



# NGUAN

***Untitled, from the series Singapore***

2013

Archival pigment prints

100 × 100 cm

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

The Articulation Prize Singapore Learning Pack is published by the Singapore Art Museum in conjunction with the programme Articulation Prize Singapore

© 2022 Singapore Art Museum

Copyright in the content of this Educational Resource may also reside in persons and entities other than Singapore Art Museum (SAM). SAM is committed to respecting intellectual property rights. Please contact SAM should you have any concerns. No part of this Educational Resource may be reproduced without the prior written consent of the rightful copyright owners. SAM takes no responsibility for your use of this Educational Resource.

**Please direct all enquiries about the Articulation Prize Singapore Learning Pack to:  
[education@singaporeartmuseum.sg](mailto:education@singaporeartmuseum.sg)**



## Did You Know?

1. In the *Singapore* series, Nguan succinctly captures the deep sense of alienation that exists in and permeates the city-state by taking intimate and unstaged portraits of strangers on the streets of Singapore. The artist observes that this sense of alienation is not unique to Singapore and is prevalent in many metropolises.
2. To create this series, Nguan wandered around the streets of Singapore every day, searching for strangers to photograph on a medium format film camera. Sometimes, he would walk for miles or stand completely still just to find a suitable subject. Nguan would capture his subject the moment he made eye contact with them. He terms this moment of encounter “the decisive glance,”<sup>i</sup> arguing that “the decisive glance” cannot be recreated in a staged portrait.
3. When selecting the subjects for his photographs, the artist explains “[i]n general, I look for faces that can bear the weight of the complex dreams and anxieties and narratives that I wish to project onto them.”<sup>ii</sup>

Visit the [SAM Learning Gallery](#) to find out more about this artwork.



## Let's Talk!

1. Study the series of photographs. What adjectives come to mind when you look at these photographs?
2. Street photography involves the recording of everyday life and people in public spaces, often in a candid manner and without the knowledge of the subject. Observe the people in Nguan's photographs. What do you think they were thinking at the precise moment they were captured by the camera?
3. The artist chose to use a muted colour palette and soft tones for this series of photographs. Imagine the photographs were black and white images instead. How would the mood of these photographs change? How would you interpret them differently?
4. For the *Singapore* series, the artist did not inform his chosen subjects before capturing them in his photographs. What do you think are some of the possible considerations and implications of capturing unstaged portraits of strangers?
5. If you were the artist, how would you select your subjects? How would you describe the impulse you have to visually document them? Would you have a social purpose in mind or a visual message you would like to convey?
6. During the National Day week in 2016, Nguan took over the New Yorker Photo Instagram account, filling it with images of scenes that are familiar to Singaporeans. How do you think social media has changed the way(s) in which art is promoted and disseminated?



## About the Artist:

**Tan Ju Nguan** (aka Nguan) is a Singapore-based photographer whose practice explores the subjects of loneliness, alienation and living in cities, and examines issues related to Singapore's urban condition. Nguan spent fifteen years overseas before returning to Singapore in 2010. As a result, his photographs carry a hint of the perspective of an outsider looking in, studying the people living in Singapore and surreptitiously capturing stolen moments that others may have overlooked. Nguan has participated in local and international exhibitions, including *2014 Frames: Projecting International Photography*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow (2014); *Chobi Mela VII: Photographs Connecting People of The World*, Dhaka (2013); *24/7*, Sculpture Square, Singapore (2013); and *Microcosmos*, Goodman Arts Centre Gallery, Singapore (2012).



## Find Out More:

Chew, Hui Min. "9 questions with Singaporean photographer Nguan who took over New Yorker Photo Instagram." *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/9-questions-with-singaporean-photographer-nguan-who-took-over-new-yorker-photo> (accessed 3 March 2022).

CNN. "Photographer subverts Singapore's 'sterile' reputation by capturing dream-like images of the city-state." *CNN Style*. <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/nguan-singapore-photographer/index.html> (accessed 3 March 2022).

National Heritage Board. "Untitled, from the series Singapore." *Roots.sg*. <https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1325683> (accessed 17 February 2022).

Schmuhl, Elizabeth. "Somewhere Unanticipated: An Interview with Nguan." *MQR*. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2017/12/somewhere-unanticipated-an-interview-with-nguan/> (accessed 3 March 2022).

Storm, Rebecca. "A Conversation with Nguan." *The Editorial Magazine*. <http://the-editorialmagazine.com/a-conversation-with-nguan/> (accessed 3 March 2022).

Tan, Ju Nguan. "Bio." *Nguan.tv*. <http://nguan.tv/about.htm> (accessed 17 February 2022).

Wang, Nadya. "Home Truly: Interview with Singaporean photographer Nguan." *Luxuo*. <https://www.luxuo.com/culture/art/home-truly-interview-with-singaporean-photographer-nguan.html> (accessed 3 March 2022).

---

i National Heritage Board, "Untitled, from the series Singapore," *Roots*, <https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1325683> (accessed 17 February 2022).

ii Ibid.