

ART SG

Special Report



Clockwise from top left: works by Elmer Borlongan at Art SG 2025, on the stand of Ames Yavuz gallery; *Drifting Bodies*, a video by artist duo field-0, part of the Singapore Biennale; a visitor to Art SG admires a Bernard Cathelin painting; *Buhay ay Vodavil Komiks (Life is a Vaudeville Comic Book)* by Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, whose work can be seen at the National Gallery Singapore; and the Marina Bay Sands complex, which hosts Art SG

All roads lead to Singapore

Singapore's premier art fair, Art SG, returns to the Marina Bay Sands (23-25 January), while the city comes alive for Singapore Art Week

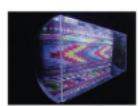
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ART SG
Special Report

A melting pot for all the artists in Southeast Asia

The region comprises countries with myriad distinctive cultures, traditions and languages. The smallest, Singapore, punches above its weight as an arts hub, with its government institutions, nonprofits and galleries championing not just homegrown artists, but of those from its neighbours across the region. By **Lisa Movius**

Southeast Asian art is experiencing a boom, with a slew of new projects opening around the region, the maturing of an earlier cohort of initiatives from the 2010s, and a growing global appreciation of the region's culture. Head-turning launches in Thailand have joined established events in Indonesia and the Philippines, and a strong base of respected artists are fomenting a genuine new energy for Southeast Asia.

But while the spotlight is now shared more evenly, Singapore is still home to the region's most established art scene and professional institutions. It also claims a unique role as a place where Southeast Asia's otherwise often siloed national scenes converge and converse.

"What is interesting about Singapore is [that] the National Arts Council [NAC] seems to not just promote the art of their own national artists," says Andreas Teoh, a collector who founded the Singapore non-profit art foundation The Institutum. "Singapore can really take the role of being the melting pot for all the artists in the region, and be the beacon for Southeast Asian art."

While many countries, not surprisingly, prioritize their own artists, Singapore's art scene at the grassroots, institutional and governmental levels embraces a broadly Southeast Asian remit. "There seems to be an acceptance, an openness to greater diversity," Teoh says. "That's why it's so important as a place to show and sell art. Singapore is really one of the only countries in the world that is [so officially supportive of regional art], and that is wonderful."

Gunalan Nadarajan and Roopesh Sitharan, the curators of *chupalong*, an exhibition (see page 9) during



Art SG has expanded this year and now encompasses the S.E.A. Focus fair, which had its first edition in 2019. This year's event will bring together a total of 106 exhibitors from 30 countries, many of them from the Southeast Asian region

Singapore Art Week, agree. They describe a regional art ecosystem that has developed significantly over the past few decades, with numerous cities, such as Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila, becoming important hubs for regional artists and exhibitions. But Singapore's institutions, including the National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum, and major events like the Singapore Biennale and Singapore Art Week have "sustained an unwavering mandate and curatorial focus on developing and showcasing regional arts", they say. As a result, the city has become "a central node in this evolving ecosystem" and a catalyst for other hubs. While major exhibitions such as ArtJog (in Yogyakarta), the Bangkok Biennale, the Thailand Biennale (in Phuket), and the Yogyakarta Biennale have matured, they note, these forums have not always had a significant or consistent regional focus on Southeast Asia.

"The regional art scene is hopping!" says Iola Lenzi, a Singapore curator, researcher and critic specialising in Southeast Asian contemporary art, though she notes that the past 12 months have also "seen closures of several art spaces that, though small, have been important anchors of the SEA [Southeast Asian] independent contemporary ecosystem over years: Sān Art in Saigon; Your Mother Gallery, Singapore, for example". The absorption this year of the S.E.A. Focus fair into Art SG "has also taken a toll on the independent regional scene because S.E.A. Focus did a good job of representing some of the region's less commercial and more risk-taking artists", Lenzi says.

