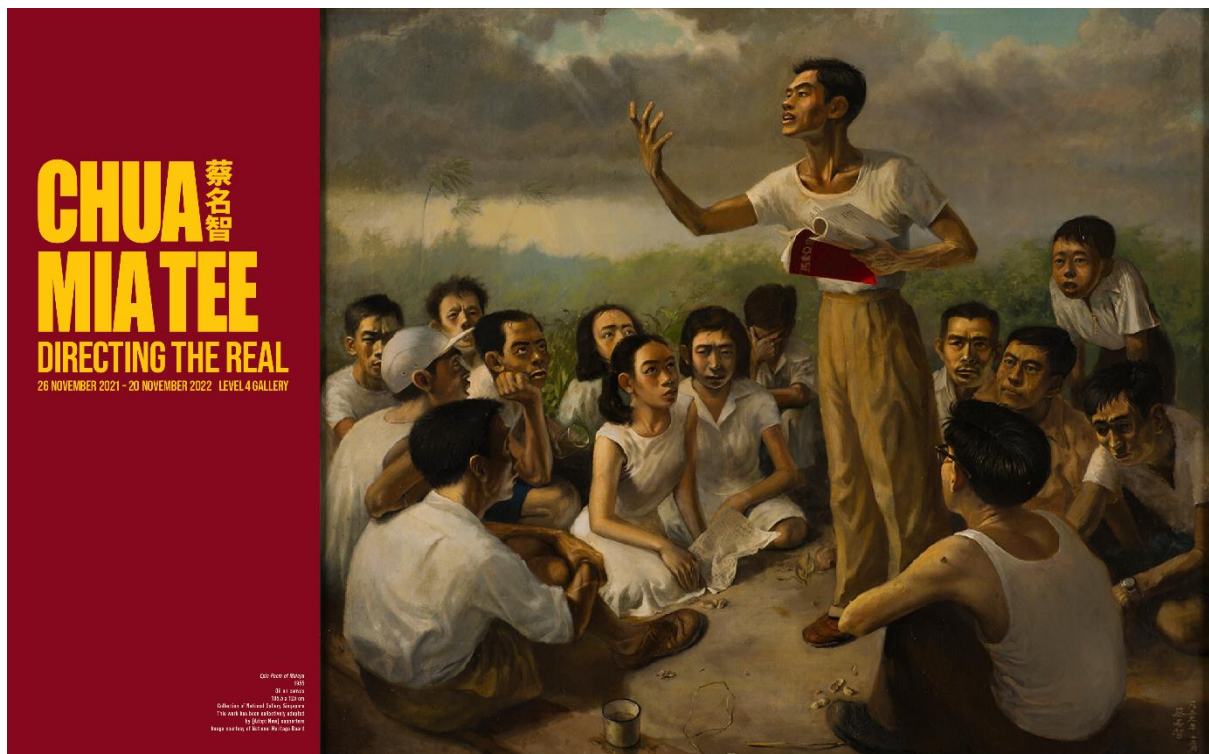


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE CELEBRATES CHUA MIA TEE WITH
ARTIST'S FIRST MUSEUM EXHIBITION SINCE 1992**

The show transports viewers to 1950s – 1980s Singapore with masterfully drawn scenes of everyday life and people through the lens of one of the nation's leading realist painters



“The painter assumes the role of screenwriter, director and actor to freely shape the subject’s image.”

Singapore, 18 November 2021 – National Gallery Singapore presents *Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real*, which spotlights Chua Mia Tee (蔡名智) (b. 1931), one of the leading realist artists in Singapore’s art history. Taking inspiration from the artist’s quote on how “the painter assumes the role of screenwriter, director and actor to freely shape the subject’s image”, the exhibition offers audiences an insight into Chua’s distinct view on realism that goes beyond the mere representation of reality. Chua’s purposeful direction of images takes centre stage in the show, compelling visitors to appreciate his critical contributions and enduring influence on Singapore’s artistic landscape. Opening on 26 November, *Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real* showcases his masterfully painted works that depict vivid scenes and portraits of life and people

of Singapore during its transformative years from the 1950s – 1980s. The exhibition also marks the artist’s first solo institutional exhibition since 1992, a fitting tribute that aptly coincides with his 90th birthday on 25 November.

