

THE TAILORS AND
THE MANNEQUINS:
CHEN CHENG MEI
AND YOU KHIN



How are far-flung regions of the world encountered in Southeast Asia's modern art? How have artists expressed their curiosity about the unfamiliar, while recognising the complexities of daily lives in distant places? And how do we imagine "Southeast Asian modern art" as a category, when the experiences of the different nations in the region have been so divergent?

This exhibition explores these questions through the works of Chen Cheng Mei (Tan Seah Boey 陳城梅) (b. 1927, Singapore; d. 2020, Singapore) and You Khin (យូ ឃីន) (b. 1947, Cambodia; d. 2009, Thailand). Both artists adopted highly individual styles, led unusual lives, and have been outliers in most art historical accounts. Although Chen and You did not know each other and were born two decades apart, they shared a lasting affinity for portraying everyday scenes in diverse locations. The exhibition chronicles their movements across the world from the 1970s until the 2000s.

Chen lived in Singapore but travelled extensively on short study trips, visiting dozens of locations in Southeast Asia, Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Singapore's increasing stability and prosperity in the years after her graduation from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1954 enabled this easy mobility as her practice developed. While Chen's career spanned over 60 years, her first major solo show was only in Singapore in 2004.

In contrast, You lived in France, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Qatar, and the United Kingdom as a refugee for over three decades. He graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1973, but left Cambodia before the genocide and only returned in 2003. His itinerant life reflects the economic and political upheavals that Cambodia endured during this period. He held solo exhibitions in Khartoum, Abidjan, Doha, London and elsewhere.

Despite these differences, Chen and You shared a planetary consciousness, respecting the diverse peoples they encountered and represented in their art, and recognising that cultures can never be completely understood from the outside. This exhibition features artworks, photographs and sketches drawn from the personal archives of both artists, making vivid connections between Singapore, Southeast Asia and other parts of the decolonising world, beyond the West.



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DALAM SOUTHEAST ASIA

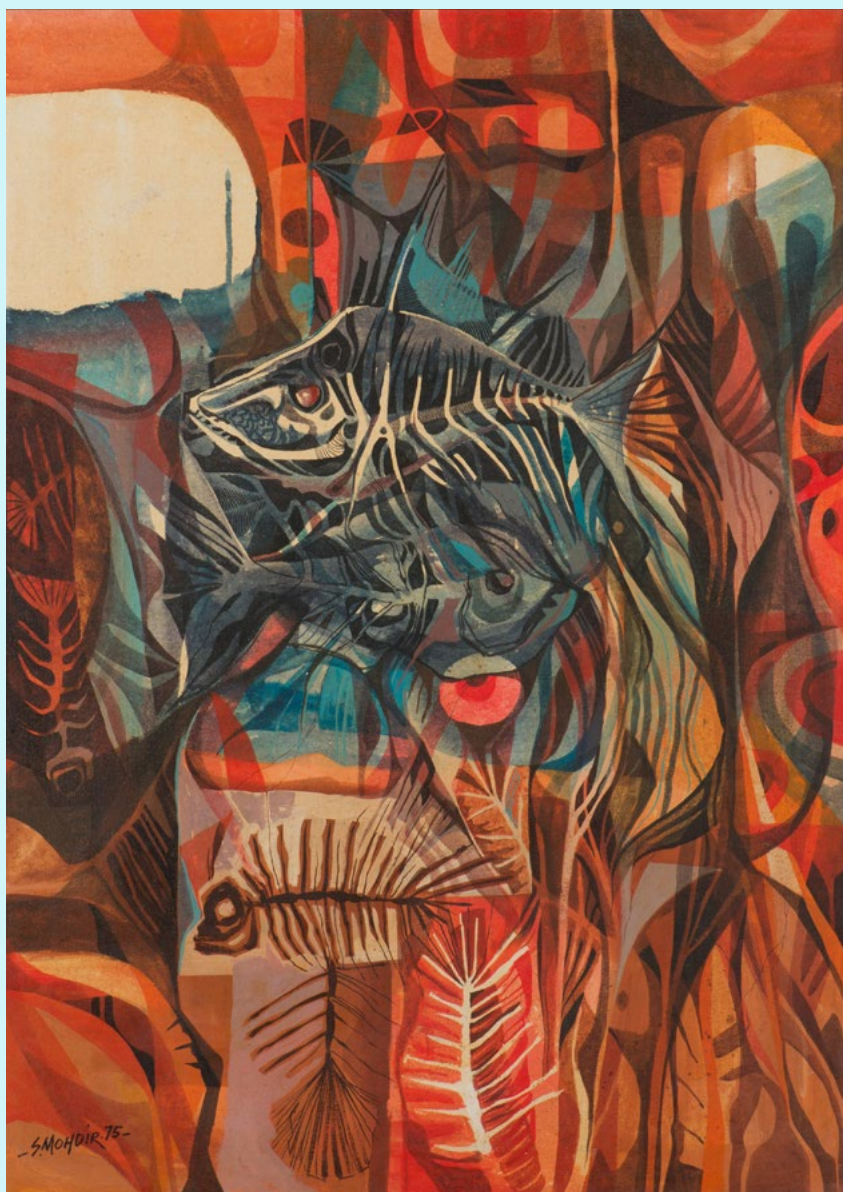
by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

PREFACE

It has become almost cliché 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 museums' 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.

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 advance 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 TAILORS AND THE MANNEQUINS: CHEN CHENG MEI AND YOU KHIN

by Roger Nelson

“My world is modern,” the artist You Khin proclaimed near the end of his life. Born in Cambodia, and educated there and in France, he had lived mostly far from home, including as a refugee and a stateless person.¹ From the 1970s until the 2000s, he lived, worked and held exhibitions across Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere—first in Sudan, then Ivory Coast and Qatar, and later the United Kingdom and Cambodia. Stirred by these remarkable experiences, You’s artistry was planetary in scope. Around the same time, Chen Cheng Mei, another artist some twenty years his senior and from a quite different postcolonial circumstance, was also embarking on an expansive journey of global curiosity. Born and educated in Singapore, where she resided all her life, Chen took dozens of study trips over the same period to seek inspiration for her art, primarily in Asia, Africa and Oceania. Like You Khin, Chen affirmed her commitment to the modern, declaring that “everyone is an artist in this world.”² Despite many differences in their biographies and artworks, the two artists shared several important qualities. By taking a comparative approach, this exhibition and essay foregrounds their similarities as well as their distinctions. Encounters with modern people in unfamiliar locations were central to both artists’ works. Furthermore, Chen and You Khin shared a special commitment to honouring the unknowability of the strangers that often appear in their works. I call this aspect of their approach *encounterism*.

How is the world—including Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and beyond—imagined and encountered in Southeast Asia’s modern art? This question is central to the exhibition *The Tailors and Mannequins*, which features works by Chen Cheng Mei (b. 1927, Singapore; d. Singapore, 2020) and You Khin (b. 1947 Cambodia; d. 2009, Thailand), made chiefly between the 1970s and 2000s. The exhibition proposes that the modern art of this region has value not only for its explication of “Southeast Asia” and its regional sensibilities—it can also be an exemplar of a distinctly modern and postcolonial cosmopolitanism that traverses the Global South³ while respecting the “right to opacity” inherent in its people and cultures, as described by French–Martinican writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant.⁴

The two artists have been outliers in most accounts of the art of Singapore, Cambodia, and Southeast Asia. You Khin is little known outside Cambodia, and has been scarcely discussed in writing⁵, while appreciation for Chen’s work has been chiefly limited to her period with the Ten Men Art Group⁶, a loose collective of artists whose storied 1960s travels in Southeast Asia were initiated by her. Whereas the exhibition gives primacy to the aesthetic experience of their artworks, with supporting text kept to a minimum, this essay positions their works within an enlarged terrain of ideas. Some of these ideas come from the artists themselves—and I have been fortunate to have access to the artists’ substantial archives, which the National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive is digitising as an extension of this exhibition—but other ideas reach beyond their practice, traversing the diverse territories in which they worked and from where they drew inspiration.

We may approach Chen’s and You’s works aided not only by their thoughts and those of their Southeast Asian peers, but also equipped with ideas that circulate in the Global South; ideas the artists would have encountered during their peripatetic lives and travels. Artworks by Chen and You Khin make manifest the “internal unity to the world” while “recogni[sing] the aggressiveness and fierceness of the encounter [with] heritage”. These ideas are invoked in a manifesto by six Iraqi modern artists, including Ismail Fattah, who You Khin met in 1988 while living in Qatar, and sketched



1
Portrait of Iraqi modern artist Ismail Fattah, Qatar, 1988, by You Khin. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of Muoy You, wife of the artist.

in a portrait that is included in this exhibition.⁷ Chen’s and You’s works also instantiate the notion that “culture is the essential cement of every social group, its primary means of intercommunication and of coming to grips with the outside world.”⁸ This was articulated by a group of pan-African intellectuals whose ideas had currency while Chen was travelling and You Khin was living in Africa.

This attempt at “deprovincialising” Southeast Asia’s modern art is inspired, in part, by Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe’s call for a “planetary library” that “rests on the assumption of the inseparability of the different archives of the world” and strives to “draw upon each of them while drawing them together.”⁹ In a similar vein, when the six Iraqi modern artists wrote the manifesto cited above, the “new vision” they called for was a “new vision of the *world*”.¹⁰

SHARED CONCERNS, DIVERGENT TRAJECTORIES

Although Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin were born two decades apart, never knew each other, and tended to paint and draw in very different styles, the artists had several important qualities in common. They were educated at the preeminent art academies in their respective countries—Chen graduated from Singapore’s Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1954, and You Khin from Phnom Penh’s (Royal) University of Fine Arts in 1973—then furthered their studies in France.¹¹ They then went on to live highly unusual lives, spent a good deal of time far from home, and adopted rather individual styles. Both artists resisted the conventional expectations of their gender: Chen set an uncommon example for women with her adventurous and outgoing nature, while You’s wife, Muoy, had a career as a professor of the French language that played an equal and sometimes greater role in their family’s life. Both artists took an early interest in ancient Khmer “heritage,” as evidenced in the exhibition by Chen’s *Angkor Wat Detail II*, inspired by Cambodia’s celebrated premodern temples,



2



3

2

Chen Cheng Mei
ANGKOR WAT
DETAIL II
1962
Oil on canvas,
65.5 x 73.5 cm
Gift of the artist
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore

3, 4

You Khin as a
student in Phnom
Penh, Cambodia,
and an example of
his student artwork
depicting Angkor
Wat, early 1970s.
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore
Library & Archive.
Gift of You Muoy, wife
of the artist.



4

and by photographs of You's early works depicting similar subject matter, made in Phnom Penh a few years later. It seems that both artists shared a belief in the importance of "strengthening cultural bonds," as was said of the Ten Men Art Group in 1965.¹² They also seemed to agree that "the past is not a dead object that we study; rather it is a stance that goes beyond time,"¹³ a proposition that was put forth in the manifesto by the six Iraqi modern artists. These notions had currency not only in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, but also across the Global South.

Even more striking than these commonalities are the shared concerns that underpin both artists' works. These foundational fascinations include a recurrent compulsion to record ordinary people and quotidian scenes; an enthrallment with the portrayal of cloth and other tactile surfaces; and a deep, abiding attraction to picturing their encounters with distant places and unfamiliar cultures. Both artists prized everyday subject matter as an opportunity for compositional experimentation and to articulate their own idiosyncratic styles. This is evident in

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Chen Cheng Mei
 MARKET
 1980
 Oil on canvas,
 83.5 x 76.5 cm
 Gift of anonymous donor
 Collection of National
 Gallery Singapore

6

Photograph of market
 scene, c. 1960s–1970s,
 by Chen Cheng Mei.
 Collection of the artist’s
 family, Singapore.

7

You Khin
 UNTITLED (MEETING
 ABOVE PIGEON CAGES)
 1978
 Oil on canvas,
 65 x 100 cm
 Collection of National
 Gallery Singapore

8

Sketch of market scene,
 Sudan, c. 1977–1979,
 by You Khin.
 Collection of National
 Gallery Singapore
 Library & Archive, gift of
 Muoy You, wife of the artist.

Chen’s *Market*, a painting of a Singapore scene that recalls a photograph she took, and You’s *Untitled (Meeting Above Pigeon Cages)*, which depicts a market in Khartoum and resembles several of his sketches. The approach set them apart from their peers (such as the left-leaning “social realists” affiliated with Singapore’s Equator Art Society, or their Phnom Penh counterparts in the *Samagam Silpa Vicitrakar Khmaer* or Association of Modern Khmer Painters), who during the 1950s and 1960s approached everyday scenes with a primary interest in their ideological associations, rather than their aesthetic possibilities. Above all, Chen’s and You’s works make evident the immense significance of their travels, especially through the Global South, as wellsprings of inspiration. Rendering visible their encounters with the world—within and beyond Southeast Asia—is at the heart of both artists’ work.