Still, new initiatives are emerging to balance out the losses. In Thailand, Lenzi points to the Bangkok Kunsthalle, which opened in a striking Chinatown industrial space in 2024, and Dib Bangkok, a private museum housing the Osathanugrah family collection of Thai contemporary art. In Vietnam, the new Vũ Dân Tân Museum, Hanoi, opened last month, and also promises to be a key research and exhibition space, says Lenzi, who curated its opening exhibition. Built by the family of Vũ Dân Tân (1946-2009), it will not only be dedicated to the pioneer of Vietnamese contemporary art, but also, through him, wider contemporary art practices in Vietnam, supported by strong educational programming.

Nadarajan and Sitharan also emphasise the ongoing contribution of earlier developments. Several new art museums and institutions have been established in the region over the past decade, including the Ilham Gallery (Kuala Lumpur, opened 2015), the MAJAM Contemporary Art Museum (Chiang Mai, 2016), Museum MACAN (Jakarta, 2017) and the reopening of the Jim Thompson Art Center in new premises (Bangkok, 2021). "These new institutions have raised the level of ambition to 'curate the region' with an impressive range of exhibitions and programming as well continuing to connect Southeast Asian artistic practices with the pulse of global contemporary art currents," they say.

The pair's Chupalong exhibition, which takes its name from a Hokkien-Singlish word for the blend of a mix of elements, features ten artists from around the region, including Witaya Junna (Thailand), Margaret Tan (Singapore) and Giang Nguyen Hoang (Vietnam), and explores how Southeast Asian creatives negotiate technologies in everyday cultural contexts. "In our research for the project we discovered surprising similarities in creative approaches to technologies despite the vast differences in levels of access and kinds of technologies available in the region," Nadarajan and Sitharan say.

Chupalong is the second stop of a travelling concept organised by Nadarajan and Sitharan. Starting at Kuala Lumpur's Ilham Gallery last August as *menggyam* (which means "disruption" in Malay), it will this summer continue in the Indonesian art hub of Bandung. In each iteration a different configuration of artists, works and curatorial tactics are employed to tease out the continuities and disjunctions in the region's response to technological development.

Andreas Teoh sees such cross-border collaboration as essential to a sustainable future. Regional integration, he argues, "is already happening, with all the actors and people and private institutions coming up in Southeast Asia. We are all discussing ways to share and do projects together." A strong ecosystem requires a holistic approach involving "audience, curators, artists, institutions – everything has to come together, across the region, not just in one place".

However, Teoh feels the audience for Southeast Asian art still remains underdeveloped locally and internationally, which has an impact on the artists. "If you have an audience that is entirely local, then what happens is the artists' works also becomes siloed, because they start producing just for the home audience", while others cater to overseas tastes, both limiting their reach, he says. "I think artists in the region need to develop entry points to their work so that a greater audience can be taken through the journey with them, rather than only an audience that shares their kind of demographic."

Lenzi, whose recent book *Power, Politics and the Street: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia after 1970* examines the region's artistic evolution, argues that Singapore must also continue to invest in its own grassroots



"New institutions have raised the level of ambition to 'curate the region'"

GUNALAN NADARAJAN AND NARENDER SITHARAN
Curators



infrastructure. "A few artist-led art spaces such as Objekts and Deck are hopefully establishing strong roots, but more such bottom-up, artist-shaped initiatives would enrich the Singapore scene and distinguish it in an increasingly homogeneous global art world."

While Art SG faces competition from Art Basel Hong Kong and, increasingly, Art Jakarta, Lenzi sees the regional grounding as Singapore's strength. "The S.E.A. Focus art fair, although very small, is widely appreciated and judging by the crowd [last year], hits above its weight with international visitors. This interest suggests that Singapore, if interested in carving out a solid niche in the global art ecology, could do worse than hitch itself more assertively to Southeast Asian art."

