

An Interview with Dr Eugene Tan

Director, National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum



Eugene Tan

Image Credit: National Gallery Singapore

Culture Academy	Would you introduce yourself and what you do for our readers?
Eugene Tan	I am Eugene Tan. I have been Director of National Gallery Singapore since 2013 and Director of Singapore Art Museum (SAM) since 2019. Alongside my colleagues at National Gallery Singapore, I develop strategies for key museological and curatorial aspects of the Gallery's work, and guide the display and further development of the Gallery's collections. The Gallery opened in 2015, and now oversees the world's largest collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art. Our curatorial strategy aims to re-think conventional art historical narratives by creating open dialogue between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia, and the world. SAM's role, being a contemporary art institution, on the other hand, is about making sense to our publics about how the art being made by our artists in Singapore and the region today reveals aspects about our societies which we may not be fully aware, as well as perspectives and possibilities of what our world can be.
Culture Academy	Part of NGS's vision is to foster and inspire an inclusive society. How does appreciation for the visual arts engender inclusivity?
Eugene Tan	Museums have always played an important role in presenting the art and culture of other societies to a local public. A willingness to appreciate the visual arts

signals an openness to encounter perspectives different from our own, and through it we might approach ideas, views or opinions beyond our own lived experiences, but which remain grounded in an intention and visual language within our recognition.

The Gallery aims to create a space that allows for open discussion and dialogue centred on the art we present, for our publics to reconsider established narratives, art historical or otherwise, as well as the structures of society today. Over the past five years of the Gallery's existence, we've aimed to accomplish this through our exhibitions, programmes, and publications that speak to inspiring an inclusive society. The Gallery has always been focused on examining the art histories of Singapore and Southeast Asia within a larger global context. While our long-term exhibitions of Singapore and Southeast Asian art look at the histories within the country and the region respectively, our international collaborations with institutions around the world connect and contextualise Southeast Asia into larger art historical narratives. They do so by also re-thinking established art historical narratives through the perspectives of Southeast Asia. Our challenge now is to expand on the ways in which we work toward this vision.

Culture Academy	How does learning about the history of Singapore's visual arts add to our understanding of different communities and peoples?
Eugene Tan	The Gallery's long-term exhibition, <i>Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century</i> , traces the history of Singapore through an art historical lens, in a broadly chronological sequence. Each work on display provides insight into why and how an artist responded to their surroundings and circumstances, and reflects the complexities of telling a story of Singapore. Through the generosity of artists, we may come to understand that there is not a singular story of its formation and development, but a range of perspectives which can be layered onto the common narrative.
Culture Academy	What are some visual arts elements, be it styles or techniques, that are unique to Singapore?
Eugene Tan	<p>The Gallery just opened <i>Something New Must Turn Up: Six Singaporean Artists After 1965</i>, a joint exhibition of six solo presentations that explores the diverse artistic practices of six post-independence Singaporean artists: Chng Seok Tin, Goh Beng Kwan, Jaafar Latiff, Lin Hsin Hsin, Mohammad Din Mohammad, and Eng Tow. These six artists were innovators who broke new ground and contributed significantly to the development of Singapore's modern and contemporary art in the post-independence era.</p> <p>They each experimented with practices and techniques radical for their time, some employing traditional mediums in unconventional ways. Chng Seok Tin trained as a printmaker, but after the loss of her vision, devised innovative strategies in print, sculpture and installation to further her practice. She integrated tactility into her work using common, everyday materials in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, her installation <i>Man Eats Man</i> (2006) uses dried daylily buds, a medicinal plant typically used in Chinese cuisine. Jaafar</p>

Latiff integrated conventional techniques of batik with his abstract style, which he advanced alongside explorations in acrylic painting and computer art. Lin Hsin Hsin's work whole-heartedly embraces technological advancement. Hers is a practice grounded in nascent computer technologies and mathematics, decades before the proliferation of digital art that we see today. She used her computer to "paint," and launched the first virtual museum in the world in 1994.

These artists were also creating art in response to Singapore's shifting physical and cultural landscapes. Mohammad Din Mohammad's art is grounded in mystical practice that was, at the time, becoming increasingly displaced; a Sufi mystic, his paintings, assemblages and archives reveals his commitment to harnessing different aspects of his beliefs for the rejuvenation of the human body and spirit in contemporary Singapore. Goh Beng Kwan's work likewise responds to his evolving context, by capturing the joys and anxieties of this changing urban environment. His experimental collages incorporated a wide range of cultural materials and motifs, exploring issues around cultural representation, urbanism and identity. Eng Tow's work too reflects on her environment and experiences, in a similar direction but to remarkably different ends. While they share a common history, these artists' outputs are incredibly diverse, and speak to the fertile grounds for creation in Singapore at the time.

