

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 APRIL 2024, 10 AM

**“Figuring” art through elements of nature at National Gallery Singapore’s
*Figuring a Scene***

The fourth edition of Dalam Southeast Asia brings a unique curatorial approach that uncovers a fresh perspective of understanding different forms of art



Installation view, *Figuring a Scene*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

SINGAPORE, 5 April 2024 – How do you understand and make sense of artworks? **Dr. Patrick Flores**, Deputy Director of Curatorial and Research at National Gallery Singapore suggests that elements from nature can lend meaning by animating social forms and shaping each viewer’s unique understanding of artworks. This inquiry is explored in National Gallery Singapore’s upcoming exhibition, ***Figuring a Scene***, which opens from **5 April to 1 December 2024**.

Housed in **Dalam Southeast Asia** – the Gallery’s first-ever experimental project space advocating for the lesser-known narratives and the recalibration of the typical collections-based long-term display – Dr. Flores presents artworks in **six episodes**, trying out a curatorial approach that departs from the loose chronological order of the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery.

Each section is based on a natural element perceived in the artwork, inviting visitors to consider how elements of nature can draw out different interpretations based on each

individual's situation, knowledge and lived experiences. These elements are commonplace, and usually taken for granted, resulting in the need for them to be re-experienced in the context of an exhibition and the life of art forms. The episodes can be viewed collectively or independently. When viewed collectively, visitors may uncover links between the exhibition materials across the different episodes.

Dr. Flores says, “National Gallery Singapore is constantly pushing its limits on how exhibitions are curatorially presented to provide visitors with an unparalleled experience with a unique Southeast Asian perspective. As I worked on my first exhibition for the Gallery, it was important that I continue to advance the Gallery’s vision. *Figuring a Scene* diverges from the largely linear method of storytelling seen in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery to encourage fresh perspectives on viewing, understanding and appreciating Southeast Asian artworks and materials. We hope that the exhibition will evoke curiosity on the process of creating forms and how sensitive materials like art become significant within specific settings.”

Episode 1: Shadow - Examining the discourse between nature and technology



Sharon Chin. *Creatures on the Move (In the Death of Night)*. 2023-2024. Plywood and printed posters, dimensions variable.
Installation view of *Figuring a Scene*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

The exhibition opens with an artwork born from activism. Malaysian artist Sharon Chin’s *Creatures on the Move (In the Death of Night)* is a commission piece featuring animal placards used in Chin’s street protests for climate justice. The artwork reflects the global ecological crisis and the artist’s experience when an oil refinery was built in Port Dickson near her home. Using placards, Chin casts the shadows of the animals found in her garden against the

background of the oil refinery to stage the discourse between national development and ecological preservation.

Episode 2: Fruit - Southeast Asia's culture as told through depictions of durian



Anusapati. *Single Object*. Undated. Wood (durian), 48 x 75 x 47 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.



Liu Kang. *Durian Vendor*. 1957. Oil on board, 47.5 x 118.5 cm. Gift of the artist's family. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



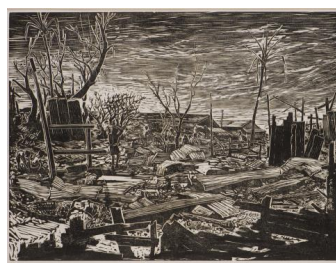
Robert Zhao Renhui. *Durian Tree, Bukit Panjang*. 2024. Inkjet print on fabric, mounted on wooden light box with LED lights, 140 x 210 x 12 cm. Collection of the artist and ShanghART Gallery. Installation view of *Figuring a Scene*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Synonymous with Southeast Asia, the region's native fruit is even dubbed the "national fruit" of Singapore. In this episode, visitors are encouraged to explore the cultural identity of the region through different portrayals of the King of Fruits – in the form of sculpture, painting and photography and reflect on how it was fabled in colonial times to become an iconic part of Singapore's national identity. Anusapati's *Single Object* is sculpted from a durian tree and alludes to the *kentongan*, a Javanese musical instrument. Southeast Asian visitors would likely recognise the scene painted in Liu Kang's *Durian Vendor* which is reminiscent of the markets where the fruit is being prepared and sold. Robert Zhao Renhui photographed what is believed to be one of the older durian trees in the Bukit Panjang where it stands in a forest of what used to be a *kampung* before its evacuation in the 1980s.