Clockwise from top: the Art SG fair is a big draw for collectors across the region with last year's edition attracting more than 40,000 visitors; the new Vũ Dân Tân Museum in Hanoi; Dib Bangkok in Thailand; a series of works by Filipino artist Elmer Borlongan, on the stand of Ames Yavuz gallery at last year's fair; and the spectacular Marina Bay Sands complex, which hosts the fair

ART SG

Special Report



“Conversations about gender and feminism are much more evident now than a decade ago”

KRISTINA LYON
collector and author

Singapore Art Week puts women artists from the region to the fore

A new book and a major exhibition are highlighting contemporary female artists from Singapore, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries. By **Lisa Movius**

This year's Singapore Art Week (SAW) includes several celebrations of Southeast Asia's female artists, including the release of the book *You Are Seen: Women's Contemporary Art Practice in Southeast Asia*, and the exhibition *Fear No Power: Women Imagining Otherwise* of five trailblazing artists from the region at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS). "It's going to be a big women's moment!" says Audrey Yeo, the president of the Art Gallerists Association Singapore (AGAS) and founder of the Singapore gallery Yeo Workshop, which published *You Are Seen* and will show Indonesia's Citra Sasmita at its Gillman Barracks space and at Art SG.

The projects reflect decades of ongoing efforts to give women artists their full due, and belie a complicated terrain for them around the diverse region. "It is hard to generalise what the current situation is for women artists in Southeast Asia," says Krystina Lyon, a collector and the author of *You Are Seen*. "Countries with less institutional support or where censorship and conservative social norms persist tend to be more challenging for women artists. It also depends on the individual art practice and how provocative it is to the conservative and patriarchal home contexts."

Lyon cites how the Filipina performance artist Eisa Jocson "has been more widely recognised internationally because of the subversiveness of her work, yet the Philippines has a wonderfully established art scene that includes many acknowledged women artists like Imelda Caipe-Endaya, Julie Lluch, Nicole Coson, Jill Pia and Pacita Abad, to name a few." Artists working in performance, like Singapore's Suzann Victor and Indonesia's Rahmaiani, faced extra barriers due to



former prohibitions on that medium. "Chun Wai from Myanmar now lives in exile due to clashes with the military regime. Citra Sasmita, who is now well established internationally – with a solo show at London's Barbican last year – has also experienced tensions from the local market in Bali due to her resistance to deeply entrenched restrictions [favouring tourism over Indigenous rights]," Lyon says.

The NGS exhibition *Fear No Power* (9 January–15 November) features Malaysia's Nirmala Dutt, the aforementioned Imelda Caipe-Endaya, Indonesia's Dolores Sinaga, Thailand's Phattawan Suwannakudt and Singapore's 2026 Venice Biennale Pavilion artist Amanda Heng. The NGS's chief curator Patrick Flores, says it "allows us to situate

Singapore's own socially responsive and gender-sensitive practices within a wider Southeast Asian context. By placing Amanda Heng's work alongside the other Southeast Asian artists in *Fear No Power*, we see how Singaporean concerns, from gendered labour to the politics of public space, resonate with regional histories of activism, post-authoritarian transition, and everyday resistance." The exhibition furthermore, "sheds light on how Singapore's artistic transformations were never isolated or existed in a vacuum. Many of the questions these artists are grappling with – modernisation, nation-building, community and care – were shared across Southeast Asia."

The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) regularly spotlights the region's female artists, such as last year's solo show of the Malaysian multidisciplinary artist Yee I-lann, while *Womanifesto* and the Filipina collective Kasibulan have provided platforms for raising the profile of Southeast Asian women artists. Hong Kong's non-profit Asia Art Archive has also undertaken extensive programming and research on regional women's topics.

In the market, Yeo says, the Southeast Asia landscape "mirrors much of the world: there are simply fewer women artists than men, and the disparities echo across pricing, visibility, and opportunities. The reasons are rarely singular. They sit within layers of cultural expectation – traditional gender roles, family obligations, and the quiet, inherited scripts about ambition that shape who feels permitted to take up space in the art world."

