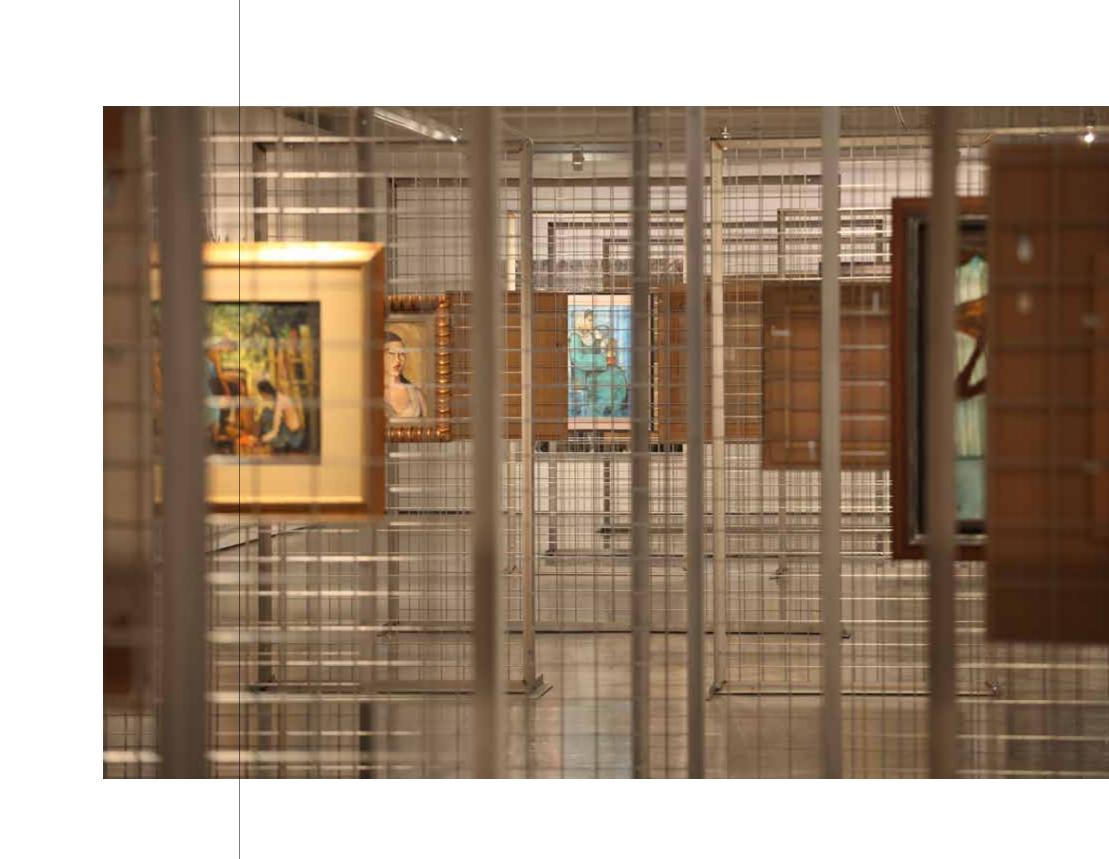


## ARTISTS IMAGINE ANATION



Abdullah Ariff Boo Sze Yang Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey) Chen Shou Soo Chen Wen Hsi **Cheong Soo Pieng** Chia Yu Chian Chng Seok Tin **Choo Keng Kwang** Chuah Thean Teng Chua Mia Tee Foo Chee San Ho Khay Beng Khaw Sia Koeh Sia Yong Kuo Ju Ping Lee Boon Wang Lee Cheng Yong Lim Mu Hue Lim Tze Peng Mohammad Din Mohammad Ng Eng Teng Ong Kim Seng Tumadi Patri Phua Cheng Phue **Anthony Poon** Seah Kim Joo Tang Da Wu Tay Bak Koi Tay Boon Pin Teo Eng Seng **Tong Chin Sye** 

Wee Beng Chong Wong Shih Yaw Yeh Chi Wei Yong Mun Sen



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#### Foreword

Works of art are much more than simple collectables or trophies, in the same way that history is more than a compilation of triumphal stories or nostalgic reflections. Histories build and change through their own telling. The works in this exhibition, *Artists imagine a nation*, record individual artists' perceptions, experiences and thinking, and document their aspirations for their communities and the future. But no matter when they were made, artworks carry deep layers of meaning that are contemporaneous with the present in remarkable ways. As well, like histories, they are subject to changing interpretations.

Artists imagine a nation brings together eighty-five figurative works from the 1930s to the present, many of which have never been publicly displayed. The exhibition is the result of a timely collaboration between Koh Seow Chuan in his role as a collector, and the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.

The exhibition has been organized around the broad theme of people and places. It considers how works of art reflect the way societies form and remodel over time, and how artists contribute to the reshaping of cultural and social values. Tracing aspects of the history of Singapore and Malaya, the exhibition also draws attention to the role of philanthropy in sponsoring art practices. With the majority of works produced in the key pre- and post-independence period in Singapore between the 1950s and 1980s, the exhibition focuses on artists' representational choices of allegory, portraiture and landscape. The works are particularly marked by the artists' ambitions—where they experiment with new knowledge, or build personal connections to heritage and tradition. Many of the represented artists were and are educators and leaders of artist groups; many have been recognized as the innovators of their generations.

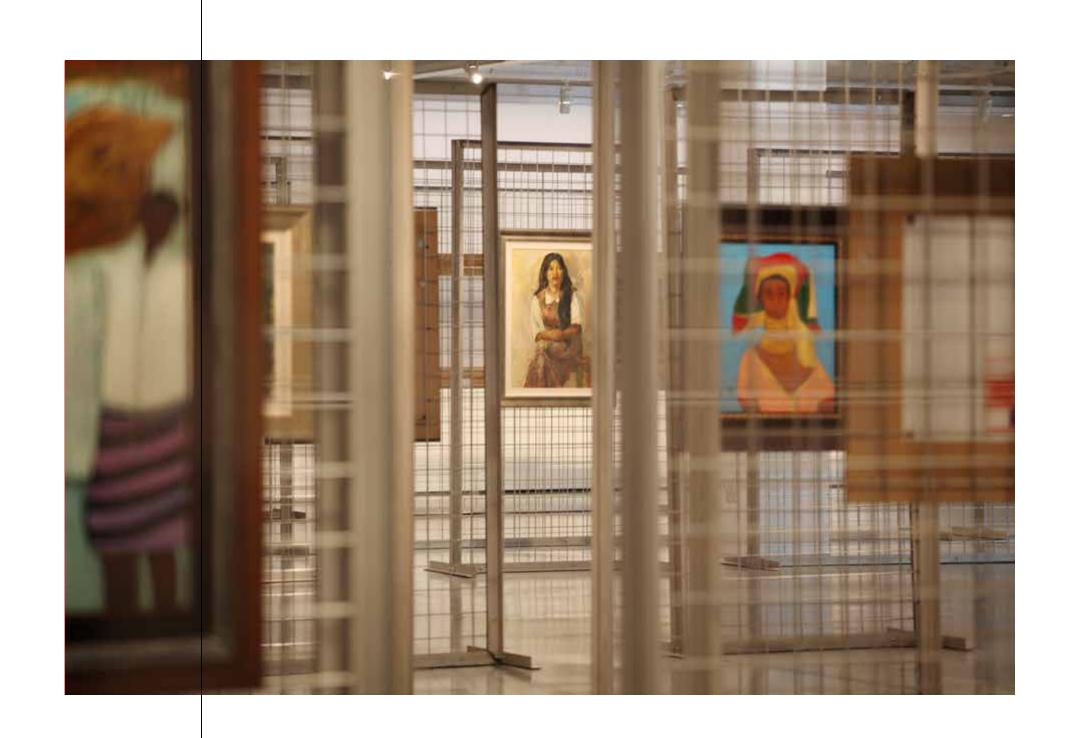
As a curator, the way in which an artwork maintains a contemporary value interests me, and it is with this question in mind that we invited architect Helen Oja to design for the exhibition a new interior architecture. Oja's grid-like installation of stainless steel 'screens' follows something of a modernist spirit consistent with the twentieth-century timeline of many of the works, but it also proposes an experimental, provisional approach to display that is contemporary.

A work of art maintains its status as a speculative object well past the date the artist considered it 'finished' or resolved, and in fact meanings might never actually fix or settle. What we identify as *contemporary* is as much about a process of looking back and re-evaluating the practices and insights of those who have travelled before us as it is about constantly seeking the new. For this exhibition, the display architecture interestingly reveals the paintings' versos, which are normally concealed. We have sought to accentuate the material surfaces and surrounds—the steel, the glass, and painted surfaces—and provide oblique through-ways of looking, 'back' as well as front-on views. The purpose is to encourage a closer connection to where these works of art actually come from; the intimacy of an artist's studio, the conversations of intellectuals, often humble makeshift circumstances. There are more recent signs on these works too—of handling and safe-keeping, provenance, and the effects of time.

It has been a great pleasure to commission the essay in this catalogue from young writer Teo Hui Min. The essay includes the first published writing on many of the exhibited works and, bearing this in mind, Teo has taken a detailed perspective 'from the ground up', reading each work closely. Production of this catalogue has also presented an opportunity to photograph and provide documentary evidence for many of the individual works.

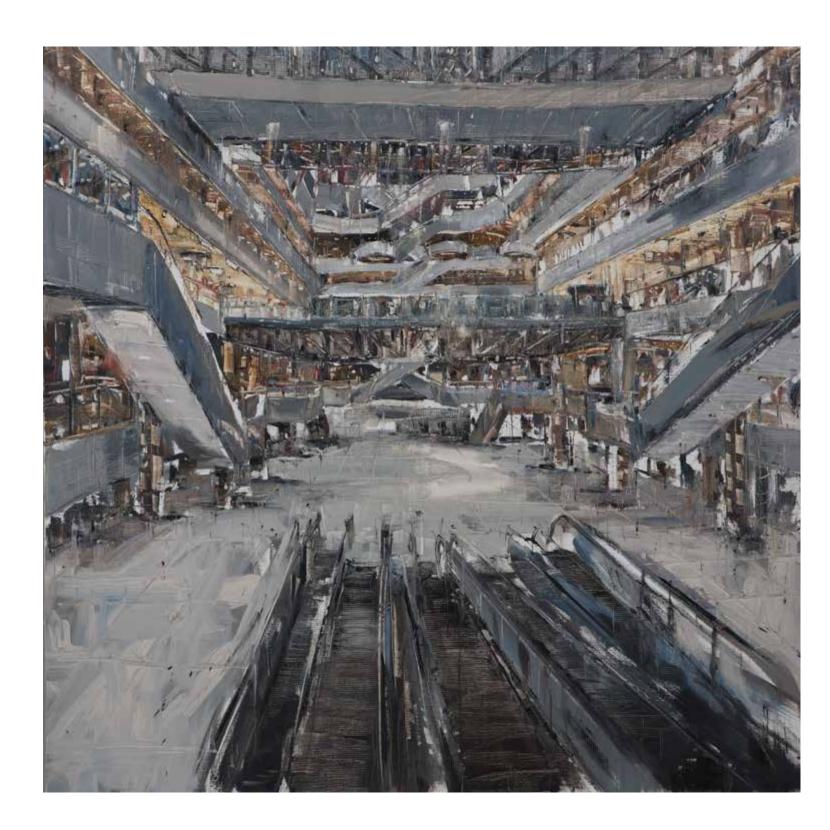
The support of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth's Cultural Matching Fund, which matched generous private funding, has made this project possible. We are indebted to Koh Seow Chuan for so open-handedly developing with us this exciting, ambitious and cosmopolitan exhibition. Lenders Linda Neo and Albert Lim, among others who prefer anonymity, have enthusiastically supported our project from the beginning. And finally, we express our warm thanks to the many artists and their families to whom we have been introduced as part of this project, and who have provided important advice and information.

Bala Starr
Director, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore



Teo Hui Min

# Pictures of people and places



#### Introduction

Meeting together as a team (Bala Starr—curator, Helen Oja—architect, and me as writer) for one of our first discussions at DP Architects' office in the Marina Bay area of Singapore, Koh Seow Chuan gave us a brief insight into the flexibility, dynamism and collaboration that underpin his architectural practice. These were qualities that also informed our meetings, as Koh encouraged our different ideas and opinions while the exhibition took shape. In our discussions about the selection of works for the exhibition, its design, and the focus of the accompanying writing that would be produced, we often engaged in rewarding debates about the works themselves, and the development of contemporary art practice in Singapore. The artist groups and societies which characterized the early landscape, the mobility of these artists, the diverse influences that shaped their artistic expression, and the reasons why they were drawn to their various subjects of representation, were some of the questions which continued to motivate us throughout the process of our collaboration.

The broad theme of people and places provides space to consider the changes in our region's landscape over the years, but also, from the perspective of the artist, asks how subjects of representation, and the artists' own positions as people within these different environments, change over time. The 1950s to the 1980s is acknowledged as a key period of artistic development in Singapore (and the region) primarily due to the post-war, post-colonial context and, in the specific case of Singapore, a period that traces pre- and post-independence around the year 1965. This exhibition reveals the capacity of private collections to bring together a representative group of works focused on this period of development in the arts. Instead of attempting to present a broad, canonical narrative of Singapore art history, the exhibition focuses on the specific scenes and stories that caught the attention of these artists and, later, the collectors of their art. This relationship between collector and artist becomes especially interesting when we consider that commissions for personal portraits were as common as commissions for public art. Early patronage by individuals such as Tan Tze Chor and Dato' Loke Wan Tho was crucial to the freedom of expression that artists were afforded when alleviated of financial burden. Indeed, Singapore's short history as a nation and the relatively early development of its art market imply that the growth of artistic endeavour and ambition was in tandem with the desire from public and private individuals and institutions to collect and promote the arts. When considering the eighty-five works from thirty-six artists across different styles and periods that were made available to us through several private collections, it is worth reflecting on the means through which a collection, and what can be called a 'collecting focus', come about. While perhaps initially motivated by interest in a certain style, or particular landscapes or subjects, the commitment of a collector is most evident in their exha

In considering iconic images of Singapore that come to mind when thinking about the visual history of the nation, the centrality of the Singapore River, bustling street scenes, and a mosaic of ethnicities figure sharply. This visualization of Singapore is in line with the deliberate construction of a national consciousness in the post-independence period. However, the 'natural' fascination that artists of this thirty-year period had with depicting these people and places preceded any firm political articulation of 'Singapore', which suggests the reflexive relationship between artistic representation and how a diverse community of people can conceive of shared visual reference points when imagining what defines their nation. In the styles and methods of portraying these scenes, there emerge interesting variations that express the artists' individuality. One aim of this exhibition is to provide space and time to dwell on individual pictures, the circumstances of their production, and their position within a period of artistic production.

## Visualizing the landscape and people

Choo Keng Kwang's panorama of Malayan life is evidence of the ambition that characterized early artistic production during the late 1960s, when artists undertook large-scale works, often focusing on a holistic presentation of communal life and activity. In Choo Keng Kwang's 1969 interpretation of the theme (pp. 60–1), the structural aesthetics of batik painting are transposed to the medium of oil on canvas. Drawing inspiration from the innovation of Malaysian artist Chuah Thean Teng, who at the time was receiving regional recognition, Choo has employed his own unique stylization in the characters and details that are included in the painting. Choo's figures populate the canvas in geometric, angular forms and he depicts them engaged in various activities, including preparing food, fishing and weaving. The composition is complex, and Choo creates a rhythmic layering from the foreground of birds and assorted tropical fruits, to the mid-ground of seated figures, and the background of standing figures. The spaces in the upper half of the painting are textured with crackled lines reminiscent of the batik technique, and distinguished by increasing definition of the painting's structure.

An artist who was also interested in the woodcut technique, Choo displays his craftsmanship and appreciation for the conformity of line within an essentially flat surface. His figures appear almost modular, and Choo's choice of lively colour and intricate rendering of detail give the image vibrancy. Incorporating recognizable visual symbols such as cross-sections of the tropical papaya and durian, and cultural tropes such as the lion dance and the women's adornment of traditional Malay batik sarongs on the left half of the composition, the painting captures an idyllic pastoral community spirit and unity between racial and cultural groups in Singapore. The dynamic linework and compositional details are carefully controlled in this work, and the overall result is a theatrical, staged image of the diversity and festivity of Malayan life. Interestingly, by the late 1960s, Singapore was well on its way to becoming an urban city centre, and the rural *kampong* life depicted in Choo's 1969 work was already being rapidly replaced by the efforts of the Housing Development Board to gentrify the landscape and raise standards of living by providing housing tower blocks.

At the time, it was popular for works of such significance to be commissioned by both public and private institutions and organizations, and placed prominently in entranceways and lobbies. In the post-1965 period, there emerged a need for a unified national identity, and through such culturally rich panoramas an otherwise intangible national consciousness was perhaps made visible. *Artists imagine a nation* brings together several examples of these large-scale works, most notably the substantial painting, nearly 7 metres wide, by Seah Kim Joo, acquired by Brother Joseph McNally for the LASALLE Art Collection in 1996.¹ Like Choo, Seah Kim Joo expresses his own interpretation of the batik medium. Batik, specific to the cultural and art history of the region, offers a tactile connection to a deeper and more far-reaching history that extends to a broader Malayan identity, one that is arguably absent of external cultural influence. In fact, the history of batik painting as art rather than craft is one based on the successful incorporation of traditional and modern aesthetics. The method was first popularized by Chuah Thean Teng, who pushed batik beyond the confines of intricate pattern-making by introducing stylized figuration in line with Cubism². Unlike Choo's single canvas, Seah Kim Joo's ambitious panorama, *Untitled [Malayan life]* (1968) (pp. 94–5) is made up of five batik panels wrapped over a canvas support. Seah Kim Joo presents us with familiar vignettes of traditional culture, while also depicting the connection with prehistoric man in the far right-hand panel. By doing so, he emphasizes the ancient roots of Malaya, and the prehistoric man in the far right-hand panel. By doing so, he emphasizes the ancient roots of Malaya, and the prehistoric man in the far right-hand panel. By doing so, he emphasizes the ancient roots of Malaya, and the prehistoric man in the far right-hand panel. By doing so, he emphasizes the ancient roots of Malayan art history in the pre-independence period.³ Both Seah Kim Joo and Ch

A smaller and earlier work by Seah shows his process of experimentation with different media before settling on batik as the best means by which to express his grand vision. The untitled scene of women around

Acknowledging the importance of historical context, our key interest is in the visual connections between the selected works, and the way that these pictures provide a window on conceptions of Singapore's early landscape. With a certain vibrancy of colour palette and density of composition that is evident across the selected works, these artists developed a recognizable visual language for art from the Malayan region. In terms of visual representation, the exhibition presents the diverse peoples from the different ethnic groups in Singapore, as well as the various places that artists have identified. On a secondary level, the selection of works also seeks to represent the various artists that were, and continue to be, key individuals and members of artist groups during both the pre- and post-independence period of modern Singapore. There is a disparity among the represented artists—who are overwhelmingly males of ethnic Chinese descent—that is both symptomatic of the conditions of the time, and also reflects the group of works available to the exhibition. The inclusion of works by female artists such as Chen Cheng Mei highlights their particular contribution to diversifying the pictorial languages of landscape and portrait painting in the second half of the twentieth century. Works by Abdullah Ariff help contextualize and position Malay artists alongside the largely ethnic Chinese migrant community of artists who were fascinated with the indigenous culture of the region.

In inhabiting and representing a young nation, the work of the selected artists collectively records what eventually comes to mirror a canonical national story of idyllic pastoral beginnings, and the struggle and triumph of industrialism underpinned by a diverse population. While acknowledging that many of the artists were themselves conscious of their part in the construction of this narrative, it is my intention to focus instead on what motivated these artists to choose their subjects and paint the way they did. What were the places where these artists were practising? What were the artists' positions in relation to the wider community? I do not suggest a theoretical framework that traces the development of portrait and landscape painting in Singapore, nor attempt a listing of factors that made possible the specific conditions of art production. Reflecting the way in which the exhibition design exposes the versos of the paintings, a ground-up perspective begins first and foremost by acknowledging the materiality of the paintings themselves. This has informed my interest in what it meant for these artists of early Singapore to inhabit the places they chose to depict, and how they related to the people whom they immortalized. Following through to modern-day iterations of places, such as Boo Sze Yang's series of paintings of malls (see p. 14) where he depicts the new commercial monuments of our landscape, how have experiences and conceptions of the Singaporean landscape changed? In focusing on portrait and landscape paintings and their shifting styles and subjects of representation, I will explore the network of artists practising within various spaces, from the classroom, street and riverside, to the studio, and ask how these spaces become places through the act of creation and representation.

On the question of artistic imagination and creativity, it is also worth exploring the degree to which these artists projected an ideal version of their surroundings onto the canvas and, indeed if they did, their reasons for romanticizing the people and landscapes of Singapore. From realist renderings in the style of studio portraiture and European traditions of landscape painting, to bold experiments in stylization, the works in this exhibition give us the opportunity to consider the search for an individual and collective visual language that could adequately depict the people and places that captured the attention of artists working in Singapore.

