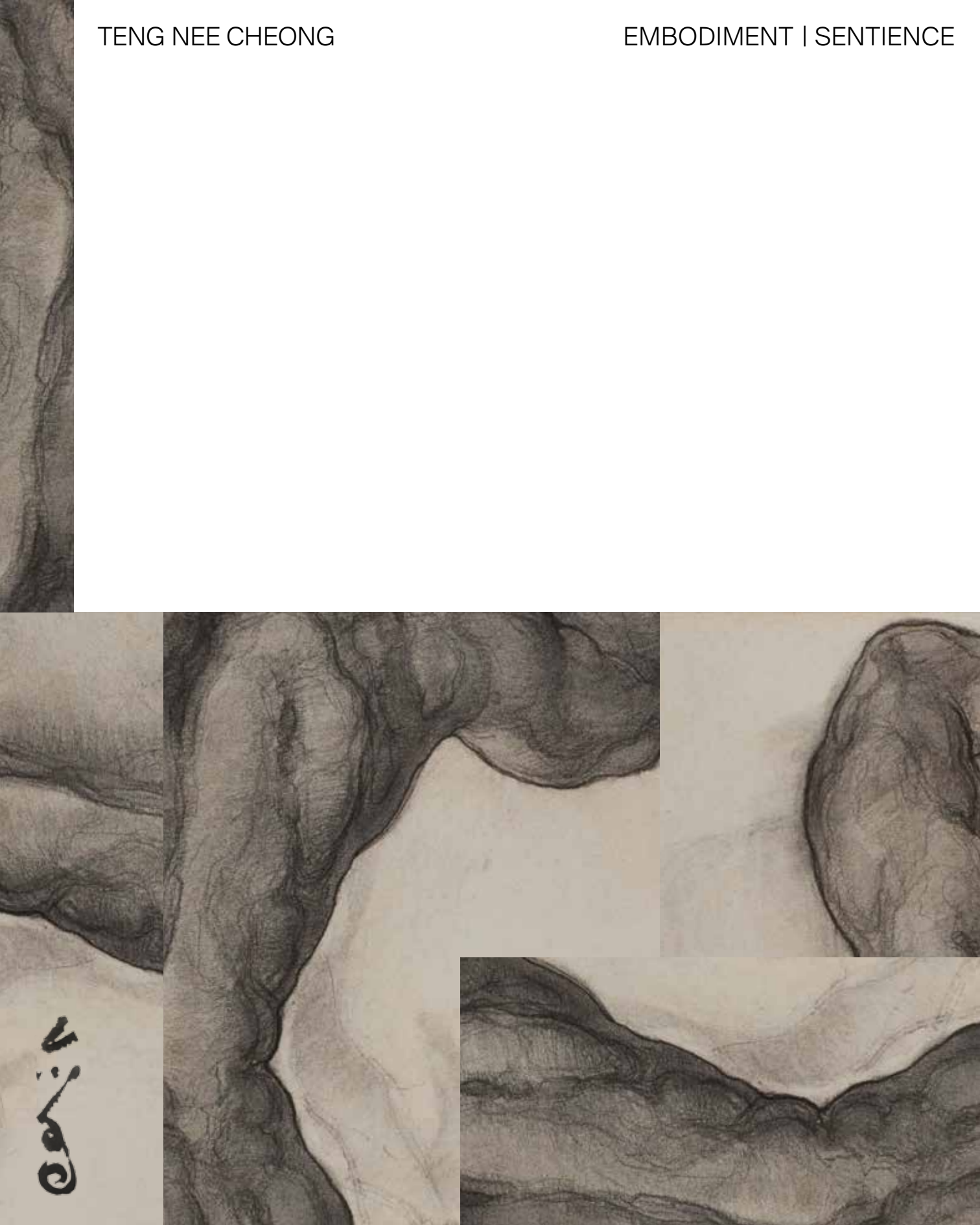


TENG NEE CHEONG

EMBODIMENT | SENTIENCE





“In character, kind, generous, and intelligent, Nee Cheong, plain-spoken but with plenty of wit, is a man of immense *courage*. As I recall our childhood days and as I walk through his inventory, there is no doubt in my heart and mind, Nee Cheong’s body of works is a testament of his unyielding spirit and sheer will power in the pursuit of his passion, Art.”

Suzie Teng

Nee Cheong's sister

The Teng Nee Cheong Estate

EMBODIMENT | SENTIENCE
© 2018, The Private Museum Ltd
ISBN: 978-981-11-8896-1
Printed in Singapore

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Singapore 187969

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Artwork images courtesy of Dr Patrick D McCLURE, The Teng Nee Cheong Estate, Koh Jia Min, Amanda; documentation images courtesy of The Private Museum and The Teng Nee Cheong Estate



TENG NEE CHEONG
EMBODIMENT | SENTIENCE

05.10–09.12.2018

PREFACE

In commemoration of the 5th anniversary of the passing of late Singaporean artist, Teng Nee Cheong (b. 1951-d. 2013), The Private Museum is pleased to present *EMBODIMENT | SENTIENCE*, featuring a selection of charcoal works between the 1970s and the 2000s—from the collection of the Artist’s Estate.

In 2015 and 2016, we presented two important exhibitions with the Chua Ek Kay and Anthony Poon Estates. We share with humility and gratitude that this is the third ‘Artist’s Estate’ exhibition in our museum’s history. We are very glad to be part of this significant collaboration with the Teng Nee Cheong Estate, in putting together the first extensive showcase of Nee Cheong’s charcoal drawings.

In our first visit, we uncovered more than 300 charcoal drawings and sketches on the human body by Nee Cheong, dating back as early as 1970, painstakingly organised and stored in the residence of Suzie Teng, Nee Cheong’s sister. As with our other ‘Artist’s Estate’ exhibitions, this project

resulted to a deep, meaningful bond between us through art, conversations and memories of the late artist.

The exhibition explores themes such as dualities, sensuality, desires and perceptions of the human body through the artist’s inquisitive lens and the stark lines encapsulated by the alluring nudes. Deeply-personal and perhaps even provocative, *EMBODIMENT | SENTIENCE* attempts to lightly trace Nee Cheong’s art practice compelled by his fascination with and reverence for, the human figure.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the Guest-of-Honour, Low Sze Wee for gracing the opening reception and his continuous support towards our organisation over the years.

Last not but least, our heartfelt gratitude to Suzie for her love for Nee Cheong and her faith in us; to T.K. Sabapathy for his wisdom and guidance, without which all this would not have been possible.

DANIEL TEO
Founding Director
The Private Museum

FOREWORD

How did I get to know Teng Nee Cheong?

I first met him sometime in 2010, when I was invited to contribute an essay for a publication of his works called *Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, which came out in 2011. Up until that time, I had not met Nee Cheong before but was already an admirer of his works. I remember being attracted by his colourful still-life drawings of flowers, fruits and vases, all beautifully arranged against exotic textiles. I was also drawn to his charcoal studies of the human form. He had a remarkable way of applying charcoal on paper which made it look as if the charcoal had liquefied and then somehow miraculously reconstituted itself to become flesh and bones.

In 2010, I was shown the *Tattoo* series which Nee Cheong was working on then. I was stunned by those paintings, which were more ambitious in scale, darker in temperament, and much more complex in terms of composition and concept than anything that I had seen thus far. Those works seemed to be a provocative synthesis of many of the key ideas and forms which he had developed over the years. What drove the artist to create such paintings? How did he see the world and people around him? I was intrigued, and readily accepted the invitation to write an essay on the understanding that I would be able to meet the artist in person and get to know him better.

In the following months, I met Nee Cheong several times in his studio at Telok Kurau. We discussed about his early beginnings, creative impulses, and personal journey as an artist. He spoke at length about his admiration for early teachers like Georgette Chen and Ng Yat Chuan. He recalled fondly his many trips, some made with fellow artist Siew Hock Meng, to Bali - a place that was an almost inexhaustible source of creative inspirations for him. He also highlighted the importance of continually examining the human form, which was often the emotional pivot in his many works.

Those discussions caused me to relook at Nee Cheong's entire body of works in a whole new light. What appeared initially to be simple still-life arrangements of plates and bowls suddenly became as strange as the surreal landscapes found in his figurative paintings. His innocuous juxtaposition of luscious flowers and fruits with his sensuous nudes took on added significance and potency. Even now, whenever I look at one of Nee Cheong's works, I continue to be surprised by what I discover.

Alas, with his demise in 2013, my encounter with Nee Cheong was all too brief. There is an old Latin saying 'Art is Long, Life is Short', which essentially reminds us that time limits our accomplishments in life. However, I prefer to paraphrase it to say 'Life is Short, Art is Long'. Although Nee Cheong is no longer with us, his art lives on.

LOW SZE WEE
Chief Executive Officer
Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

THOUGHTS ON
TENG NEE CHEONG
AND DRAWING

T.K. SABAPATHY

I

This is an account on drawings in Teng Nee Cheong's art and of the scope, content and persistence of drawing in his art. Writers have attended to these while appraising his practice although largely within sight of his paintings. The significance of drawing is acknowledged; its aesthetic distinctiveness is recognized. Yet, drawings tend to be presented in the company of and discussed in association with painted pictures. A delicate ambivalence prevails when seeing and talking about Nee Cheong's graphic works. This account begins at this juncture and proceeds to examine this artist's life-long involvement with drawing. It is the first such published study issued in conjunction with the first exhibition on drawing-as-such in his practice and art.

A second matter needs to be noted. This exhibition of drawings is devoted to representations of the human body as nude. Nee Cheong's figural drawing is equated with the showing of undraped male and female bodies; it is assumed that bodies have always appeared so in his art and that they are affiliated with the artist's self. This account turns it back on these surmises. It examines some of the earliest surviving materials indicating varied impetus and resources for drawing the human figure, the crystallization of interests in the figure as a visual concept and form, and the realization of the body as nude in his figural drawing. The nude did not appear all at once and as completely formed; it emerged in the midst of a range of figural studies and representations. This account marks a detailed examination of drawing in this artist's life; it does not, however, exhaust this enquiry and topic.

II

Drawings by Nee Cheong have appeared in exhibitions and publications along with his paintings. When appraising the two in an artist's practice comparatively, tendencies veer to-

wards placing drawings on subsidiary or supportive registers of importance; such inclinations stem from conventions for gauging the two asymmetrically whereby drawing's significance in an artist's work is measured largely as preparedly readying the creation of painted pictures which mark the ultimate destination for a visual artist. This is not to say that drawing is therefore irredeemably consigned to rungs below the sovereign standing of painting in all instances.

Hence Nee Cheong's graphic works are created and publicly displayed as claiming equal status with painted compositions, even as one is affiliated with the other. This is especially so when representing the human figure which appears as transferrable and seen migrating between the two mediums. Drawings of the human body are, nevertheless, rendered, scaled, formatted, framed, shown in order to behold them as integral wholes and to impart commanding pictorial presences. As pictures, each holds its own sphere of attention affirmatively.

In these situations drawings are seen autonomously; that is to say as pictures in their own right, conceived and executed as singular graphic works with inherent qualities and value. Even as kinship with painting is visible, and often it is palpably apparent, drawings created by Nee Cheong bearing these traits are esteemed as distinct and separately compelling, as art works.

The prestige accorded to drawing springs from criteria such as those I mention. When assessing Nee Cheong's art, Lindy Poh hoists his graphic works onto elevated spheres enabling her to focus on and appreciate drawings as works in their own right in this vein. Here is an extract from an essay that directs attention to the appeal and gravity of such pictures.

