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**DALAM SOUTHEAST ASIA RAISES THE CURTAIN ON LESS-EXPLORED ARTISTS IN  
THE REGION**

*National Gallery Singapore's first-ever Project Space spotlights fresh narratives around  
Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art in a series of rotating exhibitions*



*Exhibition views of *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin.**

*Image credit: Joseph Nair/ Memphis West Pictures*

**Singapore, 27 October 2021** – National Gallery Singapore invites visitors to a journey into emerging perspectives in *Dalam Southeast Asia*, its first-ever Project Space that features under-studied artists from the region, and innovative curatorial approaches in the presentation of Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art. Open to the public from 29 October, the space will launch with its debut show, *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, which will run till 10 April 2022. It is the first of four rotating, small-format exhibitions slated to roll out in the space approximately every six months till 2023.

**DALAM**  
SOUTHEAST  
ASIA

*Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to engage various audiences by diversifying the narratives featured by the Gallery, with a particular focus on representing less-studied artists and innovate more inclusive forms of storytelling. In line with the self-reflexive practices being adopted by museums worldwide, the Gallery contributes to this global moment from a distinctly Southeast Asian standpoint by sparking conversations around the myriad questions confronting the production, display, and writing of modern and contemporary art in the region.

*Dalam Southeast Asia* is conceived as a small format exhibition, i.e., a specially designed space that takes into consideration emerging questions around sustainable museum design and display techniques. *Dalam Southeast Asia* is located in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery, and is one of the 15 galleries housing the long-term exhibition *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*. Its location alongside the UOB Southeast Gallery enables the public to gain an ‘inside look’ into the fresh curatorial approaches against the backdrop of key masterpieces in Singapore’s National Collection. A majority of the artworks in *Dalam Southeast Asia* exhibitions will be drawn from the National Collection as well, including many never-before-seen recent acquisitions and donations.

Dr Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore said, “*Dalam Southeast Asia* marks a significant turning point in the Gallery’s curatorial efforts to inspire dialogues around the region’s modern and contemporary art. In our mission to become a museum that is inclusive in our selection and presentation of artists and their works, we are launching our first-ever project space that debuts new artistic and curatorial perspectives in an attempt to expand and engage with the very narratives the Gallery set up in *Between Declarations and Dreams*. We encourage visitors to step inside the worlds and works of underexplored Southeast Asian artists, to appreciate the local and regional artistic viewpoints and practices that make up Southeast Asia’s diverse arts landscape.”

### **Novel and inclusive approaches behind *Dalam Southeast Asia***

*Dalam Southeast Asia* experiments with new approaches and ideas around the display of artworks within the physical gallery.

The Malay word ‘*dalam*’ means ‘inside’. The word also carries esoteric undertones suggesting the ‘deep’, ‘within’ or ‘interior’. In this spirit, *Dalam Southeast Asia* extends an invitation to ‘go deeper’ into Southeast Asian art stories by providing visitors a glimpse into what it means to tell and experience the story of the region’s art. This goes against the traditional process of

museums turning to art history's established narratives to determine which artists and works to include in exhibitions. In contrast, *Dalam Southeast Asia* and its series of rotating exhibitions strategically flips this process by making brand-new curatorial research visible, thereby, creating room for thinking about display as a form of research. The public is invited to approach modern and contemporary art in the region not as a fixed, canonical narrative, but rather as one that is open to ongoing critique and revision.

By periodically revolving the works it displays, the space continuously refreshes the stories it tells and explores new questions and artists with every show.

### **Inside *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin***

*The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin* is the first exhibition to be held in this project space. The show seeks to explore how the world – including Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and beyond – was imagined and encountered in Southeast Asia's modern art, as well as how the category "Southeast Asia's modern art" can be imagined given the varying histories of the region's nations.

To find answers, the exhibition focuses on artists Chen Cheng Mei (陈城梅; b. 1927, Singapore; d. 2020, Singapore) and You Khin (យូ ឃីន; b. 1947, Cambodia; d. 2009, Thailand) – outliers in most accounts of art in Singapore, Cambodia, and Southeast Asia – to spotlight the period between the 1970s and the 2000s, when encounters with people and places in far-flung locations across the Global South were a recurring inspiration for both artists.

The exhibition title refers to You Khin's work of the same name, *The Tailors and the Mannequins* brings attention to the artists' works that emphasise fabrics and clothing, which in turn has a symbolic function in highlighting the exterior rather than interior qualities of the people the artists met on their travels. Their works often show a distanced relationship to unfamiliar people and cultures that echoes the distance between the tailors and mannequins depicted in You Khin's work.



