



FIGURING A SCENE

While walking through an exhibition, we may find ourselves drawn to certain artworks and their shapes, colours and textures. Naturally, we try to understand these forms by relating them to what we are familiar with. However, in our urge to find significance in these artworks, we tend to miss most of the process.

And so, we ask: How are these forms produced and perceived? What takes place when they are gathered together?

This exhibition invites you to explore the process of form-making and how we make and understand art. It looks at how artists transform events and objects into art that tells a story or evokes a certain moment in history. In other words, it explores the process of “figuring” or embodying both a sensitive material like art and the means through which it is made to matter in the world.

Figuring a Scene unfolds across several episodes in which natural elements become the very thing through which social forms are grasped. For instance, the tree of a fruit becomes the sculpture of the fruit, which in turn evokes the environment of Singapore and Southeast Asia through photography and painting. Or maybe a fire gives birth to a metropolis, a shadow protests its own source of light, a peculiar scent pervades the museum and wax embeds faith and terror.



CONTENTS

Dalam Southeast Asia 4

by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

The Stuff of Forms 16

by Patrick Flores

Artworks 42

Exhibition Views 59

Acknowledgements 66

Credits 68

DALAM SOUTHEAST ASIA

by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

PREFACE

Originally authored on 15 July 2021, additional notes are added each time a new project is initiated at Dalam Southeast Asia; these notes are dated accordingly.

It has become almost clichéd to introduce yet another “project space” within the confines of the modern art museum, considering how the model has proliferated globally in the past decade.¹ How did we, in such a short period of time, reach this point of self-referential superabundance? What do these “project spaces” offer? What concerns do they speak to? Several claim to offer insights into lesser studied or suppressed stories within the experience of modern art; or at least begin to acknowledge the silences inhabiting exhibitionary projects due to social prejudice, caused by historical and contemporary biases. Many “project spaces” seek to generate narratives through case studies gathered under a shared curatorial thematic. Some even push the envelope of the modern by resuscitating non-Western cultural objects, which are often bereft of “authorship” (at least in terms of how traditionalist streams of art history register the creator), in innovative ways. Many of these objects had entered museum collections in the former metropolises and colonies via the insults of colonialism. Another approach emphasises engaging contemporary artists who are at the forefront of innovations in their field. These contemporary artists investigate museum collections as a means of bridging the silences of the past with the urgencies of the present. As museums become more willing to interrogate themselves on aesthetic and political grounds, some have even begun to facilitate “takeovers” of their “project spaces” by constituents linked to social justice movements.

No matter the approach, the resulting exhibits are positioned within the modern museum's ongoing attempts at remaining agile in its programming. They also harness the recent upsurge in decolonising narratives, staking a claim for the legitimacy of subaltern knowledge systems. The impulse appears to be the same across varied contexts: curators and museum professionals around the world are no longer able to shy away from addressing inequalities, including that of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and are beginning to recognise the need to be more open to self-critique. Just as the "white cube" proliferated across the world as a method for display in the modern museum of the 1960s and 1970s, the "project space" now replicates on a planetary level. It is part of our collective moment, wherein artists, curators, publics, and other museum constituents are putting forward a set of shared ethical paradigms for a knowledge base that seeks to guarantee shared access and exposure. The "project space" is a node in this constellation of change.

The aim of *Dalam Southeast Asia* (the National Gallery Singapore's "project space" located within its long-term display, *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*) is to contribute to this moment of self-reflexivity from the vantage point of territorial Southeast Asia. By inviting curators at the Gallery to devise questions and then develop strategies to address them, *Dalam Southeast Asia* argues for lesser-known narratives. By directly questioning the ways in which the modern art of Southeast Asia is displayed and written about, *Dalam Southeast Asia* aspires to recalibrate what a long-term collections-based display is, and what it may seek to achieve.



S. Mohdir
DALAM
1975
Acrylic on canvas,
92 x 66 cm
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore

“*Dalam*” is a Malay word meaning “inside.” It is used in everyday parlance to invite someone to enter a place or room. The word also carries esoteric undertones suggesting the “deep,” “within” or “interior,” pointing towards that aspect of the Self which is perceptible but also yet to be revealed. The word has been adopted by several artists. Simryn Gill’s celebrated suite of 260 photographs depicting the interiors of Malaysian homes, titled *Dalam* (2001), offers insights into the visual phenomenon that is the contemporary living room—a place where one seeks refuge from the vagaries of everyday life, but which is also built up part by part as an expression of one’s relationship with popular culture. Likewise, “*Dalam*” is the title of a painting from 1975 by S. Mohdir that surveys the depths of the ocean. The work is a

description of perception, whether directed outwards or inwards, as it announces the indelible realisation that modern man is merely a speck in the universe. Gill and Mohdir remind us that art is not separate from reflexivity, and reflexivity is not separate from art.

Since its inauguration in 2015, *Between Declarations and Dreams* has been an attempt at generating an ideal sort of “provincialism” that refuses to submit to the homogenising effects of the Euro-American master narrative of art. The long-term exhibition features almost 400 works of Southeast Asian art ranging from the mid-19th century to the present, and an evolving curatorium has been systematically “rotating” over 100 works every year.² In this pursuit, the display has sought to develop its own distinctive capacities (drawing on crucial primary research and fieldwork conducted by the curatorium across Asia, Western

Europe, the United States, and elsewhere) for shaping what is now a shared story of global modernism. In this way, *Between Declarations and Dreams* lays claim to the Euro-American canon and its futures. Curating from this vantage point allow us to strive for decolonising modernism's structures; as a result, allowing for multiple anachronistic worlds to thrive.

The idea of a project space at National Gallery Singapore has been with me for some time. It emerged from three key concerns, discerned from years of sustaining a unique long-term display that focuses on the geographical region of Southeast Asia. Although the concerns I outline below are specific to the Gallery, they may apply to any major collecting institution with a focus on the non-West.

Firstly, we have too often relied on art history to establish the legitimacy of narratives before including them in *Between Declarations and Dreams*. Whilst it may be wiser for curators to follow the art historians hypothesising as a prelude to display, *Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to present works in a format that is first and foremost “contingent on display,” i.e., presenting bodies of work that have not received sustained art historical attention, so that the exhibition becomes a realm for generating perspectives on artistic processes and their relationship with burgeoning concerns in society. In this way, the modern in Southeast Asia registers its relevance to the present, and our collective efforts to forge a future art history that is diverse. This potential is unlocked by suggesting that the process of display—alongside public dialogues, careful captioning, and copious compilations of curatorial notes—is an extension of the didactic role of the museum. *Dalam Southeast Asia* is thus a

rehearsal for a forthcoming art history, and those that experience the exhibition are its first readers.

Secondly, we need to begin challenging the very narratives we have set up since 2015 within the galleries that make up the chronological display of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, and actively resist the singularising effects of such a canon-building venture. By exploring dilemmas and silences that have governed the ability of curators to narrate stories within modern museums, *Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to contribute to a more inclusive but “uneven” narrative of modern Southeast Asian art, one which remains a work in progress. In this way, *Dalam Southeast Asia* aspires to enable our publics to recognise that the stories we offer ought to be understood as contingent and open to revision with the passage of time. This process will need to be undertaken with care, because we also do not want to be seen as turning to the margins as a convenient way to access narratives without fully unravelling the problems of the centre. After all, it is the task of each new generation to revise the narratives that have been handed down by actively addressing the exclusionary practices of the past.

Thirdly, it has become increasingly important to stand outside the vending machine of art. This is a demand being made not by curators and museum professionals, but by publics around the world: that museums become responsive to and reflect the concerns of the communities they seek to serve. Increasingly, museums are being challenged to represent diverse voices, reduce carbon footprints, adopt digital interfaces, and claim a place for themselves as providing essential goods for everyday consumption. As a result, it has become imperative to produce an interior space (*dalam*) that talks about how curated

projects can engage with this trajectory. What does “curating” collections-based displays mean today? In this pursuit, Dalam Southeast Asia prototypes the small-format exhibition that testbeds speculative approaches to curatorial research and exhibition design. For instance, the curators developing the various exhibitions have not only engaged artists or artist’s estates in conversations but also consulted a range of constituents to fill gaps in the production of cultural meaning. Curators must actively ask how their work in the field should and must have broader implications. With each exhibition, the hope is to devise more responsive approaches for the display of modern art within the museum.

To reiterate: The inauguration of Dalam Southeast Asia marks a significant turning point in the Gallery’s curatorial efforts to display, acquire and stimulate public dialogues around the dilemmas confronting the modern art of Southeast Asia. By locating Dalam Southeast Asia strategically within the framework of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, we seek to balance the familiar vocabularies with the lesser known, generate public and semi-public conversations, and perhaps create new values around the growing awareness that whatever power museums have is granted to them by the constituents they depend on to do their work.