Setting out to write about the selection of works for this exhibition, many of which have not been exhibited together publicly, if at all, I was most struck by the way the works resonate with one another across styles, subjects and periods. A testament to the ability of private collectors to bring together works which relate to one another in fascinating visual as well as historical ways, it is my aim to explore these connections between the works rather than isolating them by artist or genre. Keeping in mind the specificity of their context as part of private collections, and the resultant mosaic that has emerged through years of passionate acquisition, I recall what Koh Seow Chuan once told me—that it is a pleasure to simply sit down and talk about art.

a well (1962) (p. 93) is a more impressionistic attempt to capture the vibrancy of village life. The medium of oil allowed for an expressive representation of colour, resulting in a striking visual experience when compared to the subtle tonality and the deliberate trace of construction in the batik method. In the oil painting, we observe the angularity of the women's arms—an experiment in figuration that was eventually stylized into the diagrammatic figures seen in the batik panorama. The mottled background of the painting recalls the style of the French Impressionists, and is achieved through a painstaking layering of pigment to achieve a textured effect. As portions of the work give way to natural paint loss, the incredible complexity of the base layers of the painting are revealed, and one begins to see the level of detail contained within an apparently simple scene. The women's colourful sarongs lack the characteristic detail of batik patterns, and Seah has compensated for this by applying bold, bright colour on their garments. The women are depicted performing domestic tasks such as washing laundry and bathing their children, but rather than the then conventional placement of women in a domestic interior setting, here they are seen at ease in the outdoors, and very much part of the landscape. Their faces are obscured and turned away from the viewer, suggesting the secondary importance of individuality in the context of communal activity.

Khaw Sia's *Untitled [Kampong spirit]* (1967) (pp. 68–9) presents an iteration of the Malayan panorama in his preferred medium of watercolour on paper. While comparatively smaller in terms of scale, it conveys the same pride in cultural identity, and the desire to immortalize a picturesque image of cultural life. An artist more commonly associated with the vibrant arts scene of Penang, this work by Khaw Sia is evidence of the porousness between national boundaries at the time, with many artists spending time between Singapore and Malaysia in equal measure, and being aware of the artistic developments and trends on either side of the causeway. Like many of the artists who went on to become key figures in the Singapore arts scene, Khaw Sia was a graduate of the Sin Hwa Academy of Fine Art in Shanghai, and also gained instruction from Sir Russell Flint, at the time a prominent Scottish watercolourist. Khaw subsequently developed his recognizable stylistic combination of English watercolour aesthetics and precise Chinese ink techniques. In *Untitled [Kampong spirit]*, Khaw Sia juxtaposes a day and night scene of village life. The spirit of community and celebration are conveyed in the bright colours and lively postures of the dancers on the right-hand side of the composition. The work suggests the liveliness of the night in comparison to the more peaceful village scene depicted in the daytime. Dance and music, important components in the transmission of Malay culture, are given primacy in this view, and Khaw Sia highlights the rhythms and colours of Malay life. The fluidity and dynamism of Khaw's dancers are paralleled in the panoramas of Seah Kim Joo and Choo Keng Kwang, who have translated the realism of these elegant forms into their diagrammatic figures.

The celebration of Singapore's fiftieth year of independence marks an opportunity to reflect on the country's development as a nation since 1965. While a definite milestone, we must keep in perspective how young a nation Singapore truly is, and the privilege of retrospect during a time when we still have access to the generation who lived through the transition to independence; the legacy of the artists practising in the 1950s and '60s remains fresh, their subjects still familiar. The political importance of 1965 cuts across the development of a nation's art history whose roots can be traced back to the deep indigenous history of Malay culture. The mobility of artists in the pre-independence period, which continued well into the 1980s, emphasises the importance of Singapore's history as a part of greater Malaya. While this national division has become more distinct in recent years, the period immediately following independence was characterized by a camaraderie in the artistic community that arguably became most well-articulated in a modern sense with the establishment of the Penang Chinese Art Club in 1935, with artists Lee Cheng Yong and Yong Mun Sen as president and vice-president respectively.

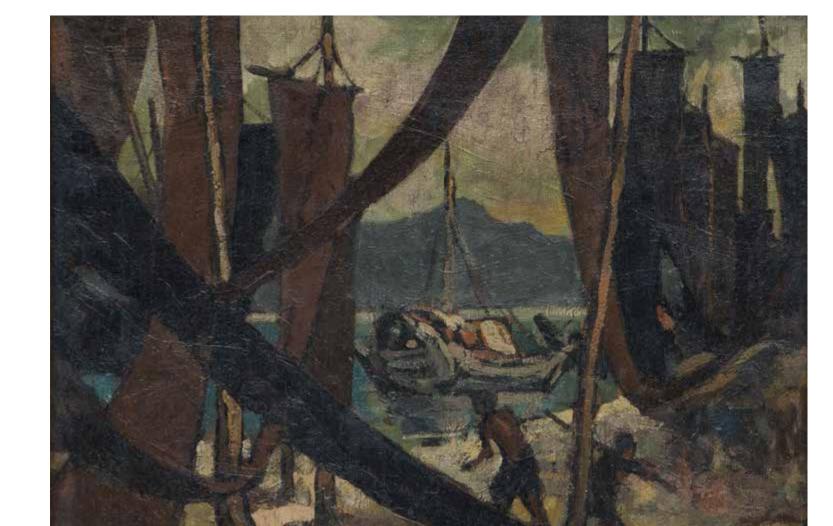
An example of an early landscape executed in this pre-independence period, Yong Mun Sen's *Untitled [Boats through the nets]* (1936) (p. 20) is a highly textured work, executed in oil on canvas, and presenting

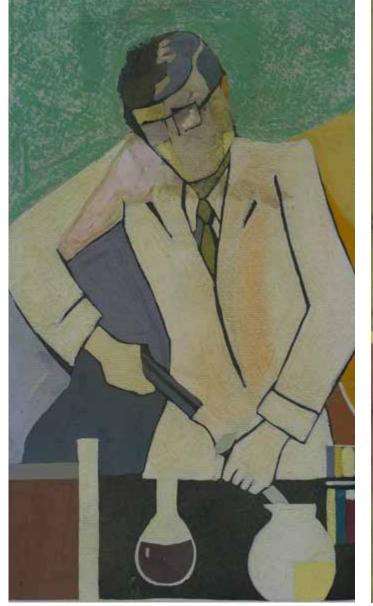
realistic depiction of labourers by the beach among hanging fishing nets. The mundane object of the fishing net is given sculptural drama in Yong's composition where the nets dissect the foreground and background of the painting, obscuring a view of the sea and mountainous landscape. Known for his sombre palettes and thick layers of paint, there is a density to Yong's 1936 painting that continued throughout his artistic career. Yong was a self-taught artist who learnt from books on Western Impressionism and was influenced by the style of Gauguin. The pre-war period of the 1930s saw Yong painting alongside his contemporaries in Penang, artists such as Abdullah Ariff, Lee Cheng Yong, Khaw Sia and Kuo Ju Ping among others. In this work, the hanging nets frame the two figures in the centre of the composition, tanned by the sun and hunched over their manual task. A boat in the lighter hues shared with the water, sky, and beach waits in the distance, while the figures blend with the shadows cast by the overhanging nets. The figures, portrayed in dark earthy tones, are placed in direct correlation to the fishing nets, and in contrast to the yellows and blues of sand, sea, and sky. Particularly important in areas such as Penang and Singapore where the sea serves as both an isolation from, and link to, the rest of the region, Yong encapsulates the geographical specificity of the relationship between man and the shore. Positioning us at an observational distance, the features of the figures are obscured, and their postures turned away from the viewer. The desire to capture the rustic simplicity of life, as expressed by Yong in this painting, is one that underscores much of the art production around the independence period. Compared to the carefully orchestrated compositions of the monumental panoramas, *Untitled [Boats through the nets]* suggests a more spontaneous rendering of an observed scene.

It should also be noted that the medium of oil on canvas was deemed experimental for Yong Mun Sen, an artist better known for his watercolour paintings. The relative popularity of watercolour as a medium was an effect of the lack of access to oil paints and canvas, with artists such as Yong needing to travel to Singapore to obtain them. Singapore's long history as an important entrepôt site meant steady supplies, and was also a practical reason for the fruitful cross-fertilization of artistic styles and ideas, as well as the early development of a vibrant artistic community.

A contemporary of Yong Mun Sen, Lee Cheng Yong's fascinating group of watercolour portraits on paper (c. 1950) (pp. 21, 76–8), gathered here in this exhibition, provides an intriguing glimpse into the infectious modernism that swept through the artistic community in Malaya. Each individual work appears like a snapshot, puncturing the present with the immediacy and freshness of its colour and composition. The figures' gazes are directed beyond the confines of the paper, and there is a sense that the portraits are intended to be part of a larger scene; when placed together, the bold blocks of background colour appear to merge into one another almost rhythmically. The combination of yellow and green is arresting, and imbues the portraits with a brightness and liveliness. Lee Cheng Yong's figures are more figure-types, performing poses that are recognizably associated with their tasks. For example, a farmer's act of lifting a hoe, a violinist with a cocked bow, and other various postures associated with science and experimentation. In this series, Lee Cheng Yong's works veer into the illustrative with angular lines and strong colour. A gallery catalogue from the Lee Cheng Yong retrospective exhibition held at the Penang State Museum in 1996 reveals that the group of portraits are preparatory studies for a large-sized watercolour panorama, preceding that of Khaw Sia.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the overt placement of cultural symbols seen in the post-1965 panoramas, Lee Cheng Yong brought together figures representing a more traditional way of life, as well as a futuristic vision and ideal.

Seen as a group, Lee's figures appear to be undifferentiated except for their manner of dress and chosen activity, and each work holds multiple layers and planes in a compositional complexity akin to Braque's. It can be argued that the key signifiers and characteristics that we now use to identify works from Southeast Asia in terms of colour, subject and style, are absent from these portraits. In terms of skin tone, the figures appear almost European, and the modernity of their situations places them outside a conventional *kampong* context. What stands out most in this group of portraits is the beginning of experimentation with representation of the national







spirit in the post-war period and lead-up to Malayan independence from the British colonial government in 1963. In these small paintings, people take precedence over the landscape and their surroundings. Lee Cheng Yong gives importance to the variety of life, and to the potential contained within the diverse peoples of the region.

Abdullah Ariff, credited alongside Yong Mun Sen as one of the founding fathers of watercolour painting in Malaya, also employed a European aesthetic in his art. *Untitled [Boats under tree]* (1960) (p. 45) is suffused with a warm light characteristic of Ariff's style, giving his works a hazy, dream-like effect. Interestingly, the scene depicted is one of idle leisure, unlike the majority of the artworks that have been brought together in this exhibition. The two figures under the tree, as well as the figure towards the centre of the painting, are seemingly carrying fishing poles, but the characters in Ariff's scene could not be more different from the bare-backed labourers of Yong Mun Sen's *Untitled [Boats through the nets]*. In the far left of the picture, two figures (presumably, by the lithe rendering of their figures, female) enjoy the restful scene. In spite of the realist detail and style of the painting, one questions the reality of a landscape that recalls an image of a picturesque European lakeside more than the tropical density of a Southeast Asian landscape. Where the majority of ethnic Chinese artists appear to have been preoccupied with an essentialized representation of indigenous Malay culture and expression, Abdullah Ariff produced romantic images of the Malayan landscape in a visual language descended from a Western tradition. With *Untitled [Boats under tree]*, a nostalgic fantasy of a sunny afternoon, Ariff effectively positions his mind's vision of rustic Penang within a universal aesthetic of watercolour painting, and offers an easily accessible window through which to appreciate the beauty of the land.

Another example of the artistic representation of people situated within the landscape, Chia Yu Chian's Untitled [Malayan life] (1958–62) (right) is largely centred on the now-familiar theme of kampong spirit, but interestingly presented here in an all-female context. One of the largest works produced by Chia, the painting finds parallels with Seah Kim Joo's smaller but similarly ambitious untitled scene of women around a well (1962) In Chia's work, flecks of colour represent the intricate patterns on the women's sarongs, and both works feature women in communal activity. The preoccupation with depictions of the female form and the trope of the mothe and child are two of the most prevalent subjects in Southeast Asian painting. On a symbolic level, the female body has often been understood in relation to fertility, culture, and the regeneration of life. Depicted out of doors and in direct contact with the land, the women in both Chia's and Seah's paintings are firmly located in notions of nation and community building. Chia's figures, and his technique of thickly applying paint in bold colours and strokes, are strongly reminiscent of the style of Yong Mun Sen, whose figures were also painted in earthy tones to signify their indigenous identity. In the varying postures and perspectives that Chia presents, his subjects are almost character studies, or different vignettes brought together into a single composition. For example, the central two figures of a woman combing a girl's hair seem separate from the group of women standing behind them to the left, who in turn seem separate from the two parallel rows of women seated on either side of the central pair, balancing the composition. Chia attempts to create depth in the picture by eliminating the facial definition of four women on either side of the group, making them seem further away, but the proportions of the women are revealed to be out of sync when we look at the size of the standing group in comparison to the two faceless figures seated on their left. Not ov



Chia Yu Chian
Untitled [Malayan life], 1958–62, oil on canvas on board, 71 x 120.5 cm (sight)

These examples of paintings produced around the period of Singapore's independence in 1965 show that artists were focused on experimentation in various media and styles, searching in tandem with the young nation for a clearly articulated identity. Understanding the normalization of certain depictions of Malay life and culture and their eventual confirmation as nationally accepted images of a united past in post-independence Singapore it becomes interesting to turn our attention towards the specificity of the Singaporean landscape, and the similar representation and construction of certain people and places as national signifiers.

Though a much-laboured theme, the place of the Singapore River in the national consciousness cannot be overstated. The river in Singapore was the main locus for trade and merchant activity, and the physical connection to the region and the world. For the many artists who immigrated to the country from China in the face of political instability in their home country, the sea was the passage that brought them to their new home. One of the earliest oil paintings attempted by Chen Wen Hsi in Singapore, *Untitled [Singapore River]* (c. 1950–51) (p. 51) is an expressive, expansive interpretation of the scene. Chen assumes a perspective where the river takes up more than half of the composition. Those familiar with the actual proportions of the river would know its narrowness, and the proximity of its two banks. The view that Chen chooses to present to us is one that allows access into the scene as if we were arriving for the first time at the city's port—the landscape opens up before us in a realistic depiction of perspective.

Arriving in Singapore for the first time in 1946 after a thorough education at the Sin Hwa Academy of Fine Art in Shanghai and with a preference for Chinese ink painting, Chen Wen Hsi lectured at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) from 1947 to 1961, and found himself in the company of fellow immigrants and artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, who sought new means of artistic expression. As pointed out by Marco Hsu, what the medium of oil painting offered was a range of styles and expressions unencumbered by the formal rules of traditional Chinese painting. Hsu argued that the modernist developments in Western oil painting allowed for 'personal expression at any location, unfettered by any particular traditions of that place'. Certainly in the case of these artists, the medium allowed them to approach their new surroundings with a veritable blank slate upon which to capture the scenes that fascinated them the most. This exhibition brings together several unique iterations of the Singapore River, but this early example of the genre by Chen Wen Hsi contains an undeniable freshness in its approach. Bringing to mind the incandescence of a Van Gogh, the reflection on the water's surface is executed with surety and precision. The artist's palette is dense and murky—blues, browns, whites and yellows meld into each other thickly. The result is atmospheric and moody; the expectant bustling activity of a city port fading behind the reassuring forms of junk boats and orderly buildings.

Another work, *Untitled [Singapore River scene]* (1960) (p. 52), by Chen offers us a unique opportunity for a visual comparison of the two works. The reflective blues of the earlier work give way to a pronounced juxtaposition of green, yellow, and thick white impasto in the later composition. Moving into abstraction, Chen's work confronts us with a flat perspective of traditional shophouses along the riverside. The frenetic brushstrokes and lack of open areas of colour emphasize the busy energy of a commercial port, and the inevitable disorder of such a scene. Thick black outlines loosely define the boundaries of the buildings, but their integrity as physical structures is impossible to hold without a reference for foreground and background. To the right of the composition, the suggestion of a minaret recalls the impressive colonial architecture that towers over the riverside shophouses in the earlier rendition of the scene. In this newer expression however, the highest section of the building is abstracted and placed on the same level as the shophouses—all jostling for space within the tight constraints of the painting. In his later painting Chen now places the viewer directly within a sensory experience of the riverside bursting with life.

These two conceptions of the Singapore River and its surroundings do more than record a change in the physical landscape, and we can perhaps better understand the two expressions as a shift in the artist's perspective and position in the landscape. Compared to the early 1950s depiction of the river, romantic and grand, Chen's later work is gritty and raw. Moving from the perspective of artist-as-observer, surveying and capturing the details of the scene in order to convey a desired atmosphere, to the artist as fully situated within the scene, translating onto the canvas the immediacy of experience, we are tasked with the question of what it means to imagine and inhabit a place. This search for artistic identity, mirrored in the search for a national identity, is (perhaps simplistically) illustrated in Chen's constant refashioning of his signature. From 'WH Chen' to 'C Wen Hsi' in the span of five or more years, before his return to the medium of Chinese ink painting with modernist flair, Chen's initial explorations in oil are widely acknowledged as his most innovative and experimental. There is a restless energy in the abstract composition that is absent in the earlier, more picturesque painting, but perhaps what underlies both works is the artist's fervour in the interim to discover new styles and techniques.

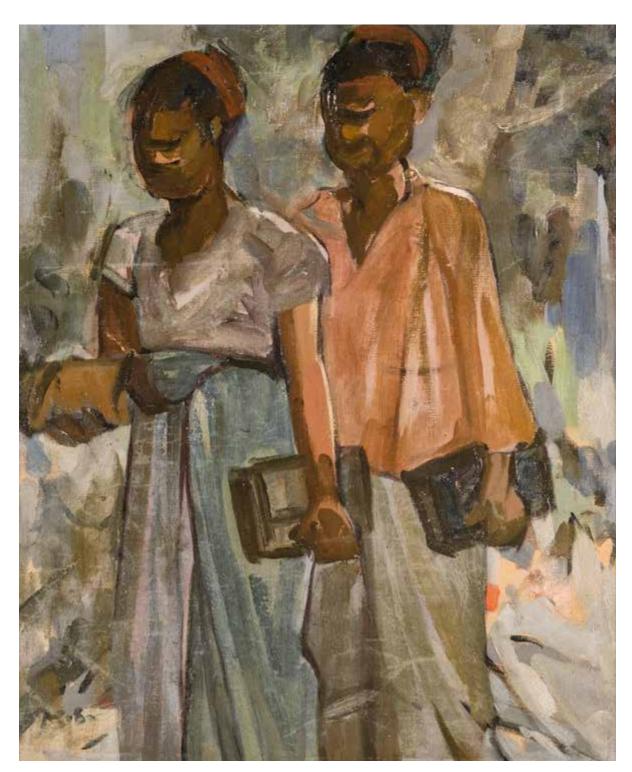
Many of the artists played a role in art education in Singapore, and the views and perspectives of this so-called first-generation group came to inevitably influence and shape the subsequent production of images that are now deeply ingrained in a national consciousness. From large-scale artworks that were intended for public display and consumption, to intimate early experiments with medium and style, images of Singapore and its associated people and places have been mediated through their representations in works of art. Tracing Singapore's development over the years through the eyes of the artists brought together in this exhibition, we are made aware of favourite subjects and themes that emerged within the close-knit artistic community, and the individual artists' search for their identity through their interpretations of these themes. As we move on to examine the individuals and situations that are now reflected in a diverse mosaic of people from different races and social positions, we shall bear in mind, as in the example of Chen Wen Hsi, the position of these artists in relation to their subjects.