Characteristically executed on large sheets of paper (measuring 56 x 76cm), Nee Cheong's drawing stands out not only for technical virtuosity but also for their unusual luminosity and translucence – that astonishing 'liquid'

quality that has become his hallmark. Nee Cheong's graphite drawings are regarded as 'autonomous' or independent of his paintings (as opposed to functioning as preparatory sketches for oil works). Still, the artist points out that they bear a significant link to his paintings, and often act as a kind of 'matrix' or template that is used and adapted in various compositions.¹

It is a complexly etched profile of a kind of drawing that she highlights as appealing, prominent, accomplished and critically salient. Yet its significance in Nee Cheong's practice is hedged, partly by including the artist's appraisal, which is given deferential prominence and partly by Lindy Poh's ambivalence. It would be useful to see the figure as co-existing in drawing and in painting, thereby freeing one from obligations for regarding one as serving the other, generally.

Drawings are produced to meet with interests other than what I have described and Lindy Poh underscores. They are, for instance, undertaken as studies: for deepening understanding/knowing his subjects and the self; for cultivating thought processes for creatively furthering, consolidating an art practice; for developing representational and expressive capacities when employing drawing as a medium; and for advancing his art along sustaining, continually exploratory pathways.

Drawings as studies may yield other outcomes. They may mark preparatory stages, signify stepping-stones for crystallizing subsequent compositions, progressively advancing them until they are regarded as 'finished works'. Artists conventionally and frequently employ drawing for these purposes; in studying them we gather deep knowledge of processes, methods entailed in the making of art works in particular practices. Lindy Poh mentions drawings executed as preparatory studies in the citation inserted above; in that connection she reports Nee Cheong saying he sees his graphic works as leading to painted compositions, thereby underlining their relative position to painting. She makes no comment on this matter, which needs not remain unexamined. I return to it later and in the meanwhile continue enumerating kinds of drawing by mentioning one more. In yet other instances drawings as studies may consist of notations of nuclear notions or first thoughts or of getting-to-know gestures and markings. In these, imagery is suggestively, incompletely, extemporarily given graphic form.

I round off these thoughts by briefly dwelling on the lives of drawings. How are they featured when beholding a creative practice unfold? How, when are they utilized as references, resources, stimuli, provocations for furthering an artist's art, especially an artist such as Nee Cheong who produces drawings continually throughout his life? Such questions propel this

account; answers are offered occasionally when attending to resolutions and productions sparked by contingencies prevailing at particular moments in his art's history. For this occasion I forward two observations pertaining to lives of drawings spurred by interests in tracking routes that indicate development and disruption or change in Nee Cheong's practice.

Firstly, drawings as studies may be short-lived; they testify momentary, shifting engagements. In other words they do not appear as begetting progeny by way of germinating new, advanced pictorial representations. In these circumstances they chronicle graphic acts of seeing, perceiving and making at specific stages over durations that are brief and signifying stand-alone outcomes. Such drawings constitute primary materials for ascertaining an individual's visual field of interest, drafting abilities or propensities and artistic achievement, specifically.

Drawings as studies may be, on the other hand and secondly, vitalized by Nee Cheong for spurring his art further and for consolidating formal and symbolic properties in particular works; these choices and decisions may lead to creating paintings and drawings as worked-out compositions, subsequently. That is to say, an artist's own works prompt or give rise to new creations within that artist's practice. It is in this sense that Lindy Poh refers to the vital impact of drawing on painting when relationships between the two are seen via the lens of the artist. Drawings as studies by an artist may be viewed as resources by other artists who seize and appropriate imagery from Nee Cheong's graphic oeuvre for consolidating a production, emulating and honouring a fellow artist or jockeying for status historically.² When writers attend to these matters critically and comparatively, they bring into relief networks whereby art, artists and art practices are juxtaposed; networks that may yield examinations along art historical perspectives.

III

The earliest surviving studies date from the late 1960s, coinciding with his enrolment in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in the years 1968-1970. Drawings as studies are pursued intensely in the 1970s and through the 1980s. Nee Cheong utilizes a wide variety of paper, bound as note books and assembled as sketch pads; these are not in all instances manufactured, formatted and readied for special use in art studies – indicating a necessity and willingness for employing available, affordable paper. These studies are made in charcoal, one of the oldest material and hand-held points for registering marks on surfaces - especially paper. It is immensely versatile; Nee Cheong deepens his familiarity with its propensities and selectively exploits its properties.

The human figure is a recurring, dominant topic; at times landscape is represented for which watercolour is used. Buildings are featured, from time to time. Sketches are produced while traveling, in Thailand, east coast of peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia; in them monuments, marine and riverine settlements and figures in domestic and work spaces are shown. Depictions of things or objects arranged as rudimentary still life appear; these are subsequently developed in his paintings in the 1980s, where they are seen as imposingly designed imagery, bearing complex symbolic import. These are executed as complete works and quite frequently as pictures consisting of elaborate iconographies in which languorously posed, self-absorbed (narcissistic) male and female nude figures are entwined with still life arrangements.

Before proceeding to examine drawings in some detail I briefly mention Nee Cheong's tenure as a student in the academy, especially as it impinges upon his practice and development of drawing. Among his teachers were Georgette Chen and Ng Yat-Chuan. The former is prominently installed in stories of art in Singapore and therefore tends to be mentioned deferentially, preferentially when there is talk of Nee Cheong's teachers. Ng Yat-Chuan who is virtually absent from reigning accounts of artists here is, on the other hand, shunted to a secondary register in the telling of this artist's life; yet he is significant.³

I have no wish to align the two as rivals for attention but to point out that Yat-Chuan was a formative teacher who inculcated in students the importance of drawing for systematically developing capacities for visual thinking. He devised drawings as studio demonstrations of technical and cognitive processes for seeing, analyzing and realizing forms and imagery. For instance a figure was studied as wholes, as fragments and partially, as seen from multiple and shifting viewpoints; these were graphically registered on a single sheet of paper enabling the seeing of processes by which pictorial units or entities are formed and for seeing them collectively and comparatively.⁴ It is a pedagogical devise entrenched



Teng Nee Cheong (left) and Ng Yat-Chuan (right), 2009



Figure studies, 1970

in academies of art. Nee Cheong absorbed and employed it fervently. Conceived and continually tested as a method, it endures in his practice of drawing and distinguishes it. It would not be unreasonable to propose that the wellsprings of this method are traceable to Ng Yat-Chuan's teaching of drawing in the academy.

Remembrance and esteem of his teacher may be gleaned from a photograph of the two, illustrated in a book titled *Nee Cheong. Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, published in 2010. It was taken when Nee Cheong visited the art gallery of the National Institute of Education (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) in 2009 on the occasion of Yat-Chuan's exhibition of his drawings. The two appear convivial and at ease with one another (Fig. 1). Cheo Chai-Hiang and Cecily Cheo, who conceptualized and curated this show, tell me that Yat-Chuan conveyed to them his high regard for Nee Cheong, especially his graphic works.⁵

IV

Interests in this exhibition and the publication are in drawing the human figure. It appears at the beginning of Nee Cheong's artistic life, settles as the dominant preoccupation in his practice and endures to the very end. It is unrivalled. As a subject, a motif, as imagery, the figure is represented continually, ambitiously and consummately as no other. The body, female and male, is shown in his developed drawings preponderantly as nude. Lindy Poh nails Nee Cheong's involvement as obsessive. He was, she remarks, "manic-obsessive about his studies of the human anatomy typically taking 3 hours at a stretch to complete a single pose."⁶ Models who have worked for and with the artist say as much.⁷

Lindy Poh is absolutely right. What she says, though, is prompted by seeing figural drawings that are highly advanced

in an art practice made up of years of looking at models and compressing bodies as graphic forms on flat (paper) surfaces, and from gauging a studio regime that had been firmly established. By the 1980s figural drawing is deeply rooted in Nee Cheong's art; in that decade too the nude is etched as the unmatched topic in drawing and in figural drawing as a picture category. These resolutions did not materialize all at once; neither were they determined completely all of the time.

Drawings produced in the early 1970s illustrate varied interests when dealing with figures. These spring from familial, social and institutional milieus as well as from examining the self. Such a range is not exceptional. Artists often begin informal and formal studies by depicting family members, friends and acquaintances, fellow students and teachers, bodies at work and disposed in leisure, and so on. Imagery is registered when seeing them as pictorial subjects, at times in unrehearsed, un-staged situations and at other times by consolidating them formally as consciously posed and selectively positioned.

A number of sheets survive, consisting of depictions of Madam Dien Sau Ing – Nee Cheong's grandmother; he was especially attached to her. They may be regarded as portraits in the sense that the subject is known and named, relationships with the artist are deep and emotionally binding, and the imagery bears traits that are closely observed and specific. In Fig. 2a she is shown virtually full length in bed, propped on pillows; a four-legged table with bowls is placed close by the bed. She is presented in profile. Her head is modeled quite firmly; eyes are closed and the mouth is slack and opened. Her knuckles and wrist-joints are prominently registered, indicating ageing, infirmity and the depletion of bone and muscle formations.



Portrait studies, 1970



Self-portrait, 1972

The entire left side of the figure is in shadow, enabling Nee Cheong to render this portion as asserting weight and density. Deep shadows are registered when the body leans, presses against the pillows; charcoal is compressed firmly, thickly and intensely on the paper surface. Her left arm is underscored by repeated, thick linear formations, laid one on another. The body is undeniably ageing; Madame Dien as a grandmother, though, is presented as asserting a visible presence – pictorially at least.

In Fig. 2b Madam Dien reappears; she is treated with radically altered interests. She is presented partially, as only her upper body is visible; apart from her head which is, as in the earlier drawing, modeled confidently, the remainder of her upper body is faintly rendered, with traces of broken lines suggesting a severely bent (arthritic?) right hand. She is fast asleep. The focus is on the head.

The head of Madam Dien is represented severally on the sheet of paper; each consists of a summary configuration cast in profile and occasionally frontally. Facial features are reduced and even omitted, thereby setting aside salient markers of individual identity and of personhood; setting aside too the artist's deep emotional ties with his grandmother. Interspersed among them is imagery of hands, similar to their depiction noted earlier. The head is now a source for systematically, serially developing formal concepts and for furthering capacities of drawing as a representational and expressive medium for depicting the human figure/body. In these regards Nee Cheong is employing schemes devised



Self-portrait, 1972

and demonstrated by Ng Yat-Chuan while teaching drawing in the academy.

Fig. 3a and 3b are drawings featuring the self; there are a number that survive, a few bearing the date 1972. It is probable that all such pictures were executed in or approximating that year. As images they are presented as bust-length and head representations, conforming to sub-sets in the portrait genre.

It is customary to refer to relationships between artist and sitter in conventions for making portraits. Such a nexus is immensely complicated, even nullified in self-portraits where the artist is not easily, stably seeing the self simultaneously as a sitter and an artist. This generates sustained tensions, often transmitted to the creation of such images. In Fig. 3a, Nee Cheong the subject hovers into view, effectively as a disembodied entity as the representation is not discernibly located in pictorial space; the image is seen as a form that condenses on the paper surface. His head is slightly inclined, resting on his right hand, which cups his ear and cheek firmly, protectively. Facial features are rendered with near-sculptural firmness and weight. His wrist and fingers are drawn with anatomical precision. His appearance is tangibly formed; his demeanour, however, is recessed and distant. His eyes are opened and deemed as nominally seeing; they are cast in deep shadow and not fixedly connecting with the world beyond the picture.

In Fig. 3b he is shown assertively; the image nearly fills the page. The head, positioned firmly on his shoulders, dominates; it extends almost to the top edge of the paper. The

neck is tensed as it emerges from an open-collared shirt. The remainder of the upper body fades from view. As in Fig. 3a, here too the hand is prominently represented. It is cupped, poised and alert. The impact of its formation as a gesture is not easily decidable although it is compelling visually. Nee Cheong as the picture's subject looks out, full face; his bespectacled eyes are decisively focused. He is watchful, turned outward to the world. Yet his raised hand wards off any presumed tendencies for gaining access or entry into his image, and to his-self.

