

From Current Issue

[EDITOR'S LETTER](#) Dreams of Progress

[THE POINT](#) Art as Multispecies Vibrancy

[ESSAY](#) The Year of the Rat

[PROFILE](#) Joven Cuanang

[FEATURE](#) Memories of Zarina Hashmi

[REVIEW](#) Jeffrey Shaw

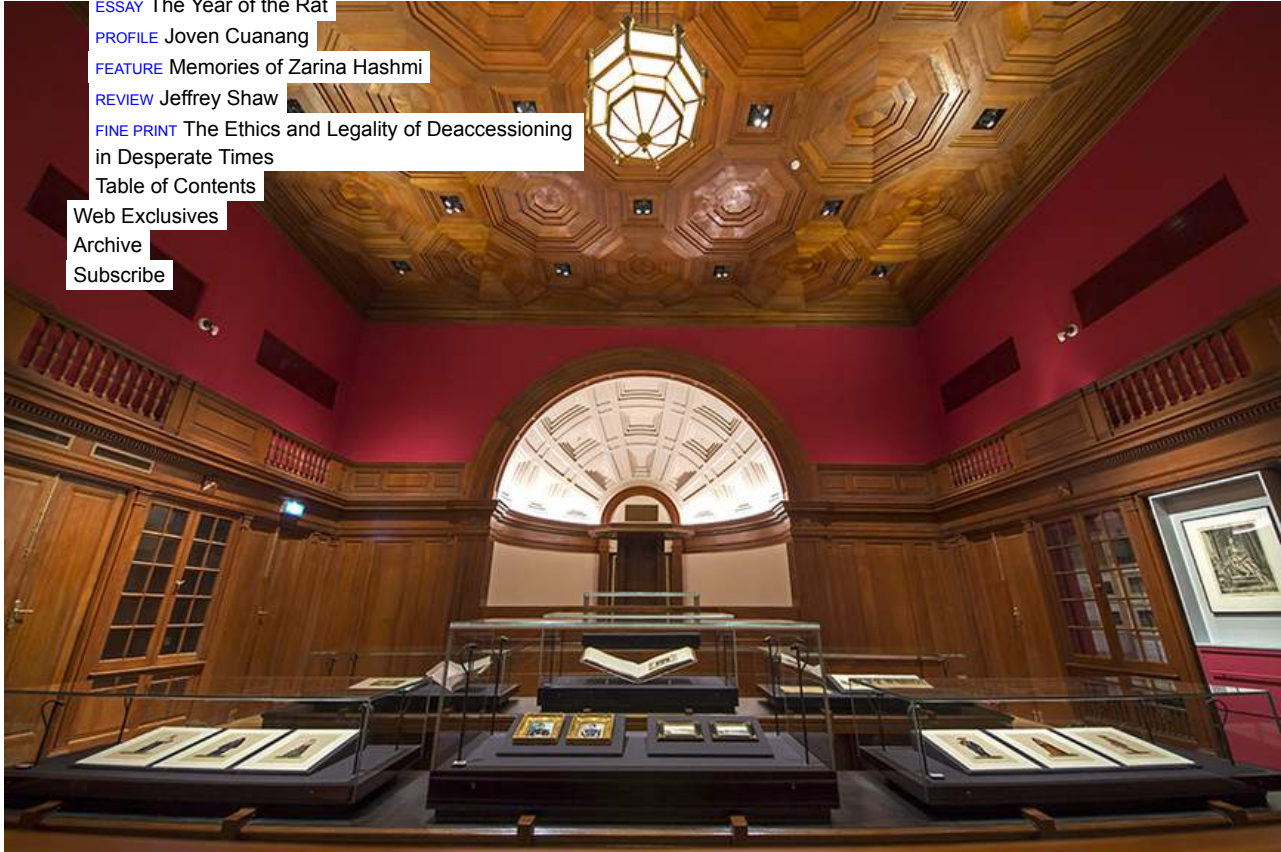
[FINE PRINT](#) The Ethics and Legality of Deaccessioning in Desperate Times

[Table of Contents](#)

[Web Exclusives](#)

[Archive](#)

[Subscribe](#)



National Gallery Singapore's UOB Southeast Gallery. Courtesy National Gallery Singapore.