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

National Gallery Singapore

15 July 2021



Exhibition view of *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, 2021.

Postscript 1, 15 July 2022—On Curatorial Responsibility

It has been a year since we launched Dalam Southeast Asia. During this time, the project space has enabled the curatorium at the Gallery to engage with the challenges that were identified at the outset, ranging from the ability to develop newer sets of ethical paradigms that enable more inclusive measures for accessing art, to allowing the “curatorial” to act as a space for hypothesising an art history that is yet to come. The inaugural exhibition, *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, which ran from 29 October 2021 to 12 June 2022, generated turns that paid homage to the incredible lives both artists led and the array of materials and objects they left behind. *The Tailors and the Mannequins* re-emphasised the role modern art museums must (and will continue to) play in facilitating the circulation of stories that have yet to receive sustained art-historical attention. This was achieved through the tireless work of Roger Nelson—my colleague and curator of the show—in engaging the artists and their estates alongside a series of specialists in a number of wide-ranging conversations that not only enabled gaps to be filled in a meaningful manner but also initiated the public into a vast realm of associated histories pertaining to forced migration and the ability of the Southeast Asian artist to display their art in environments where infrastructure was still in the midst of being formed.

Moreover, the exhibition pointed to the manifold lateral links between Southeast Asia and other regions across the decolonising world (collectively known as the Global South), including in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. As this process unfolded in the lead up to and during the exhibition via a series of public conversations, it became possible to reflect upon the sovereignty that curators (and by extension, public art institutions) continue to exercise over the artworks they display, especially when curatorial enchantment actively seeks meaning within the painting’s subject matter but also beyond the boundaries of the artwork, whereby circulation and distribution is seen as an endearing facet of how one may consume the work of art today, in our time. This means that the authorial agendas of the artwork may be sublimated into a demonstration of contemporaneity, whereby the curator acts as an agent who resides within and at the edge of the culture that delivers the subject matter and context for the art. As the different Dalam Southeast Asia projects unfold, it will be pertinent to maintain notes on how this phenomenon unfolds and the techniques each curator develops to enhance accountability for the way artworks, materials, archival traces, and most importantly, the stories we are entrusted with, are used.

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To access curatorial texts and programmes associated with *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-tailors-mannequins>

Postscript 2, 15 July 2023—On Curatorial Transmission



Exhibition view of *Familiar Others*, 2022, showing Rocky Cajigan's response printed alongside a photograph by Eduardo Masferré titled *Young Man* (1953).

The second exhibition at Dalam Southeast Asia raised a range of questions on “curatorial transmissions,” especially in relation to the presentation of Southeast Asian modern art. With *Familiar Others: Emiria Sunassa, Eduardo Masferré and Yeh Chi Wei, 1940s–1970s*, curated by my colleague Phoebe Scott, the thorny issue of “Otherness” and who can carry the burden of its representation in light of postcolonial thought came to the fore. As part of the exhibitionary form and narrative, Scott engaged a range of interlocutor-respondents from communities said to be represented in the artworks to respond to the paintings, photographs and archival matter on display. Common practice suggests that these messages—highlighting “potential issues” that have emerged in relation to modes of representation as ethical, philosophical and social conventions have shifted over time—be included in the catalogue, discussed in public programmes, or relegated to the bottom of artwork labels. Instead, *Familiar Others* placed these messages—often critical and working in tandem—front and centre alongside the artworks, suggesting that the didactic and educative function of the art institution be challenged by an overstaging of concerns that can now, potentially, reveal a range of issues related to the messaging of modern Southeast Asian art. I would like to speak to one such pressing matter: the “collectivism” suggested through such an experience of modern art.

From the outset, the curatorial intent of Dalam Southeast Asia has been about challenging the prevalent modes of presentation within the art institution. This concern has emerged from a movement taking place across museums as they seek to convert their largely white cube-led narratives (which emphasise the autonomy of the modern artwork) into sites of active public engagement. In this new mode, quiet contemplation is an option but not necessarily the norm—so much so that the beholder is now assumedly a talkative agent, socially engaged and culturally conscious. The underlying curatorial assumption is to generate an exhibitionary mode that offers a critical insight into the historical and present conditions from which pictures emerge. For *Familiar Others*, the artworks are immersed into such a collective ethos of introspection through a range of poetic and essay fragments generated by external agents other than the curators, effectively calling into question any suggestion of the museum as an impartial mediator of perspectives. How such an awareness can be sustained, enhanced and made productive remains to be seen. For the moment, I offer this observation: We seem to be moving towards a curatorial constructivism whereby the museum's transcendental promise is being carefully reconstituted by the urge for an inclusive social order promoting collective interaction and a sense of community. This constructivism is premised upon a growing public awareness, at times driven by forces beyond museum workers, that the art institution and its narratives, no matter how naturalistic and certain they appear, are merely historical constructions. It is now, as the saying goes, a matter of time.

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To access curatorial texts and programmes associated with *Familiar Others*, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/southeastasia-dalam-familiar-others>



Exhibition view of *The Neglected Dimension*, 2023

Postscript 3, 15 January 2024—On Curatorial Openings

In its third iteration, Dalam Southeast Asia ventured into a domain that has been on the edge of debates on modern art: abstraction and its experimentations with spirituality. Titled *The Neglected Dimension* and curated by my colleague and art historian Anissa Rahadiningtyas, the project set out to survey the interlinked practices of Ahmad Sadali, A.D. Pirous, Haryadi Suadi and Arahmaiani that emerged from the art school under Institut Teknologi Bandung—a site of major experimentations in abstraction from the 1950s until the 1990s. Set across three generations, the project borrowed its title from a 1987 essay by art critic Sanento Yuliman, who reiterated Ahmad Sadali's argument for the artistic and material manifestations of religion and religiosity (in the Indonesian case, Islam and Islamicity) to be considered when assessing the development of modern art in Indonesia. In the curatorial text accompanying the exhibition, Rahadiningtyas argues that Yuliman's celebration of Islamic aesthetics was a response to the agitations accompanying the dismantling of two centuries of European colonial rule and the search for autonomous metaphors in abstract painting in Indonesia. The exhibition at National Gallery Singapore studied how the potentials of Arabic and Jawi script were reimaged through an approach called “calligraphic modernism”—an expression Rahadiningtyas borrowed from art historian Iftikhar Dadi and his surveys on similar and parallel developments in West Asia, North Africa and South Asia. The aim of *The Neglected Dimension*, if it may be surmised, was to extend the geographical scope of “calligraphic modernism” to Southeast Asia. In fact, the project of “modernising” Islamic aesthetics extended across the Global South from Bandung to Tunis, from Baghdad to Dhaka. In light of the exhibition and its accompanying public programmes, I would like to reflect on one matter: the curatorial “opening” that emerged as a result of this project.

One of the aims of Dalam Southeast Asia has been to draw attention to aspects of the region's art that require exhibitionary attention, as well as enable a kind of simultaneous thinking/rethinking and assimilation/metamorphosis of the bases through which we think about artistic practices and movements in Southeast Asia. “Calligraphic modernism” might just offer an incredible, and even outrageous, opening into ongoing decolonial debates on difference and the Other. What I mean is this: calligraphic abstraction is unique in its potential to craft out an attitude that can disrupt the coherence of abstraction as a dialogic exchange between non-Western artists and their peers in New York and Paris (such has been the case around Constructivism, Cubism, Futurism and even non-objective abstraction). This movement—if it can be constituted as such—did not just emerge in the Global South but was also unique to it. Although Rahadiningtyas did not fully develop this argument, she has left us with this opening with an entry/fragment featured in the timeline that appears in the exhibition catalogue: the Konferensi Islam Asia Afrika (KIAA, or the Islamic Asia-Africa Conference), which was held in Bandung, exactly a decade after the Asia-Africa Conference. It is likely that A.D. Pirous, Ahmad Sadali, Haryadi Suadi and a number of their peers were informed of this significant event,

which sought to build similarities across the Islamicate world. The question then arises: Can we now build a constellation of encounters between these artists and their peers across the formerly-colonised/Islamicate worlds...? A broader curatorial investment into this topic is gently requested.

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To access curatorial texts and programmes associated with *The Neglected Dimension*, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/TheNeglectedDimension>

NOTES

- 1 Examples of “project spaces” located within major European and American museums includes the following: (i) Stedelijk Turns, which is a room within the Dutch museum’s collections display (commonly known as Stedelijk Base). Stedelijk Turns features “new discoveries, commissions, and acquisitions” that have a direct impact on the museum’s collection. (ii) Salle Focus, which the Musée National d’Art Moderne maintains within the Centre Pompidou’s long-term displays. It is meant to present lesser-studied figures within the story of modernism and host contemporary art interventions. (iii) *Minor Histories*, an exhibitionary and discursive programme by the Van Abbe Museum, which features “pieces from the collection that have received less attention over the years, as well as recent acquisitions that uniquely represent the times, we live in.”

