

Vanguards & Visionaries



Singapore is transforming into a hotbed of creativity. Not only is it a nexus for South East Asian contemporary art, the bustling port city is also home to a growing number of talented artists, curators, patrons and dealers

Text
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Curator Louis Ho

Louis Ho isn't just one of Singapore's most experimental curators, he's also the most dapper. Alongside his insightful exhibitions, the critic and curator is best known for his signature suspenders and bow ties made of everything from ceramic to Lego. This sartorial boundary-pushing befits his reputation for thinking outside the box, with projects such as the 2016 Singapore Biennale, which he co-curated. 'I'm interested in specific topics that may not get a lot of airtime,' says Ho, explaining that this includes art emerging from under-represented countries like Myanmar.

Most recently, he's been working on an exhibition exploring camp, kitsch and queer sensibilities in the socio-historical context of South East Asia, which recently opened at the ADM Gallery at Nanyang Technological University. 'To the best of my knowledge, there hasn't yet been a show in Singapore that deals with this particular topic,' he says. 'Here, we tend to shy away from what's seen to run counter to popularly accepted mores.' With projects like this on the horizon, however, times are slowly changing.



Facing page
Artist Dawn Ng's work defies the common conception of Singapore as staid. Her mirror-based installation *Merry Go Round* (2020) headlined the recent *Strange Things* exhibition
Image by Jovian Lim

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Louis Ho (top left) curated Audrey Yeo's *Strange Things* exhibition, held in the derelict 2 Cavan Road complex. Pictured left is Mike HJ Chang's *False Spring / False Land* (2020). Wood, prism, glass, epoxy, silicone, metal, pvc sheet, fabric, 55 x 52 x 18 cm
Bottom left image by Ahmad Iskandar Photography. Images courtesy of Singapore Art Museum (top left) and Singapore Arts Club (bottom left)



Image by Studiolokel Photography

Gallerist Audrey Yeo, Yeo Workshop

Singapore may have a reputation for being straight-laced and predictable, but local gallerist Audrey Yeo sees the city in a different light. 'We aren't shackled by traditional ways,' she says. 'The art scene is so new; it keeps changing. It has potential.' Since she opened her eponymous gallery in Gilman Barracks, a former British military facility turned arts venue, she's become known for her bold exhibition programming. 'Art shouldn't be a directive from the market,' she says. 'I don't want to dumb it down and underestimate people here.'

Among the passionate dealers in the city, Yeo is known for championing home-grown talent. Almost half of her roster of artists comprises Singaporean names ranging from young multimedia artist Sarah Choo Jing to the late Solamalay Namasivayam, a pioneering artist known for his expressive sketches of nudes. Yeo says she gravitates towards artists who have a social message, like Indonesian activist artist Maryanto, whose dramatic murals and charcoal drawings explore issues such as poverty, pollution and politics. While the citywide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced the gallery to shut temporarily, Yeo remains optimistic. 'I'm relishing this time to dig deep and try to discover a new model for the gallery. It's our job to continue to make art relevant and valuable.'



Top
Dawn Ng in her studio with works from her Into Air series (2020)
Image by Caline Ng

Bottom
A piece from Ng's Monument Memento series (2020), in which she engraved conversations from a year-long Q&A project with a stranger into stone
Image by Liling Liu

Artist Dawn Ng

Pursuing a career in the art world wasn't an easy decision for Dawn Ng. 'Growing up in Singapore, being an artist felt like such an indulgent and nonsensical idea to my generation,' says the 38-year old. Only after stints in New York and Paris, where she worked in advertising, did Ng return to Singapore and fully immerse herself in art creation. Today, she is one of the city's most talked-about contemporary artists. In 2010, she did a series of guerrilla installations in which a giant inflatable white rabbit appeared in unexpected locations such as a hawker centre. 'It forced people to re-examine familiar spaces, by invoking a sense of surprise and wonderment in the everyday,' says Ng, who with this work sought to defy misrepresentations of Singapore as prosaic and boring.

Since then, she's continued to challenge preconceptions with her work. Among her notable projects is a series of provocative texts — the results of probing conversations with an Israeli psychologist — carved into marble plinths, and more recently, performance piece *11*, which involved 11 pairs of strangers reading 11 scripts inside 11 confessionals. By placing people in this intimate setting, she coaxed complete strangers to form unusual and unconventional bonds.



WONDER
IS A
RAINBOW
PANIC
IS A
BUTTON
FEAR
IS A
PRISON
BOREDOM
IS A
FOG
SADNESS
IS A
PLANET
LOVE
IS A
PERSON
ANGER
IS A
POISON
CONTEMPT
IS A
KNOT
DESIRE
IS A
DESERT
SHAME
IS A
STAIN
GUILT
IS A
ROCK
JOY
IS A
LIGHT

Collectors John Chia and Cheryl Loh

Unlike many collectors who enjoy basking in the limelight, Dr John Chia and his wife Cheryl Loh keep a deliberately low profile. 'I don't think our collection is something to scream and shout about,' says oncologist Chia. Gallerists, artists and curators, however, would beg to differ, describing Chia and Loh as two of Singapore's most dedicated collectors. Their collection runs in the hundreds but includes only a handful of Western names. 'It doesn't make sense for us to collect the work of an American artist, for example,' says Chia. 'We try to collect art of our times.' The couple is known for their cerebral taste and for taking chances on young South East Asian artists; they're also very supportive of local artists like John Clang, Jeremy Sharma and Jimmy Ong.

The couple's latest purchase is Singaporean artist Suzann Victor's *Promise*, a giant installation exploring female sexuality and domesticity. It consists of an altar, loaves of bread, clanging pots, candles and human hair arranged to spell out taboo words in blood

red. 'It's a terribly moving work,' says Chia, who snapped it up within minutes of seeing it. Whether it's a dramatic installation like Victor's or delicate graphite sketches by Ong that reference Java's complex colonial history, Chia says they're constantly learning from their acquisitions. 'Good art always keeps its secrets and retains just enough of its mystery to keep drawing you in... day after day, year after year, always rewarding the viewer.'



John Chia and Cheryl Loh are enthusiastic art collectors known for their cerebral taste and for supporting young local and regional artists

Top
Installation view of Suzann Victor's *Promise* (2019) at Shaping Geographies: Art, Women, Southeast Asia, held at Gajah Gallery. Human hair, velvet, bread, woks, baby rocker, dimensions variable
Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery

Bottom
John Clang, *Being Together, Tye Family (Paris, Tanglin)* (2010–2012). Fine art archival print, 67.7 × 101.6 cm
Image courtesy of FOST Gallery