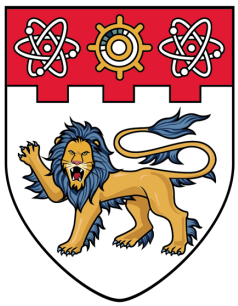

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

READING MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART HISTORY THROUGH EXHIBITIONS

HONG CHU YU GRACE

SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA

2019

READING MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART HISTORY THROUGH EXHIBITIONS

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School of Art, Design and Media

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University

in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts (Research)

2019

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ABSTRACT

Exhibitions have been crucial to the construction of modern Southeast Asian art history since the first Southeast Asian art exhibition in 1957.[1] They are a primary means for canon building through tangible displays of artworks and published writings. Established in 2015, the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) has quickly become the most influential institution for producing exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art. The NGS's exhibitions have been instrumental in shaping a new master narrative of modern Southeast Asian art history—one that has been posited as originating in nineteenth century colonialism and remains deeply informed by narratives of Western modernism. However, the role of the NGS's exhibitions in the construction of a modern Southeast Asian art history has yet to be scrutinised beyond the museum's publicised regional engagement—and in relation to the Singapore's national agenda. This thesis examines the complexities and tensions of the NGS's curatorial position through two significant exhibitions: *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century* (2015–2020), *and Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond* (2016). Through the close study of curatorial strategies and exhibition mechanics behind the display of artworks by two major Southeast Asian artists, Nguyen Gia Tri (b. 1908, Vietnam–d.1993, Vietnam) and Cheong Soo Pieng (b. 1917, China–d. 1983, Singapore),[2] this study argues that the NGS's exhibitions have cultivated a dominant narrative that ultimately suppresses the complexity and diversity of other Southeast Asian countries' art histories towards the goal of positioning Singapore as the regional centre for Southeast Asia.

[1] In 1957, the first Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition was held in Manila, Philippines.

[2] These two artists have been chosen due to the significant curatorial emphasis as evident in the catalogue essays and their hanging in the exhibition layout. Other important Southeast Asian artists who have been featured in both exhibitions include Carlos "Botong" Francisco (b. 1912, Philippines), Galo B. Ocampo (b. 1913, Philippines), Victorio C. Edades (b. 1895, Philippines), Emiria Sunassa (b. 1894, Indonesia), Affandi (b. 1907, Indonesia), S. Sudjojono (b. 1913, Indonesia), Ahmad Sadali (b. 1924, Indonesia), Hernando R. Ocampo (b. 1911, Philippines), Sompot Upa-in (b. 1934, Thailand), Latiff Mohidin (b. 1941, Malaysia) and Fernando Zobel (b. 1924, Philippines).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Prof Michelle Lim, my research supervisor, for her patient guidance and useful critique of this research work. My dear friends and colleagues Muhammad Ridzal Abdul Hamid, Kenneth Tay, and Rie Ong have also been generous with their instrumental advice. I would also like to thank Prof Michael Walsh and Prof Andrea Nanetti for their historical knowledge and research skills imparted in their lessons. Advice given by Prof T.K. Sabapathy and Prof Yin Ker, as well as Dr Seng Yu Jin, have also been insightful in developing this research thesis. Finally, I wish to thank my husband Samuel for his endless encouragement and support throughout my study.

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Introduction

Since 1996, Singapore has played a leading role in the production of modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions.[3] The newest state-funded art museum in the country, the National Gallery Singapore (NGS), is Singapore's largest art and cultural institution, representing the culmination of the city-state's cultural and nation-building policies years in the making. The NGS has played an active part in championing the research and scholarship of modern Southeast Asian art by staging large-scale group survey exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art that have been accompanied by extensive catalogues and programmes such as academic conferences.[4] Among the art institutions in Singapore and Southeast Asia, the NGS is especially noteworthy for launching blockbuster exhibitions and securing partnerships with large, reputable art museums overseas such as the Centre Pompidou, the Musée d'Orsay, and the Tate Britain which have resulted in joint, traveling exhibitions.[5]

In Southeast Asia, large-scale exhibitions are the primary platform through which modern Southeast Asian artworks are presented to the public. As a primary producer of such exhibitions, the NGS has played an important role in spearheading efforts to write an art history of the region, which spans a relatively shorter time period in comparison to those in

[3] The opening of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 1996 marked the region's and Singapore's first dedicated public collection of Southeast Asian art. During the ten years that preceded the announcement of Singapore's plans to open the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) in 2006 at the first Singapore Biennale, SAM played a key role in cementing Singapore's leadership as the major collector and exhibitor of Southeast Asian artworks; laying the foundation for the position in which NGS would later operate as the second art museum in Singapore dedicated to Southeast Asian art.

[4] To date, NGS has staged seven major group exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art, accompanied by five exhibition catalogues. In addition, monographs and essays have been published. Academic conferences include "Reframing Modernism: Connections and Ruptures," June 8, 2016.

[5] These NGS exhibitions which were held at the museum's premises include: *Colours of Impressionism: Masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay* organised in collaboration with Musée d'Orsay, Paris (16 Nov 2017–11 Mar 2018); *Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies* organised in collaboration with Tate Britain (6 Oct 2016–26 Mar 2017); *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond* organised in collaboration with Centre Pompidou, Paris (31 Mar 2016–17 Jul 2016). The NGS's first traveling exhibition *Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960-1969)* (28 Feb–28 May 2018) was held at Centre Pompidou, Paris and was the Centre's first Southeast Asian art exhibition at its In-Focus Gallery.

other parts of the world. To that end, the NGS has funded and organised exhibitions that present group surveys of modern Southeast Asian art from different nation-states to fulfil its objectives.[6]

The ten-year period between 2006 and 2016 marked a transition in the history of Southeast Asian art exhibitions. The greater interest in collecting and exhibiting contemporary Southeast Asian art at the beginning of this period resulted in a neglect towards the earlier modern period. Subsequent awareness of this gap heightened the current urgency, in the late 2000s,[7] to articulate the importance of the modern as a historical period which preceded the contemporary.

It is within this context that the NGS opened in 2015 as a Southeast Asian art museum at its current location in central Singapore.[8] Prior to this, it had organised other exhibitions in the five years leading up to its official opening. From 2006 to 2016, there have been numerous modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions as compiled in Appendix A. From this list, the most important exhibitions of this period organised by the NGS are:

- *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century* (2015–2020)
- *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond* (2016)
- *Realism in Asian Art* (2010)

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[6] Apart from art institutions, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also been an active organiser of group Southeast Asian art exhibitions. Other organisers include the Goethe-Institut and Alliance Française.

[7] See John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney, N.S.W: Power Publications, 2010); Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio, eds., *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011); Nora A. Taylor, ed., *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, Studies on Southeast Asia 56 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publ., Cornell Univ, 2012); Gridthiya Gaweewong, Manuporn Luengaram, and Kasem Phenpinant, eds., *Anthology of Southeast Asian Modern and Contemporary Art* (Office of Contemporary Art & Culture, Ministry of Culture, 2016).

[8] The NGS occupies two national monuments of Singapore, its former Supreme Court and City Hall. On the NGS's official website, the buildings are described as "landmarks of Singapore's colonial past and journey to independence." See "Building History & Heritage," National Gallery Singapore, accessed December 29, 2018, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/about/building/history.

These exhibitions are noteworthy for proposing a new narrative of modern Southeast Asian art history—one that begins with nineteenth century colonialism and runs in parallel with Western modernism.[9] These exhibitions have been highlighted for their scale, as determined by a wide spectrum of quantitative and qualitative indicators such as the number of artworks and artists shown, and contributions to publication history. These exhibitions marked a shift in curatorial strategies from previous exhibitions staged in the 1990s as they expand on the concept of a regional Southeast Asia that had been established through prior exhibitions, building on the development of regional art movements within this framework, as seen in how *Reframing Modernism* proposed the concepts of Southeast Asian modernism.

From these three major exhibitions, *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*[10] have been chosen as case studies for this thesis. These case studies demonstrate the NGS's and, by extension, Singapore's role in rewriting the narrative of modern Southeast Asian art. One of the ways in which this is done is through modifying the means of which the "modern" has been periodised to include all Southeast Asian art produced from the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1839–2000). However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing on the period between 1928 to the late 1970s, which have been chronologically defined as the start and end point of the "modern" by academics specialising

[9] In this thesis, the word "modernism" is used in its accepted definition as a style or movement in art which broke apart from classical or traditional forms. Likewise, the word "modernist" is also used in adherence to this definition, of being associated with modernism. Henceforth, the thesis later discusses the contrary arguments for an understanding of Southeast Asian modernism(s) that are defined in other ways; namely, that modern Southeast Asian art did not clearly diverge from tradition, as what is deemed traditional does not bear clear parameters for the modern to break away from.

[10] These exhibitions are henceforth referred to as *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* respectively in this thesis.

in Southeast Asian art history.[11] Pertinent to this thesis' focus of the NGS, this time period also adheres more closely to Singapore's historical milestones.[12]

The NGS's exhibitions were grounded in this early strategy of using exhibitions as a tool to claim the region, with Singapore as its cultural leader. From 1957 to 2005, state-sponsored exhibitions in Singapore took on a political slant as they demonstrated Singapore's interest in cultivating a position of cultural leadership among other Southeast Asian countries. These exhibitions took place against the recovery of postcolonial independence in the region and the early years of rapid economic development and industrialisation. With the aim of establishing Singapore as the centre of Southeast Asian art, a more concerted curatorial programme by its institutions were put in place and culminated with the opening of the NGS in 2016. Thus, Singapore's intention to regionalise the narrative of Southeast Asian history through its museums' art exhibitions has always been political and the NGS is a prime example of how its policies are put in place.

In Chapter One, this study of exhibitions is situated within the field of art history, revealing how exhibitions have been vital to the construction of canons and narratives in

[11] For the purpose of this thesis, an in-depth study and definition of the term "modern" will not be undertaken as the complications of the definitions of the "modern" and "contemporary" in Southeast Asian art is beyond the scope of the paper. The arrival at this periodisation is supported by Simon Soon's marking of modern art's emergence in the region with the one-man show staged by Philippines artist Victorio Edades in 1928. The exhibition saw an expression of Edades' exposure to modern art in the U.S. and Mexico, and a desire for departure from the traditional sentimentality he observed in the Philippines upon his return home. However, this is contested by Cid Reyes who claims Juan Arellano, not Victorio Edades, painted the first modern painting in the Philippines. As the modern and the contemporary in Southeast Asia are not configured separately as distinct movements transiting into the other, it is unclear when the modern ends (or has ended) across the region. Instead, the end point of the late 1970s is informed by art historian T.K. Sabapathy's observation of the 1970s as the decade for which the contemporary in Southeast Asian art was noticeably recognised, where more Southeast Asian artists identified their practice across themes of the global contemporary. See Soon, "Chapter Eight: When Was East and Southeast Asia's Modernism in Art?: Comparisons and Intersections," *The Modernist World*, eds. Allana Lindgren and Stephen Ross, (London: Routledge, 2015); Cid Reyes, "Review of Conversations on Philippine Art, ed. Reyes Review," *Philippine Studies* 39, no. 1 (1991): 124; T. K. Sabapathy, introduction to *Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2012).

[12] These historical milestones include Singapore established as Britain's main naval base in East Asia in 1922, the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, the attaining of self-governance in 1959, the merger with Malaysia in 1963 and the eventual separation and declaration of independence as a republic in 1965. See "Singapore History - Home," accessed December 29, 2019, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history.

modern Southeast Asian art history. This is followed by a delineated focus in Chapter Two, where two artists in two exhibitions by the NGS are used as case studies for which the process of canonisation and narrative-writing is dismantled; applying this thesis' proposed template which examines the exhibitionary text and curatorial hanging, and arriving at the resultant biography and significance of the two artists in their countries' and the region's art history. Chapter Three takes these themes of the regional narrative as a point of departure and considers its implication for modern Southeast Asian art history as a field of study—where the Singapore-centric art-historical narrative stands to become dominant. Upon summarising the construction of a regional narrative led by the NGS, Chapter Four then presents a brief overview of other existing approaches and institutions which have made similar attempts to writing Southeast Asian art history, and addresses the direction for future studies.

1.1 Modern Southeast Asian Art Through Exhibition History

The history of Southeast Asian art exhibitions began in 1957, when the Art Association of the Philippines and the Asia Foundation staged the first Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition in Manila, Philippines. The next Southeast Asian art event, known as the Southeast Asia Cultural Festival, was held in Singapore in 1963 across various performance spaces[13] and was primarily driven by Singapore's "nationalist agenda."[14] After these two events, Southeast Asian art exhibitions were mostly helmed by political organisations and state-funded institutions. From 1957 to 2005, these exhibitions were organised by ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as well as art institutions

[13] Performances and events were staged at the newly opened National Theatre, Victoria Theatre, Hong Lim Park and community centers. See Jennifer Lindsay, "Festival Politics: Singapore's 1963 South-East Asia Cultural Festival," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010), 241.
[14] Kathleen Ditzig, "An Exceptional Inclusion: On MoMA's Exhibition Recent American Prints in Color and the First Exhibition of Southeast Asian Art," in *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 1, no. 1 (2017): 66, doi:10.1353/sen.2017.0002.

located across Japan, Australia, and Singapore such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Queensland Art Gallery, and the Singapore Art Museum.

ASEAN's founding in 1967 was followed by a Southeast Asian art exhibition the next year. Thereafter, a total of 22 ASEAN-funded Southeast Asian art exhibitions were held.[15] The final ASEAN exhibition was staged in 2002. It is notable for being the first ASEAN organised exhibition curated with the region in mind, that is, a conscious decision to produce an exhibition "not organised along national lines."[16] Titled *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-East Asian Art,* the exhibition was conceived as a traveling show and was staged at the Singapore Art Museum and the MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst (Centre for Modern and Contemporary Art, Duisberg, Germany). This 2002 exhibition reflected an awareness and adaptation of how other institutions were displaying Southeast Asian art in Japan, Australia, and Singapore.[17]

In Japan and Australia, Southeast Asian art became of interest for its state-funded art institutions. The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) in Japan hosted the first Southeast Asian art exhibition outside of Southeast Asia in 1992 and started the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 1979-80.[18] In Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery launched the Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) in 1993. While both trienniales were not strictly focused on Southeast Asian art history per se, they have featured numerous works by Southeast Asian artists and

[15] While these 21 exhibitions were mounted as group exhibitions of Southeast Asian art, they were presented as a collective platform for individual nation-states; within each show, the artworks' differences were representative of the various nation-states.
[16] Simon Soon, "Maps of the Sea," Regionalism, Southeast Asian Art Resource Channel," accessed July 15, 2019, http://www.search-art.asia/attachments/files/MAPoftheSEA.pdf.
[17] Soon, "Maps of the Sea." Soon has compiled a list of exhibitions, conferences, publications and related events dating from 1957 to 2011 where modern and contemporary art Southeast Asian countries are presented regionally as "Southeast Asian" or "Asian."
[18] FAAM started the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 1979-80 (a development from *The Asian Art Show, Fukuoka* which took place every 5 years and became a Triennale in 1999). This was followed by six more Southeast Asian art exhibitions in Japan; individually or in collaboration with other institutions like the Japan Foundation, and the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.

contributed to the discourse of Southeast Asian art history through their catalogues and conferences.

The introduction of these triennales was also read as political acts towards consolidating the Southeast Asian region vis-a-vis Japan and Australia. Kajiya Kenji charted the ideology behind Japan's growing interest in presenting Asian and Southeast Asian art from 1980 to 2010, stating that "Japan's role as [the] leader in Asia . . . was an element of cultural imperialism."[19] Ahmad Mashadi noted that Australia's interest testified towards a "new and pragmatic approach towards Asia and Asia's emerging economic status."[20] Therefore, starting in the 1990s, the impetus to present Southeast Asia as a regional collective through art was very much tied to the political interests of nation-states; the production of exhibitions and scholarship through publications enabled these art institutions (and their respective countries) to assume the role of leadership in the region.

