

# Heroines Behind Galleries: Audrey Yeo | COBO Social

[cobosocial.com](http://cobosocial.com) Updated Sep 29th, 2017

## Heroines Behind Galleries: Audrey Yeo



Portrait of Audrey Yeo



Audrey Yeo





Audrey Yeo with her colleagues (Courtesy of Yeo Workshop)



Audrey Yeo with Tu Hong Tao and Sammi Liu, with the large oil painting, 'Continuous Mountain and Bush.'



Audrey Yeo with Tu Hong Tao and Sammi Liu in Yeo Workshop







View of Maryanto’s exhibition Story of Space in Yeo Workshop



View of Xue Mu ‘s exhibition Liquid Truth in Yeo Workshop

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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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Audrey Yeo is a stoic philosopher in Louboutin who is fuelled by passion. We are talking about a Wuthering Heights kind of passion, which she combines with lucid determination. The motto that this young gallerist lives by is: if something is difficult, don’t avoid it, face it and become good at it, so that it won’t scare you anymore.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of Yeo Workshop





### Portrait of Audrey Yeo

“I have always been interested in challenging myself, in learning all sort of different things,” says Audrey, who is sitting quietly at the back of her gallery, surrounded by catalogues and books. “You have a life journey, it never ends here, you have to develop different skills.”

It is inspiring to find such toughness and drive in a graceful, friendly and elegant woman. The founder and director of Yeo Workshop is open to sharing her vulnerabilities, as well as fighting against all odds to bring forward her vision of the arts.

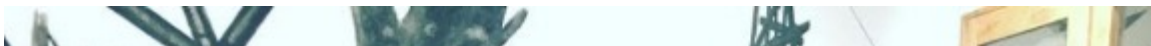


### Audrey Yeo

Since she was a little girl, Audrey has practised the philosophy of “letting obstacles become the way” without consciously realising it. For example, she recalls finding it difficult to learn Mandarin: “I remember my mother asking me what I was hoping to achieve, as I was getting Mandarin tutoring of all kinds and still only getting Fs in class. I would get humiliated and my teachers said there was no way I would qualify. But I was like: “Please, let me try! Let me at least get a D!”

The gallerist grew up in a family where art and culture were ever present. “My dad side is very musical and my mum’s side is more into visual art. Also, my grandparents were art collectors. I think art really changes your life and influences your perspective.”

Though she developed a deep interest in art history, when it came to picking her major she didn’t choose the “easy path”, which was the humanities for her. Instead, she decided to study accounting at the University of Southern California. “I was afraid of numbers, but wanted to learn something that was hard for me,” she says. “I might still not be the best at it, but at least I have an insight into that world. Today, that knowledge comes in handy when managing the gallery.”







Audrey Yeo with her colleagues (Courtesy of Yeo Workshop)

Before setting her own space in Singapore, Audrey worked in a gallery in London – one of the many cities she has lived in. Although she enjoyed living in Britain, she never felt she really belonged there: “I had cool friends, but it actually wasn’t very meaningful for me. I was in a very English neighbourhood and I had no deep interest in cultivating an English narrative.”

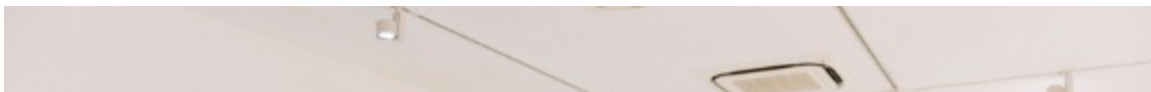
Conversely, Audrey cares intensely for Singaporean society and issues, and this shows in even the smallest of ways: “I eat at hawker centres all the time and feel very worried when their children don’t want to take the business over. I decided to come back to Singapore because this is my soil.”



Audrey Yeo with Tu Hong Tao and Sammi Liu, with the large oil painting, ‘Continuous Mountain and Bush.’

She is well aware that when working in the art business, you do not simply sell pictures to hang on the wall. “You are creating a culture,” she says. “Our programme at Yeo Workshop is not immediately commercial, so I always had this long-term view about what we want to develop and cultivate now, in order to achieve better results for the whole art system later.”