Portraits and portraiture are short-lived; they are visible with recognizable frequency in the early 1970s, are glimpsed intermittently in the middle of that decade – often interspersed with other notations of partial figures on a single sheet – and slip out of view during the closing years of the seventies. This is not to say that the human figure is abandoned. Not at all! It is henceforth cultivated to satisfy different interests and goals; figural drawing increasingly features the human figure in its entirety or fully, without bearing overt symbolic and personalized significance; the human figure is also represented as nude. The latter gathers momentum swiftly, accelerates to extents it dominates Nee Cheong's visual field. The nude is installed in his practice of drawing as the unrivalled topic in the 1980s and continues to reign until the end of his artistic life. It is along these sight lines that Nee Cheong's figural drawings tend to be viewed exclusively as representing the human body as nude. Such a destiny or resolution was secured over time; it was consolidated by seeing models with sustained concentration and graphically transforming perceptions of them as bodies, inscribing them with charcoal on paper.

Quite an extensive range of early drawings of the human figure survives; in all likelihood executed in the decade when



Figure study, 1978



Figure study, undated

Nee Cheong represented his grandmother and the self as portraits, i.e. 1970s, after he had completed his studentship in the academy. When examining these we discern the progressive emergence of the figure as a topic in his art and of its dominance. They are studies made in charcoal set on modestly sized, irregularly formatted paper. Representations are of figures that are full length, partial and fragmented. At times a number of notations are registered on a single sheet, probably at different times.

Nee Cheong deals with figures that are seated, standing, reclining and in active positions; he views them from the front, the rear, in profile and as made up of mixed viewpoints; it is at times partial. Infrequently a figure is seen from a raised perch looking down on a body lying on a ground, Fig. 4; it is an occasion for displaying abilities to visually conjure a sense of seeing a three-dimensional object on a flat surface as inhabiting in space. In this drawing a body, rendered as tangible, is aligned diagonally and seen as receding into space when viewed from its head towards the feet. These studies demonstrate Nee Cheong's methodical visual examination of the figure, his systematic cultivation of graphic vocabulary for seeing the body acutely and articulating it confidently in pictorial form. Drawing is employed as a formative, enduring medium. From time to time in these explorations the figure appears as nude; it is female and male.

Fig. 5a shows a seated female nude in three-quarter view, in a pose customary in figure studies. Her arms are raised and held behind her head while her torso is presented in full view. Her legs are folded and set in a direction opposite to the placement of her torso. Her upper and lower sections of her body are set at right angles to one another. She is located towards the top edge of the picture surface, removed to an elevated viewing level. Her body is drawn with tentative, light,

infirm contours; cross-hatching faintly suggests the mass of her abdomen and breasts. In Fig. 5b the nude is standing and shown to knee length; her head is turned towards her right and inclined downwards and partially out of view; her arms are folded over and cover her breasts. The figure is enclosed, turned within itself even as the body is nude and in view.

In each of Fig. 6a, 6b is a male figure, seated and differently posed; one appears as nude. These are among conventions for studying the academy nude. Nee Cheong's representations of the body are firmly anchored in these conventions; he painstakingly examines them, gaining mastery of seeing and registering the human figure. He never abandons the body. Its appeal is lodged early in his artistic life. The drawings examined here demonstrate these stages of his practice.

In Fig. 6b the figure is presented complicatedly and demanding. Nee Cheong has to scrupulously attend to the body's anatomy, examine its details and articulate the figure as an integral form. He meets these tasks confidently and consistently. This is a physically consolidated, sensually inflected representation of a male body. Its genitals are rendered clearly and are just as clearly in view. The figures in these illustrations are represented firmly, concretely – setting them apart from drawings of the female nudes discussed earlier.

V

From the 1980s onwards Nee Cheong professionalizes his practice by securing and establishing a studio and by recruiting models professionally. Drawings of the nude are

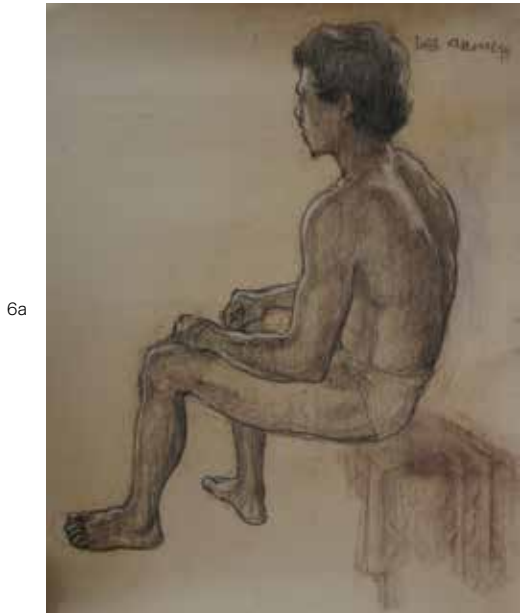


Figure study, undated

studio-based enterprises; the nude is seen in the studio - its birthplace and locus. Nee Cheong's studio is initially installed in his residence; it is subsequently established as a separate work place, adequately safeguarded for presenting the undraped human body as nude for representation in art. He secures these provisions by professionalizing his art, cultivating clients/patrons for acquiring his works, maintaining all of these at requisite levels for advancing his practice.

The studio is the birthing site for his drawings. Nee Cheong is not exceptional in this regard, although in dealing with the body as nude such a location is especially pertinent and is a defining environment. Fig. 6a and 6b indicate their place of creation by featuring props for staging the figure. Figural drawings produced subsequently may not necessarily do so. In them, the figure often appears as though it is unlocated; this is one way of seeing them. Another is to discern their habitat primarily as defined by the surface on which they appear; they exist virtually on/in picture surfaces.

Extant writings on Nee Cheong's drawings tend to focus on developed stages of his art, namely: the 1990s and onwards, when the figure is firmly, assertively and dramatically displayed. These are undeniably hard-won productions entailing sustained thought and abilities cultivated over thirty years of continued practice. The interest in this account has been in tracing the beginnings and examining the gradual development of his practice. It now turns briefly to talk about the symbolic import of, especially, the male nude in Nee Cheong's drawings.



6a

Untitled, 1975



6b

Untitled, 1976

Lindy Poh highlights this artist's commitment to drawing and his exceptionality in remaining "one of a handful of Singapore artists noted for their outstanding figurative drawings." She also mentions the sensuous, erotic, homoerotic tenor of his nudes, suggesting that they may in turn allude to and mask impetus emerging from particular sexual identities, such as those embodied by gays. These are undoubtedly complex, difficult to talk of matters; their representation is conditioned and constrained by laws and norms prevailing in Singapore (sex between males is criminalized).

Bodies are gendered. When represented as nude, the body's gender, which is its defining property, is displayed as sexually enhanced - i.e. as emphatically male, as complicatedly female and as ambivalent. Beholding the nude is to encounter sexuality; and sexuality is a powerful, inherently human trait. Of course nude presentations yield manifold significance; at times they tend towards sublimating sexuality by elevating the body onto metaphorical registers. Nee Cheong's drawings, especially of the partial figure and to an extent figures viewed predominantly from the rear, evoke such associations (Fig. 7,8). Writers who comment on his figural compositions prefer appraising his representations of the nude in this vein.

At times presentations may yield sexuality unexpectedly, starkly. Among Nee Cheong's drawings of the male nude are representations of the body that depart from (heterosexual)

conventions for showing the nude; they are homoerotic, where images of the body are shown as emerging from male pleasure stimulated by viewing the male body. In them, sexual potency is conveyed explicitly by enhancing male genitalia and, rarely, by displaying oral sexual acts. Sexual potency is implicitly depicted by bodily gesture, posture and pose, amplifying details of the anatomy and by the proximity of the body as a graphic image to the viewer. In the majority of such representations, the nude appears as an isolated entity, alone, on the picture surface.

In ending this account one matter needs mentioning. Are these representations on display in this exhibition necessarily expressions of the artist's self and of his sexual identity? Low Sze Wee in an endnote for an essay on Nee Cheong's figurative pictures enters the following disclosure: "In a recent interview Nee Cheong commented that whenever he painted figures (be it male or female), he often imagined that he was the subject being painted."⁸ Low Sze Wee offers no comment on its pertinence for talking about the artist's work.

It is a tantalizing disclosure and needs to be examined. For the present these observations are offered. Self-identity is not self-depiction. Connections between who an artist is and the



7

Untitled, circa mid-1990s



8

Nak Mey Siam, 1980

substance and appearance of art works created by that very artist are not direct and given; neither are the artist and the created work one and the same. If it were, it would be disastrous and of no interest for anyone. Nee Cheong's representations of the human figure are fuelled by his imagination, his conviction in the anxious yet profound and desirous significance of the body (including its homoerotic/erotic potency), his unceasing drive for producing art and his quiet desire to connect with the public. These may well be transmitted and transformed by notions of the self, but they are not manifestations of the self directly or autobiographically represented in his figural drawings.⁹

T.K. Sabapathy is an art historian who has published extensively on modern and contemporary art and artists in Southeast Asia. He is currently an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, where he teaches courses in histories of art.

1 Lindy Poh, 'Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier', *Nee Cheong. Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, Teng Nee Cheong and Gajah Gallery, Singapore, 2010, p 23. A number of writers endorse the dual status of drawing in Nee Cheong's art.

2 In his picture titled *Pemberontakan Harun Manis (Mango Mutiny)*, dated 2014, Jimmy Ong inserts into it a reworked female figure derived from Nee Cheong's drawing. For a discussion of Jimmy Ong's approach to works by other artists as resources for his productions see T.K.Sabapathy, From Bukit Larangan to Borobudur, Recent Drawings by Jimmy Ong, 2000-2015, Fost Gallery, Singapore, 2016.

3 Lindy Poh names the two as making enduring impressions on Nee Cheong as a student. She focuses on Georgette Chen's charismatic impact and reports Nee Cheong's recollection of his teacher's "mantra of '3Ps – proportion, positions and perspective'". She proceeds to describe apprehensions by students as "the petite Chen gracefully moved from student to student. Some would recoil as she deftly but surely refined their works with her sticks of charcoal." *Nee Cheong. Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, p 23. Yat-Chuan, on the other hand is not discussed beyond his mention; he disappears.

Nee Cheong's recollection is as follows: "My passion for drawing started with two teachers at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts – Georgette Chen and Ng Yat Chuan. From Mr Ng I learnt much observing his quiet confident ways of control and contrast. From Madam Chen, I learnt the no-nonsense, no-pampering and matter-of-fact method of drawing, bearing in mind her three Ps- position, proportion and perspective." 'Decadent in Ways Mortals Fear. Commentaries by Teng Nee Cheong', *Nee Cheong. Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, p 84.

When viewing erotic prints by artists from China and Japan, Nee Cheong is puzzled and entranced by their treatment of human figures in them, which he sees as violating principles he had been taught at the academy. He says that the anatomies of the figures in these prints are "violating the '3Ps my teacher Georgette Chen held dear – proportion, position, perspective – be damned!" he then adds: "incidentally she never encouraged nude study when she was teaching" in the academy. *Ibid*, p113.

4 Cecily Cheo sharply notes the biased, preferential appraisals of artists in exhibitions and in art writing. She says: "Right at Home. Drawings and Prints by Ng Yat-Chuan is the first one-person exhibition of this accomplished artist to take place in Singapore since 1966. That this artist's work has remained un-shown for so many years, in a country the size of Singapore, with its small, close-knit community must give rise

to many questions. It is interesting to speculate, for instance, why one artist's work can be shown with monotonous regularity, while another's work remains hidden from public view; or why one artist's career can attract exuberant, political and state patronage, while another's continues its slow growth in the shadows of a very private life led far from the lime light. These questions are useful, as they should encourage in the viewer a healthy skepticism about what might presently constitute any 'official' record of art history in Singapore." *Right at Home: Drawings and Prints by Ng Yat-Chuan*, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2009, p6. For intimations of connections between Georgette Chen and Ng Yat-Chuan see Yvonne Low, 'Re-Introducing Ng Yat-Chuan, Right at Home, pp 13-16. I am deeply indebted for information and insights into Ng Yat-Chuan's drawing and teaching at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts to writings by Cecily Cheo and Yvonne Low as they are featured in this publication.