During the 1990–2005 period, the following exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art were particularly significant for their scale, in terms of number of artworks and countries represented, the themes and issues presented, as well as the extensive catalogue essays that accompanied them. These exhibitions were the first to undertake the definition of "regional" Southeast Asian art, expounding and establishing the discourse on the term. These exhibition activities produced the first narratives of Southeast Asian art history. Through these exhibitions, modes of comparison and juxtaposition between Southeast Asian countries' art histories were first demonstrated. The curatorial strategies of showing Southeast Asian art would become the model from which future exhibitions compare and build upon. The selected exhibitions below were hence vital to institutionalising a specific regional

[19] Kajiya Kenji, "Asian Contemporary Art in Japan and the Ghost of Modernity," in *Count 10 Before You Say Asia: Asian Art After Postmodernism*, ed. Yasuko Furuichi (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 2009), 213.
[20] Ahmad Mashadi, "Regionalist Perspectives on Southeast Asian Art," in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia 1973–2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi, et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 336–37.

perspective of modern Southeast Asian art, as they were the first few large-scale exhibitions presented by art museums, whereas previous regional exhibitions were mainly created as traveling shows or as one-off events:

- *New Art from Southeast Asia* (1992) at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum
- *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art* (1996) at Singapore Art Museum
- *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia* (1997) at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum
- *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues* (2005) at National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea, and the Singapore Art Museum

These exhibitions are important markers in modern Southeast Asian art exhibition history; they are still referenced and cited in texts for exhibitions taking place more than ten years later, as seen in the catalogue for one of the case-studies for this thesis, *Between Declarations* at the NGS. These four exhibitions are especially significant as there have been few exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art and relatively little art-historical scholarship and literature on the topic of modern Southeast Asian art; the primary focus in the production of Southeast Asian art exhibitions have been centred on *contemporary* Southeast Asian art. These exhibitions and their organising institutions, while small in number, are of critical importance, as they ground the long arc of modern Southeast Asian art history prior to the contemporary. Furthermore, the role of Singapore in producing modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions was already assigned to the Singapore Art Museum, which organized its own and collaborated with other large museums to produce such exhibitions as well as publications and academic conferences.

The first instance where Singapore mounted a Southeast Asian event was the Southeast Asia Cultural Festival in 1963, two years before its independence in 1965. The festival was conceived with the goal to "propagate Singapore's position as a centre of world trade and the emporium of South-East Asia."[21] Since the 1960s, the countries in Southeast Asia have developed rapidly[22] and Singapore saw a need to distinguish the country as not only an economic powerhouse of the region, but as a cultural centre in the twenty-first century.

From the early 1990s, Singapore's goal in becoming a "global arts city" led to the state's endeavours to become the arts and cultural centre of Southeast Asia, demonstrated through its collecting and exhibiting of Southeast Asian art. This direction was put forth as a state policy in 1989, with the major landmark report titled "Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts" by the Singapore Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts that laid out the "blueprint for cultural policy in Singapore."[23] The National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board were then established in 1991 and 1993 respectively. This led to the reports "Singapore: Global City for the Arts" in 1995 and "Renaissance City Report 1" in 2000.[24] A direct outcome of these reports was the opening of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 1996 as well as the launch of the Singapore Biennale and the announcement of the NGS in 2006.[25] Detailing Singapore's implementation of its cultural policies, Kawasaki had highlighted both plans from 1995 and 2000 as "crucial turning points"; the establishing of Singapore's museum management in the 1980s further allowed it to "secur[e] leadership of

[21] Lindsay, "Festival Politics," 233.
[22] Following the culmination of World War II, a majority of Southeast Asian countries achieved independence and were decolonised between 1945 to 1963 (with the exception of Brunei in 1984). The subsequent formation of ASEAN in 1967 consolidated trade and influence of the region.
[23] Lily Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas," Geoforum 31, no. 4 (November 2000): 409, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(00)00006-3.
[24] The Renaissance City Reports 2 and 3 would follow in 2005 and 2008 respectively.
[25] The Singapore Art Museum was not the first art museum in Singapore or in Southeast Asia, but the first state-funded art museum in Singapore.

the ASEAN countries."[26] The positioning of Singapore as the cultural centre of Southeast Asia became further apparent with the subsequent announcement of a Southeast Asian focus by these art museums. The consolidation of art from this region as "Southeast Asian" was a desirable means for a country to assert its dominance, and this has been exemplified in Singapore's cultural policies. As Chong noted, "the examination of [Singapore's] art institutions and cultural policies through the decades is the examination of the state's evolving objectives for arts and culture in response to the changing socio-economic conditions."[27]

Over the years, the SAM and the NGS have undergone key changes to their mandates, in dividing the national responsibilities for curating modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art between the two museums.[28] With a larger budget and physical premises, the NGS took over the SAM's major role in supporting Singapore's vision as the global arts city in 2015.[29] For the SAM, which was established in 1996, its vision to collect and present Asian and Singapore Art was narrowed to Southeast Asian and Singapore art, with the addition of "Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia" to its existing logo in 2015.[30] This coincided with the

[26] Kenichi Kawasaki, "Cultural Hegemony of Singapore among ASEAN Countries: Globalization and Cultural Policy," International Journal of Japanese Sociology 13, no. 1 (November 2004): 23-27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6781.2004.00051.x.
[27] Terence Chong, Introduction to *The State & The Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions,* ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018): xvi.
[28] However, this division has not been sustained. As further elaboration is found on page 13 of this thesis.
[29] In 2018, NGS held the exhibition *Untold Stories of the National Collection Unveiled at (Re)collect: The Making of our Art Collection* (11 May – 19 August 2018) which allowed visitors to understand the NGS's journey with regard to Singapore's National Collection, as "custodianship shifted from the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) in 1976 to Singapore Art Museum in 1996 and to the present day National Gallery Singapore which opened in 2015." See "Untold Stories of the National Collection Unveiled at (Re)Collect: The Making of Our Art Collection Exhibition by National Gallery Singapore," National Gallery Singapore, accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/content/untold-stories-national-collection-unveiled-recollect-making-our-art-collection-exhibition.
[30] With each edition of the Singapore Biennale, the number of different countries from which the artists originated from decreased. The eventual takeover in leadership by the Singapore Art Museum in 2013 led to a decisively more Southeast Asian biennale; with its curatorial team comprising of 27 curators from nine Southeast Asian countries. Within Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Thailand have also launched their own biennales, but with a direction that strives towards a wider international appeal, rather than to present a Southeast Asian focus. This has been the case up till May 2019, when the Jakarta Biennale announced its theme of Southeast Asian art for its upcoming edition.

opening of the NGS in 2015, which boasts "the largest public collection of modern art in Singapore and Southeast Asia."[31] The museums' stated goals thus marked a clear distinction in terms of their collections and programmes—and signalled the NGS's role as *the* museum for *modern* Southeast Asian art.

Over the last four years, the NGS has constantly updated its mission statement to articulate its agenda as a Southeast Asian art museum. The noticeable change in diction reflected a shift from general museology and research-based approach to Southeast Asia, and towards one that focuses more on Singapore; specifically, mentioning and centring Singapore as the platform from which modern Southeast Asian art is presented to the world. The NGS's research, resources, exhibitions, and publications have placed the institution as the key producer of modern Southeast Asian art history. During its launch, the NGS's mission was "dedicated to collaborative research, education and exhibitions, highlighting the importance of modern art in Southeast Asia in a global context."[32] One year later, this mission made way for a more utilitarian statement that "reflects Singapore's unique heritage and geographical location," "features Singapore and Southeast Asian art from Singapore's National Collection in its long-term and special exhibitions" and "works with international museums to jointly present Southeast Asian art in the global context."[33]

With these changes in its mission statement, two observations about the NGS's purposes as a national and regional museum can be made. First, the distinction between "Singapore and Southeast Asian art," as opposed to the sole region of "Southeast Asia" as mentioned in its previous mission denotes the separation of Singapore from Southeast Asia; it

[31] "About the Gallery," National Gallery Singapore, accessed March 15, 2019, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/about.
[32] "About - News - Press Room - Largest Southeast Asian Modern Art Exhibition Displays Rare Masterpieces," National Gallery Singapore, accessed March 15, 2019, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/about/news/press-room/Largest-Southeast-Asian-Modern-Art-Exhibition-Displays-Rare-Masterpieces.
[33] "About - News - Press Room - Rare Chinese Ink Masterpieces Unveiled at National Gallery Singapore," National Gallery Singapore, accessed March 15, 2019, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/about/news/press-room/rare-chinese-ink-masterpieces.

is a part of Southeast Asia, but its specificity and exclusivity is highlighted against and brought across through the vehicle of the Southeast Asian region. Second, Singapore as possessing a "unique heritage" and its "geographical location" vis-à-vis Southeast Asia is the priority amongst its three thrusts; a reinforcement of the government's positioning of Singapore as the global arts city among cities. This prominence of Singapore in Southeast Asia is incorporated as a key feature of the NGS's curatorial strategies.

The NGS has been the leading presenter as the world's first art museum dedicated to modern Southeast Asian art since 2015. The two case study exhibitions, *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, are distinct from the other biennales and triennales organised in Japan and Australia, as the museum's curatorial framework reflected a different curatorial strategy with a more sustained and frequent programming. While cultural institutions in Japan and Australia have organised large and notable Southeast Asian art exhibitions, it has not been at a pace as regular as the NGS and none have taken on the explicit mission of (re)presenting Southeast Asian art.

Thus, the NGS has manifested Singapore's goal to become a global arts city as part of its nation-building initiative. Through the NGS's control of Singapore and Southeast Asia's art historical narratives, the museum's leadership position mirrored that of Singapore's in the region and in ASEAN. This was achieved through the NGS's exhibitions which aimed to canonise works by modern Southeast Asian artists, establish Singapore-based artists as national and regional icons, as well as chart the colonial narratives of Southeast Asian countries' journeys towards independence.

The NGS has rewritten the chronology of modern Southeast Asian art by periodising modern Southeast Asian art from 1839 to 2000. This proposed perspective of Southeast Asian art history has been reflected and circulated through the NGS's exhibitions, programs, and publications. The year 2000 marks the National Heritage Board's partition between modern

and contemporary artworks in Singapore's national collection; the split in Singapore's collection of Southeast Asian art across these two museums, between the NGS and SAM respectively.[34] This periodisation has institutionalised the definition of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art history in Singapore,[35] and is contrary to other exhibitions and literature presenting modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art; which typically marked the late 1970s to early 1990s as the beginning of the contemporary. At the point of writing, no other Southeast Asian art exhibitions have adopted the NHB's periodisation of modern art.

In the exhibition *Between Declarations,* the fourth theme of the exhibition "Re:Defining Art: 1970s and After" displays artworks produced up until 2001, without any mention of the word "contemporary" used to describe the works or time period in the lengthy curatorial essay by curator Adele Tan.[36] The redefinition of modern Southeast Asian art history has thus been brought forth through this new chronology postulated by the NGS's exhibitions.

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[34] The National Heritage Board, which manages Singapore's National Collection, allocated artworks to the NGS and the SAM according to its date of creation with the year 2000 as the point of reference. However, adherence to this endpoint is flexible on a case-by-case basis. To add to the blurred perimeters between the NGS and the SAM, the museum director of the NGS, Dr. Eugene Tan, was also appointed as the museum director for the SAM in 2019.

[35] This makes for a unique way of separating the modern and contemporary, as the absence of overlap in time period does not follow the three periods typically used in Asian art discourse as put forward by Turner: namely, historical Asian art produced up to the nineteenth century (but in specific cases beyond), the "Asian Modern" from the nineteenth century to early 1990s, and the "contemporary" that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For Sabapathy, the contemporary in Southeast Asian art is recognisable from the 1970s onwards. See Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette, eds., "Introduction Part 1: Critical Themes, Geopolitical Change and Global Contexts in Contemporary Asian Art," in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions, Connectivities and World-Making,* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wwv81.4; and T.K. Sabapathy, introduction to *Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, 2012), 15.

[36] Today, art historians and curators alike agree that the definition of "modern" and "contemporary" remain contentious in Southeast Asia due to the different influences and ways art has developed in each country, as well as the complexities and contexts of languages which have interpreted the "modern" on their own respective terms. A recent research paper titled "Terminologies of 'Modern' and 'Contemporary' Art in Southeast Asia's Vernacular Languages" contributed by ten Southeast Asian writers posit that this rigorous discussion of the terminologies will offer new perspectives and possibilities of comparative work, while also countering "naïve understandings of terms like 'modern', 'modernism' and 'modernity,'" thus denoting that further research needs to be done with regard to writing the definitions. See Roger Nelson, introduction to *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 2, no. 2 (2018): 67–81, https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2018.0019.

1.2 Exhibitions as Sites for Producing Art Historical Narratives

Major exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art have become the foundation for scholarship on which more exhibitions are built upon, and art historical research written. Exhibitions produce art historical narratives which contribute to art history through two primary ways: first, the production of literature for the exhibition, comprising essays and other write-ups and second, the actual exhibition as the location and source for the visitor's encounter with the artwork. This thesis considers the exhibition texts and display of the exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* at the NGS, towards examining the narratives that are consequentially produced for modern Southeast Asian art history. These exhibitions texts refer to the exhibition catalogues, wall labels, official press releases by the NGS and artwork write-ups in accompanying marketing collateral, while the display refers to the exhibition's physical layout, the placement of works in terms of proximity (i.e. side-by-side in conversation) and based on the exhibition's themes.[37]

Large institutional exhibitions have been the main contributors to art historical scholarship on modern Southeast Asian art as exemplified by the significant Southeast Asian art exhibitions highlighted in the previous section. These exhibitions produced texts in the form of catalogues, wall label write-ups, and essays that present the art historical narratives that underpin the exhibitions. Complementing the strong viewership that these exhibitions attract, the life of these exhibition texts does not cease with the end of each show; they take on the form of archival material that are referenced by future art historical scholarship and on

[37] For *Between Declarations,* a full colour 291-pages catalogue was produced, titled *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century.* A full colour 119-pages publication titled *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century : Selections From the Exhibition* was also produced. Two press releases were issued, and the exhibition is featured in the museum's quarterly publication "The Gallery Guide." Wall labels of selected works are also available on the museum's mobile application "Gallery Explorer." For *Reframing Modernism,* a full colour 247-pages catalogue was produced, titled *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*. One press release was issued, the exhibition was featured in the museum's "The Gallery Guide" for the April to June 2016 issue, and a brochure in English was distributed. A full-day symposium titled "Reframing Modernism: Connections & Ruptures" was held on 8 June 2016; full videos of each speaker's segment are publicly available on YouTube.

which more exhibitions are staged. In Southeast Asia where the body of art historical scholarship is still growing, such exhibition texts provides source materials in lieu of traditional art historical texts in the form of monographs, biographies, and critical essays.

In the production of modern Southeast Asian art history, the exhibition took precedence as a primary site of art historical construction. In examining how the role of exhibitions have been a significant factor in the writing of art history, a symposium on this topic was convened at the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, in October 2013 on the subject "Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia." Hammad Nasar reiterated the relationship between art exhibitions and art history, arguing that they "[have] become the primary sites of art historical construction,"[38] exhibitions thereby producing texts, and texts forming interpretations that are art historical. Reflecting on the collection of the Asia Art Archive, he observed that a majority of texts are produced for and with the event of exhibitions, rigorous in scholarship, and based on existing art historical publications.

In reading Southeast Asian exhibitions as art history, physical exhibitions are considered as major sites for the production of art historical narratives. They are unique in presenting new arguments and narratives through an intentional display of works that are placed side by side to bring forth certain aspects between them, creating a relationship that builds and draws from its display with another work. In the exhibition, connections between separate works are created by displaying them together. In particular, a group of works are presented under an overarching theme that unifies individual, separate pieces to present a coherent curatorial narrative. Hence, an actual examination of the physical exhibitions should always accompany the reading of the exhibitionary texts. Nasar asserted that the "physical

[38] Hammad Nasar, "Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (2014): 8.

placement play an important role in how the works are read and the art historical narratives they tell,"[39] but the resulting investigation of this "physical placement" and how one should go about doing so remains to be carried out through art historical scholarship.

