

Introducing Sustainability, Culture and Heritage to Preschool Children Through Contemporary Art



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In Singapore, children below nine years of age make up close to 10% of its permanent population. Despite their tender age, these children exert immense influence as the flagbearers of the hope and future of Singapore. This paper discusses how the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) harnesses three key ingredients – ‘play’, ‘explore’ and ‘develop’ – to engage young minds using the contemporary artwork in its collection as the stimulus. We examine this in relation to one of SAM’s signature programmes, *Think! Contemporary Preschool Programme*. Here, the element of ‘play’ has been integrated to ignite young children’s curiosity, prompting them to ‘explore’ the relationship between people and nature and their connectivity with the world. Through the artworks created, children have been able to ‘develop’ their ideas around these themes. Finally, we reflect on how SAM’s Education team has responded to the challenges of COVID-19 by embracing a blended approach that leveraged on technology, to provide a platform for preschools to showcase what their children have learned about contemporary art, allowing the children’s young voices to be heard.

Play and Creative Learning with SAM’s Preschool Programme

SAM’s *Think! Contemporary Programme* was first developed in 2011 as a multi-visit, museum-based primary school programme that advocates learning through art at the museum. Following the success of the programme, SAM expanded it to include preschools in 2019 through *Think! Contemporary Preschool Programme*. This is a structured, museum-based learning programme where preschool children are introduced to Singapore’s contemporary art as a means of stimulating learning and exploring the world around them. It has been developed with reference to the learning goals of the Ministry of Education’s “Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework” – discovery of the world, aesthetics and creative expression, and motor skills development. The artworks from The Learning Gallery at SAM navigate ideas of home, community, identity and memory in Singapore, providing entry points for children to explore these themes.

Mitchel Resnick, a professor at MIT’s Media Lab and leading authority on learning research, points out that the value and importance of play has been recognised by philosophers and psychologists throughout history (Resnick, 2017). He explains that play is a powerful tool for learning, and that children should be encouraged to develop their own ideas through a dynamic creative process. This is an iterative cycle in which children imagine, then create, play, share, reflect and, in turn, imagine once more, fuelling what he calls the “Creative Learning Spiral” (Figure 1).