Lyon says she decided to write *You Are Seen* because she observed two gaps: "A lack of accessible narratives that centre Southeast Asian women and gender diverse artists

within both regional and international art histories; and a shortage of practical, artist-centred documentation that could be used by curators, students and collectors". The project grew from her work as a collector and researcher, wanting to document how the 35 artists featured in the book "sustained and advanced" their practices, to raise awareness of them, to provide a resource for researchers and curators, and to advocate for "more equitable institutional and market recognition".

"Conversations about gender and feminism are much more evident now than a decade ago – in academic conferences, in biennials, and in the programming of major museums," Lyon says. She anticipates that coming years will see three parallel trends: more archival projects that centre women artists and raise their global prominence; that the ongoing efforts of artist-run and feminist platforms will reshape the larger establishment; and that the gallery-level market will continue to improve. "However, major retrospectives [and] canonical histories under institutional remits will always lag behind unless stakeholders commit to long-term programmatic change," she says. "Visibility is improving but for lasting traction there will need to be more investment in curatorial fellowships, acquisition policies, teaching curricula and research funding."

The National Gallery Singapore's exhibition *Fear No Power* will include works such as Nirmala Dutt's *Do Not Log Carelessly Let Misfortune Befall You* (1990) (above), Imelda Caipe-Endaya's *Buteyoy Vodavil Komiks (Life is a Vaudeville Comic Book)* from 1981 (left) and Dolores Sinaga's bronze *Solidarity* (2000/25) (below)



© NGS/PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREA LIMA; SCULPTURE © 2000/25 BY DOLORES SINAGA; © 1981 ENDAYA

ART SG *Special Report*

Five works to see at Art SG

Textile pieces and glass sculptures are among our top picks at the fair. By Payal Uttam



Jakkai Siributr
CG20 (2023)
US\$40,000
FLOWERS GALLERY

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Thailand's booming tourism industry ground to a halt. As visitor numbers fell, workers in the service industry across the country lost their jobs. While several years have passed, many individuals have yet to recover their livelihoods. When the Thai

textile artist Jakkai Siributr learned that one of his studio assistants lived in a community of workers who were struggling, he was moved to help. Siributr purchased their old uniforms to provide financial support. For this work, he deconstructed orange vests from taxi drivers and spa uniforms of masseuses and stitched them together to form a vibrant tapestry. He adorned the work with beads, chains, threads and talismanic objects to symbolise how Thai people visit temples and turn to supernatural powers for healing and protection.

Citra Sasmita
Timur Merah Project XI:
Bedtime Story (2023-24)
PRICE UNDISCLOSED
YEO WORKSHOP

The Balinese artist Citra Sasmita invites viewers to step away from the bustling fair ground and settle onto floor cushions beneath a protective canopy of monumental scroll paintings.悬于天花板的画卷，灵感来自巴厘传统Kamasan绘画，描绘了神话叙事，经常聚焦于男性英雄。女性角色通常被描绘在画面边缘。通过将平衡、放置女性角色于中心，Sasmita颠覆了这种权力动态。通过将女性描绘为有力量、有能量的，Sasmita颠覆了殖民地想象中巴厘女性的刻板形象。这些安装式作品也继续发展纺织品和墙绘，灵感来自《太平洋之火》和《火之舞》，这两部作品都具有破坏力，但也有再生力。通过在这件作品中融合巴厘哲学《Takus》，Sasmita创造了一种超越生死的感知。



Pinaree Sanpitak
Stacked Offering I
(2024-25)
AROUND US\$5,000-
US\$20,000
AMES YAVUZ

The Thai artist Pinaree Sanpitak began exploring female breasts in her work shortly after the birth of her son in 1994, when she began breastfeeding. Reflecting on her experience as a mother, the breast became a metaphor for herself as well as a broader celebration of womanhood. In 2001 Sanpitak began to draw parallels between the breast and Buddhist stupas—dome-shaped sites of veneration, and began

her *Breast Stoppo* series, combining the sacred with the sensuous. Over the past two decades, she has experimented with mediums including etching, painting, weaving and sculpture. *Stocked Offering* (2024-25), is part of a new series made of luminous hand-blown glass. The delicate work builds upon her previous sculptures made of layered mulberry paper. Saniapati has described her breast works as "evolving self-portraits" which reflect transformations in her body and life. At once fragile and playful, this glass form reflects the precarious nature of human balance and the need for balance in life.