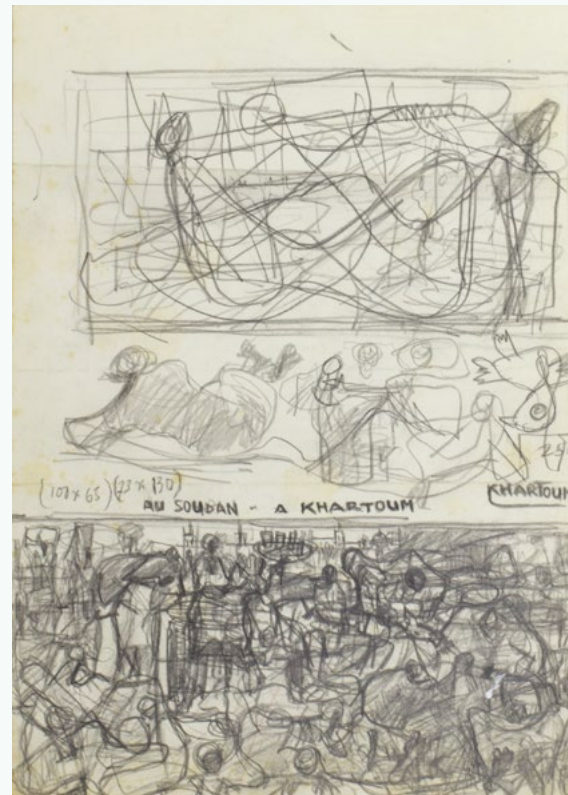
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6



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Yet the nature of their travels differed greatly. These differences stemmed not only from each artist's individual circumstances (for example, Chen Cheng Mei was the daughter of an affluent businessperson who owned orchards, and You Khin the son of rural rice farmers¹⁴), but importantly also from the diverging histories and fortunes of their respective homelands.

Throughout her life, Chen lived and worked in Singapore, which enjoyed increasing stability and rising prosperity during the decades following its decolonisation. This set the new nation apart from many of its Southeast Asian neighbours, who were beset by various conflicts. From her comfortable base at a charming, gardened house in one of the city's leafier areas (not far from where the family's abundant fruit orchard had been¹⁵), Chen took dozens of short study trips across many continents—first in Southeast Asia, then to South and East Asia, Latin America, Southern and Eastern Africa, Oceania, and beyond¹⁶—bringing back with her numerous sketches, snapshots, souvenirs, and memories which then animated her work in her studio. Artist and writer Choy Weng Yang writes that while on her travels, Chen enjoyed:

“subjecting herself to demanding, intensive sessions of sketching on the spot, supported by tantalising moments of visual surprises. These precious visual discoveries would later be expanded and stretched to their full potential in the privacy of the artist's studio.”¹⁷

By contrast, You Khin left the civil war in Cambodia in 1973 to study in France, and did not resettle in his homeland for three decades. In the intervening years, Cambodia suffered mass violence and upheaval. He lived as a refugee while working as an artist and architect in Sudan and Ivory Coast, experiencing several years of statelessness before spending almost twenty years in Qatar and finally residing for a short period in the United Kingdom. Like most Cambodians of his generation, his family was tragically decimated by the Khmer Rouge genocide during the 1970s. Artist and scholar Chheng Phon described these atrocities as a “heavy rock [that] will weigh down on us for many

hundreds of years to come.”¹⁸ Most of the artists active in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge took power died during the genocide; as many as 80 to 90 per cent, according to Chheng Phon.¹⁹ You’s extensive archive, which documents the solo exhibitions he held in Abidjan, Abu Dhabi, Khartoum, Doha, London, Phnom Penh, and elsewhere is perhaps the only such record documenting the continuous professional practice of any Cambodian visual artist of his generation.²⁰ His sketches and notes made between the 1970s and 2000s shift between English, French, and Khmer, making palpable his cosmopolitan sensibility as a Cambodian who received a French passport after his period of statelessness.²¹

ENCOUNTERISM, OPACITY AND MODERNITY: ARTWORKS INSPIRED BY TRAVELS

Should artworks by Southeast Asian artists working in the wake of decolonisation be approached with the same critical vocabulary developed in critiques of artworks made by Western artists during the colonial period? Specifically, should depictions of modern African, South Asian, and other peoples made by Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin be considered examples of “primitivism,” a term used to describe (and censure) Western artists like Paul Gauguin, who worked in Tahiti nearly a century prior? Perhaps efforts at decolonising or de-imperialising art-historical and curatorial methods may also include coining new terms for understanding art.

While both Chen and You Khin were drawn to portraying people from cultures other than their own, their works consistently shy away from making claims to a special, totalising or ethnographic insight into those cultures, which they implicitly recognise as modern, not “primitive.” Nor do they valorise those cultures as being more “exotic,” “pure,” or “noble” than their own. Thus, the Western-derived and Western-centric discourse of primitivism is ineffective for approaching works by these artists. Primitivism is a concept typically used to describe works by Western artists that

depict people from other parts of the world; Western primitivism has been roundly critiqued for reproducing racist perceptions and perpetuating colonial dynamics in which dominant social groups speak on behalf of Others that they judge—as Gauguin did—to be “un-civilised.”²²

In contradistinction, Chen’s and You’s paintings, prints and drawings portraying people and scenes from across the Global South may instead be considered *encounterist*. Their works aim to dramatise and restage the artist’s subjective experience at the ephemeral moment of encounter, rather than characterising or judging the essential nature of the people, place or culture being encountered. Chen explained that her interest was in discovering “What is the progress in the art world in other countries.”²³ In both Chen’s and You’s works, there is a registration of all the world’s people as modern.

Chen’s and You’s encounterism relies on several shared strategies. First, there is the tendency to depict figures with their gaze averted from the artist, and by extension from us as viewers. Second, they stylise and simplify their depictions of figures, resisting naturalistic representation. Third, there is a compositional distancing of the figures from the space occupied by the artist, and thus the viewer. Finally, both artists accentuate the clothing worn by the figures rather than their bodies, thereby emphasising their exterior qualities rather than attempting to offer insight into their interior lives.

These strategies work in tandem to make manifest that the people the Chen and You Khin met and depicted in their works were unknowable: their encounterism preserves for their subjects what Glissant calls these people’s “right to *opacity*.”²⁴ Glissant argues that people have the right to remain unknown and unknowable—opaque rather than transparent—to outsiders looking in. He notes that the erosion of opacity necessitates a negation of complexity: “In order to understand and thus accept you... I have to reduce,” a process that also provides “grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements.”²⁵

We may also regard the acceptance that people will always remain beyond total comprehension as an essentially *modern* mode of thought. Singaporean artist and writer

Ho Ho Ying argues that the nature of the modern is essentially and inherently always opaque and out of reach:

“When you manage to grasp the modern, it has ceased to be modern. The modern is the ‘shadow of a bird in flight,’ always moving forward; the ‘shadow of a bird in flight’ you see is the vanishing of the old and the new coming forth to take its place.”²⁶

According to Ho, to be able to truly see the modern, an artist must be always slightly out of step with it.²⁷ To perceive something—or someone—as being somehow ungraspable or unknowable is to recognise that thing or person as being modern. Hence, artworks by Chen and You Khin offer a way beyond primitivism: their works offer a view of the people they encountered as essentially and inherently modern.

Let us consider *The Tailors and the Mannequins* by You Khin, the painting from which this exhibition takes its title, and one of many artworks in which the dramatic depiction of fabrics and humble professions takes centre stage. The work demonstrates that the approach I am calling encounterism is based on the artists’ cosmopolitan movements in the Global South. Encounterism’s constant remove between the artists and their subject is demonstrated here, and can be approximated to the distance between the tailors and their mannequins.

Each of the four encounterist strategies outlined above—the depiction of figures with their eyes averted, rendered in simplified and non-naturalistic form, situated at a certain distance within the composition, and with their clothing especially emphasised—can be seen at work in this painting. First, we note that the two figures are hunched over their work; their gaze is averted from the artist’s (and thus from ours), as these tailors diligently concentrate on their tasks of sewing and cutting cloth. By not depicting their faces, the artist is preserving their opacity, and denying us a sense of access to their interior lives. Second, we may note the figures’ elongated limbs, as well as the visible brushstrokes and angular lines that define the cubistic style of this decidedly non-naturalistic composition. We understand that we are seeing two tailors



9
You Khin
UNTITLED (THE
TAILORS AND THE
MANNEQUINS)
1981
Oil on canvas,
83 x 60 cm
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore

at work, but we also understand that the appearance of this scene has been substantially altered and stylised, a decision which enforces a detachment between us as viewers and the tailors as represented subjects. Third, the figures are physically distanced from the artist (and thus from us) within the picture plane. They are set back in an area made spatially ambiguous by the distorted depiction of the black and white floor tiles, which refuses to obey the familiar conventions of Western linear perspective. Obstructing our view of these figures are cascading rolls of beige, emerald and umber-coloured cloth, which are shown falling forward from the tailors into the pictorial space between them and us, which is also crowded with the machines, tools, and furniture of their trade that fill the tailors' workshop. Fourth, both figures are draped in clothing which is accentuated through the confident use of almost-gestural brushwork, and which overlaps with other fabrics the tailors are sewing.

Together, the textiles form a diagonal mass that stretches from the top left to the lower right corner of the image, dividing it in two. The bare mannequins in the upper right of the painting offer a stark contrast with the voluminous extent of cloth, which both covers the figures and forms a barrier between them and the artist. It is as if the artist was only looking in on these tailors from outside. You Khin has not attempted to offer any special insight into their character, either as individuals or as members of a society that was foreign to him; they remain opaque. The artist also redoubles the opacity of the painting by veiling the entire work in a pale brownish wash that mutes its colours and subdues its mood. The figures within it are both symbolically obscure, and literally obscured.²⁸

Recalling Ho Ho Ying's insight on the nature of the modern, we may view this distance between the artist and his subjects as a product of cultural difference for You Khin, a Cambodian migrant who had only recently arrived in Ivory Coast at the time of making this painting. It is perhaps also a sign of You's apprehension that the people he was encountering were distinctly modern, and that he could never, in Ho's words, "manage to grasp the modern." You Khin, who proclaimed "my world is modern,"²⁹ was certainly very interested in the sense of things being out of reach,



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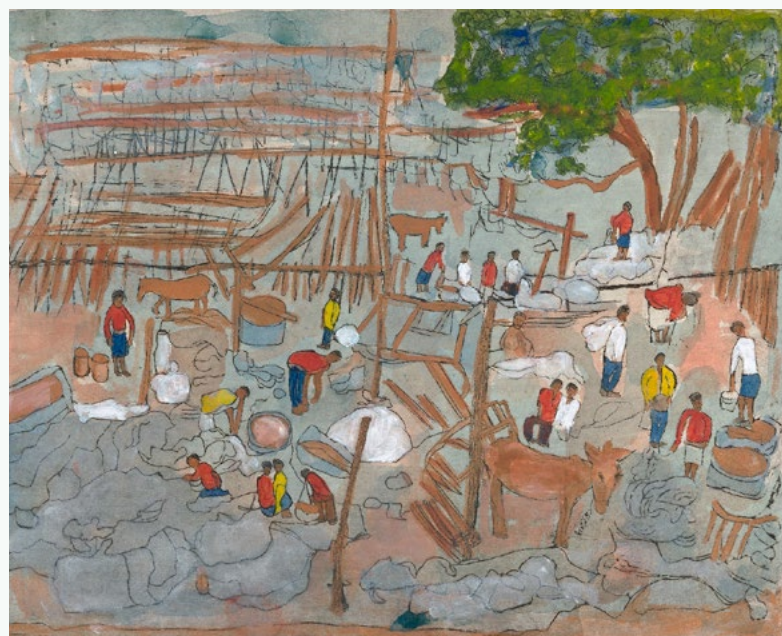
Photographs of laundry drying, South Asia, c. 1970s–1980s, by Chen Cheng Mei. The same subject is explored in two of Chen's prints on display in this exhibition. Collection of the artist's family, Singapore.

11

Chen Cheng Mei
LAUNDRY (INDIA)
2008
Etching on paper,
47.5 x 60.5 cm
Collection of the artist's
family, Singapore

as well as in slippages of perception with its always fleeting and uncertain nature. We can only hint at what we have perceived, as Ho also intuited, through poetic turns of phrase and literary images. In a notebook You Khin used after his return to Cambodia, he wrote: "The eye tells you it's white, but the ear hears the sound of black."³⁰ It is worth noting that the mannequins in the painting are rendered confidently in black and white, imbuing them with a clarity and definition which eludes the human figures.