In Singapore, the NUS Museum hosts *preproom | things that may or may not happen*, an experimental project platform that features artworks, cultural objects, and archives as they are being accessioned, reworked or revised in relation to the museum’s extensive historical collections of art. The Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, which does not maintain an extensive collection, has hosted MAM Projects, a gallery that attracts similar inquiries. The NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore carved out The Lab, the Centre’s “space for introducing research in process and as an open studio for activation.”

Another recent shift in this genre of space building is the “experimental project lab,” which attempts to bridge visual art with debates in advanced technologies. The LACMA runs The Art + Technology Lab, a joint initiative with Hyundai, YouTube, SNAP Inc and SpaceX for exploring the convergence of art and technology. Similarly, MoMA’s Creativity Lab hosts The People’s Studio, where “visitors can learn about and experiment with artists’ strategies that rely on exchange, shared reflection, and collaboration.”

- 2 The inaugural hang in 2015 of *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century* was developed by Cheng Jia Yun, Clarissa Chikiamco, Horikawa Lisa, Phoebe Scott, Syed Muhammad Hafiz, and Adele Tan. Since 2016, the curatorium has also included Goh Sze Ying, Qinyi Lim, Shujuan Lim, Anisha Menon, Roger Nelson, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, Melinda Susanto, and Charmaine Toh. Alongside extensive efforts at surveying the Southeast Asian collections and developing detailed captions, the curatorium has actively sought key long-term loans from institutional and private lenders to address gaps in the chronological displays. For instance, a highlighted gap has been the mid-19th century displays, which has benefited from generous loans of works by Raden Saleh and Juan Luna from the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Lopez Memorial Museum respectively.



THE STUFF OF FORMS

by Patrick Flores

The vision of Dalam Southeast Asia as a project space revolves around self-reflexivity, which encourages questioning deep-seated norms; recovery, which aims at remembering and getting well; and redistribution, which seeks to decentralise authority and address inequities. *Figuring a Scene* speaks to this vision and mainly contributes to the curatorial method. In contrast with previous exhibitions at Dalam Southeast Asia which were productively monographic, thematic and tended to be clear-cut about their objects of inquiry, this articulation of the space is less straightforward in naming its intentions and delays as it dilates its discourse. This offers a different way to make exhibitions, which usually endeavour to conclude rather than to speculate, complicating the curatorial logic of the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery, which is largely linear and understandably evolutionary.

Figuring a Scene does not unfold as art history—there is no assumption that the intelligence required to guide it is art-historical knowledge nor are there master artists advancing or progressing with their masterpieces. Rather, it unfolds as a constellation of images or tropes, prompting the public to respond with an equivalent gesture of aesthetic interest invested in and elicited by these images or tropes. By doing so, the exhibition insists on the notion that exhibitions are contexts in themselves, much like the other contexts perceived to be external to them, such as history, society or abstractions of faith and identity. It takes the risk to claim that feeling is a fact, imagination is information, sensing is knowing, and different registers of context mingle to conjure a mutating sensorium.

If we must conceive of this exhibition as a narrative consisting of scenes, it could be a story of something coming into a particular form; how this something becomes something else—that is, how it transforms; and how both carve out a place in a broader frame of reference like history, or a structure like society, or an abstraction like faith or identity. These contexts—constituting as they are constituted—can be provisionally acknowledged as being modern, with their attendant asymmetries, as they iterate across modernism, modernity and modernisation. The scenes may cohere or they may be disarticulated independently and rearticulated relationally.

Passage

As we walk through an exhibition, the forms on display draw us in. They send out impulses to which we respond in a range of ways. We tend to relate these forms to what we know and what we have previously seen. We name the forms, figure them out and imagine them to be meaningful or assign meaning to them.

With this belief in art's capacity to represent, what might be missed in the urge to recognise are the many moving parts inherent to the process of making; the possibility of the public not fully comprehending what they are sensing; and the chance that art is not able to represent the reality that the said public is expected to interpret.

This exhibition traces the process of form-making within particular contexts, such as history, society, faith and identity. In doing so, it raises questions around making and making sense, particularly how nature or events transform through the body of the viewer when they encounter forms in art or history. It probes the procedure of “figuring” or embodying both a sensitive material like art and the means through which it is made to matter in the world, be it through a happening or within a setting or scene, as in a narrative or drama.

Figuring a Scene clarifies this across the episodes of the shadow, fruit, fire, air, wax and city, dwelling on instances in which such natural elements or substances become social forms to be intuited and grasped. To cite: the tree of a fruit becomes the sculpture of the fruit, which in turn evokes the environment of Singapore through both photography and painting. Following this, the same tree yields a sculpture in Java that resembles a drum and is used to alert the village to imminent threats, a fire gives birth to a metropolis, a shadow protests its own source of light and wax embeds faith and terror.

Mainly, the exhibition centres on locale, be it town, city, nation or museum, examining how nature creates culture as an environment and a sign system; how atmosphere informs representation as well as institution; and how the artifice of a formal collection interacts with a social collective based on belief and the critique of structure. On another level, the exhibition presents how modern and contemporary Southeast Asian artists, from Liu Kang to Sharon Chin, sustain an ecology of forms in which nature and culture render the condition and the possibility of art, along with its myriad poetic effects.

Episodes

Shadow The artist Sharon Chin lives and works in Port Dickson in Malaysia, tending to a garden where various animals wander. In the neighbourhood, right at her doorstep, is an oil refinery that emits a glowing light at night. Such is the setting that holds nature and technology—the species of the Earth and global industry—in tension. Chin sensitively probes this tension, stirred by her commitment to climate justice and the critique of ecological displacement. Through linocut prints of animals she created to illustrate Zedek Siew’s book *Creatures of Near Kingdoms*, she crafted placards for a Climate Strike protest in Kuala Lumpur. Subsequently, the same placards were repurposed for a workshop called “Chained to Plastic: The Unmanageable Waste,” where participants learned about hydrocarbon

molecules and integrated plastic waste with the placards. For *Figuring a Scene*, the prints-placards, in their different iterations, were remade into shadow puppets. Assembled into a mural, they perform in a liminal site between the garden and the refinery, staged through the light of “fossil capitalism” or an economy overly dependent on the extraction of fossil fuels. In this installation, forms ominously and urgently emerge from the constant struggle between natural and social forces. The artist asks: “Without darkness, how can we dream of the day?”



1
DURIAN SELLER, 1985.
Chu Sui Mang Collection,
courtesy of National
Archives of Singapore.

Fruit

Three works in this episode flesh out the fabled durian, a fruit whose story and image have shaped the imagination of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Through a painting, a photograph and a sculpture, the durian is depicted in various forms. Liu Kang paints the various phases of its passage in which the fruit, sharing space with the mangosteen, is gathered for the market, inspected, pried open, prepared for sale, placed on shoulder pole baskets and eaten. Anusapati transforms a fallen durian tree, cut down by his neighbour, into an abstract and minimal sculptural piece that is reminiscent of the Javanese musical instrument *kentongan* and in conversation with the work of Constantin Brancusi. Robert Zhao Renhui photographs a durian tree in the forest of Bukit Panjang, formidable in its role as a witness to the life of its vicinity across the years; at the same time, foragers consider this tree to bear the sweetest fruit. The durian, with its natural and tropical form, fabled in colonial times and contentious in the contemporary, assumes different guises in history and everyday life. In these transformations, we are initiated into thinking of how a fruit can become culturally meaningful within the necessary yearning for a sense of place and belonging, as well as the memory of the land, its ancestors and its colonisers.

Fire

The tragic fire that engulfed the villages and communities of Bukit Ho Swee in 1961 was a critical moment in the social history of Malaya. Characterised as a sprawling, congested, fetid and “inert” slum of attap huts, Bukit Ho Swee was home to around 16,000 people. To a significant extent, the fire emergency paved the way for



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2
 BUKIT HO SWEE, RUINS
 AFTER FIRE, 1961.

Singapore Press Holdings
 Collection, courtesy of
 National Archives of
 Singapore.

3
 AFTERMATH OF BUKIT
 HO SWEE FIRE, 1961.

Ministry of Information
 and the Arts Collection,
 courtesy of National
 Archives of Singapore.



3

the development of the local urban form in Singapore. An important aspect of this modernisation was the intense pace at which the construction of public housing took place. Through their paintings, drawings and prints, artists like Liu Kang, Lim Hak Tai, Tan Choo Kuan and Lim Yew Kuan have referenced episodes of fire incidents in Malaya and independent Singapore as both a ruinous and generative condition in the historical life of the post-colony. They would summon the element itself in its fierceness, as well as the aftermath of rebuilding from the ashes, mingling the registers of nostalgia, the anticipation of a new landscape and a description of everyday life. These works deviate from the predominantly exotic or pastoral scenography for which the stalwart coteries (the Nanyang artists and the Ten Men Art Group) were known.¹ In Singapore's history, the Bukit Ho Swee fire was a condition of modern possibility, with the ensuing reconstruction becoming a central trope in its narrative of progress.