In addition, exhibitionary texts have stood in for art historical texts in contributing to Southeast Asian art history.[40] According to NGS senior curator Seng Yu Jin,[41] the study of exhibitionary texts is especially critical for Southeast Asia where relatively little research and writing on art history has been conducted.[42] In that regard, exhibitionary texts have offered a platform for which traditional components of art historical texts such as artist biographies, artwork provenances, and artist exhibition histories are published. In his research, Seng identified exhibitionary texts as "[the] curatorial text that frames the exhibition," "other writings related to the curatorial objectives of the exhibition," artwork labels and accompanying texts.[43]

Exhibitionary texts comprising essays, wall texts, and labels have revealed the curatorial and institutional role in exhibition-making. Up until the early 1970s, museum texts in Europe and North America were often written by curators and presented as static blocks of heavy writing in museological jargon and as afterthoughts to the exhibition and its objects for display.[44] Only towards the late 1970s did museums start making exhibition texts more

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[39] Nasar, "Sites of Construction," 8.
[40] Exhibitionary texts are solely dependent and created for the purpose of exhibitions, while art historical texts on the other hand, have typically been published without a direct link to institutional events.
[41] Since as early as 2010, Seng Yu Jin has been a curator at the NGS. In 2010, he was part of the curatorial team for a major NGS exhibition of more than 300 artworks, the solo retrospective *Cheong Soo Pieng: Bridging Worlds.* Seng's PhD thesis is titled "A history of art exhibitions: the emergence of critical exhibitions in Southeast Asia, 1970s–1990s" and was published in 2019. See Yu Jin Seng, "A History of Art Exhibitions: The Emergence of Critical Exhibitions in Southeast Asia, 1970s–1990s," 2019, http://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/225000.
[42] Yu Jin Seng, "The Primacy of Exhibitionary Discourses: Contemporaneity in Southeast Asian Art, 1992 – 2002," *Asian Art Histories* (blog), April 8, 2013, http://www.asianarthistories.com/site/the-primacy-of-exhibitionary-discourses-contemporaneity-in-southeast-asian-art-1992-2002/.
[43] Yu Jin Seng, "Framing Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia through Exhibitionary Discourses," in *SouthEastAsia Spaces of the Curatorial, Räume des Kuratorischen*, ed. Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker, Jahresring 63 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 59.
[44] M.P. Fruitman and L.S. Dubro, "Techniques: Writing Effective Labels," Museum News 7, no. 3 (1979): 57–61, quoted in Dana Fragomeni, "The Evolution of Exhibit Labels," Faculty of Information Quarterly 2, no. 1 (March 15, 2010), http://fiq.ischool.utoronto.ca/index.php/fiq/article/download/15408.

accessible to the public, written with concise words and sentence structure targeting the general public.[45] Today, the presence of text in an exhibition often commands our attention more than the object itself. According to Orit Gat:

> The wall labels, introductory texts, and section texts condition the pace at which visitors move through an exhibition, the amount of information they receive beyond any pre-existing knowledge, and their sense of what the museum wants them to know or learn over the course of the show. To group together these three textual mechanisms—the introductory wall text, the section texts, and the labels—is, in a way, to go against a museum's best practices, since each of these plays a different role in communicating an exhibition's thesis and pace. But they all support each other in an endless loop of authority.[46]

The exhibition text is hence irrefutably steeped in authority, directing and defining the very perspective visitors should look at an object with. For Seng, the "provision of explanation for artworks" led the way visitors "engage with selected themes and issues pertinent to the exhibition."[47]

An example of an art historical text that has illustrated the study of exhibitionary texts of Southeast Asian art is Kevin Chua's essay "Exhibiting Modern Asian Art in Southeast Asia" which compared two exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art: *Realism in Asian Art,* a joint exhibition between the National Art Gallery, Singapore, and the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, in 2010, and *Strategies Towards the Real: S. Sudjojono and Contemporary Indonesia Art* at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum in 2008.[48] In his essay, he used the curatorial texts as the subject material by which he critiqued

[45] R. Faron, "Reading between the Lines: How Will Museums Label the Future?" Museum News 82, no. 6 (2003): 31–32, quoted in Fragomeni, "The Evolution of Exhibit Labels," 2010.
[46] Orit Gat, "Could Reading Be Looking?" E-Flux Journal, no. 72 (2016), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/72/60501/could-reading-be-looking/.
[47] Seng, "Framing Contemporary Art," 59.
[48] Hereafter referred to as *Realism* and *Strategies* respectively.

what the exhibition sets out to do and whether this was achieved. Chua examined the exhibition by analysing the diction employed, for example:

> The exhibition [*Realism*] relied on a cliché of the West to get itself going: "While in the West the past is abandoned, in Asia however the constant and consistent reconciliation Asian artists faced towards new ideas and technology from the West with their own cultures, traditions, and philosophy, in fact gave rise to a new strain of modernism." Here the West is caricatured as a culture and geographical region hurtling forward toward the new, without looking back to the past … To so sharply mark "tradition" off from "modernity" for one artist or artwork might be written off as simplification; but to transpose this to characterise an entire culture is, to put it mildly, egregious.[49]

On the contrary to *Realism*, Chua has cited *Strategies* as exemplary in utilising wall texts that did not offer a prescriptive narrative but encouraged a "plurality of perspectives" where "wall texts—often quotes—jarred productively with visual objects and imagery" allowing visitors to *hear* these voices as they looked at the art.[50]

However, in addition to acknowledging exhibitionary texts as being an important resource for Southeast Asian art, there is a need to establish a methodology for the collection and analysis of such texts. From Seng's approach, questions such as which texts should be considered, and more significantly, how these texts should be read, were some concerns. In addition to using his approach towards exhibition texts, my thesis addresses the issue of selecting critical literature and the need for a constant review of the physical exhibition.

Bringing the discussion back to Southeast Asia, the academic study of exhibitionary texts is two-fold. First, it offers insight into the positions of the curators—and by extension

[49] Kevin Chua, "Exhibiting Modern Asian Art in Southeast Asia," in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (2014): 107.
[50] Chua, "Exhibiting Modern Asian Art," 110.

the museums they represent—in treating and viewing the objects. Second, it offers "a discursive site where academia and museology overlap"—especially critical for a region where relatively little research and writing on art history has been conducted, thus offering a way in to understanding the history of exhibitions of art in Southeast Asia.[51] In the two case studies used for this thesis, the exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* have been the chosen sites of study for their production of modern Southeast Asian art history. They were examined for the new narratives that their curatorial strategies have proposed. This included the setting the origins of modern Southeast Asian art history in the throes of nineteenth century colonialism, a reliance on Western framework in defining the modernism of Southeast Asia, as well as the NGS's identification of specific artworks as canons in Southeast Asian art history in order to achieve its goals.

The NGS's curatorial agenda has been made tangible through exhibition hanging and layout, which is just as crucial in studying exhibitions. In the exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism,* selected works by Cheong Soo Pieng and Nguyen Gia Tri were accorded prominent positions within the exhibition layout—such as being the first work at the exhibition entrance or having entire walls allocated for a single artist's work. According to Boris Groys, each exhibition is a narrative space, telling a story and directing the viewer's experience in a particular order; but this has also meant that the "spatial and aesthetic *form* of the exhibition and its distinct properties are often omitted from discussion."[52] While the exhibitionary texts were often documented through catalogues, press releases, brochures and the like, not all exhibitions preserved an exhibition floorplan for future research. This lapse in documentation is perhaps equally as significant as the discourse, since such plans would indicate the actual presentation of how artworks, in terms

[51] Seng, "Framing Contemporary Art," 59.
[52] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 2012), 91. Emphasis is his.

of how they were hung and displayed—the closest scholars could get to the experience of seeing the art exhibition for themselves.

While curatorial texts might offer a balanced thesis on the issues and themes at hand, it is the hanging of artworks and layout that dictates how visitors move through a space and which works they encounter first or last. Embedded in the exhibition, beyond the explicit curatorial texts, are thus other suggestions in the form of hanging and layout, a site where politics takes place, where certain artworks take precedence over another—all this has fed back into the narrative of the exhibition, as well as the overarching goals of the curator, museum, and state. For Chua, "the modern-contemporary structure made [*Strategies*] refreshingly open-ended; instead of privileging either modern or contemporary art, viewers were put in an active space between the two."[53] Unfortunately, there was little written in Chua's essay about the exhibition structure of *Realism.* Hence, as readers, we do not get a complete understanding of what he meant in saying that its "exhibition structure seemed to function as a bland container for the works of art."[54]

The study of exhibitions as sites for producing art history has been undertaken by scholars specialising in the field of both Western and Southeast Asian art, most notably through the in-depth examination of exhibitionary texts. Studying exhibitions as sites for Southeast Asian art history has led to a deeper insight of how its narratives have been constructed, revealing the goals of large, state-funded institutions like the NGS. However, previous scholarship of Southeast Asian art exhibitions has not sufficiently taken into critical account the physical exhibition sites where the display and hanging of works inform the exhibition's narratives; these should be read in tandem with the exhibitionary texts. As such, this thesis will be the first to examine two major modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions

[53] Chua, "Exhibiting Modern Asian Art," 111.
[54] Chua, 110.

Between Declarations and *Reframing Modernism* as critical sites in the production of the region's art history, as put forth by Singapore's NGS.

1.3 Literature Review

The study of exhibition histories is a new and emerging field, and is relatively more developed in America and Europe, where conferences on this topic as well as degree programmes dedicated to curatorial studies have been launched.[55] The format and role of the exhibition has also been widely discussed in publications with regard to its role in art history, especially in Western Europe and North America.[56]

In Asia, a small number of symposiums and conferences have been held. However, as the proceedings are so recent, full publications have yet to be made widely accessible for further research. This thesis argues that exhibitions should be examined as a complementary source within the field of art history and its methodology. Where traditional art historical scholarship (such as the study of formalism and biographies) is absent, exhibitions have proven to be instrumental archives for art historical research in the region.

In the literature review, I have focused on examining regional perspectives and national accounts of modern Southeast Asian art history which illuminate my understanding of modern Southeast Asian Art exhibitions. The primary literature for this thesis is the NGS's exhibition catalogues and collaterals, where the NGS's intended curatorial strategies and

[55] An example is Afterall's *Exhibition Histories*, a series launched in 2010 offering critical analysis of exhibitions of contemporary art which has nine issues to date. In terms of degree programmes, Central Saint Martins College in London has offered a postgraduate MA degree in "Exhibition Studies" since 2011.
[56] See Bruce Altshuler, ed., *Biennials and beyond: Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1962 - 2002*, conceived and ed. by Phaidon editors and Bruce Altshuler; [Vol. 2] (London: Phaidon Press, 2013); Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Expanded ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998).

exhibition narratives are presented.[57] Each exhibition case study used for this thesis has been accompanied by an extensive catalogue, featuring curatorial essays that explained the themes and narratives of the shows, as well as the standpoint of the museum and its objectives in staging the exhibitions.

In particular, the catalogue for *Reframing Modernism* featured artist biographies of each artist in relation to the works chosen for the exhibition. Other publications specific to the artists Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng have also been key materials in providing a comparison for the NGS's canonisation of the artists. In comparing the artist biographies, artwork write-ups, and exhibition histories across different literature available, one may identify the key points of the artist's oeuvre which are repeated across publications and hence the existing and established narrative. Against this narrative, anomalies have been found in the form of specific highlights that are mentioned for the first time and/or not as widely repeated across the publications. This then raises the question of intention by the institution with regard to the support these publications bring to the specific narrative of the exhibition and the prestige of the institution's collection. This is observed in the case studies' canonisation of the artists' artworks, which also speaks to the field of modern Southeast Asian art history as a whole since it contributes to the established narratives; Cheong Soo Pieng and Nguyen Gia Tri's positions and contributions to modern Southeast Asian art history are elevated and made significant as its key figures.

Secondary literature that have presented a regional understanding of Southeast Asian art history have articulated a perspective of Southeast Asia as a region, drawing connections and identifying themes of Southeast Asian art. These major studies of Southeast Asian art

[57] Sze Wee Low, ed., *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015) and Sarah Lee and Sara Siew, eds., *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016).

from 1998 to 2018 include *Modern Asian Art* (1998), *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-East Asian Art* (2002), *Eye Of The Beholder: Reception, Audience, And Practice Of Modern Asian Art* (2006), *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader* (2011) and *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia 1973–2015* (2018). These texts, which contain essays written by art historians specialising in Asian and Southeast Asian art, have laid the groundwork for the formation of a regional understanding of Southeast Asian art from which many curators have drawn from and elaborated in their exhibitions. In addition, texts that have surveyed the art history of Southeast Asian countries chart and explain the development of modern art and modernism specific to the country, naming the artists who have contributed to its trajectory. These include *Modern Artists in Malaysia* (1983), *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1992) and *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond* (1997). As the national narratives are the source materials from which the regional narratives have originated, an understanding of how artists were first defined within their country's art history provide the foundation for explaining how they were selected as regional artists. However, this is not always the case, and where the national and regional narratives differ—especially in the selection of key artists—the comparison illuminates the curatorial process behind the exhibitions.

Furthermore, my study is supplemented by journals and popular publications with contributions by academics, writers, and curators. The frequent publication of journal issues allows for short, in-depth essays on diverse topics of Southeast Asian art which have expanded on the discussions found in books. More specifically, essays on exhibitions and institutions published in *SOUTHEAST OF NOW: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, as well as magazines *Art Asia Pacific* and *Art Review Asia* have been especially useful. Essays that have referred and

responded directly to the case studies *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* provide an alternative voice to the institution's narrative presented. Conferences include "Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia," Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2013) and the forthcoming "Connecting Modern Art Histories in and across Africa, South and Southeast Asia," Dhaka Art Summit (2019).

Key texts and conferences that helped develop the framework for reading *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* were published and held in North America and Europe, with the Euramerican exhibition context and audience in mind. These have pointed to the direction for theorising exhibitions in general, and have been adapted to my approach for Southeast Asian art. For the study of exhibitions, key texts include *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History: 1962–2002* (2013), *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1986), and *The Power of Display* (1998). Further research that have historicised exhibitions and examined institutional canonisation has been published by journals such as the *Journal of Art Historiography,* and conferences on the subject include the thirteenth "Deutscher Kunsthistorikertag" (2009) and "Object—Value—Canon," by the Getty Research Institute (2014–2015).

Overall, these sites—books, journals, and magazines—have been the main platform through which modern Southeast Asian art history has been written. Apart from traditional art historical texts, the extent and diversity of writings also point to how texts which become part of art historical scholarship may take on many forms, from essays for exhibition catalogues, reviews in newspapers and magazines, papers presented in conferences and forums, to even opening remarks at an art exhibition's reception. This thesis has also made discerning use of non-scholarly texts such as press releases, art reviews published in print or online magazines, as well as brochures and text from the NGS's website. My thesis addresses the lack of exhibition studies in Southeast Asian art through the examination of exhibition texts and

design in *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, drawing from current literature on national and regional art histories to critique the role of institutions in canon formation of modern Southeast Asian art. Through the close examination of these exhibitions as a starting point, the institutional agenda of the NGS in its contribution to modern Southeast Asian art history has been made apparent.

1.4 Research Methodology: A Proposed Template for Reading Art Exhibitions

This thesis proposes and provides a systematic approach to modern Southeast Asian art history in two steps: first, by examining the physical aspect of exhibitions; and second, reading the exhibitions as sites for the production of art history. These two aspects articulate the curatorial strategies which create the narratives of modern Southeast Asian art history. My template for reading exhibitions synthesises the literature available and documentation of the exhibition design through field trips, thereby proposing a methodology for its study as a complement to traditional art historical methods. This template may also be applied to other Southeast Asian artists, exhibitions, and institutions. While this thesis aims to bring more attention to the examination of physical exhibitions by offering examples and a proposed template, the curatorial text and its communicated narratives nonetheless play the crucial and major role in my thesis, as its current precedence in the field of exhibition studies (elucidated in the earlier chapters) provide existing guidelines for my proposed template.

In the NGS's *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, I have examined the significant narratives presented via curatorial strategies, and the institutional agenda that is read in tandem. These exhibitions have ranked among the largest in scale in the history of modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions—understood in terms of the number of artists, artworks, and countries represented. As recent exhibitions with a close proximity in installation dates, *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* have also allowed for a

physical experience and account of its exhibition layout, design, and experience, enabling a successive reading of the two exhibitions.

In particular, visual analysis of artworks by Nguyen Gia Tri's and Cheong Soo Pieng within the physical exhibition space has revealed the curatorial strategies in forming the narratives. This visual analysis was conducted in tandem with the exhibition text, design and the positioning of artworks in relation to the other works on display (such as paintings by other Southeast Asian and Western artists in the same exhibition), shedding light on how exhibitions have become sites of art historical construction in modern Southeast Asian art history. As primary literature, the NGS's catalogues have detailed their curatorial strategies and narratives, which are analysed in direct comparison to the physical exhibition design.

Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng were chosen for this thesis as they are already established artists within their countries' narratives, and the NGS has played a significant role in consolidating their status and significance within Southeast Asia. Nguyen and Cheong have both been highlighted by the NGS as key artists of modern Southeast Asian art through exhibitions and publications. This has been built on prior country-centric narratives of Nguyen and Cheong as founding masters of modernism within Vietnam and Singapore respectively.

Nguyen and Cheong's acclaimed positions within their home countries and the NGS's assertion of their position as modern masters of the Southeast Asian region is analogous to Picasso and Matisse's role as the icons of Western modernism. In the field of modern Vietnamese art, Nguyen's mastery of lacquer painting represented innovation in Vietnamese modernism. Cheong Soo Pieng has been highlighted within the Singapore art narrative as the key artist of the Nanyang art style who brought his expertise and knowledge of Western and Chinese art education to depict life in Singapore. Cheong's subsequent teaching career at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) provided a platform to transmit his values and

ideals, as well as technical art styles and subjects to his students who came from neighbouring Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia.

