

Singapore's
Visual
Artists

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Singapore's Visual Artists

A Note on the Publication

In this publication, artists are listed in alphabetical order as part of the directory's objective to serve as a user-friendly guide and educational resource. For the wider public who would like to know more about the key names in Singapore's visual arts scene, this directory will be a useful starting-point. For easy reference, readers may refer to either the content page (located at the front) or the index (located at the end) of the directory for an alphabetical list of artists and mediums respectively. The directory also functions as a profiling platform to give visibility to our artists and their works to international audiences.

An external panel of curators and art historians was set up to review and advise the list of artists for the publication. In maintaining objectivity, the publication's editorial team was not involved in the selection process. Invitation to the artists to participate in this publication is primarily based on the criterion of the artist's ongoing visual art practice and presentation of his or her works in the last five years. Significant contributions to the art scene, in Singapore and/or overseas, in the past 10 years were also taken into consideration. Participation in this publication is on voluntary basis. All possible efforts have been made to seek the participants' agreement and to ensure the information was accurate at the point of publication.

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Foreword

Kathy Lai

Chief Executive Officer, National Arts Council

The visual arts scene in Singapore has come a long way. From the early days of art associations, art schools and art exhibitions to the present development of multitudinous platforms at the local and international levels, many opportunities have opened up for our arts practitioners to cultivate their practice and showcase their works. Today, our art scene is a vibrant landscape that boasts good infrastructure, a growing art market and a wide range of art activities. Our artists have also increasingly made their mark in the global arts space, attaining special mentions and global acclaim at key international platforms such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta and the Cannes Film Festival.

Following our celebration of 50 years as a nation, we stand at the cusp of a new beginning and a new milestone. While there were a number of commendable efforts in the 1990s to capture the bio-data of Singaporean visual artists, there was no publication that provided a comprehensive listing of Singapore's visual artists and their development. Given the rapid progress across the scene in recent years, it is timely to embark on an artist directory to reflect on the progress of the visual arts scene in Singapore and set the stage for the future.

As Singapore builds on its position to become a global arts city and the gateway to Southeast Asian art, this directory will be a good introduction to over 280 visual arts practitioners from different generations and across various visual arts practices. It will also serve as an educational tool to foster greater awareness and appreciation of Singapore's visual artists both at home and abroad. More importantly, this directory is a celebration of the works and achievements of our visual artists whose passion and creativity have helped capture, contextualise and re-imagine the rich cultural past, present and future of Singapore.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the artists who have participated in this directory and kindly shared their practice and works. I believe that our public as well and international audiences will find this a rich and useful companion to our visual arts scene.

The Question of Art in Singapore

Shabbir Hussein Mustafa

Senior Curator, National Gallery Singapore

How does one begin to understand Singapore art? Are there shared experiences that connect artists in Singapore? How is Singapore art connected with other art developments regionally and globally? What are the key impulses that drive art in Singapore? Is it indeed possible to think about Singapore as a “non-territorial” category, where we consider how it has been represented both within Singapore and outside? How are we able to tell a history of Singapore through Singapore art? Moreover, how is art history or art historiography curated? Could one lobby for two types of art histories, one of the museum and the other of the academia? If such an imagination was to be put forward, what sort of an exposition would this generate?

Most accounts of Singapore’s art history begin with the rise of art associations, art schools and exhibitions in the early 20th century. However, taking a step further back in time to the 19th century will allow us to consider a wider range of sources of visual representation. During the 19th century, Singapore found itself at the crossroads of not just trade, but also an imagination of what a young colony could look like. Studying the colonial encounter and the impact of the arrival of migrants with varied value systems brings our attention to the localisation of visual traditions as well as the burgeoning of visual representations of Singapore as one of the Straits Settlements. Indeed, art was being produced across the Straits Settlements and within the Malay Peninsula, so to speak of art in Singapore in the 19th century, one has to also look at art in Penang and Melaka. The intersection of Singapore’s art history and history as a British colony is exemplified by 1819, the year of Singapore’s founding by Sir Stamford Raffles from the East India Company being also the year in which one of the earliest visual impressions of the Singapore landscape was created. The drawing was made when Captain Daniel Ross, a ship commandant on the fleet that brought Raffles and his emissary, Major-General William Farquhar to Singapore, commissioned one of his fellow sailors to sketch an outline of the Singapore harbour.

A settlement prior to the arrival of the British is known to have existed on the island as early as the 16th century. Yet it was in the 19th century that sojourners and settlers would bring with them various ideas that began to intermingle with the local landscape. This was a period when different individuals from varied backgrounds converged onto Singapore from far flung places such as China, the Indian Subcontinent and the territorial West. These encounters created contact points between Europe and Asia.

