

Heroines Behind Galleries: Emi Eu, Director of STPI Singapore | COBO Social

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Emi Eu, Director of the STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery. Courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.



Emi Eu at Amanda Heng's opening. Courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.





Emi Eu at Jane Lee's opening. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.



Emi Eu at Artist Shirazeth Houshiari's opening. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.



Emi Eu at Birkrit Vanija's opening. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Emi Eu with artist RIKRIT Iravanija and gallerist Tim Neuger. Courtesy of Emi Eu.



Emi Eu in front of Han Sai Por and Heman Chong's work. Courtesy of National Heritage Board Singapore.



STPI group photo with Alfredo & Isabel Aquilizan. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

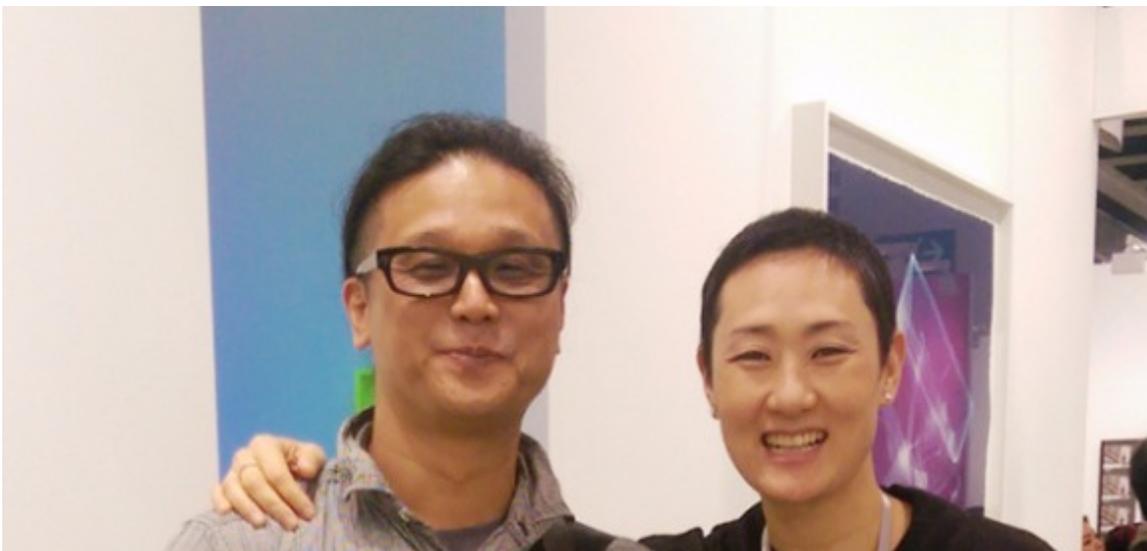


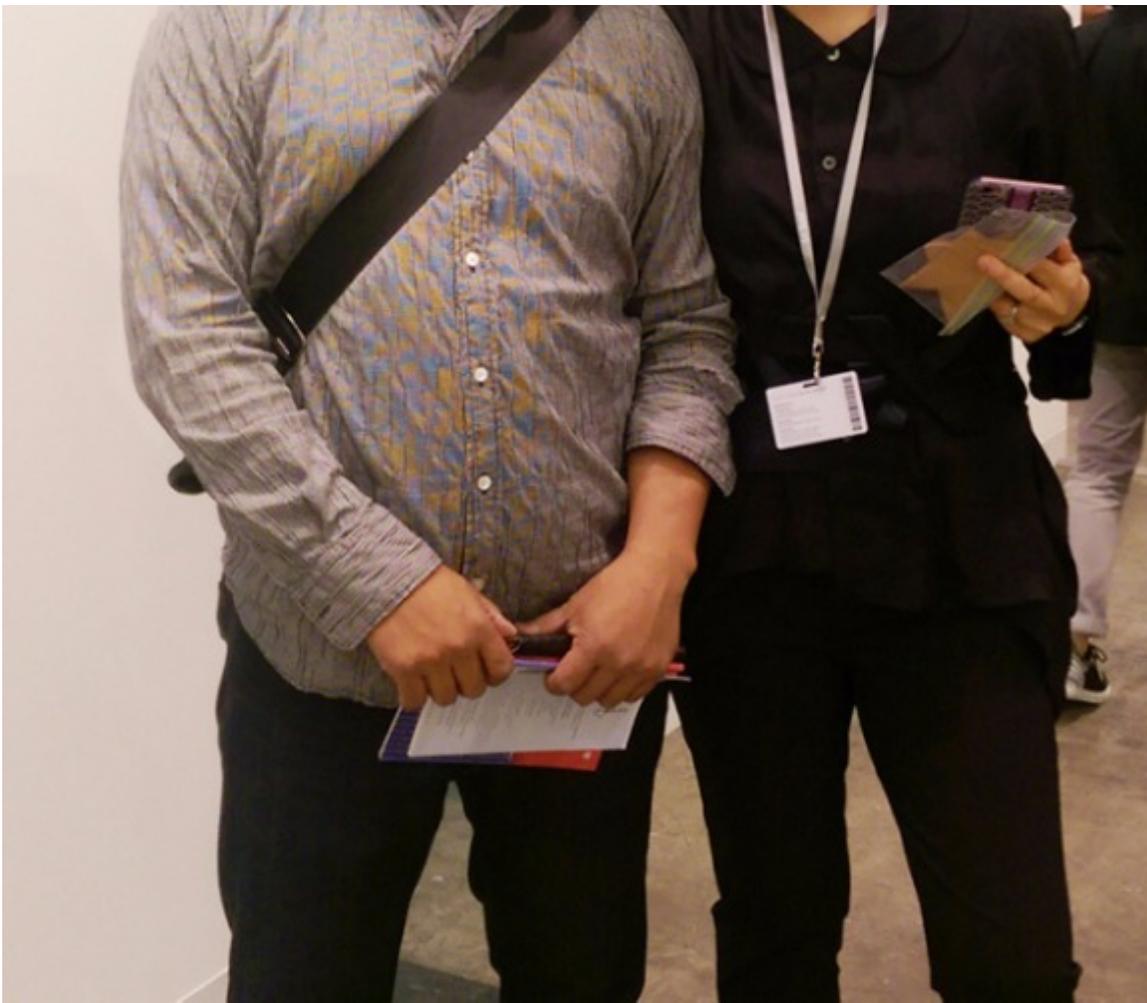


Emi Eu at Zao Wou Ki's opening with French Ambassador H.E Benjamin Dubertret. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.



Emi Eu with artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.





Emi Eu with artist Shinji Ohmaki at Art Basel Hong Kong 2017. Courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Emi Eu is the director of the STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore, a space for conceptual developments in contemporary art practice in print and paper. With a cosmopolitan background, Emi Eu didn't chose art; it was art that chose her. But once she embraced it, she gave a great contribution in the growth of Singapore art ecosystem and artistic experimentation.

TEXTS: [Naima Morelli](#)

IMAGES: Courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore & National Heritage Board Singapore





Emi Eu, Director of the STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

“Art was really not part of my focus growing up. It was there in the background, but I just never thought I would be working in the art industry,” tells me Emi Eu in a small, empty conference room tucked in the secret bowels of the STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

I’m surprised. For a person who is the physical incarnation of an institution, you’d think Emi would have had a super-sharp focus on her objectives in life since the beginning. But that was clearly not the case: “It kind of happened fortuitously and I guess I’m fortunate that I’m working in this industry, because I really like it.”



Emi Eu at Amanda Heng’s opening. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