You Khin. *Untitled (The Tailors and the Mannequins)*. 1981. Oil on canvas, 83 x 60 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Chen and You Khin are paired in the first show due to the various parallels found between them, beyond their shared label as outliers. Despite being born two decades apart, not knowing each other, and practicing art in very different styles, Chen and You Khin shared similar backgrounds in their art education, spent a long time overseas to develop their personal styles, resisted conventional expectations of their gender, and displayed early interest in Khmer heritage. Shared concerns underpin both artists' works, including their tendency to record ordinary people and everyday scenes, a fascination with cloth and other tactile surfaces, and an attraction to picturing encounters with distant places and unfamiliar cultures. Overall, their works provide significant insights into their views of the world, which address the show's central questions.

For visitors expecting Southeast Asian artists to depict mainly Southeast Asian scenes, this exhibition poses a novel surprise. Many of the artworks depict people and places that the artists encountered very far from "home" – such as women doing laundry that Chen sketched in Pakistan near the Afghanistan border, or bakers selling bread near You Khin's home in Qatar.

Visitors can also expect a distinct set-up in the first show. To convey a sense of "rawness" to the site and its platform for experimentation and "inside" access to the Gallery's collection, *Dalam Southeast Asia* is fitted with a modular and see-through grid wall system – a new spatial element that can be used flexibly and repeatedly to display information, and provides a sustainable design feature fit for future exhibitions. The design of this modular wall system is inspired by the racks used to store artworks in the Gallery's collection.



*Exhibition views of *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin.**

*Image credit: Joseph Nair/ Memphis West Pictures*

The exhibition is accompanied by a free e-catalogue accessible via a QR code inside *Dalam Southeast Asia* or on the [Gallery's website](#). The e-catalogue enhances the accessibility of the exhibition, and subsequent projects in *Dalam Southeast Asia*.

Future exhibitions slated to show in *Dalam Southeast Asia* will continue to spotlight more Southeast Asian artists and pioneering studies on lesser-known art practices in the region. Information on each show will be released closer to its respective opening date.

General admission applies to *Dalam Southeast Asia* and *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*. For more information, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-tailors-mannequins>. Media assets are accessible via this [link](#). The artists' biographies are available in [Annex A](#). Descriptions of the artwork highlights are available in [Annex B](#).

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**About National Gallery Singapore**

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution which oversees the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art. Situated at the birthplace of modern Singapore, in the heart of the Civic District, the Gallery is housed in two national monuments - City Hall and former Supreme Court - that have been beautifully restored and transformed into this exciting 64,000 square metre venue. Reflecting Singapore's unique heritage and geographical location, the Gallery aims to be a progressive museum that creates dialogues between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world to foster and inspire a creative and inclusive society. This is reflected in our collaborative research, education, long-term and special exhibitions, and innovative programming. The Gallery also works with international museums such as Centre Pompidou, Musée d'Orsay, Tate Britain, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT) and National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA), to jointly present Southeast Asian art in the global context, positioning Singapore as a key node in the global visual arts scene.

In 2020, the Gallery was the only museum in Southeast Asia that received a ranking in The Art Newspaper's annual global survey of attendance at art museums, taking 20<sup>th</sup> place. It was the first museum in Asia to receive the Children in Museums Award by the European Museum Academy and Hands On! International Association of Children in Museums in 2018. The Gallery also won the awards for "Best Theme Attraction" at TTG Travel Awards 2017, "Best Attraction Experience", "Breakthrough Contribution to Tourism" and "Best Customer Service (Attractions)" at the prestigious Singapore Tourism Awards in 2016 for its role in adding to the vibrancy of Singapore's tourism landscape.