5 This was conveyed in a telephone conversation with Cheo Chai-Hiang and Cecily Cheo on 16 August, 2018.

6 Lindy Poh, *Nee Cheong. Those the Gods Love*, p23.

7 I have met with one of the models who is professionally named as Kim, who candidly and enthusiastically discussed his meeting with and working for Nee Cheong. Kim recalls the artist as decisive and demanding, requiring that a gesture or a pose be held for lengthy durations. Nee Cheong was also unfailingly respectful in his conduct. When he needed to touch the model's body to adjust or alter a position, it was with expressed consent of the model. Unlike, as Kim relates, other situations in which he had been intrusively, crudely and brusquely handled.

'Nora', one of Nee Cheong's favoured female models is effusive in her commendation and recollections. She says Nee Cheong helped her to cultivate self-confidence. She forged a life-long friendship with the artist. I have not met 'Nora'. She has written a moving commemorative note. Reminiscences and tributes by Kim and 'Nora' are published in this volume. They may well mark the very first identification of models and representations of their voices in accounts of artists in Singapore. Relationships between artists and models, in instances where they are entrenched in practices here, are un-researched and un-written.

8 Low Sze Wee, 'Between the Real and the Imagined', *Nee Cheong. Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, p8.

9 The focus in this study is trained on Nee Cheong to extents that comparative discussion of representations of the figure/body/nude in the art of Ng Eng Teng, Siew Hock Meng, Jimmy Ong and Group 90 has been, regrettably, set aside.

IN CONVERSATION

SUZIE TENG & T.K. SABAPATHY

The conversation took place in the residence of Suzie Teng on 6 July 2018.

TKS: This exhibition of Nee Cheong’s work is devoted predominantly to his drawings and his use of charcoal as a medium. Charcoal on paper. From your recollection, has the figure been with him for as long as he began his practice?

ST: Yes, I have sketchbooks. He started out really early even in his teen years before NAFA. He will doodle on his little notepads and behind envelopes, anything he could doodle on. Human figures of my cousins, my aunts, family members. And they are all here, catalogued.

TKS: As a young person the whole world is potentially available for imagining the environment: landscapes, trees, buildings, street scenes, people moving in and out. Yet the figure, as a complete thing on its own, seems to have captured his imagination more than any other. Do you have any idea why this might be?

ST: The human figure (figurative drawings) is the most challenging for artists, especially visual artists. And I think my brother is always up for a good challenge. He was a perfectionist. He took the most difficult form of visual art to master. He was so passionate about it that he was just going to conquer it. And the first thing to do was figurative drawing. In all of history, we know that figurative art is the most difficult. Not many have mastered it. He was bound and determined that he was going to conquer it.

TKS: Was this ever remarked on by him, that “the figure is the most fascinating, most complex, most elusive and yet I’m going to capture it”. Did he ever make any verbal observations on this?

ST: Not likely. Yet, it was something that he alluded to. He commented that the figure is one of the most difficult but it’s not insurmountable. I am not in the arts at all, but it became apparent from my subsequent encounters with art. He taught me and there are only a few things in life he taught me about art. We have talked about things like pottery, sculpture. And how much work there was into it. That’s when he alluded to it. Figure drawing is perhaps the most difficult to master. It’s one of those things that leaves an indelible memory, isn’t it? It wasn’t until later that I would come across this statement of his. There’d be sketches of hands, feet, torso, heads, faces, profiles. I remember trying to do a face profile myself but I couldn’t. I found all of these sketchbooks and I finally understood what he meant. He was going to master it. I have no idea where he got the idea, or where he got this passion for this. Nobody in our family has an inclination for art. It was my aunt (mother’s elder sister) who noticed his interest in art from his early sketchbooks. It was she who told a pastor, a Fuzhou Methodist church pastor. Who introduced Nee Cheong to NAFA (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts), otherwise he had no knowledge of NAFA. He was thrilled. The NAFA days were the happiest days of his life.

TKS: Wow, how wonderful to hear that!

ST: Yes, I could tell from pictures, photos and in the times of his life then. He even mentioned it, in one of his writings. He was so delighted that there was a school that teaches art the way he likes it. Classical art and traditional art. And that he could now formally have the knowledge to begin this path of his.



T.K. Sabapathy examining artist’s sketchbooks

TKS: The academy should be terrifically thrilled to hear this from an ex-student. Because the term ‘happy’ is not usually employed by students. The figure is lodged in Nee Cheong’s imagination and his art for the entire duration of his life. What is your view, your opinion, of the figure in Nee Cheong’s art?

ST: It is breath-taking. It is one of those things that every time you look at, I think, “Oh dear this has to go out, I cannot be the only one enjoying this.” The craftsmanship with which he implemented this human form needs to be shared. That is my opinion. It needs to go out to awe people the way it did me. He was my brother so I am very familiar with all his works. But when I took over, it really struck me that this has to be seen. To teach! To show! So people/artists can learn. Don’t you think so? I mean I can’t keep this and just admire it myself for my own gratification. It has to go out there to be passed on.

TKS: Ok. What gratification do you get when you see these pictures? I mean here are bodies, male, female. And bodies are not easy to behold just like that. You say you are awed by them. Do these bodies come over as powerful, potent things to you? Are they beautiful things? Are they fearful things?

ST: When I see these human forms that he drew, they are almost alive. And perhaps because he is my brother, I feel the diligence and the perfections that he put into every mark, the blending. I could feel all that energy of the hard work he put into it. And when I look at it, that’s what comes to me. Not only is it realistic, it jumps at me as if the person is there.

TKS: Is that a moment of anxiety for you? To see a live thing which is so potent and might come toward you? How do you position yourself or place yourself in relation to that? Is it something that is exciting? Is it something that is exciting and also anxious?

ST: Not at all. Whether I see a female form or a male form, there is no eroticism in it for me. The body is, without getting too philosophical, it’s just a vessel. Your body is just a vessel. It is the soul that counts. It’s the spirit in it. And he manages to bring the spirit of the person out in these drawings. When I speak to these people they are exactly like that. They are warm, they are nice people. They are very down to earth people. And he brought that beauty out. Is that possible? Yeah. There’s no obscenity. It’s not obscene.

TKS: And you said you have met some of the models?

ST: Yes. I have met Kim, I have not met ‘Nora’. Although I saw her once at the studio. Never talked to her. But we started reconnecting online. You can tell from her activities that she is warm, vivacious. No headiness, no airs about her. And it is the same way with the male model (Kim). They are just good, honest, hardworking people, happy with life. The others that I have met, in Bali, Ubud; you can tell that they’re really, really good people.

TKS: How do you feel about the exhibition, the works that are going to be shown? Do you have any anticipation about how this might be received? This is the first showing of Nee Cheong’s drawings. They have been shown in the company of other things. But this show is concentrated on his drawing.

ST: Correct. You have highlighted, one afternoon, about how this will impact, because it is a drawing with no background, so can be stark. So back to this noble idea of mine. I was thinking in the art world people don’t have problems with their tolerance, right? (Laughs) I believe they are fairly more open-minded, right? So then we have those holier-than-thou(s), oh well, too bad! Yes, it will stir up emotions and they are entitled to how they want to think, or their opinion. Everybody’s entitled. I just know in my heart that this is not about erotic art, it is academic.



Suzie Teng going through her inventory

TKS: What if it is erotic? What's wrong with that? Eros may be beautiful, fulfilling, consummating, in many, many ways. It may slip and slide into pornography but it need not!

ST: What I meant for these holier-than-thou people, if this is pornographic to them, there is nothing I can do. I can't control that.

TKS: Do you wish that this exhibition would also lead to a deeper appreciation of Nee Cheong's art? You know people may not know the extent to which his world of drawing reaches. Do you anticipate that this might also happen? He is largely known through his paintings, and now we are looking at his drawings. Do you anticipate that this might also happen? He is largely known through his paintings, and now we are looking at his drawings?

ST: I have not thought of it in this way. But that there'd be a deeper appreciation of his art? I suppose that's a consequence that once you bring it out there, that information or that knowledge, I guess that would lead to a deeper appreciation. It really was just to share all these stunning works. Behind that marvellous colourist was also a man who was meticulous and this was what he did to bring you his great canvas work. Because this was his preparation for what he did on canvas, most of them. But the diligence or the singlemindedness with which he produced these charcoal works is again, just very stunning to me.

TKS: Do you know if he shared this interest with other artists? Any other artists in Singapore?

ST: I know he had several contemporaries, off the top of my head, of course, is Siew Hock Meng. But that was eons ago. In the early days in Bali, they travelled together. Also, definitely Ng Eng Teng. These are the only two I know. Watercolourist Ong Kim Seng too, I think they were good friends.

TKS: I think the two that you mention, Hock Meng and Eng Teng, are probably two of the closest with Nee Cheong. In their shared view of the importance of the human form. And giving the human form such prominence in their art.

ST: Yes, Eng Teng and his sculptures. Mr Siew (Hock Meng), portraitures. There's one young Malaysian artist. But of late, I have not seen his works. He invited me to one of his exhibitions; he does portraits or figure painting. I'm not sure what his other works are about. I just know that he had one work which he actually lifted off of Nee Cheong.

TKS: When you quote someone and insert that quotation into your own work, it is a way of acknowledging another. It happens often in art.

ST: Well, he didn't hide it from me, he took one of Nee Cheong's drawings, which was in the 1999 exhibition: *Abandoned Thoughts, Two-man Show* at the Art-2 Gallery in Singapore. He did something like a tribute for the whole exhibition, including a tribute to Lee Kuan Yew.

TKS: Another artist is Jimmy Ong.

ST: Yes, he did that tribute piece too. That long piece where he used Nee Cheong's typical poses of women. Nee Cheong's bodies and figures continue to live in the works of others. How many drawings do you have with you for which he used a model, as far as you know?

TKS: Yes, *Pemberontakan Harun Manis (Mango Mutiny) (2014)*. And Jimmy, when I met him, openly said: "This is a tribute to Nee Cheong and I reused his figures here." He paid tributes to other artists as well.

ST: Maybe 200 or 300. My inventory is going up to three hundred and of course that includes some of the oils. So maybe if I take those out then: 250? It's over 200.

TKS: That's a quite a substantial body of work by any reckoning. In a relatively short life.

ST: Yes. Where in the world did he find all the time to do this. He's a tiny person. Not that he's not fit, he's just not the sporty, move-around-fast type; he's very leisurely you know.

TKS: And quiet. I remember him.

TENG: So I guess when he gets inspired that's when he really goes. On top of the hundreds of books he has. And I am very sure he read every one of them. I know that he has studied these books because there are marks in them.

TKS: Where are these books? Do you have them?

ST: He had a lot of them here. A lot of them are also in his home in Kallang.

TKS: It is his library and that is quite formidable to hear that.

ST: He read novels, studied old masters, even Russian painters. He was just into everybody, especially Japanese art. The list goes on; I have a lot of books, old books.

TKS: And to think that these drawings were produced during his lifetime although not frequently exhibited. He produced them not along the same pathway as he produced his paintings. That is an interesting thing to ponder over. How he might have looked at drawings himself. Were they something that were private to him?