Air It is visually difficult to represent air in art due to its inherent invisibility, yet its role and effect are visceral and vital. The painter Sun Yee conjures the presence of air by portraying the movement of wind, which causes trees to sway. She also implies the trickle of rain through streaks of white paint that slightly and intermittently speckle parts of the trees, hinting at a possible storm—an impression that the oblique orientation of the painting enhances. In a different medium, a photograph by Lim

Tzay Chuen insinuates the cloud of vapour emitted by a fogger releasing pheromones—a chemical secreted by an organism to induce physical, if not erotic, attraction. The image is a reference to the artist’s action in 2006 for the first Singapore Biennale, held at the historic City Hall building, which was at that time being redesigned to become National Gallery Singapore. Like the flecks of white paint that Sun quickly yet delicately applied to the canvas, faintly visible are the particles of a diffused atmosphere, which gains presence as the light sculpts the contours of the stairs in the storied building.

Wax Renato Habulan titles his assemblage *Tira* (2014–2023), a Filipino word that yields to different meanings. The root word for “residence,” it could also refer to remains or the action of striking. The work is made of many components, including driftwood and found statuary, but the most intriguing is the paraffin wax that becomes the ground where various items, like a wooden sculpture of an unconsecrated, transfigured Christ found and acquired from a closed commercial workshop, are ensconced. The scene refers to the colonial religion of Catholicism in Philippine culture. Over time, this spiritual system has been subjected to folk and popular appropriation and reinterpretation, opening religion up to diverse post-colonial meanings and political effects. The work signifies the embeddedness of the system as well as its fragmentation. It also implicates the horrors of war in parts of southern Philippines, manifesting in how their contraptions cling to and fuse with the wood. Amid this seeming dispersal of persistent forms is a synthesis proposed by the artist—in fact, a transfiguration—revealing a haunting ecology of images composed of organic materials like wood and wax. The tableau is part-altar, part-processional carriage and part-sepulcher.

City Two prominent signs of Singapore’s aspiration towards a national and modern form are its public housing and the art museum, both of which can be traced to discourses emerging from post-colonial Malaya. These are documented in writings from architecture and engineering, which are part of the broader efforts towards modernist



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4, 5
BUILDING WORKS AT
BUKIT HO SWEE FIRE SITE,
1962. Ministry of Information
and the Arts Collection,
courtesy of National Archives
of Singapore.

nation-building and the policy of urban community housing. One text, written a year after independence, speaks to the cultural role of Singapore as a city “so vital in the creation of national identity.”² Another text details the programme for constructing apartments, including the use of brick, sand and granite by the Housing and Development Board in 1962. These projects were catalysed by the fire crisis at Bukit Ho Swee of 1961, an event regarded as critical in transforming “squatters into citizens” at the cusp of Singapore’s nationhood in 1965. Troubling this yearning for cultural and physical well-being through art and shelter is a teak sculpture by Shui Tit Sing of the Ten Men Art Group. The seemingly quaint vignette hints at despair amid the thrill of change or trauma in the wake of tragedy: the fantasy of development is inflected by the folklore of residents falling off high-rise buildings. Today, almost 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing.³

[Elements]

To express form as more than just a function of technique and position it as tropic (rhetoric that is metaphorical, figurative or formed by figures of speech) requires the intervention of style. In this regard, I cite the art historian of Mesopotamian culture Irene Winter, who notes that:

The very act of making produces a way of making;
and if one accepts that that way of making is

manifest as style, then it is style that not only gives form but also “affective agency” in the psychological sense [...] style itself then becomes a sign existing between the maker and the world.⁴

For his part, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard notes that the “physiology of imagination, even more than its anatomy, is subject to the law of the four elements,”⁵ of fire, earth, air and water.

The exhibition is envisaged as zeroing in on the elemental, aiming to disrupt the usual approach towards discourse and pedagogical closure. It allows the audience to engage with the sensory experiences provided by the artwork. This method aims to curb the compulsion to look for meaning or significance that preempts opportunities for insight, epiphany or fabulation. When experiences intersect with the discursive, the latter will have been so geopoetically suffused that the discursivity ceases to be the kind that announces itself legibly as an explanation. That said, the exhibition is excitedly invested in ideas and concepts, and even in theories, but in a way that these become tropic, like figures of speech, and following Winter, stylistic. The curatorial desire is for the conceptual artefacts of the nation-state or country, culture and museum to create a chance for viewers to be immersed in the elements. This is so that when they are discussed as categories of analysis, they become, in the spirit of *Dalam Southeast Asia*, reflexive, restorative and redistributive.

When the discourse of Southeast Asia is summoned as a master narrative of context through the practices of the artists in the exhibition, it loses its *a priori* privilege. Instead, it is historicised and internalised in the everyday life depicted in the works and the social histories of artists. This is starkly evident in the works of artists, such as the Nanyang artists or Ten Men Art Group, who travelled Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s to tap the vein of regional sensibility. In this exhibition, the exotic ideal delineated by the said artists is unsettled by scenes of adversity like fires or psychologically motivated actions like suicide. Regardless

of the suggestion, there seems to be always the need for the painter or sculptor to simulate movement within a motionless two-dimensional space. Sun Yee's attempt in *Storm* (1959) is felicitous as well as illusionary, making it all the more precarious, considering that the image of wind and water indicates a tropical depression. Painting, here, puts forward an inclination or a stance of the represented scene but also stands its ground as a plastic presence, maintaining its material integrity. The same is true of Shui Tit Sing's sculpture *Why?* (1979), in which a person's act of jumping off the building is caught in *medias res*; the suspension is carved in teak and the sculpture can only simulate the panic around the harrowing affair.

Moreover, the exhibition seeks to implicate the museological imaginary as constitutive of the artistic form. The very formation of the institution lies at the heart of the possibility of art as a specific kind of proposition. To be sure, such a citation of the museum bears traces of institutional critique, but one that choreographs the forces at work in the making of art and a "national gallery." Implicated in these forces at work is the public, their involvement primarily as bodies that come in contact with the ambience of the museum. Such contact should be reckoned as aleatory and not behaviorist. Hence, Lim Tzay Chuen's infiltration of the civic building that was being refunctioned into a museum of modern art is germane. In fumigating the premises with synthesised human pheromones in *The Opposite is True #2* (2006), he fills the void with something at once eerie and irresistible, thus contaminating "an interior of orchestrated desire."⁶ It is an exploit—or mischief—that the artist aggravates to activate the "subliminal links between city, myth, and body chemistry."⁷ The institutional dissipates as a suggestive economy.

[Close Reading]

The exhibition, while preoccupied with the phenomenological theatre, also focuses on the philosophical apparatus of aesthetic modernity. In this respect, a close reading of a

work like Liu Kang's *Durian Vendor* (1957) is instructive. As described earlier, it scans the different stages of bringing durian to the market for public consumption. Methodologically speaking, Yve-Alain Bois's analysis of Henri Matisse's *Bathers with a Turtle* (1907–1908) may point to some lessons specifically around the fixation on an object that transfigures allegorically or becomes an occasion of melancholy. As a result, the transfiguration dispels the irresistibility of belief in the representation of the enigmatic turtle. No longer restricted to its status as a recognisable thing, the latter lingers in the picture petrified like a rock, even as it resists the objectification and the reification of a living animal through the armature of painting.⁸ In other words, the image of the turtle is almost but not quite the turtle we know to exist in actual life. It remains vivid, however, because it is painted. Transposed to the durian scene, and linking Liu Kang up with Matisse (who is said to have inspired the former profoundly), a case can be made about the converse of alienation: the object, serving both as food and commodity, absorbs the various persons depicted in the painting, as well as the viewer who is captivated by both the underlying consistency of the anecdote as well as the tectonic sufficiency of the composition. Bois observes Matisse's "strongest turn: the dialectic opposition between the formal coalescence of the group, cemented with all the energy of the dynamic structure [...] and the incurable isolation of each of its members."⁹

The allegiance to representation underlies the production of an absence, generated through forms of allusion to an assumed reality that exists beyond the artwork. The denser a painting is with things, the more the things lose their authenticity, rendering them practically absent.¹⁰ To some extent, the idea of the petrification of the figures in the Matisse painting—which includes the forlorn and aloof female bathers located adjacent to the supposedly inert object, the turtle—holds true, signifying melancholy. Retroactively, if the durian becomes a cipher for the identity of Malaya or Southeast Asia, it can be reasoned that such identity veritably rests on a longing that is neither present nor absent, but only missing. Thus, the painting becomes a "meta-picture," an

artifice on the labour of representation and the represented and the possible beholding of the wistful beholder.

