

EMERGENT CONNECTIONS IN AN INTERLOCKED/ING ART ECOSYSTEM

By Andrea FAM

EMERGING: COLLECTING SINGAPORE CONTEMPORARY¹

What does it mean to consider something to be emerging? A quick Google search of the word led me down a rabbit hole of emerging markets and economic trends which while confounding and confusing with its off-technical, sometimes highfalutin terms², undoubtedly in turn affects the emerging, emergent and emerged of culture and politics³. But if we were to try to isolate this enquiry and to consider the emerging in the arts, what could we mean? There are many things that emerge: trends and topics, artists and spaces for example. In the selection of works for the exhibition, 'Emerging: Collecting Singapore Contemporary – Selections from the DUO Collection', we bear witness to all of these; there is a sliding scale of emerging artists (for who you speak with will very much determine where along the scale they locate an artist), whose works were acquired from a variety of emerging, emerged, or now closed galleries, and a list of developing themes in the forms of personal and collective history, global observations and concerns, and imagined narratives.

And what does *collecting Singapore contemporary* mean? Though not analogous to *collecting contemporary in Singapore*, the exhibition does attempt to dually speak to both the creation of works by Singaporean artists and the locale of Singapore as a site of artistic production and reception.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition title, conceptualised by The Private Museum (TPM) Singapore, tells of DUO Collection's vision to support artists, collectives and spaces in and of Singapore. It does this through recognising the agency it has as a private collection that can create its history as told through contemporary art.

¹ Whilst the art ecosystem is not limited by geography, for the purposes of keeping this essay compact, the examples used within are based on the context of Singapore and its art scene.

² I recognise this seems rich coming from someone entrenched in an industry/vocation that seems crippled by a need to communicate in five-syllable words.

³ I believe that within and around the term 'emerge' are philosophical propositions which may serve to deepen the conversation should one so desire. 1. What is emerging? There is that which is emerging, and the process in which it breaks surface - material or otherwise. 2. What emerges? Is the 'emerges' that critical moment when the thing stops its active, its 'ing'? 3. Does what has emerged signal the finite position of the thing - a full stop, something already in the past - something 'ed'?

SELECTIONS FROM THE DUO COLLECTION

The works displayed seem disparate, contrasting in material and form. That their producers are a vast group of 16 individual artists could mislead one to think that the conceptual underpinnings of the works diverge but that would be missing a quality found in nearly all the offerings in the show. Disguised in muted hard lines, playful assemblages or topographical mappings enfold the notion of escape - literal or metaphorical - through concealment and encoded camouflage, and speaks to a universal view of the world and globalised reflection of the self.

The study of urban architecture as proponents for alternative readings of our built surrounds is detectable in the diptych painting, *Between Neither This Nor That* by Kayleigh Goh and sculptures, *Only You Know* and *The Dark Space In Between* by Faris Nakamura. Quiet and controlled lines formed by paint on wood create tight corners and angles in both sets of works. These help to construct spaces that reflect on notions of the singular and solitary by attempting to examine the contiguous quality of incidental spaces. This consideration of openness, in-between-ness, emptiness or voids, can be seen as allegorical to the psychological experiences faced by so many in this and no doubt the coming decades' mentally saturated lives.

Conceptually linked to the presence of absence in Goh's and Nakamura's works is Kray Chen's two-channel video, *Not Sure What to Eat for Dinner*. In it the artist is seen roaming endlessly along supermarket aisles, stopping to survey the seemingly limitless options displayed neatly on shelves or else is at times caught in grocery 'crossroads', uncertain which way to turn. The work, edited in such a way that the artist and the 'supermarket' seem to float in whiteness, speaks about the inundation of the offerings presented in this technologically cacophonous decade. Yet while suggesting the omnipresence of technology and the abundant choices it has to offer, this work could hint at the curiosities or anxieties of the options (or lack thereof) available⁴.

