The opening of National Gallery Singapore comes at a time of great significance for Singapore in her 50th year of independence. This event gives cause for celebration, but also a reminder of the historical, social and political contexts which Singapore has been a part of. It brings to mind the commonality of experience in the region we call Southeast Asia – one made up of young nation-states with longstanding traditions and cultures, each of which experienced, in one way or another, the forces of colonialism, war, nationalism, independence, and modernity. It is this recognition – of shared experiences and impulses amid diversity – that informs the Gallery’s inaugural exhibition of the art of Southeast Asia: *Between Declarations and Dreams*.

It is with this same understanding of the importance of the region for Singapore and the commonalities that it shares with neighbouring countries that drives one of National Gallery Singapore key missions: to further the understanding of art in Southeast Asia. As such, the aim of the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery and this, its first exhibition, is to provide a regional narrative of the modern art of Southeast Asia from the 19th century to the present, highlighting the richness and diversity through shared historical experiences, as well as the key impulses to art making across the region. For the first time, there will be a long-term and comprehensive exhibition devoted to the historical development of art in Southeast Asia from a regional perspective. While the current understanding of Southeast Asia is often through the economic-political configuration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ten countries that it comprises, it is also acknowledged that this approach has its complexities and limitations. Therefore, it is also the aim of *Between Declarations and Dreams* to complicate this understanding of the region and of regionality, to address how we understand “Southeast Asia” as a geopolitical entity as well as an imaginary one and, by consequence, the art produced within this context.

The title of the exhibition may be credited to one of Indonesia’s most cherished poets, Chairil Anwar. In his poem of 1948, “Krawang and Bekasi,” Anwar laments the massacre of villagers in West Java by the Dutch colonial forces, giving vent to the desire for national independence at the time. This line may also be said to encapsulate the experiences of many artists in the region, caught as they are between declarations and dreams, the personal and the political. The exhibition
therefore seeks to address, in addition, questions such as: What are the concepts of “art” in Southeast Asia? What are the shared experiences that connect artists in Southeast Asia? What are some of the key impulses that drive art in Southeast Asia? What are the significant factors and events that have affected the production and reception of art in Southeast Asia? Who are the key artists who have shaped art in Southeast Asia? And how is art in Southeast Asia linked to the wider region of Asia and the world?

*Between Declarations and Dreams* builds upon previous exhibitions of Southeast Asian art organised by institutions such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and the Singapore Art Museum and does so in a number of ways. It extends the examination of modern art in Southeast Asia back to the 19th century, correlating to the beginning of how the modern history of the region has been understood and coincides with the disruption that many societies in Southeast Asia experienced as a result of European colonisation and imperialism; this art historical study continues through the 20th century and ends in the early 21st century. Unlike the paradigm shift between modern and postmodern (contemporary) art in Euro-American art history, the art historical developments in Southeast Asia can be perceived to be part of its modern development. The current exhibition also examines the role of diasporic artists and the connections the region had with art centres in Europe and America, in addition to highlighting new areas of research, including under-researched artists. *Between Declarations and Dreams* will also examine how we think about art history, and the role of the curatorial and of the museum within this constantly evolving understanding of history.

There are more than 300 artworks on display in *Between Declarations and Dreams*, reflecting the curatorial narrative of the exhibition and its attendant issues and concerns. Hailing from diverse time periods, these works varying in medium, style and genre present similarities and connections in sometimes unexpected ways. An exhibition of this scale could only have been achieved with the help of individuals and institutions around the world whose works are on display, next to those from Singapore’s National Collection. We are humbled by, and ever thankful for, their unstinting support. It is my hope that this exhibition and publication will foster a greater understanding of art in Southeast Asia and that it will raise as many questions as it will answer about the development of art in the region. It is an exhibition that is of great significance for Southeast Asia, one that has been long in the making.

Eugene Tan
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