However, the sense of melancholy is confounded by the ethnographic dimension of modernist painting. In Liu Kang's *After the Fire I* (1951), the historical moment is referenced directly, but the rendering of that moment is almost cursory, with the figures deprived of *rondure* and the infrastructure lacking in details and confidence. This only attests to the difficulty of painting and its elliptical and abbreviated nature, its doubts about its capacity and its exertions to merely graze the contours of history through iconography, typical visual data, memory, archival documentation, conjecture, lore, apocrypha, gossip or a *mélange* of all these.



6

Durian tree along Upper Thomson Road, June 2008. Image courtesy of Ong Kwan Han.

Narrative and relationality, therefore, are indispensable in encrusting the work of art so that it achieves the kind of liveliness enlisted by contact with its viewers. Robert Zhao Renhui's *Durian Tree, Bukit Panjang* (2024), a photographic image of a durian tree glowing in a lightbox, would be deficient without the stories relayed to the artist by the carpenter Teo Teah On, who once foraged in the forest at night in search of the durian in the "wilderness of sweets."¹¹ Teo, a historian of the forest and the fruit, believes that the photographed tree is one of the older ones in the area and offers tales and etiquette around durian picking: "No one can lay claim to a tree: the fruit goes to those who come first. However, it is common for people to wait in two-hour slots under a tree. Some also wear safety helmets as they fear being injured by falling fruit."¹²

Likewise, Anusapati recalls his fascination with trees in his childhood. In the 1960s, he played under the canopies of rubber trees in Cibubur, which was considered part of the rural outskirts of Jakarta at that time. Alongside rubber trees, he was struck by wooden tools used in the cultivation of wet rice.¹³ Against these reminiscences, Anusapati reflects on the changing ecology of Jakarta and Indonesia by restituting "affective agency" into the wood, enhancing its integrity and nature through subtle indentations or circumspect marks of a humble carpenter, like a slit that



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A kentongan, date and location unknown.

encircles a wooden sphere and implies an interior. The bond that the artist guarantees between the sculptural form titled *Single Object* (undated) and the musical instrument called *kentongan* leads us back to the durian, the connoisseurship of which is based on sound. To determine the ripeness of the “inner flesh of an unopened fruit,” the expert, who may well be a connoisseur, scrapes “the outer skin with a fingernail and listening carefully [...] ear to the fruit, to hear whether the pulp has shrunk away from the pith.”¹⁴ The *kentongan* serves as a village device that forewarns the neighbourhood of imminent danger, perhaps a storm or a fire. Through this interplay between modernist sculpture in the mode of Brancusi and a customary artefact, Anusapati reflects on the perceived pressures of modernity within Indonesian art.

The natural and cultural history of the durian as a fruit renders it tropical as well as tropic—the latter used as a suffix to mean “turning towards” or “affecting.” It is a study of contrarities: well-cherished by many yet expensive for the common folk; its odour sharp and permeating but likened to custard, berry or nectar with vermifuge and aphrodisiac properties; described as “anathema to the occident,”¹⁵ by poet Noel Wynard but contested as well in Southeast Asia; prone to a folklore sequence that at once exalts its almost sublime substance and speaks of retribution; a seemingly benign symbol across the region but one that has historically been controlled by the government in Malaya in terms of licencing, hawking and selling. Andrea Montanari remarked upon its management from the colonial era to the 20th century:

The seasonal nature of the fruit and the unpredictability of the crop played a significant role in the perceptions as well as in the actual experience and management of the durian seasonal booms [...] the environmental and olfactory impact of the durian season on the urban context of a growing, overcrowded, and perceived-as-unhealthy tropical city [...] the endless and mostly unsuccessful battle that the Municipality first and the Independent government later launched on hawking in general, and on durian trade in particular.¹⁶

Finally, the durian is an exemplary plant, as explained in J. Corner's *Durian Theory of Flowering Plants*, demonstrating the interrelatedness in the ecology of the tropical forest: "durian seeds, left behind on the forest floor once the forest animals have eaten the pulp, will regenerate and grow close to the 'mother tree,' replacing this when the old tree dies."¹⁷ The landmark building in Singapore known as Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay is pictured in popular consciousness, rightly or wrongly, as a durian. The building's brise soleil spikes—cladding designed to control light and heat—are likened to the thorn (*duri*) of the wondrous durian.

Modernity

The limning of fires in the history of Malaya and Singapore is a salient way to mediate National Gallery Singapore's discursive investment in modernity. Mainly, it is the Bukit Ho Swee incident that plays a central role here in Singapore's transition to modernisation. Both the historical reality of the fire and its representation in art have been made to inform the modern. The scholar Loh Kah Seng contends that:

As a result of the Bukit Ho Swee fire and the political purges, high modernist HDB estates steadily replaced the kampong at the margins of Singapore city throughout the 1960s. A total of 12,829 families were evicted from their homes in the HDB's first five-year plan, of which three-quarters moved to planned resettlement areas or accepted HDB flats. By 1965, in the restored urban periphery stood 54,430 units of public housing flats, accommodating 23 per cent of the population, and rising. A year later, Lee Kuan Yew proudly stated that "Singapore is a proud city. It is acquiring the one hallmark of a great civilised community, magnificent buildings plus comparable workers housing." The semi-autonomous urban kampong population was progressively being socialised into becoming citizens of the new nation-state.¹⁸

Loh lays out the three myths surrounding the fire: the myth of its salutary necessity as a way to banish the squalor of the kampong, on the one hand, and the vivification of an embryonic nation, on the other; the previously idyllic portrait of the said kampong; and the orchestrated arson that supposedly razed Bukit Ho Swee to the ground. This mixture of data, impression, rumour, gossip and urban folklore may serve as a foil to the singular and official history deployed by the nation-state. Such polyvalence around the interpretation of the fire restores agency to the mass of people who experience everyday reality and enables Loh to posit that the kampong were not the antithesis of the modern; rather, they “constituted an alternative of modernity to the official vision. Squatters were [...] progressive and urbanised, and with effective social autonomy.”¹⁹

8, 9
 BUKIT HO SWEE
 FIRE, 1961. Ministry of
 Information and the Arts
 Collection, courtesy of
 National Archives of
 Singapore.



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It is interesting to point out that Shui Tit Sing’s work titled *Why?* (1979) tempers the enthusiasm of the discourse of modernity as it intimates the urban folklore on suicide in multi-storey apartments, reported in the news as early as the 1950s in post-colonial Malaya. From his work of teak wood, one can glean a scene in which a person is on the verge of jumping off a window and other residents of the building are extending their limbs, presumably to prevent the act. This reveals a disturbing phenomenon taking place in public apartments as a residual expression amid

modernisation and scenes of conviviality as seen in another of Shui's works titled *Cooperation (Passing Metal Beams)* (1976). In this sculpture, people help to construct a building by sending up metal beams from person to person across various floors. For the working class, this folklife in city public housing was an ubiquitous reality, which included the stigma clinging to suicide and the stories of ghosts involved in the deaths. Indeed, it was the undercurrent below the seamless scenography of development and efficiency.²⁰ As such, this way of life might have been viewed as residual. The curator Vasif Kortun, pace Raymond Williams, reconsiders the residual not as atavistic, retardataire or instrumentalised like heritage; rather, it is that stimulus which cannot be easily accounted for or ingested into the metabolism of either the dominant or the emergent body politic due to how it is "throwing itself further."²¹ Such residuality can also be seen in materialist ways, specifically in the development of large-scale residential buildings over the course of the 20th century in the United States and how:

The introduction of simplified and standardised production processes and goods displaced established productive trades, created a broad spectrum of low-paid positions that offered little hope of training or advancement, and at the same time brought employment to university-trained engineers.²²

This specialisation within the urban construction industry may well have been cognate with the particularisation of art as the catalyst—if not the culmination—of the modern. With modernity, art is institutionalised within a museum in a city of culture, codified in art history, and yet potentially sceptical of the modern itself through the experiments of a progressive creative class who is amenable to reflexivity yet enmeshed in the commodification and financialisation of art.