I was used to see Emi Eu around openings in minimalist black and white outfits, standing out without even trying. Often dressed à la gamine, with large pants and loose blouses, she usually looks a bit like Diane Keaton in Woody Allen’s movies, but with more confidence; more calm and composed.

The day of the interview Emi has less of a nonchalant cool look, and is wearing a colourful, comfortable jumper. Her signature super short hair contrast with a face that is almost from another time. Though she has inherited minute facial features from her Korean parents, her expressions and way of carrying herself are those of American’s intelligenzia, mixed with a distinctive European flair. Her cosmopolitan allure is not surprising, having she lived in Korea, the US, Italy, to then finally relocating in Singapore.



Emi Eu at Jane Lee's opening. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Emi grew up in a household where art and culture were always present. Indeed Emi's mother Chung Young Yang is a very renowned scholar in textiles and an embroider, who authored an important book on textiles of Japan, Korea and China and even has a museum named after her: "I saw my mother doing textile design all the time and we were surrounded by painting materials. We had many ink paintings and antiques furniture around the house, mostly North Asian."

Whereas her friends would listen to pop hits, as a little girl Emi was drawn to classical music: "I was listening to it all the time, that was my thing. I didn't really pay attention to visual arts. My mother had a great collection of LP33 of all the classical music series from the Deutsche Grammophon, so that was what I had in my room at the time. Which not everybody wants to have, right! (laughs)"

Not even an internship at The Metropolitan Museum of Art as a high school student managed to convince Emi that the arts were in her stars. She went on studying business at university indeed. Then, as a graduation present, her mother offered her to go to Venice, Italy for a while: "A family friend just opened the Venice branch of a gallery and I had the opportunity to be working there," Emi explains.





Emi Eu at Artist Shirazeth Houshiary's opening. Courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

“I ended up living in Italy for four years. That’s how I actually got to know more about modern and contemporary art.” That first gallery job was really bottom-up. Emi participated to art fairs, she did all the packing and she archived works, she handled artist estates and even answered the phone once she learned to speak Italian, (which she does fluently, giving sentences an American emphasis).

