



*For immediate release*

**Media Release**

**Iconic Singapore Artworks to Inspire Visitors at  
National Gallery Singapore**

***400 Singapore masterpieces to present cohesive narrative of Singapore's art history  
at DBS Singapore Gallery***

**Singapore, 19 October 2015** – National Gallery Singapore today unveiled iconic works that paint the story about art in Singapore during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The inaugural long-term exhibition, *Siapa Nama Kamu?* (*What is Your Name?* in Malay) will be presented at the DBS Singapore Gallery, where visitors can experience the timeless appeal of about 400 key artworks.

The exhibition examines Singapore's identity and links to Southeast Asia and the rest of the world by reflecting how artists in Singapore grappled with diverse values, ideas and tensions since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Visitors will come to appreciate the multiple facets of Singapore art, arising from the interweaving of diverse cultural values and expressions, fluid exchange of ideas, and continuous experimentation by local artists.

The title of the exhibition *Siapa Nama Kamu?* is based on the words on the chalkboard in Chua Mia Tee's painting *National Language Class*. The work was created in 1959, the year Singapore gained self-governance from the British. This artwork was later displayed in the former City Hall in the 1960s where the Ministry of Culture was located.

"National Gallery Singapore is the first museum in the world dedicated to modern art from Singapore and Southeast Asia, and will present the most-extensive long-term exhibitions of art from the region. Through *Siapa Nama Kamu?*, we want to present a cohesive narrative of Singapore's art history and engage our visitors with lesser known aspects, such as developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the formation of art groups resulting from anti-colonial sentiments in the 1950s," said Dr. Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore.

“Apart from showcasing works from the National Collection, we also worked closely with artists and their families who have graciously donated or loaned significant works to create the most extensive exhibition about Singapore’s art history. Each painting tells a moving and inspirational story that will go towards creating a stimulating and enriching museum experience for all visitors.”

The exhibition captures the broad sweep of Singapore’s art histories at defining periods. A total of six themes (see Annex for more details) – *Tropical Tapestry*, *Nanyang Reverie*, *Real Concerns*, *New Languages*, *Tradition Unfettered* and *Shifting Grounds* – will present the development of Singapore’s art scene from early visual impressions in the 1900s, the emergence of the Nanyang artists in the 1930s, the rise of Singapore’s cultural identity in the 1960s, to new approaches to art in the 1980s. The exhibits will be updated regularly as the National Gallery Singapore’s curators continue with research work.

Mr Sim S Lim, Singapore Country Head of DBS Bank, said: “We are pleased that a number of artworks that the bank has donated to the National Gallery Singapore are in its permanent collection. In line with DBS’ lineage as the Development Bank of Singapore, our corporate art collection reflects the bank’s strong Asian and Singapore heritage, as well as the evolving local art scene. As Singapore’s largest bank, we wanted to support the Gallery in its outreach efforts to enable more Singaporeans and visitors to learn and appreciate the story of Singapore art.”

In addition to making a SGD25 million donation, DBS also gifted 26 artworks by Singapore’s leading artists to the Gallery last year. They comprised works of various media by notable artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Anthony Poon, Tan Swie Hian, Ong Kim Seng, and Thomas Yeo.

The DBS Singapore Gallery, located in the City Hall Building, will open its doors on 24 November 2015. It is one of two permanent galleries that will be open at National Gallery Singapore. Admissions to the permanent galleries will be complimentary during the Opening Celebrations from 24 November to 6 December 2015. Following this period the permanent galleries will continue to be complimentary for Singaporeans and permanent residents.

- End -

## Annex

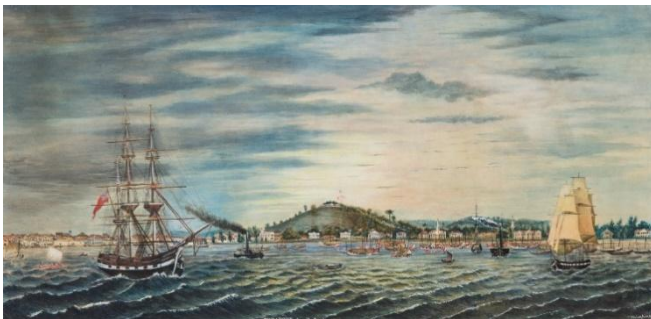
The following outlines an overview of the six themes of *Siapa Nama Kamu?* presented at the DBS Singapore Gallery.