Depictions of cloth and people working in simple trades recur in You's practice, and also in Chen's; although she is not known to have depicted tailors, Chen did on several occasions take laundry as a subject. She also captured clotheslines in photographs from her travels through South Asia, which are also included in the exhibition. Usually considered a mostly feminine domain, laundry is an aspect of daily life rarely captured by the artist's peers in Singapore or elsewhere in the region. Chen's *Laundry (India)* is a complex polychrome etching which depicts twenty people busily washing garments by a riverside and hanging them out to dry. Another etching titled *Laundry (Kalash Women)* appears to be inspired by Chen's travels in Pakistan and her encounters with the Kalasha people, a minority group who typically reside along the northwest border with Afghanistan, who Chen also sketched. The print centres on two simply rendered figures, clad in matching black robes adorned with vermilion and gold, working in tandem to wring



11

12

Chen Cheng Mei
LAUNDRY
(KALASH WOMEN)

1994

Etching on paper,

56.5 x 72.2 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor
Collection of Singapore
Art Museum

13

Sketch of Kalash woman,
Pakistan, 1991,

by Chen Cheng Mei.

Collection of the artist's
family, Singapore.



12



13

out an indistinct garment. Their profiles are dramatically set against a variegated background field of pale brown tones that dominates the composition, within which cross-hatched outlines evoke woven surfaces and other details of vernacular architecture. The figures face each other, their gaze averted from Chen's, and from ours.

By capturing them in the middle of wringing out laundry, Chen emphasises the fleeting nature of her encounter with these women. This preserves the unknowability and opacity that we may understand as being the right of these Kalash women, people who were culturally different from the artist. It also registers these people as fundamentally modern subjects, despite the remoteness of where they are residing and the manual nature of their labour. In the image, a horizontal band of pale blue ink serves not as sky, but instead as the ground on which the figures stand; it is as if even in this quiet, everyday moment, Chen perceives the world as always ungraspable and in flux.³¹

Chen's peer and friend, the artist and writer Chng Seok Tin, affirmed that:

“Chen Cheng Mei's colour sense is exceptional. She very rarely uses a colour straight from the tube, but would add a bit of this and a touch of that from other pigments to create a rich and engaging hue.”

Chng went on to claim that she “learned how to mix colours” while working with Chen.³² Tan Szan, who is Chen's niece, affirms that the artist's “keen sense of



14
Chen Cheng Mei
MARKET SCENE,
SRILANKA
1975
Oil on canvas,
61 x 80 cm
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



15
Chen Cheng Mei
MARKET SCENE,
SRILANKA
1981
Oil on canvas,
61 x 80cm
Private collection,
Singapore

colour” was a “gift enhanced through early interactions with nature as nurtured by my grandfather, an orchid cultivator and horticulturalist.”³³ The precision of Chen’s palette is evident in her repetition of the same shade of lilac from *Market Scene, Sri Lanka*, a 1975 painting included in the exhibition, in a 1981 work of the same title.³⁴ This also indicates that the artist revisited her memories (and perhaps also her sketches and photographs) from earlier trips over a period of several years.

Chen’s and You’s encounterism rests not only on curiosity, but also a commitment to intercultural exchange. This echoes what the Organisation of African Unity asserted in their “Pan-African Cultural Manifesto,” cited at the beginning of this essay, that “culture” transcends “tribal or ethnic divisions.” In the manifesto, as in Chen’s and You’s work, “culture” is understood very broadly as “the totality of tangible and intangible tools, works of art and science, knowledge and know-how, languages, modes of thought, patterns of behaviour and experience.” Moreover, “culture, in its widest and most complete sense, enables [people] to give shape to their lives.”³⁵ Achille Mbembe expanded such thinking a half-century later, taking it from the national and continental to the planetary with the insistence that “‘desegregating’ and disenclaving theory must become a constitutive part of the new agenda.”³⁶ Mbembe contends that ideas from decolonising zones across the Global South can enrich our understanding of the whole world.

So, too, do artworks by Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin. They allow us to perceive not only Singapore’s and Cambodia’s imbrication in Southeast Asia, but also this region’s connections to the planet at large.

NOTES

A substantially expanded version of this essay is published concurrently in *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 5, no. 1–2 (October 2021): 205–249. Published by NUS Press at the National University of Singapore, the journal is available to read for free online [here](#).

I am grateful to Zoe Butt and Simon Soon for their insightful comments on earlier drafts, and to Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Russell Storer for their astute edits. I am also indebted to the families of Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin for their great generosity.

- 1 Lucy Kinder, “Exhibitions Show Different Aspects of Cambodian Art,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 12 June 2009.
- 2 Chen Cheng Mei, interview by National Archives of Singapore (NAS), Visual Arts, Accession Number 003370, 6 November 2008, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/83188299-1161-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad (accessed May 2021). A transcript of this interview, prepared for this exhibition by intern Katya Narendratanaya, is available in the Gallery’s Library & Archive. RC-S33-CCM2.
- 3 “Global South” describes locations outside of North America and Western Europe, many of which have been undergoing processes of decolonisation, and many of which comprise lower income societies. The term has gained traction in recent years, in part as an alternative to terms like “Third World” and “developing nations.”
- 4 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), especially 189–190.
- 5 The two scholarly discussions of You’s work consist of less than four pages in: Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* (Honolulu, Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020), and a brief mention in: Boreth Ly, “Of Trans(National) Subjects and Translation: The Art and Body Language of Sopheap Pich,” in eds., Nora A. Taylor & Boreth Ly, *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology* (Ithaca, New York: SEAP, 2012), 117–129. The artist is also briefly mentioned in: Roger Nelson, *Modern Art of Southeast Asia: Introductions from A to Z* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019), 41.
- 6 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 has been compiled for this exhibition by intern Katya Narendratanaya, and is held in the Gallery’s Library & Archive.

- 7 Dia al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah, Saleh al-Jumaie, Muhammad Muhraddin, Rafa al-Nasiri & Hasheem Samarji, “Manifesto: Towards a New Vision (1969),” trans. Anneke Lenssen, Sarah Rogers & Nada Shabout, in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Anneke Lenssen, Sarah Rogers & Nada Shabout (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 306–309.
- 8 The Organisation of African Unity, “Pan-African Cultural Manifesto (1969),” in *Why Are We ‘Artists’? 100 World Art Manifestoes*, ed. Jessica Lack (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 2017), 128–140.
- 9 Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 39. Mbembe’s comments on “deprovincialising” are précised in: Achille Mbembe, interview by Paul Gilroy, Sarah Parker Remond Centre, University College London, 17 June 2020, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-achille-mbembe> (accessed May 2021).
- 10 Al-Azzawi, Fattah, et al., “Manifesto: Towards a New Vision,” 308. Emphasis mine.
- 11 You Khin graduated with a degree in Interior Architecture from the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1973; when he enrolled, prior to the 1970 coup that deposed the monarchy, this had been the Royal University of Fine Arts. He subsequently studied Three Dimensional Decorative Arts in Marseilles at the Luminy School of Fine Arts, between 1973 and 1977.

Chen Cheng Mei studied printmaking under the artist Stanley William Hayter (b. 1901, United Kingdom; d. 1988, France) at Atelier 17 in Paris in 1969. Although her studies there were brief, they appear to have had a lasting impact on her work. The studio was known for its unconventional approach, in particular to the application of ink to the plate, and in recent research has been celebrated as an important site for women artists, including for proto-feminist activities. See: Christina Weyl, *The Women of*

Atelier 17: Modernist Printmaking in Midcentury New York (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019). Chng Seok Tin, Chen Cheng Mei's friend and peer, studied with Hayter in Paris from 1980 to 1981 (see: Koh Nguang How, "Chng Seok Tin," Singapore Infopedia, last modified September 2019, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1385_2008-10-29.html). In a 2014 interview, Chen told Bridget Tracy Tan that "Hayter encouraged her to produce prints, in order to enrich her painting. It was a process that would allow her to explore textures, colours and effects." Bridget Tracy Tan, "That Without Which – Chen Cheng Mei," in *Joie de Vivre: Chen Cheng Mei*, exh. cat., eds. Alicia Lin and Bridget Tracy Tan (Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), 12.

- 12 S. Rajaratnam, at the time Minister of Culture, wrote this in the Foreword to *Ten-Men Art Exhibition: Tour of Sarawak* (Singapore, 1965); quoted in: Yvonne Low, "Women Artists: Becoming Professional," 254.
- 13 Al-Azzawi, Fattah, et al., "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision," 309.
- 14 On Chen's family history, see NAS interview, 2008; see also Tan, "That Without Which," 5. On You's family history, I rely on conversations and also an interview with You Muoy, conducted by online call in April 2021. A transcript of this interview, prepared by intern Katya Narendratanaya, is in the Gallery's Library & Archive, RC-KHI-YK1. See also the timelines of both artists' lives, appended in this catalogue.
- 15 Tan, "That Without Which," 5.
- 16 Thirteen passports are included in the artist's archives. From these, intern Katya Narendratanaya produced a partial list of places visited; this list is in the Gallery's Library & Archive. Countries she visited in Africa include Kenya, Mauritius, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
- 17 Choy Weng Yang, "An Odyssey of Passion and Courage: Chen Cheng Mei's Artistic Journey," in Chen Cheng Mei, *Odyssey: Oil Works* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2008), 10.
- 18 Chheng Phon, 1983, cited in Roger Nelson, "An Introduction," in Suon Sorin, *A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land: A Novel of Sihanouk's Cambodia*, trans. Roger Nelson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), p. xix. A prominent figure, Chheng Phon had taught at the Royal University of Fine Arts during the 1960s; it is likely that You Khin knew him.
- 19 Chheng Phon, 1983, cited in Nelson, "An Introduction," p. xviii.

