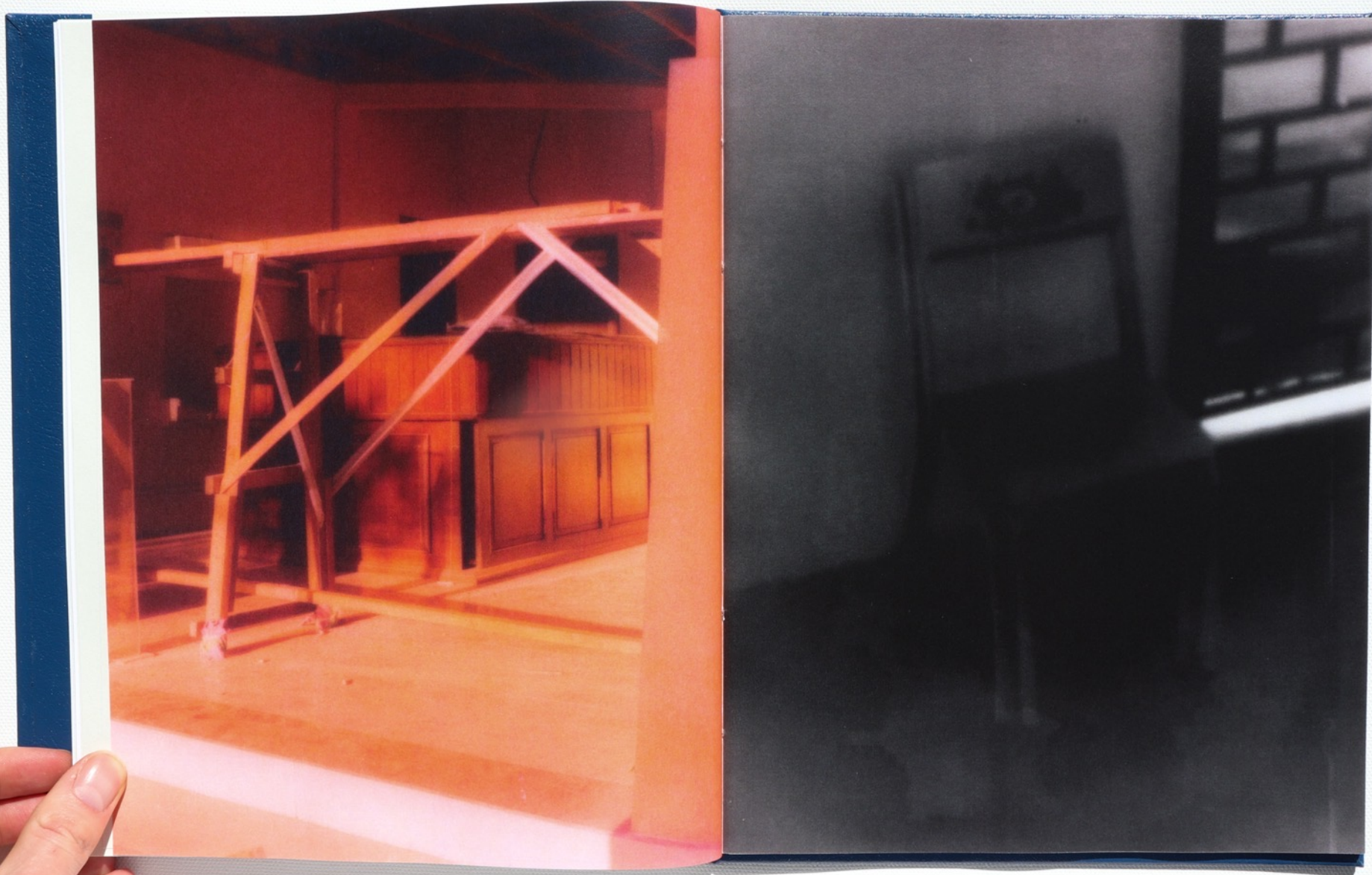
The abundance of outcrops of iron-ore in Malaya, with their easily worked decomposition products, and the survival of numbers of *tulang mawas* and spear-heads—in the Perak Museum there are now over fifty specimens—in spite of the humidity of the climate and of the fact that large numbers of those found must have disappeared without having been recorded, leads to the conclusion that there existed at one time a considerable iron-age culture in Malaya.

Tulang mawas are of various types.³⁰ They were wrought, not cast, and there is no absolute uniformity of type, though certain of them may be grouped together. It is not clear for what use exactly some of the elbowed types, of which there are several kinds, were designed. Many of them are incomplete, and their operative edge, whether used for striking, cutting, stabbing, chipping or planing, where it does survive, is so corroded as not easily to be identified.

Date: 20/10/1951

Author: William Linehan

Object: Description of Tulang Mawas





Date: 20/05/2023

Author: Aisha Siti

Object: Map Drawn on a Napkin

The map, drawn by an elderly lady in a restaurant on the southern bank of the river in Kuala Tahan, that allowed me to locate Parker.