Spanning four decades of Chua’s artistic practice, the exhibition features over 50 works alongside archival materials, filmic recordings, and quotes from the artist’s writings, offering deeper insights into Chua’s artistic philosophies. Audiences are invited to discover how his paintings of life in Singapore went beyond realist depictions, reflecting his intentional direction of the image to bring out the “truths” that engage and move the audience. Focusing on works from the 1950s – 1980s, *Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real* also sheds light on a period where Chua’s artistic growth runs parallel to the development and transformation of Singapore as a nation in its early years. Through his vivid depictions of the country and its inhabitants in this period, the exhibition examines the social tensions across different segments of society as the young nation was laying the foundations for progress and development.

Although he is widely recognised as a realist painter, Chua is also a skilled sculptor, creating busts of his kin, artists, and key local figures. His keen ability to bring his subjects to life and his diverse body of work—from landscapes to figure painting, everyday life and the community, paintings and sketches to sculptural busts—is a reflection of the people, life and societal changes in Singapore, as well as the tensions in the nation’s changing landscape the artist himself lived through.

From his days as a young artist, Chua Mia Tee helped champion the growth of Singapore’s visual arts scene as the visual arts instructor for the Singapore Chinese High Schools’ Graduates of 1953 Arts Research Group and as one of the founding members of the Equator Art Society, a group that consisted of artists who were primarily concerned with depicting social conditions and the masses, especially the labouring class. While he was a student at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, he served as a student-teacher and continued teaching after he graduated. His invaluable contributions to Singapore’s art and history earned him the Cultural Medallion in 2015.

Dr Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore says, “National Gallery Singapore is honoured to hold Chua Mia Tee’s first solo museum exhibition in nearly 30 years. As an artist, educator and active member of the historically influential Equator Art Society, Chua is an influential figure in Singapore’s art history and landscape who has made nationally significant artistic contributions throughout his distinguished career. We hope that as the Gallery continues to spotlight the practice of critical local artists, such as Chua Mia Tee, greater appreciation for their legacy and greater interest in local and regional art will be cultivated among our audiences.”

Masterly directions of the real: Exhibition highlights

The exhibition is divided into three main sections, each spotlighting a critical aspect of Chua’s practice and life in Singapore in the 1950s – 1980s.

Point of View: A Search for the Real



Chua Mia Tee. *National Language Class*. 1959. Oil on canvas, 112 x 132 cm. Gift of Equator Art Society. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Zooming in on his role in Singapore’s art history, the first section, *Point of View: A Search for the Real*, introduces viewers to artworks which capture local communities through the lens of Chua’s personal experiences and, just as importantly, his principles. Largely focused on his works in the 1950s in post-World War II Singapore and Malaya,

the section seeks to showcase Chua's approach in directing his artworks to represent the narratives and voices of the people. Instead of leveraging on art to convey "ideal" values to the people, Chua championed the need for artists to draw from personal experience and depict familiar aspects of society to create meaningful works that resonated with the public. This section features some of his most celebrated works, such as *Epic Poem of Malaya*, *National Language Class*, and sculptural busts. Shedding more light on Chua's activities with the Equator Art Society, this section also features artworks that were shown at the first Equator Art Society exhibition in 1958, and archival materials of the art group, including films of the group's exhibitions, bonding activities, and publications.

Characters: In Focus and in Action



Chua Mia Tee. *Workers in a Canteen*. 1974. Oil on canvas, 88.5 x 126.5 cm. Gift of the artist.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

The second section features realist portraits by Chua, who seeks to capture the essence and characteristics of his subjects, carefully deciding which features to represent in detail, which to omit, and which to apply with broad strokes. These paintings capture Singapore's past years through the faces of everyday people such as those in the working class and the labouring masses, like boatmen and workers at a shipyard, whom he held in particularly high esteem. Chua was also commissioned

to paint and sketch portraits of key local figures which became a key part of his artistic practice through the decades. Visitors can look forward to the rare opportunity of viewing a selection of commissioned portraits of Singapore's leaders, including Lim Kim San and President Yusof bin Ishak.