ST: Yeah it is interesting, I did ask myself time and again. Nee Cheong doesn't do a lot of talking. Unlike me! In one of his articles, he mentioned that the drawings were his private collection. And that the market in Singapore is not ready. "They still want my still life, my landscape...", somewhere he mentioned that. These drawings remained with him largely. Those he did in Bali were sold to mostly Europeans, Australians, foreigners, and some Indonesians too. I'm sorting through, invoices from galleries, sales; I am trying to gather them all. My life is now on hold, devoted to this. I couldn't go on his journey but I will keep this journey open.

TKS: Wonderful.

ST: There is nobody else who will. He is somebody who so wholeheartedly poured his life into his art, into a profession he chose. I think it is stunning. It's noble, don't you think?

TKS: Yes in every conceivable way.

ST: Yeah, he is the epitome of singlemindedness. He always wanted art and... Even if my mom were to disown him. Which she practically did as she refuses to acknowledge his art.

TKS: So this cataloguing work, are you doing it completely on your own?

ST: Yeah, I'm doing it on my own, the best I can. Digitising all the photos, the magazines, the artist's statements, the things he got involved in. And of course a lot of them are his artworks. I did have a professional photographer, but he sort of backed off as had a heart bypass. He photographed most of the major works, so we got them all done. So I am now down to the sketchbooks, his books, cataloguing all his books.

TKS: Are all his works signed and dated?

ST: Some are not. Not signed but with a seal. If they are not signed and not dated, usually at the back, there might be a notation.

TKS: Have you been in contact with any of his collectors? Are they here in Singapore?

ST: They are here in Singapore. I know of others in Indonesia. Some have his paintings.

TKS: The drawings that are going to be exhibited at The Private Museum are from your collection?

ST: Yes, all are from the collection of the Estate.

TKS: There is a kind of a bond between the artist and the model. For Nee Cheong the model is vital; certain bodies appear again and again.

ST: There is dialogue that they have with each other when they work.

TKS: And the kind of confidence that the models have in Nee Cheong.

ST: Confidence and trust. And the artist trusts them too.

TKS: ‘Here is my body, and it is for you to draw’; both male and female. And that’s a hell of a decision to make.

ST: Well, it takes a very strong meeting of the minds. In ‘Nora’s’ and Kim’s case, they are also friends.

TKS: Yes, but even so, what is being done and to them is more than normal friendship. Which must mean that they both subscribe to the idea that this is a good thing to do.

ST: Like I said, congruency of the mind, of values, of heart.

TKS: One would like to know if both Kim and ‘Nora’ posed for anyone else?

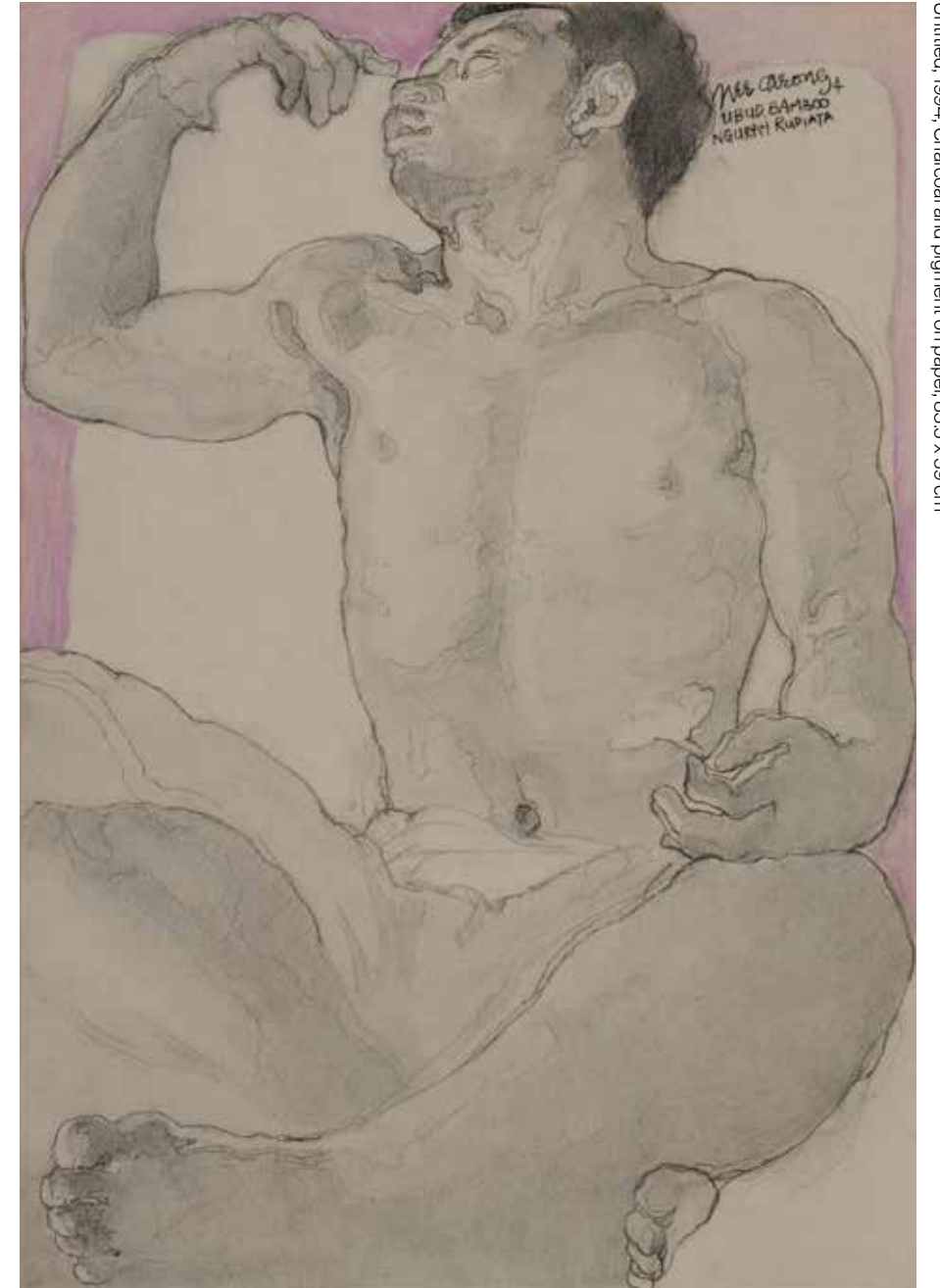
ST: ‘Nora’ probably not. Kim did. Because it is his profession as a male model. ‘Nora’ is not. But it was a form of art for her too.