BETWEEN DECLARATIONS AND DREAMS: ART OF SOUTHEAST ASIA SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY

[WEB REVIEW](#) BY MARYBETH STOCK
NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

[SINGAPORE](#)

What defines Southeast Asia and its art? This question is at the heart of “Between Declarations and Dreams,” now showing at Singapore’s new National Gallery.

The recently opened Gallery is dedicated to the study and research of Southeast Asian modern art—something no other public institution has previously undertaken, and certainly not on such a lavish scale. The extensive Gallery complex comprises some 64,000 square meters, and its ingenious design is a literal fusion of two historic buildings—Singapore’s former Supreme Court and City Hall—and is the result of a decade-long initiative costing SGD 532 million (USD 378.5 million).

The Gallery is currently presenting two major inaugural exhibitions, one of which explores the history of Singapore modern art. The other, “Between Declarations and Dreams,” is an overview of Southeast Asian modern art from the 19th century. “Between Declarations and Dreams” comprises a breathtaking collection of over 400 works representing all mediums, about half of which are from the national collection; the remainder include long-term loans from the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan, Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum, the National Museum of the Philippines and the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum. Many of the works originate from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, reflecting not only the content of the national collection, but of the current state of research in the field of Southeast Asian art.

“Between Declarations and Dreams” sprawls over 3 levels and 15 galleries—which amount to nearly 3,000 square meters—in the circa-1939 former Supreme Court building. This wing of the Gallery is vast, with soaring ceilings and an abundance of marble and wood paneling; many of the original architectural features remain intact. The title of the exhibit refers to a 1948 poem by Indonesian writer Chairil Anwar, who extolled the virtues of the individual. Indeed, what distinguishes “Between Declarations and Dreams” is that it is not based on predictable geographic or national parameters; rather, it follows the chronological development of Southeast Asian art from the 19th

century to the post-1970s. The exhibition further segregates the displayed works into four broad themes, within cultural, aesthetic, historical and political contexts.

A closer look at the four themes follow below, with a few highlights from each.



RADEN SALEH, *Forest Fire*, 1849, oil on canvas, 300 × 396 cm. Courtesy National Gallery Singapore.

Authority and Anxiety (19th to early 20th century)

The “Authority” part of the exhibition’s first theme sheds light on the cultural and aesthetic influences of colonialism and how they were not only used as propaganda, but also appropriated by local artists. Visitors begin their chronological journey in an elegant former courtroom, complete with spectator balconies and a dock. Here, a fascinating miscellany of artifacts by both European and regional artists includes: finely wrought weaponry from Java; lithographs of detailed (if inaccurate) colonial maps; watercolor studies of Vietnamese royal court costumes; photographic ethnic studies of Javan “natives”; and miniature oils on ivory by unknown Chinese artists. The definitive centerpiece is the large oil painting *Forest Fire* (1849) by Indonesian-born Raden Saleh. In his depiction of exotic jungle beasts fleeing from approaching flames, Saleh, who had at that point been living in Europe for two decades, conflates romanticism within the subtext of inexorable colonial power. Other works by this artist include two views of the Javanese Mt. Merapi erupting (both 1865) in violent landscapes that would have reinforced European preconceptions of a primitive land. Further Western artistic influences are observed in placid portraits, such as that of a prominent middle-class Philippine family (c.1880s) by Filipino painter Simon Flores, which hangs alongside fellow countryman Félix Resurrección Hidalgo’s *Christian Virgins Exposed to the Populace* (1884), a salacious example of the mythical-historical narratives popular in Europe at the time.

