

MEDIA RELEASE

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Uncover Teo Eng Seng's witty negotiations between the self and society at National Gallery Singapore's latest exhibition, *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?*

Discover how Cultural Medallion recipient Teo Eng Seng transforms everyday materials into vibrant works of art, embedding humour and irony into his socially engaged practice.



Artist Teo Eng Seng pictured with his artwork, *We're Happy. Are You Happy?*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

SINGAPORE, 27 August 2024 – Revisit local and global events from the mid-20th century to the present through the ironic and sometimes tragicomic lens of veteran artist Teo Eng Seng at National Gallery Singapore's latest exhibition. As part of its ongoing SG Artist series, National Gallery Singapore presents *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?*, the most extensive and comprehensive survey of this trailblazing multidisciplinary innovator to date.

From 6 September 2024 to 2 February 2025, visitors can look forward to close to 70 artworks from Teo, who is a key figure in developing, advocating, and nurturing Singapore's arts scene. In recognition of his contributions to the local arts, Teo was conferred the Cultural Medallion—Singapore's highest arts accolade—in 1986. As an art teacher, Teo encouraged his students to find their creative voices by using contemporary art to respond to social issues. This is reflected

in his practice, where he continued to develop and expand his multidisciplinary practice while imparting technical art skills as he explored different art forms and materials, from sculpture and painting to performance and installation art.

Over seven decades, Teo has continuously explored everyday life through his use of common materials and his commitment to social engagement and change. In the 1980s, Teo invented paperdyesculp, a medium that involves shaping dyed papier-mâché and other materials into sculptural artworks. This versatile medium reflects Teo's artistic philosophy and belief in creative spontaneity, repurposing everyday items like paper and found objects into collages and assemblages. His practice is defined by a visceral desire to reflect on the complexities of daily life, all infused with humour and kitsch.

Dr. Eugene Tan, CEO and Director of National Gallery Singapore says, “We are excited to present the works of one of Singapore’s most prolific local artists, Teo Eng Seng, as part of our second instalment of our SG Artist series this year. Teo is a highly respected artist best known for bringing modern art aesthetics to Singapore’s visual arts scene and creating socially conscious artworks that respond to issues that are still relevant today. We hope that visitors who come to *Teo Eng Seng: We’re Happy. Are You Happy?* will foster a deeper appreciation for local art and uncover how it can be a bridge to understanding the world around us.”

Mr Yuen Kuan Moon, Singtel’s Group Chief Executive Officer says, “Singtel is thrilled to support Teo Eng Seng, a Cultural Medallion recipient and one of Singapore's most esteemed artists. As a homegrown brand, we are proud to champion Singaporean artists like Teo who have demonstrated the unique ability to transform everyday materials into profound artistic statements and has helped to foster a deeper connection between art and society in the process.”

The exhibition features two thematic sections that reflect the guiding philosophies Teo upheld throughout his career: the spirit of innovation and the use of art as both a medium for social engagement and as the message.

Don't Try to Read it, See it, Feel it: A multidisciplinary practice guided by experimentation and emotive expressions



Installation view, *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

The exhibition's first section, *Don't Try to Read it, See it, Feel it*, celebrates Teo for his unique approach to art, where he explores various practices, genres, and movements, transforming them through his formal experimentations. His works, often inspired by things he had seen, heard, or felt, do not depict recognisable objects. Instead, Teo adopts vibrant colours and unexpected forms to create haphazard arrangements, creating visual realms that are integrative of existing genres and movements yet irreverent towards their established norms and practices.

His methods in sculpture and painting are distinctive, evoking memories and feelings from his own experiences. Teo emphasises spontaneity, adding colours and materials intuitively rather than through rational planning. The exhibition well represents Teo's exposure to abstraction and abstract expressionism during his studies as an art student in Singapore, London, and Birmingham.



Teo Eng Seng. *Don't Try to Read It, See It, Feel It*. 1986. Paperdyesculp on paper, 74.4 x 104.5 cm.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore. P-0949.

Don't Try to Read it, See it, Feel it (1986) is the artwork that gives its name to the title of this first section. Given Teo's English-educated background and limited familiarity with Chinese characters, he presents a personal interpretation of Chinese calligraphy. By encouraging viewers to engage with the word's essence through sensation and intuition, Teo's deliberate subversion challenges traditional notions of legibility in the Chinese logogram system, underscoring the transformative power of visual communication beyond linguistic boundaries.