Setting: Vanishing World, Growing Nation



Chua Mia Tee. *Portable Cinema*. 1977. Oil on canvas, 76.9 x 78.2 cm. Gift of Times Publishing Limited. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

From the 1970s to 1980s, Chua was keenly aware of the fast-changing life and landscapes of his growing nation and the urban setting became a central theme in several of his paintings as he sought to document the Singapore that he knew. The exhibition's third and final section spotlights these paintings and sketches, which were carefully constructed to capture the ambience and atmosphere of the scenes he was familiar with. Chua distinctively captures vanishing trades and evolving places at the time for posterity, such as Singapore's portable cinemas of yesterday and old Chinatown where he used to live. To contrast these scenic remnants of Singapore's past, the exhibition also displays large paintings of the country's urban landscapes, which contemporary audiences will recognise today.

Visitors interested in diving deeper into Chua Mia Tee's practice, artworks and contributions to Singapore's art history may access audio guides available in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, and attend complementary tours and programmes. *Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real* will be on show at the Level 4 Gallery from 26 November 2021 to 20 November 2022.

General Admission (free for Singaporeans and PRs) applies for *Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real*. For more information, please refer to the attached annexes or visit nationalgallery.sg/directingthereal for the latest updates on the exhibition. Media assets can be accessed via this [link](#).

Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real is made possible with the support of our Strategic Partner Cultural Matching Fund, and Exhibition Patron Lim & Tan Securities Pte Ltd.

- [Annex A: Chua Mia Tee's Biography](#)
- [Annex B: Chua Mia Tee: Directing the Real Exhibition Highlights](#)

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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 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.

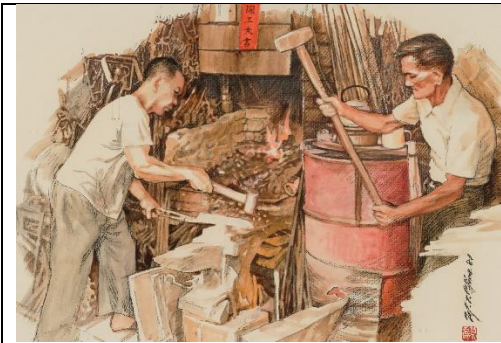
ANNEX A: ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Chua Mia Tee (b. 1931, China) is one of Singapore's leading realist artists. To Chua, realism fosters a vital connection with viewers, enabling them to understand, appreciate and identify with his works.

Chua re-settled in Singapore in 1937, after escaping from the Sino-Japanese War. From an early age, he was inspired by his father to pursue art and first studied art under the tutelage of renowned artist Chen Chong Swee. He enrolled in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1950 and was appointed as a part-time tutor there one year later, at the age of 20. He subsequently became a full-time lecturer at the Academy. Chua was also one of the founding members of the Equator Art Society, established in 1956 with the goals of providing art education and contributing to the development of realist art in Singapore. Artists in this group were primarily concerned with depicting the masses, especially the working class, using their works to draw attention to the harsh realities of daily life at the time.

Chua has created many iconic works such as *Epic Poem of Malaya* (1955) and *National Language Class* (1959), and was conferred the Cultural Medallion in 2015 for his contributions to art in Singapore.

ANNEX B: CHUA MIA TEE: DIRECTING THE REAL EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS



The Blacksmiths

1981

Pencil and watercolour on paper

Collection of Teresa Koh and Howie Lau

Blacksmithing was once a thriving industry in Chinatown, prior to the redevelopment of the area in the 1980s. Chua's portrayal of these two men engrossed in their craft captures this vanishing trade, rarely practiced in Singapore today. He used charcoal to create shadows, supplementing the watercolour to add depth to the image.