This thesis has examined the physical aspect of the exhibitions as sites through visual analysis of works by the artists Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng, as the curatorial strategies ascribed artistic motivations to the works that consequentially form the exhibition narrative. These works are *Landscape of Vietnam* (c. 1940) and *The Fairies* (c. 1936) by Nguyen, and *Goats, Figures and Jugs* (1959), *Tend Cows* (1951) and *Untitled ("Puppet Maker")* (1953) by Cheong. These works were selected as they were highlighted as key modern Southeast Asian artworks through emphasis in the accompanying curatorial essays as well as in the physical exhibitions itself. The deliberate selection of Nguyen's and Cheong's works in the exhibitions has demonstrated that the curators wanted to emphasise specific periods in both artists' oeuvres. Following this, the works were displayed and hung in a way that elicited certain messages or artistic motivations as part of the curatorial strategy in crafting the exhibition narrative. Reading these exhibitions as sites for the production of art historical narratives, the narratives that emerged from the NGS's exhibitions then contribute to modern Southeast Asian art history.

In *Between Declarations*, Nguyen Gia Tri's *Landscape of Vietnam* was presented against the search for a national identity and agency as a modern artist amidst the influence and presence of the West. Nguyen was educated at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de L'Indochine (EBAI) that adopted a curriculum which was based on the art schools of Europe and encouraged the integration of local influences. Nguyen's educational background was a catalyst for the development of Vietnamese modernism. In Nguyen's case, he has been credited for extending the medium of paintings in lacquer from the realm of the decorative to a modern innovation. In the same exhibition, Cheong Soo Pieng's *Goats, Figures and Jugs* has been presented within the theme of abstraction as a tool for modern Southeast Asian

artists to assert national identity in a time of nation-building and also reflect the internationalism of modern abstraction.

This aspiration was further evidenced in *Reframing Modernism,* where Cheong's *Tend Cows* and *Untitled ("Puppet Maker")* have been singled out for his use of cubism in conveying local scenes in Singapore. More significantly, Cheong's role in establishing Singapore's importance in art education of Southeast Asia has been asserted—through his art education in China, development of the Nanyang style, and teaching career at NAFA. This focus on Cheong was further reinforced through the hanging of his works, with no visual comparisons drawn with Western artists in the accompanying curatorial texts as well. Nguyen's *The Fairies* was positioned with a reference to Henri Matisse's *The Joy of Life* (1906) and hung across Matisse's *Interior in Yellow and Blue* (1946). This hanging not only put the two works in direct visual comparison but was part of the curatorial strategy to elevate the position of modern Southeast Asian art (which has been regarded as peripheral to the development of Western modern art), and to emphasise its significance on par with Western modernism.

In these exhibitions, I argue that Nguyen and Cheong's works have been canonised as anchors of the NGS's modern Southeast Asian art historical narrative. In essence, through examining exhibitions and the major works by certain artists, the intentions of the institution may be discerned in how canon formation takes place. Within the exhibition, the curatorial decision to highlight a certain body of works, technique, style, and/or period of an artist's career leads to the identification of masterpieces in modern Southeast Asian art, boosting the artist's contribution and installing them as key figures of art history. This concept—referred to as *reception history*—was proposed by art historians Gregor Langfeld and Tessel M., who stated:

> [...] a core type of research on canon formation is closely related to reception history, in which the history of collecting and exhibiting are important elements, and this can function as a critical tool to approach art history itself. Reception history makes the constructed nature of the discourse that creates the art work, and its meaning and value, visible. Studying the processes by which art and artists are excluded and included in their socio-historical contexts can lead to new insights that ultimately contribute to the transformation of the canon.[58]

Therefore, in reading modern Southeast Asian art history, an examination of the exhibitions reveals the discourse surrounding the selection of artworks. In the examples of *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, with most of the artworks on exhibition being drawn from Singapore's National Collection, it brings the state and institutional agenda to the fore in a critical re-looking at modern Southeast Asian art history.

[58] Gregor Langfeld and Tessel M. Bauduin, "The Canonisation of Modernism: Exhibition Strategies in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries," *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 19 (December 1, 2018): 2.

Chapter Two

National Gallery Singapore: A National Institution with Regional Ambitions

Officially opening its doors to the public in 2015, the NGS is at once a national gallery dedicated to presenting the art of Singapore, as well as a Southeast Asian art museum that showcases modern artworks of the region. With two overarching goals that have guided the institution's activities, the NGS has prioritised Singapore's national interests before Southeast Asia's. However, these two goals are incorporated as one, and should be read as such—the rewriting of modern Southeast Asian art history is integrated into and part of the NGS's main purpose of presenting Singapore's national narrative of its colonial-dependent history and role as an economic leader in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the NGS's regional narrative has been constructed as a means of bolstering Singapore's national narrative. Although the region encompasses vast and diverse histories across unique Southeast Asian countries, the cohesive overarching narrative has been built upon commonalities that parallel Singapore's and suppresses other national narratives of countries in Southeast Asia; the NGS's regional art historical narrative thereby largely colonial-centric and motivated to reinforce Singapore's role.

The NGS's interest in co-opting various Southeast Asian modernism(s) for Singapore's national narrative has manifested in its exhibitions which become sites for competing narratives of the regional and the national. The importance of an exhibition is tied to the role of the curator, who is responsible for deciding how exhibitions are planned, executed, and documented through texts and display of works. The study of exhibitions as a tool for reading Southeast Asian art history should thus be read by examining the curatorial strategies used, as well as the institutions and objectives that they represent. Paul O'Neill charted the rise of the curator's power through the development of large exhibitions where the "exhibition form" became treated as a "medium in and of itself," identified clearly with a

"specific exhibition maker, or with the signature style of the curator-producer and by his or her ability to contextualise a range of works as a whole entity."[59] Therefore, exhibitions have often been charged with specific narratives that reflect the interests of individual curators or the institutions that they represent.

Today, group exhibitions have endowed the curator as the "most visible producer of meaning" for the artworks[60] and institutions such as the NGS are no exception. Jens Hoffmann conceived of the exhibition as a creative medium with curators as the "author[s] of this nexus," the exhibition mirroring the subjectivity of the individual curator, just as each artwork mirrors the subjectivity of the artist who made it.[61] In this vein, the assumption that art exhibitions are neutral presentations of art history is fictitious, due to curators bearing their own judgements and bias as individuals, and art institutions fulfilling the necessity of carrying out its own objectives. From a Southeast Asian context, Patrick D. Flores also wrote that curators are subjects of nation-states and thus are put under the obligations of varying constraints and pressure: "to abide by certain identities (social, cultural, religious), to operate within limited resources of education and infrastructure, to support the state in its mandate of cohesion and integration."[62]

The NGS's role as producer of meaning for modern Southeast Asian artworks has been underscored by its alignment with Singapore's state goals for the development of art and culture. The NGS curator Adele Tan drew links between Singapore and Western curators in constructing the Southeast Asian narrative:

> The country's museological choice to be the representative placeholder for art in Southeast Asia means that we face similar trenchant questions as Western curators

[59] O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating*, 16.
[60] O'Neill, 91.
[61] Jens Hoffmann, *Theater of Exhibitions* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 28.
[62] Patrick D. Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008), 10.

> working on African art have, especially when art and histories from ten distinct countries are constantly being brought together to be spoken of as one region.[63]

Tan hence pointed out the problematic position of Singapore's institutions in presenting Southeast Asian art, as it implies a superiority of the curator and the curated, as well as a separation of Singapore apart from the region in the same way Western curators have presented African art. Hence, from this position, the NGS has written the regional narrative of modern Southeast Asian art according to the state and institutional goals into the exhibitions and artworks it presents.

In his book *National Galleries,* Simon Knell has also specifically highlighted the NGS's internationalist pursuit reflecting both an inherent multiculturalism as well as an economic model cemented by its status as a global hub, building upon an international identity that utilises "international appropriation."[64] Knell argued that possessing international art collections enables a national gallery from a country to author other countries' cultural identities:

> The power to curate foreign art—to distil and rationalise, to determine its merits and contributions, to impose national tastes internationally and thus to control its reception—ensured that national galleries of international art were rather more than treasure houses. The appeal of the international collection was not simply to possess great works but to author their meaning and value, and thus contribute to the construction of art history itself. Such actions advanced the status of gallery and nation.[65]

[63] Adele Tan, "The Collected Contemporary: Museological Fixtures, Fixatives And Fixations For Southeast Asian Art," in *Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, 2012), 163.
[64] O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating*, 111.
[65] O'Neill, 56–7.

Therefore, the NGS's hand in organising large exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art has led to a significant impact of modern Southeast Asian art history. In addition, there is also an accrued market value to the artworks it collects and/or presents, as the museum's inclusion in its exhibitions leaves an entry on the artwork's provenance. The consequence of the NGS's exhibition in the commercial market was most recently observed when a recently exhibited work at the museum reached a high price at the auctions less than a year later.[66] As local art institutions with a regional scope, Singapore's art museums should rightly be scrutinised and studied in how they shape and formulate narratives of Southeast Asia, given the national agenda at play.

From 2010 onwards, before the NGS officially opened, the NGS has curated the works of artists Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng, selecting and displaying them as a crucial part of the modern Southeast Asian art canon. This chapter examines the exhibitionary mechanics and curatorial strategies, specifically identifying how their works have been canonised and applying the afore-mentioned proposed template for reading art exhibitions through a close-study of exhibitionary texts and design in *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*.

The NGS's exhibitions established a narrative of modern Southeast Asian art history that began with a new chronology set in nineteenth century colonialism. In *Between Declarations,* this chronological selection revealed a reliance on the colonial narrative for the assertion and development of modern Southeast Asian art. The presence of foreign powers brought forth an "environment of change and uncertainty created by this interaction [which]

[66] Raden Saleh's *Mail Station at the Bottom of Mount Megamendung* (1871), was sold for USD 2.16 million at Christie's Hong Kong on 24 November 2018, only about six months after it was shown in the NGS exhibition *Between Worlds: Raden Saleh and Juan Luna,* which closed on March 11, 2018. See Reena Devi, "Loaned Masterpieces Public Service or Personal Gain," *ArtAsiaPacific*, November 28, 2018, http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/LoanedMasterpiecesPublicServiceOrPersonalGain.

can be seen as the beginning of a modern condition."[67] The curatorial essay noted that "new practices in art were the result of Western influences through colonial channels."[68] In *Reframing Modernism,* the presence of Western education in both biographies of Nguyen and Cheong was emphasised as the important tenet of the Southeast Asian artists' practice, even though other factors such as local influences were prevalent.

There has been an impetus by the NGS to highlight regional similarities over individual modernism(s) of nation-states in order to build a coherent regional narrative. This is discernible in the two exhibitions examined in this thesis. In *Reframing Modernism,* Western modern art narratives are located in Nguyen Gia Tri's *The Fairies* while also promoting the innovations that the artists undertook, such as in the works of Cheong Soo Pieng. By adopting a regional outlook of Southeast Asian art in order to facilitate this comparison against the West, the artists lose the characteristics of their own countries and own modernism(s)[69] which were unique in experience, style, and form. The balance between maintaining a Southeast Asian perspective while drawing meaningful connections to the West thus becomes a precarious one, particularly when one considers the potential compressing and homogenisation engendered by the former.

The NGS's regional narrative of modern Southeast Asia has mirrored Singapore's national narrative in establishing the significance and value of the colonial period, as well as Singapore's role as a centre of regional activity in Southeast Asia. This emphasis on foreign

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[67] Phoebe Scott, "Authority and Anxiety," in *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century*, ed. Sze Wee Low (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 17.
[68] Scott, 17.
[69] The use of the term modernism(s) draws from the argument that there is more than one modernism (in the West). In this sense, multiple modernism(s) took place in unique countries due to differing conditions at different times, with their own distinct developments of art. Following this argument, many scholars have called for a posturing of Southeast Asian modernism(s) instead of a Southeast Asian modernism. See Arif Dirlik, "Global Modernity?: Modernity in an Age of Global Capitalism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 6, no. 3 (August 2003): 275–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310030063001 and John Clark, "Doing World Art History with Modern and Contemporary Asian Art," *World Art* 1, no. 1 (March 2011): 93–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2011.520914. For a critique of multiple modernism(s), see Gunalan Nadarajan, "Not Modern: Theses on Contemporary Art," in *Contemporary Art in Singapore*, ed. Russell Storer, Eugene Tan, and Gunalan Nadarajan (Singapore: Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2007), 19–23.

presence as the starting point is evident in the presentation of Nguyen Gia Tri's oeuvre. In the two exhibitions, Nguyen Gia Tri's status as a master of modern Vietnamese art is brought across through an emphasis on his Western art education—Nguyen's *Landscape of Vietnam* and *The Fairies* are presented as products of the Western curriculum he received during the period Vietnam was colonialised.

The NGS has highlighted Cheong Soo Pieng by crediting certain works as significant to modern Southeast Asian art history, validating the importance of Singapore's art within the region. Cheong's contribution to Singapore's visual arts scene has been further expounded by emphasising his teaching career at the leading art school NAFA in Singapore, as he was also instrumental in the cultivation of future generations of Singaporean artists.

Striving to offer the best of modern Singapore art and modern Southeast Asian art, the NGS has maintained a distinction and priority of Singapore before the region. This is achieved through the NGS's ambitious collecting of regional masterpieces, and the creation of national icons that legitimise the importance of Singapore's art within its region. Studied alongside the other, the two exhibitions have presented a timeline of modern Southeast Asian art and situates Southeast Asian modernism(s) in historical relation to other modernisms.

Therefore, the exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* are examples of how the tensions between a national and a regional agenda can present a problematic structure for understanding the development of modern Southeast Asian art. The NGS's dual aims of being Singapore's national institution and Southeast Asia's regional museum are conflicting, since the prioritisation of Singapore's interests in terms of its historical narratives takes precedence over a complete and accurate presentation of modern Southeast Asian art—where points of divergence from Singapore's national narrative are deliberately omitted.

2.1 Building the Canons of Southeast Asian Art: Nguyen Gia Tri (b. 1908, Vietnam) and Cheong Soo Pieng (b. 1917, China)

Through the exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, the NGS has proposed a larger regional narrative in which works by Nguyen and Cheong are canonised in Southeast Asian art history. In addition to these two artists, the NGS has brought together various Southeast Asian artists in other exhibitions: *Realism in Asian Art* (2010), *Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies* (2017), *Between Worlds: Raden Saleh and Juan Luna* (2017), *(Re)collect: The Making of Our Art Collection* (2018) and *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s–1990s* (2019).

From these exhibitions, *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* have been selected as the most prominent examples of canon-building as a key curatorial strategy of the NGS's. Specifically, the artworks of Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng have been framed as among the most important in modern Southeast Asian art history as observed in the exhibitionary texts, the physical exhibition, and other publicity material.

The impact and influence of each artist's career and artworks extend beyond their countries, and they are perceived as the masters of modern Southeast Asian art. Nguyen is the preeminent lacquer painter in Vietnam, whose works marked a turning point in modern Vietnamese art history. Cheong's legacy is tied to the Nanyang art movement[70] in Singapore's art history, of which the artist is the main proponent. While there is existing literature about the significance of these artists, the institution's consistent emphasis on the two artists in each exhibition speaks of a larger regional narrative. Apart from their prominence in these two exhibitions, the NGS's intention has been exemplified through other exhibitions of the artists, publications and marketing material produced by the museum.

[70] The term "Nanyang" and its corresponding art movement is further explained on page 34.

From 2015, the NGS has been a leading publisher of art historical scholarship on Nguyen Gia Tri. To date, the artist's only monograph was published by the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Museum in 2013. Five other English scholarly publications which mention the artist were produced in conjunction with group exhibitions of Vietnamese art or as an anthology of essays on Vietnamese art.[71] Nguyen's oeuvre has also been used as a case study in dissertations, including that of the NGS curator Phoebe Scott.[72] The NGS's emphasis on Nguyen can be traced from 2010, culminating in a two-person exhibition in 2017. Of the many Vietnamese lacquer artists presented by the NGS in its exhibition *Reframing Modernism,* Nguyen was chosen over other Vietnamese masters such as Le Pho and Bui Xuan Phai to be in the two-artist show *Radiant Material: A Dialogue in Vietnamese Lacquer Painting* (2017). Therefore, the NGS's sustained interested in producing publications and exhibitions of the Vietnamese artist Nguyen Gia Tri has designated the museum as the leading purveyor of how Nguyen's artworks are understood, communicated, and presented within the field of art history, but also bears an impact on its acquisition and collection value in the art market.

Apart from *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, Nguyen has been included in the exhibitions *50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings: 1925-75* (The Sankei Shimbun, Tokyo, 2005), *Realism in Asian Art* (the NGS and the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, 2010), and *Radiant Material: A Dialogue in Vietnamese Lacquer* Painting (2017). *Radiant Material* was curated by Phoebe Scott, and featured Nguyen Gia Tri's *The Fairies* with a newly commissioned lacquer work by artist Phi Phi Oanh.