### **Tropical Tapestry (1890s – 1930s)**

This section focuses on the colonial encounter from the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in a vivid tropical tapestry of impressions from maps and landscapes to natural history drawings. While new images were created, there were also existing pictorial traditions—sculptures, decorated manuscripts and textiles of indigenous communities in the region. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several motifs started to take root, and were circulated through prints and photographs. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore's growing affluence created a demand for artworks and gave rise to public and private patrons, marking the beginnings of modern art in Singapore.



Heinrich Leutemann. *Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore* (*Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore*). c.1865. Wood engraving. Collection of National Museum Singapore

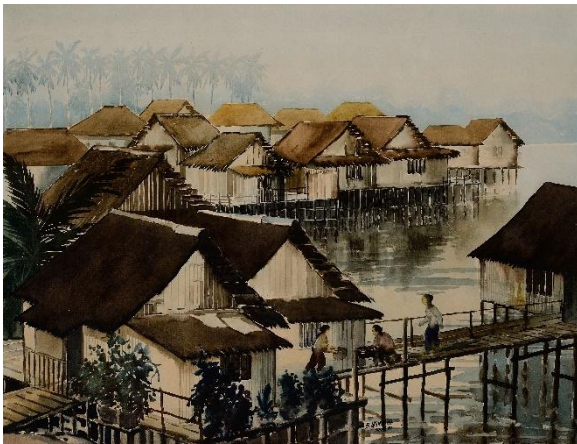


Robert Wilson Wiber. *Panoramic View of Singapore from the Harbour*. 1849. Watercolour and gouache on paper. Collection of National Gallery Singapore

### **Nanyang Reverie (1930s – 1970s)**

“Nanyang,” or the South Seas, was originally used by Chinese maritime traders to refer to the Southeast Asian region located south of China. Although the idea of a Nanyang art first emerged among local Chinese writers in the 1930s, this movement soon encompassed visual artists who sought to infuse their works with a local identity. What they encountered — local landscapes, peoples, cultural motifs — became their subject matter; indigenous materials and techniques, like batik, were incorporated into art-making as well.

Through to the 1970s, the Nanyang movement remained an organic one, with no prescribed method, style or manifesto — only the impression of a tropical site encountered and idealised.



Suri bin Mohyani. *Kampong Kuchan (Lorong 3, Geylang)*. 1951. Watercolour. Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Liu Kang. *Souri*. 1953. Oil on canvas. Gift of Liu Kang Family. Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Georgette Chen. *Lotus in a Breeze*. c.1970. Oil on canvas. Gift of Lee Foundation. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

### Real Concerns (1950s – 1970s)

The belief that art had the power to effect social change was shared by many artists who experienced the raging anti-colonial movements in Malaya after World War II. They asked who and what would be ideal subjects and how these might be depicted, for art to serve a social purpose and impact people's lives. In addressing these questions, it became apparent for many that representing an idyllic "Nanyang" was not sufficient.

Singapore artists became part of a broader Southeast Asian turn towards realistic depiction—art that exposed prevailing social conditions and portrayed the marginalised with empathy. Art had to also be aspirational, holding the promise of independence and nationhood. After Singapore became independent in 1965, art would come to engage with the effects of modernisation, particularly how that changed everyday life, and the landscape of a postcolonial nation in the pursuit of economic progress. A sense of place and an emerging cultural identity were at the heart of the artworks produced during this period.



Chua Mia Tee. *National Language Class*. 1959. Oil on canvas. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

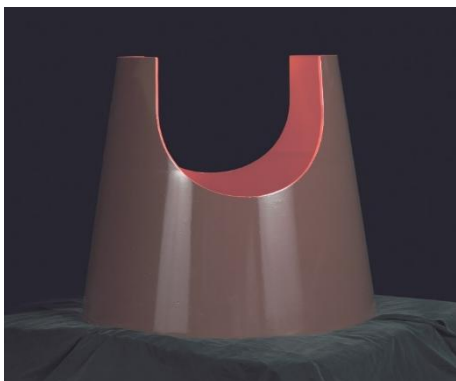


Tay Kok Wee. *Picking*. 1955. Oil on canvas. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



## New Languages (1960s – 1980s)

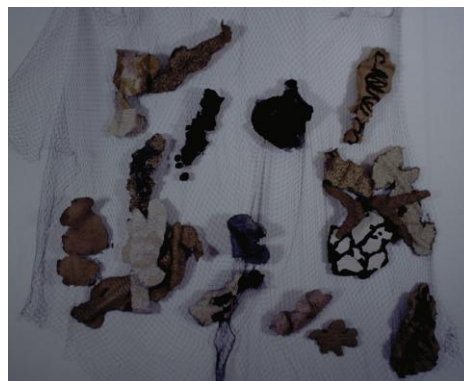
The groundwork for the rise of abstraction had, in fact, been laid a decade before. Some of Singapore's early migrant artists, like Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Lim Hak Tai and Yeh Chi Wei, were already creating semiabstract works. Abstract art does not seek to reproduce physical reality. Instead it relies on pure form, colour and texture to convey meaning or emotion. The proponents of abstraction were a younger generation of artists, some of whom had trained overseas in the 1960s and 1970s. They felt that realism did not reflect the essence of Singapore's rapid modernisation, and was not sufficient for artistic development.