Hiroki Tsukuda
Giant aggregate creature (2025)
US\$28,000

GALERIE GISELLE CAPTAIN
Growing up in the
countryside on
the island of Shikoku, the
Japanese artist Hiroki
Tsukuda often imagined
travelling to hidden
realms beyond our world.
Encounters with the most

ordinary objects in everyday life would inspire him to conjure up fantastical scenarios in alternate realities. Today, he creates meticulous collages that evoke surreal, futuristic worlds inspired by science-fiction films, video games, comics and music. He often blends fragments of urban and natural environments with geometric shapes and speculative architectural forms. Tsukuda's

Ayesha Singh
Evolution (2025)
PRICE UNDISCLOSED

The Indian artist Ayesha Singh's *Continuous Imaginings (Singapore)* (2025, pictured) is among the highlights of this year's Singapore Biennale. The sculpture perched atop a hill in Fort Canning Park transforms an architectural line drawing into a dynamic, three-dimensional installation. At Art SG, she will show her new wall reliefs from her *Evolution Series*, similar sculptural interpretations of line drawings. The calligraphic works map the evolving forms of Indian column capitals across the second to 17th century. Ajanta and Varaha, followed by forms from the Hoysaleswara Temple and the Unesco World Heritage site of Hampi. Deliberately placed behind these two visual timelines will be a third sculpture in brass, documenting column capitals from ancient stepwells in Gujarat and Rajasthan—civic water structures commissioned by female patrons, who have historically been overlooked. By distilling forms from these sites into a reflective material, Singh critiques the erasure of women while also reasserting their significance.



SECRET #16: THE ARTIST, SMITHSON, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ARMS MUSIC INC. © 1998 THE WRITER, TSJERNOV. PHOTO, MARINA TIKHINA. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALLERIA CAPITAL. DESIGN BY BURD JAMES

ART SG

Special Report

Top shows around town

Singapore Art Week (22-31 January) brings dozens of events to the city. By Clara Che Wei Peh

Printmakers and their practices take pride of place

The Print Show & Symposium

22-31 JANUARY

STPI, 41 ROBERTSON QUAY

Where do prints sit in today's art landscape? The Print Show is STPI's timely response, a new platform that brings together 27 artists who integrate printmaking into their artistic practice. Featuring leading international publishers such as Cristen Roberts, BORCH Editions, Two Palms, City Point Press and Ota Fine Arts, the presentation spans a wide roster including artists such as Jeff Koons, Tadita Dean, Yayoi Kusama and Irwan Hendrian. By gathering works across a range of printmaking approaches and price points, the exhibition is positioning itself not only as a popular entry into collecting, but also as a vital engine of contemporary art and practice.

For STPI – a creative workshop and community art gallery in Singapore – The Print Show marks a re-calibration as the S.E.A. Focus fair, which it founded and has steered since 2019, and will now be organised by Art SG.

At the exhibition, STPI will lean into its long-standing strengths of cross-institutional collaboration and convening diverse artistic communities, reasserting Singapore's role in international conversations around print. The show is accompanied by a two-day



A detail from Irwan Hendrian's *Unearthly Matter 4* (2024, right), which is one of the works on display at The Print Show & Symposium at STPI workshop and art gallery in Singapore from 22 January onwards; above: Natee Utarit's *I Would Be Silly to Be Jealous of a Flower*, 2025, also showing at STPI

symposium, *The Politics of Print: Elephant in the Room*, curated by Stephanie Bailey, which will examine how print has shaped modern and contemporary art histories; speakers include Michael Craig-Martin and Salima Hashmi. There will also be a Singapore edition of Crit Club that will include a contextual performance project by Gem A, the artist behind meeme account @freeze_magazine.



