

PORTRAIT OF A REGION

Ten years in the making, the National Gallery Singapore is a neo-classical museum of modern art with a dual mission: winning over the people and elevating a cast of unknowns – 800 artworks – to international greatness.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES



The Rotunda Library of the former Supreme Court, now an art research centre.



f all the gifts a sovereign nation can bestow upon its people, a national gallery is among the most valuable.

Done right, it's a gift that keeps on giving. Lose yourself in front of paintings – windows in to lost worlds – for hours, days, however long one chooses. Time travel into the drawing rooms, salons and artist studios of old epochs. Grapple with the themes, ideas, myth-making and narratives central to your nation's story. Cast off the shackles of the mundane and sojourn amid the sublime.

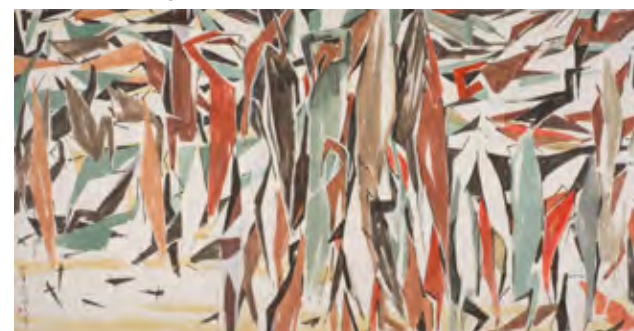
The Dutch and British realised their power to inspire and to instill a sense of national pride and belonging in the early 19th century; the Americans, Indians and Australians at different points in the last; and Southeast Asia? Well, although Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines all have them, the Singaporeans now suddenly and emphatically lead the way. In late November, the red tape was cut on a gargantuan 64,000-square-metre, \$532-million National Gallery housed in two stolid leftovers from the city-state's colonial past, the old City Hall and former Supreme Court.

Lasting a week, and forming the denouement of the Lion City's 50th anniversary of independence celebrations, its opening was quite the Singaporean occasion. Opera singers bellowed on the steps out front. Images inspired by the art within were beamed across the towering Corinthian columns behind them. Stage-managed photo-ops saw government ministers posing with schoolkids in a new centre for art education on the first floor. And there was a speech from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, one that walked a tightrope between managing and building expectations. In the newly restored City Hall Chambers, a room famous for being the spot where the Japanese surrendered to the Allied Forces in September 1945, he told guests and journalists: "The National Gallery, with 800 pieces in this collection to its name and a few more borrowed from galleries around the region, is nowhere near the scale and riches of the Louvre or the Met." But he then softened that frank admission, promising: "We will gradually build up our own collections over time through acquisitions and donations, and also as our own artists continue to contribute to the arts-and-culture scene in Singapore."

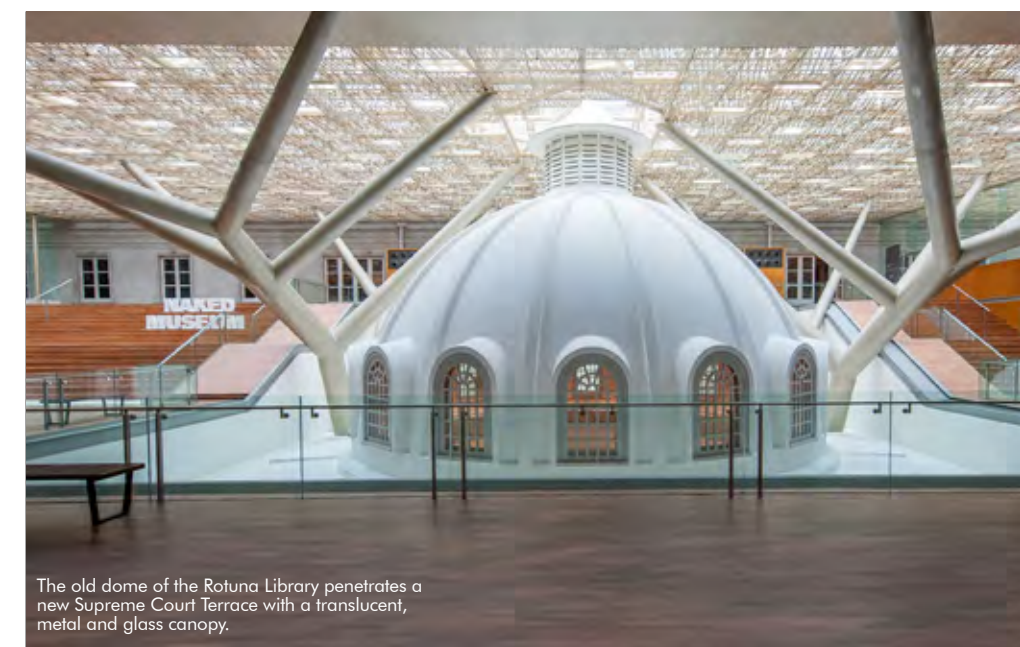
The next day, the crowds descended. As soon as the doors opened at 10am, hundreds set off, map in hand, through the bright, Beaux Arts foyers and into the two galleries filled with Singaporean and Southeast Asian art. Among them were naysayers and nitpickers making remarks such as: "These gallery ceilings are too low" (a little harsh given the conservation restrictions), "Too many corridors" (a fair point: of the 64,000 square-metres, only 18,000 are galleries) and "Why do you need to go down to the basement to get your ticket and then up again?" (though all these complaints could well be curmudgeonly responses to life in a city where institutions and initiatives typically result from top-down directives, this also seemed a fair point).