## Annex A: Biographies of Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin

*Chen Cheng Mei* (陈城梅; b. 1927, Singapore; d. 2020, Singapore)



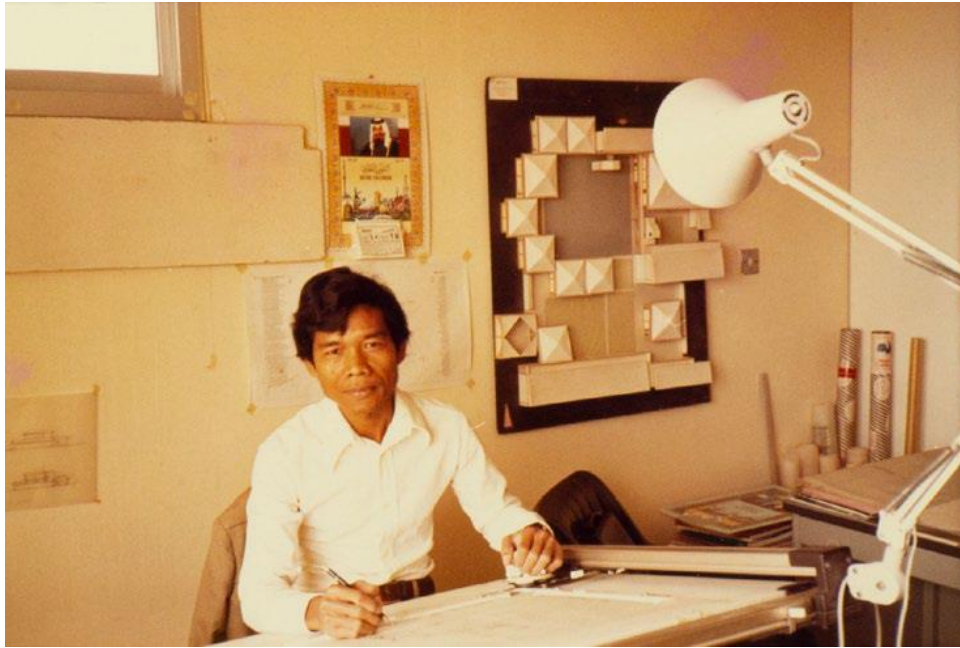
*Chen Cheng Mei at her solo exhibition at NAFA, Singapore, 2014. Image courtesy of the family of the artist*

Born in 1927, Singapore artist Chen Cheng Mei is known for her vivid coloured oil paintings and technically accomplished prints. Graduated from NAFA in 1954, Chen majored in western painting and was mentored by Cheong Soo Pieng and Lim Hak Tai. Eager to improve her line-works, Chen also studied Chinese calligraphy under Chui Ta Tee.

From the 1960s to 70s, Chen is celebrated as one of the pioneers of the Ten Men Art Group – a collective of Singapore artists who travelled through Southeast Asia and wider Asia in search of inspiration, marking a significant regionalist turn in artistic practice. While appreciation of Chen's work mostly revolved around her time with the Ten Men Art Group, her role is still less well-known than those of her male counterparts. Furthermore, her later period of solo journeys – the focus of the exhibition – is even less appreciated despite her being one of only a small number of Southeast Asian artists whose work engaged with Africa and South Asia during the decades following decolonization. Travel and nature informed her art throughout her life, and she took dozens of study trips to Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific, creating a refreshing style, which is unique and naïve.

While her paintings and prints are included in the National Collection, and her 1973 painting *Angkor Wat* is currently featured in the DBS Singapore Gallery at National Gallery Singapore, Chen has not received the same amount of recognition as her male counterparts from the Ten Men Art Group.

*You Khin* (ឃ្មុំ ឃីន; b. 1947, Cambodia; d. 2009, Thailand)



*You Khin at work as an architect in Qatar, c. mid-1980s. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of You Muoy, wife of the artist.*

You Khin was born in 1947, in a village along the Mekong River. At a young age, Khin's parents sent him to the capital, Phnom Penh to live with his uncle and pursue his studies. He enrolled in the Royal University of Fine Arts, and even as a teenager, was an active community member and prolific artist. He participated in various exhibitions in Phnom Penh. Unfortunately, most of You Khin's early works were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian genocide.

In 1973, he graduated with a degree in Interior Architecture. After graduation, he left Cambodia on a French scholarship to study in Marseilles at the Luminy School of Fine Arts.



After graduating, You Khin moved to Africa, living first in Sudan and then in Ivory Coast. He painted prolifically and held solo exhibitions in both countries. In 1981, the artist moved to Qatar, where he lived for almost 20 years, until 1999. While living in Doha and working as an architect, You Khin continued to be a prolific artist, holding several solo exhibitions and attracting media attention in the Middle East. His paintings of street scenes, markets and people typically included birds, which he personally identified as symbols of freedom and freedoms lost. Living abroad during the Khmer Rouge years, the loss of freedom in Cambodia



preyed heavily on his mind and as a tribute to his fallen compatriots, he caged the birds and added locks and chains to symbolize oppression. He returned to Cambodia in 2004.