A Singaporean-New York co-project about the sound of interference

Ground Loops

22-31 JANUARY

THE TREETOP, LEVEL 5, *SCAPE

Ground Loops marks a dynamic new collaboration between *Feelers*, a Singapore-based research lab, and the School for Poetic Computation, an experimental school in New York, two organisations that are committed to the study and research of art and technology. Curated by Celine Wong Katzman, the programme takes its cue from the electrical engineering phenomenon in which multiple devices on the same circuit generate an unexpected hum, but it reframes interference as the productive site of encounter rather than a technical fault. This premise shapes an exhibition featuring artists working across Singapore and New York, including Zainab Aliya, Neta Bonami, Bani Haykal, Ong Kian Peng, Charmaine Polkinghorne and Teo.

This ethos is carried into a series of accompanying workshops held across both weeks of the exhibition that aim to expand the audience's mode of engagement. Participants are invited to create interactive browser-based sound works with workshop teacher Tommy Martinez in *The Musical Web: Gestural Instruments*, explore digital and relational consent with artist and teacher Melanie Hoff in her collective thought experiment *Consensual Hacking*, and engage in speculative writing and coding exercises with Ashley Hi in *Bring Your Own Bug Spray*.



An installation view of *Dance Poem Revolution* by Melanie Hoff (2024), who will also be leading her workshop *Consensual Hacking*, which focuses on digital and social consent



Artists across Asia come together to create maritime-themed works

Wan Hai Hotel: Singapore Strait

20-31 JANUARY

THE WAREHOUSE HOTEL

In another exciting collaboration, Rockbund Art Museum and Art SG will present *Wan Hai Hotel: Singapore Strait*, an evolution of the ambitious and innovative exhibition model first staged at the museum in Shanghai. This new edition expands the project's exploration of archipelagic thinking and maritime identity through a constellation of artists from Southeast Asia, Australasia and the wider Asia Pacific. Transforming the lobby of the Warehouse Hotel into an immersive exhibition, *Wan Hai*

A performance view of *Void* (2023-24) by Joshua Serafin, who will be presenting a new version of *An Eye Once Blind*

Hotel draws visitors into a shifting environment of film, installation, performance and site-specific interventions.

Building on its Shanghai debut, this edition continues to feature the works of Arka Kinari, Cai Kunyu and Stephanie Consilting, while introducing new commissions and activations tailored for the local context. These include pieces by Ho Tzu Nyen, Robert Zhao, Ming Wong and Payne Zhu, as well as performances by John Clang, Bheriji Ra and Joshua Serafin, who presents a new iteration of *An Eye Once Blind*, originally commissioned for the project's first staging in April. Together, these practices chart a fluid, transregional world in which storytelling, movement and ideas of the ocean meet, transforming the hotel into a living, tidal space of encounters.

Photo: Rockbund Art Museum (bottom left); Joshua Serafin (bottom right); STPI (top); Irwan Hendrian (middle left); Natee Utarit (middle right); Melanie Hoff (right)

An installation view of the exhibition *Diplomacy and Desire: Basoeki Abdullah in Singapore*

A gallery show for the 'Rembrandt of the East'

Diplomacy and Desire: Basoeki Abdullah in Singapore

UNTIL FEBRUARY
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

This exhibition revisits the life and legacy of one of Southeast Asia's most sought-after painters. Once described as "the Rembrandt of the East", Basoeki Abdullah is renowned for his portraits of attractive women and political figures, with a reach that extended far beyond the region. The exhibition considers the artist's diplomacy embedded in the circulation and aesthetics of his work, tracing his role as a high-society painter and a cultural

producer attuned to the political power of his images. A particular focus is placed on his time in Singapore from 1958 to 1960, a pivotal moment marked by the island's attainment of self-government, through two large oil paintings that he gifted to the state. The exhibition layout also recalls his studio in Singapore, evoking the environment in which these works were made.

