



YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2021

# YEO SIEW HUA

**YEO SIEW HUA** (b. 1985) is a writer-director of films and series, whose works explore the lesser known stories in society. He believes that the film medium offers a powerful experience and mirror for contemplating the construction of identities.

He graduated among the top of his cohort in Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Film and Media Studies, winning the Kodak Singapore Prize and Cathay Organisation Gold Medal in 2005. He graduated with a degree in Philosophy from the National University of Singapore in 2012.

His second fiction feature 'A Land Imagined' (2018), about the plight of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore, won the Golden Leopard grand prize at the 71st Locarno Film Festival. It represented Singapore as an entry to the Academy Awards (Oscars) in 2020. The film also won Best Original Screenplay and Best Original Music Score at the pre-eminent 56th Golden Horse Awards in 2019. At home, it won Best Feature at the 29th Singapore International Film Festival in 2018, where he was honoured with the Leslie Ho Asian Film Talent Award in recognition of his contribution to cinema in Asia.

Extending beyond cinema networks, Siew Hua's films and visual art works have been presented at venues like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Taipei, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA), Singapore, the City Museum of Ljubljana (MGML), and at the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA).

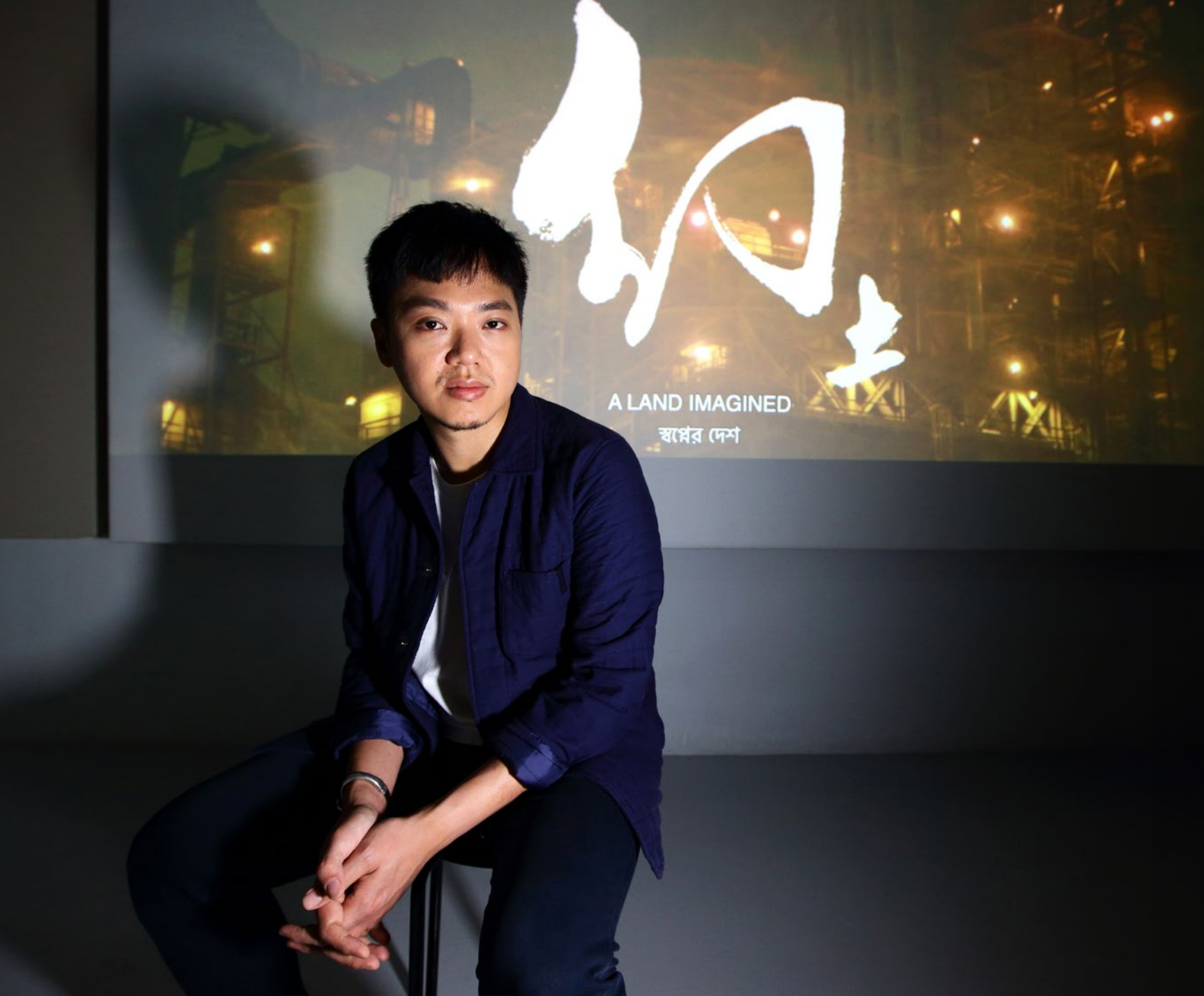
Siew Hua is a member of 13 Little Pictures, a Singapore film collective, which organises film labs and workshops around Southeast Asia. The group also produced and distributed his first feature film 'In The House of Straw' (2009) and his feature documentary 'The Obs: A Singapore Story' (2014). He is member of the Asia Pacific Screen Academy (APSA) and was awarded the APSA Young Cinema Award in 2018. He was also part of the artist group soft/Wall/studs, where he programmed documentary films in conversation with contemporary arts practice.