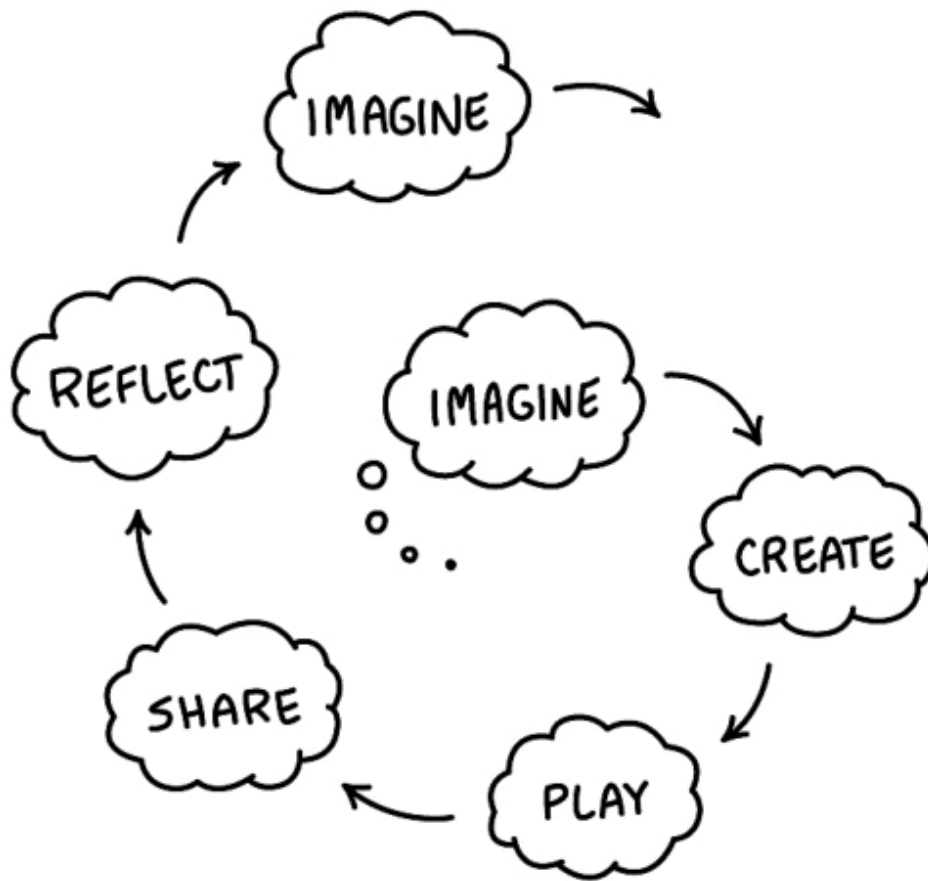


Figure 1. Creative Learning Spiral (Resnick, 2017, p. 11)

Play as a mode of creative engagement with ideas and materials is a crucial element in SAM's programme design. Over several months, the children are introduced to artworks through play and are taken on a process-driven art-making journey in which they are encouraged to draw on their natural curiosity to explore and develop their own ideas.

Exploring Sustainability by Making Art

This year, *Think! Contemporary Preschool Programme* culminated in an exhibition of the children's artworks that revolved around three themes: communities in Singapore, nature and climate change. In this programme, the children were introduced to the artworks in The Learning Gallery, featuring pieces from SAM's exhibition *Once Upon This Island* presented between 2014 and 2017.

The children interacted with the artworks through purposeful play and teacher-facilitated learning (Figure 2). As they verbalised their thoughts and kept their eyes and minds open, the children discovered how a wide variety of materials is used in contemporary art. They developed greater

autonomy in their art-making process, taking inspiration from the artworks to depart from traditional art mediums and to explore alternative and sustainable materials, such as found objects and reused items taken from home, to create their own pieces.

To mark the completion of the programme, an exhibition entitled *Hello Future: Connecting People and Nature* was held at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. This offered the preschool children a way to visually map their world through art. In total, 18 artworks from six participating preschools that cut across the diverse preschool sector in Singapore were put on display. Their works, of which four are described below, give us a view of their grasp of often complex contemporary issues of sustainability, the environment and preservation of Singapore's culture and heritage.



Figure 2. Ms Itsy and her colleague getting children to pose like the soft sculptures from Vicente Delgado's *We Are Family* (2014). Image courtesy of Arts Kidz International.

The children at Arts Kidz International created *Barren to Bountiful* (2021), a mixed media installation inspired by the greenery in Jing Quek's photographic artwork, *Singapore Idols – Army Boys* (2006). Here, they re-imagine an afterlife for empty seed pods that have served their purpose, combining these with beads, styrofoam and spices to fashion a lively composition of nature (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Barren to Bountiful*, 2021. An artwork created by preschool children from Arts Kidz International, with materials such as star anise and seed pods from the *Sterculia foetida* tree, otherwise known as the skunk tree. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Quek's *Singapore Idols – Army Boys* (2006) also resonated with the children at Nobleland Arts N Learning Place (Preschool) @ Clementi who constructed a whimsical, army-inspired toy house replete with miniature soldiers in camouflage gear. Entitled *Can You Spot Me?* (2021), it is made with a repurposed cardboard box covered with collected leaves and branches (Figure 4). In the process, the children discovered that they could make their own toys by reusing materials.



Figure 4. Children from Nobleland Arts N Learning Place (Preschool) @ Clementi making use of painted leaves in their artwork. Image courtesy of Nobleland Arts N Learning Place (Preschool) @ Clementi.

In *Singapore Icons* (2021), the children of MOE Kindergarten @ Oasis took their cue from Jason Wee's *Self-Portrait (No More Tears, Mr. Lee)* (2009), created with plastic shampoo bottle caps. The children decided to extend the lifespan of discarded aluminium can tabs and plastic bread tags by constructing abstract but instantly recognisable renditions of Singapore landmarks (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Children from MOE Kindergarten @ Oasis repurposing aluminium can tabs and plastic bread tags as materials to create their artworks. Image courtesy of MOE Kindergarten @ Oasis.