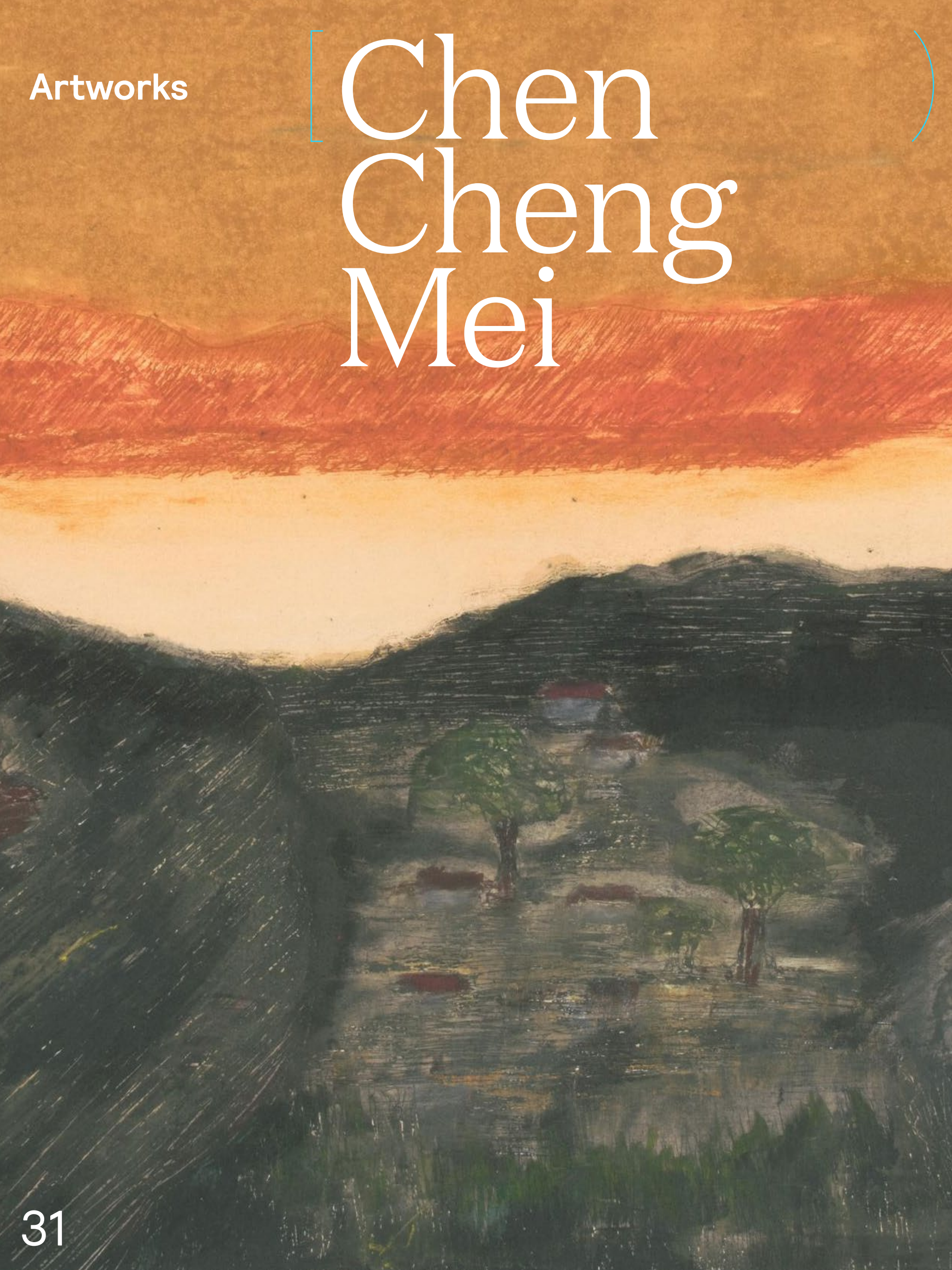
- 20** The complete archive is in the collection of National Gallery Singapore's Library & Archive (RC-S33-CCM2), thanks to the generosity of the artist's widow, You Muoy. It comprises sketches and works on paper, as well as notebooks, photographs, media clippings, and exhibition ephemera. The Gallery is in the process of digitising these materials, which will be made freely available to students, researchers, and members of the public.
- 21** Interview with You Muoy, April 2021.
- 22** Critiques of Western primitivism are numerous, and include: Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997). More recent revisionist approaches to primitivism have sought to complicate the colonised/coloniser dichotomy, and to consider how primitivism could be an empowering tool for colonised people, including artists. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage with these debates, it is important to recognise the complexity and ambiguity of primitivism as a category of thought. See: Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion, 2007). See also: Ruth B. Phillips, "Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited: The Global Diaspora of 'Primitive Art' and the Rise of Indigenous Modernisms," *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015): 1-25; and: Partha Mitter, [with Kobena Mercer], "Reflections on Modern Art and National Identity in Colonial India: An Interview," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA and London: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005), 24-49. These issues are addressed further in the expanded version of this essay, published concurrently in *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 5, no. 1-2 (October 2021).
- 23** Chen, NAS interview.
- 24** Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, especially 189-190. Emphasis mine. I am indebted to Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol for his insights on this subject during conversations in May 2021.
- 25** Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
- 26** Ho Ho Ying, "My Paintings," [trans. Tan Yong Jun, ed. Lynda Tay] first published 1978, republished 20 January 2021 on "Insights: Ho Ho Ying," Esplanade, <https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/insights-ho-ho-ying> (accessed May 2021). With thanks to Lynda Tay.
- 27** Ho's 1978 claim anticipates a strikingly similar characterisation of the contemporary by Giorgio Agamben, first published in Italian in 2006. In this widely cited account, Agamben describes

“contemporariness” as “a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, *keeps a distance from it.*” Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik & Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41. Emphasis mine.

- 28** A similar claim is made for the scumbled, murky surfaces created by Frank Bowling (b. 1934, Guyana), a British artist whose paintings (like those of Chen Cheng Mei) often incorporate unconventional media to modulate the paint, as well as other non-art materials. See: Elena Crippa, *Frank Bowling* (London: Tate, 2019), 16. I am indebted to Guo-Liang Tan for his insights on this subject during conversations in May 2021.
- 29** Kinder, “Exhibitions.”
- 30** You Khin, undated notebook, Cambodia, c. 2004–2009. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of You Muoy, wife of the artist. RC-KHI-YKI.
- 31** Unexpected, and non-naturalistic use of colours recurs in Chen’s work. The asphalted urban street in *Street Stalls* (1983) is mauve and lilac, for example, and many of the artist’s depictions of the Singapore river cast the surface of the water in red, gold, and other surprising shades of not-blue.
- 32** Chng Seok Tin, “Artist, Printmaker, Friend,” in Chen Cheng Mei, *Odyssey*, xvi.
- 33** Tan Szan, “Journeying Through the Art of Chen Cheng Mei,” in *Artists Inspire a Nation: Art Heroes of 20th Century*, ed. Michelle Loh (Singapore: Composition, 2020), 8. The text was written prior to Tan joining National Gallery Singapore as Head (Library & Archives).
- 34** The work is reproduced in: Chen, *Odyssey*, plate 42.
- 35** Organisation of African Unity, “Pan-African Cultural Manifesto,” 129–131.
- 36** Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 39.

Artworks

Chen Cheng Mei





Chen
Cheng Mei

ANGKOR WAT
DETAIL II

1962

Oil on canvas,
65.5 x 73.5 cm

Gift of the artist

Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

SUN TOWER,
MEXICO

1984

Oil on canvas,
60.5 x 85 cm

Gift of the artist

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

MARKET SCENE,
SRILANKA

1990

Oil on canvas,
61 x 80 cm

Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

**KENYAN
CHIEFTAINS**

1991

Oil on canvas,
91 x 112 cm

Private collection,
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

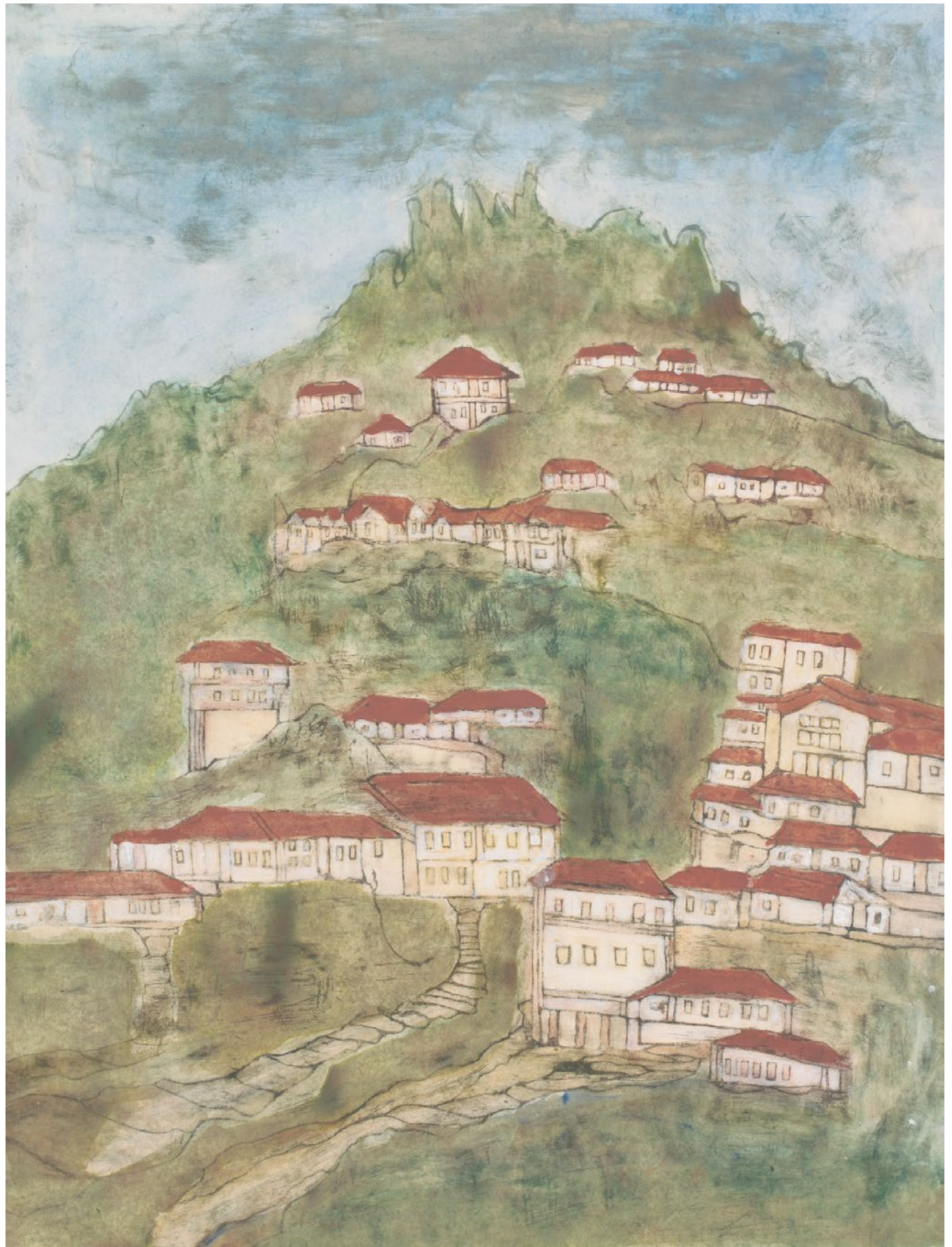
TIGER HILL
DARJEELING
(INDIA)

1990

Etching on paper,
55.4 x 75.8 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor

Collection
of Singapore
Art Museum



Chen
Cheng Mei

DARJEELING
LANDSCAPE

1989

Etching on paper,
65.4 x 51.3 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor

Collection of National
Gallery Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

AFRICAN
HIGHWAY

1996

Etching on paper,
40.3 x 35.5 cm

Collection of
the artist's family,
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

**MAASAI WOMEN
(KENYA, AFRICA)**

1993

Etching on paper,
47.5 x 60.5 cm

Collection of the
artist's family,
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

LAUNDRY
(KALASH WOMEN)

1994

Etching on paper,
56.5 x 72.2 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor

Collection of
Singapore Art
Museum



Chen
Cheng Mei

LAUNDRY (INDIA)

2008

Etching on paper,
47.5 x 60.5 cm

Collection of the
artist's family,
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

FRIGATE BIRDS

2000

Etching on paper,
52.7 x 53.6 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor

Collection of
Singapore Art
Museum



Chen
Cheng Mei

DR. KOFUN,
MEDICINE MAN,
AMAZON, BRAZIL

1992

Oil on canvas,
200 x 234 cm

Private collection,
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

MARKET

1980

Oil on canvas,
83.5 x 76.5 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

STREET STALLS

1983

Oil on canvas,
61 x 80.2 cm

Gift of the artist
Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

EATING RICE

1977

Oil on canvas,
60.5 x 106 cm

Collection of
Dr Lucy Tan-Ooi,
Singapore



Chen
Cheng Mei

TRADING ROOM

1974

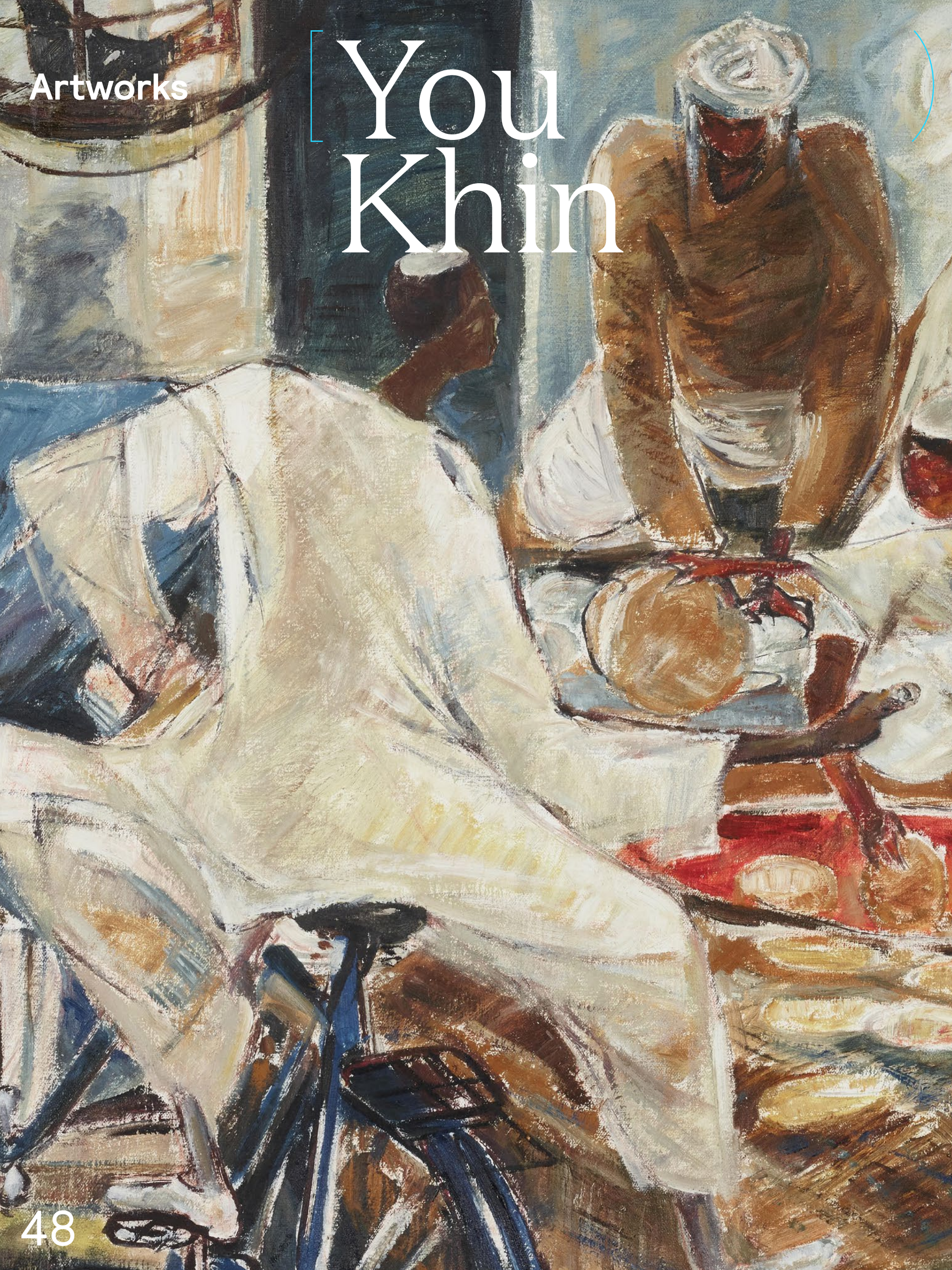
Oil on canvas,
66 x 101.5 cm

Gift of an
anonymous donor

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore

Artworks

You Khin





You Khin

UNTITLED (THE
TAILORS AND THE
MANNEQUINS)

