Charting Thoughts

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The writers invited by National Gallery Singapore to contribute towards this publication were given a main brief that their essays should further the understanding of the history of modern art in Singapore and Southeast Asia. This was aligned to the Gallery’s own research interests, as reflected in the framework of its two inaugural long-term exhibitions—one on Singapore modern art and the other on Southeast Asian modern art. Whilst the curatorial narratives of both exhibitions were shared with the writers, it was left open for them to choose whether their essays would complement, expand, critique or highlight aspects of art histories covered (or not covered) in the two exhibitions.

The eventual essays in this anthology, organised chronologically according to the periods and practices under study, cover a wide terrain. In a sense, they also reflect the current scholarly preoccupations in a field that has gained considerable depth over the past few decades, but continues to suffer from critical gaps.

On Singapore
The writers requested to reflect on Singapore art responded in diverse ways. A number took the opportunity to cast light on overlooked or lesser-known aspects of Singapore art history. For instance, Kwa Chong Guan highlights how materials such as 19th-century colonial natural history paintings and photographs inform our understanding of the beginnings of art in Singapore, which have hitherto been conventionally associated with the founding of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1938. Similarly, Yeo Mang Thong extensively researched pre-war Chinese-language newspapers to foreground the vibrant cultural scene amongst the Chinese diaspora in Singapore then. His essay provides a refreshing account of the lively literati exchanges and fervent nationalistic activities by painters and calligraphers in the years leading up to World War II. This has, in turn, shed new light on why the local art scene was able to rebound with relative ease in the 1950s, after the war came to an end.

Yvonne Low, a younger scholar, has also done admirable research on early 20th-century art activities in Singapore—an area which has, to date, received insufficient attention. Low’s essay examines the contributions of colonial women artists working in social art clubs in Singapore. Such amateur artists are often overlooked in mainstream art historical accounts which privilege the role of professional artists. Moreover, postcolonial discourses of art also tend to lack colonial references. Hence, Low provides a much-needed exploration of the now-forgotten Singapore Art Club which was set up in the early 1880s, and how such social clubs survived and further developed in post-independent Malaya. Her essay also makes mention of a few early 20th-century artists, including Low Kway Song, a Singapore-born artist who enjoyed considerable success in the predominantly European expatriate art scene at the time. His achievements notwithstanding, he as well as his contemporaries are little-discussed in conventional art historical discourse today,
which tends to emphasise the contributions of the Nanyang School artists who came into prominence in the 1950s onwards. Yet, as Seng Yu Jin points out through his piece, there are still layers of complexity that need to be better understood. Seng focuses on the practice of Lim Hak Tai, a figure most known for his role as the founding principal of Singapore’s oldest tertiary art school, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Seng urges a rethinking of both Nanyang and social realist art in Singapore. Challenging the notion that such rigid categories are mutually exclusive, he contends that such classifications become problematic when applied uncritically to our understanding of Nanyang art and social realism. Seng argues that although Lim did not seek to evoke explicit social change through his works (unlike other social realist artists), his works should be seen as a form of Nanyang art which sought to raise social awareness. Hence, such “socially engaged” Nanyang paintings offer a possible way to bridge the seemingly opposed positions of the Nanyang and social realist discourses today.

Three writers chose to examine the period from the pivotal 1980s until the present. As C.J.W.-L. Wee points out, the 1980s was a decade of transition for arts and culture policy making in Singapore. There was a new emphasis on developing the cultural sector to enhance Singapore as a tourist destination and an attractive place for Singaporeans and foreign talents to live and work. By the 1980s, Singapore was seen as having attained economic success and therefore, “inhabiting at least more of an equally shared present” with the advanced economies of the West. This meant that Singapore had to be “more of a transnational space” due to its increased interconnections with the global economy. Against that context, Wee describes contemporary art of the period as a “flexible art practice” that departed from medium-specific and object-based modern art. This resulted in an expanded use of seemingly non-aesthetic material for art-making that facilitated Singapore artists to examine the “incomplete fragments of life in the historical present” and engage with the impact of modernisation from the 1960s. In her essay, June Yap extends the discussion on the contemporaneity of art in Singapore by looking at the neoliberal globalisation of capital post-1989, and how the aesthetic expressions of the global—its flows, interruptions, disjunctions and limits—are manifest in the works of a range of artists including Tang Mun Kit, Simryn Gill, M. Faizal Fadil, Tang Da Wu, Lee Wen, Amanda Heng, Vincent Leow, S. Chandrasekaran and Lim Tzay Chuen.

