



The making of the national art collection

An exhibition charts the growth of Singapore's national art collection from 1960 to today – from a modest 110 artworks to about 10,000 pieces now

Olivia Ho

The first thing visitors see upon entering National Gallery Singapore's latest exhibition is a small red painting, 31 by 21cm, a portrait of the artist as a young man staring intensely straight at the viewer.

The self-portrait from the 1950s by Malaysian batik artist Chuah Thean Teng was the very first artwork to be registered in Singapore's National Collection of visual art.

Fast-forward to the end of the exhibition, where scale predomi-

nates. In Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul's *Asking For Nothingness*, 11,000 old medicine bottles – half filled with black-and-white photographs of elderly villagers – are arranged in towers that took eight people five days to assemble.

In the same fashion, *(Re)collect: The Making Of Our Art Collection* charts the growth of Singapore's national art collection, from its tiny but determined inception in 1960, when art had to take a back seat to nation-building, to a broader, regional outlook today.

The exhibition, which runs from Friday to Aug 19 at the Singtel Special Exhibition galleries B and C, features more than 120 works from the National Collection.

Curator Lisa Horikawa, 39, says: "The process of collecting is really about recollecting our past. Without having a sense of where we come from, it's difficult to engage with our collection, which has a

much longer lifespan than any of us."

Begun in 1960 with the donation of about 110 works by Cathay Organisation co-founder Dato Loke Wan Tho, the National Collection has about 10,000 works of visual art today, of which 8,630 are with the Gallery.

The works in *(Re)collect* are appearing for the first time in public since they entered the keeping of the Gallery, which opened in 2015.

They include works by pioneer local artists such as Georgette Chen's *Family Portrait* (1954), an intimate, relaxed depiction of the family of the artist's friend Chen Fah Shin, and Chen Wen Hsi's *Black Mountain* from the 1970s or 1980s.

These are juxtaposed with works by key artists in the region, from Malaysian painter Latiff Mohidin's *Mindscape 17* (1983) to 18 sketches of everyday scenes by Indonesian artist S. Sudjojono, which offer a

rare glimpse into the personal life of an artist known chiefly for his large heroic paintings.

The exhibition is a chance for the museum to show off recent acquisitions, from paintings from Filipino artist Fernando Zobel's *Saeta* series, in which he used not a brush but a hypodermic syringe to paint, to Argentina-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's video installation about cooking curry.

"As a gallery that has a responsibility to define and redefine the canons of Singapore art history, it's important that we continue to question what it means for a museum to display artists as pioneers," says Ms Horikawa. "We are always conscious of who has been left out of the dominant discourse."

Putting together the exhibition, she adds, meant acknowledging not just the collection's strengths, but also its weaknesses. While heavy on paintings, it does not fare so well with sculpture or photography. Most of the works collected are by male artists.

(Re)collect includes photography by local lensman Lee Lim and sculptures such as Singaporean Cheo Chai Hiang's *And Miles To Go Before I Sleep*, assembled from a log of wood, a laundry board and the titular stencilled line from a Robert Frost poem.

Besides Georgette Chen, it also features works by local female artists such as sculptures by Kim Lim, a 1950s still life by Lai Foong Moi and *Chameleon II*, a 1978 stitched clothwork by Eng Tow. Ms Horikawa says, however, that there should be more. She hopes to address this in future iterations of the exhibition.

More than 400 donors are acknowledged in the exhibition, from artists and their families to private

philanthropists and organisations. DP Architects founder Koh Seow Chuan, 79, who has donated more than 500 works to the collection, considers *(Re)collect* a "historic exhibition" in the way it highlights the process of art collection itself.

The exhibition features eight works donated by him, including paintings by local artists Wong Keen and Lim Tze Peng.

He considers the works he collects to be "like (his) children", but would also like to see them "grow up and be married into good homes".

"If you value them, good pieces should be shared with fellow Singaporeans. You want to uplift the spirit of the nation."

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VIEW IT / (RE)COLLECT: THE MAKING OF OUR ART COLLECTION

WHERE: National Gallery Singapore, 1 St Andrew's Road, Singtel Special Exhibition galleries B and C

WHEN: Friday till Aug 19, 10am to 7pm from Saturdays to Thursdays, 10am to 9pm on Fridays

ADMISSION: Free for Singapore citizens and permanent residents, \$20 for others

INFO: www.nationalgallery.sg

Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul's *Asking For Nothingness* comprises 11,000 old medicine bottles – half filled with black-and-white photographs of elderly villagers. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG



WATCH: Curator Lisa Horikawa introduces Chuah Thean Teng's *Self-Portrait* <http://str.sg/onwz>