Extending beyond the galleries, the programme features a talk by the Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani on Southeast Asian regionalism and his recollections of working at the ministry of foreign affairs when it was housed in the city hall, now home to the National Gallery. During Singapore Art Week, conversations with Grace Samboh, Gie Sanjaya and Sally Texana will bring a contemporary generation of Indonesian curators into dialogue with Basoeki's legacy, opening ways of seeing this seductive body of work anew.

An installation view of the *Second Lives* series by Yang Jie, part of the *chapalang* exhibition

The Singaporean culture of 'making do' is turned into art

chapalang

22 JANUARY-1 FEBRUARY
ARTSPACE @ HELUTRANS

There is a particular joy to be found in *chapalang*, an expression that describes the random, seemingly chaotic mix of parts that should not fit together but somehow do. In Singapore, the term has come to be associated with cultural strategies of 'making do': improvising, repurposing and working with the materials, technologies and mismatched components at hand.

The exhibition takes *chapalang* seriously, not as an accident but as an intentional methodology, a way of reprogramming the tools, systems and infrastructures we inherit

to execute our own intentions. Compiled by Gunalan Nadarajan and Roopesh Sitharan, two experienced curators and educators who have shaped much of the region's new media discourse, the exhibition builds on their earlier project *mengodam* at Iham Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, which similarly explored hacking, disruption and creative remaking.

Here, they extend that inquiry, threading together a sensibility of making the heterogeneity of technologies one's own. Each gesture signals a refusal to accept technological systems at face value, insisting instead on adaptation, subversion and vernacular ingenuity.

The artists gathered here work within this spirit of tactical reconfiguration, proposing that the 'technological' is never neutral or complete. In a moment when global infrastructures are increasingly hardening, this exhibition turns toward Southeast Asia's agile, resourceful cultures of making to imagine what else, what otherwise, might be possible.



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ART SG

Special Report

A biennial that integrates art into the city's urban fabric

Works in shopping malls and housing estates that address resistance, ecology and colonialism are part of the year's vibrant Singapore Biennale. By Payal Uttam

In a colonial-era building in Singapore, a video of the world's tallest indoor waterfall at Jewel Changi Airport is projected onto white curtains concealing a dark room. Inside, viewers sit on a floor mattress which feels like a fragile raft, surrounded by visceral footage of Thailand's Vajiralongkorn Dam.

The work, *Drifting Bodies* (2025) by the architectural duo field-O, encapsulates the theme of the eighth edition of the Singapore Biennale, called *Pure Intention*. "The idea is that intention is not the whole story," says Selene Yap, a co-curator of the Biennale. "Systems can generate a certain kind of afterlife, and there are side effects." While the waterfall impresses, it also has consequences, she adds. The work uncovers how Singapore imports hydropower through transnational infrastructure, including the Vajiralongkorn Dam, whose construction has displaced Thailand's indigenous Karen hill tribe, forcing many to live in floating homes on the reservoir.

Just as viewers move beyond the spectacle of the waterfall – a symbol of Singapore's polished efficiency – the Biennale exposes the hidden personal narratives behind various systems, exploring what the curators describe as "the incidental and peripheral".

"[In Singapore] we tend to promise some form of clarity, coherence and orderly progression. But the works assembled for the Biennale offer a preview into something that is more uncoordinated or incoherent," says Yap, who collaborated with curators Hsu Fang-Tze, Ong Puay Khim and Duncan Bass.

Founded in 2006, the Biennale is organised by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and commissioned by the country's National Arts Council. While previous editions of the event have concentrated works in SAM, this year, more than 100 works are spread across five neighbourhoods.

The Biennale is billed as a signature event of SG60, Singapore's citywide 60th anniversary celebration. "It didn't occur to us as a nation-building project," Yap says, though ideas of place-making and civic identity linger subtly in the background. Yap stresses the significance of engaging with venues across the city, and the chief curator at SAM, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, similarly describes Singapore itself as a "collaborator" of the event.

