

Arts & Culture

How Malaysia got its first pavilion at Venice Biennale thanks to gallerist's 'fit of madness'

- Wei-ling Lim felt the urge to do something for her country, and wrote to new prime minister Mahathir Mohamad to propose a national presence at Venice art show
- Mahathir said government would back her if she could raise funds for the pavilion, which will showcase the works of four Malaysian artists



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The Palazzo Malipiero (centre) will house Malaysia's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale contemporary art exhibition, which opens in May. Photo: Alamy

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Malaysia will have a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the world's most important contemporary art exhibition, for the first time, thanks to the efforts of a Kuala Lumpur art gallery owner.

Amid the euphoria over last year's change of government, the first since independence in 1957, Wei-ling Lim, in what she cheerfully admits was "a fit of madness", wrote to the prime minister to seek his blessing if she tried for a pavilion at the event.

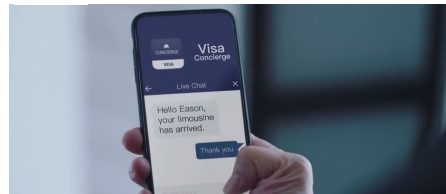
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"I wanted to do something for my country and the only thing I know is art," said Lim, whose Wei Ling Gallery has operated in the Malaysian capital for the past 17 years.

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"It is ridiculous that Malaysia has never had [a pavilion in Venice] and Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand are all there," she added during a visit to the 2019 edition of Art Basel Hong Kong last month.

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Wei-ling Lim, art gallery owner in Kuala Lumpur, received government backing to open Malaysia's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

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A letter from the prime minister, 93-year-old Mahathir Mohamad, arrived in December saying the government was willing to back her, but that financially she was on her own. "The government is short of money. He said, if you can raise the funds, we will back you. And that was that," said Lim.

The past four months have been a crash course in how to organise a national pavilion at the biennale. A Turkish artist Lim knows, who has been in the Turkish pavilion in Venice before, introduced her to a local fixer who found her a space in Palazzo Malipiero. It is next to the Palazzo Grassi, where a high-profile exhibition of works by the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans is likely to help drive foot traffic.