

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

6 SEP 2024-
2 FEB 2025

Teo Eng Seng:

We're
Happy.

Are You
Happy?



SINGTEL SPECIAL EXHIBITION GALLERY 1 AND THE SPINE HALL

nationalgallery.sg/TeoEngSeng2024

LET *Art* SURPRISE YOU

“

Practice never,
never makes perfect.
You practise to improve
and change but once you
become fully satisfied with
your own work, that
is the end of art.
Art is about
struggling
constantly;
about craving for
new things.”

National Gallery Singapore presents *Teo Eng Seng: We're Happy. Are You Happy?* as part of the SG Artist series, where you can discover the innovative spirit of Singapore artists and their commitment to experimental artmaking. This is Teo Eng Seng's most expansive solo exhibition yet, celebrating his profound impact on the Singapore art scene.

Teo Eng Seng (b.1938, Singapore) is an artist whose dynamic, seven-decade career is marked by a playful and evolving approach. Teo transforms everyday materials into vibrant works of art, embedding humour and irony into his socially engaged practice. His creations, full of spontaneous and vivid compositions, reflect his tongue-in-cheek takes on personal and broader social events. Teo's practice undermines conventional ways of thinking about and making art while staying relevant to local and global issues.

By asking “We're Happy. Are You Happy?” the exhibition invites you to explore Teo's honest and witty negotiation between self and society.

For more information on upcoming programmes, tours and access to audio guides and room sheets, please visit nationalgallery.sg/TeoEngSeng2024



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



On page 2 and this page:
MJ Dangerous V.
Undated.
Plastic waste,
paperdyesculp and
acrylic paint,
87.5 × 127 × 8.5 cm.
Collection of Singapore
Art Museum.
Image courtesy of
National Heritage Board,
Singapore.

Teo's art merges diverse practices, genres, and movements, resulting in unique, vibrant creations. Inspired by nature, his works **rarely depict recognisable objects**, and instead showcase bold colours and unexpected forms in seemingly chaotic systems. Teo's methods in sculpture and painting are distinct, and are a reflection of his experiences.



Self-portrait. 1955. Oil on paper, 38 × 29 cm.
Collection of the artist.

Teo Eng Seng (b.1938, Singapore) is an innovative artist who has shaped Singapore's art scene significantly. Known for his emotive and raw style, Teo experiments with various mediums, including oil painting and plastic waste, but is most famous for creating "paperdyesculp," dyed papier-mâché mixed with other materials and shaped into artworks.

Teo was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1986 for his contributions to visual arts, and is recognised for his services to art education and for playing an advisory role to various art institutions and national committees.

Emphasising spontaneity and immediacy, he intuitively adds colours and materials in his artmaking process. His innovative medium, paperdyesculp, exemplifies his synthesis of materials and techniques. Teo encourages viewers, "Don't Try to Read it, See it, Feel it," **prioritising emotional connection over rational interpretation.**

MJ Dangerous V repurposes jerry cans and fuel containers to honour Michael Jackson's 1991 *Dangerous* album. Merging kitsch and pop art, it humorously critiques mass consumer culture and defies high art conventions. By doing so, he playfully encourages viewers to rethink the boundaries between art, consumerism and popular culture.

**Do the things you buy
make you happy?**



Five Nails. 1991. Fibreglass on wire construction, 370 × 290 × 290 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.

These monoliths, which resemble giant fingertips, dwarf viewers with their towering forms. *Five Nails* brings to mind an episode from the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, where the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, is attempting to escape the Buddha's palm as part of a bet. When Sun Wukong encounters five gargantuan pillars, he thought that he had travelled to the ends of the universe. However, those pillars were later revealed to be Buddha's fingers—his grasp vast and inescapable despite one's efforts.

The long nail-like structures convey overtones of fear and threats from humanity's past and unconscious mind, putting viewers in Sun Wukong's position of being involved in something far larger and greater than they are.

Magnificence of Nature is a paperdyesculp sculpture on a pedestal, its imposing presence evoking a sense of grandeur despite its smaller scale. Its twisted shape, uneven surface, and vivid colours resemble organic life. The layers of various surfaces are not uniform; pigments suture the piece together, symbolising both decay and renewal found in nature's cycle of life.

What is growing,
and decaying,
in your world?



Magnificence of Nature. 1996. Paperdyesculp, 50 × 27 × 20 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore.

Sweet Talk, Straight Talk



A global citizen and transnational artist, Teo seamlessly integrates Euro-American artistic trends and Eastern techniques in his work. His art reflects a deep awareness of global and local socio-political events, from the Vietnam War to Singapore's urban migration.

Teo expresses themes of freedom, perseverance and social justice with a mix of bold directness and playful irony. His works, some characterised by monochromatic bluntness and others with vibrant textures, engage viewers in a dialogue about society and selfhood. Through his art, Teo conveys sensitive and emotive expressions, highlighting his commitment to dignity, common humanity and social issues that he regards as intimate and personal to him.