Episode 3: Fire - Singapore's national development tracked in paintings



Lim Hak Tai. *Fire*. 1956. Acrylic on board, 59 x 75.5 cm. Gift of Mr Lim Yew Kuan. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



Lim Yew Kuan. *After Fire*. 1966. Woodblock print on paper, 48.4 x 62.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



Tan Choo Kuan. *Rebuilding Bukit Ho Swee*. 1962. Pencil on paper, 26.4 x 37.5 cm. Gift of Ms Tan Teng Teng. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

The Bukit Ho Swee fire on 25 May 1961 is one of the biggest fires in Singapore's history and, retrospectively, resulted in the destruction that prompted the country's first big step towards national development through public housing. This episode centres on the imagery of fires in Malaya and independent Singapore to draw recollections of the monumental change in their growth through a series of five works by local artists Tan Choo Kuan, Lim Yew Kuan, Lim Hak Tai and Liu Kang.

Episode 4: Air - Different ways to present an invisible element



Installation view of *Figuring a Scene*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Air, although omnipresent, is naked to the human eye, and the intangible nature of air makes it easy for us to overlook its presence in our everyday lives. Artists Lim Tzay Chuen and Sun Yee take on the challenge of visually presenting the element in a photograph and painting, respectively, by drawing on its effects on the environment and, in turn, making the element “seen”. With these artworks, viewers are encouraged to examine the visual effects that air can have to shift the mood and meaning of an artwork, and to reflect on how air is ever present but hardly signified in art.

Episode 5: Wax - Colonialism and society examined in wax sculptures



Installation view of *Figuring a Scene*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Filipino artist Renato Habulan's assemblage, *Tira*, is exhibited in "Wax". Created using driftwood, found statuary and paraffin wax, the artwork paints a scene that harks back to the colonial religion of Catholicism in Philippine culture. Within the tableau is a wooden sculpture of the transfigured Christ, which makes the artwork part-altar, part-processional carriage and part-sepulchre. *Tira* brings together motifs of religion, the destruction of nature and death where paraffin wax is the medium that grounds the elements together to reference the embeddedness of the religious system and its fragmentation, as well as the implications of the war in the Southern Philippines.

Episode 6: City - Defining culture in a modern city



Shui Tit Sing. *Why?* (为什么?) . 1979. Wood, 67.5 x 23 x 15.5 cm. Collection of the Shui family.

In an era of rapid development, culture may sometimes lose its place in society. “City” examines how national culture can continue to thrive in a modern city through conventional and unconventional exhibition materials. Shui Tit Sing’s *Why?* is a teak sculpture that calls to mind the form of Singapore’s high-rise buildings that make up the city skyline. Featuring figurines of residents falling off the building, the sculpture hints at the despair amid the thrill of change as it examines the yearning for cultural and physical well-being through art and shelter. Texts from local reports are also presented in this episode as unconventional exhibition material. Visitors can examine the texts by the Singapore Planning & Urban Research Group and the Housing & Development Board about the artworks, providing historical context that shapes the perspective and the meanings that viewers assign to the art.

Figuring a Scene runs from 5 April to 1 December 2024, at Dalam Southeast Asia, UOB Southeast Asia Gallery, National Gallery Singapore. The exhibition is free for Singaporeans and Permanent Residents. Visitors can download the free e-catalogue, *The Stuff of Forms* written by Dr. Flores, at nationalgallery.sg/FiguringAScene from 5 April 2024 onwards. More information can be found in the following annex, and media assets are available via this [link](#).

- [Annex A](#): *Figuring a Scene* Exhibition Highlights
- [Annex B](#): *Figuring a Scene* Exhibition Programmes

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About National Gallery Singapore

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution that 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 20th 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.

About Dalam Southeast Asia

Dalam Southeast Asia is the Gallery's 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. Located within the UOB Southeast Gallery, Dalam Southeast Asia 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 works, recent acquisitions, and donations.

Annex A: *Figuring a Scene* Exhibition Highlights

Episode 1: Shadow



Sharon Chin
Creatures on the Move (In the Death of Night)
2023–2024
Plywood and printed posters
Dimensions variable
Commissioned by National Gallery Singapore for
the exhibition *Figuring a Scene*

The artist Sharon Chin lives and works in Port Dickson, Malaysia, where she tends to a garden that is visited by stray animals. At her doorstep is an oil refinery that emits a glowing light at night. It is a setting that holds both nature and technology—the various species of the earth and global industry—in tension.

Informed by her commitment to climate justice and the critique of ecological displacement, Chin sensitively probes this tension in her work. This can be seen in the linocut prints of animals she produced for Zedeck Siew’s *Creatures of Near Kingdoms*, as well as the placards crafted for a climate protest in Kuala Lumpur. The prints and placards in their different iterations were then relocated to a museum setting as part of a mural, before being remade into shadow puppets. These puppets are part of a performance that happens in the liminal site between Chin’s garden and the refinery, staged through the light of “fossil capitalism.” In this installation, forms ominously and urgently emerge from the struggle between natural and social forces, and the artist asks: “Without darkness, how can we dream of the day?”