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[71] See Corinne de Ménonville, *Vietnamese Painting: From Tradition to Modernity* (Paris: Éd. d'Art et d'histoire, ARHIS Impr. SIA, 2003); *Masters of Vietnamese Painting; To Nogoc Van, Nuyen Gia Tri, Nguyen Sang, Bui Xuan Phai* (Hanoi: Fine Arts Publishing House, 1994); *50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings: 1925-75* (Tokyo: The Sankei Shimbun, 2005); Sarah Lee, Như Huy Nguyen, and Singapore Art Museum, eds., *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009); and Nora A. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).
[72] See Phoebe Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist: Modernity, Agency and the Discourse of Art in North Vietnam, 1925-1954" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

For the NGS, Cheong Soo Pieng was strategically chosen as a national figure who was once a subject of regional migrations, which also affirms the national narrative of Singapore as a centre within the Southeast Asian region. The presentation of Cheong Soo Pieng at the NGS was hence emblematic of creating a national icon; the artist is portrayed as a relatable yet heroic figure that many Singaporeans can take pride in. As one of the Nanyang artists, the artist has been recognised as a key figure for Singapore art and his major works have already been canonised through art historical scholarship prior to the NGS's exhibitions.

Beginning from the 1980s, Cheong Soo Pieng has been conferred by the Singapore government the status of being the pioneer of Singapore's Nanyang School.[73] The term "Nanyang"—which literally translates to Southern Seas in the Mandarin language—refers to the migration of ethnic Chinese from China to Southeast Asia. While this had been happening since the 11th century, it was only in the 1920s that the term "Nanyang" became a group identity for overseas Chinese in the region, which was then propagated through news publications and writings.[74] The term Nanyang art was formalised by curator and writer Redza Piyadasa in his paper "*Penilaian Penchapaian Kini Seni Lukis Malaysia* (An Assessment of the Attainment of Modern Art in Malaysia)" in August 1971; this was the first survey of modern art in Malaysia.[75] Piyadasa subsequently curated the exhibition *Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang* (Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur) in 1979, and the "Nanyang" was further cemented through writings by art historian T.K. Sabapathy. A subsequent key text by Sabapathy, *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern*

[73] This status was officially formalised in a speech by Mr Wan Hussin Zoohri, then Parliamentary Secretary of Health and Culture at the opening of his retrospective exhibition. The third show in the *Pioneer Artists of Singapore* series of exhibitions launched in 1981, Cheong's retrospective exhibited over 200 artworks by the artist at the formerly titled National Museum Art Gallery in 1983.
[74] Kunyi Zou and Sittithep Eaksittipong, "In Search for 'Self' and 'Nation': Liu Kang and the Cultural Interpretation of Nanyang Art" (The 8th Humanities Research Forum in Thailand: Changing Humanities in a Changing World, Chiang Mai University: Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, 2014), 432.
[75] T. K. Sabapathy, "O No! Not the Nanyang Again!" in *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973-2015*, ed. Ahmad Mashadi et al. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 401.

Malaysian Art (1994), brought the starting point of Nanyang art forward to the 1950s, beginning from art historian Michael Sullivan's interactions with Sabapathy at the University of Malaya where Sullivan was a curator and lecturer while Sabapathy was then his student in art history classes.

As one of the Nanyang artists, Cheong Soo Pieng has been regarded as a national artist and icon for nurturing Singapore's art scene. The three other key Nanyang artists are Liu Kang (b. 1911, China), Chen Chong Swee (b. 1910, China), and Chen Wen Hsi (b. 1906, China), who form the core group with Cheong Soo Pieng; as well as Lim Hak Tai (b. 1893, China), Georgette Chen (b. 1906, China), and Lim Cheng Hoe (b. 1912, China) who have received less publicity and interest in Singapore's art narrative. Knell observed that visitors "[would] associate the work or the artist with the idea of the nation," sparking a "national sense of ownership" when it comes to their artworks, even though its artists might be foreign-born.[76] This has similarly been the case for Cheong Soo Pieng, whose biography is found within Singapore's national history and identity of immigration—that of Chinese immigrant "forefathers" who made Singapore their home.[77]

From 1956 to 2019, the sustained interest in Cheong Soo Pieng has been observed through the growing number of exhibitions and publications about the artist. Cheong Soo Pieng received his first solo exhibition entitled *Cheong Soo Pieng: Singapore Art Society* (1956) at the British Council Gallery in Singapore, and his first institutional retrospective entitled *Twenty Years of His Art* (1967) at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in honour of his fiftieth birthday and 25th anniversary of his career as an art teacher. A museum retrospective was later held in Singapore in 1983. Cheong Soo Pieng has remained a popular

[76] Simon J. Knell, *National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 18.
[77] Cheong's status as a Chinese immigrant who contributed to Singapore's art development has been recognised by press publications overseas, such as *The New York Times*. See Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, "In Art Exhibit, Singapore Honors a Son of China," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2010, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/arts/07iht-jessop.html.

choice for Singapore's art industry even in 2019, where the first half of the year was marked by a major retrospective at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) accompanied by a lecture by art historian T.K. Sabapathy. In May 2019, the auction house Christie's organised a showcase for its Spring Auction which also saw the launch of the publication *Soo Pieng: Drawings – A Centenary Reflection* (2019).

In addition to the publications and essays on Cheong Soo Pieng, the emphasis on Cheong alone was markedly observed in the programmes and publications of the NGS, expressive of the NGS's sustained momentum in promoting the artist. Cheong has also been the subject of two children's publications by the NGS, titled *Who is Cheong Soo Pieng?* (2013) and *When I Grow Up I Want to Paint Like Cheong Soo Pieng* (2010). Among the NGS's published books for children, Cheong Soo Pieng is the only artist who has been the subject of two titles.

The NGS's exhibitions featuring Cheong Soo Pieng's artworks included a solo retrospective titled *Cheong Soo Pieng: Bridging Worlds* (Sep 2010–Dec 2010) and a group exhibition *Realism in Asian Art* (Apr 2010–Jul 2010). These exhibitions were accompanied by comprehensive catalogues with essays by multiple writers.[78] In addition, the NGS co-organised *The Birth and Development of Singapore Art* (Mar 2012–Jun 2012) with Fukuoka Asian Art Museum at which the exhibition took place. Choosing works by Cheong Soo Pieng and Lim Hak Tai, the exhibition "presented an opportunity for visitors to see artworks of Singapore's two master artists, whose works form an essential part of the story of Singapore art."[79]

Prior to *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism,* the NGS has highlighted the contributions of the two artists Cheong and Nguyen as important tenets of Southeast

[78] Wei-Wei Yeo, ed., *Cheong Soo Pieng: Visions of Southeast Asia, Asian Artists Series* (Singapore: National Art Gallery, 2010); Wei-Wei Yeo, ed., *Realism in Asian Art* (Singapore: National Art Gallery, 2010).
[79] "The Birth and Development of Singapore Art," National Gallery Singapore, accessed July 19, 2019, https://www.nationalgallery.sg/see-do/programme-detail/25/the-birth-and-development-of-singapore-art.

Asian art history. These exhibitions and publications enabled the museum to introduce and communicate the significance of both artists to the general public, as well as academics and art historians of Southeast Asian art. Since moving to its new premises at the former Supreme Court and City Hall in 2015, the NGS has organised 24 exhibitions in three years. Before opening at its permanent location, the NGS also organised eight exhibitions held in the Singapore Art Museum, traveling shows in the ArtScience Museum, Singapore; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; and Zhejiang Art Museum, China.

The NGS has thus been steadily building the art historical scholarship and exhibition history of Nguyen and Cheong, towards the goal of installing works by the artists as anchors of the NGS's modern Southeast Asian art historical narrative. Furthermore, the scale and the resources of the NGS relative to other national art institutions in the region, have imbued the NGS with seemingly more canon-making authority as compared to other earlier exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art outlined in Chapter One. *Between Declarations* features over 400 artworks and is a permanent exhibition for five years, while *Reframing Modernism* was a blockbuster exhibition produced in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, bringing works from the Centre's collection to Singapore for the first time. As *Reframing Modernism* opened three months after *Between Declarations,* the overlap in duration of the exhibitions allowed for the exhibition narratives to be read concurrently.

2.2 Collecting and Exhibiting Regional Masterpieces: Nguyen Gia Tri's *Landscape of Vietnam* (c. 1940) and *The Fairies* (c. 1936)

The NGS has played an active role in collecting works by modern Southeast Asian masters, as well as in securing loans of masterpieces from neighbouring national art

institutions for its exhibitions. By collecting works that are deemed significant within each Southeast Asian country's art history, the NGS accumulated these recognised masterpieces which were then co-opted within its regional narrative. In addition, by securing valuable loans from the region, the NGS has reinforced its position as the museum that showcases the best of Southeast Asian art.

In *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, two works by Nguyen Gia Tri were installed as canons of modern Southeast Asian art for their significance in Vietnam and the region. The works were presented as products of the artist's education received at EBAI and as evidence of the artist's intention in expressing an identity for Vietnam. Nguyen's *Landscape of Vietnam* in *Between Declarations* and *The Fairies* in *Reframing Modernism* respectively, are lacquer paintings presented as key masterpieces of modern Southeast Asian art, against the backdrop of Western superiority both in the wake of colonialism and the establishment of Western paintings.

Fig. 1. Nguyen Gia Tri, *Landscape of Vietnam*, c. 1940. Lacquer on board, 159 x 119 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Nguyen's *Landscape of Vietnam* [Fig. 1] depicts a house set in nature, filled with flora and fauna in the foreground, and mountains that recede in the back. In the lacquer painting, nature is the main focus as the trees and plants tower over the house and the two human figures at the bottom. This is emphasised by careful detail accorded to the plants, which are rendered leaf by leaf in gold. In contrast, the house and human figures seem to recede; with little detail in their figures and the use of a darker palette. The composition and scale of nature in the work is also similar to Chinese landscape paintings known as *shanshui hua* (Chinese ink paintings depicting mountains and water features). In Chinese landscape paintings, the human figures are minute, evoking the scale and grandeur of nature. Nguyen renders the familiarity of such traditional Chinese ink compositions in lacquer, in a work that thus celebrates the natural landscape of Vietnam.

Nguyen's *Landscape of Vietnam* is significant as an example of lacquer techniques that he learnt at EBAI. This is documented in the accompanying text for the exhibition's catalogue that builds a narrative of EBAI's educational value and overarching impact of developing modern art in Vietnam. The significance of EBAI's European-influenced curriculum is brought across in Nguyen's work and practice, as well as other Vietnamese artists' works such as Nguyen Phan Chanh's *The Singers in the Countryside* (1932) and Nguyen Van Ty's *Panorama de Cho Bo* (1943). The founding director of EBAI, Victor Tardieu (b. 1870 – d. 1937), was a French artist whose achievement of winning the Prix Indochine award in 1920 allowed him to travel to Indochina. The institution he founded was the first formal art institution in Vietnam.

Unlike six other art schools set up in Cochinchina between 1902 to 1913, EBAI did not focus on local artisanal and craft traditions, but was based on the European art school curriculum that valued "drawing as a basic skill, as well as studies in perspective and anatomy."[80] In the essay, Tardieu's role was posited as vital to the development of Vietnamese modern art. While the students studied oil painting and sculpture, he also encouraged them to "integrate local influences into their modern art," which then led to "experimental use of painting on silk and painting in lacquer, which became important tendencies within Vietnamese modernism: silk and lacquer developed into traditions from which a uniquely local modern could blossom."[81]

The rise of innovation in the redevelopment of traditional techniques as a feature of modern Vietnamese art has been credited to the curriculum of EBAI. Lacquer painting is framed in parallel to the rise of nationalism and the need for national identity; as such the art historical development of modern Vietnamese art is intertwined with the historical development of Vietnamese nationalistic identity. EBAI's significance in developing lacquer art as a hallmark of modern Vietnamese art has been reiterated by many other academics such as Nora Taylor, Nguyen Quang Phong, and Nguyen Xuan Viet.

The development of lacquer painting as a key attribute of modern Vietnamese art and outweighing its decorative qualities is supported by Andre-Pallois, who stated that its status was elevated after the 1930s through the effort and innovation of the students at the art academy EBAI.[82] She cited Nguyen Gia Tri as essential to the revival, as his research interest in the medium led to more pigments that could be used with lacquer, increasing the range of colours that could be achieved. Nguyen was also successful in emphasising "nuances and

[80] Lisa Horikawa, "Imagining Country and Self," in *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*, ed. Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 37.
[81] Horikawa, "Imagining Country and Self," 37.
[82] Nadine Andre-Pallois, "The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine: A Striking Shift in Vietnamese Art," in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, ed. Sarah Lee and Như Huy Nguyễn (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), 9.

produced a more pleasant relief."[83] Unlike oil painting, artists who worked with lacquer had to plan ahead, as the "extreme difficulty with lacquer painting is to imagine what the final result will be as lines, shapes, and colours are arranged on the support first, then covered by the medium, which will be rubbed down only at the end."[84]

Andre-Pallois posited that Nguyen discovered abstraction painting after the wars, and "made lacquer painting evolve into this make-up of colours and forms that exists for the sake of expression."[85] Nguyen encouraged the use of lacquer painting with nationalism on the rise, urging other artists to further transform the qualities of this "Eastern medium" in order to introduce features beyond Western oil painting. In summary, Andre-Pallois claimed that the early artists of the school developed a distinct modern figurative art after completing their introductions to modern art as well as other aesthetic and mediums, and in adapting traditional techniques to the principles of modern art, "the nationalism movement and the anticolonial war gave them this opportunity to construct their own identity." [86]

Levasseur claimed that "modern painting was introduced in Vietnam with the creation of EBAI in Hanoi at the beginning of the 20th century," establishing the institution's contributing role as the sole factor in modern Vietnamese art.[87] Cited by Levasseur as a great master of Vietnamese art, Nguyen's chosen medium also displayed ingenuity in comparison with modern European art, partially solving the "conflict between forms, colours and materials, as reached in the early 20th century in oil painting in Europe" with lacquer painting.[88] Nguyen Gia Tri's lacquer paintings were also a language in abstraction, as he mentioned that "starting to paint lacquered paintings means one has already started to paint

[83] Andre-Pallois, 9.
[84] Andre-Pallois, 9-10.
[85] Andre-Pallois, 10.
[86] Andre-Pallois, 10.
[87] Patricia Levasseur, "Transmission of Abstraction in Vietnamese Painting," in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, ed. Sarah Lee and Như Huy Nguyễn (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), 141.
[88] Levasseur, 141.

abstract ones. […] The lacquerer looks into his innermost feelings, and does not look at the outer appearance of things."[89]

Thus, Levasseur suggested that the abstract qualities of lacquer painting elevated the medium beyond being merely decorative, while also surpassing the Western technique of oil painting as it "solved" the issues faced. Examining the way in which works were displayed in the NGS galleries, Nguyen Gia Tri's *Landscape of Vietnam* was hung beside Nguyen Phan Chanh's *The Singers in the Countryside* and Nguyen Van Ty's *Panorama de Cho Bo* during the exhibition's first few months as observed in 2015.[90] Thus, Nguyen's *Landscape of Vietnam* remains a key work of the exhibition, the lacquer painting representing Nguyen's innovation of traditional Vietnamese lacquer and Western art, a technique achieved through his education at EBAI.

In the catalogue for *Between Declarations,* Nguyen Gia Tri's *Landscape of Vietnam* was categorised in the second of four themes, titled "Imagining Country and Self."[91] With the sub-heading of "The Modern Impulse," the paragraph demarcated the period between 1900 and the 1940s as crucial years for the formation of art academies that "further delineated the social standing of 'fine art' and 'artist'" in Vietnam.[92] Placed under the theme "Imagining Country and Self," the section commented on the contextual landscape of colonial Southeast Asia which amounted to artists expressing their desires for the "yet-to-be born nation" while demonstrating an increased "sensibility to place," and for some a "new awareness of agency as a modern artist."[93]

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[89] Nguyen Xuan Viet, *Hoa So Nuyen Gia Tri Noi ve Sang Tao (Artist Nguyen Gia Tri Talks About Creativity)* (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Hoc Publishing House, 1998), 14, quoted in Levasseur, "Transmission of Abstraction in Vietnamese Painting,"141.
[90] At the time of writing in August 2018, Nguyen Gia Tri's *Landscape of Vietnam* (1940) is still on display, but Nguyen Phan Chanh's *The singers in the Countryside* (1932) and Nguyen Van Ty's *Panorama de Cho Bo* (1943) have been removed.
[91] Horikawa, "Imagining Country and Self," 37.
[92] Horikawa, 37.
[93] Horikawa, 32.

In addition, *Landscape of Vietnam* occupied a prominent position in the museum's publications and exhibition collateral. It was featured in the exhibition's brochure on two of the 11 total pages, as well as in the catalogue's essays which only featured 26 images, with more than 200 other artworks' images relegated to the last section of the catalogue.

Fig. 2. Nguyen Gia Tri, *The Fairies*, c. 1936, lacquer on board, 290 × 440 cm. Collection of Géraldine Galateau, Paris.