In this artwork, Teo combines everyday objects with his unique paperdyesculp technique, transforming a secondhand birdcage into a metaphor for the contradictions of wealth. Adorned with opulent columns and playful birds made from paper, the cage is a metaphor that cautions against the traps of comfort and social conventions that deter one from creating new ways of thinking about and making art.

Against the backdrop of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Teo critiques social divides, urging viewers to ponder the complexities of privilege and authentic expression.

Which is better,
to be a big fish in a small pond or
a small fish in a big pond,
and why?

Massacre at Mylai (After Haeberle's) references a photograph taken in March 1968 by war photographer Ronald L. Haeberle. The photo depicted the aftermath of American soldiers killing and brutalising the civilians in My Lai, South Vietnam.

Amongst the most representational of three paintings completed by Teo alluding to the Second Indochina War, this work portrays a mangled pile of bodies rendered in harsh black lines and jagged shapes against a saturated red background. Teo crops Haeberle's original image in this composition, bringing the violent scene even closer to the viewer in a striking confrontation.



Massacre at Mylai (After Haeberle's), 1970.
Oil on canvas, 126.7 × 152 cm.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore.
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore.

This artwork features more than 200 motorcyclists cast in concrete, and portrays the daily commute of workers across the Johor-Singapore Causeway. The uniformity of the figures, cast from just two moulds, highlights their collective mass.

However, two golden figurines break the monotony, emphasising their individuality. Teo's work symbolically honours the everyday worker, showcasing their inherent value and dignity through their labour and contributions to society.

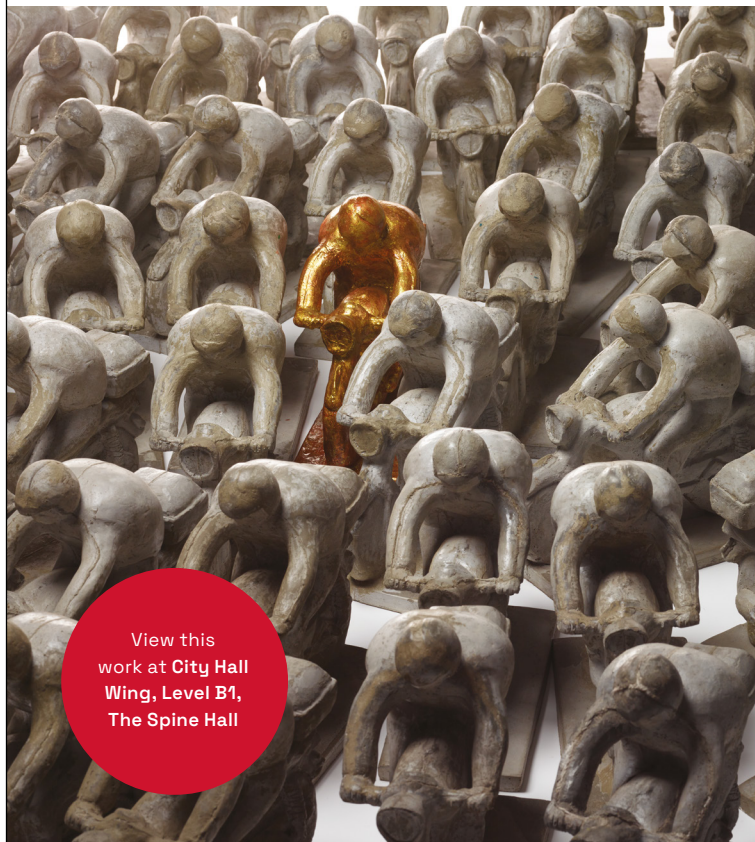
Detail of *Ah Wah and Ah Kiat: Crossing Borders*, 2001.
Glass reinforced concrete, approximately 50 × 34 × 31 cm each, 202 pieces. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.
Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore.

Exhibition Catalogue

Teo Eng Seng: *We're Happy. Are You Happy?*

Edited by Seng Yu Jin and Roy Ng
245 × 210 mm | Paperback |
approx. 160 pages |
approx. 80 colour illustrations |
S\$ 35 (inclusive of GST)
Available for purchase at our museum store,
located at City Hall Wing, Level 1

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the artist's first-ever museum survey. It includes curatorial essays contextualising the artist's ever-evolving practice, a newly commissioned interview with the artist and an illustrated biographical timeline alongside full-coloured plates.



View this
work at City Hall
Wing, Level B1,
The Spine Hall

Programmes

In conjunction with the exhibition, we are bringing together a variety of lectures, curator tours and conversations for you to learn about the artist's creative expressions and innovative use of materials. For more information about the programmes, please visit nationalgallery.sg/TeoEngSeng2024

Tickets

Purchase your tickets at web.nationalgallery.sg

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ACCESS GUIDE

Opening Hours

Daily 10am–7pm

General ticket sales end
30 minutes before closing time

Enquiries

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