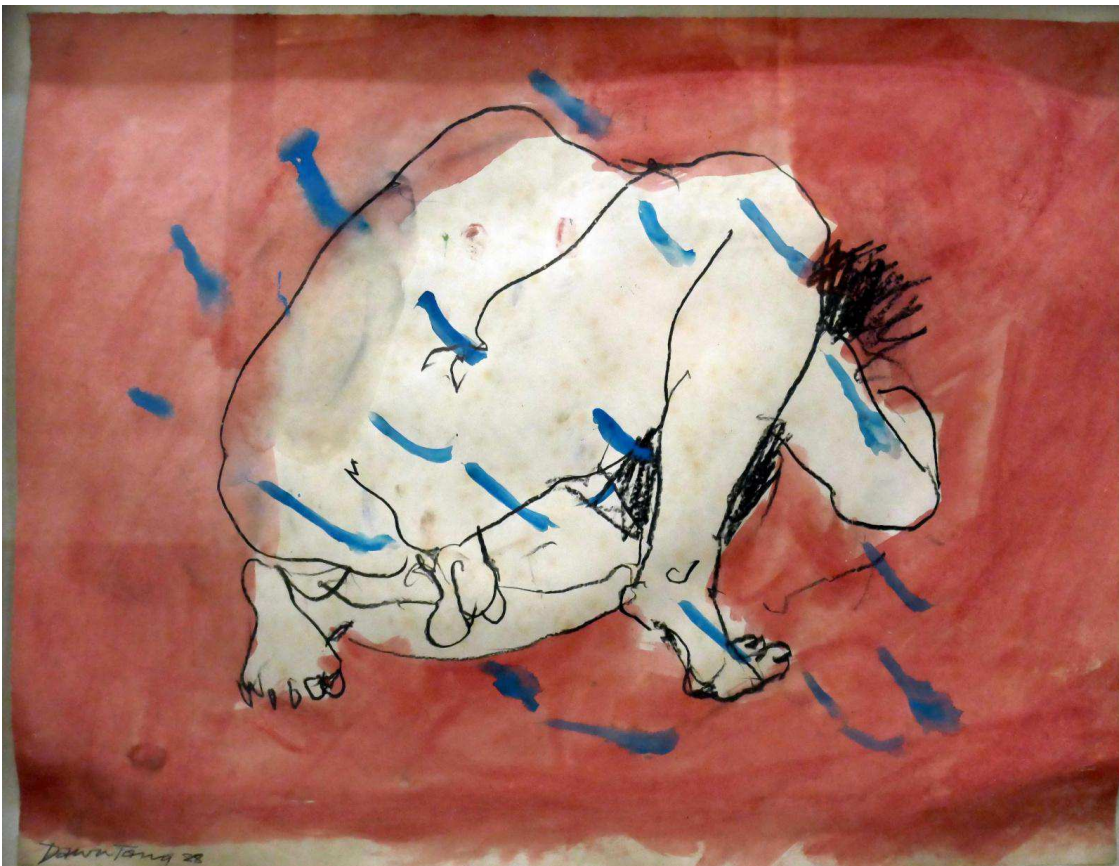


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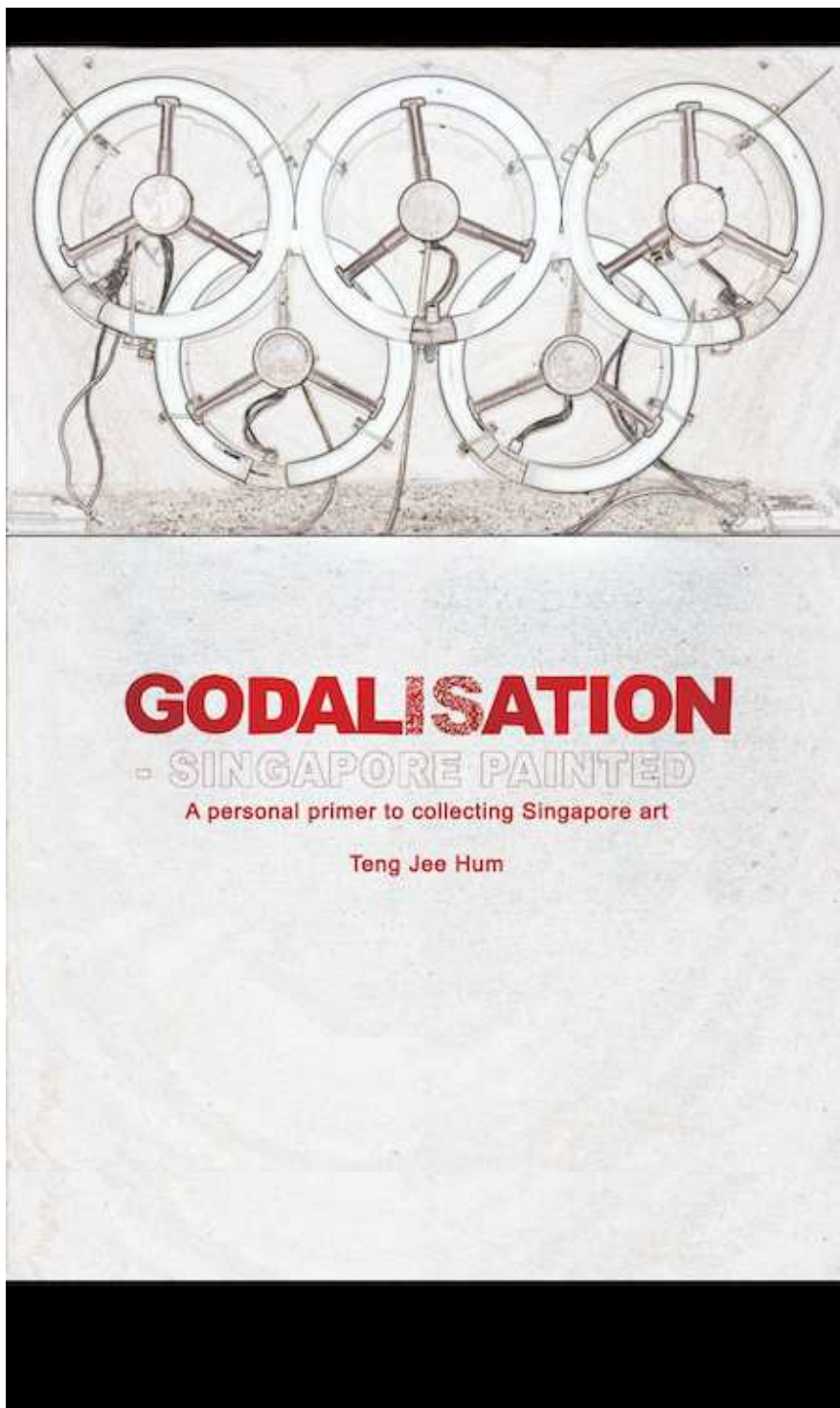
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Godalisation: Building an Art Collection in Singapore



Tang Dawu





Book Cover of Godalisation





Justin Lee's work in the Teng collection





Lee Wen's work in the Teng collection



Tang Dawu's work in the Teng collection

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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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Collector Teng Jee Hum pens the second book on collecting focused on history of Singapore, offering insight into the history of contemporary art in the city-state. Here is our Review.