Teo Eng Seng. *Magnificence of Nature*. c. 1996. Paperdyesculp, 48 x 23 x 23 cm.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 1997-02624.

Magnificence of Nature (1996) is a paperdyesculp sculpture that stands proudly atop a pedestal, exuding a monumental presence. Its gnarled form, uneven surface, and vibrant markings evoke the essence of something organic and alive, capturing the process of growth and decay. The

layered surfaces, unified by pigments, reflect the themes of decay and regeneration inherent in our biological world.



Teo Eng Seng. *Five Nails*. 1991. Fibreglass on wire construction, 370 x 290 x 290 cm.
Collection of Singapore Art Museum, 1992-00468.

The intersection between Western and Eastern influences continues throughout his artistic practice, including one of his largest artworks, *Five Nails* (1991). Visitors will be in awe of the large installation, which stands at 3.7 metres, inspired by the Buddha's palm as depicted in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Representing the inescapable grasp of humanity's subconscious, the long nail-like monoliths, which resemble giant fingertips, consume visitors and entrap them as they approach the artwork, relaying a sense of the sublime from being caught in something far larger and greater than they are.



Teo Eng Seng. *The Net (Most Definitely Singapore River)*. 1986. Paperdyesculp on net, 350 x 350 cm.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore. ASB-0043.

The Net (Most Definitely Singapore River) (1986) is an installation featuring a fishing net entangled with paperdyesculp debris. This work is Teo's wry response to the overuse of the Singapore River as a subject by local artists. Instead of a romanticised depiction, Teo captures the pollution from the 1970s to the 1980s, emphasising rawness and spontaneity in his re-creation of the river's debris.

Sweet Talk, Straight Talk: A Global Citizen Engaging in Social Commentary through Art



Teo Eng Seng. *Sweet Talk*. 2009. Acrylic on fabric, 125 x 127 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2011-03124.
Straight Talk. 2009. Acrylic on fabric, 117 x 124 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2011-031245.
Installation view, *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?*, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Throughout his career as an arts practitioner and educator, Teo has posited that art should be a platform for social commentary and a means to express their thoughts about the world. Through his art, Teo called for social justice, dignity, and common humanity when confronting sobering realities of social issues in the latter half of the 20th century.

This section showcases Teo's "straight talk" through bold, unbridled expressions of freedom and perseverance in his paperdyesculp works and sculptures. These are tempered by "sweet talk"—

humour, irony, and kitsch—revealing his tongue-in-cheek perspectives on global and local issues, artistic genres, and personal events.

This duality captures Teo's practice of negotiating society and selfhood with honesty and wit. Through his works, Teo conveys sober, emotive, and sensitive expressions for social justice, dignity, and common humanity, where the social is intimately tied to the self, evoked through painterly and sculptural attributes.



Teo Eng Seng. *We're Happy. Are You Happy?*. 1997. Paperdyesculp, bird cage and fabric, 89 x 54 x 68 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum. 1997-03601.

The exhibition's namesake, *We're Happy. Are You Happy?* (1997) is a combination of ready-made objects with paperdyesculp techniques, embellishing a second-hand birdcage with paper pieces resembling classical columns, mimicking the opulence of grand mansions in Singapore's wealthy neighbourhoods. Despite the theme of captivity, paper birds within the cage frolic between themselves in the gilded cage, symbolising the contradictions of affluent lifestyles and the trade-off between material comfort and personal freedom.

Teo's work critically reflects on the societal divide between different social classes, encouraging viewers to contemplate the complexities of wealth, privilege, and the pursuit of genuine expression amidst social disparities.



Teo Eng Seng. *Massacre at Mylai (After Haeberle's)*. 1970. Oil on canvas, 126.7 x 152 cm.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2009-01510.

Visitors can also view Teo's reflections on global events, including his painting *Massacre at My Lai (After Haeberle's)* (1970). This painting references Ronald L. Haeberle's photograph of the My Lai massacre, depicting a chaotic pile of bodies in harsh black lines against a vivid red background. By cropping the original image, Teo intensifies the brutality of the scene, creating a powerful and direct confrontation with the viewer.



Teo Eng Seng. Top: *Wabi Sabi*. 1987–2011. Acrylic on cloth, 144 x 440 cm. Collection of the artist.
Bottom: *Ah Wah and Ah Kiat: Crossing Borders*. 2001. Glass reinforced concrete, 202 parts,
each approximately 34 x 50 x 31 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2022-00924.