## Shaping the landscape and people

When thinking about how we might situate the artists as inhabitants of Singapore, we can look to the subjects that captured their attention. This exhibition has attempted to gather, as far as possible, a representative selection of the people who make up Singapore. From the 'everyday' man in the street to the subjects of formal studio portraiture, we are given an insight into the artists' preoccupations at the time, and can consider the way in which their visual interpretations and representations have come to shape our view of the past, as well as the continued influence of their artistic innovation on the present generation of artists. Cheong Soo Pieng's untitled portrait of a Chinese girl (1955) (p. 54) is a work that stands out for Cheong's rendering of the piercing gaze of the sitter, who regards us (and regarded the artist) with a defiant confidence. Upon first glance, this is a highly controlled example of portraiture in line with European aesthetics, evident in the subject's deliberate posture, the interiority of the scene, and also the orderly application of paint in uniform strokes from right to left. The girl's dress is decidedly modern and Western, which is reinforced by the attention paid to her crucifix necklace laid against English lace. The bright red of her bows, her red lipstick, and even the red of her seat, however, immediately tap into a connection between the orange-red hue and its importance in Chinese tradition as a symbol of luck and good fortune. Using colour in this way as a subtle signifier, Cheong positions the girl between tradition, and the presumed modernity of the West. The portrait is modern also in terms of style; the girl's angular eyebrows and the absence of dimensionality create interesting surfaces for light and shadow to interact. The vertical red bar running down the right corner of the painting hints at the identity of this artist as one of the most innovative of his generation, the red streak acting to balance the right side of the composition as the sitter leans more

Beneath this artistic proficiency lie the strong academic foundations of many of these early artists, and their places as prominent teachers and lecturers in the increasingly visible art institutions and art education programmes in the post-war period. The importance of what can be understood as the teaching tradition is worth examining in thinking about the relationship that these artists had to subsequent generations of artists, as well as the legitimacy that these artists attained through their links to academic institutions and collectives. The majority of ethnic Chinese immigrants had spent time studying at, or had graduated from, prestigious art schools in China. Indeed, this commonality of a shared educational experience and, hence, shared views about art production provided the basis for the formation in Singapore of the Salon Art Society in 1935, which was renamed in 1936 as the Society of Chinese Artists.<sup>7</sup>

Yong Mun Sen's *Untitled [The scholars]* (1945) (left) is a rumination on the image of the scholar, reflecting on the importance of education in a conception of modernity and progress. As seen in the earlier grand panoramic visions of Malayan culture and daily life, men and women are often depicted in separate spheres and performing separate tasks, with perhaps the exception of cultural festivities. In *Untitled [The scholars]* however, Yong places man and woman on equal par, from the upright elegance of their postures, the thick books carried by their sides, and even their headdresses. There is harmony in the pastel hues of their understated dress—plain and lacking the garish colour and intricate pattern of indigenous textiles—and they stride forward in step with each other, towards some place beyond the confines of the picture plane. Compared to the shirtless, hunched figures in *Untitled [Boats through the nets]*, the scholars are given a different kind of dignity. The fabric of their sarongs conveys the weight and luxuriousness of robes, and Yong has envisioned them in a style reminiscent of classical Greek scholars. Their earth-toned skin ties them to their Malay ethnicity, but conventional scenes of communal activity are absent here and, seen as a whole, the image lacks the symbols and colour that are commonly associated with works from the period. *Untitled [The scholars]* presents an elevated view of education and knowledge, but also the resulting distance from tradition. Without making any judgement however, on the difficulty of combining symbols of culture with symbols of education, the painting depicts an alternative view of Malay life in the late 1940s and early '50s, and acknowledges the changes and



Yong Mun Sen
Untitled [The scholars], 1945, oil on canvas on board, 56.5 x 46.5 cm (sight)

opportunities that were present at the time, rather than glorifying grand cultural tropes of the past. Yong himself did not receive a formal arts education, but his regard for scholarship, and the access it offered to different artistic styles and points of view was undeniable. Yong assisted in the establishment of the Salon Art Society by virtue of his experience with the Penang Chinese Art Club, and also encouraged the establishment of the first arts institution, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, in Singapore in 1938.

One of the most well-known teachers at the time was Cheong Soo Pieng, an artist whose legacy continues through the work of his students and the current generation of artists. The variation of styles and techniques in his body of work deserves its own focus, especially his lesser-known foray into mixed media works and abstract compositions.

Cheong constructed his own pictorial vocabulary to represent the people of Southeast Asia. A clear example of this, *Untitled [Tin mining]* (1957) (p. 55), depicts a group of women standing in a bright orange landscape. It is immediately compelling first and foremost for the artist's choice of rich jewel-like hues. The loose trousers and top of the *samfu*—a simple, everyday form of dress commonly seen in Singapore and Southeast Asia—situate the women in the period of the 1950s and '60s. The image of the *samsui* woman, the Chinese female immigrant who worked a life of hard labour at construction sites, plantations and tin mines, has in current times become a symbol for the toil and assimilation of migrants within a rapidly industrializing city. The poses of the women are highly deliberate, with each woman offering a different study of posture and perspective of the female form. Cheong presents to the viewer his ideal types of working woman in Southeast Asia, women who were integral to the region's physical development. The angular forms of their bodies, made interesting by the inclusion of cubic elements, create complex surfaces and planes that are a fitting means to suggest the multifaceted stories behind the lives of these women. The bare, arid nature of the landscape they are set against is accentuated by the glaring orange of the soil, and conveys the harsh conditions of tin mines visible along the long drive from Singapore to Penang—a route Cheong frequently took to exhibit his art, visit fellow artists, and also to paint. Within this context, Cheong's choice of subject, and manner of representation, become clearer. In his portrayal of stoic working women, Cheong presents the stylized figures against the geometric form of the tin mine in the far (upper) background, and elaborates his own unique interpretation of the characters that made up the landscape of Malaya.

In *Untitled [Egg seller]* (1956) (right) as well, Cheong applies a flat, cubist perspective to the scene—the extended left arm and left leg of the woman seated at right are oddly truncated. A more straightforward depiction of the working woman, the egg seller is engaged in conversation with another woman, perhaps in a moment of reprieve from the day's work. Both women's features, however, express stoicism and peacefulness; partly hidden from us, they are similar to those of the women depicted in Cheong's *Untitled [Tin mining]*. What is significant here is the depiction of age and labour, evident in the hunched postures of the women, and their weathered faces. Cheong's growing reputation as an artist and lecturer in this early period was centred on his innovative attempts to depict the 'essence' of his various subjects.

Developing an initial identity around their shared migrant backgrounds and common educational foundations, the early Chinese migrant artists began to define themselves as members of a Nanyang school of art and expression. A term that evolved from a geographical reference for the region of the South Seas in relation to China, to a descriptor for literary works that explicitly focused on the subject matter and concerns of the region, it was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s that a distinctive belonging and practice under a Nanyang style came to be more commonly articulated. While largely also linked to the institutional affiliation of these artists (many of them meeting as fellow teachers at NAFA), their contributions to the art history of Singapore were part of a much broader story of migration and assimilation that mirrored the harmonizing of modern and traditional techniques within their art. Their impact as individuals and, most importantly, arts educators within this early landscape, can be seen most clearly in the work of their students.



Cheong Soo Pieng
Untitled [Egg seller], 1956, gouache on paper, 37 x 47 cm (sight)

One female artist who stands out as a figure who greatly shaped the artistic perspectives and attitudes of the future generation was Georgette Chen, who was born and spent her early years in Paris, where she gained access to Western art styles and techniques founded mostly in oil on canvas. The artists who became prominent figures in developing a Nanyang style during this period were, in addition to being Chinese, largely male. This was perhaps a function of prevalent attitudes towards the arts as a domain of culture, and hence male and disassociated from the domestic lives of women. Compared to the majority of artists who held teaching positions at NAFA, Chen's artistic education took place overseas mainly between France and the United States of America. What she then accomplished, producing vibrant, impressionistic renditions of locally specific still-lifes and landscapes, influenced both her peers and her students through their seamless harmony of subject and style. This exhibition includes the work of some of Chen's students, who continue to reference and memorialize their teacher in their own art.

lang Da Wu, credited with the establishment of The Artists village in Singapore in 1988, is an artist who straddles two generations, having been trained traditionally, but practising within a contemporary art environment. In investigating Tang's practice, the dichotomy between tradition and contemporaneity becomes difficult to maintain. His media, methods, and styles of expression, particularly his performance and installation art, are situated in the contemporary, after Duchamp and Beuys. In the medium of painting, however, different influences emerge. In the work \*Untitled\* [Georgette Chen]\* (2014) (p. 99), Tang depicts the immediately recognizable, realistically rendered features of his teacher, and even depicts her characteristic signature 'CHEN' in block letters as a tattoo on her right calf to further identify her, while positioning her within a swirling scene of fantasy and drama. Chen emerges out of the background like a conquering queen, complete with sword and crown, while brandishing a stalk of rambutans. Seemingly absurd additional arms protrude from her body (which is revealed to be in equal parts man, dragon, and horse), a basket of rambutans over the elbow of one, and the hand of the other clutching a durian. These Southeast Asian tropical fruits, iconic in the art-historical vocabulary of the region as evidenced by their prominent depiction in the monumental panoramas of the post-independence period, were favoured by Chen in her carefully constructed still-life paintings. In Tang's painting, Chen, a heady collage of symbols, charges forth in a stance that can be read alternatively as warrior or figure of peace. Astride two mythical beasts that merge into her own physique, Tang identifies the beasts as representing the traditions of East and West, which Chen conquered and championed in her art—a dichotomy that was also reflected in her European upbringing, and the staunch Chinese affiliations of her husband, who was a Chinese diplomat, and one-time member of the Chinese kuomintang political part

Tang Da Wu positions Georgette Chen as one of the founding figures of Singapore art history. The halo and crown depicted atop her head describe her as a regal, as well as a maternal figure. The year 1953, inscribed on the base of the crown, is a reference to the year of Chen's arrival in Singapore, a place she claimed as her home and where she resided until her death in 1993. As part of this series of ink paintings, Tang also depicted Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, and Chen Chong Swee, in similar style and with similarly rich symbolism. This overt homage to the forerunners of art history in Singapore can be attributed to how the works of these artists have come to shape the currently acknowledged visual representation of Singapore. Iconic scenes of the Singapore River and bustling streets, the array of tropical fruit, and the specificity of local characters began at this time to differentiate Singapore from earlier representations of national consciousness tied to the grand idea of 'Malaya'.

The artists who were at the time working to produce iconic images and styles of depicting Singapore did so in a variety of ways, their modes of representation coming to shape a collective cultural memory. An investigation of the many iterations of the street scene in Singapore reveals that artists shaped their landscapes according to both reality and memory. Working in ink, a medium heavy with history and tradition, artists like Chen Chong Swee and, later, Lim Tze Peng, successfully adapted the aesthetics and techniques of ink painting to depict scenes particular to the Southeast Asian region, and specifically scenes of Singapore. In *Fruit stall* (1989) (p. 80) by Lim Tze Peng, a busy roadside hawker stall is brought to life with bright accents of colour in the detail of clothes hanging on a pole extended from a shophouse window, a collection of melons in the left foreground of the painting, and along the foliage and exposed bricks and tiles that frame the scene. Lim's deft, almost casual, application of colour, and the quickness of his brushwork evoke an immersive, timeless scene, while the blurriness of the ink wash suggests the temporality of memory. The edges of the composition are not defined, giving way to negative space—a common feature in Lim's works—making the density at the painting's centre all the more compelling. This tension between memory and reality is played out in Ong Kim Seng's large oil on canvas *Towards South Bridge Road* (2013) (pp. 88–9), which is more likely to have been produced from the artist's memory, rather than from an *en plein air* study or photographic recording of the scene as it appeared in 2013. An artist better known for his works in watercolour, the light and shadow in many of Ong's watercolours have been translated here into the medium of oil. Losing much of the finer detail of his watercolour paintings, Ong's oil paintings are concerned more with the bold expression of colour to corovy mood and atmosphere, than the precision of detail and tonality of light that watercol

Perhaps a closer approximation of the scene that Ong was attempting to capture can be found in Chua Mia Tee's *Smith Street* (1981) (p. 64), which in terms of proximity is a short two-minute walk from South Bridge Road. An artist known for his meticulous recording of reality, we can presume that Chua's work is a faithful reproduction of the Singapore street in the '80s. Compared to the style of Ong, Chua's work is unmistakably fine—from the fabric of the women's clothes, to the shutters of the shophouses. Compared to the blurred quality of Lim Tze Peng's ink painting as well, Chua's work stands out for its attention to detail. As a member of the Equator Art Society, established in Singapore in 1955, Chua, along with artists such as Lee Boon Wang (whose works are also featured in the exhibition), believed in the need for art to be firmly grounded in reality in order for it to be accessible to a wider public. The Equator Art Society found its inspiration in the May Fourth Movement in China of 1919, and emphasized an approach to art along the tenets of social realism via painting, as well as the medium of woodcut. In *Smith Street*, Chua paints in photo-realist style, diligently transcribing the typography of shop and parking signs along the road. The impressive size of the painting, unusual for Chua, is an added invitation to the viewer to feel part of the scene. The clothes hanging off a pole from a shophouse window recal a similar depiction in Lim Tze Peng's street scene, and once more there is a coherence and reiteration of certain details that signify Singapore.

Made up largely of a community of migrants, it can be argued that artists in this early period eventually came to embrace and inhabit their new home in Singapore. This shift from visitor to inhabitant was often facilitated by the strong artistic community itself, as well as assimilation into the wider populus by virtue of the strong teaching tradition in the arts that served to legitimise artistic practice, and develop a distinctive local and regional style that would continue through the work of their students. Their contributions were hence twofold: not only did these artists inform national conceptions of the people and places that made up Singapore, they also shaped the perspectives of future generations of artists.

#### PART 3

## People as 'self' and 'other'

Moving from an essentialized image of the Southeast Asian region focused on a romanticized vision of indigenous culture and harmony, the scenes depicted of Singapore in the 1970s and '80s began to take on the characteristics of the modern city state, and works can often be dated in reference to changes in the urban landscape. These changes in the architectural landscape from the rustic *kampong* to the skyscrapers and malls of today have also had an impact on the shifting position of the artist. From the space of the academic institution, to the studio, to the riverside, and the street, many artists began to look beyond traditional conceptions of space—looking inwards to reflect on their identities within a new nation, but also outwards, beyond the constraints of national boundaries in an ongoing search for artistic inspiration and identity. The mobility of these artists within Singapore, and also within the region and beyond, allowed groups and individuals to become exposed to the ideas and trends of the global art scene, and to bring that experience back to Singapore, where the artistic community was able to respond to and also integrate these new styles into their own practices.

The heavy colours and rough texture of Yeh Chi Wei's untitled work featuring a mother and children (c. 1969) (p. 111), give the viewer an immediate sense of a deep, indigenous history, in a style reminiscent of ancient cave painting—man's earliest form of image-making. Visually, Yeh's works deviate from his contemporaries' at the time, unusually presenting thick layers of paint and a muted palette. His figures, rarely stylized, are deliberately naive, and expressionistic. Also a prominent member of the artistic community, Yeh contributed to exhibitions by the Society of Chinese Artists, and was a part of the teaching tradition as an art teacher at Chun Cheng High School in Singapore in the 1950s and '60s. Yeh's art is most defined by a sense of monumentality and history. A favourite subject of many artists, the figures of mother and child are placed to the right of the painting, while the centre of the composition reveals a group of young boys or men, all facing the same direction. Despite the familiar symbolism of women and children, traditional readings of generations, community, and maternal comfort are made difficult in response to Yeh's painting. His sculptural layers of paint applied by palette knife reveal layers of colour beneath the predominantly earthy tones of the painting, while the densely overlapping colours blur the boundaries between the figures and the background. There is a sense here of a constant reworking and layering of the picture, to the extent that only rough outlines of the group of boys remain, while the forms of the mother and baby remain comparatively complete. Over time, then, certain images may be preserved, while others require an investigation beneath surface appearances. The circular halo around the figures demarcated in stone yellow creates a link with the interior of ancient cave dwellings, and draws a connection with a history that is even deeper than the ideal image of a unified Malayan culture. Regarded as the founder of the Ten Men Art Group which travelled extensively in

Cheong Soo Pieng's *Untitled [Bali life]* (1952–64) (p. 53) is an ambitious work executed in the years following Cheong's initial trip to Bali in 1952 in the company of Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, and Liu Kang. The size of the work confronts the viewer, and the line of focus that begins with the boy lying atop a buffalo and travels upwards to the temples in the distance gives the painting a depth and perspective that adds to its grandness. The careful arrangement and collection of male and female figures occupied by their various activities brings to mind the post-1965 panoramic works discussed previously. It can be argued that Cheong Soo Pieng, already at this time a prominent and innovative artist, inspired this desire to attempt works of such ambition and scale. It is known that Cheong later went on to produce several panoramic works on commission to both public as well as private institutions such as the Singapore Telephone Board, and the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, as well as Shell in Singapore. A forerunner of his generation, this impressive work from the artist in what are considered his early years of living in the region, communicates not only his confidence in technique and execution, but also his desire to elevate the unique qualities of these rural communities.

Boo Sze Yang's mall series of paintings (2010 and ongoing) (p. 14) is a contemporary expression of what it means to inhabit modern Singapore. From the commonly depicted street scene and riverside, the new monument of the commercial shopping mall has most certainly taken over the landscape of the city. Recalling a style reserved for the depiction of grand architectural buildings, Boo brings us into the interior of a deserted mall, the glass and metal of the shopfronts and criss-crossing escalators cavernous and glistening under artificial light. Boo terms these spaces the 'new cathedrals' of modern times.9 These spaces now shape our psychological conception of what it means to exist in a city. The mall becomes a place of regular visitation more so than religious sites, and becomes the main place of congregation as opposed to the arena of the street. Boo exaggerates the spectacle of modern architecture in comparison to the years of history and culture contained in the buildings that were probably demolished in order to make space for these new constructions. In the context of Singapore, where land is a particularly scarce resource, and commerce the most valued currency, space itself is a contentious issue. Commenting on the proliferation of shopping malls in the urban landscape, Boo also explores what it means to inhabit such a place. Removing the presumed inhabitants of shopping malls, he exposes the empty glory of a shopping mall without shoppers or tenants, and acknowledges its nevertheless impressive scale. The loose outlines of the structure recall Chen Wen Hsi's abstract interpretation of the Singapore River (1960) (p. 52). Where the close perspective and bright colour encourage an immersion in Chen's scene, the wide-angle perspective and sanitized palette of Boo's mall create an intangible distance and feeling of isolation. It then becomes compelling to consider the position of the artist in relation to his subjects and how, through visual expression, artists working in Singapore have come to interpret 'se

Early inspiration to compose such a grand totalizing vision of the Balinese landscape and its people stemmed from a fascination with their rural lifestyle, as well as an emulation of the myth of Southeast Asia that had been elaborated by European artists who had been similarly captivated by tribal cultures. The bright colours and boldly outlined figures of Gauguin were a strong influence on the lines and palettes of artists working in the region. Later, in 1993, Belgian artist Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès exhibited a group of his impressionist Balinese paintings at the YWCA. Searching for a regional identity that could be visually expressed through art, the group of four artists travelled to Bali in the hope that they would be inspired to create works of equal vitality. The artist as traveller often assumes the position of observer and, unlike many of the scenes depicting Singapore, most of the paintings made while abroad represent an external perspective. The figures in Cheong's Untitled [Bali life] take on an early form of stylization in their elongated limbs and necks, which would become characteristic of his later art practice. This marked the development of Cheong's ideal figure-types—their beauty and poise accentuated with clean calligraphic lines, and an angular flattening of bodily perspective. Compared to the loose, uninhibited rendering of Yeh's mother and child painting, Cheong's work is controlled and precise. Underlying these two visually differing presentations are two distinct yet interrelated concepts regarding rural culture. Yeh's work emphasizes a deep, unmediated history of life across many generations, while Cheong presents his own interpretation of the beauty of Balinese forms and landscape. Both artists, however, remain enamoured by the ideal of the indigenous person, who is respected, but also necessarily 'other'.

This is a sentiment that carried through to the brightly coloured works of Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey), a contemporary of Yeh Chi Wei in the Ten Men Art Group. The works gathered for this exhibition present the fresh, naive style that she developed as a means to best represent her impressions of the people and places encountered during her travels. Composed of bold primary colours, *Untitled [Kayan woman, Thailand]* (1994) (p. 46) contrasts the neat, spare geometric areas of colour that define the woman's figure and attire against the bright cyan background that Chen has chosen. The subject's expression is serene but, unlike Cheong's similarly calm figures, Chen's woman gazes at us directly. In what can be considered a portrait, Chen's work is decidedly informal, with the focus of the composition being very much the richness of colour, and also the exotic appearance of the Kayan women who adorn their necks with brass rings. Embedded in the search for a regional artistic identity was also the search for personal identity and, with that, the positioning of the self in relation to one's subjects of representation. From the perspective of the artists' relative comfort in Singapore and their understanding of what it meant to inhabit place, it becomes interesting to consider the varying depictions of 'self' and 'other' within the multiracial mix of the city.

The art of Mohammad Din Mohammad, and in this exhibition his assemblage of materials and objects, is a direct, tactile means of accessing a ritualistic past in a way that differs drastically from the notions of pastoralism that we have seen embedded in various attempts at depicting a wider Malayan or regional identity. Mohammad Din Mohammad's art is firmly located in his Islamic religion, as well as his strong connection with spirituality. Issues and emotions (1995) (right), as implied by its title, is a deeply introspective and personal work. Where we have acknowledged the predominance of male Chinese artists practising in the early 1950s and '60s, and their predilection for indigenous Malay culture and a deep Malayan identity, Mohammad Din Mohammad represents a personal perspective and representation of Malay history and culture including the imagery of the wayang kulit, traditional Javanese puppets that were used to dramatize Javanese myths and historical events. A symbolic link to the past, their gaunt, humanistic forms offer a very different representation of figuration in Southeast Asian art. Mohammad Din Mohammad's work proposes multiple views through the incorporation of different eyes and faces, creating pathways in and out of the work. Concerned with the tension between body and soul, Issues and emotions is a tumultuous work not so much about a generalizing experience of Malay spirituality and history, but a search for the self within a deep coagulation of history in the form of materials, images, and symbols. Along with the collection of found objects that crowd the canvas, the bright swathes of cool greens and blues, punctuated by an eruption of fiery red and orange in the centre of the composition



Mohammad Din Mohammad
Issues and emotions, 1995, mixed media, 105 x 136 cm (sight)

beneath the white scrawl of the word 'NUCLEAR', give the painting the same visual density and colour schema as many of the works I have discussed. Through the sheer mass of its collaged paraphernalia, the composition is triumphant and ultimately cohesive. The application of paint blurs the edges of objects, connecting them, and also highlights similarities between different objects whether in terms of form, or material. Visually, this is not a work that sits quietly on a wall, but one that confronts, challenges, and physically protrudes into space. The complex self, composed of memory through images of the past (traditional models and objects like the wayang kulit) and present (images from print magazines), overlaps and intertwines with larger issues of war, political geography (in the form of a section from a map), industry and the environment (a deer's head, and bird-like adhesions on the canvas, covered in rust-brown paint).