Epic Poem of Malaya

1955

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

This work has been collectively adopted by

[Adopt Now] supporters

2006-01219

This work showcases Chua's mastery at setting up a scene. He directs our focus to the central figure reciting a poem to a transfixed audience. The man's passionate reading of a poem has moved the girl on his right to tears. Rays of sunlight break through the storm clouds in the background, signifying hope amidst the turbulent times.

Chua's composition creates a sense of drama, conveying the conviction and aspirations of students and workers who believed that developing a "Malayan culture" would unite society and gain independence from colonial rule. This painting was part of the 1956 travelling exhibition of the Singapore Chinese High Schools' Graduates of 1953 Arts Research Group. The works in the show were selected to represent the realities of life under the British and many depicted unemployment and hunger, impressing upon viewers the urgent need for social justice and the country's independence.



Bust of Lee Boon Ngan

c. 1959

Plaster of paris

Collection of the artist

Chua met Lee Boon Ngan (1939–2017), the sister of his friend, the artist Lee Boon Wang, around 1952. She made a deep impression on Chua and the two married in 1961. The couple knew they were soulmates and Chua continued making portraits of Lee even after her passing.

Lee was the only girl among her five siblings. She decided to follow in her brother's footsteps and studied at Nanyang Academy

of Fine Art (NAFA), graduating in 1965. Lee became well known for her oil paintings of flowers, and participated in various group shows including the 1960 Equator Art Society exhibition.



National Language Class

1959

Oil on canvas

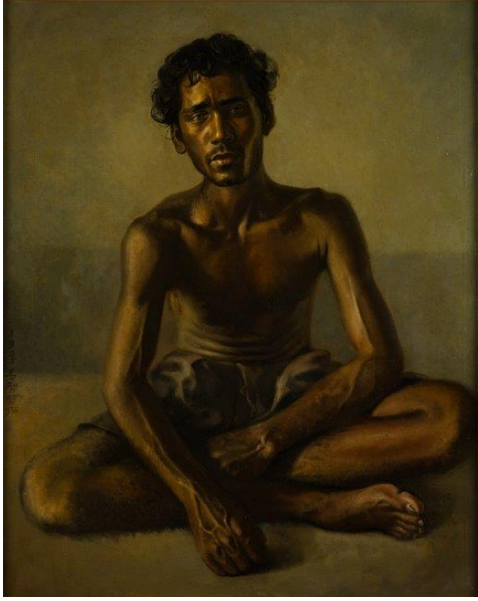
Gift of Equator Art Society


Collection of National Gallery Singapore

P-0145

Chua has said that the theme or “soul” of this work is the urgent need to learn the Malay language in the years after Singapore attained self-governance in 1955, and the dedication of students towards this endeavour. Chua cast his classmates, friends and students, including his future wife Lee Boon Ngan, in this scene. He chose to depict his Indonesian friend Herman Ali as the Malay language teacher.

The brown cloth, on the left sleeve of the student standing, Ong Tian Soo, is a small but significant detail. It reveals that Ong is in mourning for a parent, yet he is still dutifully attending and participating in this national language lesson. Such pins are customarily worn by Chinese from the first day of a relative’s funeral.

	<p>This painting was completed on 21 December 1959, 18 days after Inche Yusof bin Ishak was inaugurated as Singapore's first <i>Yang di-Pertuan Negara</i> (Head of State) on 3 December 1959 and the debut of Singapore's national anthem <i>Majulah Singapura</i>.</p>
 An oil painting of a man sitting cross-legged on the ground. He is shirtless, wearing a simple cloth around his waist. He has a weary expression, with a bead of sweat on his forehead and visible veins on his arms. The background is a soft, yellowish glow.	<p><i>Road Construction Worker</i> 1955 Oil on canvas Collection of National Gallery Singapore 2006-01220</p> <p>This work has been adopted by Seah and Siak</p> <p><i>Road Construction Worker</i> is an unflinching portrayal of the toll of manual labour. The worker's physique is wiry. Varicose veins protrude from his arms and hands, and a bead of sweat trickles down his neck. He sits with slumped shoulders, his gaze meeting the viewer's directly as he stares ahead.</p> <p>The background is sparse, save for a suffusion of yellow that creates a glow around the worker, as if illuminating him as a hero. Chua often returned to the theme of labour in his works from the 1950s to the 1970s. Singapore was developing rapidly during this period, and the constant expansion of its infrastructure was only possible through the</p>