In *The Fairies* [Fig. 2], female figures are depicted in a garden-like setting, a unifying depiction of the relationship between man and nature. The trees of the garden echo the postures of the women, who are reclining, standing, and moving gracefully as if captured in dance. Rather than emphasise nature or the figures, the colour palette and strokes for both subjects are the same, resulting in a cohesive composition where the figures and setting meld into one another. A large-scale painting across ten panels, the significance of the work once

again lies with Nguyen's technical mastery of lacquer; achieving different tones and textures on a large piece.

In the exhibition *Reframing Modernism,* Nguyen's *The Fairies* was hung at the entrance of the exhibition and was also featured in the first chapter of the exhibition catalogue. The large impact of the art academy EBAI on the development of modern Vietnamese art was reinforced and pointed out as the main vehicle from which two influential artistic practices emerged: "painting in ink and colour on silk, and painting on a two-dimensional surface using locally produced lacquer."[94] Nguyen's technical mastery of lacquer painting was also reiterated, as he used "a newly developed rubbing technique, where successive coats of lacquer were applied and then rubbed back to reveal the colours and designs beneath."[95] More emphasis in terms of visual analysis of Nguyen's painting was given in this catalogue and exhibition as compared to *Landscape of Vietnam* in *Between Declarations*, with *The Fairies* cited as one of the artist's largest and most ambitious works. Produced for a French patron, the lacquer painting depicts "idealised images of Vietnamese women"—subject matter characteristic of the artist—"in an amorphous garden-like setting."[96] The work is separated into ten panels but is unified through composition such that one views the work as a complete painting rather than distinct lacquer screens.

One of the curatorial strategies employed was to construct a parallel narrative between Nguyen and Western modern master Henri Matisse. This was achieved through the physical placement of their works and reiterated in the exhibition texts. Scott, the curator and writer of this chapter, posited that Nguyen might have been referring to the "spatial and figural arrangement in Matisse's painting of 1906, *The Joy of Life* as it shows a similar idyll

[94] Phoebe Scott, "Nguyen Gia Tri," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 36.
[95] Scott, 36.
[96] Scott, 36.

landscape of female figures gathered in recline and dance."[97] In her doctoral dissertation, Scott elaborated on the visual similarities between the two works, claiming *The Fairies* as a "counter-appropriation and Vietnamisation of [sources from European art history]."[98] The relationship between the two paintings was highlighted by Scott in her visual analysis, namely seen in the framing device and human figures distributed in its compositions.[99] However, she also acknowledged their differences, that "[Nguyen] Gia Tri substitutes the flatness and brightness of Matisse's colour with the disorienting effects of the tension between surface and depth, figure and ground, brought about by the layers of lacquer."[100]

This remark echoes Levasseur's observation mentioned above, where lacquer painting was initially experimented within the context of a European art curriculum as a means to innovate traditional techniques in the production of modern Vietnamese art; it created a new abstract language which allowed for comparison within the field of oil painting, but also exceeded expectations to achieve an end result entirely different and unique as Scott surmises:

> The purpose of suggesting these sources in the image is not simply to trace 'influence' or suggest that the work is derivative. Clearly, [Nguyen Gia] Tri has adapted and synthesised these sources in the work, and his treatment of these elements in the lacquer medium renders them distinctive. More importantly, however, [Nguyen Gia] Tri's engagement with the European canon suggests an assertion of his status as an artist, able to enter into creative dialogue with the images of the past. Read in the light of [Nguyen Gia] Tri's nationalistic tendencies, it can also reflect a desire to rebut the assumption that Vietnamese artists were of inferior standing to French.[101]

[97] Scott, 36.
[98] Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist," 122.
[99] Scott, 134.
[100] Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist," 134.
[101] Scott, 125.

Scott highlighted the stylistic tendencies that modern Vietnamese artists of EBAI had to balance at that time, where they were schooled in European art curriculum but saw a need to produce something they could label as their own and of equal position to the Western paintings they saw. Therefore, the crucial role of EBAI in the development of modern Vietnamese art is indisputable, for it was the exposure of Vietnamese artists to Western art curriculum that propelled traditional Vietnamese art techniques to new heights.

Furthermore, Scott noted that while EBAI brought French art history and practices to Vietnam through its curriculum, the latest developments of French modernism were left behind. She posited that the need of proximity to the so-called centre of Europe is unnecessary for an evaluation of Nguyen's "modernist" romantic style of work. Two reasons are further cited for Nguyen's prominence: his technical development of lacquer and his concerns of "modern individualism through a strenuous critique of traditional Vietnamese social values," evidenced in his participation with the intellectual group, Tu Luc Van Doan (Self-Strengthening Literary Group).[102] Western modernism is thus clearly decentred in the catalogue essay, producing a study of Nguyen as a tenet of modern Vietnamese and Southeast Asian art history. This reading of Nguyen's education at EBAI parallels the scholarship of other art historical narratives in Southeast Asia, where the presence of foreign artists was a key turning point in the development of modern art in the region.[103]

In the physical placement of Nguyen's *The Fairies* in *Reframing Modernism*, it was hung across Henri Matisse's *Interior in Yellow and Blue* (1946) in order to evoke the similarities between the artists' practice, drawing a comparison between Western and Vietnamese modernism. However, this decision undermined Nguyen's lacquer painting as a hallmark of Vietnamese modernism, since such a visual comparison led to superficial

[102] Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist," 26.
[103] The founding of art schools by foreigners such as the French who established EBAI in Vietnam in 1925, and the Dutch who opened an art department in the University of Indonesia are the clearest examples of Western influence.

observations of how the works appear similar. Matisse's *Interior* displays the artist's "gouache-on-paper technique" which the artist "described as 'cutting out from colour,'" a technique most prevalent in the works produced during the final phase of his career.[104] As *Interior* does not present a similar composition, theme, or colour palette with Nguyen's *Fairies,* it is unclear why it was chosen to exhibit alongside the work apart from it being a work by Matisse, who painted *The Joy of Life* (1906).

When questioned by art critic Carla Bianpoen as to why Nguyen's *The Fairies* and Matisse's *Interior in Yellow and Blue* were placed in direct visual comparison, the NGS museum director and senior curator for the exhibition Eugene Tan answered that it was due to a shared sense of "pictorial flatness."[105] Tan's statement is not incorrect, since Nguyen's painting is "treated as a flat arrangement of colour, with very little depth recession,"[106] and Matisse's *Interior* uses colour to define space while the objects in his composition do not diminish in size. However, Tan's statement is emblematic of a Western understanding of modernism, where American art critic Clement Greenberg argued that the unique and exclusive element in Modern paintings in relation to earlier historical forms of Western painting was its flatness—"because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."[107] Tan also referred heavily to Greenberg in his essay for the catalogue, titled "Reframing Representation: Abstraction and Modernism in Southeast Asia."

In terms of following through the curatorial methodology of taking an "artist-centric approach" and "using the Southeast Asian modernist concerns as an entry point into [the

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[104] Ines Bouaillon, "Henri Matisse," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 38.
[105] Carla Bianpoen, "Reframing Modernism in a Southeast Asian Context," *The Jakarta Post*, April 13, 2016, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/04/13/reframing-modernism-a-southeast-asian-context.html.
[106] Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist," 122.
[107] Clement Greenberg and John O'Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 87.

Centre Pompidou's] collection,"[108] this hanging of Nguyen Gia Tri's *The Fairies* and Henri Matisse's *Interior in Yellow and Blue* was not a strong example, since the key visual feature that visitors observed was the shared pictorial flatness—an essential Western modernist painting characteristic—and not the Southeast Asian modernism(s) the exhibition hoped to reframe, as well as the Vietnamese modernism specific to Nguyen's work on show.

Nguyen's *Landscape of Vietnam* and *The Fairies* are two works that are established as canons in Southeast Asian art history through the exhibitions at the NGS. First, by stating EBAI's importance in the development of modern Vietnamese art: Nguyen's artistic practice is grounded in this education—in terms of techniques, styles, and ways of thinking—and hence there is a clear trajectory of how Western art impacted his knowledge of Vietnamese art. Furthermore, by centring the crux of modern Vietnamese art on lacquer painting and highlighting it as a watershed development, Nguyen's lacquer works *Landscape of Vietnam* and *The Fairies* become the pillars of modern Vietnamese art, chosen from other Vietnamese artists and techniques such as Bui Xuan Phai's oil streetscapes of Hanoi, and Le Pho's and Nguyen Phan Chanh's silk paintings, to name a few. *Between Declarations'* presentation of Nguyen's lacquer painting as a cornerstone of modern Southeast Asian art was achieved through the exhibition hang, curatorial essay, and further emphasis in the NGS' marketing materials.

2.3 Highlighting a National Icon: Cheong Soo Pieng's Significant Paintings

In its exhibition programs, the NGS has been building on Singapore's national narrative of the pioneering artists who created the Nanyang style. Cheong was selected by the NGS as the most prominent Nanyang artist, and has been a key feature for the museum's

[108] Lisa Horikawa and Phoebe Scott, introduction to *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 14.

exhibitions, publications, and programmes. While the NGS has reiterated Cheong's importance throughout the museum's activities, the curatorial strategy of canonising specific works by Cheong varies as certain artworks take on a much more important role in the exhibition's narrative. In *Between Declarations,* Cheong Soo Pieng's cubist work *Goats, Figures and Jugs* was inserted within the exhibition's narrative of a search for national identity vis-à-vis abstract expressionism and realism even though it belongs to neither category. In *Reframing Modernism,* the six works by Cheong represent the important transition of his art practice and the Nanyang style in the 1950s. The six works comprised three oil paintings: *Malay Woman*, *Tend Cows*, and *Untitled ("Puppet Maker")*, and three works on paper: *Untitled ("Backyard 2")* (1951), *Untitled ("Study of Dance Postures")* (1952), and *Untitled ("Dayak with Tattoos Smoking")* (1959). As *Reframing Modernism* exhibited a smaller number of works, the relatively large number of works by Cheong was even more significant and this was further emphasised through the hanging. Examining the overall trajectory of the NGS's exhibitions and publications, the status of Cheong Soo Pieng as a national icon for Singapore has been reinforced over the years which bore implications on the reading of modern Southeast Asian art history as well.

Fig. 3 Cheong Soo Pieng, *Goats, Figures, and Jugs,* 1959. Gouache on paper, 89.8 x 39.7 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

In *Between Declarations,* Cheong's *Goats, Figures and Jugs* (1959) was categorised under the exhibition theme "Manifesting the Nation: 1950s to 1970s" which located "striking regional resonance" across Southeast Asia as artists begin to question national identity.[109] The exhibition's theme framed this search for national identity in the context of international politics during the Cold War. In terms of artistic practice, the different developments of art were tied to the countries they originate from as well as their ideologies. Abstract Expressionism became an American representation of freedom and democracy, and Socialist Realism, the artistic style of communist China and Soviet Union.[110] Against the backdrop of

[109] Clarissa Chikiamco, "Manifesting the Nation: Abstraction and the Inter-National," *in Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*, ed. Sze Wee Low (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 44.
[110] Chikiamco, "Manifesting the Nation," 44.

these influences, this theme posited a desire among Southeast Asian artists of this period to attain international standing as they continued to seek their own national identity.

Cheong's *Goats, Figures and Jugs* depicts subject-matter from the Malayan village locale, employing Cubism as the chosen style and rendered with gouache on paper. The vertical rectangular form of *Goats* is similar to Chinese traditional paintings which are typically paired with calligraphy. In this painting, the multiple vertical lines lead the viewer's eyes downwards, as one would read calligraphy, while also creating a segregation within the composition. The work is divided into square and rectangular sections, with each section encasing a goat, figure, or jug; the goat being a favourite motif of the artist which can be found in many of his works.[111] Therefore, Cheong brought together the various elements of a local village but divided into various planes in his cubistic style, while at the same time reminiscent of traditional ink paintings. In relating Cheong's works back to the exhibition's theme, an intention to create an artistic style specific to his new locale while drawing on his education and experience is observed, ultimately contributing to the cultural identity and artistic style—termed Nanyang style—of the region.

Looking at the hang of the works, Cheong Soo Pieng's *Goats, Figures and Jugs* was placed in Gallery 7. Cheong's *Goats* was hung beside visually similar works—in terms of colour palette and style—such as Vicente Manansala's *Still Life with Green Guitar* (1952) and But Muchtar's *Perempuan (Girl)* (1954) during the exhibition's first few months as observed of 2015.[112] With the three works encompassing a palette of blues and greens, Manansala's *Still Life* also depicts objects of daily use, such as jugs, fish, and a guitar, while Muchtar's *Perempuan* is composed of a girl seated on a chair, her attire and background

[111] "Goats, Figures and Jugs," www.roots.sg, accessed April 25, 2019, http://roots.sg/learn/collections/listing/1026402.
[112] This hanging was not permanent, as curators change the line-up of works on show throughout the five-year exhibition in order to showcase other works from the collection, or to allow works to undergo conservation and restoration at the Heritage Conservation Centre (this was conveyed by a NGS gallery-sitter during my visit in 2018).

rendered in angled Cubistic forms; both the subject and background simultaneously seeming to emerge to the fore. Cheong Soo Pieng's *Goats, Figures and Jugs* was no longer on display at the time of writing in December 2017 and during a second visit in August 2018. However, other larger Southeast Asian artworks which are more widely discussed in art historical scholarship remain on view.

The impermanence of the chosen exhibition hanging brings to the fore the NGS's hierarchy of artworks through the prioritisation of certain artworks over the other—certain works in this exhibition are essential and left undisturbed (Nguyen Gia Tri continues to be a mainstay), while others may be taken down and replaced by another painting. However, the NGS had launched the other similarly large exhibition *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century* (2015-2019)[113] numbering over 400 artworks by Singaporean and Singapore-based artists at the same time as *Between Declarations.* Also shown over five years, both of the exhibitions are located in galleries close to each other and hence read in tandem to the other. Since *Siapa* focused entirely on Singapore, it might be the case that the curators chose to allow more emphasis on works by other Southeast Asian artists outside of Singapore for the exhibition *Between Declarations,* as Cheong Soo Pieng's works were a main highlight in the exhibition *Siapa*.[114]

The selective removal of certain works in the hanging while others remained on permanent display privileges specific artworks, artists, and the narratives. This is conveyed through the duration of their hanging within the exhibition; works deemed crucial to Southeast Asian art history must remain on view. The selection of canonical works is also thoroughly reinforced—from the exhibition display, exhibition catalogues, to marketing collateral (which are distributed throughout the exhibition). Apart from these two artists, it is

[113] Henceforth referred to as *Siapa.*
[114] In the two curatorial essays for the theme "Manifesting the Nation," there is no mention of Cheong Soo Pieng. As Cheong's painting does not clearly fit within the field of abstraction and realism, it is understandable that his painting is not mentioned.

unclear which other works were removed from display as well as the resultant effects. In this case, with the lack of mention in the two curatorial essays as well as the absence of Cheong's *Goats, Figures and Jugs*, the work is arguably insignificant to the exhibition's theme of "Manifesting the Nation: 1950s to 1970s" which sought to identify a regional commonality across Southeast Asian artists who were interested in the formation of national identity. Thus, within this exhibition narrative, one may deduce that Cheong was not as invested as his Southeast Asian contemporaries in this search, and his work *Goats, Figures and Jugs* was a portrayal of his Malayan landscape informed by his Western and Eastern art education; his concern in making the artwork thus lay with its technique, style, and subject matter, rather than an overarching message of nationalistic identity. To add, the overall lack of Singapore artists and works presented in these sections of the gallery resulted in a gap within the engaging dialogue and connections that are drawn between works of various Southeast Asian countries, especially so since the exhibition aims to present a large overarching picture.

In *Reframing Modernism,* the NGS highlighted six works of Cheong Soo Pieng as anchors of Singapore's art history and by extension Southeast Asian art history. Produced in the 1950s, the works mark the transition in Cheong's oeuvre following his seminal trip to Bali with other Nanyang artists. Cheong's works were also prominently displayed in the layout and hung in their own separate section of the exhibition. Six of the artists' works were shown, comprising three oil paintings: *Malay Woman*, *Tend Cows*, and *Untitled ("Puppet Maker")*, and three works on paper: *Untitled ("Backyard 2")*, *Untitled ("Study of Dance Postures")*, and *Untitled ("Dayak with Tattoos Smoking")*. Following Cheong's trip to Bali with fellow artists Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi in 1952, the artist found new subject-matter to depict as he continued his exploration in styles. Scott claimed that this

trip was not a watershed moment for Cheong, unlike his peers, as the artist had already established "formal idiom[s]" prior.[115]

Fig. 4. Cheong Soo Pieng, *Malay Woman,* 1950. Oil on board, 49 x 39 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Cheong's *Malay Woman* marked the turning point of Cheong's oeuvre before his works took on a strong Cubist style. The artist's initial exploration with Cubism is manifested through the distortion of figurative forms evident in this work.[116] *Malay Woman* was completed prior to his trip to Bali, and before he started extensively applying a Cubist style to the figures and landscape of Malaya later. In *Malay Woman,* a portrait of a woman is divided into multiple planes by diagonal lines which span the entire canvas, with each plane

[115] Phoebe Scott, "Cheong Soo Pieng," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 71.
[116] Anissa Rahadiningtyas, "Tracing the Foreign Channel and Influence: Cheong Soo Pieng and Modern Art in Singapore," *Mellon Curatorial Practicum* (blog), May 4, 2014, https://curatorialpracticum.wordpress.com/2014/05/04/tracing-the-foreign-channel-and-influence-cheong-soo-pieng-and-modern-art-in-singapore/.

undergoing a different treatment in colour by Cheong. The artist's interest in composition is also visually expressed here, as the work's diagonal lines intersect the shorter diagonal lines originating from the woman's body. Cheong elongates and emphasises the length of her arms, hence the lines that demarcate her body also serves to divide the canvas, adding a sense of dynamism in the work.