But the general mood was one of excitement. People huddled around the "Social Table": a flat bank of digital screens that allow you to explore the gallery's archive and discover links between artists with a mere swipe of your index finger. Elderly Singaporeans perched on benches, maps sprawled open strategically on their laps. Teenagers on the footbridges between the two buildings posed for selfies, the tree-like aluminium columns that now prop up the translucent atrium roof in the background. Occasionally a minister, director or curator would whistle past, a group of local and international media in tow. Meanwhile, back in the galleries, the public stood rapt as gallery volunteers talked about the backstories and techniques behind individual works. Some listened as if their lives somehow depended on it.

It's a gallery for the Singaporean people, yes, but also a transnational project. Away from the tours and lectures and kids' workshops, something larger is at play in the offices where arts administrators work in spick white cubicles. Hardwired into the National Gallery Singapore's DNA is a mission with implications for the larger region and world, not just the Singaporean public. Uniquely for these parts, and most of the world, this is a national gallery concerned as much with fostering a deep understanding of the region's art-history as it is its own, where Vietnamese propaganda art, Indonesian abstractions on local



Herons by Chen Wen Hsi.



The old dome of the Rotunda Library penetrates a new Supreme Court Terrace with a translucent, metal and glass canopy.

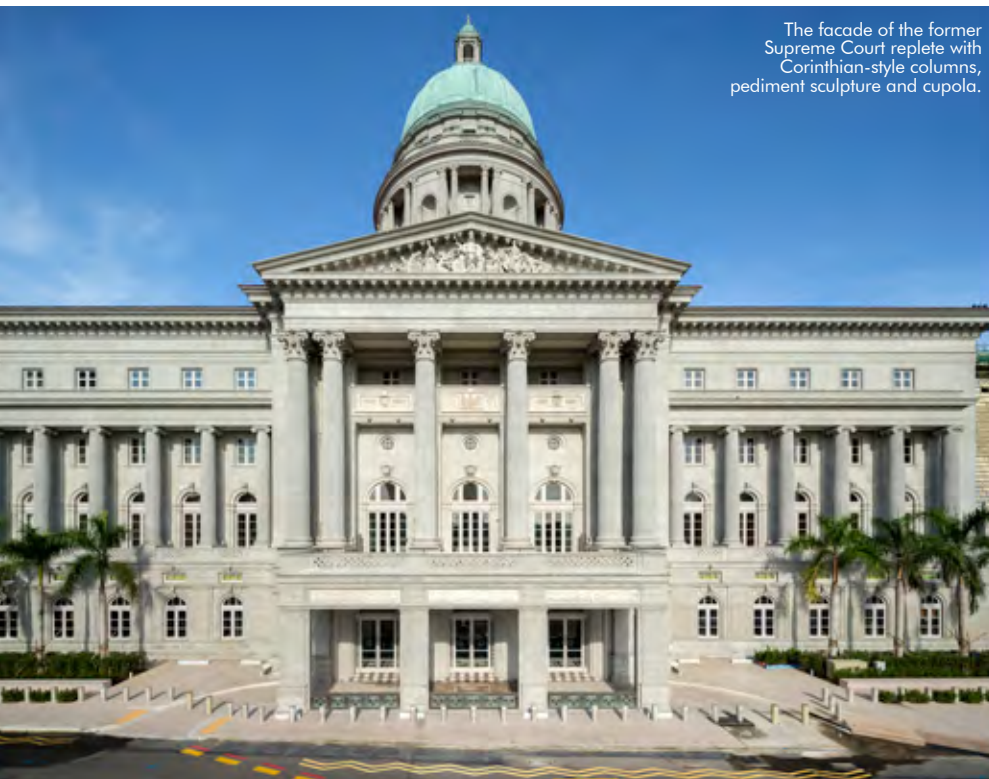
"Singapore is not an island unto ourselves. To understand where we come from, we have to appreciate our neighbourhood and our context."