Text: Naima Morelli

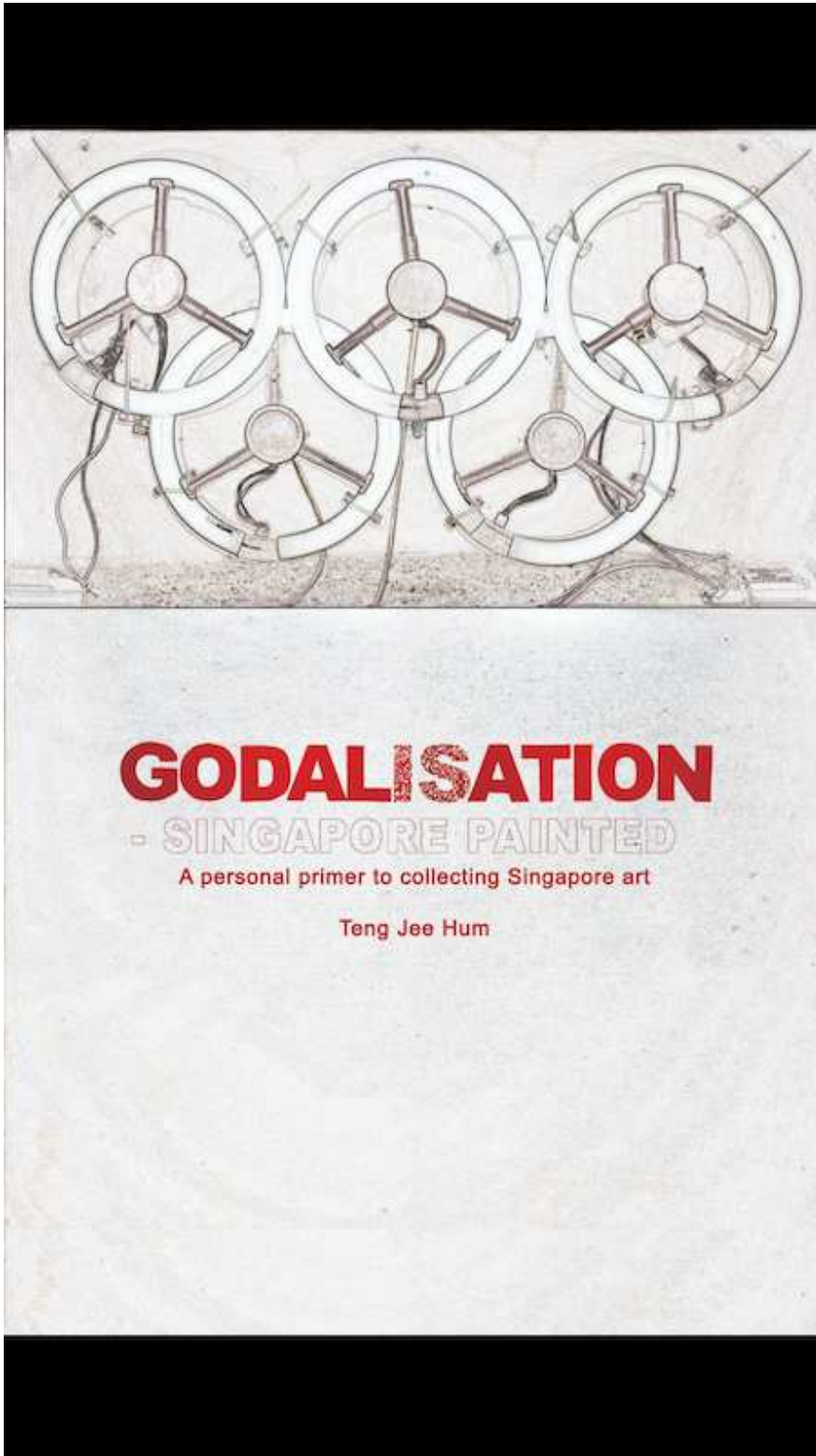
Images: Courtesy of Teng Jee Hum

Each country in Southeast Asia has a particular type of collector, and Singapore's stereotypical art patron is known for flying under the radar and fond of privacy. Not one to boast or constantly appear in society magazines, they have a sharp eye for art, and an even sharper sense for its appreciating (or depreciating) investment value.

These hypotheses based on Singapore's collecting culture were put to the test as we encountered June Ong and Teng Jee Hum, a well-known, and even better informed, collecting couple. Mr Teng had already written a book, *Godsmacked*, exploring the influence of the figure of Lee Kuan Yew on the local art and featuring the collector's own paintings, offering a rather multifaceted approach to collecting art. A background in fund management combined with experience as a painter and a passion for reading and writing manifest themselves in Mr. Teng, making his perspective on the topic undoubtedly enlightening and relevant.