Speak for the Ocean (2021), by the children at Arts Kidz International, is a tongue-in-cheek comment on the pollution of waterways and how we dispose of trash. The installation is composed of deceptively delectable popsicles which the children created by embedding discarded food labels and bits of plastic in gelatin blocks. Modelled on the well-loved local *potong* ice cream, their work engages with Dawn Ng's photo collage *Mamashop* (2012) which references the once ubiquitous but slowly disappearing provision shops in Singapore's housing estates.

Navigating COVID-19: Digital Transformations and Engagements with Children

SAM's *Think! Contemporary Preschool Programme* would normally be conducted over several months with multiple sessions that include a classroom component and a museum visit. However, the pandemic situation in 2021 prevented SAM's museum educators from physically conducting sessions. In response, SAM adapted its preschool programme for digital platforms, pivoting from on-site to online delivery. This was a particular challenge as SAM had not previously conducted any online sessions for preschool children.

In the first edition of this programme, in-person sessions in the classrooms (named SAM in the Classroom) introduced SAM and contemporary art through games, drawing activities and simple quizzes with prizes. Preschool children also visited The Learning Gallery to experience looking at and interacting with the artworks in person.

Exploring alternative ways to conduct the programme during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the team to identify the differences between physical and digital engagements. We had to recognise which elements were irreplaceable and to consider how to use technology so that we could continue to deliver the programme.

SAM in the Classroom evolved to digital classroom sessions conducted via Zoom. The digital Zoom sessions imposed some limitations. For instance, with only one camera and a relatively small screen, the museum educators could not see what the children, especially those at the rear of the classroom, were doing; this made it unworkable to conduct drawing activities. Videos and simple games alone could not hold the children's attention, so we applied the concept of play in developing a guessing game where children had to decide whether or not an image showed an artwork. They were encouraged to share the differing thoughts behind their choices. Through examples and conversations, the definition and understanding of art was expanded.

The children's physical visits to SAM also had to be replaced by a virtual gallery tour delivered via Zoom. This meant that the children had to view the artworks from the museum educator's point of view, losing the chance to focus on parts of the art that might interest them. During the virtual tour of The Learning Gallery, to enhance their engagement, teachers asked the children to pose like the figurines in Vicente Delgado's *We Are Family* (2014) (Figure 2). Despite the limitations, the children were still able to view the artworks and learn more about the messages behind the works from their classrooms.

SAM constantly experimented with online delivery to replicate the experience of an actual museum visit. This was especially relevant because many of the preschool children had never visited a museum prior to the programme. Thus, a digital twin – a virtual gallery made from a 3D scan that transforms real-life spaces into immersive models – of The Learning Gallery was created to give the children a sense of how the artworks are displayed in a physical space and how the artworks can be interacted with, effectively providing a 360-degree virtual experience. Adding photographs and videos to provide context added value to the digital twin (Figure 6). Nevertheless, while designing the online experience, the team remained keenly aware that it was not possible to reproduce elements such as the museum space, contemplative environment and the multi-sensorial experience of viewing the artworks in person.