Episode 2: Fruit



Anusapati
Single Object
 Undated
 Wood (durian)
 48 x 75 x 47 cm
 Collection of Singapore Art Museum



Liu Kang
Durian Vendor
 1957
 Oil on board
 47.5 x 118.5 cm
 Gift of the artist's family
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Robert Zhao Renhui
Durian Tree, Bukit Panjang
 2024
 Inkjet print on fabric, mounted on wooden light box with LED lights
 140 x 210 x 12 cm
 Collection of the artist and ShanghART Gallery
 Installation view of *Figuring a Scene*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Three works explore the durian, a fruit that has helped to shape the imagination of Singapore and Southeast Asia. A painting, a photograph and a sculpture articulate the image of the durian in different ways. Liu Kang paints the various phases of its passage where the durian—sharing space with the mangosteen—is gathered for the market, pried open, prepared for sale, placed on shoulder pole baskets and then eaten. Then, from the durian tree itself, Anusapati carves out an abstract and minimal sculptural piece reminiscent of the *kentongan* (a Javanese musical instrument), while also referencing the Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi. Finally, Robert Zhao Renhui photographs a durian tree in the forest of Bukit Panjang, depicting it as a formidable witness to what comes to pass in the environment around it, and which a forager considers to bear the sweetest fruit.

The durian assumes different guises in history and everyday life. In this transformation, we discover how it became culturally meaningful: both within the necessary desire for a sense of place and belonging, as well as the memories of the land, its ancestors and its colonisers.

Episode 3: Fire



Lim Hak Tai
Fire
 1956
 Acrylic on board
 59 x 75.5 cm
 Gift of Mr Lim Yew Kuan
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Lim Yew Kuan
After Fire
 1966
 Woodblock print on paper
 48.4 x 62.5 cm
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Tan Choo Kuan
Rebuilding Bukit Ho Swee
 1962
 Pencil on paper
 26.4 x 37.5 cm
 Gift of Ms Tan Teng Teng
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore

In 1961, a tragic fire engulfed villages and communities in Bukit Ho Swee. It was a critical moment in the social history of Malaya. Characterised as a sprawling, congested and “inert” slum of attap huts, Bukit Ho Swee was home to around 16,000 people. To a significant extent, the fire helped to pave the way for the country’s urban transformation. An important aspect of this modernisation was the intense pace of the construction of public housing itself. Artists like Liu Kang, Lim Hak Tai, Tan Choo Kuan and Lim Yew Kuan have referenced various fiery incidents in Malaya and independent Singapore in their works, depicting them as both ruinous and generative in post-colonial times. These artists portrayed the ferocity of the element itself, as well as its aftermath as people tried to rebuild. Thus, the themes of nostalgia, the anticipation of a new beginning and a portrayal of everyday life are all present in their works.

In particular, the way everyday life is depicted stands in contrast to the predominantly exotic or pastoral scenes that the Nanyang artists and the Ten Men Group were known for. For Singapore, the Bukit Ho Swee fire was a turning point, one that pointed towards the possibility of the modern, while the reconstruction that followed would soon become a central trope in its narrative.



Tan Choo Kuan
Rebuilding Bukit Ho Swee
1962
Ink on paper
36.9 x 26.8 cm
Gift of Ms Tan Teng Teng
Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Liu Kang
After the Fire I
1951
Oil on canvas
98.5 x 131.5 cm
Gift of the artist's family
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

Episode 4: Air



Lim Tzay Chuen
The Opposite is True #2
 2006
 Digital print
 84.1 x 118.9 cm
 Collection of Singapore Art Museum
 Photo © 2006 Lim Tzay Chuen

For the inaugural Singapore Biennale, Lim entered the former City Hall of Singapore using a portable thermal fogger; he fumigated its interiors with Athena Pheromone 10X, a synthesized human pheromone for men, designed to increase their romantic attention from women. Lim's action was timed to take place before any artworks in the Biennale had been installed, and was completed prior to the renovation of the building into the future National Gallery of Singapore.