As a site of connection between East and West, the most banal yet awesome fact about Singapore is its location. The “Nanyang,” translated as “South Seas,” is a pre-modern trading term used by the Chinese for the Southeast Asian region, taking its compass direction south of China. Yet, Nanyang is not just a geographical term. It is an impression of a landscape and resource – a region rich in cultures with its various languages, ethnicities, customs, traditions and syncretic belief systems – that Chinese migrant artists encountered anew. The Nanyang School of painting that emerged in Singapore and then Malaya from the 1930s could be claimed as one of the earliest examples of a localised school of painting. The 1952 trip to Bali by Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, and Liu Kang, the Nanyang School stemmed from this discourse.

The earliest migrant artists who came to Singapore in the 1930s had trained in the art centres of the period such as Paris and Shanghai. These artists would eventually create artworks that expressed local subject matter in styles that integrated their understanding of Chinese ink painting and the School of Paris traditions. Tchang Ju Chi was one of the earliest practising artists in Singapore, a contemporary of Xu Beihong and Georgette Chen. These artists were well-travelled and reflected cosmopolitan influences in their artistic practice. As early as the 1930s there was evidence of artists’ conscious reworking of Western conventions to develop a local expression of self and place. The establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1938 can be seen as part of this greater momentum. Tchang, who worked in the medium of oil, taught at NAFA. His paintings feature subjects that would become iconic in the Nanyang School: tropical fruits and local people.

Art education and practice in Singapore flourished until the advent of World War II. When Singapore fell to the Japanese forces in 1942, many artists and intellectuals who were active in anti-war efforts, either fled the island, or were among the first rounded up. Nonetheless, the war left its imprint on Singapore art history through the pacifist activities of key figures in the art scene. For instance, Tchang Ju Chi raised funds for the anti-Japanese war efforts in China by co-organising exhibitions with visiting artists such as Xu Beihong. Tchang lost his life during the Sook Ching (肃清). Some of Xu’s best-known artworks were created during the tumultuous years he spent in Singapore. Whilst many art groups and schools had to be closed down during the Japanese Occupation, artistic production did not cease completely. Artists such as Liu Kang and Lim Hak Tai continued to create artworks, reflecting their experiences of the war.

By the late 1950s, many artists from diverse backgrounds sought to establish a local identity for art created in this region. Apart from the Nanyang School, there were parallel artistic developments of other ethnic groups. For instance, artists like Suri bin Mohyani was known for his kampong scenes and scenery of rivers and lakes. Suri bin Mohyani was also instrumental in encouraging artists like Latiff Mohidin, who held his first exhibition at the Kota Raja Secondary School in Singapore in 1951.

After World War II, competing views of how Singapore could be represented began to take shape through discourse and art-making. Between the 1950s and 1970s, artists responded to the political struggles against colonialism, the quest for independence and nationhood, the clash of ideologies in the global context of the Cold War, as well as the social changes that were wrought by industrialisation and urbanisation. A particular group of artists came to prominence under the banner of Equator Art Society (established in 1954); founding members include Chua Mia Tee, Lee Boon Wang and Lai Kui Fang. Many had trained under the older migrant artists who laid the foundations of the Nanyang School, but in their art, they turned to Social Realism as a way to remark upon social conditions, creating artworks with political undertones. Most of them were first-generation Singapore artists.

With the birth of Singapore as sovereign nation in 1965 and the rapid pace of industrialisation and urbanisation, a different frame of reference emerged for realist art. Nowhere is this more evident than in the watercolour medium, which gained a stronghold in the art scene of the 1960s. Although it can be traced directly to the British watercolour tradition since the 1930s, the techniques and subject matter were further developed by local watercolourists such as Lim Cheng Hoe and Ong Kim Seng in the second half of the 20th century. In 1969 the Singapore Watercolour Society was established by 13 artists; among them was established artist Chen Chong Swee. Through diverse styles, watercolourists transformed scenes from a fast-changing national landscape into pictorial sites charged with longing and nostalgia.

The beginning of the Modern Art Society in 1964 was a watershed moment in Singapore art history. Its creation was symptomatic of local artists’ shift in perceptions and value systems towards the non-representational, part of an international dialogue as well as responses to a sense of artistic adventure beyond the confines of Social Realism. The 1960s marked a shift, led by loosely organised artist associations such as the Alpha Gallery (established in 1971), which argued publicly that the medium and materials of the artwork were by themselves the reality and that a work of art ought not to refer to anything other than itself. These artists called for a fresh perspective of what a painting or sculpture could mean.