Lastly, in their respective essays, academics Venka Purushothaman and Kevin Chua pose thought-provoking questions on how, why and for whom art history is written. Whilst Purushothaman raises issues of location, institutions and myth-making in the historicising of art in Singapore, Chua examines the state of art historical writing in Singapore in three broad periods, or what he calls “three moments of modernism” in Singapore: the 1300s–1890s, 1920s–1960s and 1970s–2000s. In his analysis of art historical texts by key writers like Marco Hsu and T.K. Sabapathy, he highlights the critical importance of understanding how an artwork moves through time, meeting different audiences, making new meaning and gathering complex layers of interpretations along the way.

On Southeast Asia

Of the essays dealing with art in Southeast Asia, more than half are devoted to studies on either the nation or the individual, the latter usually in the context of national art history. The nation therefore looms large in the study of art history in Southeast Asia, especially with the end of colonialisation and rise of nation-states after World War II. Over the years, academic courses, publications, exhibitions and collections have been developed within this deep-rooted nationalist paradigm. Interest in
the region and art historical research with a regional perspective has been sporadic. It only began picking up momentum from the 1990s onwards, with the advent of a growing art market in Southeast Asia. This was underpinned by rising affluence in the region due to the post-war economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s. The period also saw the emergence of institutional interests, as evidenced by the establishment of international biennales, triennales and museums with a regional focus in the 1990s. In a way, the profile of our writers also reflects these developments. For instance, Ushiroshoji Masahiro was the founding Chief Curator at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in the 1990s, an institution critical to promoting greater scholarship in Southeast Asian modern art. Likewise, John Clark, whose comparative approaches in the study of Asian modern art has nurtured, over the years, many younger scholars in the field.

In their respective essays, a number of writers have highlighted the limitations of using Western (Euro-American) art historical frameworks for understanding modern art in Southeast Asia. In such paradigms, modern art has been generally understood as a rupture with the past and a preoccupation with the new, as reflected in the succession of styles from realism to abstraction from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Modern Southeast Asian art, therefore, sits uneasily within such definitions. As Marie-Odette Scalliet notes, an artist like Raden Saleh is not considered “modern” under such a framework since he did not take up any of the modernist styles associated with Western art. Other essays commissioned for this volume also reveal that searching for clear ruptures with the past is problematic. For instance, in the case of Indonesia, its modern art beginnings are conventionally understood as a clear departure from the Mooi Indiës (beautiful Indies) of its colonial past. However, Susie Protchky demonstrates that there are clear continuities in both subject and style in works from the colonial to the early post-independence period, as reflected in the art collection of its nationalist leader President Sukarno. Likewise, how does one account for an artist like Bagyi Aung Soe from Myanmar, whose eclecticism has defied Western categorisations, and whose exceptional practice has left no obvious legacy in terms of followers or students? In that respect, scholars like Yin Ker and Ashley Thompson have shown that disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and ethnography can help to open up the discourse, and facilitate alternative insights into artistic practice and production in Southeast Asia.