Kim Lim. *Echoes*. 1967. Stainless steel, enamel paint and zinc coating. Gift of William Turnbull. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



Iskandar Jalil. *Buyong*. Undated. Ceramics. Collection of National Gallery Singapore



Teo Eng Seng. *The Net: Most Definitely the Singapore River*. 1986. Paperdyesculp and net. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

## Tradition Unfettered (1940s – 1980s)

Tradition in art was a creative source but also a burden. The development of Chinese ink in Singapore is a story of continuity and also of transformation. For much of the 20th century, migrant scholars and artists had been teaching calligraphy and ink painting to a younger generation. Their concerns included how Southeast Asian inspirations could be expressed, and whether the realist spirit, associated with modernisation, could be infused into ink painting.

Often, innovations were led by some of these migrant artists: Chen Wen Hsi, for instance, successfully integrated the aesthetic legacies of Chinese ink with Western modern art. This local strand, which we might call “Singapore ink”, has been developed by a group of younger painters since the 1960s. Notable is the work of Tang Da Wu, who utilised the ink medium unconventionally. His avant-garde approach expanded the possibilities of this traditional art form in the context of contemporary practice.



Chen Wen Hsi. *Herons*.  
c.1991. Chinese ink and colour  
on paper. Collection of  
National Gallery Singapore.

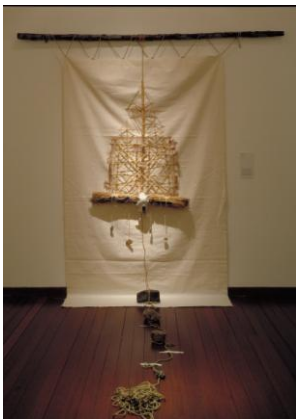


Henri Chen Kezhan, *Self-  
Portraits I & II*, 1989, Chinese  
ink and colour on paper,  
collection of National Gallery  
Singapore

## Shifting Grounds (1980s – Present)

In the 1980s and 1990s, radical performances, scavenged materials and site-specific installations heralded new approaches to art that challenged the gallery space as an arbiter of taste and value. “What is, or could be, art?” formed the debate. Artists moved from modes of representation to examinations of the production and consumption of art. “Readymades” dismantled the hierarchy of high and low culture; performances engaged audiences and signalled collaborative futures; art freed itself from material forms to resist commodification. Yet artworks were archived, restaged and documented.

The ephemerality of artworks and their afterlives jostled in tension. Amidst these shifting frontiers, artists formed avant-garde collectives that operated at the fringes of mainstream art institutions. Although these shifts have precedents in the 1970s, they gained momentum in this period. Euro-American centres of art also began to look to the world at large, and artists from Singapore were increasingly invited to exhibit at international platforms, throwing issues of self and identity into the global agenda.



Salleh Japar. *Spirit Trap*. 1990. Mixed media. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.



Lim Tzay Chuen. *MIKE*. 2005. Digital print and newspaper article. Artwork courtesy of the artist and presentation by National Gallery Singapore.



Tang Da Wu. *Don't Give Money to the Arts*. 1995. Mixed media. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



## **ABOUT NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE**

National Gallery Singapore is a new visual arts institution which oversees the largest public collection of modern art of Singapore and Southeast Asia. The Gallery is dedicated to collaborative research, education and exhibitions, highlighting the importance of modern art in Southeast Asia in a global context. The Gallery also provides a unique visitor experience through its collections and innovative programming, positioning Singapore as a regional and international hub for the visual arts.

Situated in the heart of the Civic District, the National Gallery Singapore has been beautifully restored and transformed from the former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings – two important heritage buildings of Singapore's nationhood – into an exciting new visual arts venue. Opening in November 2015, the Gallery will be a leading civic and cultural destination established for the enrichment, enjoyment and engagement of Singapore residents and visitors from all over the world. Information on the National Gallery is available at [www.nationalgallery.sg](http://www.nationalgallery.sg).

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