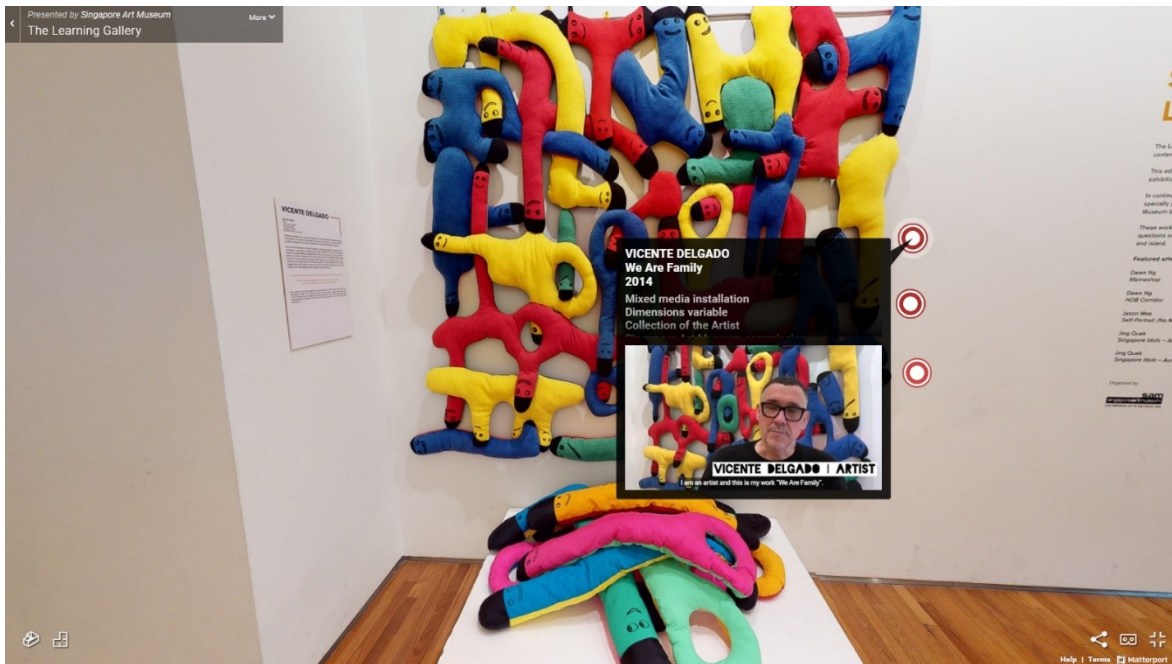


Figure 6. A screen capture of the digital twin of The Learning Gallery, featuring an embedded video interview of Vicente Delgado with his artwork, *We Are Family* (2014). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Reflections: Children as Advocates

The online delivery of SAM's preschool programme provided a catalyst for home-school partnerships, allowing for children to work with their parents in sourcing materials to create their artworks. The team found that the children's exhibition *Hello Future: Connecting People and Nature* created opportunities for parent-child bonding and increased conversations since the children were eager to share their inspiration for the artworks and their creative processes. Parents became more involved in their children's learning and development. Instead of a positive three-pronged relationship between the child, parents and the educator, this programme has resulted in a four-pronged relationship that includes the museum.

From the parents, SAM learned more about the needs of this audience group. Though some parents preferred the on-site exhibition, others preferred the digital version as they did not feel safe bringing their children to public places during the pandemic. Going the extra mile, SAM created a blended experience with an on-site exhibition and a digital twin of *Hello Future: Connecting People and Nature*. Through this, parents who were reluctant to visit in-person were incentivised to visit the digital exhibition.

While the intended beneficiaries of the programme were preschool children, it also offered teachers

the chance to develop professionally. The teachers were exposed to how a museum executed its programme, allowing them to gain insights into the workings of a museum and learn about museum practices such as developing digital twins of their galleries.

The children engaged with issues of nature and the environment, turning their thoughts into art. When the exhibition opened, these children took ownership of their artworks and rallied their family members to visit it physically or digitally (Figures 7 and 8). They took pride in explaining and spreading the important messages behind their artworks and the exhibition. This helped to build confidence and gave these young children an opportunity to become advocates of heritage, culture and environmental stewardship.



Figure 7. *Hello Future: Connecting People and Nature*, was held at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, from 6 March to 4 April 2021. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.



Figure 8. Screen grab of the digital exhibition. The physical exhibition was sited at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Conclusion

This was the first *Think! Contemporary Preschool Programme* that took place without any physical interaction with the children. Amidst the global pandemic, the programme, originally developed for in-person interaction, had to be conducted digitally. Crucially, children were unable to visit the museum to view the artworks in person. Keeping in mind the key strategies of 'play', 'explore' and 'develop', SAM's Education team was able to effectively redesign the programme sessions for digital delivery and to keep the children engaged. The aspect of environmental sustainability integrated into the programme has given the children impetus to develop their artworks.

Though disruptive, the pandemic can be viewed as an enabler for museums to accelerate their digital transformations and innovations. In the process, it was imperative to collaborate with the target audience and other stakeholders to inform museum practices to better engage audiences and serve their needs. Leveraging on technology allowed SAM to provide children and schools with continued access to the museum's resources. The exhibition *Hello Future: Connecting People and Nature* at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, visited by more than 200,000 people from 6 March to 4 April 2021, was a fitting showcase of how museums and the preschool community can partner to meet the collective goals of inspiring and growing young minds.

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