This contemplation of the self, and the position of the artist in relation to their art is mirrored in the arresting self-portrait by Lim Mu Hue (1963) (p. 79). Stylistically worlds apart from Mohammad Din Mohammad's work, but revealing a similar level of intense self-reflexivity, Lim sets himself against an abstract background that hints at the interior of a studio, while he gazes out at us with one eye obscured by half of a broken pair of spectacles. The vision of the artist is impeded, as is ours, but Lim invites us to investigate what lies reflected within the single lens—a complex, abstract painting-within-a-painting. Playing on the functionality of spectacles as an aid to sight and clarity, the painting suggests we keep one eye on unhindered reality, and another on the uninhibited exploration of form and colour. The composition itself is a combination of realist and abstract elements—from the cubist forms of the studio reflected also in the lens, to the detailed rendering of the artist's features. Commonly understood as a glimpse into the artist's psyche through his choice and mode of self-representation, Lim regards himself (and us) with a critical eye. A member of the Equator Art Society along with Chua Mia Tee, and concerned with issues of social realism in art, the nature of Lim's double perspective becomes more evident. An awareness of the need to practise art for social purpose, and of the production of art that was easily understood and accessible to all, the Equator Art Society members worked against a notion of 'art for art's sake'12, and sought to balance the advancement of artistic creativity and expression with the continued social engagement of art.

In their choice of subject, when not bound by a commissioned portrait or the studio environment, it was individuals such as Cheong Soo Pieng's working women, and Yong Mun Sen's scholars who captured the attention of these artists. These were everyday people who revealed the myriad of cultures and influences that were placed side-by-side in Singapore. Compared to the observational quality of portraits and landscapes captured during their overseas travels, depictions of local people are arguably more intimate and revealing.

This desire to reflect social reality can be seen in the two 1960s figure studies by Ho Khay Beng and Koeh Sia Yong, also members of the Equator Art Society. In choosing to depict an Indian man (p. 67), Ho Khay Beng depicts a subject who is 'other'. However, in his realist rendering, and short quick brushstrokes that suggest immediacy, Ho fosters a sense of affinity with his subject. The towel casually placed on the man's shoulder identifies him as a working man, most likely encountered by chance—perhaps his strong, weathered features caught Ho's attention. The man places his left hand against his waist, possibly as a deliberate stance requested by the artist, but one that can also be read as a gesture of discomfort or self-consciousness at being asked to pose for a painting. Similarly, Koeh Sia Yong's 1966 portrait of an old Tong Kang worker (p. 70), portrays a realist and immediacy in its execution. Koeh's subject however, seems unaware of the artist's interest, and indeed appears to have been captured during a moment of rest after a day's work. Koeh casts his subject in moody light and shadow, his crouched posture betraying exhaustion from labour. Depicting people of Singapore in this way, frankly and straightforwardly, Ho and Koeh position themselves as equivalent to their subjects, finding connections with their unremarkable appearances and, by implication, their personal stories and experiences.

Another personal engagement with history and the self is presented in Tumadi Patri's suspended installation titled *The journey of Pak Dalang* (2014) (p. 90). Drawing on two Javanese traditions of batik, and wayang kulit, Patri uses the modern, synthetic material of polycarbonate to render his puppets, as opposed to the traditional materials of leather and wood. Patri's intervention and installation method allows for the coloured surfaces of his puppets to cast shadows in multiple colours, but their bright hues and dense patterns in fact prevent an easy distinction of one form from another. Born in the same post-1950s generation as Mohammad Din Mohammad, Patri also engages with traditional motifs and symbols. As an artist interested in the visual language of the surreal, Patri's installation creates a playful, otherworldly space where light, shadow (the two traditional qualities of wayang kulit) and colour come together. He creates a contemporary interpretation of Javanese shadow puppets, positioning himself as an artist connected to the works, but also as one who acknowledges the puppets as discrete objects, allowing for flexibility in their installation. Dependent on the space and manner of their installation, Patri's art creates a new stage or arena each time, and a new chance for viewers to create a narrative for the work through their own experience of it.

Forming a parallel with the shape and style of traditional wayang kulit, we find ourselves again at an observer's distance with Cheong Soo Pieng's untitled painting of Malay women picking flowers (1982) (p. 57). The stylized forms of Cheong's women now reveal themselves to resonate with Malay dance, ritual, as well as stylization akin to wayang kulit in their elongated limbs and fluid gestures. Upon first glance, Cheong's work appears fantastical. The women's flowing robes in pastel colours, their slim, swaying figures complete with fluttering butterflies amidst bright yellow heliconias give the scene a lyrical quality. The posture of the woman at left has its origin in both traditional Malay dance, and Malay shadow puppets. Her body is distorted elegantly and the deliberate positioning of her hand, with fan as a prop, suggests a performance, with the artist and viewers as audience members. The pointillist detail of the background, a characteristic of Cheong's works in the later period, and the intricate detail of the women's sarongs in the foreground, create an intriguing contrast and position the women within an undefined landscape, without clear borders. Towards the end of his life, Cheong's compositions often assumed such meditative qualities, emphasizing harmony of composition and fine detail. Compared to the paintings of the early 1950s that are by comparison decidedly less stylized and idyllic, the early 1980s works by Cheong show a ceaseless interest in the 'other', and a tender portrayal of idealized images. For instance in the untitled market scene, also from 1982 (p. 38), the figures are depleted of muscular composition, despite being located in an environment of activity and labour. Their expressions are completely closed off from us, and we are not afforded a single fully front-facing character. The forms of the figures veer on the edge of evoking spirituality and humanity, while the different style of depiction, in hues of brown and white, gives the painting an aesthetic more akin to traditional C

In Singapore's specific context of multiple races coexisting within the same space, and also the country's proximity to the rest of the region, a focus on the people and places depicted in Singapore art provokes the question of how these artists positioned themselves while representing themselves and their own cultures, and also when representing others and other cultures. In the case of the former, it was often with the benefit of criticality, and awareness of the deep history and traditions of their own culture, and of the need to forge a personal identity and relationship with this history. In the case of the latter, while it was more often through an idealist's lens that representation occurred, it was nevertheless with respect and, ultimately, a wide-eyed fascination with the diversity of life and culture, that these artists chose the subjects they did.



Cheong Soo Pieng Untitled [Market scene], 1982, oil on canvas, 82 x 101 cm (sight)

Considering the wide variety of works that were selected for the exhibition under the theme of people and places, it has been rewarding to dwell on the individual works of art, the connections between them, as well as the individual stories of the subjects, and the artists who chose to represent them.

Perhaps most interesting for me has been the exploration of the production of iconic images of Singapore through the work of the early generation of artists. As many of these migrant artists gained familiarity and belonging in Singapore during a period that mirrored the nation's own political journey towards self-governance and nationhood, the visual articulation of Singapore was a crucial element in the larger project of constructing a national identity. Visualizing, shaping, and inhabiting the landscape of Singapore, these artists have provided a means through which we might think about Singapore's history, and their representations of Singapore remain a referent not only in terms of an accurate rendering of the past, but of the spirit and ideals that are contained in these early canvasses. The specific contexts of formal art institutions in the form of art academies and museums, as well as the early development of an art market, are among the factors that contributed to the vast proliferation of images related to the people and places in Singapore. In today's context, influenced by the innovation of the early migrant artists who etched out places for themselves within the new nation, practising artists face the challenges of rampant commercialism in the development of art as a viable alternative investment and economic sector, as well as governmental constraints on certain modes of expression. Part and parcel of Singapore's particularity as a nation, these artists must continue to search out their place and position within the contemporary landscape of Singapore.

While acknowledging the challenges—and limitations—of bringing together a canonical or representative selection of works, this exhibition comprises a body of works from private collections that proposes a narrative, but also allows space for the investigation of tangential stories that are equally important. Although I have been unable to address each individual artwork featured in the exhibition in depth, it has nevertheless been rewarding within the confines of this essay to look closely at works of art, and to perform a close examination of what such looking can reveal.

Thinking about the position of these artists, and the shift from occupying to inhabiting the landscape, reveals itself to be crucial to understanding their subsequent forays into artistic experimentation, and the eventual development of their distinctive artistic styles. Ultimately, it is hoped that this exhibition has created a space within which to contemplate what it means not only to depict, but to be a part of, the people and places of Singapore.

#### Notes

- 1 Seng, YJ 2012, 'Building a collection', in *Inside the collection*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, pp. 6–14.
- 2 Tan, CG 1994, Chuah Thean Teng retrospective, Penang State Museum, Malaysia
- 3 Hsu, M 1999, A brief history of Malayan art, Millennium Books, Singapore, pp. 1–3
- 4 Tan, CG 1999, Yong Mun Sen retrospective, Penang State Museum, Malaysia, p. 10
- 5 Lee, CY 1996, Penang State Museum, Malaysia, p. 33. Unfortunately the whereabouts of this artwork is currently unknow6 Hsu, M 1999, p. 64.
- 7 Kwok, KC 1996, Channels and confluences: A history of Singapore art, Singapore Art Museum, p. 16.
- 8 Kwok, KC 1996, p. 24.
- 9 Boo, SY 2012, The new cathedral, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore.
- 10 Yeo, W 2010, The story of Yeh Chi Wei, National Art Gallery, Singapore, pp. 36-43
- 11 Yeo, W, Seng, YJ & Tng, G (eds) 2010, Cheong Soo Pieng: Visions of Southeast Asia, National Art Gallery, Singapore, p. 42 12 Kwok, KC 1996, pp. 70–5.

Teo Hui Min (born 1990) is a Singapore-based writer. Her research interests include the social and cultural context of twentieth-century Southeast Asian art. She is currently a junior specialist for Southeast Asian art at Christie's.



Abdullah Ariff
Left: Untitled [Two Chinese women], c. 1931–32, watercolour, 27.5 x 20 cm (sight)
Right: Untitled [Boats under tree], 1960, watercolour, 37 x 54 cm (sight)

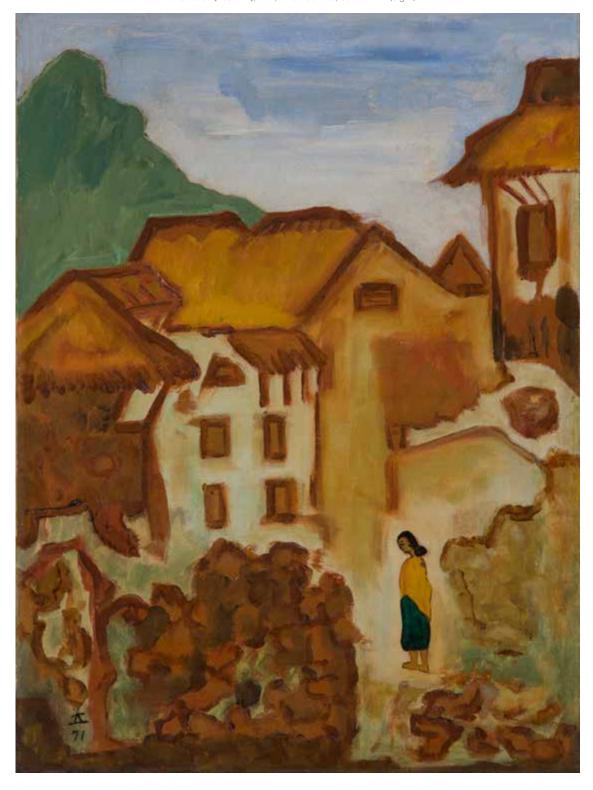






Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey) Untitled [Kayan woman, Thailand], 1994, oil on canvas, 55 x 45 cm (sight)

Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey)
Untitled [Kashmir], 1971, oil on canvas, 65 x 47 cm (sight)



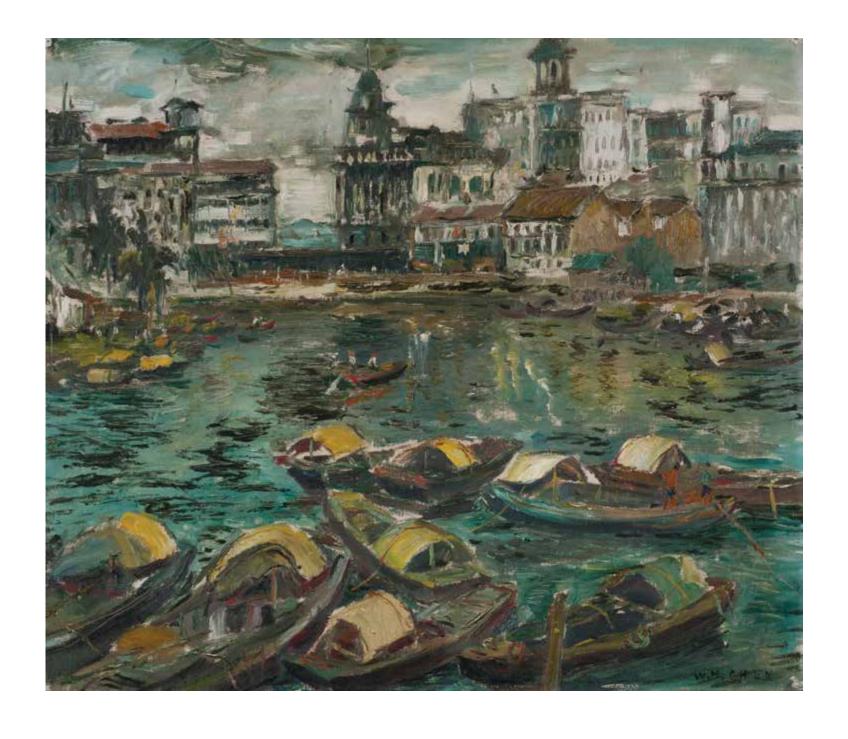


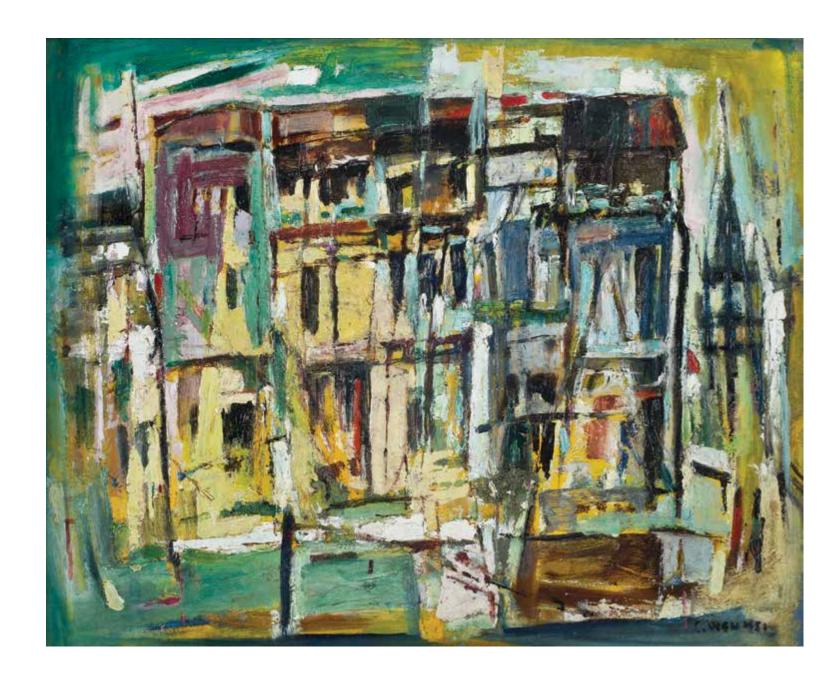
Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey)
Untitled [Market scene], 1974, oil on canvas, 79.5 x 60.5 cm (sight)



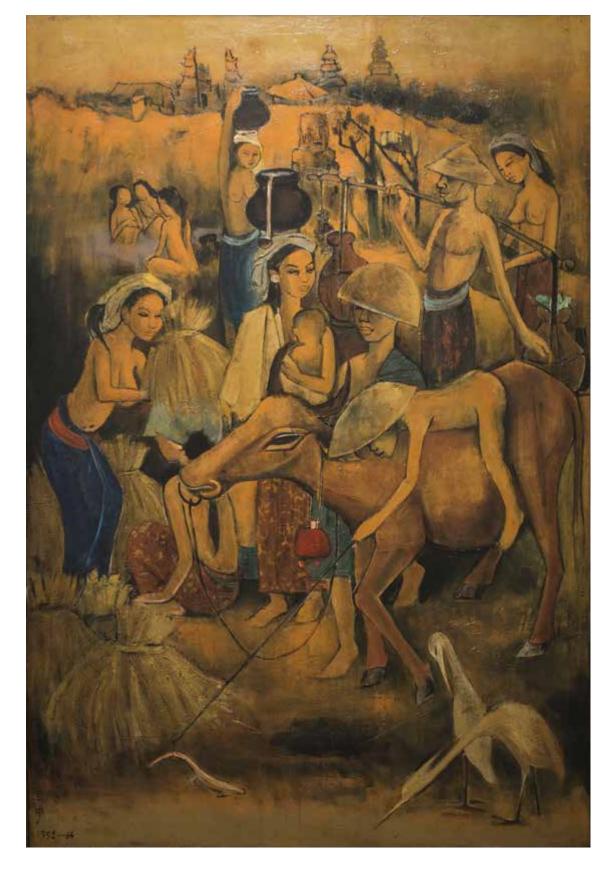
Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey) Untitled [Lake Toba], 1967, oil on canvas, 101 x 129 cm (sight)







Cheong Soo Pieng Untitled [Bali life], 1952-64, oil on canvas, 192.5 x 129 cm



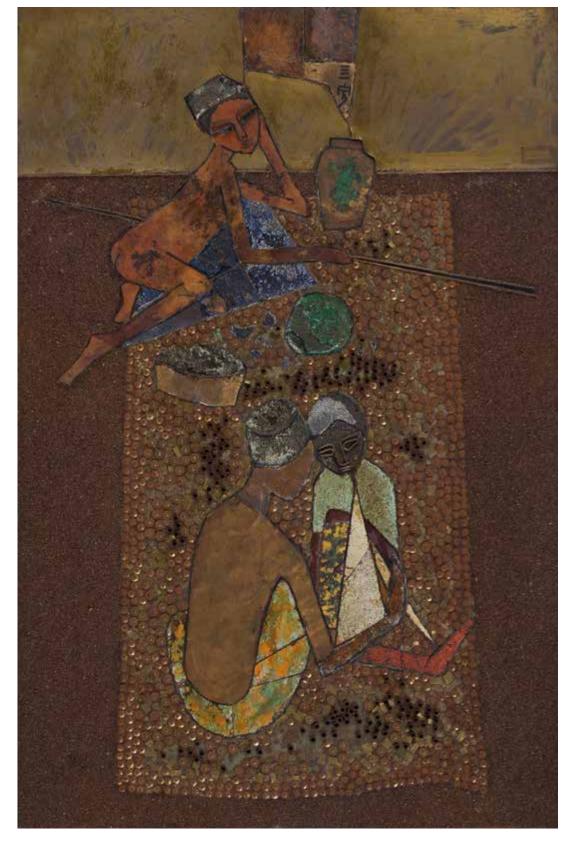
Cheong Soo Pieng Untitled [Chinese girl], 1955, oil on canvas, 66 x 45 cm



Cheong Soo Pieng Untitled [Tin mining], 1957, oil on canvas, 119 x 82.5 cm (sight)









Cheong Soo Pieng Untitled, 1982, oil on canvas, 92 x 103 cm (sight)