Photographic Evidence of Norm Parker's Whereabouts

**IN SEARCH OF NORM PARKER
(AND SUBSEQUENTLY THE ORANG MAWAS)**

*Exploring the Possibilities of 'Fictioning' to Question the Empiricism of the
Photographic Archive Within a Scientific Context.*



by Jack Sproston

1064 Words

"Paper lies even more than people do." (Alexievich, 2013)

In Search of Norm Parker (and subsequently the Orang Mawas) is an extensive body of work, incorporating photography, film, AI, text and performance. It tests the notions of empiricism, evidence and discovery, built around a story that began in 1973 when the zoologist, Norm Parker, vanished whilst hunting for a cryptid great ape known as the Orang Mawas on the Malay Peninsula. Fifty years later, I obtain a large archive of material which reveals a tension between Parker and the 'Scientific Institution'. His persistent battle to shed the label of 'pseudoscientist' creates an obsession with obtaining 'undeniable empirical evidence' for the existence of the Mawas. The entire narrative, however, is illusory: Parker, the archive, and my subsequent journey to find him are completely fictionalised.

To deconstruct my methodologies and analyse the themes within this project, we must first reconsider our perception of fiction. Fact and fiction are, "in both artistic and scientific realms, extremely closely related" (Wyants, 2021). Even in the world of science, so reliant on truth and empiricism, Foucault notes that nothing new can come about without the 'intervention of fiction' (Foucault, 1980). In artistic research, fiction is 'oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust... [for] these fictions are experienced as fact." (Lambert-Beatty, 2009). As we progress deeper into a post-truth era, it is vital that we take agency in questioning our understanding of 'truth'. Hence, I incorporate fictioning into my practice to challenge established truths and offer alternative narratives to reflect on reality in ways more nuanced and emotionally engaging than traditional research methods.

Performance fictioning is "a durational process involving performing, diagramming, or assembling new and different modes of existence through open-minded experimentation." (O'Sullivan and Burrows, 2019). It is (partly) within this scaffolding that I begin to experiment through three key outputs:

- A fictional archive
- A book (140 Pages)
- A film (14 Mins)

The archive is constructed of a series of photographic forgeries, AI-generated using a sophisticated text-to-image generation software. They are further manipulated (digitally and physically) until they closely resemble real archival photographs, displayed alongside numerous works of fictional writing disguised as original documents. By fictioning an archive, I construct a layered commentary on the unreliability and opacity of the archive and the photograph. I strive to ignite a critical response from the viewer, thus unlocking the performative potential of the work. By entering and curating the archive I explore how perspective is constantly skewing the potential for truth. In other words, I have put into operation the rhetoric of different discourses and allowed them to play together, forming their own fiction; my role is to curate them.

This curatorial performance evolves within the book and film, in which the archive is actively engaged to retrace the steps of Parker. In both outcomes the question of truth is still the key signifier, however the work's thematic scope is expanded, with each item offering different critiques on a range of themes within the context of natural science and folklore.

The book's first purpose is to serve as a comprehensive showcase of the constructed archive, providing a detailed exploration of its contents. I have drawn inspiration from Nicolas Polli's 'Ferox: The Forgotten Archives, 1976-2010', a fictionalised scientific journal designed to make the viewer 'question their own filter of criteria for what is real and what isn't.' (Polli, 2018). However, whereas Polli aims to make the journal as realistic as possible, my work straddles the border of reality and fiction more delicately. I create enough satisfaction in the artifacts for the viewer to want to engage with them whilst introducing a subtle humour through their intentional abnormalities.

The book also features transcribed conversations and elements of genuine research on the Orang Mawas. These explore the effects of imperialism and Western ideologies on the perceptions and misrepresentations that have shaped the narrative of this creature from Malay folklore. The fictional archive surrounding this research provides imagery for a stereotypical narrative of the masculine, white explorer, insecure in his position within the

scientific community, fixated on the idea that "to discover something is a fundamental need of man" (Huxley, 1923). The temporal context is important for it is set around the time 'adventure writers' such as Harold Stephens began writing about 'The Abominable Snowman of Malaysia' and discovering prints 'sixteen inches long, and half as wide.' (Stephens, 1972). This represents a period when Colonial influence still lingered heavily in the culture of Western natural science.

A critique of this colonial narrative is offered in the second part of the book: the performative journey. The 'book within a book' design, utilising different paper stocks, allows me to combine the archive with a more traditional photobook, in which the former informs the latter. By this I mean the satirical performance of searching for Parker, experienced through the photographs, is influenced by the archive. The subtle humour of replicating Parker's mission through a parodic journey of my own, scrutinises the inherent absurdity of Parker's story and the broader themes of exploration and discovery.

The satirical nature of this journey is evidenced in a much more thorough way in the film. Focusing less on presenting the archive in full, instead I take the viewer on a journey littered with forged evidence, false hope and anti-climaxes. The film questions the notion of 'discovery' more explicitly, offering a critical examination of concepts such as romanticism, colonialism and masculinity. Humour becomes prominent in my performance of a protagonist embarking on a quest for undeniable empirical evidence for the whereabouts of Parker. Unlike the book, here I physically place myself within the frame, situating myself wholly within the performance of building crude 'equipment' from bamboo, accidentally discovering a footprint with a telescope, and following the dotted line to a cross on a map. These exaggerated tropes further mock the absurdity of exploration, whilst the blurry prints of 'evidence', link back to my questioning of the photograph as truth.

In conclusion, the three outcomes work in unison to provide a complete picture of a fictional story and subsequent journey, devised to confront the absurdity of exploration and discovery, whilst challenging viewers to question the constructed nature of truth. The work

ends in the discovery of Parker's grave, the photograph of which is labelled 'Photographic Evidence for Norm Parker's Whereabouts'. It is unclear as to whether the photograph is a real darkroom print or an AI generation.

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