materials such as batik, and wild, passionate oil paintings by Filipino masters have almost equal footing with the homegrown equivalent.

"Singapore is not an island unto ourselves," said the PM in his opening speech. "To understand where we come from, we have to appreciate our neighbourhood and our context." But this is only half the picture. Understanding where it comes from is not the only reason Singapore is quietly amassing the most comprehensive collection of Southeast Asian modern (and contemporary) art in the world – it's also about *dominating* where it comes from, about fulfilling its long-held ambition to be a global arts city, about adding to the collective power of a formidable arts ecosystem that already includes infrastructure such as the Singapore Art Museum (launched in 1996), Singapore Biennale and Art Stage Singapore (an art fair of Asian contemporary art held every January).

Not everyone in the region is enthusiastic about this. When a rich, young nation appoints itself the scholarly custodian of Southeast Asian art history, and embarks on a buying spree of works of art-historical importance to nationalistic countries like the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – as Singapore has done and continues to do – eyebrows will be raised. "My hope is that the gallery will be the keeper of these works and not the gatekeeper," said Claire Hsu, executive director of Hong Kong's Asia Art Archive, to the *New York Times* recently. "It should not own history, but inspire and enable others to engage with it."

With rumours circulating of private collectors being courted in an effort to win works, and, as far as I could ascertain, no clear incentives being offered to encourage other Southeast Asians to



The facade of the former Supreme Court replete with Corinthian-style columns, pediment sculpture and cupola.

engage with the collection, questions are surfacing about just how neighbourly and altruistic this whole enterprise really is. Thailand is especially vulnerable to plundering, believe some – “a sitting duck” with “no counterforce to balance the playing field,” as one Thai art scene observer who wished to remain anonymous puts it. This could well be paranoia. As curatorial director Low Sze Wee admitted to me during my tour, Thai artists are currently vastly underrepresented in the collection. But if that changes, a near-future scenario in which Thais one day have to travel to Singapore to see Thai modern art masterworks in the flesh is possible.

There are, of course, positives to all this. In 2014, *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter lamented the deep-rooted Euro-American biases of art institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim. Now, with the National Gallery Singapore’s soft-spoken and sharp-suited director Eugene Tan promising a rash of loans and collaborations with overseas institutions (joint exhibitions with the Centre Pompidou and Tate Britain are lined up for mid-late 2016), Southeast Asian art may start to get prolonged, rather than fleeting, bouts of international recognition.

One of its main aims is to fill in one of the blank spots on International Modernism’s canvas. Again

A super articulate army of curators are deeply invested in telling a story that hasn’t yet been properly told: of how Modernism happened here, and to a different timetable and for different reasons than in the West.



Supreme Court hallway.

and again in the days running up to the official opening, in interviews, preview tours and media briefings, it was made clear that its staff – a super articulate army of curators and arts administrators that numbers in the hundreds – are deeply invested in telling a story that hasn’t yet been properly told: of how Modernism happened here, and to a different timetable and for different reasons than in the West. In opting to tell this unknown story, and so put art from this region on a level pedestal with art from the West, it is, of course, taking a risk. There are few internationally famous masterworks in the collection to attract crowds from abroad and guarantee big box-office receipts. Without those to rely on, it can succeed solely through the lucidity of its storytelling.

And just how good a storyteller is the National Gallery Singapore? Despite its academic aim to “reflexively (re)write” the art history of all Southeast Asia, currently it’s most articulate when narrating its own story. This might simply be because of the two inaugural exhibitions, both of which are due to hang for five years, the one surveying Singaporean art, “Siapa Nama Kamu?” (“What’s your name?” in Malay), is the most comprehensive.