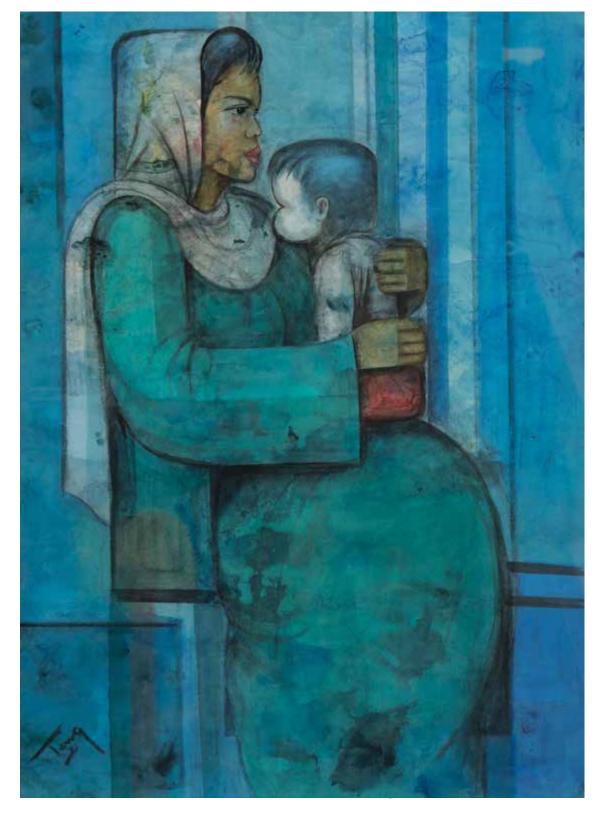


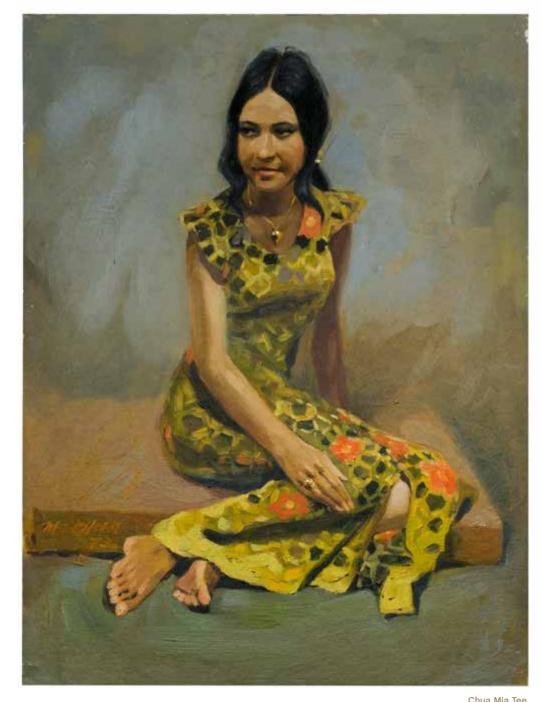




Choo Keng Kwang Untitled, 1969, oil on canvas, 125 x 425 cm (sight)

Chuah Thean Teng
Untitled [Mother and child], undated, watercolour, 75.5 x 54.5 cm (sight)





Chua Mia Tee Untitled [Portrait of a young lady], 1973, oil on board, 60.4 x 45.8 cm

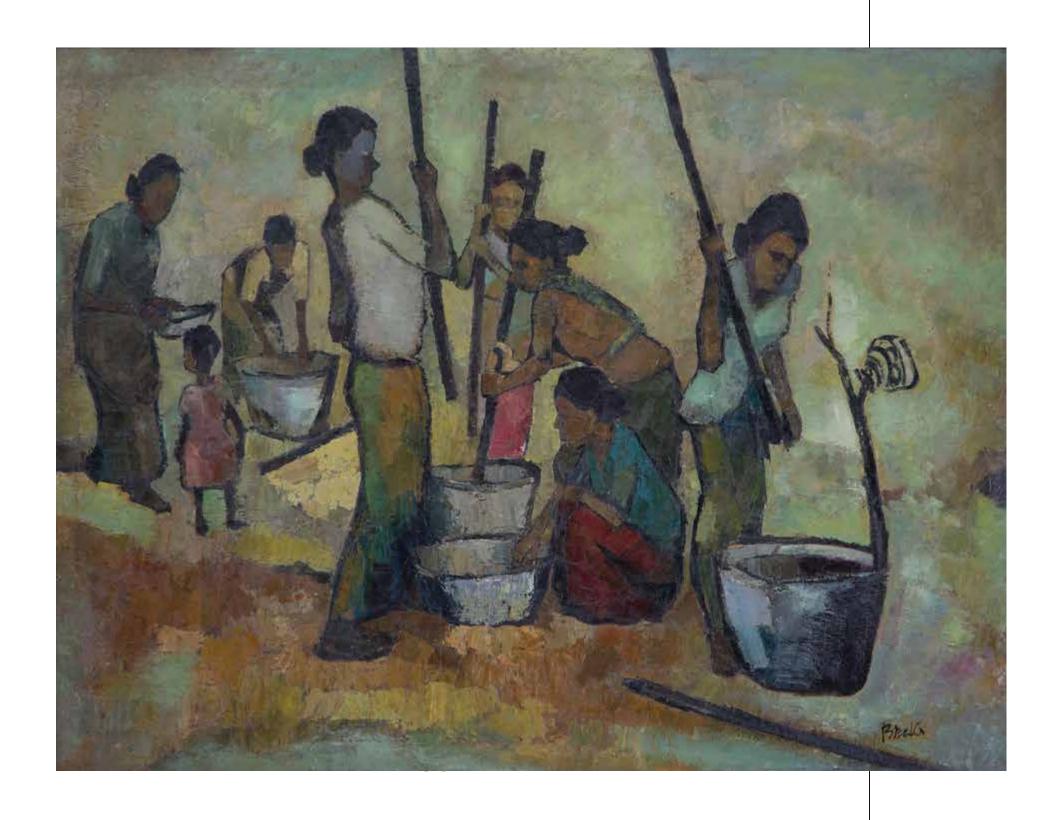


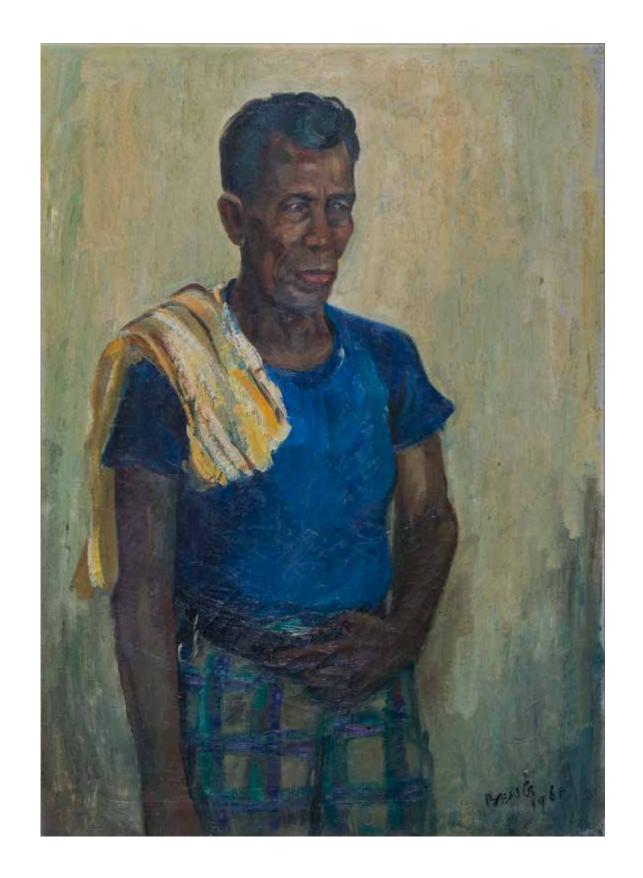
**Chua Mia Tee** Smith Street, 1981, oil on canvas, 80 x 105 cm



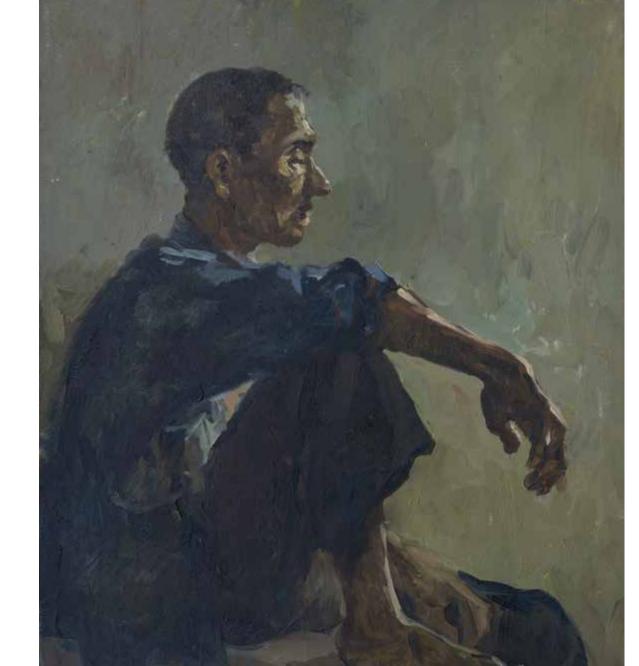
Foo Chee San Untitled, 1992, ink and watercolour on paper, 68 x 75.5 cm (sight)

Ho Khay Beng Left: *Untitled [Thrashing]*, c. 1955, oil on board, 80 x 105 cm (sight) Right: *Untitled [Indian man]*, 1961, oil on canvas, 71.5 x 51.5 cm

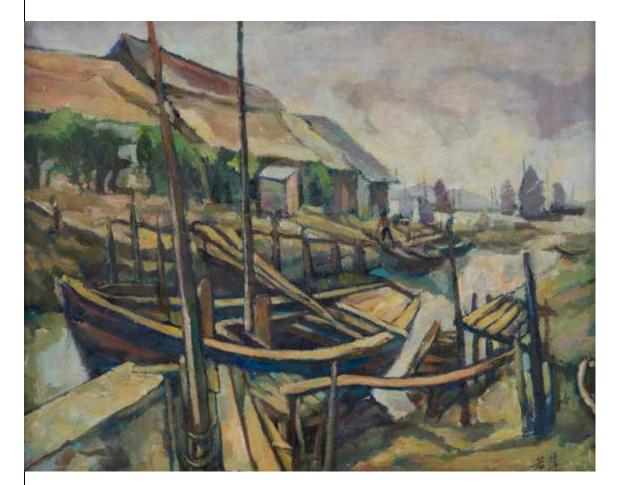






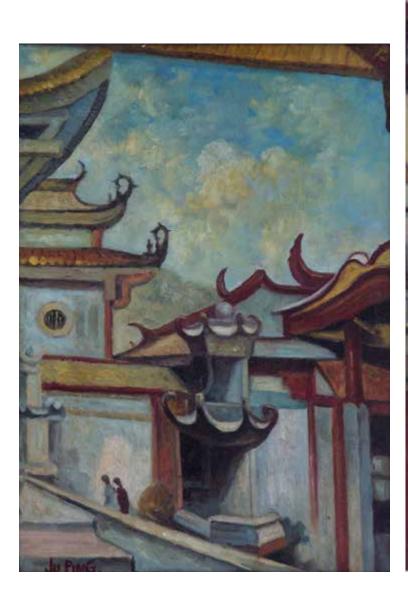


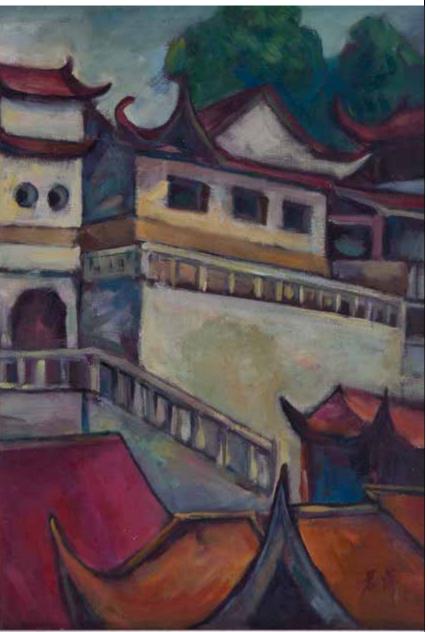
Koeh Sia Yong Untitled [Old Tong Kang worker], 1966, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 50.5 cm (sight)

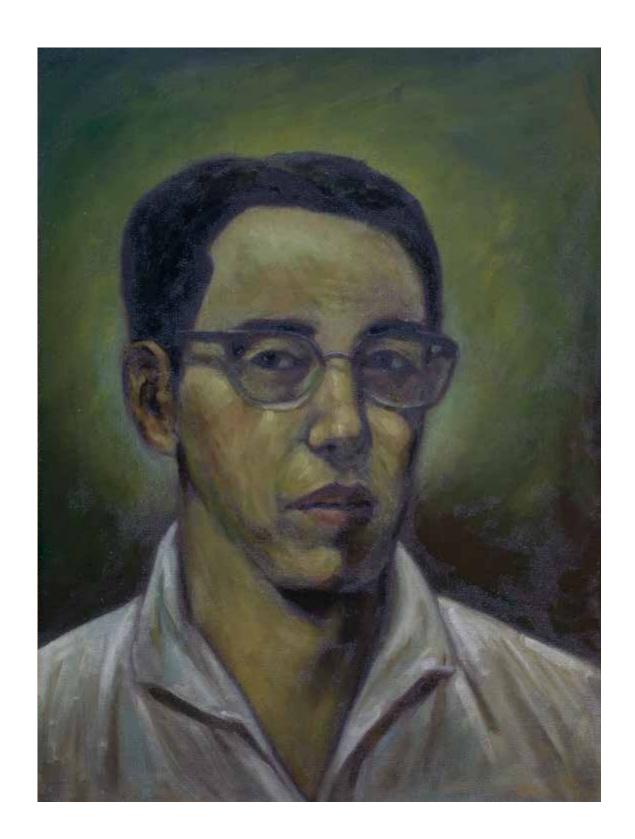




Kuo Ju Ping
Left to right:
Untitled [Chinese temple], c. 1950s, oil on board, 46 x 32 cm (sight)
Untitled [Chinese temple], c. 1950s, oil on board, 59.5 x 41.5 cm (sight)
Untitled [Chinese man], c. 1950s, oil on board, 60 x 44.5 cm (sight)







Kuo Ju Ping
Top left: Untitled [Street life], c. 1950s, oil on board, 39.5 x 42 cm (sight)
Top right: Untitled [Street scene], c. 1950s, oil on board, 51 x 63 cm (sight)
Bottom left: Untitled [Street scene], c. 1950s, oil on board, 36 x 42.5 cm (sight)
Bottom right: Untitled [Street view of mosque], c. 1950s, oil on board, 50 x 34.5 cm (sight)

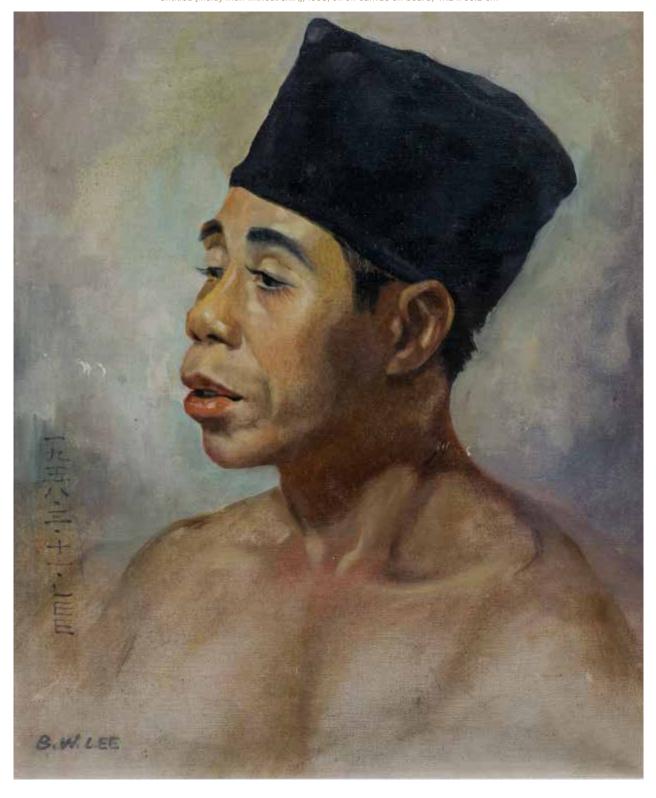








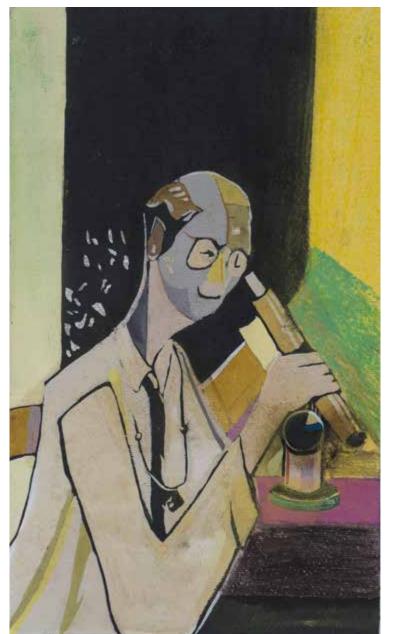
**Lee Boon Wang**Untitled [Malay man without shirt], 1958, oil on canvas on board, 47.2 x 39.2 cm



Lee Cheng Yong
Left to right:
Untitled [Farmer], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 27 x 14.2 cm (image)
Untitled [Farmer], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 23 x 14 cm (image)
Untitled [Man with microscope], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 24.5 x 14.5 cm (image)
Untitled [Man with moustache holding stick], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 23.4 x 14 cm (image)









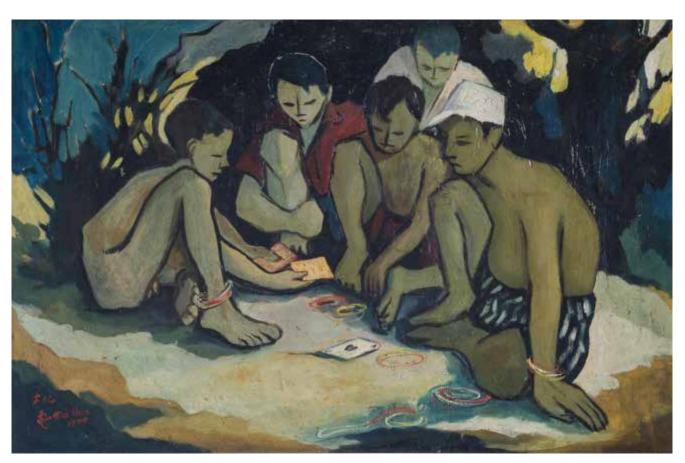
Lee Cheng Yong
Top left: Untitled [Man with stick], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 23.5 x 14 cm (image)
Bottom left: Untitled [Man with telescope], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 20 x 14.5 cm (image)
Right: Untitled [Violinist], c. 1950, gouache on paper, 26.6 x 14.3 cm (image)

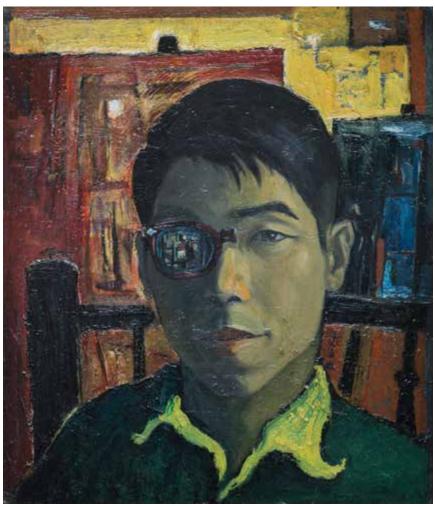






Lim Mu He
Top: Untitled [Five boys playing cards], 1959, oil on canvas, 45 x 68.5 cm (sight)
Bottom: Untitled [Self-portrait], 1963, oil on board, 36 x 31 cm (sight)





Lim Tze Peng Fruit stall, 1989, ink on paper, 66 x 92 cm (sight)





Lim Tze Peng

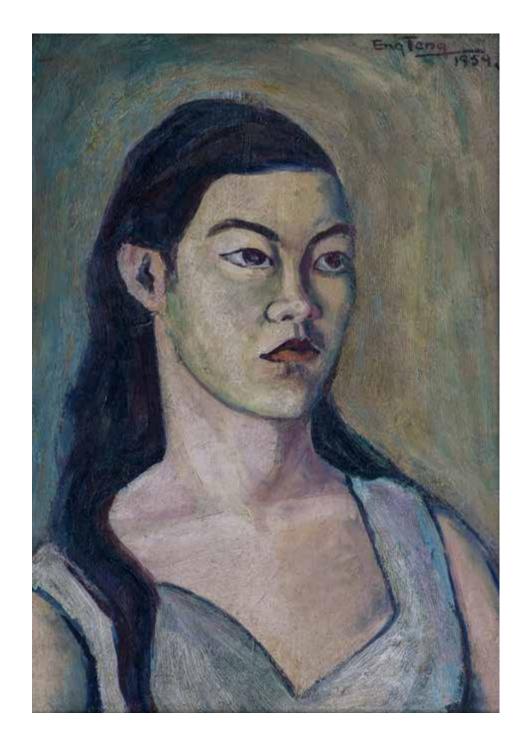
Untitled [Singapore River], 2006, ink and watercolour on paper
4 parts: 244 x 488 cm; (a) 244 x 118 cm, (b) 244 x 133 cm, (c) 244 x 117.5 cm, (d) 244 x 120.5 cm