The theme of 'trappings' follow in Joshua Kane Gomes' sculpture, *Gap Space*. Inspired by the design of a bear trap, Gomes caps the spikes of the trap's jaw with teeth shaped after humans'. Relying on preconceived ideas around the sculpture's elemental parts, the work creates an imagery of humans' propensity to lay themselves open to their own vulnerabilities. Continuing to draw on human's propensity, but this time in our preoccupation with ascribing meaning and value to objects, is the diptych *Death and Taxes* by Ben Loong. Comprised of 354 plaster tiles, the paintings are at once a welcome of chance and a construction of

⁴ Author's own analysis.

precision. The work is produced in an organic manner, where the flow of the plaster in each cast and its textural outcome is left to fate yet its mass has been calculated to occupy 354 files in relation to the combination of the energies assigned to the numbers 3, 5 and 4. The work explores the symbolism we attribute to the divine and mystical as in the instance of numerology, as well as materialism—as both our preoccupation with material objects, and matter—and its importance in society.

The divine and spiritual is the subject of Danielle Tay's *Uncertain Discoveries* series from which the collage painting, *Unconventional Choices* derived from. Bound within Tay's method of production is an openness to exceptions to the rule as in her approach to compositions of paper motifs and cut outs. This act of allowing the process to steer her flow of production necessitated an ability to be adaptive which is a theme carried in her painted paper collage, *Unconventional Choices*. Investigating uncertainties within our natural world and entertaining speculations about its future, the work features a mother bird that builds a nest for its baby in the branches of potted plants. An odd choice for a wild bird, the artist imagines a future where nature and man are forced to co-exist in greater intensity.

The compositional makeup of the works by Goh and Loong (cement and plaster respectively) and the theme of Tay's overbuilt city, link tangentially to the concept of works by Melissa Tan from her exhibition 'Back to where we've never been'. In the series Tan explores the material composition of Singapore in relation to its continuous urban development and redevelopment. The titles of the works in 'Back to where we've never been' adopt the NATO phonetic alphabet system; *Charlie and Whiskey I* is titled after the Central-West mapping of Singapore. In adopting the NATO phonetic alphabet system as a naming device, Tan inserts a manner of coding into her work and in doing so creates a mirror unto the encoded and palimpsestic structure of Singapore's acronymic nature, and its incessant yearn for construction, reconstruction and renovation.

Coding continues in Genevieve Chua's triptych, *Moth #9, #10, #11*. In it, Chua presents a study of the effect of the Luna moth's physiological adaptations. The Luna moth's tails are auditory deflectors that produces echoes which intercept predatory echolocations thus foiling their attacks. Working in painting, the triptych presents translated abstract recordings of the sonar frequencies of the beats of the moth's wings.

Kuat Zhi Hooi's practice is one that encodes text, specifically mandarin characters, into sculptural objects. In *Table From A Stranger Place*, he has branded a quintessentially Malaysian- and Singaporean-Chinese style dining table with the Hokkien and Mandarin

characters for *home*. As a jumble of strokes, the characters' meanings get lost within the veins that spread across the patterning on the tabletop, and as this happens, the meaning of *home* and *togetherness* as symbolised in the dining table in Asian households, becomes camouflaged.

A group of works that appear to coalesce together are those of Kanchana Gupta, Masuri Mazlan, Khairullah Rahim, Jodi Tan, Ian Tee. United by their colourful palettes, occasionally whimsical arrangements, and material compositions they stand as a company that beckons to be observed. But within their vibrant folds, stitches, grooves and compressions are stories as retold through personal encounters, and reimagined narratives. Beyond their superficial appeal lies desires for comfort and protection as in the case of Masuri's sculpture, *Reach*, Tee's abstract quilt, *FIRE BLANKET 6*, and Gupta's sculptures, *Work in Progress #120* and *Compressed Slab 006*. They also speak about concealment for protection and survival, as embodied in Khairullah's two assemblages, *Rosy Cheeks* and *The Still Praying Mantis*. While Jodi Tan's, *Tree (1)*, is a 3-dimensional sculpture that reconfigures the spatial and perspective qualities of a 2-dimensional still life image into a shape-shifting puzzle.

Fyerool Dharma's *Portrait No. 7 (Si Pengasas or The Migrant)*, and Luke Heng's, *Composition No. 11* compositionally lie on extreme ends but what the two works do have in common is the theme of deconstruction as a means to receiving both the appearance and concept of the works.

