

New Singapore National Gallery repositions SE Asian art

NAIMA MORELLI

TUESDAY 17 NOVEMBER, 2015

South East Asia's big new gallery opens next week in Singapore. ArtsHub gets a sneak preview.



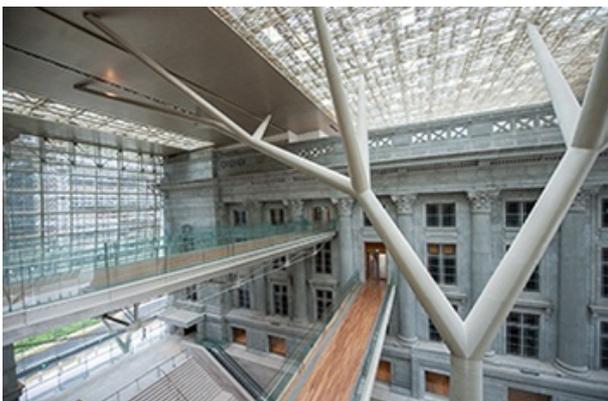
Wu Peng Seng, Construction (Detail)

'We have made history, and now we will write it down,' wrote Singaporean novelist Vyvyan Loh in *Breaking the Tongue*.

The phrase is a fitting tribute to the ambitions of Singapore, a country which has the population of Victoria and an area a tenth the size of Greater Melbourne but which has catapulted to the top of the heap on a range of business measures, including 10 years of ranking as the easiest country in the world to do business (<http://www.doingbusiness.org/rankings>).

Now Singapore is hoping to attract cultural as well as business visitors with a major new gallery. The National Gallery of Singapore, which has been ten years in the making, will finally open its doors to public on the 24 November.

The country has spent \$532 million developing the building, which is built from two national monuments, the former Supreme Court Building and City Hall.



View of the link bridges connecting the two historic buildings which comprise the new Gallery.

The Gallery claims the world's leading public collection of modern art not only from Singapore but from across Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The collection comprises more than 8,000 works from the 19th and 20th centuries in a range of media including paintings, sculpture, video and multi-media works.

At opening it will display two major exhibitions: one drawn from the permanent collection and focusing on Singaporean artists and the second including significant loans from across South-East Asia.

"Siapa Nama Kamu?" ("What Is Your Name?" in Malay), explores Singapore's identity. The local art history is divided into six periods – Tropical Tapestry, Nanyang Reverie, Real Concerns, New Languages, Tradition Unfettered and Shifting Grounds.

Through the work of national artists including Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Anthony Poon and Thomas Yeo, visitors will be able to see how Singaporean artists have explored their current values and ideas, while also experimenting with their craft.



Cheong Soo Pieng, Drying Salted Fish

The work in this gallery ranges from respectful traditional folk art and portraiture to abstract forms and conceptual installations.



The exhibition "Between Declarations and Dreams", hosted by the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery section, traces the development of modern art across the region. Starting in the 19th century, the exhibition shows how the history of Southeast Asian art has been inextricably connected to the region's tumultuous social and political past.

Here we can also observe Southeast Asian artists' take on international tendencies, and their relationship with local aesthetic traditions. Each chronological section of the show has an overarching theme, corresponding to the zeitgeist shared by artists from the region: Authority and Anxiety, Imagining Country and Self, Manifesting the Nation, and Re:Defining Art.

This encompassing gaze on Southeast Asia as a whole is a new achievement of the National Gallery. Until now, modern and contemporary art from the region has been available largely in archives and private collections but not cohesively and publicly displayed.

By observing side to side masterpieces of Indonesian Raden Saleh to the Filipino Juan Luna, one can see similarities and differences. These are to find not only in the work of the two artists, but also in the attitudes of the two countries towards a number of issues, notably colonialism.

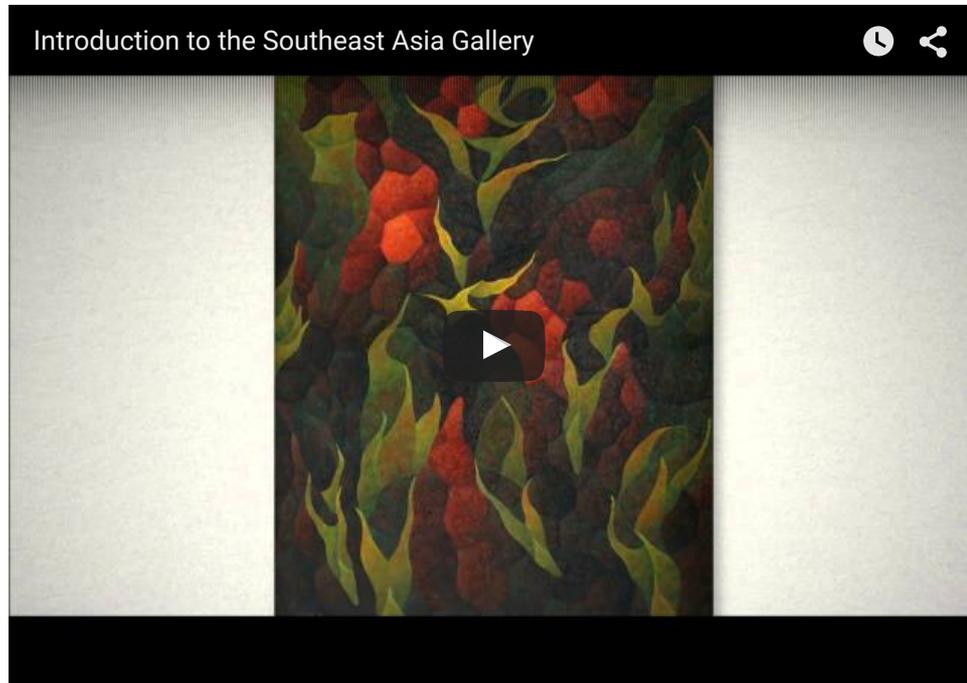


Raden Saleh, Wounded Lion



Questions arise: how did nationalistic impulses emerge from the works from different regions? What relationship artists had with the modernists styles from the west? Was there ever an artistic dialogue across Southeast Asia? These reflections, previously tackled only by academics and specific art history courses, will now be available to a general public.

The contemporary art section is still quite small for the time being. It hosts a few key works marking the recent developments of contemporary art in Southeast Asia. Here the social and the political are still protagonists. The status quo is challenged in works of local artists such as Amanda Heng and Tang Da Wu, and in media experimentation of pioneers like Indonesian Krisna Murti.



The Gallery is being promoted with great pride in Singapore, where it has considerable support from business. Two months ago the family of the late Singaporean real-estate magnate Ng Teng Fong donated \$15 million for research, education and outdoor commissions.

But there are the inevitable detractors. Bloggers have criticised the new logo, as looking like a couple of Tetris blocks, prompting the designer, Chris Lee from Asylum, to a full-throated defence: 'ts reductionism reflects the museum's dynamism and confidence in its vision. The two blocks are originally derived from the two buildings that are joined to form the National Gallery. It could also represent two platforms, two dialog boxes etc... Art should be a two way conversation.'

The new Gallery will augment a growing list of cultural offerings including the Singapore Art Fair, the Singapore Biennale and Art Stage Singapore. It will also move public consciousness from viewing Singapore's as primarily a marketplace, in art as in other businesses.

Instead it promises an institution dedicated to developing a collective memory for the region. By gathering and offering access to the rich arts heritage from the region, it may finally ink in the fascinating art history of Southeast Asia.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.