1981

Oil on canvas,
83 x 60 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin

UNTITLED
(COFFEE HAWKER)

1979

Oil on canvas,
80 x 60 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin

UNTITLED
(PUBLIC SCRIBES)

1993

Oil on canvas,
65 x 54 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin

UNTITLED
(DOHA SCENE:
PAKISTANI
BAKERS)

1990

Oil on canvas,
65 x 100 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



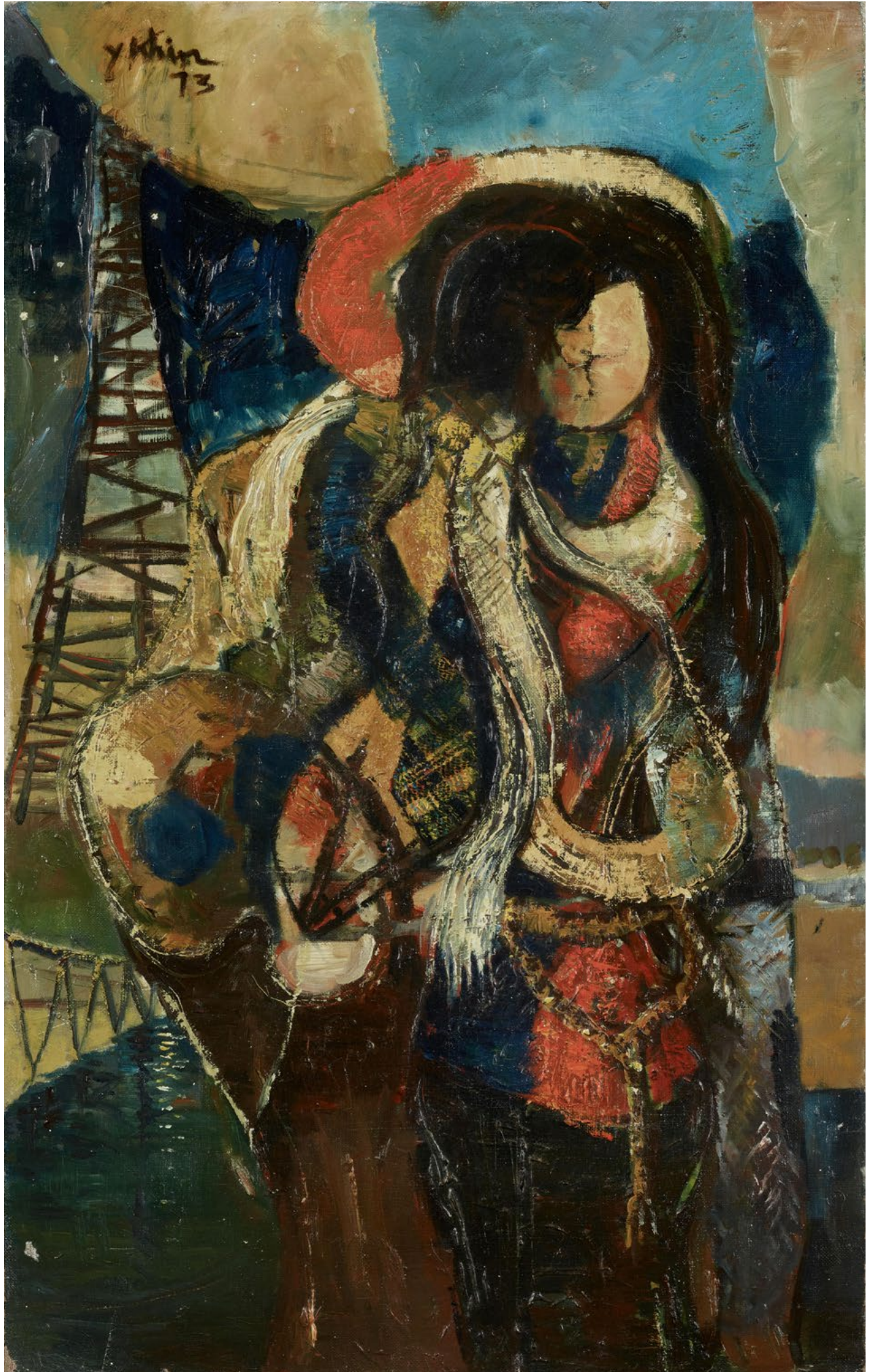
You Khin

UNTITLED
(MEETING ABOVE
PIGEON CAGES)

1978

Oil on canvas,
65 x 100 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin
BLUE NIGHT

1973

Oil on canvas,
61 x 38 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin

WOMAN SITTING
IN FRONT OF
SCARECROW II

2008

Oil and string
on canvas,
130 x 96 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin

UNTITLED
(THE CHINESE
MAN EATS THE
CAMBODIAN SOUP)

1975

Oil on canvas,
46 x 38 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore



You Khin

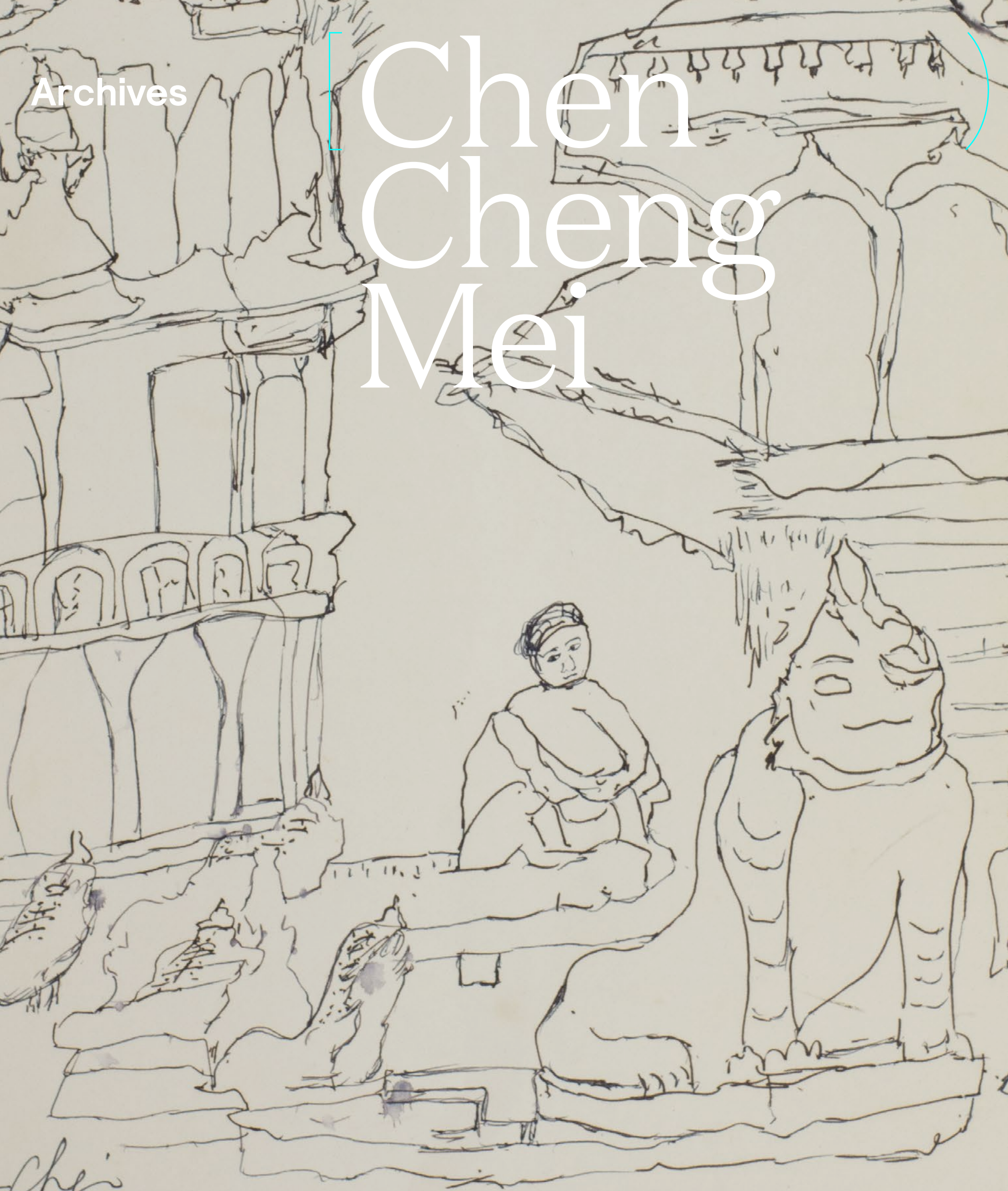
UNTITLED
(PEOPLE AWAITING
CARGO SHIP)

2000

Oil on canvas,
116 x 84 cm

Collection of
National Gallery
Singapore

Chen Cheng Mei



Chen
n, Nepal
3 F. A. D.

Archives

Chen Cheng Mei

Chen took over 200 trips to dozens of different destinations during more than six decades of artistic practice. She returned most often to places in South and Southeast Asia and Africa, also visiting the Americas, Europe and Oceania. From the 1970s onwards, most of these trips were self-organised journeys in search of artistic inspiration. Chen sketched prolifically during her travels. While she sometimes depicted scenery and special landmarks, most of her sketches concentrate on ordinary, everyday scenes of labour, markets, and villages.

All materials are from the collection of the family of Chen Cheng Mei. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission of artist's family. RC-S33-CCM2.