SELECTIONS OF CHARCOAL
DRAWINGS (1970S-2000S)
FROM THE TENG NEE CHEONG
ESTATE COLLECTION

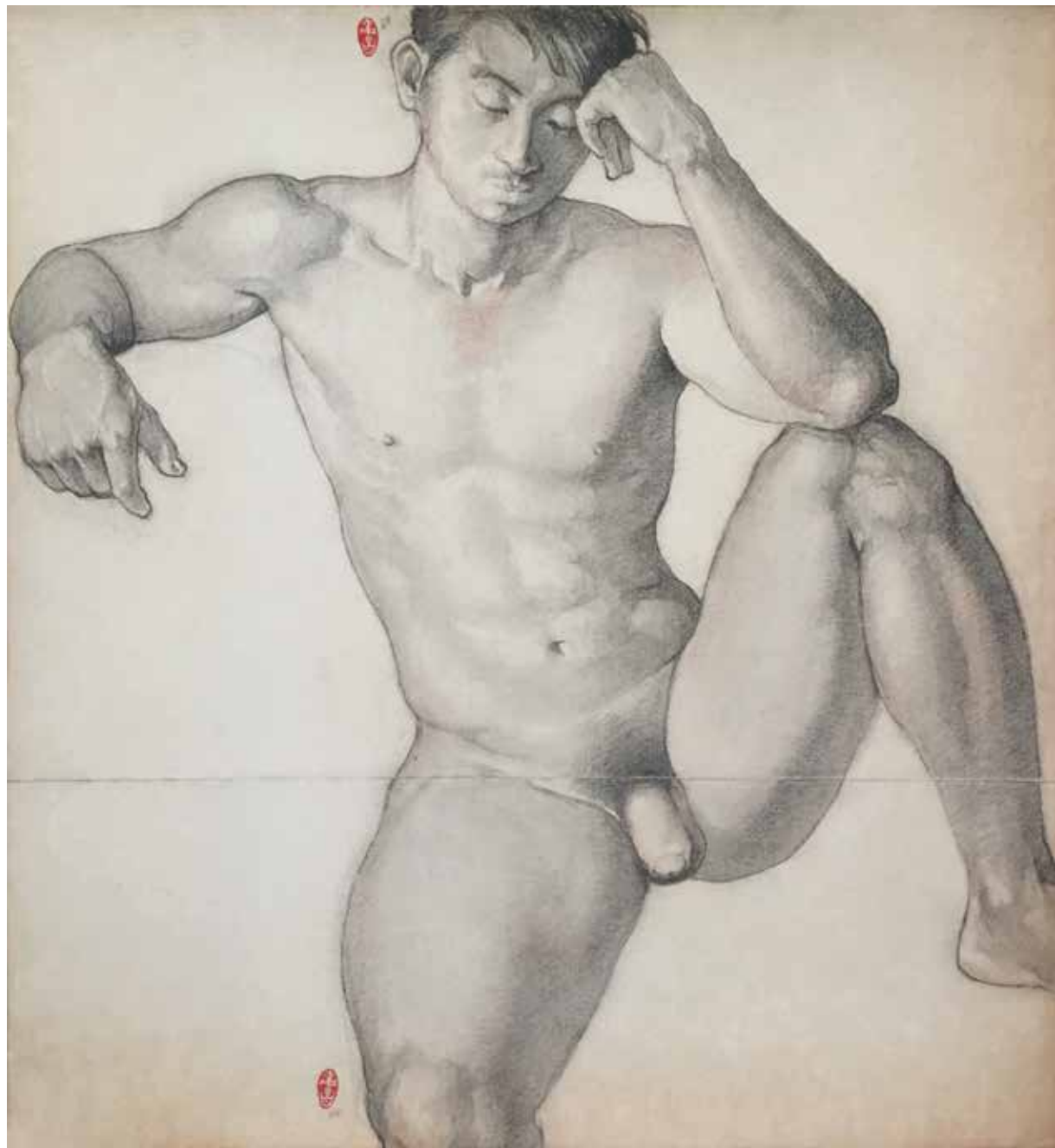


Untitled, 1997, Charcoal on paper, 122 x 91.5 cm

Untitled, 1984, Charcoal on paper, 77 x 55 cm



Untitled, 1984, Charcoal and pigment on paper, 83.5 x 59 cm

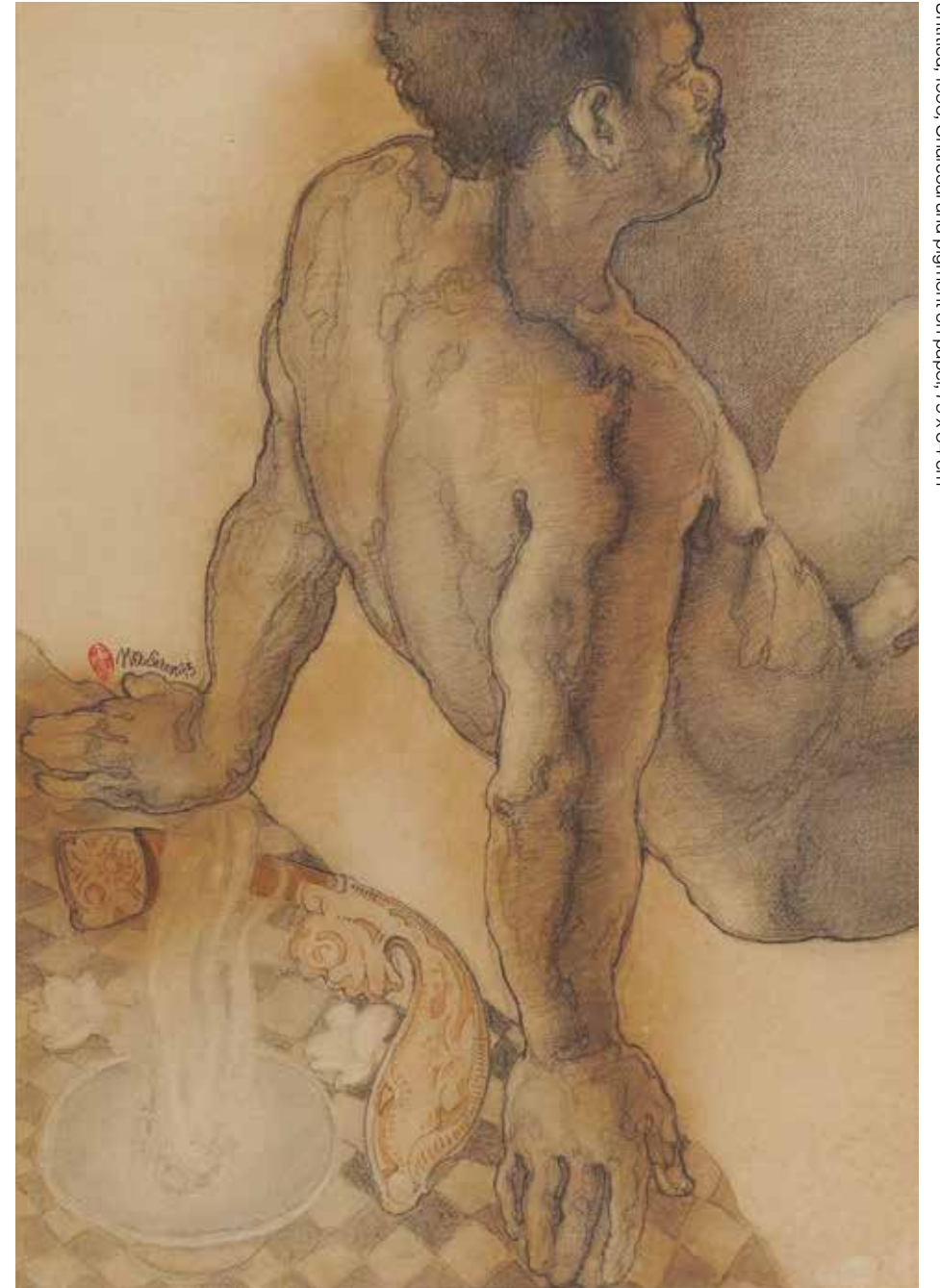
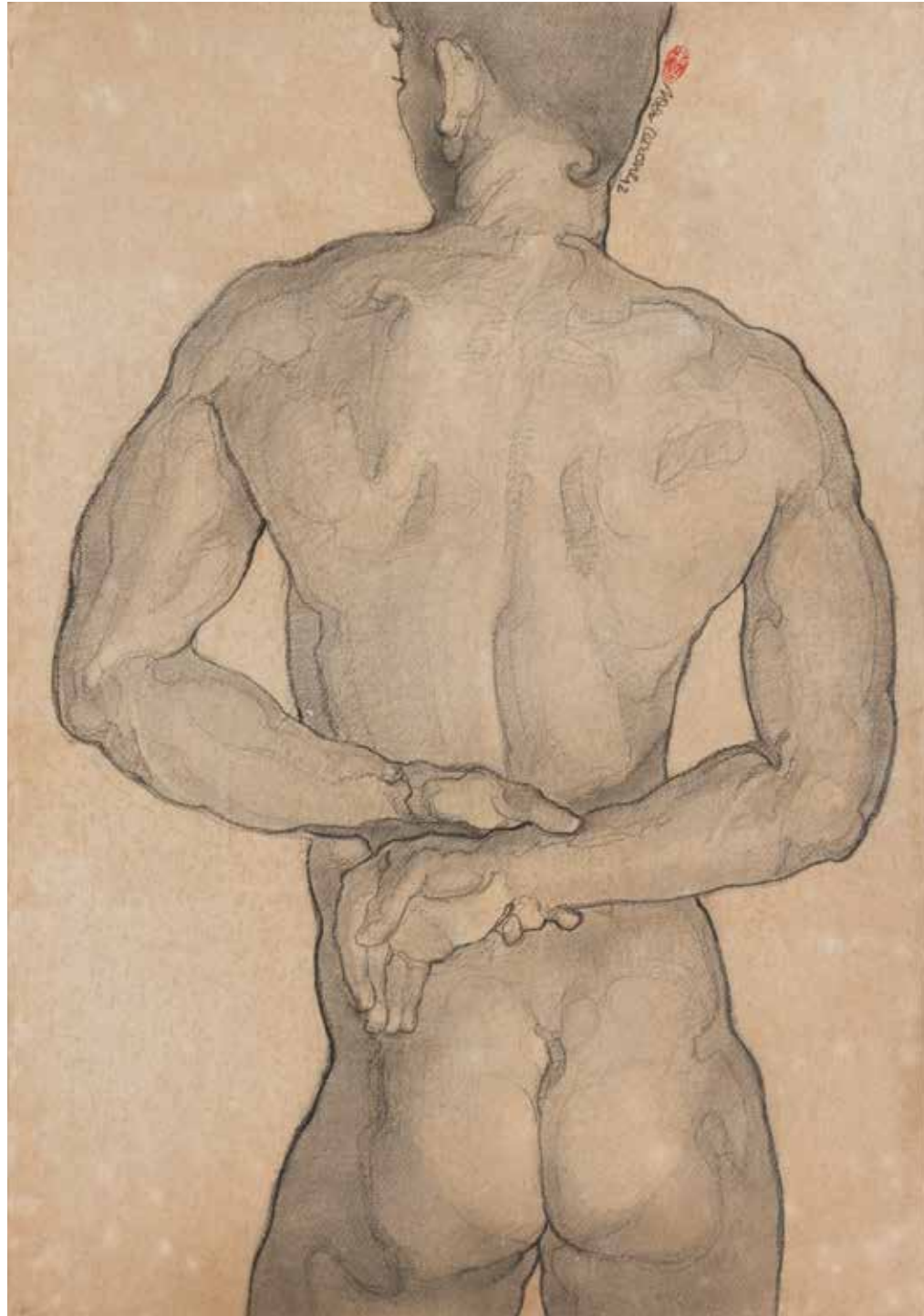


Untitled, 1988, Charcoal on paper, 75 x 73.5 cm

Untitled, 1999, Charcoal on paper, 120 x 63 cm



Untitled, 1992, Charcoal on paper, 82.5 x 58 cm



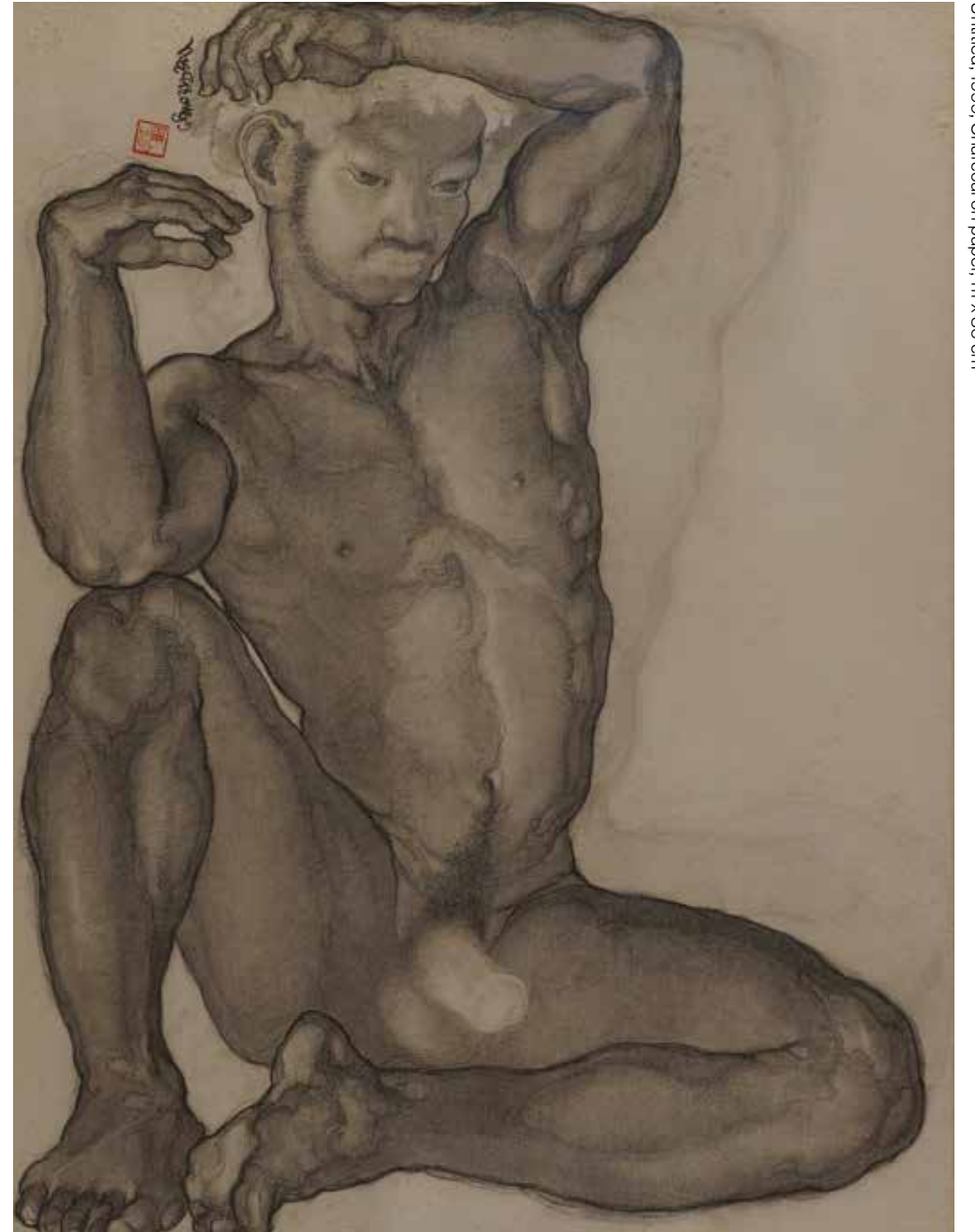
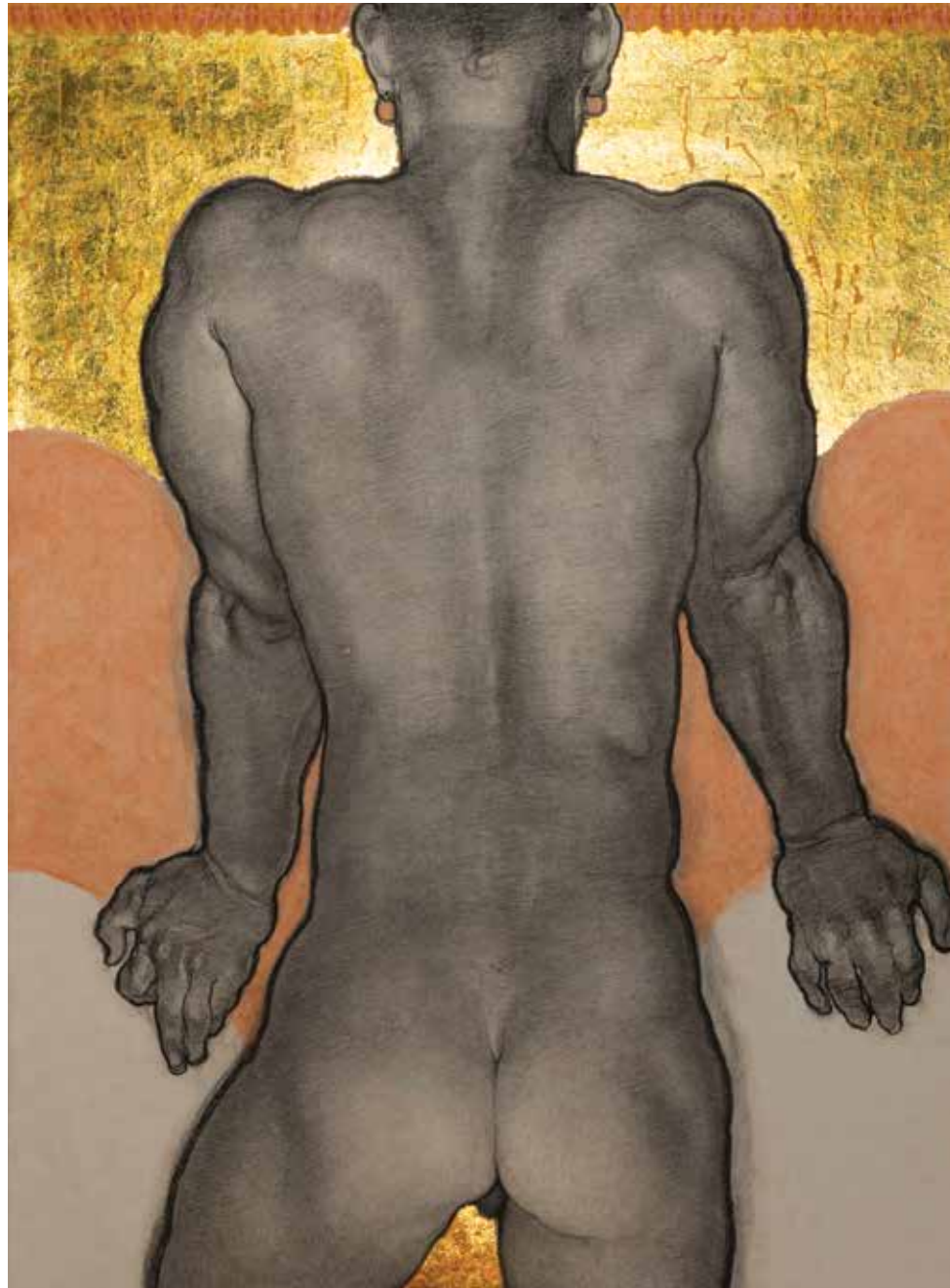
Untitled, 1995, Charcoal and pigment on paper, 79 x 54 cm