	<p>industry and arduous labour of the construction workers.</p>
	<p><i>Workers in a Canteen</i> 1974 Oil on canvas Gift of the artist Collection of National Gallery Singapore P-0236</p> <p>This painting captures the boisterous atmosphere of workers at lunch at Jurong shipyard. Chua has staged the scene as if the viewer has just entered the canteen, with the diagonal composition heightening the sense of dynamism and depth.</p> <p>The scene features over 70 workers: some are wolfing down their meals while others chat. The simple tableware and empty bowls in the foreground reflect the work's central theme, which Chua has expressed as “吃的是草，挤出来是奶”. This quote by the well-known Chinese writer Lu Xun means “while the meal is simple, the product of labour is immensely valuable.” Chua aimed to convey his respect and admiration for blue collared workers, and their critical role in society.</p>



Portable Cinema

1977

Oil on canvas

Gift of Times Publishing Limited

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2004-00564

Chua drew on his childhood memories of watching cinema through portable street carts in this work. For only a few cents, one could peep through slots in a specially constructed box and view popular characters such as Robin Hood, Popeye or Frankenstein in action as the vendor manually turned the reels.

This painting was commissioned for the Straits Times Group's limited edition 1978 calendar, where Chua and fellow artist Choo Keng Kwang each produced six paintings on the theme of vanishing trades in Singapore. The artists also showcased some of these works in a joint exhibition on this theme organised by Times Publishing Bhd and the Singapore Handicraft Centre.



Singapore River

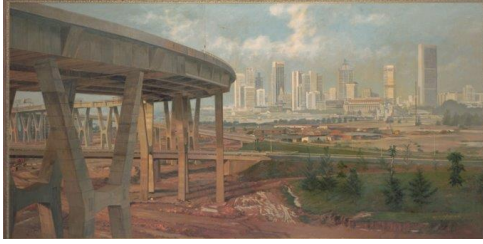
1978

Oil on canvas

Collection of Lim & Tan Securities Pte Ltd

Chua, along with many other artists, felt compelled to capture the Singapore River and the livelihoods around it for posterity following then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's call for a clean-up of the river in 1977. This mammoth task entailed moving thousands of people into public housing and street hawkers into food centres, as well as relocating the lighter boats over a 10-year period.

Four distinct styles of buildings are depicted, representing Singapore's progress from British colony to developed nation: the neo-classical Supreme Court building with its copper dome in the background; a modernist skyscraper on the left; shophouses and street food stalls. The focus of the painting seems to be the latter two, which dominate the composition. By 1978, these food stalls had been replaced by the Boat Quay Food Centre.



Benjamin Sheares Bridge–The Viaduct

1981

Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

P-1109

Chua evokes a sense of alienation and dystopia in this panorama of the Singapore skyline and Benjamin Sheares Bridge. This 1.8km concrete highway had just made its public debut at the time. The massive viaduct looms over a desolate landscape constructed out of reclaimed land. The sea is long gone, and the trees and grass purposefully planted to stabilise the newly reclaimed land contrast starkly with the soil which is soon to be covered by concrete roads transporting people from all parts of Singapore to work in the Central Business District. The environment here has succumbed to the allure of speed and convenience. The few human figures passing under the Bridge are so miniature that they are practically imperceptible, and the haze clouds the skyscrapers in the background.



Pagoda Street, Chinatown

1980

Oil on canvas

Collection of Benny and Rosemary Oh

Chua presents this scene from an elevated angle, capturing the bustling activity all the way down the narrow street. Shoppers wind through the market in different directions, some pausing to browse the produce of the vendors beneath the umbrellas. The shoppers are loosely composed in the shape of an “S,” creating a sense of rhythm and flow that adds to the scene’s vibrancy.