Works are embedded in a diverse range of sites, from vernacular spaces such as shopping malls, to early public housing at Tanglin Halt and former colonial grounds, such as Fort Canning Park.

Deliberately open ended, the amorphous title *Pure Intention* embraces a litany of themes which ripple throughout the show, including invisible systems of control, resistance, ecology, war and colonialism. The cluster of video works (including *Drifting Bodies*) in the Wessex Estate – a former colonial residential enclave for British military families – is



Above: *Drifting Bodies*, a video of the world's tallest indoor waterfall, at Singapore's airport, is by the duo field-O, whose work investigates the hidden impacts of infrastructure projects. Left: *The Filipino Superwoman X H.O.M.E. Karaoke Living Room* by Elsa Jocson is a makeshift karaoke lounge that puts the spotlight on the often difficult lives of Filipino domestic workers



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perhaps the strongest. While there is little connective tissue between works at other sites, here the underlying maritime themes and stories of island communities navigating displacement and erasure unite the pieces.

On the ground floor, the Puerto Rican artists Allora & Calzadilla's *Under Discussion* (2004) shows a fisherman's son sitting on an upturned conference table turned motorboat, navigating a historic fishing route around Vieques, a Caribbean island once used by the US Navy as a weapons-testing range. Through an absurdist approach, the artists explore the idea of individual agency amid loss of sovereignty.

Upstairs, in a video, *Seaweed Story* (2022), a choir of elderly haenyo women – Korean free divers known for reaching the ocean floor to collect edible seaweed – sing a solemn ballad. The work by the visual research group ikkibawikrr reflects the resilience of an aging community whose traditions are disappearing. The artists, who spent nearly two years on Jeju Island with haenyo women, also worked with them to make playful seaweed wall reliefs.

This community-engaged approach extends beyond the works in Wessex Estate. The Filipina artist Elsa Jocson, for instance, worked with the migrant worker rights group Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) to hold workshops for Filipino foreign domestic workers (known colloquially as "helpers"). They chose personal anthems celebrating their dignity, and Jocson helped them to create accompanying music videos. What resulted is *The Filipino Superwoman X H.O.M.E. Karaoke Living Room* (2025), a makeshift karaoke lounge screening the videos in a shop unit in Lucky Plaza mall – a gathering place for Filipino foreign domestic workers. Although the wall text mentions these workers' "displacement and sacrifice", it tread carefully and is not overtly critical, even though migrant workers often face marginalisation and mistreatment.

The Biennale's strength therefore lies not in confronting socio-political issues, but in moments like Jocson's work, which spark dialogue with local sites. The works at Raffles Girls' School is another example – Bandung-based Japanese artist Kei Imaizumi's monumental paintings explore the deception and violence of Japan's occupation of Indonesia. They are particularly resonant given that the school's former campus was the headquarters of the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police, during war years.

In contrast, the institutional venues, such as the National Gallery Singapore and SAM's industrial space in Tanjong Pagar Distripark, lack potency and impact. SAM's ground floor is stuffed with so many disparate works that it dilutes the viewing experience. This was a similar case with the exhibition's 2022 edition, confounding tilted Natako, which filled two floors of SAM with largely overwhelming works.

As the Biennale continues to find its footing, it is worth noting that the country's contemporary art scene is still young. "The Biennale is often described as a global format, but in Singapore, we recognise that it plays a very local role," Yap says. Given this context, placing art beside spice market vendors, hair parlours, Chinese medicine shops and a cafe serving nasi lemak (a popular Malay rice dish) makes sense. Instead of boldly challenging the status quo, this is a quiet Biennale that shares deeply personal stories and pays homage to conversations and rhythms that already exist.

• Singapore Biennale: *Pure Intentions*, until 29 March, various locations, Singapore

THE ART NEWSPAPER Art SG special report

ART SG SPECIAL REPORT

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