1
Farmers,
Samoa, 1995

2, 3
Village scenes,
Samoa, 1995



1

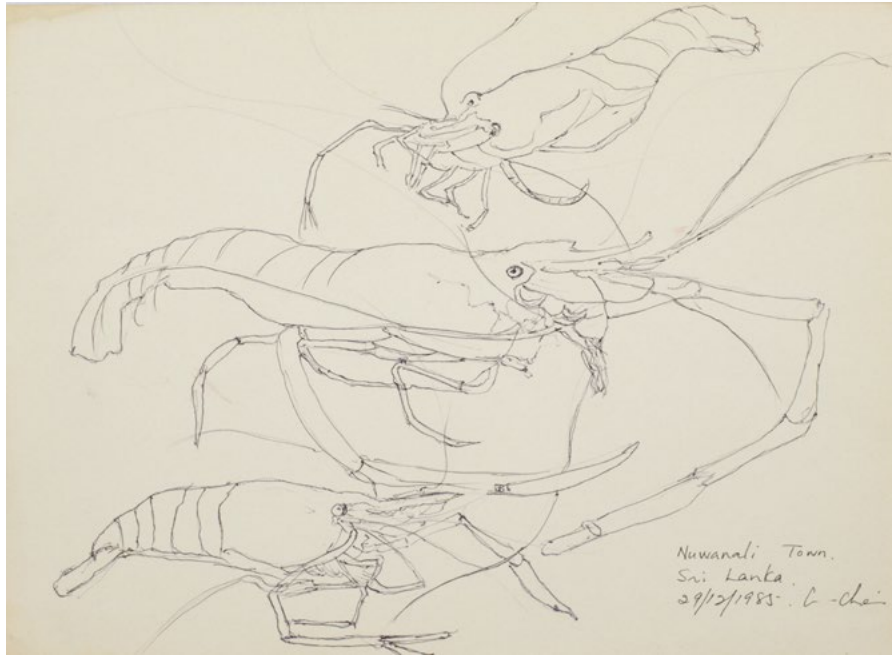


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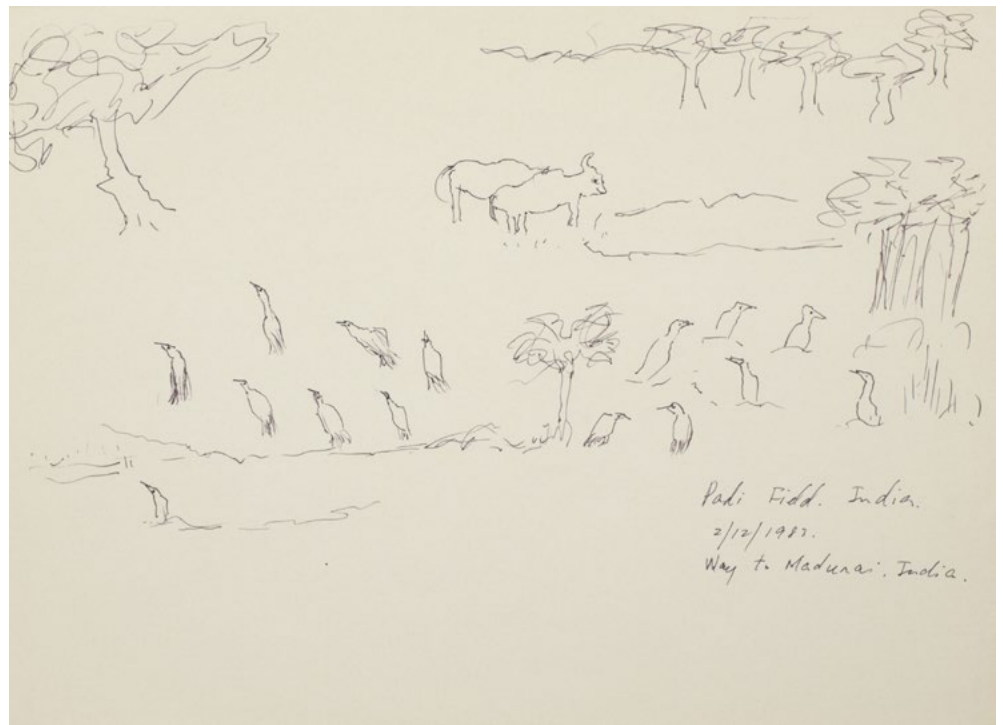
3

During the 1960s, Chen travelled mostly within Southeast Asia. Many of her sketching trips were with the Ten Men Art Group, a loose collective of artists whose frequent journeys Chen had initiated in 1960. From the 1970s onwards, however, South Asia became Chen's favourite destination. She visited India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka repeatedly over the coming decades.



Nuwanali Town,
Sri Lanka
29/12/1985. C-Chen

4



Padi Field, India.
2/12/1983.
Way to Madurai, India.

5



C-Chen
Khajuraho. 71.

6

4
Lobsters,
Sri Lanka, 1985

5
Padi field,
India, 1983

6
Khajuraho temple,
India, 1971



7

7
Patan temple,
Nepal, c. 1971

8
Laundry drying,
South Asia,
c. 1970s–1980s.
The same subject
is explored in two
of Chen's prints
included in this
exhibition.

Chen's paintings and prints are often based closely on her sketches and photographs. They focus mostly on markets, street scenes, and even laundry. Many of the artist's compositions dwell on makeshift structures that give texture to the fabric of daily life.



8

9
Market scene,
Malaysia, c. 1960

10
Market scenes,
c. 1960s-1970s

11
Kalash woman,
Pakistan, 1991



9



11



10





12



13

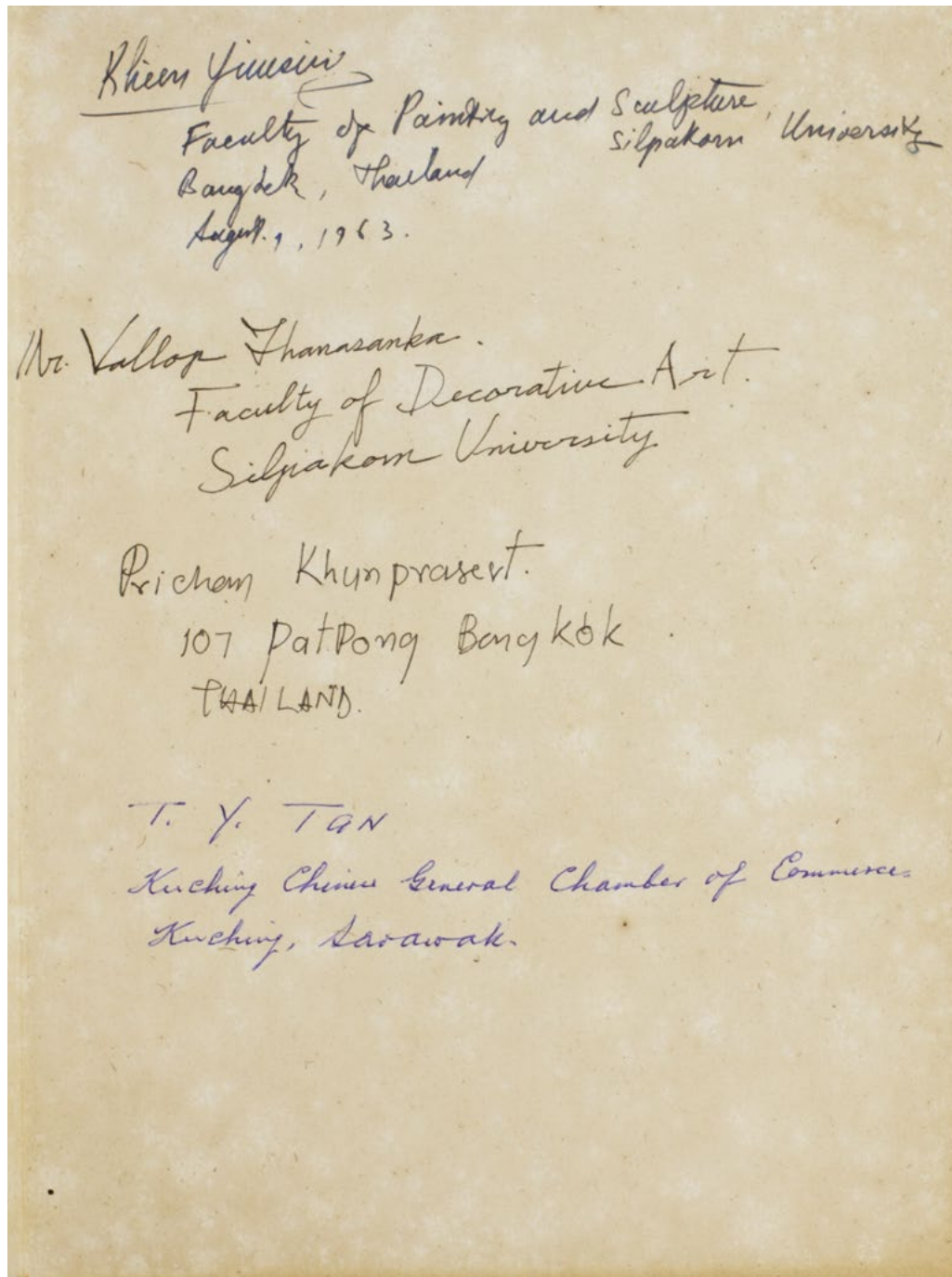


14

15

12-15
Travels in Southeast
Asia with the Ten Men
Art Group, 1960s.





16

16

Autograph book signed by artists in Bangkok, Sarawak and elsewhere during Chen's travels with the Ten Men Art Group, 1960s

17

Amah (nursemaid) in Chinatown, Singapore, c. 1977. Chen's painting, *Eating Rice*, which is part of this exhibition, is based on this image.

17



Archives

You Khin



Archives

You
Khin

For 30 years, You Khin lived and worked in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. As a refugee, he held two solo exhibitions in Khartoum in Sudan during the 1970s. Later, his exhibitions in Doha during the 1990s were presided over by Qatari government officials. You Khin also worked as an architect. One of his employers introduced him to the celebrated Iraqi modern artist, Ismail Fattah, who he sketched in 1988.

You Khin often designed his own invitations and posters, and his exhibitions were frequently reviewed in local media. His archive is the single most complete record of any Cambodian artist's work during this period.

All materials are from the collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of Muoy You, wife of the artist. RC-KHI-YK1.



1



2

3



1-3
You Khin as a student in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and an example of his student artwork depicting Angkor Wat, early 1970s