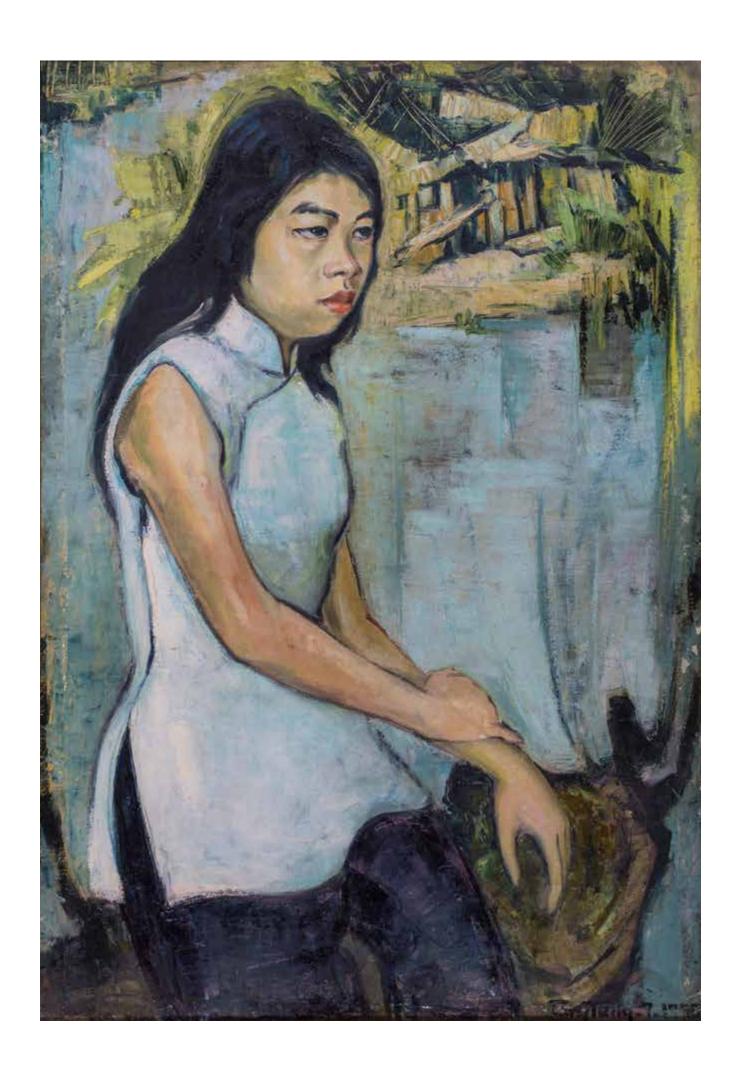


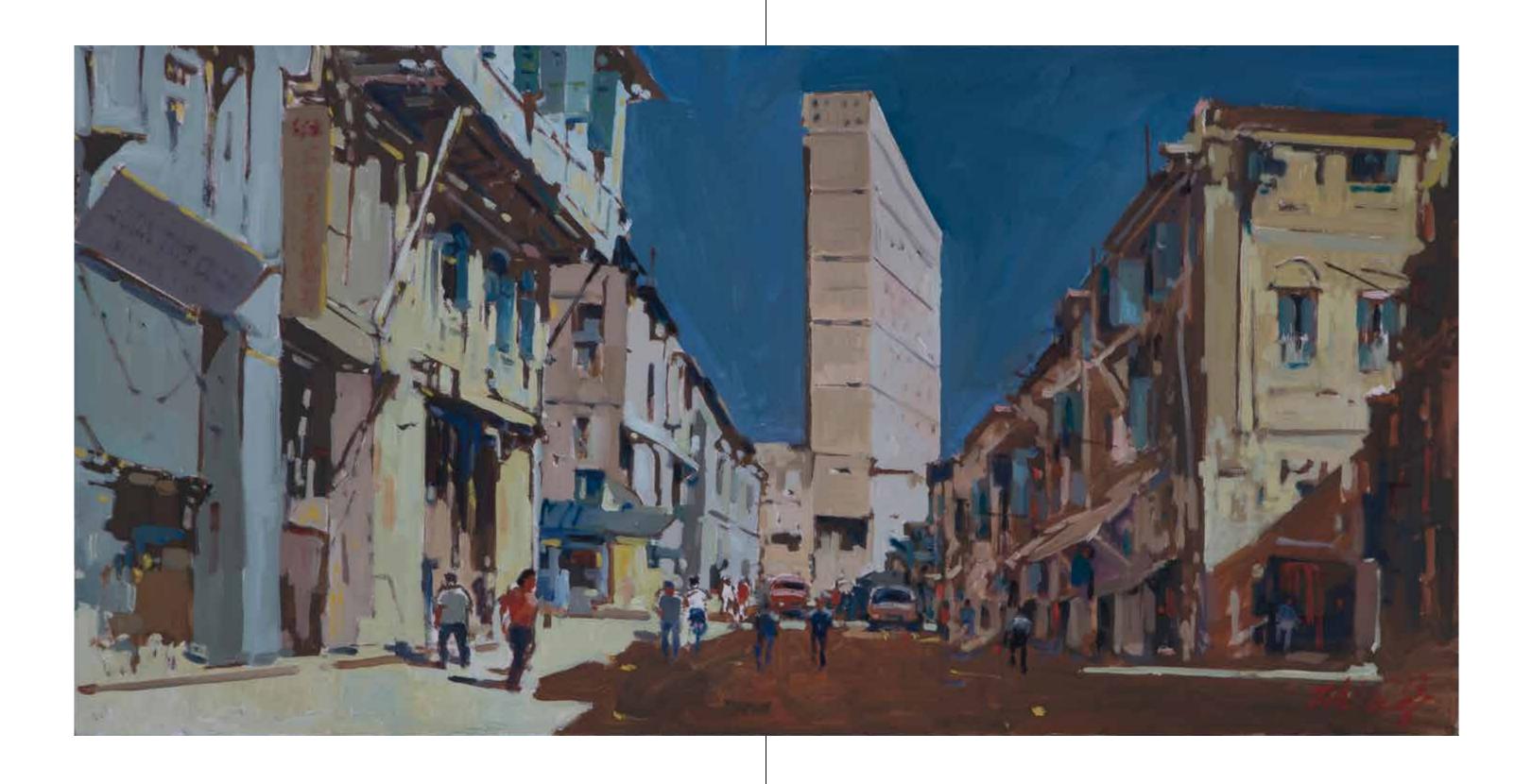


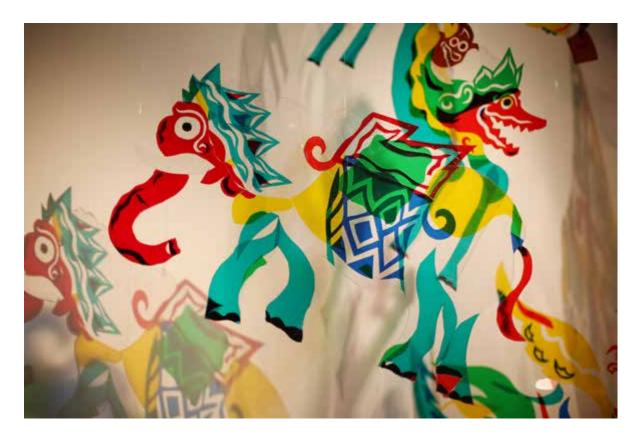


**Ng Eng Teng**Left: *Untitled*, 1959, oil on canvas on board, 43.7 x 30.7 cm
Right: *Untitled [Chinese girl]*, 1960, oil on canvas, 85 x 58 cm







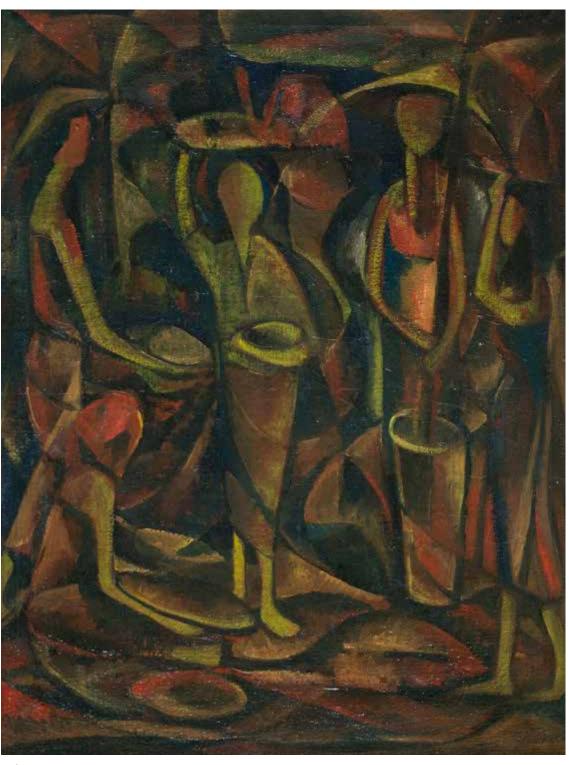






Phua Cheng Phue Untitled [Three Indian women], 1972, oil on board, 51 x 75.8 cm

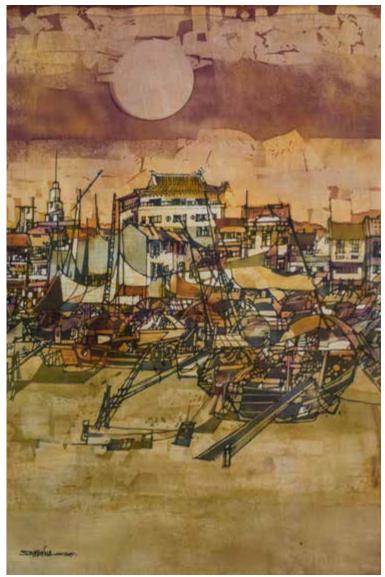


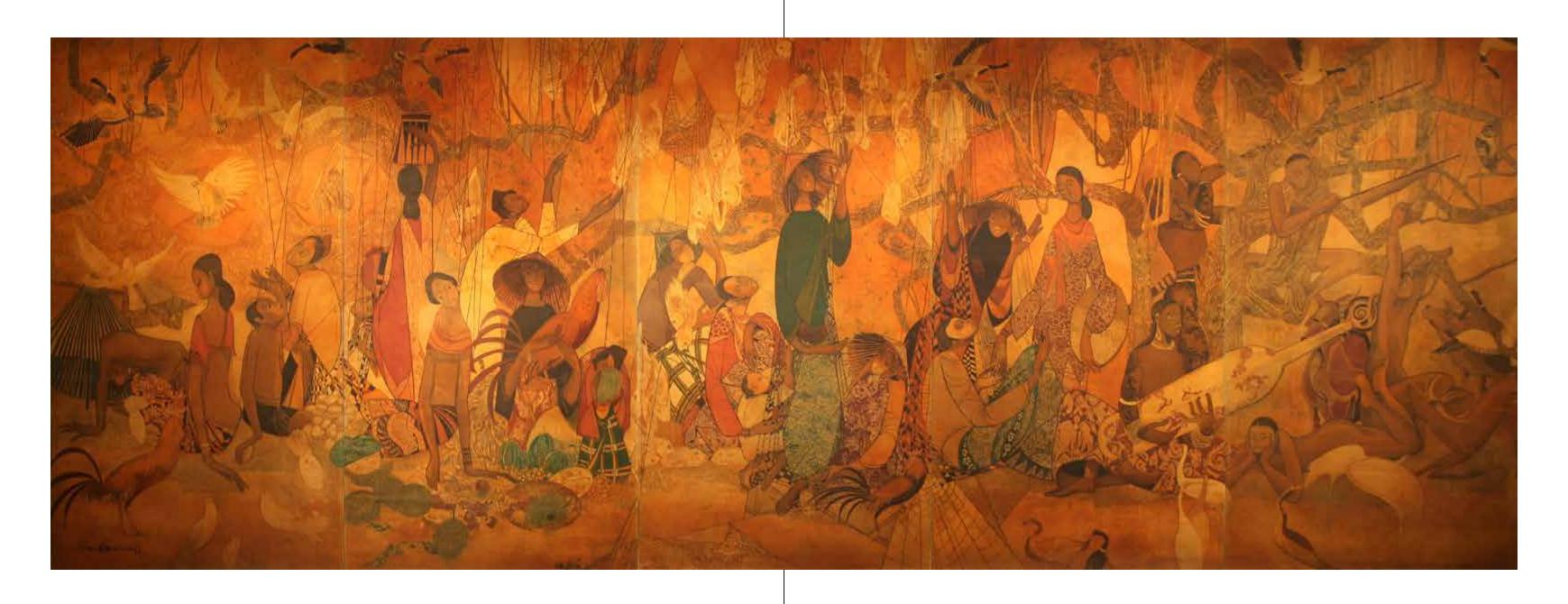


Anthony Poon
Fruit of the toil, 1964, oil on canvas, 80 x 61 cm



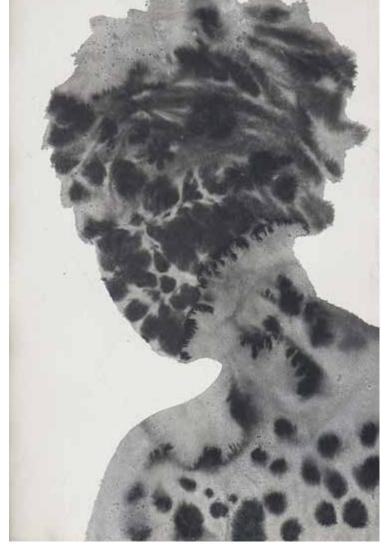






Tang Da Wu Left: Mr Cheo Chai Hiang, c. 2005, ink on paper, 103 x 69 cm Right: Untitled, c. 2005, ink on paper, 102 x 69.5 cm