As an educator, Siew Hua has taught at various institutions, including School of the Arts (SOTA), LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore Polytechnic and his alma mater, Ngee Ann Polytechnic.



Yeo Siew Hua with the Golden Leopard

Photo courtesy of Samuel Golay for Locarno Festival



## A CONVERSATION WITH YEO SIEW HUA

**Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences in film?**

My earliest memories of the arts came from the films and music I was exposed to as a young person growing up in Singapore. I always have a curiosity for something different. In the days before the Internet, I was actively seeking out avenues that had the potential to present new encounters, even if I could not fully understand some of these experiences. I would let myself stumble into the unfamiliarity of films from around the world I find at the Singapore International Film Festival, as I still do, and also the sights and sounds of experimental forms from *The Substation*, during those formative years.



Screening and Q&A session at the 2019 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival

Photo courtesy of Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival Executive Committee

**What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works, and how did you overcome them?**

The thing about making films is that it takes a long time to make a work, sometimes years. A big challenge for me as a filmmaker is keeping the original idea fresh and exciting for myself and relevant for my audiences, since so much time has passed in between. Making a film is like having a constant fight with time. I have to keep it novel for myself, or I will lose my yearning for it. So, I feel the need to push myself and the work further, sometimes into uncomfortable unknowns. It is in these uneasy spaces that I find my work meaningful, and hopefully my audience will too.

**What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?**

Filmmaking is an intensely collaborative art form and the most rewarding aspect of what I do is undoubtedly working with my cast and crew. It is amazing to experience different creative minds come together, moving as one, to create a singular vision. To be honest, it is not always the case, but when such alignment happens, it is really quite “shiock.” As a process, it comes closest for me as an exercise of collectivity and community.

**What do you want the audience to experience through your films?**

Just as how I discovered the world through films, I seek to create works that bring new experiences and ways of understanding for my audience. I am interested to create an encounter with something outside of themselves. It requires trust and patience, but hopefully through this process, they have the chance to interpret new meaningful connections for themselves and even discover their own reflections, refracted through the prism of another.

**Please share what a typical day in your life as film writer/director is like.**

I spend most of my days writing pitches and proposals for grants. It is a bit of a joke, but not really. If one thinks about it, the amount of time spent on acquiring the financing for a film is greatly disproportionately more than that spent on set to direct a film.

In the meantime, I research and develop my scripts. Ultimately, a lot of a filmmaker’s work is finding and securing the resources required to produce the film, and in that process, I get in touch with my work in a more profound and structural way.

**What are your vision and hopes for Singapore’s film scene?**

I hope for more openness in the production and reception of films in Singapore, and for the makers to have real freedom to explore what



Yeo Siew Hua's 'A Land Imagined', 2018, won the Best Original Screenplay at the 56th Golden Horse Awards in 2019

Photo courtesy of Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival Executive Committee

they find interesting and important. In every other field of discipline, from the sciences to finance and healthcare, Singapore has become a contributor to larger conversations internationally. In terms of the arts and culture, we are still lagging behind. We have not been able to establish a voice, but I hope we will get there in time.

**What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?**

Be kind to oneself and others. It is more important than anything else in a field where teamwork is the only way to achieve any good work.

**How does receiving the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.**

The Young Artist Award is an important recognition of my work in the arts and provides a big support for my development as a filmmaker. I wish to push my practice further in ways that will not only help me grow but also take a deeper look into the modes and processes of producing films in Singapore that will benefit the film community here.



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I would like to thank the National Arts Council and those who supported me on the nomination of this award, which is regarded as an important recognition for arts practitioners in Singapore.

As a filmmaker, I can accomplish very little alone. I owe much of what I have achieved to my cast, crew and collaborators, particularly my producer Fran Borgia and Dan Koh, who have supported me from the very beginning of my artistic journey. This award owes very much to their undying belief in me.

I want to thank Joachim Ng and his team at IMDA for their passionate support of my work and their efforts in growing a strong local film industry. I will also take the chance to thank my father, Yeo Aik Khoon, my mother, Lee Siew Lay, and my brother Yeo Kwan Hua for providing me with the love and support that allowed me to flourish and grow into the person I am today, and also a special thanks to my partner Cecilia Kang.

Finally, I would like to thank my nominator Boo Junfeng, who has helped pave the way for Singapore filmmakers and to all those who have shared generously with me along the way.