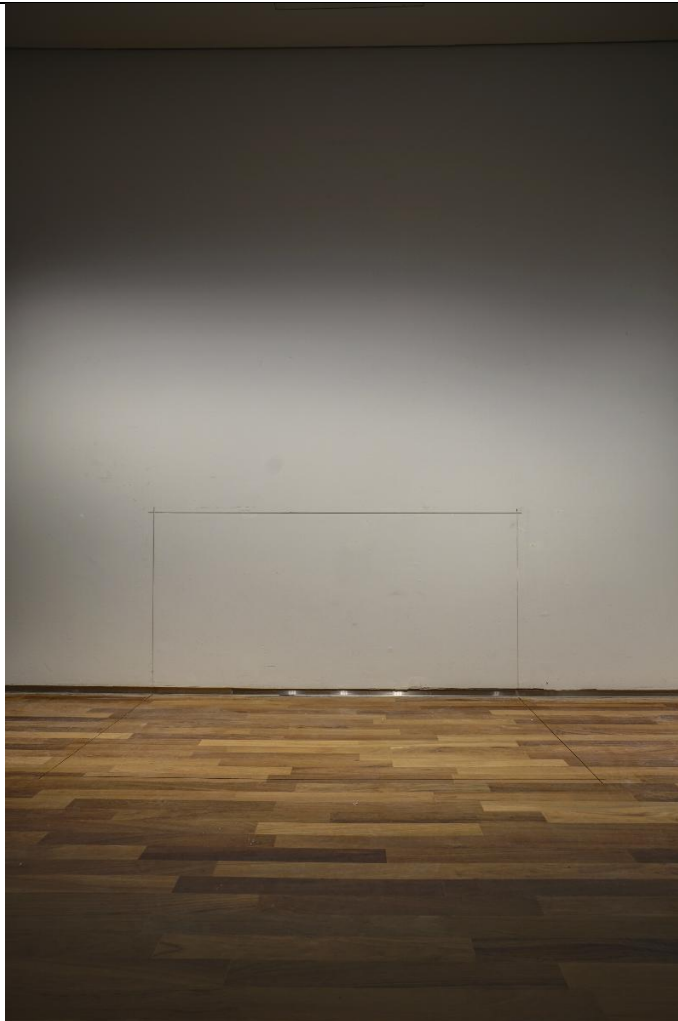


Installation view of Chng Seok Tin: *Drawn Through a Press in Something New Must Turn Up: Six Singapore Artists After 1965*. Image Credit: National Gallery Singapore

Culture Academy	Would you name an artwork that you feel, captures a keen sense of belonging to Singapore, and why that artwork is important to you?
Eugene Tan	A work in the Gallery's collection that is significant to me, featured in our long-term display, is Cheo Chai Hiang's 5' x 5' (<i>Inched Deep</i>) (1972, remade 2015). It consists of lines etched on the wall and floor, joining to form the outline of a square. The original work from 1972 was titled 5' x 5' (<i>Singapore River</i>), meant to

evoke what was, even then, a well-worn emblem of modernising Singapore. It was created for an exhibition by the Modern Art Society. At the time, Cheo was in England pursuing a formal artistic training, and so sent instructions for the work's creation. It was rejected by practitioners of a more mainstream, formalist Modernism, who felt the work was empty and boring. They also argued that the Singaporean public would find it "hard to accept new and explorative types of art work."

Yet Cheo's work is now recognised as one of the first to herald the "contemporary" in Singapore. By shifting the subject's perception from the object of art itself to its environment, others around them, and the process of its creation, he rejected the aesthetic constructs and artistic practices that dominated Singapore's visual arts then. The spirit of his conceptual practice, or perhaps conceptual art more widely, encourages us to consider the condition of subjectivity and how we relate to others. Many artists would later continue experimenting with the fundamentals of conceptual art in Singapore. Singapore's visual arts landscape flourished through the co-existence of plural ideas; richness brought about by a desire to engage in open and constructive discussion. In Cheo's 5' x 5', we see that a sense of belonging to Singapore is an embrace of difference, and a desire for that sense to be felt by all.



Cheo Chai Hiang. *5' x 5' (Inched Deep)*. 1972. 150 x 150 cm. Mixed Media. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image Credit: National Gallery Singapore