Her gallery line is to promote young, conceptual artists, which tends to baffle visitors who are used to more conventional art. Audrey even mentions some conservative family members who have questioned her choices or dismissed her work as “kind of cute”, wondering why she doesn’t work for a more commercially viable gallery or auction house. “That doesn’t bother me,” she says. “I think it is important to work with artists of your generation and always try to push the boundaries. As long as we are sustainable, I’m happy that we are not making a huge profit. On the other hand yes, we need to stay alive because our artists need to eat.”







Audrey Yeo with Tu Hong Tao and Sammi Liu in Yeo Workshop

Yeo Workshop is located in the first block of the Singapore art district Gillman Barracks, which the government set up to become an arts district. So far Gillman Barracks, as a whole, has never completely fulfilled its expectations. Although it gets very crowded during the big art weeks and events, it is not really somewhere people naturally hang out during normal weekdays. “You know, sometimes I sit there and I’m quite upset because I feel we have tried to do everything we can, including investing everybody’s resources and personal time into creating initiatives. But there is only so much I can do as a small piece of the puzzle. I don’t know what else we can do,” says Audrey, with a mixture of discouragement and stubbornness in her voice.

Audrey and her partner are also art collectors, but the gallerist is very clear that there can be little overlapping between what she collects and what she exhibits in her space: “In my collection, I have more of a feminist taste. I have only ever bought three pieces from the artists I work with. To purchase work from these artists would be a very good investment, as they are all very serious. They live very humble lives and I’m proud to say that everything goes back into production. I respect my artists a lot; we are friends but when you start talking about the work, that is something else to me. They become almost demi-gods in that sense.”



View of Maryanto’s exhibition Story of Space in Yeo Workshop

One time, Audrey had a strong temptation to buy work from the Indonesian artist Jim Allen Abel, aka Jimbo. “I love Jimbo’s work. He has these amazing black photographs and I really wanted to buy one so much and they are so affordable. But it takes a year to do each series and I think someone above my station deserves to buy his work. It should go to museums, not to a private collection like mine, hidden away from other people. And I’m already promoting Jimbo’s career.”

In Southeast Asia, there is a sense that the roles in the art system are being redefined all the time and art operators wear many hats. In this scenario, Audrey has a sharp clarity about who needs to do what. This has perhaps also been informed by her experience with the *Arnoldii Arts Club*, a side project that aims to educate the public about art.

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Today, the club runs on a much smaller scale, as she feels that many other institutions in Singapore are organising similar activities, from CCA to STPI and LaSalle. “It was a money-losing enterprise which we did for the sake of culture. At Yeo Workshop, we will fill the gap where we are needed. If we are not needed, there is no need for us to compete in that arena at all. I think we are quite dumb, to be honest... quite idealistic!”

With this idealism – combined with her magnetic energy and proactive attitude – Audrey has managed to build a like-minded community of people who gravitate around the gallery. “Sometimes, I forget this is not my house, but my working place,” she laughs.



View of Xue Mu ‘s exhibition Liquid Truth in Yeo Workshop

The artists, art historians, curators, patrons and collectors who hang out at the gallery are people interested in philosophy and the humanities and have a real interest in the artist’s practice. “They are looking for different kind of experience, something to enrich their lives,” she says. “We hardly ever have flashy collectors. Many of the collectors who come here would rather have dinner here at the gallery on a Friday night, rather than go out with friends to fancy parties.”

Many of them would prefer to stay anonymous and Audrey always speaks on their behalf. “They would refuse *Tatler* or *The Business Times*, but they would do our little weird art magazine that we produce at the gallery, no problem. So I always make sure I tell them that it would be inspirational and encouraging for the whole the art community to know about them. Younger patrons, for example, don’t know how to live with art, and they are quite worried about posting on Facebook.”

Having created her own small universe of positive values, Audrey is able to see the better side of her fellow countrymen’s nature. “I think Singaporeans are very genuine. That’s why we are not often so polite, because we really say what we mean. And, while we are all very different, Singaporeans are, individually, very kind.”

Yeo Workshop

Current Exhibition: [Monsoon Song by Fyerool Darma](#)

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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 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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