Broadly chronological, it begins in the early 1880s, “a time of art before the time of art in many

ways,” as senior curator Hussain Mustafa puts it, but that helps us understand the early sources of the modern in Singapore, namely colonialism. Key works include the faux-naïve paintings of “Nanyang artists” such as Cheong Soo Pieng, and Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class*, an evocative depiction of Chinese students learning the then-national language Malay from 1959, the year Singapore wrestled self-governance from its masters.

Some of the most memorable works offer stark social commentary – Choo Keng Kwang’s woodcut print documenting an incident when Chinese students clashed with the British authorities back in 1954, for instance – or an ironic playfulness, such as Teo Eng Seng’s *The Net*, comprised of debris



Clockwise from top: *Boschbrand (Forest Fire)* by Raden Saleh; *National Language Class* by Chua Mia Tee; self-portrait by Georgette Chen.



Works on display in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery.

dredged from the Singapore River. This is a tongue-in-cheek stab at the emotionally overwrought and highly romanticised output of the Singapore Watercolour Society, which flanks it.

To the curatorial team's credit, controversial works haven't been locked away in the storeroom in the hope that no one will notice. Not all of them anyway. "In our retelling of Singapore art history," says Tan, "we've been able to highlight certain aspects which have, until now, been overlooked."

Josef Ng's *Brother Cane*, the 1994 video work that caused an open fissure in Singaporean society and led to the National Art Council withdrawing funding for unscripted performance art, is not on show. However, other video works from that period, as well as some in other media produced in response to the ban, are. Found in different corners of a room covering the '80s and '90s, and somewhat overloaded with installations by Tang Da Wu and other players in the influential conceptual art collective the Artist's Village, they are not well explained or contextualised, but they are there.

Have the curators displayed a certain level of self-censorship in choosing not to underscore the controversial aspects of these works? Or is the fact that they are here at all a sign that the Singapore government is actually more relaxed than many artists, historically, have perceived? Knowing the Singaporeans, these sorts of questions will probably be dissected at a National Gallery forum soon.

The exhibition covering the broader Southeast Asia region – and flowing through the timber-paneled chambers and colonnaded halls of the former Supreme Court – is more troublesome, mainly because it is less authoritative. The problem is not that "Declarations and Dreams" attempts to

tell lots of stories – about the founding of art schools by Europeans, about the dawn of social realism, about the rise of avant garde movements – but that it fails to tell any of them fully, and whilst adopting a magisterial tone that befits the setting.

Walking out of Gallery 2, for example, you could be forgiven for thinking that all of 19th century Southeast Asia took up oil painting in an attempt to refute colonialist notions of cultural superiority, when the truth is that only parts of it did, namely Indonesia and the Philippines. You leave having not learnt anything about the impact of communism, or that surrealism was arguably more influential among mid-20th century Thai artists than abstraction, or that the reason so little Thai art appears in the early sections is not because of a dearth of quality but because, as alluded to earlier, much of it is, for the time being, out of reach.

"I'm sure if you ask a specialist from each country they will tell you there are lots of things missing," admits Tan. "A lot of key works are in the respective national museums or collections of different countries. And it's very hard to borrow modern Thai art," he adds, "much more difficult than doing a show of contemporary Thai art." Nowhere in the show will you find any such admission of fallibility.

Still, although it should come with a warning (perhaps: *This is a spotty survey that more reflects our buying habits and co-institutional relationships than the region it covers*), there are plenty of strong works. Perhaps the most powerful of all is *Boschbrand (Forest Fire)*, a lush, highly-codified and wonderfully over-the-top depiction of bulls and tigers tumbling by the Indonesian romantic painter Raden Saleh. Another highlight is the concluding section featuring a potpourri of works by regional contemporary artists, including key installations by Thai A-listers such as Montien Boonma and Michael Shaowanasai.

There are quite a few wow moments, actually, not all involving art. The Supreme Court's domed rotunda is now an art research centre with a dramatic sense of history. A rattan-like glass and metal membrane covers the gap between the buildings, then sweeps up to create a top floor with newly enclosed open spaces and designer restaurants. In one more example of the Singaporean's internationalism, an architectural competition to design the conversion was held, and the winners, French firm Studio Milou, have done a great job, creating a cultural megastructure that oozes civic grandeur and retains original touches.

You have to hand it to the Singaporeans. It might be a gift that Southeast Asia should receive with a modicum of caution, and one that's destined to reveal its true value slowly, in the years and decades to come, but what a gift. ✕