Walking through the artworks in one of the warehouses where he stores much of his collection, he speaks passionately about the works and how he found them. At one point he pulls a paper out of his pocket, with the air of mystery of someone who is showing you a treasure map. "This is my personal scheme for the different generations of artist in Singapore," he said, already conceiving an idea for his next written venture.

Two years later, Mr Teng penned his second book – *Godalisation – Singapore Painted: A Personal Primer to Collecting Singapore Art*. Through the perspective of the collector, he unravels the history of contemporary art in Singapore. In the beginning of the book, Mr Teng explains his theories for art collecting, as well creating parallels between Singaporean and global art history. Among all the content, he focuses most heavily on the concept of "zeitgeist", namely the spirit of the times. This quality exemplifies something eternal, and yet closely connected to the specific moment in time in which art is made. It is this quality an artwork holds, which according to him marks the work as history-making.



Book Cover of Godalisation

A true Singaporean, the book reflects Mr Teng's love of schematization and pointers. He divides the artists into five periods: the Colonial Period, the Nation Building Period, the Globalization Period, the Paternal Production, and the New Era. Each chapter starts with the historical context of that period, both global and local, followed by a list of artists whose work Mr Teng has collected, and deems significant. He then goes onto highlighting their sociological importance and the differences in approach.

An important theme present in the book, is the emergence of women's empowerment in Asia. For example, the author notes that if Singapore will have a female prime minister

in the future, the work of famous seminal painter Georgette Chen would become even more popular, or perhaps read in a different light. Another prevailing theme is one which highlights LGBTQ issues. There is a strong emphasis on Justin Lee, whose work takes centre stage in the Teng collection. The artist always provides an alternative dimension to the stifling “normalization” of Singaporean society, as well as shedding light other important socio-political issues, for example the neglect of the elderly in Singapore.