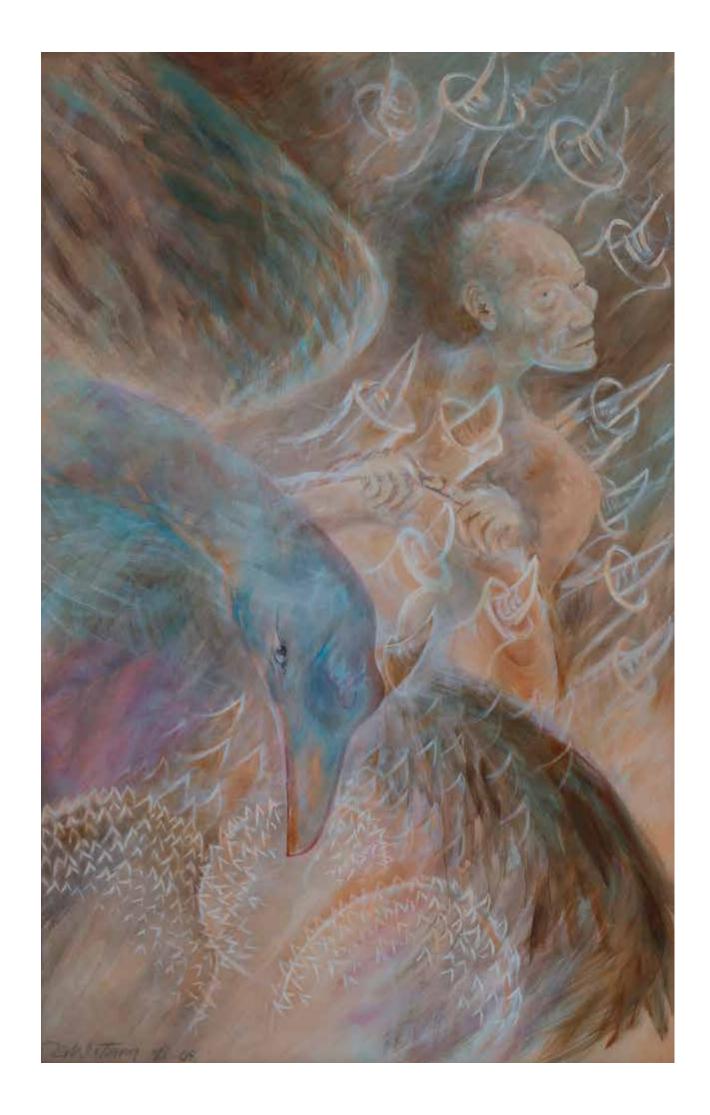








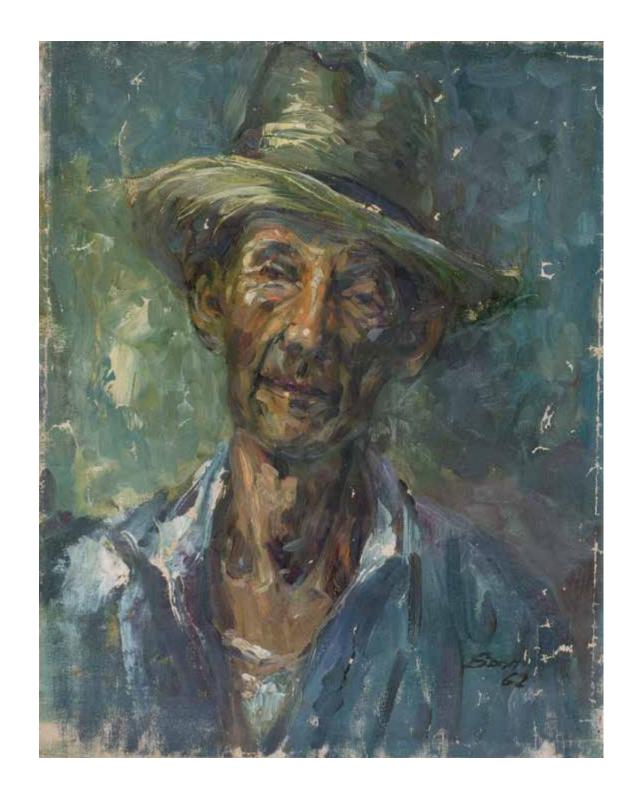


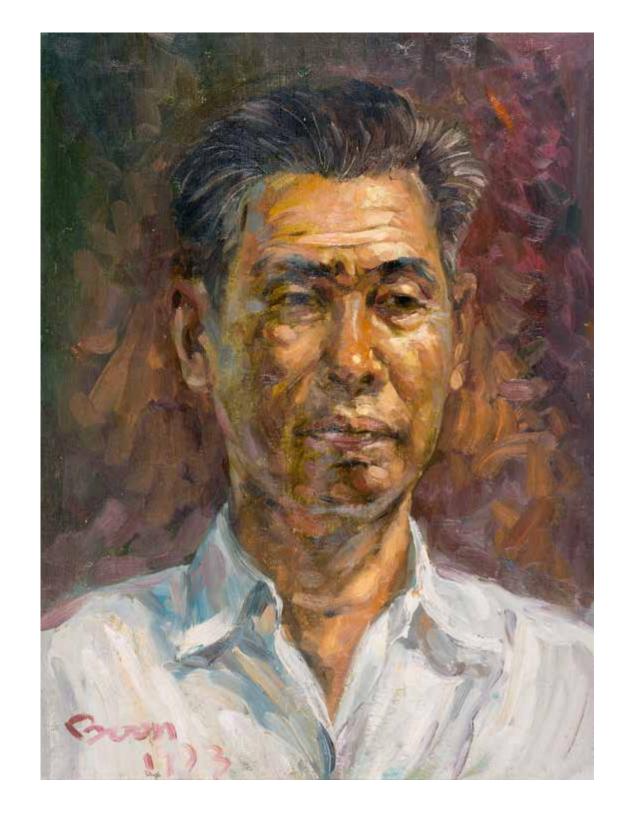






Tay Bak Koi Untitled [Songs of fishermen], 1966, watercolour, 62 x 117 cm



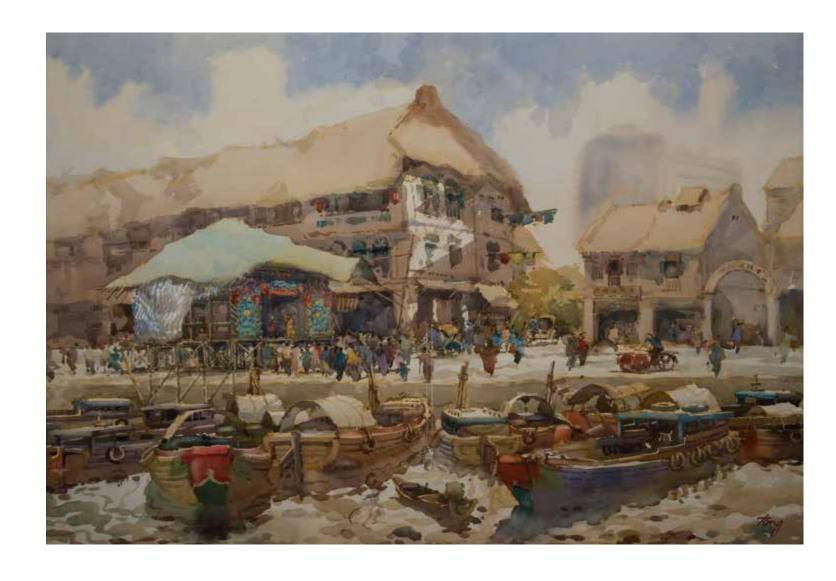


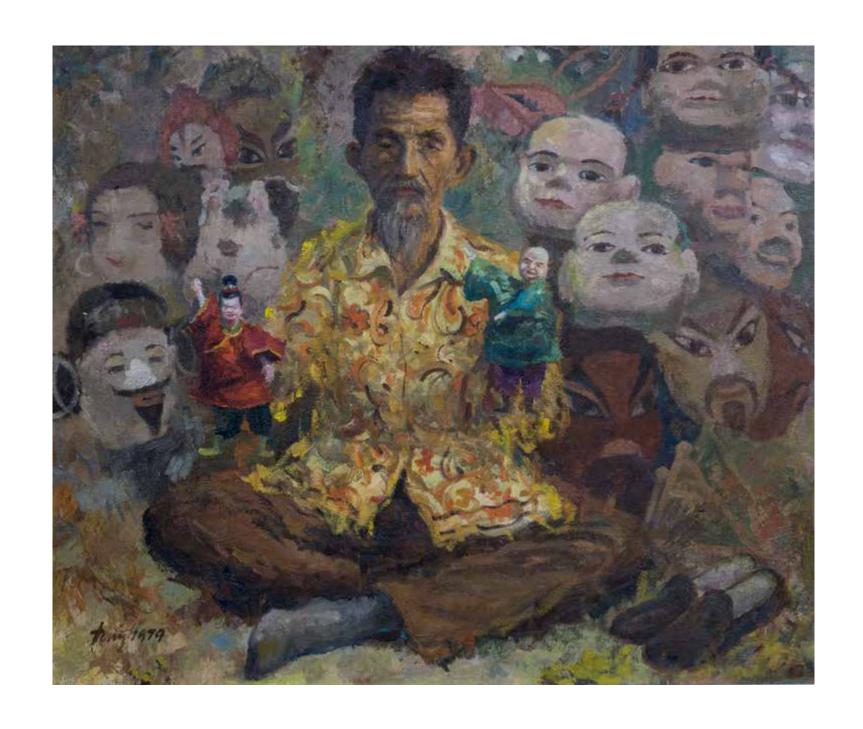


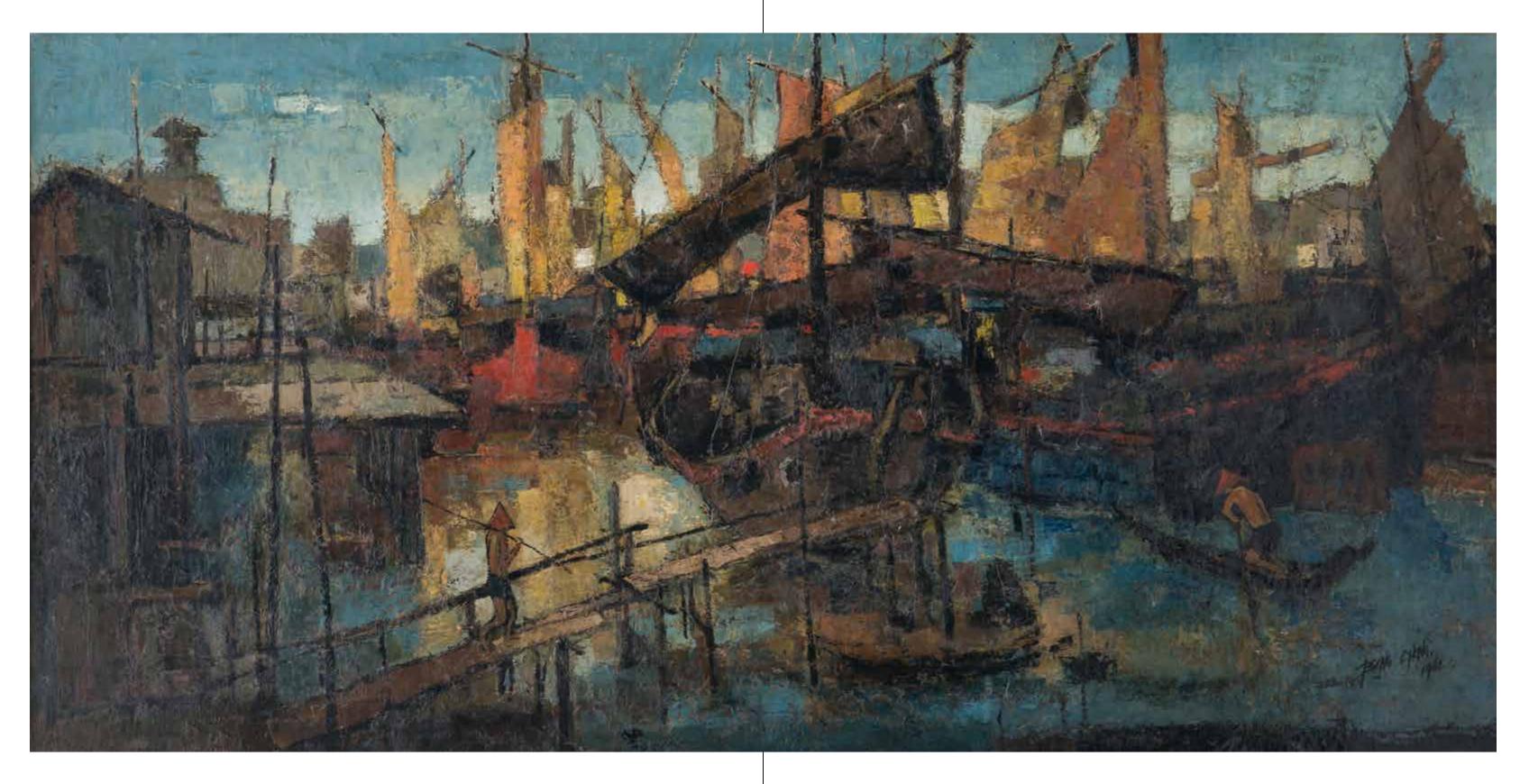
Tay Boon Pin
Untitled [Seated Malay girl], 1972, oil on canvas, 81 x 56 cm

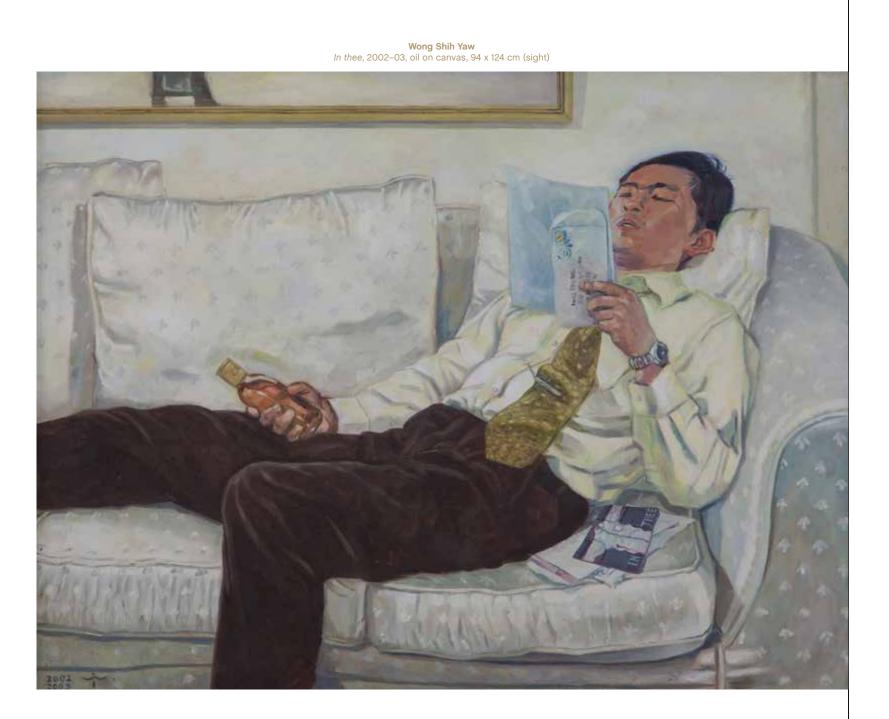






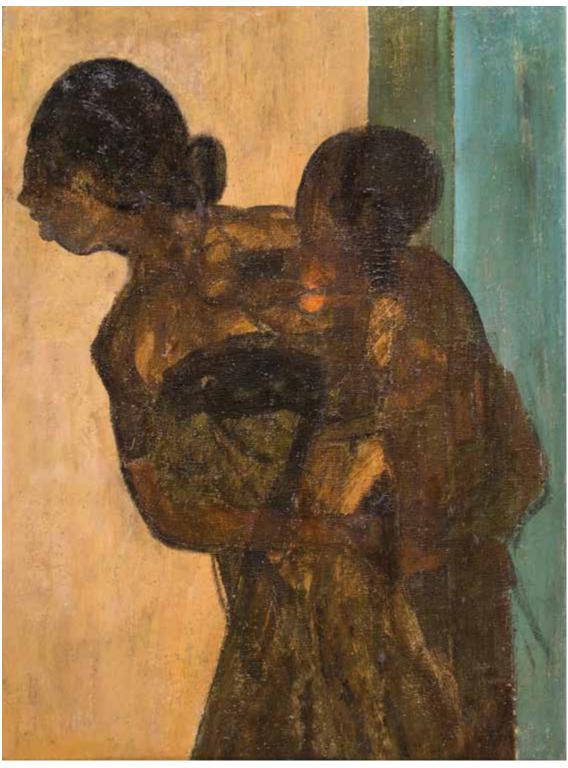






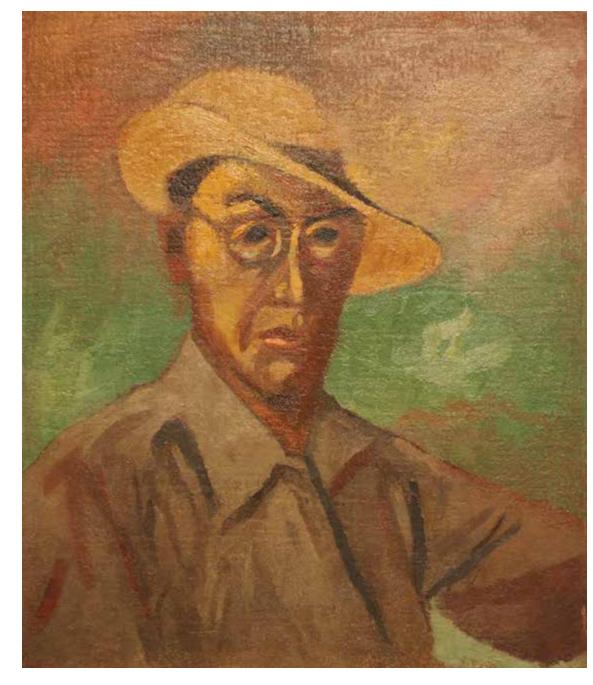
Yeh Chi Wei Untitled [Mother with children], c. 1969, oil on board, 59 x 72 cm (sight)





Yong Mun Sen
Untitled [Mother and child], undated, oil on board, 53 x 38.5 cm (sight)

Yong Mun Sen
Untitled [Self-portrait], undated, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 49.5 cm
LASALLE College of the Arts Collection, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore



Catalogue of works in the exhibition

Note: Dimensions are given in centimetres (cm), height preceding width followed by depth. Descriptive and attributed titles are in parentheses.

# Abdullah Ariff born Penang, Malaysia, 1904; died 1962

Untitled [Two Chinese women], c. 1931–32 watercolour 27.5 x 20 cm (sight) p. 44 2 Untitled [Boats under tree], 1960 watercolour 37 x 54 cm (sight) p. 45

# Boo Sze Yang born Singapore 1965, lives Singapore

The mall #19 (Plaza Singapura), 2011 oil on canvas
180 x 180 cm
p. 14

# Chen Cheng Mei (aka Tan Seah Boey) born Singapore 1927, lives Singapore

born Singapore 1927, lives Singapore

4
Untitled [Lake Toba], 1967
oil on canvas
101 x 129 cm (sight)
p. 49

5
Untitled [Kashmir], 1971
oil on canvas
65 x 47 cm (sight)
p. 47

6
Untitled [Market scene], 1974
oil on canvas
79.5 x 60.5 cm (sight)
p. 48

7
Untitled [Kayan woman, Thailand], 1994
oil on canvas

55 x 45 cm (sight)

p. 46

# Chen Shou Soo born Wenchang, Hainan, China, 1915; died Hong Kong 1984

8 Untitled, 1948 oil on canvas 39 x 49 cm (sight) p. 50

# Chen Wen Hsi born Baigong, Guandong, China, 1906; died Singapore 1991

Untitled [Singapore River], c. 1950–51 oil on canvas on board 53 x 64 cm p. 51

Untitled [Singapore River scene], 1960 oil on canvas on board 61 x 76 cm p. 52

# Cheong Soo Pieng born Xiamen (Amoy), Fujian, China, 1917; died Singapore 1983

Untitled [Bali life], 1952–64 oil on canvas 192.5 x 129 cm p. 53

Untitled [Chinese girl], 1955 oil on canvas 66 x 45 cm p. 54

Untitled [Egg seller], 1956 gouache on paper 37 x 47 cm (sight) p. 29

Untitled [Tin mining], 1957 oil on canvas 119 x 82.5 cm (sight) p. 55

# Untitled, 1971 mixed media 91.5 x 61 cm p. 56

Untitled, 1982 oil on canvas 92 x 103 cm (sight) p. 57

Untitled [Market scene], 1982 oil on canvas 82 x 101 cm (sight) p. 38

Untitled [Mother and child], undated oil on canvas

97 x 61 cm

p. 58

# Chia Yu Chian born Kota Tinggi, Johor, Malaysia, 1936; died Malaysia 1991

Untitled [Malayan life], 1958–62 oil on canvas on board 71 x 120.5 cm (sight) p. 23

# Chng Seok Tin born Singapore 1946, lives Singapore

Dream castle, 1988 woodcut 75 x 30 cm (block) p. 59

# Choo Keng Kwang born Singapore 1931, lives Singapore

Untitled, 1969 oil on canvas 125 x 425 cm (sight) pp. 60-1

# Chuah Thean Teng born Chenkiang, Fujian, China, 1914; died Penang, Malaysia, 2008

Untitled [Mother and child], undated watercolour 75.5 x 54.5 cm (sight) p. 62

# Chua Mia Tee born Shantou, Guangdong, China, 1931; lives Singapore

Untitled [Portrait of a young lady], 1973 oil on board 60.4 x 45.8 cm p. 63

Smith Street, 1981 oil on canvas 80 x 105 cm p. 64

# Foo Chee San born Hainan, China, 1928; lives Singapore

Untitled, 1992 ink and watercolour on paper 68 x 75.5 cm (sight) p. 65

# Ho Khay Beng born Penang, Malaysia, 1933; died 1986

26 Untitled [Thrashing], c. 1955 oil on board 80 x 105 cm (sight) p. 66

Untitled [Indian man], 1961 oil on canvas 71.5 x 51.5 cm p. 67

# Khaw Sia born Shanghai, China, 1913; died Penang, Malaysia, 1984

28
Untitled [Kampong spirit], 1967
gouache on paper
21 x 152 cm (image)
pp. 68–9

# Koeh Sia Yong born Singapore 1938, lives Singapore

Untitled [Old Tong Kang worker], 1966 oil on canvas 65.5 x 50.5 cm (sight) p. 70

# Kuo Ju Ping born Chinzian, Fujian, China, 1913; died Penang, Malaysia, 1966

38 x 47.5 cm (sight) p. 71 31 Untitled [Chinese man], c. 1950s oil on board 60 x 44.5 cm (sight)

Untitled [By the jetty], c. 1950s

oil on board

p. 73

Untitled [Chinese temple], c. 1950s oil on board 46 x 32 cm (sight) p. 72

33 Untitled [Chinese temple], c. 1950s oil on board 59.5 x 41.5 cm (sight) p. 72

34 Untitled [Malaysian street scene], c. 1950s oil on board 36.5 x 54 cm (sight) p. 71 Untitled [Street life], c. 1950s oil on board 39.5 x 42 cm (sight) p. 74

Untitled [Street scene], c. 1950s oil on board 51 x 63 cm (sight) p. 74

Untitled [Street scene], c. 1950s oil on board 36 x 42.5 cm (sight) p. 74

38
Untitled [Street view of mosque], c. 1950s
oil on board
50 x 34.5 cm (sight)
p. 74

# Lee Boon Wang born China 1935, lives Singapore

39 Untitled [Malay man without shirt], 1958 oil on canvas on board 47.2 x 39.2 cm p. 75

# Lee Cheng Yong born China 1913, died Penang, Malaysia, 1974

Untitled [Farmer], c. 1950 gouache on paper 27 x 14.2 cm (image) p. 76

Untitled [Farmer], c. 1950 gouache on paper 23 x 14 cm (image) p. 76

Untitled [Man in laboratory], c. 1950 gouache on paper 24.8 x 14 cm (image) p. 21

Untitled [Man with easel], c. 1950 gouache on paper 20 x 14.5 cm (image) p. 21

Untitled [Man with microscope], c. 1950 gouache on paper 24.5 x 14.5 cm (image) p. 77

Untitled [Man with moustache holding stick], c. 1950 gouache on paper 23.4 x 14 cm (image) p. 77

Untitled [Man with stick], c. 1950 gouache on paper 23.5 x 14 cm (image) p. 78

47 Untitled [Man with telescope], c. 1950 gouache on paper 20 x 14.5 cm (image) p. 78

Untitled [Violinist], c. 1950 gouache on paper 26.6 x 14.3 cm (image) p. 78

# Lim Mu Hue born Singapore 1936, died Singapore 2008

49 Untitled [Five boys playing cards], 1959 oil on canvas 45 x 68.5 cm (sight) p. 79

Untitled [Self-portrait], 1963 oil on board 36 x 31 cm (sight) p. 79

# Lim Tze Peng born Singapore 1923, lives Singapore

Fruit stall, 1989
ink on paper
66 x 92 cm (sight)
p. 80

Untitled [Singapore River], 2006 ink and watercolour on paper 4 parts: 244 x 488 cm; (a) 244 x 118 cm, (b) 244 x 133 cm, (c) 244 x 117.5 cm, (d) 244 x 120.5 cm pp. 82–3

Gestures in ink XI, 2006 ink and watercolour on paper 69 x 138 cm p. 81

Gestures in landscape II, 2006 ink and watercolour on paper 82.5 x 151 cm (sight) pp. 84–5

# Mohammad Din Mohammad born Malacca, Malaysia, 1955; died Singapore 2007

Issues and emotions, 1995 mixed media 105 x 136 cm (sight) p. 35

# Ng Eng Teng born Singapore 1934, died Singapore 2001

Untitled, 1959 oil on canvas on board 43.7 x 30.7 cm p. 86

57 Untitled [Chinese girl], 1960 oil on canvas 85 x 58 cm p. 87

# Ong Kim Seng born Singapore 1945, lives Singapore

Towards South Bridge Road, 2013 oil on canvas 50 x 100 cm pp. 88–9

# Tumadi Patri born Singapore 1959, lives Singapore

The journey of Pak Dalang, 2014 polycarbonate film, adhesive film 14 parts: overall dimensions variable p. 90

# Phua Cheng Phue born Singapore 1934, died Singapore 2004

60 Untitled [Three Indian women], 1972 oil on board 51 x 75.8 cm p. 91

# Anthony Poon born Singapore 1945, died Singapore 2006

Fruit of the toil, 1964 oil on canvas 80 x 61 cm p. 92

# Seah Kim Joo born Singapore 1939, lives Singapore

Untitled, 1962 oil on canvas 48 x 74 cm p. 93

*Untitled [Singapore River]*, c. 1965 batik on cotton 90 x 60 cm (sight) p. 93 Ontitled [Malayan life], 1968
batik on cotton laid on canvas
5 parts: 256 x 691 cm; (a) 256 x 139 cm,
(b) 256 x 137.5 cm, (c) 256 x 137.5 cm,
(d) 256 x 138 cm, (e) 256 x 139 cm
LASALLE College of the Arts Collection,
Institute of Contemporary Arts
Singapore. Acquired 1996
pp. 94–5

# Tang Da Wu born Singapore 1943, lives Singapore

Untitled [The Artists Village], 1988–2008 oil on canvas 280 x 174 cm p. 98

Mr Cheo Chai Hiang, c. 2005 ink on paper 103 x 69 cm p. 96

67 Untitled, c. 2005 ink on paper 102 x 69.5 cm p. 97

68 *Untitled*, c. 2005 ink on paper 102 x 69.5 cm p. 96

69 Untitled [Self-portrait], 2005 ink on paper 103 x 68.5 cm p. 97

70
Untitled [Self-portrait], 2005
ink on paper
102 x 68.5 cm
p. 97

Untitled [Georgette Chen], 2014 ink on paper 260 x 152 cm p. 99

# Tay Bak Koi born Singapore 1939, died Singapore 2005

72 Untitled [Songs of fishermen], 1966 watercolour 62 x 117 cm pp. 100–1

# Tay Boon Pin born Bagansiapiapi, Sumatra, Indonesia, 1936; lives Singapore

73
Untitled [Old man with straw hat], 1962
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74 Untitled [Seated Malay girl], 1972 oil on canvas 81 x 56 cm p. 104

75 Untitled [Portrait of a Chinese man], 1973 oil on canvas 48 x 35.5 cm p. 103

# Teo Eng Seng born Singapore 1938, lives Singapore

76
Untitled [Self-portrait], 1958
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# Tong Chin Sye born Singapore 1939, lives Singapore

77 Untitled [Opera by the Singapore River], 1972 watercolour 94 x 136 cm p. 106

78
Untitled [Puppetier], 1979
oil on canvas on board
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p. 107

# Wee Beng Chong born Singapore 1938, lives Singapore

79 Untitled [Wharf], 1962 oil on canvas 89 x 180.5 cm pp. 108–9

## Wong Shih Yaw born Singapore 1967, lives Singapore

80 In thee, 2002-03 oil on canvas 94 x 124 cm (sight) p. 110

# Yeh Chi Wei born Fuzhou, Fujian, China, 1913; died Singapore 1981

81 Untitled [Mother with children], c. 1969 oil on board 59 x 72 cm (sight) p. 111

# Yong Mun Sen born Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, 1896; died Penang, Malaysia, 1962

Untitled [Boats through the nets], 1936 oil on canvas on board 49 x 58 cm (sight) p. 20

Untitled [The scholars], 1945 oil on canvas on board 56.5 x 46.5 cm (sight) p. 26

Untitled [Mother and child], undated oil on canvas 53 x 38.5 cm (sight) p. 112

Untitled [Self-portrait], undated oil on canvas
55.5 x 49.5 cm
LASALLE College of the Arts Collection,
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p. 113

All works held in private collections in Singapore unless otherwise noted.