Fyerool's *Portrait No. 7 (Si Pengasas or The Migrant)*, is from his *Moyang* series (*Moyang* being *Jawi* for ancestor) which are abstractions from 19th century photographs and portrait paintings in the context of Singapore's history. The portraits have been cropped or obscured, often suggestively removing or concealing the most significant part of a portrait - the face. Left behind are signifiers—such as the subject's hands and the documents these hands had written or signed—that suggests alternative entry points in which to consider Singapore's history.

Heng's, *Composition No. 11*, is a study in the conceptualisation and physical manifestation of the act of painting. In it he reconfigures the painting's elemental component—its frame—and allows us to linger in the 'emptiness' that it demarcates while simultaneously highlighting the frame itself as a surface for mark-making.

The criss crossing of connections and rearranging of links between the above-mentioned works—individual and grouped—is natural in the creation of alternative readings or the

widening of existing discussions and narratives, and is one of the primary methods of exhibition-making, not least in museums.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS – THEIR MORPHING AND INTERLOCKING ROLES

Can being held within a single collection constitute enough of a unifying factor; should there be a unifying factor and should it matter? How do collections—private or publicly funded—function in our society today and what is the agency of artists, and private and public collections and institutions?

The invitation to produce a piece of writing for TPM on the DUO Collection's inaugural presentation—the first of TPM's five 10th year anniversary shows—was an opportunity for me to (re)think the differences in the ways private and public collections are changing. In the last five years alone—the years since my joining the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the institution's collection strategy for acquiring works for the National Collection (NC) has been edited/ tweaked at least three times. This should not come as a surprise; our mission is to be a museum for contemporary art of and around Singapore and Southeast Asia, and our collecting approach should strive to remain versatile as countries the world over face continuous change, not least those in the Southeast Asian region. Within this scaffold is the museum's attempt to diligently and responsibly reflect the history of the region and the themes and trends that have impacted the lives and affected the trajectories of artists.⁵

While SAM is mandated to acquire works a certain way (given it is a publicly funded institution), private collectors are not. In the exhibition written about within these paragraphs we observe a collection that answers simply to a subconscious. The DUO Collection is not one that forces a prescribed theme (even if it appears that many of the works resonate with each other), instead the works are connected by an emotional and intellectual engagement and an aesthetic preference. Explained differently: without carving out a fixed framework in which to acquire works, the collection grows in ways that broadly reflect the changes associated with our time, changes that reflect differently depending on the lens in which they are seen.

TPM opened with the 'aim to be an alternative platform to bridge the gap between the private and the public'⁶ and 'was established with the objective of providing a space for art

⁵ At the time this essay was being composed, SAM was preparing to announce (sometime in January 2020) an adjusted vision and mission and with that an adjusted acquiring strategy to reflect this change.

⁶ "About Us - Introduction." The Private Museum Singapore. Accessed December 12, 2019.

collectors to showcase their collections in a curated display as well as an alternative platform for artists to push boundaries in the expressions of various art forms.⁷ Their presence has an important role in creating opportunities for contemporary art collectors to present their perspectives on themes and topics that are pertinent to them, gives privately collected artists a means to understand the collection their work(s) are a part of, and lends new narratives to the conversations around contemporary art in and of Singapore, the region and the world, which creates necessary counterpoints to the narratives that emit from national institutions such as SAM.⁸

With globalisation firmly rooted as the *modus operandi*, thus affecting economies, cultures and politics, the roles of artists, galleries, collectors and institutions so too have entered into stages of expansion and integration. This essay does not wish to oversimplify the collecting processes of private or public collections. It instead hopes to start a deeper conversation on how collections continue to form, develop, shape, reshape and impact—not least because we as individuals and communities as well as our environments never stop changing—and art never stops reflecting these changes.

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<http://theprivatemuseum.org/index.php/about-us/>

⁷ "Philanthropy - About". The Private Museum Singapore. Accessed December 12, 2019.

<http://theprivatemuseum.org/index.php/philanthropy/>

⁸ SAM does not expound to being the official narrative on matters pertaining to the arts and the public holds a responsibility to keep all public institutions held accountable by being critically engaged with their offerings (exhibitions, programmes, etc.).