The intersection between mental malaise and the hectic pace of construction of buildings before and after the fire in 1961 gave rise to a psychogeography that was condensed in what could be misrecognised as a typical diorama of

an uneventful occasion. In light of Shui's curiosity about other places in Southeast Asia²³, such a silhouette of the quotidian—like a frieze in a temple in Cambodia, quaint but charming—indexes the effort of a modern artist to signify culture as it ramifies and historicises psychology. The tension here pertains to realism that imbues the style of works on the fire. Lim Hak Tai's *Fire* (1956) and Lim Yew Kuan's *After Fire* (1966) register fire through what broadly may be termed as “social realism,” the kind that is distinct from academic realism or naturalism. Constructing realism as “social” freights the picture with critical commentary, and in both works, it heightens the urgency whether through expressionism in painting or the everyday currency of the woodblock. Within this realism is also the tradition of Chinese drawing on paper, as seen in *Rebuilding Bukit Ho Swee* (1962) by Tan Choo Kuan, in which the delicacy of inscription of ink and graphite on the surface pervades, and the figure and ground relationship between nature and the construction of built form defines the social and cultural context. Surely, the promise of this engagement is extended to assemblage and performance through Renato Habulan's *Tira (Remains)* (2014–2023) and Sharon Chin's *Creatures on the Move (In the Death of Night)* (2023–2024). Habulan's gathering of wax and found wood implicates the relationship between politics and faith—or taken together—the political theology; Chin's shadow play of animal puppets–placards prefigures the unremitting pillage of the planet if change is not enacted. Both perform the structure and dramaturgy of ruin, its reality and realism, amid signs of progress and protest, between which may emerge the real resolve of transformation.

Fire and shadow are finally fundamental to the poetics of the exhibition. In fire, we find the subject-object binary surmounted, the source of liveliness and consummation. In *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bachelard asserts:

We have indeed tried to show that fire is, among the makers of images, the one that is most dialecticized. It alone is subject and object. When one gets to the bottom of an animism, one always finds a calorism. What I recognize to be living in the immediate sense is what I

recognize as being hot. Heat is the proof par excellence of substantial richness and permanence: it alone gives an immediate meaning to vital intensity, to intensity of being. In comparison with the intensity of fire, how slack, inert, static and aimless seem the other intensities that we perceive. They are not embodiments of growth. They do not fulfil their promise. They do not become active in a flame and a light which symbolise transcendence.²⁴

And in the shadow, we glimpse the origin and limit of representation. Victor Stoichita proposes that the shadow in the history of visual culture sheds light on the origin of the will to create and the volition to think through. According to him, painting

[...] was born the first time the human shadow was circumscribed by lines. It is of unquestionable significance that the birth of Western artistic representation was “in the negative.” When painting first emerged, it was part of the absence/presence theme (absence of the body; presence of its projection). The history of art is interspersed with the dialectic of this relationship.²⁵

The shadow, as a trope, thus forms the basis of a historiography of art, pace Stoichita, through the myth of origin itself. This primordality is shared with fire, which, in this exhibition, is seen to accelerate the metabolism of a city and its culture. In *wayang*, the shadow is emblematic of a liminal speech act, as explicated by the critic Leo Howe:

Shadows are an appropriate medium too because, unlike any other genre of drama, they conjure up the realm of pure *kebatinan*: the inner world of mysticism and spiritual potency, and its outer manifestations of power, wealth, status and sexual capacity. Shadows, after all, lack colour (from the screen side anyway), and in the way they are placed and moved against the screen their shapes are fuzzy and indistinct. Finally they seem to move, act and speak of their own accord and thus exist as apparently independent figures.²⁶

With the shadow looming, the modern ceases to be too certain about the stature of its objects and the way these objects are subjected to either affirmative identifications or negative discriminations. The shadow exposes the limit of representation, of something that turns up in the world, one that is verily a modern obsession. Sharon Chin stays with this same trouble when she recast the prints of animals into placards and eventually into phantasms within the museum. The philosopher Tristan Garcia reminds us that the modern has always been fixated on production and at the same time on its denial: of producing something and resisting the condition of being a thing. Garcia reconstructs this ethos of critique so that “each thing has the chance to be something: neither nothing nor everything nor another thing. Something...”²⁷ Each thing is nothing less than something in the fullness of its integrities—wherever, whenever, however it is chanced upon, bodily, and finds its form, exceptionally. *Figuring a Scene*, hence, tries to catch a faint sight of the in-between, the beyond and the missing, but hopes to also claim the protean remains of a possible, passing present by feeling a form’s becoming.

NOTES

- 1 On Chen's role with the Ten Men Art Group, see: Lai Chee Kien, "Southeast Asian Journeys and the Ten-Man Art Group: An Interview with Tan Seah Boey [Chen Cheng Mei]," in Chen Cheng Mei, *Odyssey*, 14–19. See also: Yvonne Low, "Women Artists: Becoming Professional in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Australia, 2014, 237–251. On the Ten Men Art Group's continuing relevance today, see: Roger Nelson, "Chen Cheng Mei (1927-2020)," *Artforum*, 27 February 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/passages/chen-cheng-mei-1927-2020-85151>. A compilation of articles on Chen and the Ten Men Art Group from anglophone Singapore newspapers was compiled for *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, the first exhibition in Dalam Southeast Asia, by intern Katya Narendratanaya and is held in the Gallery's Library & Archive.
- 2 Singapore Planning & Urban Research Group, "The Cultural Role of Singapore City," *Rumah*, 1966, 44.
- 3 On statistics of Singaporeans living in public housing, see: Department of Statistics Singapore, "Households," <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/households/households/latest-data> (accessed 27 February 2024). On public housing in Singapore, see: Housing & Development Board, "Public Housing – A Singapore Icon," <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/about-us/our-role/public-housing-a-singapore-icon> (accessed 27 February 2024).
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- 6 Jeannine Tang, "Spectacle's Politics and the Singapore Biennale," *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 3 (2007): 372.
- 7 Dana Chan, "Lim Tzay Chuen: The 'Non-Artist'," National Gallery Singapore, <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/magazine/lim-tzay-chuen-the-non-artist> (accessed 24 January 2024).
- 8 Yve-Alain Bois, "Matisse's Bathers with a Turtle," *Bulletin (St. Louis Art Museum)* 22, no. 3 (1998): 8–19.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 10 See Tristan Garcia, "In Defence of Representation," in *Picture Industry: A Provisional History of the Technical Image 1844-2018*, exh. cat., ed. W. Beshty (New York: Luma Foundation/CCS Bard, Zurich/Annandale-On-Hudson, 2015), 758–761.
- 11 This phrase is a title of a 1973 publication by Gilda Cordero Fernando.
- 12 Roots, "Durian Tree, Bukit Panjang," <https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1350798> (accessed 24 January 2024).
- 13 Sin Sin Fine Art, "Anusapati," <https://www.sinsinfineart.com/anusapati.html> (accessed 24 January 2024).

- 14 Jacqueline M. Piper, *Fruits of South-East Asia: Facts and Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 18.
- 15 Mark Jenkins, "Ah, Sweet Durian: In Singapore, the Stench & the Glory," *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/travel/1990/03/25/ah-sweet-durian/bd67d84f-7790-4a3f-a46c-8d1806623f24/> (accessed 20 January 2024).
- 16 Andrea Montanari, "The Stinky Kin: The Social and Cultural History of the Durian" (M.A. Diss., National University of Singapore, 2011), 89.
- 17 Piper, op. cit., 20.
- 18 Loh Kah Seng, "Kampong, Fire, Nation: Towards a Social History of Postwar Singapore," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2009), Asian Cold War Symposium, 642.
- 19 Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore*, (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with NUS Press and NIAS Press, 2013), 2.
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- 22 Amy Slaton, "Style/Type/Standard: The Production of Technological Resemblance," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, eds. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 94.
- 23 See Michelle Vachon, "Looking at Angkor through an Artist's Archives," *The Cambodia Daily*, 30 July 2016.
- 24 Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 111.
- 25 Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 8.
- 26 Leo Howe, "Shadows, Selves and Speech: Wayang Kulit in Java and Bali: Review Article," *Cambridge Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (1987): 93.
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Appendix I:
Housing & Development
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BUILDING DEPARTMENT

1962 was a year of unprecedented achievement in the field of public housing in Singapore, for a record of 12,230 units were completed during the year in spite of difficulties and obstruction encountered in the clearance of building sites.

Target listed in the State Development Plan				Work achieved by the Housing & Development Board			
1961	...	...	7,096 units	1961	...	...	7,320 units
1962	...	...	9,735 units	1962	...	...	12,230 units
1963	...	...	9,690 units				
1964	...	...	12,750 units				

Between its inception on 1st February, 1960 and 31st December, 1962 the Housing & Development Board has completed in a period of less than three years a total of 21,232 units as against 23,019 units built by the Singapore Improvement Trust in the thirty-two years of its existence. At the end of 1962, some 10,911 units were under construction and if no unforeseen difficulties occur in the future the 52,000 units provided in the Board's first Five Year Building Programme will be completed well within schedule as the annual completions to date exceeds the target figures listed in the State Development Plan.

The development of the housing estates is distributed along the five mile perimeter of the city, from Kallang and Tanjong Rhu Estates 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 3,231 units were completed in Queenstown. Neighbourhoods I, II and V have all been completed and occupied, half of Neighbourhood IV has been completed and earthworks in Neighbourhood III have been finalised with the use of the Board's own machinery. At the end of the year about 10,000 flats in Queenstown had been completed and occupied and a further 6,000 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 market and a post office. It is expected that the whole of Queenstown will be fully developed by the middle of 1964 with 17,500 residential units with an estimated 150,000 population.