Imagining Country and Self (1900s to 1940s)

The concept of nationalism spread throughout Southeast Asia during the early 20th century together with a greater sense of identity and place, and local and expatriate artists offered up nostalgic homages to the land and its heritage. Many produced landscapes, often suffused with golden light: two particularly bucolic examples at the Gallery are by Indonesian painters Leo Eland and Wakidi, whose respective works *Landscape of Java* (1929) and *Ngarai Sianok* (c.1940s) are idealistic portrayals of Javanese mountains and rice paddies. Colorful village marketplace pastiches were another common theme, distinguished by rich, detailed palettes and congenial characters in local dress. One such work in the Gallery is *Market at Marmot* (1940) by French painter Louis Rollet. Perhaps more intriguing is the elegant *Balinesische Legende* (*Balinese Legend*) (1929), a Rousseau-like exploration of Indonesian myth by German painter Walter Spies. As European art schools came to be established in cities like Hanoi and Bangkok in the 1940s, local artists sought to instill their work with an individual style. One of the half-dozen or so such sculptures within the Gallery’s “Imagining Country” section is *Musical Rhythm* (1949), a graceful bronze-work of a seated flutist, for which Thai artist Khien Yimsiri infused his country’s ancient sculptural traditions with modern gesture. Also on view is *Panorama de Cho Bo* (*Panorama of Cho Bo*) (1943) by Vietnam’s Nguyen Van Ty, an early student of lacquer painting, is a three-panel, red-and-gold lacquer screen depicting a stylized landscape.



WALTER SPIES, *Balinese Legend*, 1929, oil on canvas, 80 × 65 cm. Courtesy National Gallery Singapore.



HERNANDO R. OCAMPO, *Dancing Mutants*, 1965, oil on canvas, 101.8 × 76 cm. Courtesy National Heritage Board, Singapore.

Manifesting the Nation (1950s to 1970s)

This theme represents the most extensive, and most diverse, grouping of artworks within “Between Declarations and Dreams,” ranging from heartfelt social realism to the politicized anti-authoritarianism of the late 1970s. The Second World War triggered political upheaval throughout the region, where in its aftermath, as many countries gained independence, artists tackled concepts of nationalist identity. Much of the imagery in “Manifesting the Nation” is a straightforward documentation of social and economic change, including, for example, crowds gathering for elections and land being torn up for mining. Allegiance to a national ideal is also portrayed here, embodied by perhaps one of the best-known paintings in Singapore’s national collection, *Epic Poem of Malaya* (1955), by Chinese artist Chua Mia Tee, a much-referenced work which presages an autonomous Malaya (a federation of local states, then protectorates of the United Kingdom, which later gained independence and became Malaysia). Further allusion to newfound patriotism is made by Indonesian artist S. Sudjojono in his 1965 oil painting *Kami Present, Ibu Pertiwi (Stand Guard for Our Motherland)*.

Early forays into abstraction hang alongside these more literal works. The unearthly forms in Hernando R. Ocampo’s *Dancing Mutants* (1965) are at once gorgeous evocations of the artist’s native Philippine flora and color and a cautionary vision of an atomic fallout. Many artists of this time sought to infuse their work with indigenous motifs; others were inspired by traditional mediums. Chinese-born Chuah Thean Teng was the first artist in Malaysia to use traditional batik in creating modern paintings. His loosely figurative *Morning* (1960–63) is complemented by the later, more conceptual batik-work by Singapore’s Jaafar Latiff, titled *Wandering Series 8/79* (1979). As for painting, Malaysian artist Latiff Mohidin’s “Pago Pago” series revels in regional iconography. In the oil work *Pagodas II* (1964), from his aforementioned series, the artist engulfs his canvas with the characteristic forms of a mosque and pagoda, both outlined in colorful patterns. Familiar marketplace and village imagery inspired many during these decades, as seen in the deconstructed forms of Sudjana Kerton’s undated *Kehidupan de Kampung (Village Life)*.

Continuing chronologically, the works in the “Manifesting the Nation” section unfurl into full-on abstraction. One particularly spacious gallery includes paintings by Singapore’s Jolly Koh (*Fan Fern*, undated) and Jose Joya from the Philippines (*Hills of Nikko*, 1964), as well as several sculptures, including the spiky amalgamation *Untitled* (c. 1960s) by J. Elizalde Navarro, another Filipino artist. To conclude this particular thematic section of the exhibition, a final gallery is filled with posters, sketches and other works dating from the 1970s, all reflecting regional and local conflict, including the Vietnam War. The sculpture *Kinupot* (1977) portrays human forms struggling inside a sack, by Edgar Talusan Fernandez of the Philippines, which alludes to activist dissent under his country’s martial law. Other paintings here include the powerful *Massacre at Mylai (After Haeberle’s)* (1970) by Singapore’s Teo Eng Seng and the conciliatory *You, Gun and Flower* (1972) by Vietnamese artist Tran Trung Tin.