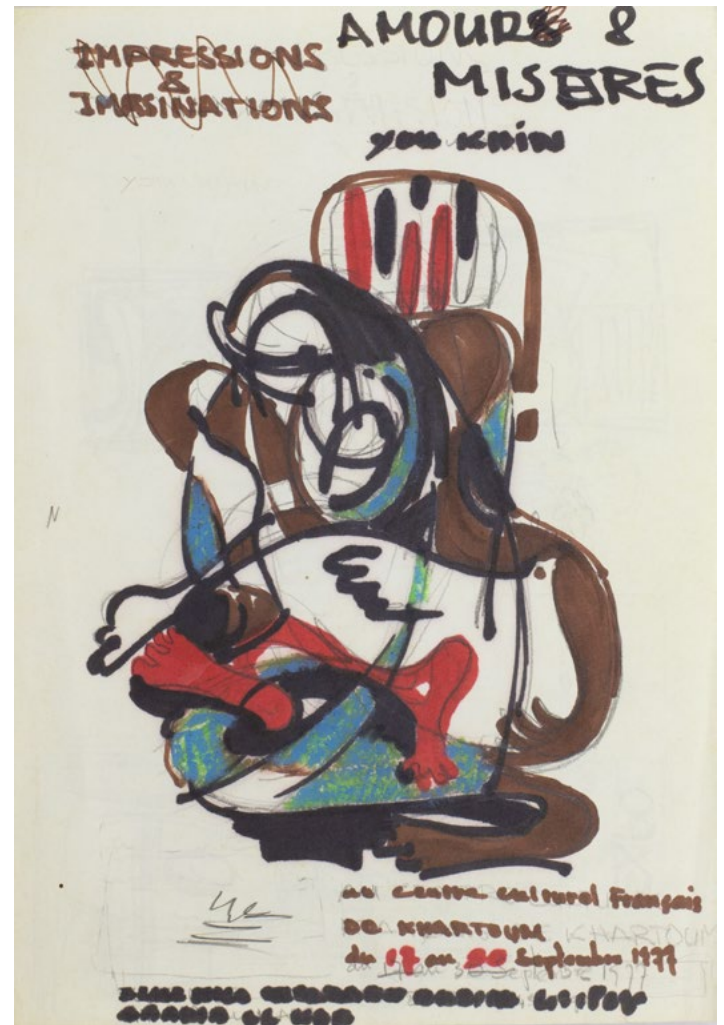
4

4
The art school in
Marseilles where You
Khin studied, 1974

5
You's design for the
invitation to his
solo exhibition at
the French Cultural
Centre in Khartoum,
Sudan, 1977

6
A report on You's
solo exhibition at
Elf Petroleum in
Doha, Qatar in the
Gulf Times, 1995

5



6



8



7

9



7
You Khin at work as an architect in Qatar, c. mid-1980s

8
Figures at a table, Ivory Coast, 1981

9
Portrait of Iraqi modern artist Ismail Fattah, Qatar, 1988



10

10 You's design for a poster for the French-language radio station in Qatar, 1995

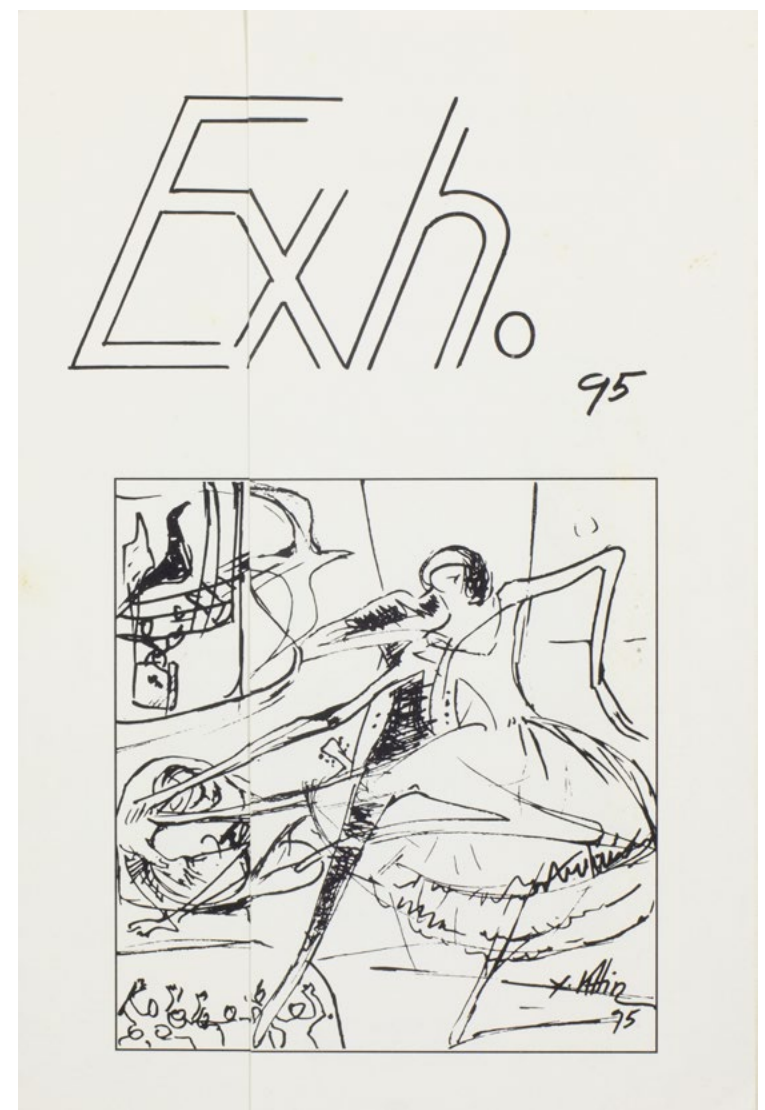
11 Review of You's solo exhibition at the French Cultural Centre in Khartoum, Sudan in *Sudanow* magazine, 1977

12 You's design for the invitation to his solo exhibition at Elf Petroleum in Doha, Qatar, 1995



11

12





14

You Khin sketched prolifically, and his oil paintings are often based on drawings done in pencil, pastel, and watercolour. In Sudan and Ivory Coast, his favourite subjects were markets, hawkers, and domestic scenes. In Qatar, he frequently depicted shipyards, port scenes, and symbolic depictions of birds both caged and in flight. These diverse scenes express a sense of everyday life; You Khin liked to linger and observe, and he paid special attention to indications of the hardship he encountered.

14
Hawker, Sudan,
c. 1978–1979

15
Tailors at work,
Qatar, 1993

16
Shoemaker
at work, Qatar, 1996



15



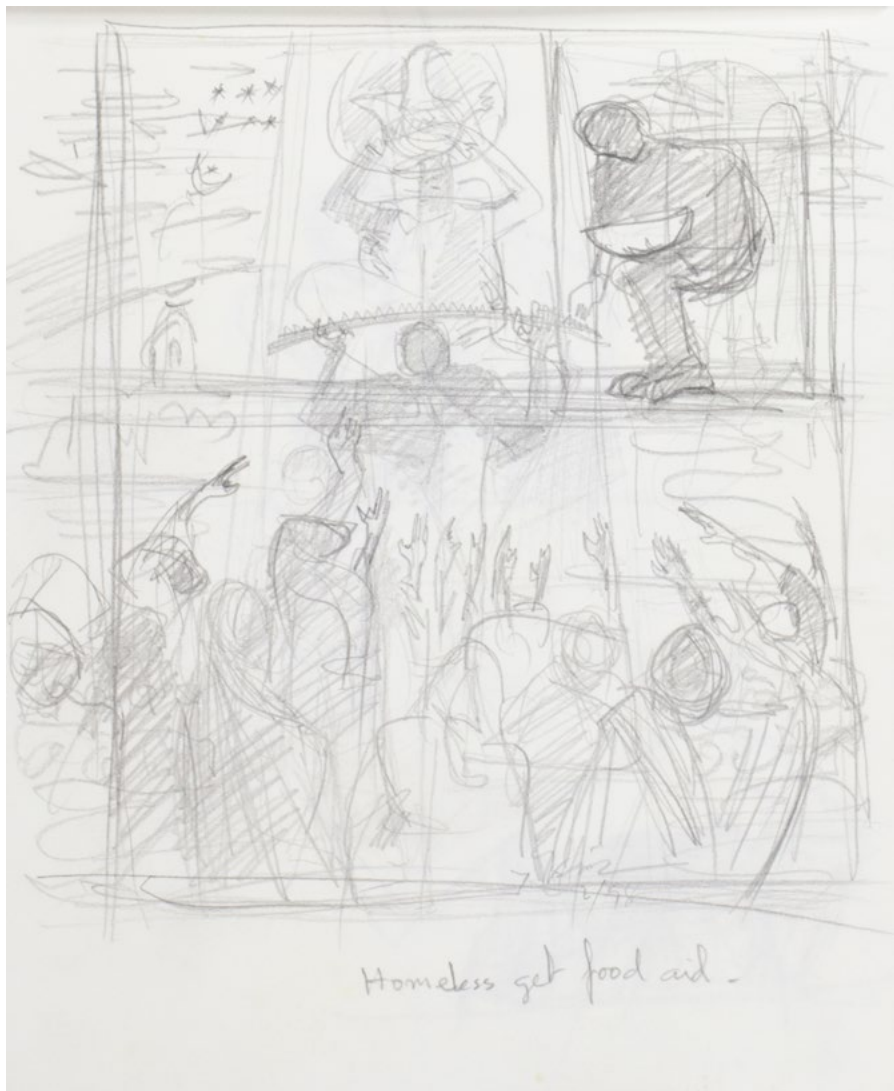
16

17
Market scene,
Qatar, 1983

18
Cargo ship unloading,
Qatar or London,
c. 1990-2000s



17



18



18



19

20



18
Birds in the
Gulf, Qatar, 1990

19
Market scene,
undated

20
Market scene,
Qatar, 1988

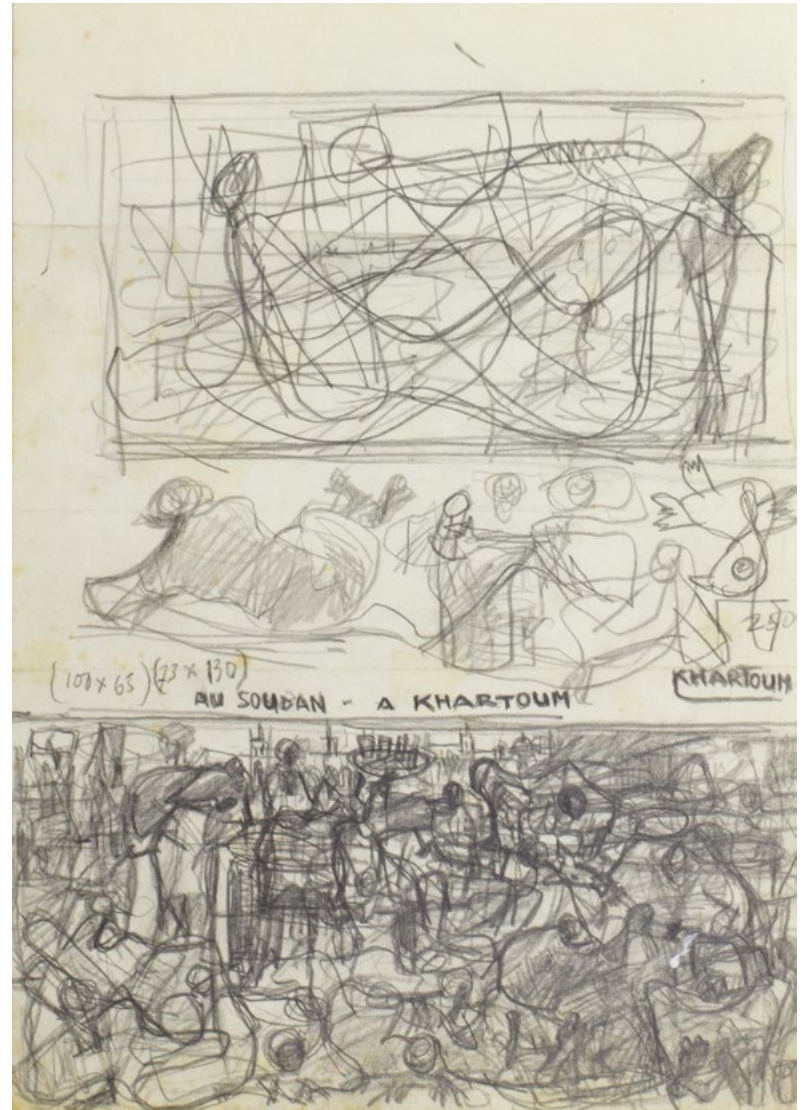
21
Market scene,
Sudan, c. 1977-1979

22
Public water
fountain, Qatar,
1989

23
Domestic scene,
Sudan, c. 1978-1979



22



21

23



Timeline

Chen Cheng Mei

1927

Chen Cheng Mei (Tan Seah Boey 陳城梅) is born in Singapore. Chen's mother is the niece of Teo Eng Hock, a close associate of Sun Yat Sen and the founder of the Singapore branch of the Kuomintang. Her father is a successful businessperson who owns orchards and cultivates acclaimed orchids and durians.

1941—1942

Japanese forces occupy Cambodia from 1941 and Singapore from 1942. Aspects of daily life, including schooling, are disrupted until 1945.

1949

Enrols at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore, where artists Lim Hak Tai and Cheong Soo Pieng are among her teachers. Chen had previously joined the YMCA Art Club led by artists Lim Cheng Hoe and T.Y. Choy.

1951

Begins full-time employment as a French translator at the Bank of China in Singapore, where she works until 1971. Continues to study at NAFA part-time.

1954

Graduates from NAFA. Her paintings from the 1950s include still lifes, abstract compositions, and scenes of landscapes and villages.

1960

Initiates a road trip to peninsular Malaysia with three fellow artists, including her brother Tan Teo Kwang. The collective later grows, and takes on the name Ten Men Art Group. Chen declines to lead future trips; she proposes that artist Yeh Chi Wei take on the role instead.

RIGHT

Chen Cheng Mei with her colleagues at the Bank of China, Singapore, 1962



1961

The Ten Men Art Group, comprising ten artists including Chen, take their first trip together. They travel to Kota Bahru and around peninsular Malaysia; Chen's husband arranges for the cars and drivers. Upon their return to Singapore, the artists hold an exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall.



Chen Cheng Mei on a Ten Men Art Group trip in Southeast Asia, 1960s

In following years, the Group travels to Java and Bali (1962), Cambodia and Thailand (1963), Sarawak (1965) and Borneo (1968); the destinations are discussed between Chen and Yeh Chi Wei. During the 1970s, the Group travels to China and India.

1967

ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is formed. Singapore is a founding member, while Cambodia joins later in 1999.

1969

Studies printmaking with artist Stanley William Hayter at Atelier

17 in Paris. Printmaking, chiefly etching and lithography, becomes central to Chen's practice from this point on.

The Pan-African Cultural Manifesto is launched at the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers. Pan-Africanism remains influential over coming decades.

1970

Participates in a group exhibition organised by the Southeast Asian Art Society in Singapore; exhibits in group shows regularly until 1992.

1971

Resigns from her job as a translator at the Bank of China after 20 years of service, and becomes a full-time artist. Travels to India and Nepal for the first time on a self-organised study and sketching trip. Eventually returns to India at least eight times, and also travels widely elsewhere in South Asia.

1981—1982

Participates in group exhibitions in Japan and Monaco.

1984

Travels to Mexico.

Travels alone to Papua New Guinea, which would become one of Chen's favourite destinations.

1986

Donates an imported printing press to the LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

**TOP**

Chen Cheng Mei at her solo exhibition at NAFA, Singapore, 2014

BOTTOM

Chen Cheng Mei
Detail of *Angkor Wat*
1973
Oil on canvas,
76 x 50.5cm
Gift of Koh Seow Chuan
Collection of National
Gallery Singapore

1986—1988

Participates in group exhibitions in Australia.

1990

Travels to Africa for the first time, visiting Mauritius and Kenya. Chen would return to Africa in 1993, visiting several countries including South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia.