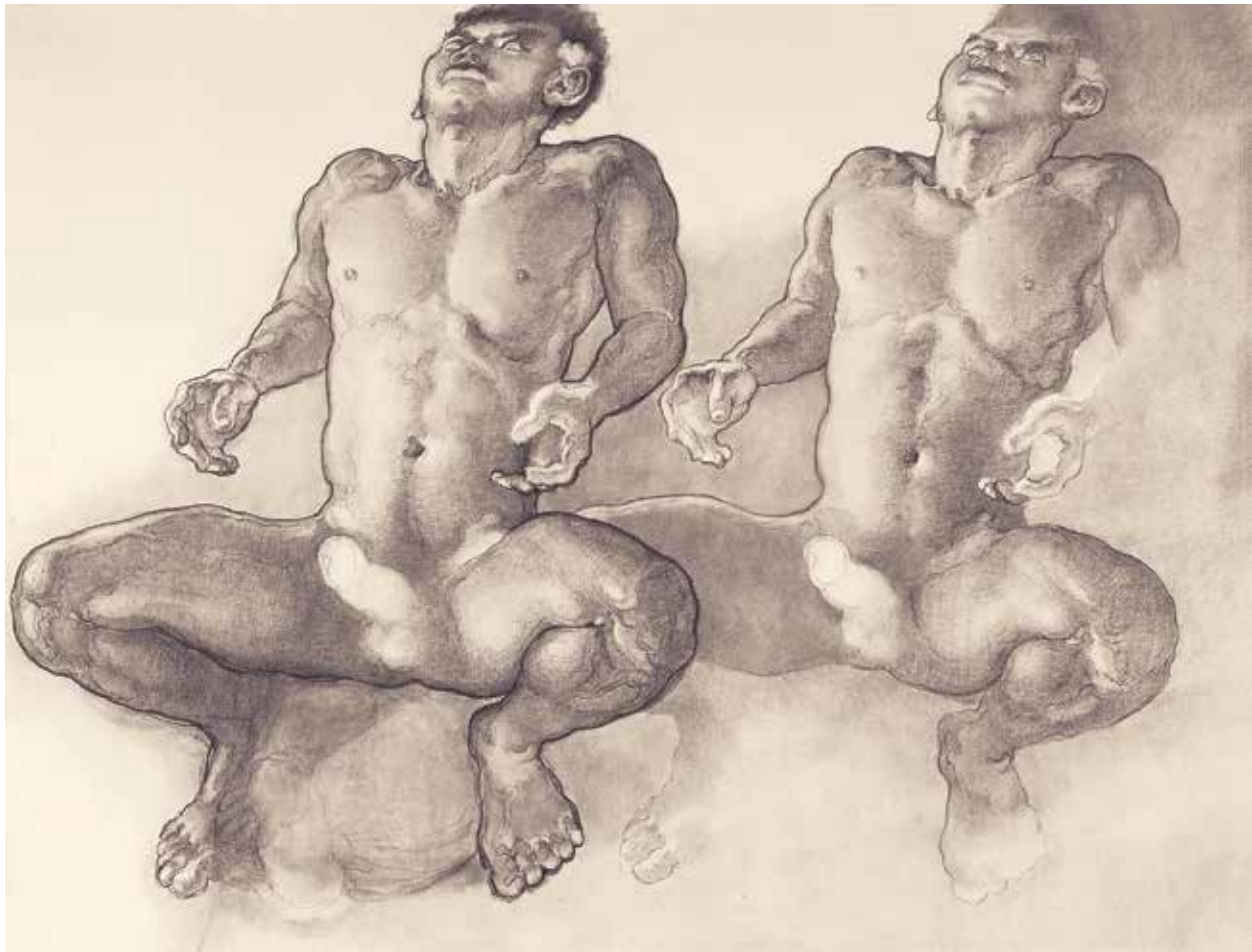
Untitled, 1999, Charcoal on paper, 91.5 x 122 cm



Nak Mey Siam, 1980, Charcoal and pigment on paper with gold leaf, 122 x 91.5 cm



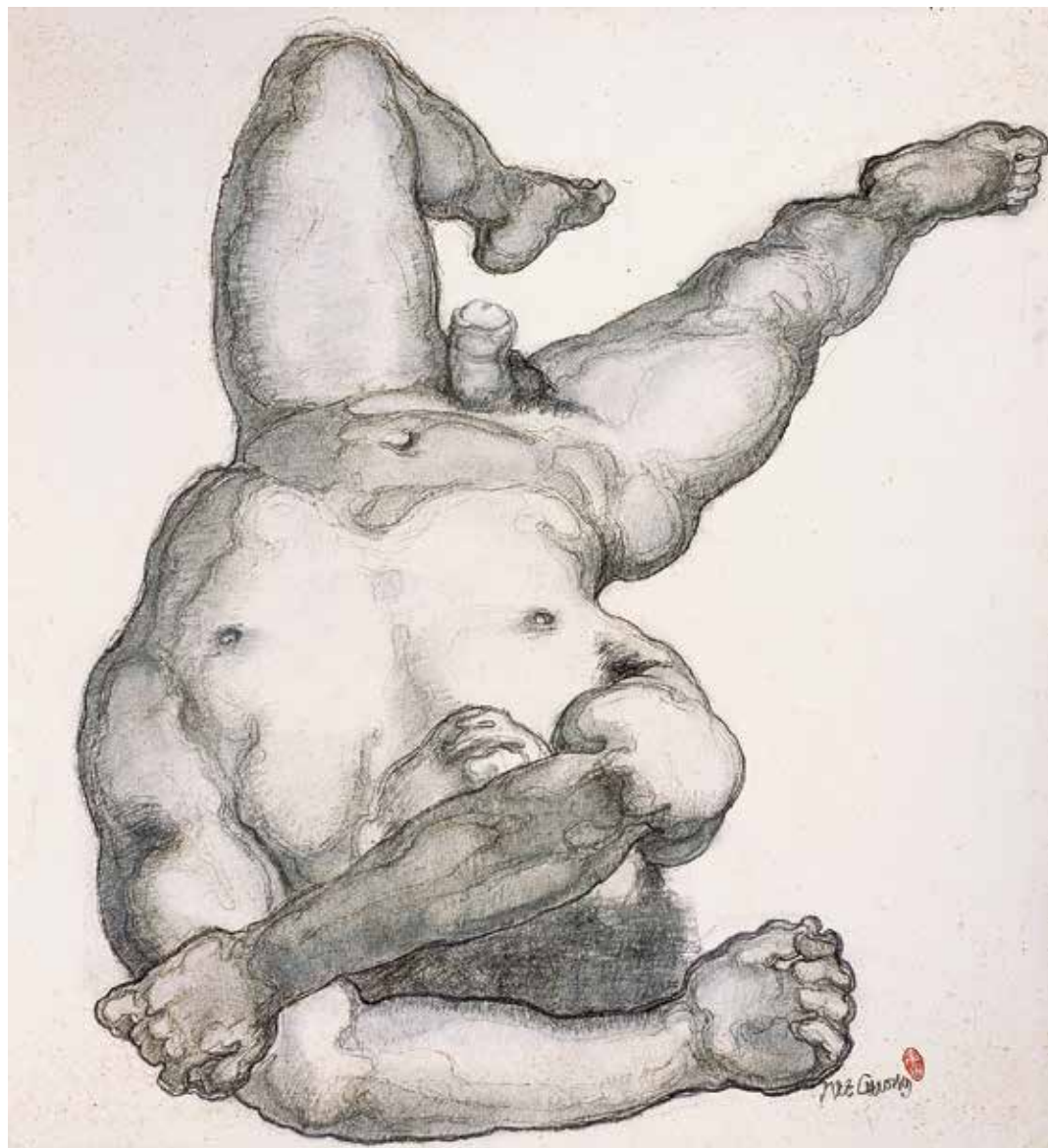
Untitled, 1999, Charcoal on paper, 111 x 86 cm



Untitled, 1998, Charcoal and pigment on paper, 84 x 115 cm



Untitled, 1995, Charcoal on paper, 83.5 x 76.5 cm



Untitled, 1995, Charcoal on paper, 140 x 88 cm





Untitled, 2000, Charcoal on paper, 91 x 121.5 cm



Untitled, 2005, Charcoal on paper, 88 x 118 cm



Untitled, 2004, Charcoal on paper, 86 x 112 cm



Untitled, 2000, Charcoal on paper, 91 x 121.5 cm





Untitled, 1993, Charcoal on paper, 79 x 55 cm



Untitled, 2003, Charcoal on paper, 121 x 91 cm



Untitled, 1993, Charcoal on paper, 79 x 54.5 cm



Untitled, 1993, Charcoal on paper, 79 x 55 cm



Untitled, 1999, Charcoal on paper, 85 x 113 cm



Untitled, 1990s, Charcoal on paper, 90 x 120 cm



Untitled, 2003, Charcoal on paper, 91 x 121 cm



Untitled, 2004, Charcoal on paper, 91 x 121.5 cm



Untitled, 1998, Charcoal on paper, 113 x 83 cm



Untitled, circa early-1990s, Charcoal and pigment on paper with gold leaf, 113 x 83 cm



Untitled, 1984, Charcoal on paper, 50 x 70.5 cm



Untitled, circa 1980s, Charcoal and pigment on paper, 70.5 x 74 cm



Untitled, circa 1980s, Charcoal on paper, 70.5 x 66 cm



Untitled, 2003, Charcoal on paper, 64 x 117.5 cm



A Balines Morning 1998, 1998, Charcoal on paper, 87 x 118 cm



Untitled, 1986, Charcoal on paper, 55 x 79 cm



Untitled, 2000, Charcoal on paper, 91 x 115.5 cm



Untitled, 1998, Charcoal and pigment on paper with gold leaf, 92 x 120 cm



Untitled, 1999, Charcoal on paper, 115 x 150 cm



Untitled, 1999, Charcoal on paper, 92 x 150 cm



Untitled (tattoo man series), 2000, Charcoal and pigment on paper, 117 x 63 cm

REMEMBERING
TENG NEE CHEONG:
RECOLLECTIONS BY
THE MODELS

'NORA'

The world of life drawing modelling was introduced to me by an English girlfriend of mine who was modelling back then. As someone who is always interested in arts and creativity, I became curious how artists would bring my body form to life on the canvas through their eyes. I started with portrait drawing classes but went into life drawing classes shortly after.