Re:Defining Art (post 1970s)

The final thematic installment of “Between Declarations and Dreams” reflects how globalization began to transform Southeast Asian indigenous cultures in the years during and after the 1970s. As more artists began studying abroad, they experimented with new ways of making art; thus, in this section of the exhibition, visitors are confronted with an array of multidisciplinary works that include painting, video, installation and performance. Works include early ventures into conceptualism, together with examples of avant-garde experimentation. On display are excerpted commentary and photographs from the provocative 1974 installation *Towards a Mystical Reality* by Malaysian artists Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, a manifesto on the state of their country’s art at the time. Also on view is Indonesian artist Jim Supangkat’s *Ken*



JIM SUPANGKAT, *Ken Dedes*, 1975, plastic, wood, marker pen and paint, top: 61 × 43.5 × 27 cm, bottom: 125.5 × 41.5 × 26 cm. Courtesy National Heritage Board, Singapore.

Dedes (1975), a hybrid of ancient and modern identities, in which the body of a historic Javanese queen has been grafted onto a modern female counterpart.

During this post-1970 period, artists also began to infuse their works with found objects in an attempt to spark social awareness. The central gallery's focal point is a massive installation by the late Thai artist Montien Boonma, titled *The Pleasure of Being, Crying, Dying and Eating* (1993/2015), a Buddhism-inspired exposition on the nature of life. Its tower of precariously stacked ceramic bowls overwhelms the room, and it is flanked by equally energetic works that are commentaries on economic power and class: *Hiding Rituals and the Mass Production II* (1998–2000), a sensual form woven of rattan by Indonesia's Nindityo Adipurnomo; and a ritual-altar-like installation of cloth and wood by Zulkifli Yusoff of Malaysia, entitled *The Power II* (1991). Nearby are video and stills from *Performance* (various years) by Indonesian performance artist Melati Suryodarmo, whose practice aims to incite awareness between the body and environment.



MONTIEN BOONMA, *The Pleasure of Being, Crying, Dying and Eating*, 1993/2015, ceramic bowls, wooden tables, cloth and brass, dimensions variable. Courtesy National Heritage Board, Singapore.

The final works of “Between Declarations and Dreams” lament the loss of heritage and tradition in the modern age, and often incorporate indigenous or craft-based mediums to convey a bittersweet nostalgia. One work by Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul, *Homage to Fon Pan-Ya* (1995), comprises a glass cabinet filled with Chinese snuff bottles holding photos of elderly locals, thus transforming them into artefacts. Norberto Roldan’s assemblage *Matriarch from Negros* (1989) integrates Philippine native textiles and found objects as a chronicle of his country’s shifting cultural identity. This tendency to impose

modern design and innovation onto traditional forms is also seen in Indonesian artist Heri Dono's *Wayang Legenda* (1988/2015), a contemporary performance installation involving Javanese shadow-puppets.

What defines Southeast Asia and its art? From historical artefacts to contemporary perceptions of such objects, "Between Declarations and Dreams" traces the circuitous route of the region's art, from its connection to 19th-century colonialism to its current reformulations of heritage, aesthetics and identity. The artistic journey through these galleries is a beautifully articulated progression, and the collection here establishes a lucid and distinctive framework for the Gallery's fundamental aim: to advance the scholarly discourse on the history of Southeast Asian art. Given its detailed historical analyses and eclectic visual palette, "Between Declarations and Dreams" may best be savored over multiple visits—luckily, it is in place for the next five years.

"Between Declarations and Dreams," which opened at the National Gallery Singapore on November 24, 2015, is slated to be on view through to 2019.

Tools

| [More](#)

Related

[BLOG](#) Conversation With Low Sze Wee, Curatorial Director of National Gallery Singapore

[SINGAPORE](#) DEC 2015

[NEWS](#) NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE RECEIVES GENEROUS DONATION FROM FAMILY OF NG TENG FONG

[SINGAPORE](#) SEP 2015

© 2020 ArtAsiaPacific

[Credits](#)

[Log In](#)

ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com