Sun Yee
Storm
 1959
 Oil on canvas
 50 x 60 cm
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore

Representing air in art is a challenge because we cannot see it, yet air is omnipresent and vital. The artist Sun Yee conjures air through a rendering of wind causing trees to sway. With brushstrokes, she also implies the trickle of rain through streaks of white paint that slightly and intermittently speckle parts of the trees. This is an indication of a possible storm, an impression that is enhanced by the oblique orientation of the painting. In Lim Tzay Chuen's photograph, we see the cloud of vapour from a fogger that releases pheromones—chemicals that an organism secretes to induce physical attraction. The image is a reference to the artist's performance at the first Singapore Biennale in 2006 at the historic City Hall building, which is now part of National Gallery Singapore. Like the flecks of white paint delicately applied onto the canvas by Sun, the particles of a diffused atmosphere are faintly visible. Slowly, with the light that sculpts the contours of the stairs of the storied building, these particles eventually acquire their own presence.

Episode 5: Wax



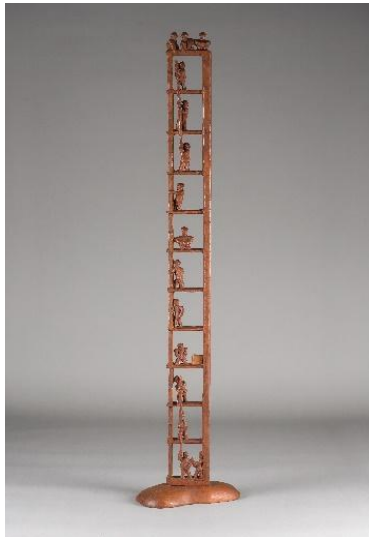
Renato Habulan
Tira (Remains)
 2014–2023
 Paraffin wax, sculpted wood, aluminium and found objects
 140.5 x 145 x 224.5 cm
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore
 © Renato R. Habulan

The title of Renato Habulan's assemblage, *Tira*, is a Filipino word that carries many different meanings: it could mean "remnants," the action of striking or could even be the root word for "residence." The work is made of many components, including driftwood and found figurines. However, the most intriguing part of the work is the paraffin wax in which various items are embedded or on which they rest, such as a wooden sculpture of a transfigured Christ which was found in a carving workshop, incomplete and unconsecrated. The scene depicted in the work is a reference to Catholicism, the colonial religion in the Philippines. Over time, this spiritual system has been reshaped by folk and popular reinterpretation, gaining diverse post-colonial meanings and political effects. It thus reflects the system's widespread influence as well as its fragmentation, heightening the horrors of war in southern Philippines. Amid this seeming dispersal of persistent forms, the artist proposes a kind of synthesis, revealing a haunting ecology of images alongside organic materials like driftwood and wax. The tableau is part-altar, part-processional carriage and part-sepulcher.

Episode 6: City



Shui Tit Sing
Why?
 为什么?
 1979
 Wood
 67.5 x 23 x 15.5 cm
 Collection of the Shui family



Shui Tit Sing
Cooperation (Passing Metal Beams)
 合作 (高楼传铁)
 1976
 Wood
 140 x 31.5 x 16 cm
 Collection of the Shui family

Public housing and the art museum are two signs of Singapore's aspiration to a national and modern form. These two impulses can be traced to discourses emerging from post-colonial Malaya. These discourses may be observed through architectural and engineering texts, which are situated within the encompassing project of modernist nation-building and the policy of socialised human settlement. One text written a year after Singapore gained independence claims that the cultural role of Singapore as a city was "so vital in the creation of national identity." Another text details the process of constructing apartments, including the use of brick, sand and granite by the Housing and Development Board in 1962. The catalyst for this programme was the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire, an event which transformed "squatters into citizens" just before Singapore gained independence in 1965. Complicating this yearning for cultural and physical well-being through art and shelter is one of the two teak sculptures by Shui Tit Sing. The seemingly quaint vignette hints at despair amid the thrill of change, or trauma in the wake of tragedy. In the end, the fantasy of development is disrupted by the folklore of residents falling off high-rise buildings. Almost 80% of Singaporeans are currently housed publicly.

The Cultural Role of Singapore City

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In the context of a newly independent Singapore, while it is vital to give economic development top priority, the problems of cultural and social integration are equally important as the process of nation building and the evolution of a national identity. Individualism has broken down racial barriers by creating job opportunities which are not dependent on traditional ethnic and family backgrounds but on individual and educational merits. In our housing and educational programmes, we should also cope with the problems of integrating the various ethnic groups. The city core can also play an important role in the social and cultural integration by having points of convergence for the people to participate in common activities of work and recreation. It is through the close contact of people that all the diverse talents, traits and forces meet, react, blend and develop, and hence there is a hope for a genuine integrated culture to emerge.