Holds an exhibition at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca in Mexico.

1992—2004

Participates in group exhibitions of printmaking in Singapore.

1995

Travels to French Polynesia, Cook Islands, Samoa and Fiji.

2004

Holds first solo exhibition in Singapore, featuring prints; a publication accompanies the show.

2008

Holds a solo exhibition at Singapore's National Library, featuring oil paintings; a publication is also produced. In an interview with the National Archives of Singapore, Chen asserts that "Everyone is an artist in this world."

2014

Holds a retrospective solo exhibition at NAFA's Lim Hak Tai Gallery, Singapore. It features prints, oil paintings, and works on paper.

2015

National Gallery Singapore opens, with Chen's work featured in the long-term exhibition *Siapa Nama Kamu: Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*.

2020

Passes away in Singapore.

2021

The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin opens at National Gallery Singapore.

Timeline

You Khin

1947

You Khin (ឃុំ ឃ្លីន) is born in Kampong Cham, Cambodia. You's parents are rice farmers, and his uncle paints jataka scenes in Buddhist temples in their village.

1967—1972

Participates in several exhibitions in Phnom Penh while a student at the Royal University of Fine Arts. Attracts attention in the local media for his works, which include depictions of the temples of Angkor as well as Khmer dancers.

1969

The Pan-African Cultural Manifesto is launched at the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers. Pan-Africanism remains influential over coming decades.

1970

Civil war erupts in Cambodia after the Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, is overthrown by the Cambodian General Lon Nol in a coup d'état supported by the United States. A Khmer Republic is proclaimed, and the monarchy is abolished after almost two millennia. Institutions including the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh are renamed.

1973

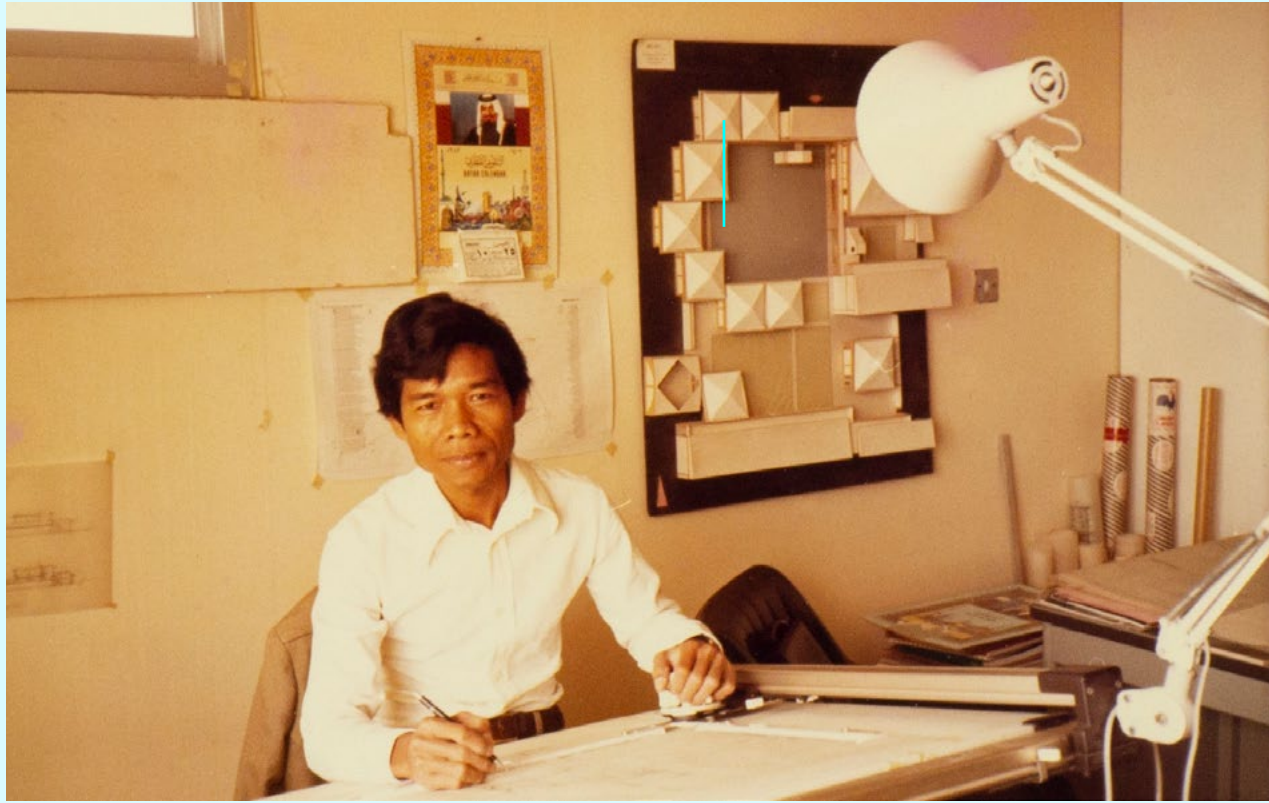
Moves to France after graduating from the University of Fine Arts with a degree in interior architecture. Pursues further studies at the School of Fine Arts and Architecture in Marseilles, with a government scholarship. Meets his future wife, Muoy, another Cambodian studying in France.

1975

Pol Pot's communist forces, known as the Khmer Rouge, take power in Cambodia on 17 April. During the subsequent genocide, Phnom Penh and other cities are forcibly emptied. Around 1.7 million Cambodians perish, including most of YouKhin's family. It is later estimated that between 80 and 90 per cent of all artists in Cambodia are killed. The Khmer Rouge's reign of terror continues until January 1979.

RIGHT
You Khin as a student in Phnom Penh, early 1970s





You Khin at work
as an architect in Qatar,
c. mid-1980s

1977

Graduates and moves to Khartoum, Sudan from Marseilles. You's wife Muoy teaches French at the University of Khartoum, while he works as an architect under Usam Ghaidan, an Iraqi architect and scholar who had recently published books studying vernacular architecture and culture in East Africa.

Begins to include birds and cages in his works as symbols of freedom and its constraints.

Holds a solo exhibition at the French Cultural Centre, Khartoum.

1979

Holds a solo exhibition at the Hilton Hotel in Khartoum.

Moves from Khartoum to the Ivory Coast, living first in Bouake and then in Abidjan.

1980

Participates in a group exhibition at the French Cultural Centre in Abidjan.

1981

Moves from Abidjan to Doha, Qatar. He is employed by the Qatari Ministry of Education, and again works as an architect under Usam Ghaidan.

1988

Meets the Iraqi artist Ismail Fattah, and sketches his portrait.

1989

Qatar issues tourist visas for the first time. This follows the opening of the first museums in Qatar during the mid-1980s, and the establishment of a national airline in 1994.

1992—1995

Holds solo exhibitions every year, including at the Sofitel Hotel, Doha (1993), the French Cultural Centre, Abu Dhabi (1994) and the offices of the Elf Petroleum company, Doha (1995).

1999

Moves from Doha to London, United Kingdom.

2000

Participates in a group exhibition at the Salon des Artistes Indépendants in Paris, France.

2002

Holds a solo exhibition at Riverside Gallery, London; joins group exhibitions in London.

2011

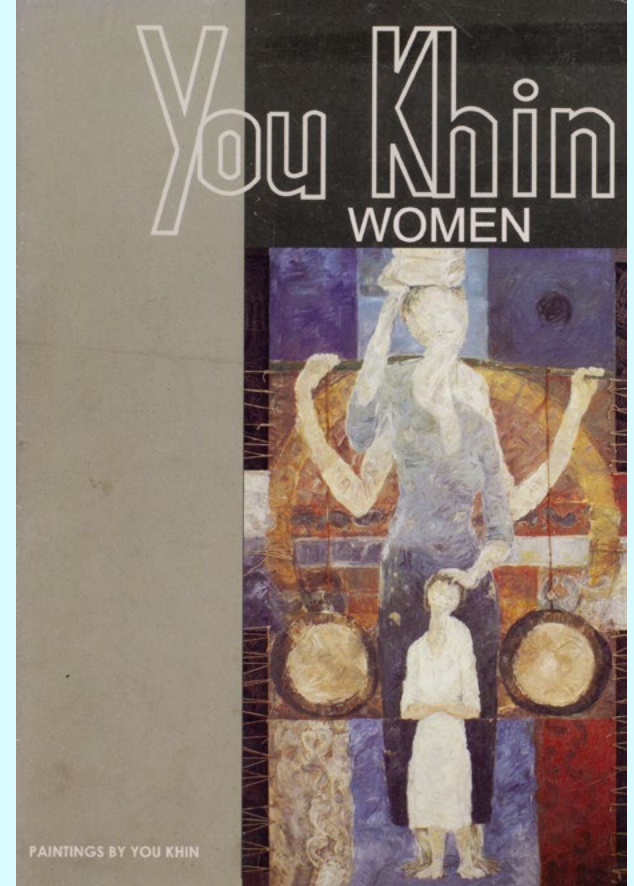
A survey exhibition of You Khin's later works opens at California State University, United States.

LEFT

Self-portrait by You Khin, Cambodia, c. 2008

RIGHT

Brochure for You Khin's solo exhibition at the French Cultural Centre, Phnom Penh, 2009

**2004**

Moves from London to Phnom Penh, joining his wife Muoy, who had returned there the previous year. Begins incorporating string into the surface of his paintings.

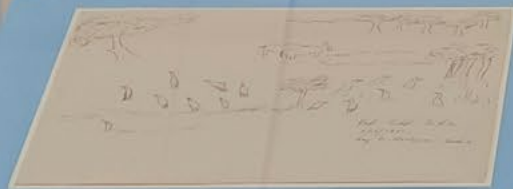
2021

The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin opens at National Gallery Singapore.

2009

Holds a solo exhibition at the French Cultural Centre in Phnom Penh. He is diagnosed with cancer two months later, and travels to Bangkok, Thailand for medical treatment, where he passes away at the age of 62. In one of his final interviews, the artist proudly declares: "My world is modern."





1. The first sketch, 1949
2. The second sketch, 1950
3. The third sketch, 1951
4. The fourth sketch, 1952
5. The fifth sketch, 1953
6. The sixth sketch, 1954





Youssouf Guizo
 1941-1998
 Lunchtime (Doha Scene: Pakistani Bakers)
 Oil on canvas
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore
 2019-2020

Depicted in a traditional white thobe, the central figure in this painting is gathered around a table where fellow bakers are being prepared and served. The man is absorbed in conversation with each other, uninterested in the presence of the foreigner.

The scene recalls the local Pakistani bakery that Youssouf often visited with his children during his years in Qatar. The artist was drawn to other migrants, as he was one of the only Qatari artists living in Qatar. This painting offers an insight into how Youssouf perceived life in his adopted home by observing the human details of everyday life.



1



3



2



4







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Page 1: You Khin. Detail of *Untitled (The Tailors and the Mannequins)*. 1981. Oil on canvas, 83 x 60 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Pages 7, 32–34, 36–37, 40, 42, 44–45, 47, 49–57, 76 (bottom): Images courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Page 12: Chen Cheng Mei. Detail of *Laundry (India)*. 2008. Etching on paper, 47.5 x 60.5 cm. Collection of the artist's family, Singapore.

Page 31. Chen Cheng Mei. Detail of *Tiger Hill Darjeeling (India)*. 1990. Etching on paper, 55.4 x 75.8 cm. Gift of an anonymous donor. Collection of Singapore Art Museum. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Page 48: You Khin. Detail of *Untitled (Doha Scene: Pakistani Bakers)*. 1990. Oil on canvas, 65 x 100 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Page 58: Detail of a sketch by Chen Cheng Mei of Patan temple, Nepal, c. 1971. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission of artist's family. Collection of the family of the artist, Chen Cheng Mei, RC-S33-CCM2.

Page 65: Detail of a sketch by You Khin of a market scene, Sudan, c. 1977–1979. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive, gift of Muoy You, wife of the artist.

Pages 74, 76 (top): Images from the collection of the artist's family, Singapore.

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ESSAY

Figs. 1, 3, 4, 8: RC-KH1-YK1.

Figs. 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14: Images courtesy of National Heritage Board

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Fig. 17. Re-photographed by Roger Nelson.

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Fig. 4: RC-KH1-YK1.1.27–32.

Fig. 6: RC-KH1-YK1.3–06.

Fig. 10: RC-KH1-YK1.3–05.

Fig. 12: RC-KH1-YK1.3–01.

Fig. 17: RC-KH1-YK1.1.19.

Fig. 18: RC-KH1-YK1.1.27–08.

Fig. 21. RC-KH1-YK1.1.22.

Fig. 23. RC-KH1-YK1.1.12.

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