Brief artists' biographies

### ABDULLAH ARIFF

ABDULLAH ARIFF
Abdullah Ariff was born in Penang, Malaysia, in 1904. He was a self-taught artist and an art teacher in Penang, acknowledged as a leading early exponent of watercolour painting in Malaysia. Due to demand for his services as an art instructor, he was accepted into the Penang Impressionists group, which in the mid-1930s was almost wholly comprised of expatriate European women. In the early 1950s Ariff held solo exhibitions in the USA, and in London, and was invited to take part in the Salon of the Society of French Artists at the Grand Palais in Paris. He also worked as a cartoonist, designer and art director. In the mid-1950s he established the Ariff Advertising Agency. Ariff died in 1962. The National Visual Arts Gallery in Kuala Lumpur held a retrospective exhibition of his work in 2004.

Further reading Ali, Z 2007, Abdullah Ariff: Father of modern art in Malaysia, Balai Seni Lukis

### BOO SZE YANG

(2012), and has participated in more than 50 group exhibitions. A number of his works are held in the Singapore National New England.

### CHEN CHENG MEI (AKA TAN SEAH BOEY)

Chen Shou Soo
Chen Shou Soo was born in Wengchan, Hainan, China, in 1915.
At 15 years of age he enrolled in the Shanghai Academy of Fine
Arts, later continuing his studies at the University of Tokyo. Chen
travelled to Italy in 1935, where he lived and worked for 30 years.
In 1965, he moved back to China to teach at the Beijing Institute
of Fine Arts. In 1948, Chen Shou Soo and his wife, artist Angela
Maria Lattanzi, held a major exhibition in Singapore at Robinson
& Co., sponsored by the Society of Chinese Artists. In the 1970s
Chen moved to Hong Kong, where he died in 1984.

### CHEN WEN HSI

Chen Wen Hsi was born in Baigong, Guangdong, China, in 1906. He studied at the Shanghai College of Art in 1928 and later transferred to Xinhua College of Art. Chen migrated to Singapore

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Chen, WH 1968, The art of Chen Wen-Hsi, Straits Commercial Art, Singapore.
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Chen, WH 1982, Chen Wen Hsi retrospective 1982, Ministry of Culture & National

### CHIA YU CHIAN

### CHNG SEOK TIN

blind, and began to focus on creating sculptural and mixed media works. She has held 25 solo exhibitions and participated in more Chua Mia Tee works.

Further reading
Barnes, R 1981, 'Seok Tin: Back from the cold; but she has to go away again

# CHOO KENG KWANG

Choo Keng Kwang was born in Singapore in 1931. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1953. As a first-generation Singaporean artist, he is best known for his oil paintings representing landscapes and animals. Choo has made a significant contribution to art education in Singapore and became the head of art education at NAFA in 1984. Choo's

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Choo, KK 2002, The selected works of Choo Keng Kwang, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore.

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Chuah, TT 1993, Batik art, University of Beijing.
Sullivan, M 1959, Chinese art in the twentieth century, Faber and Faber, London.
Tan, CG 1994, Chuah Thean Teng retrospective exhibition catalogue, Penang State
Museum Malaysia

Museum, Malaysia. Tan, CK 1994, *Pioneers of Malaysian art*, The Art Gallery Penang, Malaysia Tan, CK 2014, *Eight pioneers of Malaysian art*, Marshall Cavendish, Singapor

Chua Mia Tee was born in Shantou, Guangdong, China, in 1931. He migrated with his family to Singapore in 1937. Chua graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1952 and subsequently taught there. He was a member of the Equator Art Society. Chua is best known for history paintings such as *Epic* 

### FOO CHEE SAN

Second-generation artist Foo Chee San was born in Hainan, China, in 1928. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and was awarded a Colombo Plan scholarship in 1963. His practice includes woodcut printmaking, lacquer ware, and Chinese ink and oil painting, and he has held exhibitions in

**Further reading**Tan, A 2012, *Tribute to Foo Chee San: Moments and milestones*, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore.

Further reading

Ho Khay Beng: Memorial exhibition (1934–1986) 1996, The Art Gallery Penang,
Malaysia

# KHAW SIA

First-generation Malaysian artist Khaw Sia was born in Shanghai in 1913. He studied at the Sin Hwa Academy of Fine Art in Shanghai from 1925 to 1932. His family migrated to Penang, Malaysia, in 1937. Khaw held his first solo exhibition in Penang in 1955, exhibiting paintings of Balinese women and landscapes. Working in oil, pastel and watercolour, he exhibited his paintings and received awards for his art in London and Paris in the 1950s. He died in Penang in 1984.

KOEH SIA YONG
Koeh Sia Yong was born in Singapore in 1938. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1958, majoring in Western painting. He was a key member of the anticolonialist Equator Art Society (1956–72), whose members were exponents of realist art in Singapore. Over the last 50 years, Koeh has produced woodblock prints, political cartoons and oil paintings. Koeh has lived in Bali, where Balinese indigenous life and customs influenced his style. He lives in Singapore.

Kuo Ju Ping
Kuo Ju Ping was born in Chinzian, Fujian, China, in 1913. He was
a founding member of the Penang Chinese Art Club in 1935. Kuo
graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) among
the first graduate cohort of 1940. It is reported that he did not
sell any paintings during his lifetime, earning recognition only
posthumously. Kuo's works are held in the collections of Fukuoka
Art Museum, National Visual Arts Gallery (Kuala Lumpur), Penang
State Museum, Malaysia, and the Singapore National Collection.
Kuo died in Penang in 1966.

### LEE BOON WANG

### LEE CHENG YONG

Lee Cheng Yong was born in China in 1913. He studied in Shanghai at the Sin Hwa Academy of Fine Art and was a teacher in Penang, Malaysia. He held his first solo exhibition in Penang in 1932. The exhibition included Western-style paintings and sculptural works. Lee was the founding president of the Penang Chinese Art Club in 1936. He specialized in oil painting and was influenced by the Post-Impressionist art of Gauguin and Van Gogh. Lee's works are held in the collections of the Fukuoka Art Museum, Singapore National Collection, National Visual Arts

Further reading
Tan, CK 1994, Pioneers of Malaysian art, The Art Gallery Penang, Malaysia.
Tan, CK (ed.) 1996, Lee Cheng Yong retrospective, Penang State Museum,

### LIM MU HUE

LIM MU HUE
Lim Mu Hue was born in Singapore in 1936. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1955 with a diploma in Western painting, and taught at NAFA from 1961 to 1969. Lim is best known for his skillful woodcut prints, which were the basis for a large-scale mural at Esplanade MRT station. Lim drew inspiration from the Singapore landscape and Western representational styles to develop his distinctive manner of expression. A 2014 retrospective exhibition at NAFA presented more than 60 works in various media from the 1950s to 2008. Lim died in Singapore in 2008.

Further reading Hsu, M 1999, A brief history of Malayan art, Millenium Books, Singapore. Lim Mu Hue: An inventive life 2014, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore

### LIM TZE PENG

### MOHAMMAD DIN MOHAMMAD

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), majoring in Western painting. Mohammad's expressive paintings and sculptures were influenced by Sufism as well as his devotion to the practice

Further reading
Farrer, D 2009, Shadows of the prophet: Martial arts and Sufi mysticism, Springer,

Ng Eng Teng was born in Singapore in 1934. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1961 and continued his studies in the UK at the North Staffordshire College of Technology and Farnham School of Art. His first solo exhibition was held at the National Library in 1970. Ng, 'the grandfather of Singapore sculpture', is best known for his figurative sculptures, which occupy public sites around Singapore. He was also a highly skilled painter and produced ceramics and drawings. Ng's art portrays humanist themes. He was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1981, twenty years before his death in Singapore in 2001.

Singapore.
Sabapathy, TK 2003, Configuring the body: Form and tenor in Ng Eng Teng's art,
NUS Museum, Singapore.

### ONG KIM SENG

Ong Kim Seng
Ong Kim Seng was born in Singapore in 1945. He is a selftaught artist well-known for his watercolour paintings. He has
worked as a full-time artist since 1985, and has held numerous
solo and group exhibitions internationally. Ong is the first and
only Singaporean to have won six American Watercolor Society
awards. Ong was conferred membership in 1992, the only Asian
artist outside the USA to be admitted to the prestigious 138-year

Tumadi Patri was born in Singapore in 1959. He began studies at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1986. Combining batik painting and wayang kulit, his art represents his Javanese cultural heritage. Patri became a full-time artist in 2009 and staged his first solo exhibition at DLR Gallery, Singapore, in April 2014. He is a member of the artist group Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya (APAD), which was founded in 1962.

Phua Cheng Phue was born in Singapore in 1934. He was a self-taught artist and exhibited in Singapore and elsewhere in Southeast Asia in the early 1970s. In 1978 his works were shown in Moscow in the first Singapore art exhibition brought to the Soviet Union. He died in Singapore in 2004.

ANTHONY POON

Anthony Poon was born in Singapore in 1945. He graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1964, and held his first exhibition at the National Library. He continued his studies at Byam Shaw School of Art in London in 1968. Poon was part of the group known as second-generation artists in Singapore, whose works defined a new modernism in Singapore that departed from the Nanyang style. He was active on art panels and advisory boards, and his paintings and sculptures are held in collections in Asia and the USA. Poon died in Singapore in 2006.

SEAH KIM JOO
Seah Kim Joo was born in Singapore in 1939 and raised in
Terengganu, Malaysia, where he was exposed to traditional
batik-making processes. He joined the Nanyang Academy of
Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1959 and in 1965 returned to Terengganu to
travel the Malaysian east coast and consolidate his knowledge
of batik techniques. He was a member of the Ten Men Art Group
making regular excursions to other Southeast Asian countries.
In 1972, one of Seah's paintings was selected for the Singapore
government's commemorative stamp series, in honour of his
contribution to art.

Further reading
Lim, F 1969, Seah Kim Joo and his batik art, Art Studio, Singapore.
Kwok, KC 1996, Channels and confluences: A history of Singapore art, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore.

### TANG DA WU

TANG DA WU

Tang Da Wu was born in Singapore in 1943. He studied at Birmingham Polytechnic and Goldsmiths College, London. He founded The Artists Village in 1988, the first art colony in Singapore. Although Tang works in diverse media and has consistently practised ink painting, he is best known for his performances and installations. His art often addresses themes of environmental concern and social issues. Tang has participated in international survey exhibitions including the 3rd Gwangju Biennale (2000), the 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (1999) and the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007).

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Davis, L 1999, 'Processing raw material', Esplanade: The Arts Magazine,
September-October, pp. 34-7.
Kwok, KC, Mahizhan, A, Sasitharan, T (eds) 2002, Selves: The state of the arts in
Singapore, National Arts Council, Singapore.
Leong, G 1991, 'Audacity in art', Mirror, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 11-12.
Tay, D 1989, 'A prodigious son comes home', Accent, vol. 63, pp. 65-6.

### TAY BAK KOI

Further reading
Chia, W 1994, 'Reminiscences of the southern seas: An introduction', in

Tay Boon Pin
Tay Boon Pin was born in Bagansiapiapi, Sumatra, Indonesia, in 1936. He migrated to Singapore in 1945. Tay graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1956. The sea is a recurring motif in his work. Between 1956 and 1970, he researched and held seminars on painting techniques with the Equator Art Society, promoting the social realist style in Singapore. Tay held his first solo exhibition in 2011 when he was 75 years of age.

### TEO ENG SENG

Teo Eng Seng was born in Singapore in 1938. In the 1960s he studied at the Central School of Art and Design in London and the Birmingham College of Art and Design. Teo resided in England for 10 years, teaching in art colleges and developing his practice. In 1979, he declared that he was abandoning oil painting Since then, his experimentation and invention of 'paperdyesculp' has led him to explore the use of plastic waste in his art, and he has also extended his oeuvre to include both performance and installation art. He was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1986.

Sabapathy, TK 2011, Teo Eng Seng: Art and thoughts, Ethos Books, Singapore

### TONG CHIN SYE

### WEE BENG CHONG

WEE BENG CHONG

Wee Beng Chong was born in Singapore in 1938. He studied at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Paris. Wee is a versatile artist who practises calligraphy, Chinese ink painting and sculpture. He was the first recipient of the Cultural Medallion, in 1979. In 1961, he held a solo exhibition of his seal carvings and paintings at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. He was the head of the fine art department at NAFA from 1982 to 1989 and was one of the founding members of the Modern Art Society in Singapore in 1963.

Further reading
Goh, B 1990, 'Wee giant in the arts', *The Straits Times*, 28 September.
Koay, S 1987. *Arts of Asia*. National Museum of Singapore.

Wong Shih Yaw was born in Singapore in 1967. He studied painting at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Wong was one of the founding members of The Artists Village, established in 1988. His often intricately detailed allegorical paintings explore notions of identity, individuality and sexuality. In recent years, he has adopted a more illustrative style of painting, depicting predominantly biblical themes and narratives in the context of local Singapore settings. Wong's paintings are held in the Singapore National Collection.

### YEH CHI WEI

Malaya and travel to other parts of Southeast Asia. Yeh taught art for 22 years in Malaysia and Singapore. He was the founder and 'chief planner' of the Ten Men Art Group, a group of artists who got together in the early 1960s seeking new material and inspiration for their works by travelling widely in the region. Yeh researched diverse cultural practices including Javanese batik and Chinese rubbings. His distinctive oil paintings interweave Asian and Western histories. Yeh died in 1981. The National Art Gallery Singapore presented *The story of Yeh Chi Wei* at the Singapore Art Museum in 2010.

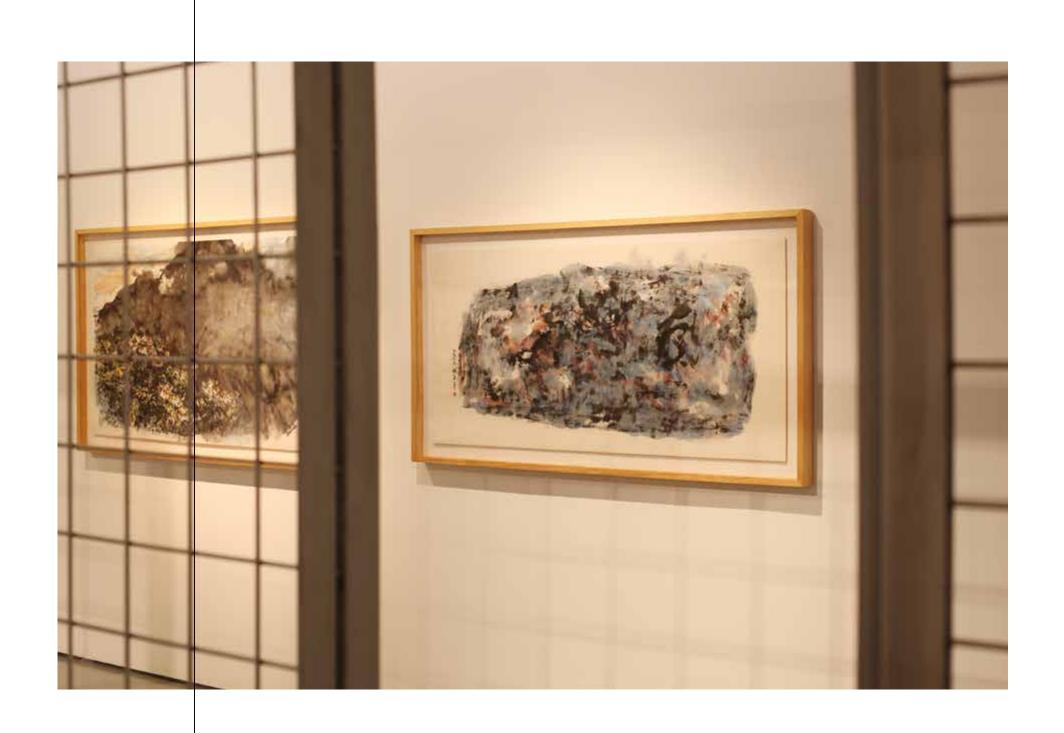
# YONG MUN SEN

Yong Mun Sen was born in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, in 1896. He is acknowledged as leading the growth of modern Malaysian art and has been named the father of Malaysian painting. Yong travelled to China in 1901 to pursue a formal education in calligraphy. In 1920, he moved to Penang, Malaysia, forming the Penang Chinese Art Club in 1936. His watercolour paintings of landscapes incorporate Chinese art influences. Yong was honoured with memorial exhibitions at the National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, and at the Penang State Museum (both in

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Tan, CK 1998, Social responsibility in art criticism, or, Why Yong Mun Sen is the father of Malaysian painting, Art Gallery, Georgetown, Malaysia.
Tan, CK 2014, Eight pioneers of Malaysian art, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore.



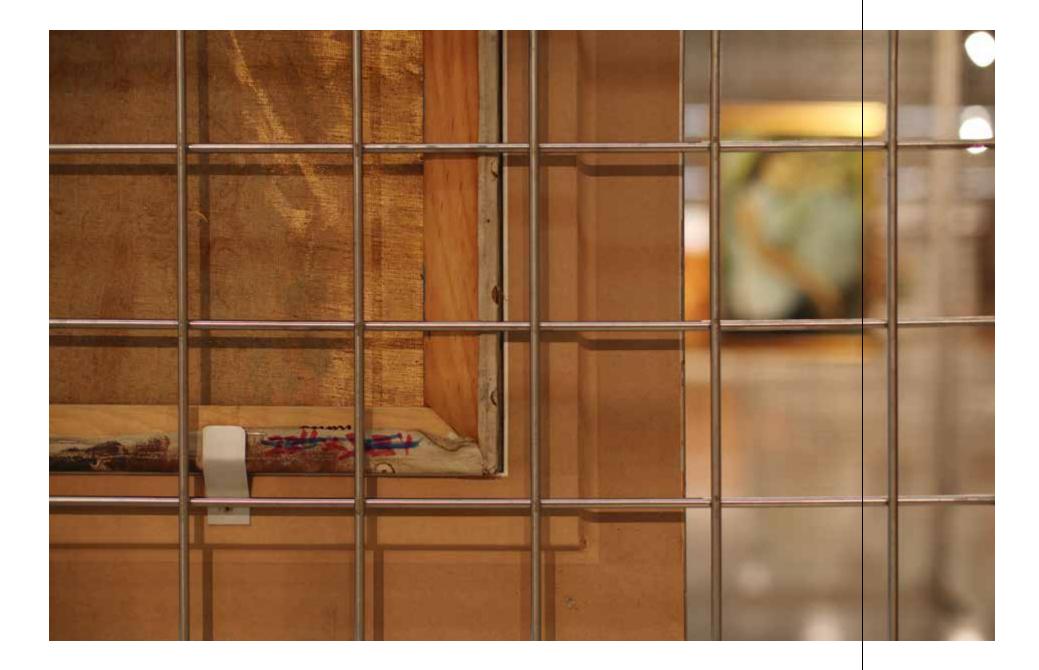




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Artists imagine a nation: SG50. Pictures of people and places from the collections of Koh Seow Chuan and friends

Published by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore on the occasion of the exhibition *Artists imagine a nation:* SG50. *Pictures of people and places from the collections of Koh Seow Chuan and friends*, 13 February to 19 April 2015.

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Front cover image:

Teo Eng Seng, *Untitled [Self-portrait]* (detail), 1958, oil on board, 71 x 50.5 cm







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