For its ties to “tradition”, delicately balanced with its capacity to make transparent the fracture between modernity and the evolving present, the story of ink in Singapore art bears further examination. In terms of the strength and longevity of its practice in Singapore, it is without parallel in Southeast Asia. Ink can serve as an interesting interstitial site of discourse about Singapore art. It encapsulates a transfer of legacies from their country and culture of origin to Singapore; local artists’ grasp of its deep history and cultural associations even as they seek greater innovations within the medium. Since the 1950s and 1960s, artists such as Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng opened another avenue of ink innovation by bridging aesthetic legacies between Chinese ink and Western modernism. This was further developed by a group of younger painters from the 1980s. Key artists such as Tang Da Wu are known for their unconventional use of ink, opening up new readings.

The 1970s is marked by the activities of artist collectives such as The Artists Village (TAV), Trimurti and 5th Passage, and the movement of Singapore artists within the global biennale system of the 1980s and 1990s – three critical directions that developed almost simultaneously. Art in Singapore began to increasingly involve a wholly different set of negotiations, one between the artist, art institution and State. This was most clear in the emergence of performance art as one of the most significant yet ephemeral mediums in the 1980s and 1990s.

The story of art in Singapore has multitudinous shapes, as this essay has sought to invoke, and indeed it is borne out too by the splendid diversity within this visual arts directory. The story of Singapore art is not a rigid and static entity, but an ever-evolving question that requires further probing and examination, drawing our attention to new ways of understanding our past through art. It is also one way to say that the story of art in Singapore is made relevant and gains greater strength through our collective care and attention towards it.

A Brief History of the Singapore Visual Arts Scene

June Yap

Independent art historian and curator

As an index of artists, this Visual Arts Directory is not the nation's first. A similar reference was published in 1992 under the editorship of artist Tan Swie Hian, and launched by then-chairman of the National Arts Council (NAC), Professor Tommy Koh. Although this would mean that the present publication is not unique, to understand the visual arts scene of Singapore today is to go back to the context of this earlier directory in the 1990s, when a host of activities directed towards the furthering of cultural development occurred. The aim of the 1992 directory was to facilitate the growth of the art scene, and it was one amongst a number of measures of its time that also included the establishment of the NAC. In fact, the same year that the Council was formed, 1991, another catalogue documenting painters and sculptors was published, *Art & Artist Speak*, which was reissued in 1998 as *Singapore Artists Speak*. But what prompted this surge of cultural initiatives in the 1990s?

The catalyst of these measures intended to invigorate the arts via policy was the 1989 Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, a report that in turn had its roots in the 1985 Economic Review Committee discussion. Concurrent with this renewed interest in the arts in 1985 was the move of the administration of the arts from the Ministry of Culture (established in 1959) to the Ministry of Community Development, along with the introduction of the Arts Housing Scheme the same year. It was certainly a time of change. The administration of the arts would subsequently come under the Ministry of Information and the Arts in 1990, renamed the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts in the new millennium, and then, into the present, reconsolidated under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth as of 2012.

In addition to the NAC, the 1989 Report recommended a national arts centre that was realised as the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in 2002, a national heritage trust which was instituted as a statutory board – the National Heritage Board (NHB) – in 1993, and a national art museum at the former St. Joseph's Institution as the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), thus transitioning the National Museum Art Gallery begun in 1976 into a full-fledged museum entity of its own. With the opening of the National Gallery Singapore in November 2015, in combination with SAM (set up in 1996), the total volume of exhibition space available for the presentation of the visual arts increases substantially, and, with it, an expectation of a further boost to the arts scene. Looking back, it might be said that this period of the late 1980s through the 1990s set the course for the visual arts scene. But the realisation of its course did not come to pass by virtue of policy alone. Rather, the art scene as observed today is the result of the cumulative efforts of a variety of institutions, organisations and, importantly, artists.

Apart from the national agencies and institutions, another venue that has had impact on the visual arts scene is The Substation. Mooted in 1985, with Cultural Medallion recipient and playwright

Kuo Pao Kun as its founding director, The Substation opened its doors in 1990. While the gallery space within the multi-disciplinary arts centre has been limited, it has nevertheless been the site for many a critical experimental presentation, performance and gathering of artists. Another noteworthy space is Sculpture Square. Previously a church, a school, then briefly a restaurant and a car workshop, the conversion of the venue to cater to the arts was first conceived by sculptor Sun Yu-Li in 1999. Presently it is the site of Objectifs – Centre for Photography and Filmmaking founded in 2003, continuing to prove that the nineteenth-century building is an ideal space for the presentation and appreciation of the arts.

However, it is not through infrastructure alone that an arts scene develops, and a number of programmes administered by the institutions through the years have played important roles. Two key initiatives amongst such programmes are: the President's Young Talents exhibition inaugurated in 2001 as a platform for showcasing emerging artists locally; and its complement, the nation's participation at the Venice Biennale, with its first occasion at the international event also in 2001 for the Biennale's 49th edition. As increasing efforts were put into promoting Singapore artists to others abroad, the focus also turned to bringing international attention to art within Singapore, and, extending from the experiences of national art exhibitions, in preparatory run-up to the inauguration of the Singapore Biennale in 2006 were Seni: Singapore 2004, Art and the Contemporary co-organised by SAM and the NAC, and the Singapore Art Show in 2005, respectively representing international and regional, and local art.



Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and his wife, and the Minister for Information and The Arts and Minister for Health Brigadier-General George Yeo Yong Boon looking at the exhibit at the Official Opening of the Singapore Art Museum at the Old Saint Joseph's Institution.
Photo from the Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Besides spaces and programmes for exhibition and presentation, art education too has been essential to the art scene, not only in producing artists, but also in championing aesthetic appreciation at the broad level. Pivotal to this history of education is the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) that was established in 1938 with China-born artist Lim Hak Tai as its founding principal. Counting amongst its teaching staff other key artists from China who had settled in Singapore such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Georgette Chen, NAFA was the main art school in Singapore till 1984 when the LASALLE College of the Arts, initially known as St. Patrick's Arts Centre, opened. More recently, in 2008 the first pre-tertiary educational institution for the arts was set up with the School of The Arts (SOTA), further enlarging options and support available to aspiring young artists in Singapore and the region.

The logical extension of this convergence of art production and education taking place within the art schools is the development of platforms for artistic discourse and research. This intersection of art, research and education in Singapore can be traced back to the University of Malaya Art Museum that was founded in 1955, and from which, in a consolidation of art collections, rose the NUS Museum as part of the National University of Singapore's Centre for the Arts. As for LASALLE, in 1986 the school's art gallery was opened with a contribution of artworks from the philanthropist and artist Dr. Earl Lu. From 2001 the eponymous Earl Lu Gallery operated in tandem with the Contemporary Asian

Arts Centre, transitioning in 2004 into the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Singapore. Similarly bridging academia and art presentation is the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA). Begun under the auspices of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and kicking off its schedule of exhibitions and public programmes in 2014, unlike its contemporaries, the NTU CCA is housed at Gillman Barracks, rather than at the university's campus.

Originally set up in 1936 to support the colonial British infantry, one of a number of locations incorporating the arts that has since developed in the second half of 2000, Gillman Barracks reopened in 2012 as an art precinct with international and local galleries as its tenants. As an art and lifestyle precinct, in its design of a mixed-use enclave blending art, craft and dining offerings, Gillman Barracks is comparable to earlier art venues such as the neighbourhood of Dempsey Hill, previously the Tanglin Barracks (developed in 2007), and Old School, situated at the former Methodist Girls' School on Mt. Sophia (which has since closed).. The galleries within these precincts operate as commercial ventures, and in straddling the role of supporting artistic production and the sale of art, they join the visual arts infrastructure complex in the area of trade and commercially-oriented projects that, since 2011, includes the regional and international art fair, Art Stage, which has increasingly taken over the role played by annual art fairs.



Tang Da Wu, *Jantung Pisang* (2006), performance with Chuyia Chia at Your Mother Gallery, accompanied by neighbourhood children Gautama, Gausitum, and Nisan. Photo by Dan Yeo, courtesy of Your Mother Gallery.

Finally, not forgetting the artists central to these undertakings, the history of artists organising and producing initiatives in support of artist practices and the art scene, goes back to the early days of Singapore, with groups such as the Equator Art Society (registered in 1956) and the Modern Art Society (founded in 1964). Besides facilitating the presentation of art and the representation of artists, artist groups and art societies have created networks for Singapore artists and enriched the community. Significantly, like the new policies that were introduced from the 1990s, these initiatives and organisations enabled and advocated for the experimental in art practice; examples of which are the seminal groups, The Artists Village (TAV), begun in 1988, and 5th Passage, from 1991. Continuing the trend of artist-run ventures following TAV and 5th Passage, in particular providing platforms for artists at early stages of their practices, were U.T.O.P.I.A., Plastique Kinetic Worms, Your Mother Gallery, Pink Ark and nog studio that emerged in the later part of the 1990s into the early 2000s. In the same period, turning attention to curatorial and discursive practices in addition to activating networks, were the programme-oriented p-10 and Wunderspaze. Moving into the second half of the 2000s, in an extension of engagements with public space and community begun in the 1990s, the following emerged: Post-Museum and Food#03, Grey Projects, Open House (OH!) and Latent Spaces. Among them, only TAV, Your Mother Gallery, Post-Museum, Grey Projects and Open House continue to operate in the present. Yet, in providing alternative approaches to art, its production and reception, these initiatives generated by artists, however long or short their term, have been crucial to the history and the development of the visual arts scene. For, although Singapore's first Ministry of Culture was established in 1959 and the development of the visual arts, as observed above, has since progressed tremendously, the true measure and mark of the art scene lies in its artists.

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