Fig. 5. Cheong Soo Pieng, *Tend Cows,* 1951. Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 71.2 cm. Donated by Singapore Totalisator Board, Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

In *Tend Cows*, Cheong depicts a domestic scene representative of Singapore's cattle industry during the 1950s. Rendered in a Cubist style, the composition is segregated into three different sections with the use of strong juxtaposing colour. In the foreground of the oil painting, the work comprises a kneeling human figure on the left and two cows in the middle which dominate the canvas. The rounded back of the man echoes the humps of the cows' backs, and Cheong traces a line across the canvas in a darker colour, separating the cows and

human figure from the surroundings in the back. This gentle curve peaks in the middle at the cow's sharp horns. In the bottom right corner, a hard-edged fence interrupts the sinuous curves of the figures; rendered in swatches of red, blue, and green, it draws attention away from the main figures with its greater use of colour. In the background, a female figure in a blue top and red skirt is hunched over with a bucket in hand. The environment of a man-made compound with fences that surround the cows and a neighbour in the background thus suggests that this scene is taking place in a more densely populated area, such as a shophouse.

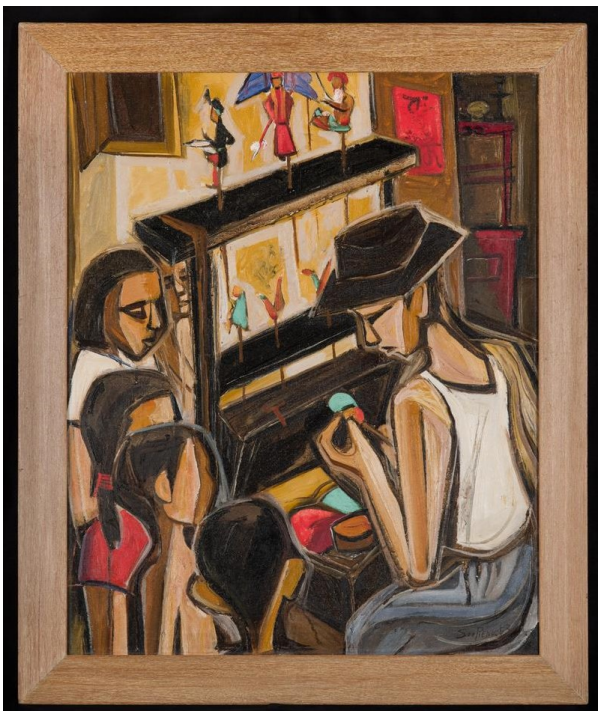
Cheong produced *Tend Cows* after *Indian Men with Two Cows* (1949), and both artworks are similarly composed of the same subject matter but rendered in two different styles. Not included in the exhibition *Reframing Modernism, Indian Men with Two Cows* suggests the identity of an Indian-Muslim man in *Tend Cows,* since he is similarly attired, wearing only a red *sarong* tied around the waist, and a hat that resembles a *songkok* due to its height and angular shape.[117] While it is unclear if the hat is in actuality a *songkok,* the Indian-Muslim community which settled in Little India may be traced from 1890 since the opening of the Anguilla Mosque. Therefore, in Cheong's *Tend Cows,* he captures a slice of the local Singapore landscape, specifically that of Indian-Muslims who worked in the cattle industry; a trade so ubiquitous in Little India that the names of roads were made with this reference.

Cheong's *Tend Cows* is a prominent example of a synthesis between Western and Chinese influence rendered in oil painting, which art historian Redza Piyadasa remarked as the most interesting contribution of treatment to modern paintings in Malaya. Piyadasa summarised three distinct modes of treatment that the Nanyang artists utilised in his writings about the Nanyang artists in the 1960s:

[117] A *sarong* refers to a long piece of garment wrapped around the body and tucked at the waist or under the armpits, traditionally worn in Southeast Asia by both women and men.

(1) a straight-forward "western" approach in oils which reveal the influence of the School of Paris i.e. reflecting Post-Impressionist, Fauvist and, even Cubist influences; (2) a straightforward "Chinese" approach using Chinese inks and rice paper and exploiting calligraphic qualities; and, lastly (3) a synthesis of "western" and "Chinese" influences through the use of oils on canvas.[118]

Therefore, Cheong's decision to depict the same subject matter but in two different styles are testament to his mastery and exploration with various techniques and styles. The stylised forms in *Indian Men with Two Cows* reflects his education in ink painting where his concern lay with pictorial composition in dividing the painting,[119] while *Tend Cows* displays an experimentation with the effects of oil in impasto, demonstrated in the textures on the body of the cows and man.



[118] Redza Piyadasa, *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan Dalam Seni Moden Malaysia, 1930-1981* [*The Treatment of the Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art, 1930 – 198*] (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1981), 32.
[119] Kian Chow Kwok, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: National Heritage Board: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 43.

Fig. 6. Cheong Soo Pieng, *[Not Titled] (Puppet Maker),* 1952. Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. Donated by Loke Wan Tho, Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Completed in 1952, Cheong's *Puppet Maker* is another example of his exploration in applying a cubistic style to depictions of local Singapore scenes. In *Puppet Maker,* a puppet maker sits at his desk making puppets, while a group of children are huddled around him. Careful attention by Cheong is accorded in the brushstrokes on the man's skin, his use of different shades and multiple lines creating a sense of movement. In the background, a swatch of yellow fills most of the canvas, with the only details a window to the left and to the right a small red banner with mandarin characters affixed onto a pillar. The empty background and the use of a limited palette keeps the emphasis centred on the figures and their activities. Puppet making by street vendors was a common sight in Singapore's Chinatown, and the red banner is a further detail of the scene's location. For Scott, the work *Puppet Maker* reflected Cheong's concern for keen observations of the vernacular; though the facial features of the figures are stylised, the puppet-maker's craft and environment are conveyed clearly.[120] *Puppet Maker* is hence another prime example of Cheong's experimentation in Western and Chinese techniques which he brought across through depicting scenes of the Singapore locale.

These three works by Cheong highlight the significance of the Nanyang style in Singapore and Southeast Asia, as it also captured the diversity of the region. Furthermore, the three chosen paintings depict the three main ethnicities in Singapore, representing Singapore's position as a regional centre where people from multiple ethnicities settled. Piyadasa noted that the Nanyang artists' commitment to depicting motifs and subject-matter found in their Malayan surroundings was especially important as it began "a more complex

[120] Scott, "Cheong Soo Pieng," 73.

search for directions within the context of artistic activity in Malaya and also projected questions about cultural identity that still continue to haunt our polyglot society."[121] Thus, the Nanyang artists' approach of depicting local subject matter through a hybrid of East-West techniques and styles resulted in an amalgam particular to Malaya, reflecting "considerations that were peculiar to a group of Chinese artists attempting to arrive at modern art productions that were linked to the place itself."[122]

In terms of exhibition hanging as well as in the curatorial essay, the treatment of Cheong was different from other artists. In the catalogue, while other artists' examples from the exhibition illustrated new schools of thought pertaining to Modernism in terms of individual artists' adaption of Cubism and Abstraction, the artists in Gallery 1 (where the works of Cheong Soo Pieng were exhibited) were chosen for their indefatigability of "a picturesque aesthetic within their modernism," with some embodying "a sense of cosmopolitanism."[123] The key concern here is thus the "cosmopolitanism"—the assertion of the artist's biography in traveling to multiple places, gaining experience and exposure to diverse styles and techniques which ultimately served to enhance the artist's talent and visual vocabulary as he became privy to cultural influences of other regions. The "cosmopolitan" artist is well-travelled and knowledgeable about art beyond his own environs; art from other parts of the world are available for his observation and adaptation. This emphasis on cosmopolitanism displays a shift from the format of placing Southeast Asian and European works side by side for comparison.

In her essay, Scott used the framework of French Modernism to identify manifested stylistic features in the works of Cheong Soo Pieng. Prior to his move to Singapore, Cheong Soo Pieng studied art in Xiamen, China, but had also received a Western art education. The

[121] Piyadasa, *The Treatment of the Local Landscape,* 31-32.
[122] Piyadasa, *The Treatment of the Local Landscape*, 172.
[123] Horikawa and Scott, introduction to *Reframing Modernism,* 17.

Xiamen Academy of Fine Art boasted a faculty of diverse backgrounds, which included teachers who had returned from their studies in France. French stylistic influences were flexed across Chinese, Japanese, and even Filipino art education systems, creating a "visual toolkit detached from their original context of production" to be "used freely, reinterpreted, and mixed."[124] In the works of Cheong, Scott noticed a shift across various influences that can be detected even in works produced in close duration—from one influenced by Paul Gauguin to a loosely cubistic style. Bearing in mind that artists like Cheong conceived the image of an idyllic village life, Scott pointed out that it is worth examining how far the Nanyang painters took on a "Gauguinist-type paradigm of primitivism when figuring the people of Southeast Asia," especially those from Bali.[125] Therefore, the role of Western art education in Cheong's art oeuvre not only bore an impact on the techniques and style of his work, but could also be seen in his choice of subject matter, where an exotic other—in the form of Bali and the Balinese—provided a canvas for which his migrant identity and new environment could be expressed.

Cheong has been singled out by art historian Piyadasa as the "innovator of several of the subsequent 'formulae' that became associated with the [NAFA]."[126] Writing about Cheong, the artist-curator-historian Redza Piyadasa observed that the artist, along with his peers Chen Wen-Hsi, Georgette Chen, and Chen Chong Swee had received art-training in "Beaux-Arts type art academies in the larger cities of Shanghai, Canton and Amoy" before they arrived in Singapore.[127] This meant exposure to both Western modernist art tendencies such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism as well as traditional

[124] Phoebe Scott, "Towards an Unstable 'Centre': Paris Modernism Encountered, Refracted and Diffused," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 25.
[125] Scott, "Towards an Unstable 'Centre,'" 25.
[126] Piyadasa, *The Treatment of the Local Landscape,* 32.
[127] Piyadasa, 31.

Chinese painting; the Eastern and Western artistic influences subsequently synthesised by the artists to create an eclectic outlook.[128]

Similar to how Paris as an art centre had far-reaching impacts in Southeast Asia, NAFA in Singapore also had a comparable effect through the region. Both Piyadasa and Sabapathy recalled that NAFA played a significant role in the formation of "a particular and localised development of modern art within the region and one with relevance *to and for the region."*[129] Lim Hak Tai, who was the founding principal at the Xiamen Academy of Fine Art in 1923, set up NAFA in 1938. He was credited for having a deep understanding of Singapore's cultural and social background of that time, installing a name for the school that encapsulated the region as a distinct entity yet maintaining a connection to China. As a founder of NAFA, he encouraged artists to focus on the "reality of the 'Southern Seas'" in style and subject.[130] His role as art educator was also critical, his six directives for Nanyang art continuing to deeply influence Singaporean and Malaysian art communities even today.[131] At the end of World War Two, the school reopened and saw increased enrolment with almost 40 percent foreign and non-Chinese students from Southeast Asia.[132] Cheong's role in NAFA was thus highlighted *in Reframing Modernism* as part of the school's legacy, and by extension, the importance Singapore played in the region.

Therefore, the NGS's curatorial strategy of formulating the regional narrative to serve Singapore's national narrative is revealed through the analysis of Nguyen Gia Tri's and Cheong Soo Pieng's works in *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism.* The NGS's exhibitions and publications have contributed significantly to the documentation and the

[128] Piyadasa, 31
[129] Michelle Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art After 1990* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 13. Emphasis is Antoinette's.
[130] Scott, "Towards an Unstable 'Centre,'" 24.
[131] Zhen Min Ong, "A History of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts: 1938-1990" (Master's Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2006), 89.
[132] Wei Khuan Chia, "Lim Hak Tai," in *Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary (2 Volumes)*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 625.

display of modern Southeast Asian art. While this is a laudable contribution, the issue of the NGS's version lies with the emphasis on specific parts of the artists' careers that serve Singapore's overall goal of propagating its own national narrative. The NGS's resultant modern Southeast Asian art historical narrative has a beginning located in colonial presence in the region – specifically in Western art education of its artists – from schools founded by foreigners (i.e. Nguyen Gia Tri's enrolment at EBAI), or through a Western art education received elsewhere (i.e. Cheong Soo Pieng's education in China). This narrative overshadows the contribution of Nguyen to the Vietnamese art scene in other areas, such as his depiction of the political struggles at that time and his active involvement in political groups. Nguyen contributed cartoons and illustrations which satirised foreign and colonial involvement to the newspapers *Ngay nay* and *Phong hoa.*[133]

In addition, within the NGS's regional narrative of Cheong Soo Pieng as a Nanyang artist of Singapore, he is given a cosmopolitan identity that underscores Singapore's vision as a centre for Southeast Asia in terms of trade and culture. Singapore was the beacon of modern Southeast Asian art development as its artists were mobile and its art school, NAFA, which Cheong taught at, welcomed students across the region and was positioned as a regional intellectual locus. Hence, the role of the NGS as arbiter of modern Southeast Asian art must be read in consideration of its mission as Singapore's national gallery as well, and these tensions are observed through the reading of its exhibitions.

Furthermore, the NGS establishes Nguyen's contribution to lacquer painting and Cheong's vital role in the Nanyang artist movement as the cornerstones of the NGS's institutional narrative of modern Southeast Asian art history. By including Nguyen and Cheong as well as the key developments they are recognised for, the NGS as an art institution

[133] See Phoebe Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist: Modernity, Agency and the Discourse of Art in North Vietnam, 1925-1954" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

stakes its ownership of the cultural narrative of Southeast Asia. The NGS has thus become the producer of a regional narrative, selecting key portions of its neighbouring countries' art history to place within it.

Chapter Three
A New Regional Narrative for Southeast Asia

As the world's only modern Southeast Asian art museum, the NGS's involvement in staging large-scale exhibitions, frequent educational programming and production of publications has endowed its regional narrative with a greater voice and reach. This led to the NGS's new regional narrative with Singapore established as the core of Southeast Asia. This has become the dominant narrative of modern Southeast Asian art. In Southeast Asian art historical scholarship, the issue of the regional against the national narrative has been an active discussion; the very grouping of a "Southeast Asian" art in light of the tensions between its member countries has been a main point of contention. As discussed in the Introduction, multiple Southeast Asian art exhibitions have attempted their own curatorial narratives which strive towards striking a balance between the regional and national. However, the NGS's efforts and impact have been outstanding due to the large amount of dedicated resources used to sustain the museum's activities over a long period of time. This chapter will consider the NGS's narrative through exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism,* examining how the NGS has written this new regional art historical narrative that begins in nineteenth century colonialism with Singapore at its centre.

The NGS's regional reading of Southeast Asia's identity presents a problematic structure for understanding the development of modern Southeast Asian art histories. Specifically, its generation of a regional narrative in service of Singapore's national agenda erases existing divergences in Southeast Asian modernism(s) for an iteration that runs alongside Singapore's national narrative. These issues are located in the curatorial strategies, made visible through the exhibition design and accompanying texts which lead to the resulting audience experience. These aspects of the exhibition were significant as they

communicated the exhibition themes, as well as the overarching regional and Singapore-centric narrative that the NGS proposed. Nora Taylor has detailed the impact that the NGS's exhibitions have on modern Southeast Asian art history:

> In establishing the [NGS] under the premise of telling the story of Southeast Asian art, museum officials are inevitably trying, consciously or not, to set a standard. The choices that they make in terms of selection, display, interpretation, and exhibition design will be regarded and judged as producing art history.[134]

Therefore, the NGS's role as the leading proponent of the regional narrative has established the institution as a key contributor to the future of modern Southeast Asian art history.