The reaction from artists was very encouraging. I became known quite quickly within the industry and was modelling 3 classes a day on most days. I was introduced to an artist called Mr Lee who had an art studio in Jalan Eunus. It was not long after, that he had mentioned me to Nee Cheong. I was contacted by Nee Cheong [NC] and the rest was history.

I first modelled for NC in 1997-98 and soon after started to model for him regularly. We had formed a strong relationship over the years. He was different from the other artists. He took interest in me and made it a point to get to know me. He guided and pushed me to be a better model - a pose at a time. Some of the toughest poses I had done were for NC. And some of the most incredible transformations were from NC's eyes to his hands and down on paper. Thus, it made working for him such a pleasure and worthwhile.

We extended our relationship out of the studio; we would go for meals, chatted endlessly and never short of laughter between us. And he never fails to treat me with great respect, putting my needs and privacy before all others. I appreciate him for always doing that.

As I pen this reminiscing of the past, I'm overwhelmed by this huge feeling of sorrow as I have lost this special soul in my life. But I feel special that NC chose me as his muse for that period of 10 years. He saw me bloom from a young girl to a woman and he brought out the grace in me.

I turned 40 this year, 21 years since I first started modelling and I wanted to contact him prior to my trip back to Singapore. I had a final request: to be drawn by him again; but I received news of his departure instead. Although we may never meet again, the memories I have of him remain strong. Your voice I hear in my head always and forever. You were more than just an artist to me, you were my friend and I miss you dearly. And you will never be forgotten.



Artist & Model - 'Nora', circa 2000s

KIM

It seemed as though it happened only yesterday—the long bus rides to Telok Kurau Studio.

During the economic decline in the late 90s, I was re-trenched twice and needed to make a living. In a strange turn of events, a friend challenged me to try life modelling and that's where it all began, on 2nd Jan 2000.

After a few months of posing for a group of leisure artists in my new career, they invited me to an art exhibition. There were many paintings, but one beautifully-drawn artwork stood out for me, the only charcoal drawing of a male nude laying on his belly. It moved me beyond words. That was how I met Mr Teng Nee Cheong.

Working with Mr Teng was always an exciting challenge. He would begin by telling me his ideas, getting me to experiment with various poses, and eventually deciding one for his new piece. Respectful, thoughtful and engaging, he always made sure I had enough to eat and drink, before and after our studio sessions. Knowing his desired poses were very demanding, he was always patient and went the extra mile to check on me.

In the background playing his favourite classical music, our sessions always filled with conversations and laughter. As time passed, we grew closer and our time extended beyond the studio. We shared meals at the coffeeshops after studio sessions, and often visited art exhibitions together. From time to time, I would accompany him to the bookshops at Bras Basah and Kinokuniya at Bugis Junction. We became more than just artist and model at work, but very good friends.

At the end of 2003, I left Singapore to further my studies in Perth. I continued to pose for him each time I returned, even up to 3 sessions per week. In 2008, his health took a turn. Our sessions reduced, contact dwindled and eventu-

ally stopped. Until the day, I received the news from another artist that Mr Teng had passed on.

It is difficult to hold back tears while writing this memoir. I did not have a chance to bid him farewell for the last time. I shall pen down a 'proper' farewell here:

"Mr Teng, I am really grateful and honoured that you have chosen me, allowing me to be your muse, to model faithfully for you all these years. Liberating me, respectfully and sensitively. You have always encouraged me to express and share creative thoughts, bringing the best out of me.

You have made your marks to prove that the full frontal 'Fullest Bloom' of men on paper and canvas will remain strong, bold and beautiful ever more so than the real living man in me.

In memory of your talent, passion and friendship, I dedicate the words from the song, *Never Enough* by Loren Allred to you.

I'm trying to hold my breath
Let it stay this way
Can't let this moment end

You set off a dream in me
Getting louder now
Can you hear it echoing?

Take my hand
Will you share it with me?
Cause Mr Teng, without you... '

You have left us young Mr Teng, and I can never say this enough...I thank you with all my heart, I really do. I miss you very much, yes I do."



Artist & Model - Kim, circa 2000s

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY
& CURRICULUM VITAE



TENG NEE CHEONG (b. 1951-d. 2013, Singapore) was an artist renowned for his exotic palette that reflects the various influences of cultures and traditions around Asia. His works use distinct symbols of adjacent cultures or religions, such as Balinese mythology, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Teng is regarded as one of Singapore's foremost artist in the genre of figurative and representational art. He was a graduate of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, where he was tutored by the iconic Georgette Chen and Ng Yat-Chuan. Born in Singapore, geographically located in the hub of various cultural exchanges of Southeast Asia, Teng paints in oils and draws with charcoals, inspired by Asian mural paintings and Persian miniatures, in his depiction of flora in particular. He was notably inspired by impressionism and expressionism and throughout this practice, produced works of still-life and botanical studies that demonstrated these foundations.

In the later phase of his practice, he evolved a language and approach that was singular and unique in figural art works in Singapore. His charcoal works on paper of male and female figures were fluid and expressive and often deployed as the basis for figures in his oil paintings.

His works were exhibited in Holland, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Paris, Singapore and United States. He was given numerous awards from the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Award and the UOB Painting of the Year competitions, and his works are among private and public collections including the Singapore Art Museum, National Gallery Singapore, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), UOB Bank, DBS Bank, Neka Art Museum (Bali, Indonesia) and more.

Teng Nee Cheong passed away peacefully at home, his family beside him, in the early hours of dawn on June 2013.

ART EDUCATION			
1968-1970	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore	1988	Singapore Artists Exhibition, Hong Kong, China
		1987	Artists Contemporains des Singapour", Paris, France
		1986	Festival of Arts, Art Forum, Singapore
		1984	2 nd Young Artists Exhibition, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
		1982	Flora Fauna, Singapore
SELECTED AWARDS		COLLECTIONS	
1996	Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, Singapore	Daniel Komala, Jakarta, Indonesia	
1995	Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, Singapore	Embassy of Singapore, Washington D,C,, USA	
1993	Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, Singapore	Embassy of Singapore, Tokyo, Japan	
1991	Singapore Art Society Tan Tze Chor Art Award	Embassy of Singapore, Bangkok, Thailand	
1982	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Alumni Association Creative Award	Embassy of Singapore, Paris, France	
1978	Ministry of Culture Special Award	Embassy of Singapore, Manila, Philippines	
SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS		Jusuf Wanandi, C.S.I.S., Jakarta, Indonesia	
2010	Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier, Gajah Gallery, Singapore	Neka Art Museum, Bali, Indonesia	
1998	Once Where Celestial Gods Frolicked, Jakarta, Indonesia	Singapore Art Museum, Singapore	
1992	Crescent Over the Equator, Shenn's Gallery, Singapore	The Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), Singapore	
1980	Art in Action, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore	The Hilton Hotel, Singapore	
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS		The Hyatt Regency Hotel, Singapore	
2015	The 12 th Gongju International Art Festival, Limlip Museum, South Korea	The Ministry of Community Development, Singapore	
2015	The UOB Art Collection - Drawing from our past, framing our future, NAFA, Singapore	The Monetary Authority of Singapore, Singapore	
2014	50 th Anniversary Commemoration, Modern Art Society Singapore, Singapore	United Overseas Bank Ltd. (UOB), Singapore	
2013	The Purest Song of Praise, Singapore	PUBLICATIONS	
2011-2012	Plunder & Play · Art is a Lie, Singapore	2015	Asia Aroma-Arts, The 12 th Gongju International Art Festival 2015, South Korea
2009	Daegu Art Fair, Daegu, Korea	2014	30 Art Friends - Collecting Southeast Asian Art, an art project by Quek Tse Kwang, a publication dedicated to Nee Cheong, Singapore
2008	Commemorating A Decade: 1997-2007, Telok Kurau Annual Exhibition, Telok Kurau Studios, Singapore	2013	The Purest Song of Praise, Telok Kurau Studios 15 th Annual Exhibition, Singapore
2005	Wealth of Visions – The DBS Art Collection, The Art House at Old Parliament, Singapore	2011-2012	Art is a Lie, Telok Kurau Studios 14 th Annual Exhibition.
	Erotica, Tony Raka Gallery, Mas, Gianyar, Bali, Indonesia	2010	Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
2004	The 19 th Asian International Art Exhibition, Fukouka Asian Art Museum, Japan	2001	Telok Kurau Studios 2001, Singapore
2000	Fireflies Calypso As Twilight Descends, The Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards 2000		Impressions – Ingressions, Singapore Artist. CD-ROM, National Arts Council, Singapore
1999	Abandoned Thoughts, Two-man Show, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore	1999	Abandoned Thoughts, Publisher: Lim Tiong Ghee & Teng Nee Cheong, Singapore
1998	When the Season is Nigh, The Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards 1998	1998	Once Where Celestial Gods Frolicked..., Garret Kam, editor. Teng Nee Cheong, Singapore
1996	Once Where Celestial Gods Frolicked, The Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards 1996, National Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand		The Development of Painting in Bali: Selections from the Neka Art Museum (2 nd revised edition), Suteja Neka and Garrett Kam, Yayasan Dharma Seni Museum Neka, Ubud, Bali, Indoneisa
1995-present	Permanent Collection Exhibition, Neka Museum, Bali Indonesia	1997	Southeast Asian Art: A New Spirit, Koh Buck Song and Jane Leong, editor. Art & Artists Speak, Singapore
1995	Naked Thunder, The Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards, ASEAN Sect, Jakarta, Indonesia 1995	1996	A Collector's Journey: Modern Painting in Indonesia, Collection of Jusuf Wanandi. Agus Dermawan T., Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta and Neka Museum, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia
1993	A Timeless Bondage, The Philip Morris The Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards 1993	1993	Crescent over the Equator: Teng Nee Cheong, with an introduction by TK Sabapathy, Teng Nee Cheong, Singapore
1991	20 Singapore Artists Exhibition, USA	1991	Change: 20 Singapore Artist, A Decade of Their Work, TK Sabapathy and SV Krishnan, editors. Yeo Chew Hong, Singapore
1989	ASEAN Travelling Exhibitions, ASEAN Countries	1990	Singapore Artists Speak, Richard Lim, editor. C.H. Yeo, Singapore

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the essay writer, Mr T.K. Sabapathy and the following organizations: INDC Pte Ltd, A Minor Thread, Allegro Print, Digit Design and FrameHub, for their dedication and support in making this exhibition a success.

A very special thank you to the Guest-of-Honour, Mr Low Sze Wee, Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre for officiating the opening of the exhibition and taking time to write the foreword.

Last but not least, our heartfelt gratitude all our donors, patrons and supporters for the kind support and generous contributions towards the production of the exhibition and catalogue.

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Family of the Artist

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Suzie Teng
Nee Cheong's sister
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Nee Cheong's brother
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