Beyond the gallery spaces, visitors can look forward to a re-creation of the world's busiest land crossing border at The Spine Hall. *Ah Wah and Ah Kiat: Crossing Borders* (2001) captures the

daily migration of workers between countries worldwide. Closer to home, this work resonates with the Causeway between Singapore and Malaysia as one of the busiest border crossings in the world. More than 200 sculptures of motorcyclists are massed together as a crowd whose monotony is only broken by two golden figurines in their midst, emphasising their individuality. Teo's work symbolically honours the everyday worker, showcasing their inherent value and dignity through their labour and contributions to society on both sides of the Johor Strait.

Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy? runs from 6 September 2024 to 2 February 2025. Visitors may purchase Special Exhibition Passes at \$25 each (\$15 for Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents) to view the exhibition at Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery 1, Level 3, National Gallery Singapore.

Visitors can purchase early bird Gallery Passes through our website by 26 September 2024 to enjoy 20% off Special Exhibition or All Access Gallery Passes. This promotion applies to both *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?* and *Kim Lim: The Space Between. A Retrospective*, which runs from 27 September 2024 to 2 February 2025 at Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery 2 and 3.

Artworks displayed at The Spine Hall are free to view for all visitors. For more information, please refer to the attached annexe or visit nationalgallery.sg/TeoEngSeng2024. Media assets are available through this [link](#).

- [Annex A](#): *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?* Artwork Highlights
- [Annex B](#): *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?* Exhibition Programmes, Audio Tours, and Catalogue

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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. As a registered Charity and an Institute of Public Character, National Gallery Singapore relies on the support of the public to build collections, engage in research, develop programmes and bring art to everyone.

Annex A: Teo Eng Seng: *We're Happy. Are You Happy?* Artwork Highlights

Don't Try to Read it, See it, Feel it




Artwork	Credit Line
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Don't Try to Read It, See It, Feel It</i>. 1986. Paperdyesculpt on paper, 74.4 x 104.5 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. P-0949.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Five Nails</i>. 1991. Fibreglass on wire construction, 370 x 290 x 290 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, 1992-00468.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>The Mind</i>. 1975. Light bulbs, acrylic, painted wood, electrical circuit, and switches, 42.5 x 63.5 x 51 cm. Collection of the artist.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Torso</i>. 1965. Emulsion on paper, 48.5 x 38 cm. Collection of the artist.</p>

	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>MJ Dangerous V.</i> Undated. Plastic waste and paperdyesculp, 104 x 75 x 1 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum. 1997-02626.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Magnificence of Nature.</i> c. 1996. Paperdyesculp, 48 x 23 x 23 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 1997-02624.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Multiplex.</i> 1992. Paperdyesculp and canvas on blind system, 2 parts, each 251 x 204 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2015-00382.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>The Net (Most Definitely Singapore River).</i> 1986. Paperdyesculp on net, 350 x 350 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. ASB-0043.</p>

Sweet Talk, Straight Talk

Artwork	Credit Line
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>We're Happy. Are You Happy?</i>. 1997. Paperdyesculp, bird cage and fabric, 89 x 54 x 68 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum. 1997-03601.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Massacre at Mylai (After Haeberle's)</i>. 1970. Oil on canvas, 126.7 x 152 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2009-01510.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Sweet Talk</i>. 2009. Acrylic on fabric, 125 x 127 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2011-03124.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Straight Talk</i>. 2009. Acrylic on fabric, 117 x 124 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2011-031245.</p>

Artworks Located at The Spine Hall and Coleman Entrance

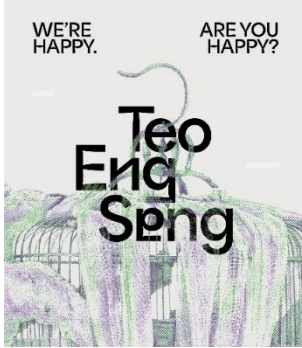
Artwork	Credit Line
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Together</i>. 2003. Fabric, cotton, cardboard frame and metal rod, tent: height 220 cm, width 135 cm. Collection of the artist.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Wabi Sabi</i>. 1987–2011. Acrylic on cloth, 144 x 440 cm. Collection of the artist.</p>
	<p>Teo Eng Seng. <i>Ah Wah and Ah Kiat: Crossing Borders</i>. 2001. Glass-reinforced concrete, 202 parts, each approximately 34 x 50 x 31 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. 2022-00924.</p>