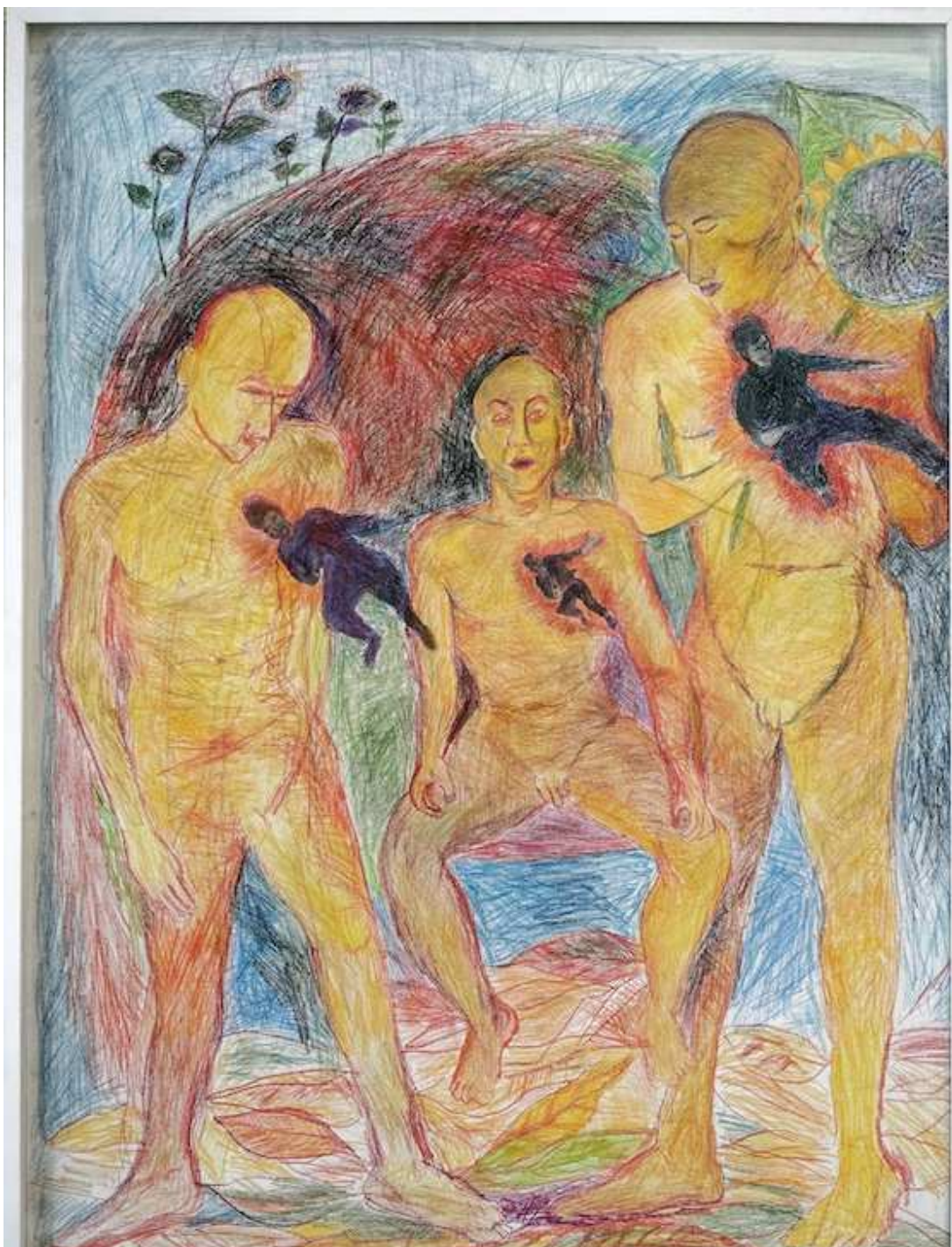


Justin Lee’s work in the Teng collection

Nation Building Period is perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book. Here the author tells the story of how artists in the Lion City became “controlled artistic free spirits,” during the time when Lee Kuan Yew started shaping the city state in what is described in the book as a “god-like manner” Indeed, the book title “Godalisation” refers

described in the book as a "god-like manner". Indeed, the book title "Godalisation" refers to the god-like stature of and massive influence the political leader had on Singaporean culture. The ambivalence Singaporeans feel towards this figure and the way how he moulded their lives is marvellously described, and includes the consequences of this process on the development of the Singaporean art world.

Perhaps a matter of preference, the book could have used a little more of a personal touch, grit, or was a bit more "blood", (as Camus' Caligula would say). More of a narrative in first – person or heartfelt tone were loosely embedded, but could have surfaced more readily. It's understandable that Mr. Teng, being quite private, would put himself in the background, letting his opinions, his selection of artists and artwork speak for themselves. However, there is still much to learn about the back story of the collector's first impressions of the artworks, the acquisitions and his personal relationship with the artists.





Lee Wen's work in the Teng collection



Tang Dawu's work in the Teng collection

But maybe that's part of the Lee Kuan Yew's influence too; as Mr Teng pointed out in the book, the statesman never celebrated himself, (there are no images or statues of him around the city). It's not surprising then that a Singaporean collector growing up in this cultural attitude, also prefers to keep his deep motivations and life experiences to himself. Or maybe we will have the pleasure to read a more narrative driven personal story of the Teng collection in another book!

That said, *Godalisation* remains an important brick in building a cohesive history of art – and of collecting art – not only for Singapore, but for Southeast Asia at large. The significance of a collector having a knowledge of history, and understanding how art reflects its time, is perhaps the most valuable lesson offered in this book, reinforcing the potential power collectors can have in shaping history. We can only hope this book will inspire other collectors to examine and reevaluate their motives for collecting, and broaden our understanding on what it means to be a collector.

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

contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

[#June Ong](#)[#Lee Kuan Yew](#)[#Naima Morelli](#)[#Teng Jee Hum](#)

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