In the discussions about art and the nation, a number of essays have coalesced around Indonesia: one of the largest countries in the region with a relatively longer history of modern art development. This is mirrored by substantial discussions about Indonesian art and its relations with the nation. What is Indonesian modern art? What is “Indonesian” about Indonesian art? How does one define local or national identity in art? These are issues that have preoccupied Indonesian artists and commentators since the early 20th century. In his essay, Aminudin TH Siregar surveys the long-running cultural debates in Indonesia that emerged in the early years of her struggles for independence. These debates continued in 1969 when Oesman Effendi controversially argued that most art produced then was still derivative of the West, and Indonesian painting with national characteristics had yet to emerge. Siregar concludes in his piece that the issue of Indonesian art’s identity is not easily resolved, given its complex web of “acculturation and en-culturation processes.” These processes become evident in Adrian Vickers’ study of Balinese modernism from the 1920s to 1940s, which spotlights the difficulty of accounting for such art within the conventional nationalist narrative of Indonesian art. Each generation will need to find its own answer to these complex issues. In fact, as Scalliet discusses in her detailed study of Raden Saleh, an artist’s identity and
standing was highly malleable at the time, and could change from generation to generation. Initially marginalised in the early 20th century due to his European affiliations, Raden Saleh’s reputation was later restored by the founding President of Indonesia, Sukarno, who admired his art and positioned him as a nationalist artist. Somporn Rodboon’s and Nora A. Taylor’s respective studies of Thai modern art and Vietnamese contemporary art both highlight the dilemmas and contradictions in art practice and writing. In Rodboon’s succinct account, she examines how Thai artists grappled with Western modernism and Thai traditionalism in the 1950s and 1960s. When Bhirasri’s students were criticised for using modernist styles, their teacher defended them by arguing that such use was a “natural development” so long as it could convey their individuality. Likewise, Taylor provides a nuanced analysis of the Vietnam art scene from the 1970s to 1990s. She demonstrates how a reading of the conventional association between the rise of Vietnamese contemporary art and the Đổi Mới governmental economic reforms in the mid-1980s can becomplicated by the agencies of individuals like Bùi Xuan Phai and informal associations like Salon Natasha. Adele Tan uses Malaysian artists as her case studies for arguing that closer attention be paid to photographs of artists posing with their artworks, found as illustrations in publications or reports. Usually regarded as supplemental or marginal to an essay, Tan makes a case for using such materials as critical resources to appraise an artist’s work, attitudes and politics by examining the “ways they interpose on how we read artists, their art and their unexpected lifeworlds.”

Acknowledging the limitations of nation-centric discourses, with their essentialist tendencies and unproductive binary relationships, scholars like T.K. Sabapathy, John Clark, Ushirosoji Masahiro, Patrick D. Flores and Lee Weng Choy have looked to the region to play up relationships, flows and connections that are more reflective of the fluidity and complexities of identity formation and artistic production in Southeast Asia. In his analysis of the development of conceptual art (and conceptualism) in Southeast Asia, Sabapathy highlights such difficulties, and cautions that researchers are unlikely to find “continuously linked lineages” but rather, “broken and separate genealogies” arising from diverse geographies and histories. Looking across time and space, Clark, Ushirosoji and Flores analyse parallel developments in the region from the 19th century to the 1960s. Whilst the impact of European colonialism has been much commented upon, Clark’s analysis of 19th-century art from Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines surfaces connections beyond Europe by introducing intriguing connections with the Indian Company School and Chinese trade paintings. Flores’ analysis illuminatingly maps artistic developments against the complex processes of “the struggle with successive colonialisms, the coming to terms with independence and the process of belonging to the international world.” Arguing against a simplistic understanding of Southeast Asian art as a series of stylistic influences, Ushirosoji voices concern about the over-reliance on Euro-American frameworks in discussing art from Southeast Asia, given the syncretic nature of art practice in the region. For instance, the art academies established in Hanoi, Bangkok and Singapore in the 20th century all advocated hybrid approaches in art education, where Western art styles and techniques were taught alongside traditional art forms. Although Sabapathy and others have embarked on broad comparative analysis, younger scholars like Soon and Seng look at more specific instances of common historical experiences and artistic developments in Southeast Asia. Soon compares leftist art movements in Indonesia and Singapore, and finds common strategies in the politics of inclusion and use of the body as a weapon to challenge power structures. Seng examines the
phenomenon of what he terms “critical exhibitions,” organised by artists in the 1970s. This was a new exhibitionary mode at the time, led by student–artists who challenged then-dominant categories of art and promoted socially engaged art.

Conclusion

In closing, Lee’s acute observations come to mind. In thinking and writing about Southeast Asian art, a degree of self-reflexivity is critical in the “difficult and complicated process of making sense” of the terrain. As he asserts, “[c]oncepts like modernism, realism or conceptualism become even more contentious when applied across cultures and geographies.”

In her essay on the Burmese artist Bagyi Aung Soe, Yin Ker maintains that each artist is exceptional, and merits scrupulous study in examining how he/she responds to specific problems arising from an evolving context. Ultimately, as she persuasively argues, scholarship needs to be open to flux, plurality and challenges, and not seek the safety, singularity and stability of theories and definitions.