**Annex B: Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy? Exhibition Programmes,
Audio Tours and Catalogue**

For an updated listing of programmes, please visit nationalgallery.sg/TeoEngSeng2024

Programmes	
A Science for Happiness: On Teo Eng Seng's Aesthetic Prospectus	
Date and Time:	7 September 2024, 11am
Venue:	The Ngee Ann Kongsi Auditorium
Admission Details:	Free, registration required
Description:	<p>Celebrating the opening of the exhibition <i>Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?</i>, this programme features a screening of a 2003 Mediacorp documentary on Teo Eng Seng from the TV series "Self-Portraits", followed by a response on the exhibition, titled "A Science for Happiness: On Teo Eng Seng's Aesthetic Prospectus" by theorist Dr. Cissie Fu.</p> <p>The programme concludes with a discussion with Professor T.K. Sabapathy. The discussion is moderated by one of the exhibition curators Dr. Seng Yu Jin.</p>
Drop-in Activity at Keppel Centre for Art Education	
Date and Time:	November 2024
Venue:	Keppel Centre for Art Education
Admission Details:	Free for All
Description:	Inspired by Teo Eng Seng's <i>The Net: Most Definitely the Singapore River</i> , transform used paper into sculpture!
Sculpture Trail Guide for Families	
Date and Time:	6 September 2024
Venue:	Keppel Centre for Art Education
Admission Details:	Free for All
Description:	<p>Explore the wonders of sculpture of artists like Teo Eng Seng through our Sculpture Trail Guide designed just for kids!</p> <p>Self-guided resources for families and will be available during the exhibition period, on a first come first serve basis.</p>

Slow Art Jam	
Date and Time:	1 December 2024 Additional slots may be added at a later date.
Venue:	Rooftop Studio 1 - 4
Admission Details:	Paid programme, registration required
Description:	Join us for a unique art experience that blends creativity with mindfulness. The Slow Art Jam workshop invites participants to explore the meditative practice of Slow Art while discovering the captivating works of Teo Eng Seng. Guided by our facilitator, attendees will have the freedom to paint their canvas tote bags inspired by Teo Eng Seng's work, merging artistic expression with personal reflection. Take home your handcrafted tote as a functional and meaningful keepsake from this enriching session.
When Street Dance Meets Happiness	
Date and Time:	18 January 2025
Venue:	Roving Performance
Admission Details:	Free for All
Description:	Experience a captivating roving performance where street dance meets innovative visual art. This dynamic show explores how both forms evolve from addressing societal issues. Enjoy the movement and creativity as the performance moves through different spaces. Stick around for an exclusive post-show tour with the choreographer to delve into the creative process. Don't miss this unique fusion of dance and expression!
Tours	
Docent-led Tours (For Teo Eng Seng and Kim Lim)	
Date and Time:	Starting from 11 October 2024 English Tours Thursday to Sunday 3.30pm to 4.30pm Mandarin Tours Saturday and Sunday 1.30pm to 2.30pm
Venue:	Singtel Gallery 1-3, The Spine Hall, Coleman Entrance
Admission Details:	Special Exhibition or All Access Gallery Passes required for entry to <i>Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?</i> and <i>Kim</i>

	<i>Lim: The Space Between. A Retrospective.</i> The tour itself is free of charge.
Curator Tour	
Date and Time:	19 October 2024, 11am and 3pm
Venue:	Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery 1
Admission Details:	Free, registration required
Description:	In these special tours, the exhibition curator will bring you through artist Teo Eng Seng's practice across seven decades. Looking at Teo's paintings, paperdyesculpt works, sculptures and large-scale from a non-chronological manner, learn more about how his works stem from an emotive resonance with the broader environment he has lived, worked, and taught in.
Audio Tours	
Venue:	https://www.nationalgallery.sg/teoengseng2024#audiotourandresources
Description:	Audio tours for 5 artworks are available. Script by Lou Giansante.
Exhibition Catalogue	
 <p>ISBN: 978-981-18-9827-3 245 mm (H) x 210 mm (W) 160 pages 128 colour illustrations SGD 35 Paperback 5 September 2024 Publisher: National Gallery Singapore</p>	<p>A catalogue for <i>Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?</i>, edited by curators Seng Yu Jin and Roy Ng, offers a comprehensive overview of the Singaporean artist's bold experimentations over the past seven decades. It is available for purchase at the Gallery Store by ABRY, and select book retailers in Singapore, and internationally.</p> <p>For more information, please contact publications@nationalgallery.sg.</p>