(b) Bukit Ho Swee

After the disastrous fire on 25th May 1961, work at Bukit Ho Swee was carried out with the utmost speed. As a result 3,228 units of flats were completed at this fire site in 1962 and a further 2,000 units were in various stages of construction at the end of the year.

The Board assisted the Government by constructing two standard type primary schools at this fire site for the Ministry of Education. These schools were completed in the record time of slightly under nine months and 4,000 students were admitted to these schools on 2nd January 1963 when the new school term commenced.

The physical appearance of Bukit Ho Swee has been completely changed after the Board's development of the fire site. Prior to the fire, Bukit Ho Swee was one of the most congested attap hut slums in Singapore where 16,000 people lived in unhealthy and insanitary conditions. Today, twice that number of people have already been accommodated in the Board's flats and when the whole scheme is completed in 1964 there will be around 70,000 people staying in the 11,000 units of flats in this new Bukit Ho Swee Housing Estate.

(c) Alexandra Hill Estate

Alexandra Hill Estate is the highest estate so far constructed by the Board. The original Alexandra Hill has been reduced by 70 feet, from 150 feet above sea-level to about 80 feet above sea-level. The whole estate, comprising 2,222 units of flats was completed in 1962.

A special feature in this housing estate is the absence of the usual water tanks on the roofs as a result of the construction of a very big pumping station in Queenstown.

(d) St. Michael's Estate

The development of St. Michael's Estate was completed in 1962 with the construction of 1,480 units of flats bringing the total in this estate to 5,187 units housing about 35,000 people.

The estate is very well located and is in very popular demand. The accommodation provided in this estate ranges from \$20 per month flats to \$99 per month terrace houses constructed by the former Singapore Improvement Trust

(e) MacPherson Road (South) Estate

Phase I of the MacPherson Road (South) Scheme was completed in 1962 and a total of 1,782 units of accommodation have been provided under this Phase for about 12,000 people.

The development of Phase II of the Scheme was initiated in 1962. At the end of the year about forty of the ninety acre site were cleared of squatters and the Board let out large piling contracts to three of the biggest piling firms in this part of the world to prepare the foundation work for a further 7,500 units of flats. At the end of 1962 the first building contract for 5 blocks of 10 storey flats for 600 units was let and building work commenced.

(f) Kallang Airport Estate

In Kallang Estate 822 units of flats were completed in 1962 to finalise the whole construction programme for this estate. About 30,000 people are now housed in Kallang Estate's 4,386 units.

Because of its proximity to the centre of the city, Kallang Estate is particularly popular and there is a big waiting list for these new housing units.

(g) Tanjong Rhu/Mountbatten Road Estate

By the end of 1962, 810 units of the 1,144 units planned for this estate had been completed. The construction cost of these housing units is exceptionally high, by the Board's standards, as the piling cost is approximately \$1,200 per unit. Again, because of its proximity to the heart of the city and the sea-front, this housing estate is extremely popular and almost all the offers of accommodation in this estate have been taken up immediately. The remaining flats in this estate are expected to be completed in early 1963.

(h) Fort Road

The building contracts for the Fort Road scheme of 1,512 units were let in 1962. When the Kallang, Tanjong Rhu/Mountbatten Road, and Fort Road schemes are completed this area will form a very big centre of 8,000 units of low-cost housing for more than 50,000 people.

(i) Lorong Tai Seng

21 units of shops in Lorong Tai Seng, constructed at the fire site, were completed in the record time of less than four months. All the shopkeepers affected by the fire in 1961 were allocated new shops in early 1962.

(j) Toa Payoh New Town

The progress of the second residential satellite town in Singapore, Toa Payoh New Town, was held up throughout 1962 and no physical progress was made in this scheme because the site could not be cleared of squatters. It is a great pity that the Board's scheme to house a quarter of a million people in Toa Payoh and to reclaim 400 acres of swampy site in Kallang Basin for development as an industrial complex could not be proceeded with as a result of organised resistance from squatters.

(k) Kim Keat Road

In order to meet the requirements of the squatters of Toa Payoh, the Government set aside a special fund for the construction of 194 units of basic terrace houses in Kim Keat Road to cater for the smaller cottage industries in Toa Payoh affected by the clearance. However, due to the resistance of the squatters to clearance, these terrace houses, which the Board completed in the first half of 1962, were still vacant by the end of the year.

(l) Clinics and Veterinary Centres-Somapah Road Tampines Road.

The Board has assisted the Government in the construction of an outpatient clinic in Somapah Road and a veterinary centre in Tampines Road. Both these schemes were constructed in record time and were handed over to the Government in 1962.

BUILDING MATERIALS

The Board's massive housing programme and the development projects being carried out by Government and private enterprise have stretched the building industry almost to its capacity, and shortage of building materials and skilled labour was experienced throughout the year.

(a) Bricks

The production of bricks in 1962 remained more or less at five to six million bricks a month while the demand was between eight to ten million bricks per month. As a result of the shortage of bricks a lot of construction work was delayed pending the delivery of the bricks. A notable example was the brick-end-walls of flats where the structure quite often reached the roof top level while the brickwork was still at a very low level.

(b) Sand

The supply of sand fluctuates with the seasonal rainfall and there is normally a shortage of sand during the dry season. However, in order to avoid delay in constructional work, the Work Brigade of the Ministry of National Development developed two sand-pits in Kaki Bukit and Tanah Merah to produce sand for supply to our building contractors. The successful operation of these sand-pits will help the Board maintain its pace of building and stabilise the market price of sand.

(c) Granite

The shortage of granite was extremely severe in the first half of 1962 and several schemes were delayed to a great extent. For several months our building contractors were able to proceed at only two-thirds of their normal speed. As a result of this shortage of granite very few building contracts were let in early 1962 and consequently very few building units will be completed in early 1963.

In order to increase the production of the granite in Singapore the Board has started to organise two granite quarries, one in Bukit Timah Road and the other in Pulau Ubin. The Bukit Timah quarry commenced production in the third quarter of 1962 while machinery for the Pulau Ubin quarry has been ordered and delivered to the site. By the end of the year the installation of the machinery in Pulau Ubin had almost been completed and it is expected that production of granite will start in the beginning of 1963.

METHODS OF CONSTRUCTION

The traditional methods of construction have been used for the multi-storey flats although substantial improvements in organising techniques and methods have been introduced at the building sites. Our contractors are now capable of building a 10-storey building within twelve months. The foundation work for these buildings takes approximately two months, concrete works including the water tanks take about eight months, and a further two months are required for the painting and finishing.

The Board's speed of construction is almost twice that of the former Singapore Improvement Trust. For example the S.I.T. took 20 months to complete 9-storey Rochore House while the Housing & Development Board took only 18 months to complete the adjacent 20-storey Selegie House.

PREFABRICATED SYSTEM OF STRUCTURES

Investigations into a prefabricated system of construction are continuing but none of the systems has yet been adopted by the Board. It is hoped that a system will be available in future so that the prefabrication methods can be adopted for the construction of the Board's flats at a lower cost or higher speed or both.

Appendix 2:
Singapore Planning
& Urban Research
Group, "The Cultural
Role of Singapore City,"
published in *Rumah*,
1966, pages 43–44.

The Cultural Role of Singapore City

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 in the process of nation building and the evolution of a national identity. Industrialisation 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 this close contact of people that all the diverse talents, trends and forces meet, react, blend and develop, and hence there is a hope for a genuine integrated culture to emerge.

Culture as we define it, is the total effort of a people in organising and expressing their corporate life. Culture is therefore not only the revival of tradition and the veneration thereof but the sum of all the activities that enrich the life of a people. Thus painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, drama, films, 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 sea port, dependent on entreport 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 nationalism. Consequently Singapore like Kuala Lumpur and Penang have developed with a governmental, administrative, commercial and recreational centre for the colonialists, surrounded by settlements of concentrated ethnic groups with their own centres. This form of our city is anachronistic in the new era of independence. Fifty percent of our population is under 21 years old and are local born. Unlike their parents they have no yearning to return to their ancestral lands. As many parts of our city need to be re-developed, we should take the opportunity to plan 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 at 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 by their very nature complement one another. It is only through the intense multi-usage of land that the 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 pedestrians 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 offices, shops, res-

taurants, art galleries, museums, concert halls, cinemas, community centres and they are all easily accessible to the people from their high rise flats as well as from their multi-racial residential areas. The shops, restaurants, and cafes with their brightly lit displays will be opened day and night to cater for all types of crowds, such as those in the Ginza of Tokyo, Piccadilly of London and Champs Elysees of Paris. People can shop and walk in comfort and safety. These will contribute to the image of the city in its cultural role and be identified by the local people and visitors as representing the nation. Raffles Place and its immediate vicinity can be transformed into such a precinct. As at the moment it is mainly commercial, by the injection of entertainment, night shopping and eating facilities the area can be vitalised both day and night. Another example is China town which has, however, developed in spite of lack of conscious planning. The cinemas, shops, Peoples park eating stalls and high density cubicle dwellings have created this stretch of New Bridge Road into a vital centre of activity day and night. This phenomenon is largely unplanned and has therefore many attendant unsavoury features such as an inherent traffic problem in which vehicles and people intermix to the peril of both. The high density cubicle dwellings while giving life to the place is at the same time extremely unhealthy and insanitary. The challenge in our new urban redevelopment programmes is: can we recreate

areas of such activities and integrate the different ethnic groups while maintaining good planning and health standards?