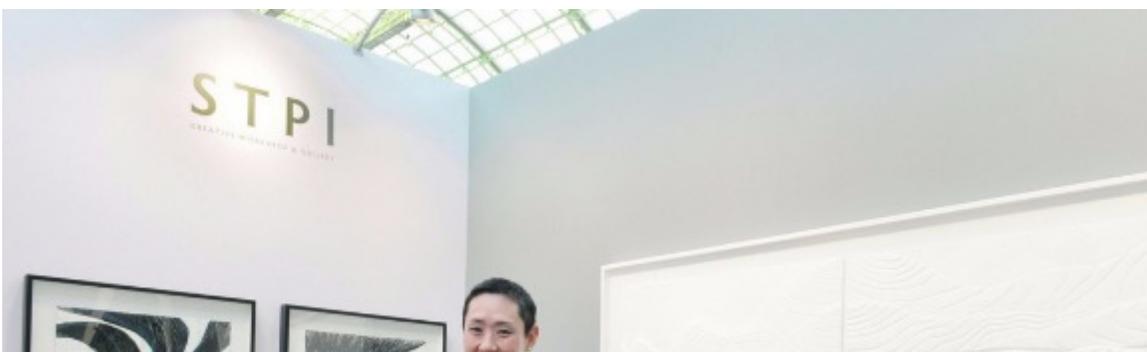
She first came to Singapore in 1996 to oversee a gallery space, and she experienced the so-called cultural desert: “I remember being stricken by Singapore having so many malls! The Singapore Museum had just opened in '96. That was the first time I saw Georgette Chen's works and I noticed she must have had influences from Paris' school.”



Emi Eu with artist Rikrit Tiravanija and gallerist Tim Neuger. Courtesy of Emi Eu.

Back then she had no idea about Singapore art or regional art. However she was keen to learn: “My first trip to Yogyakarta was in '97. I went to the Affandi's house and to Widayat's studio and I purchased some of his works on paper. That was my first foray into learning about regional art.”

She then went back to New York, to get her master degree, but ended relocating to the Lion City in 2001: “My husband is Singaporean and we decided to come back to start the family. That is when I got the job at STPI.”





Emi Eu in front of Han Sai Por and Heman Chong's work. Courtesy of National Heritage Board Singapore.

The changes she witnessed in the art scene in Singapore have been tremendous: "Today we have so many galleries and of course many Singaporean artists that are practicing. I didn't know that many young artists back in the '90s. The only ones that I knew, like Georgette Chen or Cheong Soo Pieng, were from the collection of my mother in law, who was quite interested in painting."

STPI's contribution was key for growing the local art environment. "STPI had in his initial proposal the idea of becoming a catalyst into the contemporary art scene. It definitely played a big part in getting this whole art ecosystem moving. We single-handedly created a market for works on paper which is mid-range prices. At the same time we helped establish a much stronger sector for the art services."



STPI group photo with Alfredo & Isabel Aquilizan. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

The strength of STPI are top-notch exhibitions and art residency. These focus on international artists with different art practices, challenging them in producing work with the paper medium and printing. The final works are the result of a collaborative process between the artist and the STPI team.

This is the 16th year Emi Eu works and directs STPI, and she is going for the 17th. Her name in the art world is now synonymous with the institution. However, to the social side of the job she prefers working behind the scenes: "People do expect to see me around, so I have to be in the front as well as in

the back. I'm kind of all over the place, although my preference would be to be in the back. ”



Emi Eu at Zao Wou Ki's opening with French Ambassador H.E Benjamin Dubertret. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Emi follows all the aspect of running the gallery and the workshop, the programming and the business strategies, making all the commercial and the research aspect go seamlessly. However, the part she enjoys the most - and confesses she is not able to do as much as she would like to - is working with artists: "I'm always amazed at hearing artist's ideas and projects. These are the moments I treasure."

To select the artists for the program, Emi makes sure to know their practice very well: "That is the very first criteria that I got to have. I really look for art that I can get an instinctive understanding of, or for artists which consider the depth and breadth of possibilities we offer at STPI."





Emi Eu with artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

Emi considers a good relationship with artists the key for running a gallery: “Galleries are almost like managers, agents of the artist. You have to really love the artists you are working with and believe in them and in their career.”

As well as being a member of the Selection Committee for Art Basel Hong Kong, Emi Eu also presides on the Art Galleries Association of Singapore, which she helped reviving four years ago. In her role, she is striving to have the galleries in Southeast Asia are cooperating with each other. While she has seen a lot of progress, she is also aware that the art world has become very competitive.





Emi Eu with artist Shinji Ohmaki at Art Basel Hong Kong 2017. Courtesy of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery.

For young gallerists, Emi thinks the first requirement is to have real passion: “To run a gallery is going to be very difficult, from a financial standpoint in particular. Anyone who wants to become a gallerist must remember that this is a lifetime job. It is not simply opening a gallery and selling things that people like, because there will inevitably be ups and downs,” she pauses.

“But the role of young gallerists is very important, as they are the ones that are going to grow together with the artists of their generation. In running a space, you need to be very creative about it.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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