More than 30 years after his departure from Phnom Penh, You Khin's work was exhibited in his native Cambodia. His solo exhibition at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh, June of 2009, was met with astounding praise and recognition of his importance as a key figure in Cambodian art history. You Khin died suddenly in August of 2009 from lung cancer, he was 62 years old.

## Annex B: Artists' highlight works and descriptions

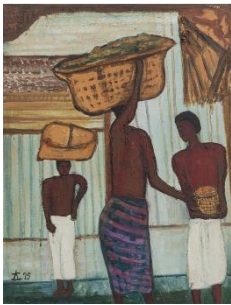
Artwork	Description
 <p>You Khin. <i>Untitled (The Tailors and the Mannequins)</i> 1981. Oil on canvas, 83 x 60cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>What are these two tailors thinking of as they sew? We don't know: the artist has kept their inner lives opaque, hidden from view. Their workshop is sparse, and the tailors keep their eyes averted, engrossed in labour. This painting was made while the artist You Khin lived and worked in Ivory Coast in West Africa.</p>
 <p>You Khin. <i>Untitled (People Awaiting Cargo Ship)</i>. 2000. Oil on canvas, 116 x 84cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>A crowd of people greet the arrival of a merchant ship with eagerly outstretched arms. You Khin based this scene on recollections from his decades living in the busy port city of Doha in Qatar. The artist often visited the dockyards there, sometimes witnessing the delivery of food aid as cargo ships arrived.</p> <p>Sea freight is essential to the mechanics of global trade, and this painting lays bare a facet of the planetary movement of people and goods seldom seen first-hand.</p>



You Khin.  
*Untitled (Doha Scene: Pakistani Bakers).*  
 1990.  
 Oil on canvas, 65 x 100cm.  
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Dressed in resplendent white kurta, the central figures in this painting are gathered around an oven where flatbreads are being prepared and served. The men are absorbed in conversation with each other, uninterested in the presence of the lingering artist.

This scene records the local Pakistani bakery that You Khin often visited with his children during his years in Doha. The artist was drawn to other migrants, as his was one of the only Cambodian families living in Qatar. This painting offers an insight into how You Khin passed time in his adopted home by observing the mundane details of everyday life.



Chen Cheng Mei.  
*Market Scene, Sri Lanka.*  
 1975. Oil on canvas, 61 x 80cm  
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



Chen Cheng Mei made this painting after one of several trips to Sri Lanka. While she lived and worked in Singapore, Chen travelled extensively in Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere. Her journeys inspired a planetary consciousness that is reflected in her artwork.



Chen Cheng Mei.  
*Eating Rice.* 1977, 60.5 x 106cm.  
 Oil on canvas.  
 Collection of Dr Lucy Ooi.

What is the woman in this painting thinking? Her ambiguous facial expression gives little away. The woman's clothes identify her as an amah (nursemaid). Despite living a comfortable life in Singapore, Chen was often drawn to migrant workers for her subjects.

The scene is based closely on a photograph that the artist took in Singapore's Chinatown, on display in a vitrine. Chen's use of overlapping semi-transparent colours, such as the lucent mint, aqua and taupe interspersed with white on the woman's blouse, is typical of her paintings

	<p>and etchings made between the 1970s and 2000s.</p>
 <p>Chen Cheng Mei. <i>Kenyan Chieftains.</i> 1991. Oil on canvas, 91 x 112cm. Private collection, Singapore.</p>	<p>Flowing crimson robes dominate this composition. The painting conveys Chen's thrill at seeing these vivid colours during her visit to Kenya, on one of several study trips she took to Africa. As a tourist, Chen's primary motivation was to seek artistic inspiration. Here, as in many of her artworks, Chen emphasises the attire worn by the people she encountered; their feelings remain opaque. The artist approached her travels as an opportunity to experiment with colour and form, rather than offer insight into the cultures she encountered.</p>
 <p>Chen Cheng Mei. <i>Trading Room.</i> 1974. Oil on canvas, 66 x 101.5cm. Gift of anonymous donor. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>This painting depicts the trading floor at one of Singapore's stock exchange companies. The dark green blackboard features stock names written by brokers; the black ribbons winding across the floor are ticker tape, used for recording trades at the time. Chen worked as a translator in a Singapore bank for 20 years, retiring three years before making this painting.</p> <p>The artwork offers a wryly comic insight into an engine room of speculative global capitalism, revealing aspects of the planetary circulation of capital that are usually hidden from view.</p>