Culture in its widest & in the total effort of a people in organizing and expressing their corporate life. Culture is therefore not only the realm of tradition and the recreation thereof but the use of all the activities that enrich the life of a people. This painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, drama, film, sports and all the other media of mass communication contribute to culture. As such, it forms an integral part of everyday living.

The city of Singapore as a new port, dependent on foreign trade, is young in existence and had attracted people of various ethnic backgrounds. This migrant population under colonial rule was impeded and discouraged

towards the development of nationalistic. Consequently, Singapore like Kuala Lumpur and Penang have developed with a governmental, administrative, commercial and recreational centre for the colonists, surrounded by settlements of conventional ethnic groups with their own centres. This form of our city is maladjustive in the new era of independence. Fifty percent of our population is under 25 years old and one local born. Unlike their parents they have no yearning to return to their ancestral lands. As new parts of our city need to be re-developed, we should take the opportunity to give our city with a core for an integrated population and make it play a more vital role in its cultural development.

The prime importance in the planning of such a core is to make it conducive to attract people of different races and of all levels to participate in the activities offered. Therefore it should not be only commercial but should have other functions incorporated into it, such as cultural, social, recreational and residential. These functions for very active complement one another. It is only through the intense mix-up of use that our city can be transformed into a hive of activities both by day and by night. The problem of traffic in the core should not be overlooked. There must be pedestrian and traffic segregation to give pedestrian safety and ease of traffic movement, and at the same time the pedestrian and city dwellers will be comparatively free from the fumes and roar of traffic.

Just imagine in our city where there are pedestrian precincts, with official, shops, etc.

Singapore Planning & Urban Research Group
The Cultural Role of Singapore City
 Original publication, 1966
 Digital reproduction, 2024
 Published in *Rumah*, 43–44.
 Images courtesy of Singapore Planning & Urban Research Group

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BUILDING DEPARTMENT

1962 was a year of unprecedented achievement in the field of public housing in Singapore. For a total of 12,221 units were completed during the year in spite of difficulties and obstructions encountered in the discussion of building sites.

Targets listed in the Basic Development Plan		Work achieved by the Housing & Development Board	
1961	— 7,000 units	1961	— 7,221 units
1962	— 8,721 units	1962	— 12,221 units
1963	— 8,697 units		
1964	— 12,700 units		

Beyond its inception on 1st February, 1960 and 21st December, 1961 the Housing & Development Board has completed in a period of less than five years a total of 24,221 units as against 22,629 units built by the Singapore Improvement Trust in the thirteen years of its existence. At the end of 1962, some 10,611 units were under construction and if no unforeseen difficulties occur in the future the 6,000 units provided in the Board's First Five Year Building Programme will be completed well within schedule as the annual completions in this exceeds the target figures listed in the Basic Development Plan.

The development of the housing estates is distributed along the five main corridors of the city, from Kallang and Tampines in the East to Queenstown, on the West, to cater for the requirements of the people in the various localities.

BUILDING SCHEMES

(a) Queenstown

During 1962 a total of 2,221 units was completed in Queenstown. Neighbourhoods I, II and V have all been completed and comprised half of Neighbourhood IV has been completed and earthworks in Neighbourhood III have been finished with the use of the Board's own machinery. At the end of the year only 3,000 units in Queenstown had been completed and occupied and a further 6,800 units were in various stages of construction.

The planning of the Queenstown Town Centre has also been finalised to include three theatres, two shopping centres, a retail and a post office. It is expected that the whole of Queenstown will be fully developed by the middle of 1964 with 12,000 residential units with an estimated 10,000 people.

(b) Bukit Ho Swee

After the disaster fire on 20th May 1961, work at Bukit Ho Swee was carried out with the utmost speed. In a month 1,210 units of flats were completed at this fire site in 1962 and a further 1,000 units were in various stages of construction at the end of the year.

Housing & Development Board
Annual Report 1962
 Original publication, 1962
 Digital reproduction, 2024
 Published in *Housing & Development Board Singapore Annual Report 1962*, 19–22.
 Images courtesy of the Housing & Development Board

Annex B: *Figuring a Scene* Exhibition Programmes

For an updated listing of programmes, please visit nationalgallery.sg/FiguringAScene.

Programmes	
In Dialogue with Patrick Flores and Siddharta Perez	
Date and Time:	Sat 11 May 2024 11 am
Venue:	National Gallery Singapore, Supreme Court Wing, L4 Mezzanine, Glass Room
Admission Details:	Free, registration required
Description:	How do exhibitions define how we make sense of history or society? This conversation between Dr. Patrick Flores and curator Siddharta Perez will delve into debates around exhibition-making and the tension between <i>making</i> and <i>making sense</i> .