The building of a core in Singapore which is more than commercial and administrative centre entails vast expenditure, but it must be argued that this expenditure is as necessary as expenditure on economic development. At the present moment, vast amounts of money are being spent on urban development and renewal projects, multi-storey carparks, and road improvement schemes, public monuments and civic buildings to name but some of them. The question is one of objective. Is the objective of these projects far reaching or are they ad-hoc in nature? Does the sum total of the effect of these projects contribute to the creation of a city which can perform its cultural function so vital in the creation of national identity? Therefore, there is necessity to re-evaluate the impact of these projects in a broader context. We must also account for rapid changes in the social order in our time when obsolescence may threaten our new developments soon after they are completed. It is therefore a challenge to the people and to the capacity for vision and ingenuity of our political leaders and planners in establishing policies upon which our cultural city of tomorrow will emerge.

**Singapore Planning &
Urban Research Group**

Artworks





Anusapati
SINGLE OBJECT
Undated
Wood (durian),
48 × 75 × 47 cm
Collection of Singapore
Art Museum



Liu Kang
DURIAN VENDOR
1957

Oil on board,
47.5 × 118.5 cm

Gift of the artist's family
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Robert Zhao
DURIAN TREE,
BUKIT PANJANG

2024

Inkjet print on fabric,
mounted on wooden
lightbox with LED lights,
140 × 210 × 12 cm

Collection of the artist
and ShangART Gallery

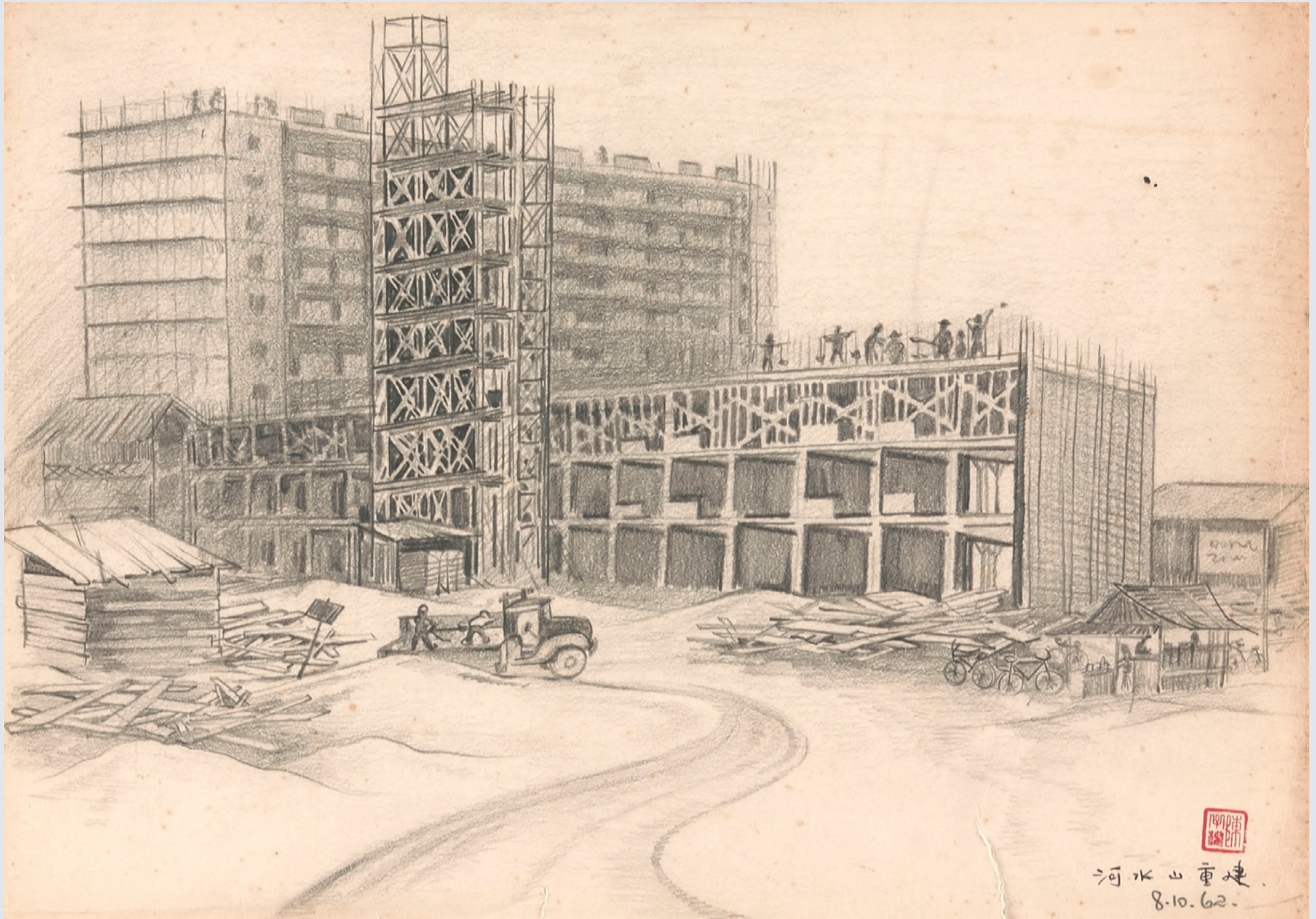


Tan Choo Kuan
REBUILDING
BUKIT HO SWEE

1962

Ink on paper,
36.9 × 26.8 cm

Gift of Ms Tan Teng Teng
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



2/10

After Fire

Lim Yew Kuan 1966

Lim Yew Kuan
AFTER FIRE

1966

Woodblock print on paper,
48.4 × 62.5 cm

Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Lim Hak Tai
FIRE
1956
Acrylic on board,
59 × 75.5 cm
Gift of Mr Lim Yew Kuan
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Liu Kang
AFTER THE FIRE I
1951

Oil on canvas,
98.5 × 131.5 cm

Gift of the artist's family
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Lim Tzay Chuen
THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE #2
2006
Digital print,
84.1 × 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 × 60 cm
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



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*



Renato Habulan
TIRA (REMAINS)

2014–2023

Paraffin wax, sculpted
wood, aluminium and
found objects,
140.5 × 145 × 224.5 cm

Collection of National
Gallery Singapore

© Renato R. Habulan



Shui Tit Sing
WHY (为什么?)
1979
Wood, 67.5 × 23 × 15.5 cm
Collection of the Shui family





Shui Tit Sing
COOPERATION
(PASSING METAL
BEAMS) 合作 (高楼传铁)

1976

Wood, 140 × 31.5 × 16 cm

Collection of the Shui family







Air

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.



Lim Tzay Chuen
 Fogger
 2006
 Performance

Sun Yee
 Wind
 2018
 Oil on canvas



While walking through an exhibition, we may find ourselves drawn to certain artworks and their shapes, colours and textures. Naturally, we try to understand these forms by relating them to what we are familiar with. However, in our urge to find significance in these artworks, we tend to miss most of the process.

And so, we ask: How are these forms produced and perceived? What takes place when they are gathered together?

This exhibition invites you to explore the process of form-making and how we make and understand art. It looks at how artists transform events and objects into art that tells a story or evokes a certain moment in history. In other words, it explores the process of "figuring" or embodying both a sensitive material like art and the means through which it is made to matter in the world.

Figuring a Scene unfolds across several episodes in which natural elements become the very thing through which social forms are grasped. For instance, the tree of a fruit becomes the sculpture of the fruit, which in turn evokes the environment of Singapore and Southeast Asia through photography and painting. Or maybe a fire gives birth to a metropolis, a shadow protests its own source of light, a peculiar scent pervades the museum and wax embeds faith and terror.

Please scan the QR code for the exhibition catalogue and to view exhibition content in 3D, Bahasa Melayu and 50%

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Lim Tzay Chuen
 Fogger
 2006
 Performance







Wax

The title of Renato Habulan's assemblage, *Tra*, is a Filipino word that carries many different meanings: it could mean "remnants" (the action of sifting 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 un consecrated. 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, highlighting 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 tables is part-altar, part-processional cartage and part-sapuhar.





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Page 67: Detail of *The Opposite is True
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