In this situation where a regional perspective is attempted across an extensive field of meanings, the NGS has been a major author in writing the art history narratives of the region. The opening essay for the catalogue of *Between Declarations* sets the stage for a regional narrative by quoting art historian T.K. Sabapathy's urgent call for a regional perspective: "Art writing by Southeast Asians have developed along lines circumscribed by national boundaries […] a glaring consequence of this is the absence of a regional outlook."[135] Therefore, the domination of the "nation-based framework" observed by Sabapathy in 1996 has continued to prevail. In the absence of a regional approach, the NGS aimed to fill this void by positioning itself as the first ever museum dedicated to Southeast Asian art where "the public will be surprised to see the depth, the richness and diversity of art that has been produced in the region," as stated by museum director Eugene Tan.[136] The NGS curators

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[134] Nora A. Taylor, "Introduction: Who Speaks for Southeast Asian Art," in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly, Studies on Southeast Asia 56 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publ., Cornell Univ, 2012), 6.
[135] T.K. Sabapathy, introduction to *Modernity and Beyond*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 8, quoted in Lisa Horikawa, introduction to *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*, ed. Sze Wee Low (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 9–10.
[136] Hilary Whiteman, "10 Years On, National Gallery Singapore Opens," CNN, November 25, 2015, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/national-gallery-singapore/index.html.

Eugene Tan, Phoebe Scott, and Lisa Horikawa worked on both exhibitions and have been significant contributors to the exhibitionary texts.

To contextualise the NGS's regional approach, it is vital to consider other comparative approaches to curating Southeast Asian art. There are three commonly cited approaches towards exhibitions that present modern Southeast Asian art, from the reviewed literature on Southeast Asian art history. While these are not the only approaches available, a beginning comparison of these three approaches aids in a preliminary understanding of Southeast Asian art exhibitions and the inter-exhibition relationships that exist relative to one another.

The first approach involves the curating of exhibitions which look at Southeast Asian modernism(s) within individual countries. Niranjan Rajah stated that the different reigns and practices of colonial powers in Southeast Asia have led to barriers between countries, as Southeast Asian nations modernised independently in relative isolation from its neighbours.[137] The modernism(s) of each Southeast Asian nation are hence different, warranting a scholarly approach of looking at single movements. An exhibition following this approach would demarcate each country through clear labels and are usually accompanied by a brief overview of each country's history. Each country's section could potentially standalone as a single exhibition, since it encapsulates a single nation-state. This approach is usually complemented by an introduction or conclusion that brings all member countries together, and an example would be the exhibitions led by ASEAN before 2003.

Adding to this, the second approach of Southeast Asian exhibitions is a focus on local modernism(s), and not to use Euramerican modernism as a yardstick for comparison across or within nations. Rajah cautioned against the perspective of a "spread of some homogenous and

[137] Niranjan Rajah, "Towards a Southeast Asian Paradigm: From Distinct National Modernisms to an Integrated Regional Arena for Art," in *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-East Asian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy, Niranjan Rajah, and Patrick D. Flores (Singapore: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (Singapore), Singapore Art Museum, 2002), 29.

'international' modernism"[138] which Taylor supported, stating that the act of defining modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art as derivative of or as a reaction against Western art missed the point.[139] This second approach comprised an outlook that examined local, individual modernism(s) as unique developments within each nation-state, and is vastly different from the history of Euramerican modernism. The suitability of this approach is reinforced by Southeast Asian modern art historian Yin Ker who, on the topic of utilising Western art methodology, has written:

> Western art was however only one amidst a host of competing artistic references, each negotiating the boundaries of its *modi operandi* in relation to those of others in the genesis of modern Southeast Asian art. Critical enquiry into its complex genealogy hence demands more than the indiscriminate adoption of Western art history's theoretical tools.[140]

Furthermore, Ker noted that the use of Euramerican art historical model in writing the narratives of modern Southeast Asian art has been underway for the past twenty-five year[141] –while it did provide headway into writing the region's art history, its continual employment without nuanced study is limiting.[142]

The third approach to curating Southeast Asian art follows a more cohesive understanding of the region through an approach of locating connections across Southeast Asian nation-states. This approach is identified by a recognition of shared key loci within artists' biographies—places of education and residency, formal and informal relationships and groups, and wider spheres of cultural influence noted in artists' statements. Taylor argued that "the art is in the exchange" and Southeast Asian art should be studied through its

[138] Rajah, "Towards a Southeast Asian Paradigm," 29.
[139] Taylor, introduction to *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art,* 3.
[140] Yin Ker, "Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond," in Artl@s Bulletin 5, no. 2 (2016): Article 2, 8-9.
[141] Ker, 8.
[142] Ker, 9.

networks, moving the discussion "beyond national borders and re-thinking thematically across geographical lines."[143] In many ways then, this approach might be the closest to a trans-national reading that takes into consideration the exchanges, flows and connections before and beyond the colonising boundaries of modern Southeast Asian countries.

Of the three approaches, the stated framework by the NGS for curating the two case study exhibitions falls within the third of thematising the region. Both exhibitions claimed to chart a regional modernism where shared similarities across Southeast Asia were the driving force of the displays. Both of the exhibitions' messaging also clearly rejected the first and second approaches; steering away from the development of modernism within individual countries (i.e. the first approach) and delving into a discussion dependent on Euramerican modernism. Though the NGS has claimed that it takes a Southeast Asian approach to modernism that did not adhere to Western modernism as the comparative model, this privileging of Western art and modernism is still observed in *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*.

An analysis of the NGS's goals as an institution provides a contextual background to its curatorial approaches for their exhibitions. This delicate balance of representing Singapore and Southeast Asia was previously foregrounded in a discussion organised by the Institute of Policy Studies with the NGS in 2010. Then director of the NGS, Kwok Kian Chow, during the discussion "Southeast Asia via Singapore: Musings on a New Museum," brought two questions to the floor: why Southeast Asia in the first place and how might museums discuss the relationship between Singapore ("the subjective") and Southeast Asian art history (the intended art display). He observed that the (Singapore) museum's role was to map the

[143] Taylor, introduction to *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art,* 21.

"national" while curating a national gallery in relation to Southeast Asia—and in doing so, unfurled diverse layers of what "Southeast Asia" meant.[144]

One of the discussants in the programme, Goh Beng Lan, Associate Professor from the Department of Southeast Asian Studies in National University of Singapore, offered some suggestions for the museum. She acknowledged two "conceptual dilemmas": first, in undertaking the project of presenting Southeast Asian art in Singapore and in a Singapore national museum no less; and second, the conundrum of modern art being part of the Western narrative and thus framing the way we understand modern art of Southeast Asia. Goh proposed a posture of interrogating modern art and modernism beyond mainstream Western knowledge—looking at connections prior to the onset of Western modernity where "regional artistic practices were embedded in the Chinese, Islamic, and Indian civilisational networks."[145] Without this posture of looking beyond the Western narrative, a constant comparison between Southeast Asian and Western modernism would present a shortfall of subsuming the development of modern Southeast Asian art under the guise of European colonialism, an "epoch characteristic" that has given rise to a constant need to look towards colonial masters (an inferiority later rejected following the independence of Southeast Asian nations),[146] referred to as a "filter of colonialism" by Antoinette.[147] In *Reframing Modernism,* where the exhibition's primary concern was a presentation of Southeast Asia modernism without reliance on the Western narrative, a reflexive acknowledgement of colonialism and an impetus to look beyond should have been examined.

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[144] Simin Tan and Adele Tan, "Institute of Policy Studies CDD: Southeast Asia via Singapore: Musings on a New Museum" (Faculty of Law: National University of Singapore, August 17, 2010), 2, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/cdd_southeast-asia-via-singapore_010910_report.pdf.
[145] Tan and Tan, "Institute of Policy Studies," 3.
[146] Kevin Chua, "On Teaching Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art," in *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 469.
[147] Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History*, 18.

Kwok also mentioned Goh's earlier comments from a previous workshop in 2009, where she suggested a possibility "to consider cultural history as a parallel history of modernity in Southeast Asia," citing the example of Indonesian artist Raden Saleh whose works elucidated strands of tension between the colonial and nationalist. In his presentation, Kwok further suggested that the existing Western art history framework is insufficient and should be complemented by other disciplines such as history and sociology, acknowledging artistic flows within the region, such as the connections between Manila, Xiamen, and Singapore.[148]

Though these frameworks were eventually not undertaken for the two case-study exhibitions, I have included them here to discuss the alternative approaches the NGS might have chosen. The trajectory of exhibiting modern Southeast Asian art is not an uncharted course, and a number of different approaches are easily discernible in the discourse surrounding its exhibition history. The debates on presenting modern Southeast Asian art at the NGS have been ongoing since its inception and is set to continue as part of its mission; the opportunity for shifts in curatorial narratives and institutional agenda is hence also plausible in future.

3.1 Locating the Origins of Modern Southeast Asian Art History in Nineteenth Century Colonialism

The NGS's decision to define a starting point of modern art history that coincided with the era of colonialism across the entire region of Southeast Asia was an act of erasure that omitted unique and significant details about each country's art historical narrative. Although grouped as a region, Southeast Asian countries possess their own languages,

[148] Tan and Tan, "Institute of Policy Studies," 3.

cultures, and art histories; with varied responses to foreign presence, trade with other parts of Asia such as China and India and with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. The definition of modern art history in Southeast Asia is thus marked by disparate occurrences across the region over different time periods. Furthermore, colonialism, while an overall shared experience for many Southeast Asian countries, took on different forms. Colonisers ranged from the Spanish, the Dutch, the French to the British who each came with their distinct ways of language, governance and activities in their colonies. For Thailand, which was never colonised, its interaction with colonial powers was vastly different from other countries in Southeast Asia. Thus, to subsume the whole of modern Southeast Asian art under the umbrella of colonialism by concentrating on the main similarities leads to a vague understanding of the region.

Despite its stance of rewriting a Southeast Asian art narrative which originates within Southeast Asia, the NGS's narrative has nevertheless been modelled on the grand Western narrative of modern art history in its selection and display of Southeast Asian artworks. The NGS's narrative has privileged European influence in the beginnings of modern Southeast Asian art history—that Southeast Asian artists created art in response and as a reaction to the colonial powers within their countries and/or region (with the exception of Thailand). The narrative hence daringly marked the start of modern Southeast Asian art within the colonial history of Southeast Asia, a decision that is problematic as it situates Southeast Asian art history within the framework of Western art it claims to distinguish itself from.

The catalogue of *Between Declarations* set the historical context for the exhibition and laid out the museum's responsibilities and objectives in exhibiting modern Southeast Asian art. The introduction offered a broad summary of the term "Southeast Asia," the history and development of the term and how these discussions have led to the production of exhibitions. Co-curator Horikawa traced the term from its first usage as a geographical region

in maps created during the nineteenth century up until the more recent formation of the ASEAN of which there are ten countries that count as members.[149] Early exhibitions, art groups, writings, and "cultural exchange[s]" were also organised with the term "Southeast Asia" in its title.

Horikawa noted that even though artists and curators have referred to "ASEAN art" and "ASEAN aesthetics," Southeast Asian art exhibitions have continued to be built on national frameworks.[150] Citing two exhibitions as its predecessors, namely *Modernity and Beyond* (Singapore Art Museum, 1996) and *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia* (Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1997), *Between Declarations* was positioned as a response to these earlier exhibitions. Apart from a shift from the national in favour of a more regional framework, another key difference from these exhibitions was the decision to include the nineteenth century in the art historical narrative of *Between Declarations*:

> By acknowledging the 19th century as a critical juncture which signalled a tremendous change to the socio-political conditions and visual culture of the region, the display will further historicise and provide a concrete grounding to our understanding of the emergence of the modern.[151]

There is hence a clear trajectory of modern Southeast Asian art that the NGS charted from the nineteenth century. In the write-up by Scott for the first theme of the exhibition "Authority and Anxiety," she mentioned recorded instances of when a Bengali painter and a Filipino painter were recognised for their talent in Europe, symbolising the "sense of the representation of Southeast Asia to the world."[152] Much of Southeast Asia was colonised by

[149] Horikawa, introduction to *Between Declarations,* 8.
[150] Horikawa, 9.
[151] Horikawa, introduction to *Between Declarations,* 11.
[152] Scott, "Authority and Anxiety," 17.

different colonial powers, and the nineteenth century is significant for the exhibition as it was "substantially different from the colonial systems" dated earlier.[153]

The catalogue's text gave a straightforward explanation to why the exhibition's narrative of modern art begins with the colonial:

> Colonialism and modernity were not the same thing, but colonisation did bring a different system of values into close contact with the existing structures and local cultures of Southeast Asia. To the extent that "the modern" is understood in terms of a conceptual break with the past, the environment of change and uncertainty created by this interaction can be seen as the beginning of a modern condition.[154]

Thus, the starting point for modern Southeast Asian art history is posited to begin with the start of colonialism, and this starting point differs greatly from previously discussed definitions of modern Southeast Asian art in Chapter One. Even in countries that were not colonialised, such as Thailand, Scott argued that "its rulers initiated major changes that must be understood in the context of the colonial threat."[155] The first theme of the exhibition was thus aptly named "Authority and Anxiety"—as Southeast Asia grappled with the anxiety of being under colonial authority and strove to regain a sense of agency.[156]

Bearing in mind that the NGS aims to be Southeast Asia's art museum and hosts the largest public collection of Southeast Asian art, the exhibition *Between Declarations* was not only significant for how extensive the show is, but doubly so for the new regional narrative it attempted to (re)write. In a recent interview dated March 2018, the NGS's director Eugene Tan shared that "the collection and research […] take the 19th century as a key turning point for art in Southeast Asia, precisely because it was the era of colonialism and most countries came under colonial rule. There is a real change in the understanding of what art is, and art

[153] Scott, 17.
[154] Scott, 17.
[155] Scott, 19.
[156] Scott, "Authority and Anxiety," 20.

production, and hence what we have come to understand as the beginnings of modern art in Southeast Asia."[157]

To comment on the exhibition narrative and provide a better understanding of how it was framed, this paragraph will briefly elaborate with a few examples. The exhibition started in Gallery 1 which aimed to present the Southeast Asian environment before the production of modern art paintings became more common and achieves this through the display historical artefacts such as archival maps and photographs, traditional crafts such as textiles, as well as illustrations which depicted the living environment. The visitor then sees the anchor of Gallery 2, the impressively large *Borschbrand* (Forest Fire) (1849), an oil on canvas painting by Indonesian artist Raden Saleh (b. 1811–d. 1880). This work was also chosen as the main image for the exhibition—featured on many marketing materials and publications produced by the museum. Beside this hung the works of two Filipino artists: Juan Luna's *Spoliarium* (1884) and *Espana y Filipinas* (1884), and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo's *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* (Christian Virgins Exposed to the Populace) (1884).

In the catalogue, the three artists were drawn in comparison through their similar experiences of studying abroad in Europe and receiving European accolades while they were there. The text also emphasised how the artists' achievements for their works in Europe created this sense of acclaim, that their Southeast Asian paintings were as good as the Europeans,' thereby equalising the subversive power dynamics through an acknowledgment of their mastery. However, Saleh achieved this at the cost of reiterating the Orientalist cliché of the East as "wild and primal," and Luna's two paintings highlighted the troubled position of the colonised subject with *Spoliarium* functioning as "an allegory of colonial oppression"

[157] Herbert Wight, "Eugene Tan of National Gallery Singapore: From Southeast Asia to Paris," *COBO Social*, March 14, 2018, https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/eugene-tan-from-southeast-asia-to-paris/.

while *Espana* "appreciated for its propaganda value for the colonial project."[158] Thus, *Between Declarations* marks its beginning in the experiences of Southeast Asian artists earning recognition for their artistic practice from colonial masters; it does, however also mention the instability of these artist's positions, since their freedom of expression were limited to the tastes and terms defined by their colonisers.

While press reviews of an exhibition are not definitive of its impact, they provide an understanding of how the general public perceived the exhibition. In this case, the mixed responses to the exhibition's opening gallery are telling. ArtReview's editor Mark Rappolt commented on Gallery 1's introduction:

> What's curious about this is that it announces the beginning of 'art' in the modern sense within the region as something specifically Western and essentially two-dimensional, with the added implication that whatever else was going on in Southeast Asia at the time wasn't art.[159]

The decision of locating modern Southeast Asian art in the region's history of colonialism hence brings forth a division between the traditional and the modern, with the transition and development insinuated to be brought about by the presence of "different" colonial systems of the nineteenth century. For art critic Helmi Yusof, "the combined victory of two Filipino artists over scores of Spanish artists helped create a radical shift in the mindset of nineteenth century Philippines: that Filipinos were as good as their European colonisers" and this "spurred the nationalist movement of the Philippines and culminated in its independence 14 years later."[160] This conclusion is implied in the accompanying wall text that stated how the painting was referred to in Chairil Anwar's poem *The Voice of the Night* (1943) as well as

[158] Scott, "Authority and Anxiety," 25-6.
[159] Mark Rappolt, "Between Declarations and Dreams / Siapa Nama Kamu?" *ArtReview Asia 4*, no. 1 (2016), https://artreview.com/reviews/ara_jan_2016_review_national_gallery_singapore_opening/.
[160] Helmi Yusof, "The Region's Story, Told through Art," *The Business Times*, October 30, 2015, https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/lifestyle/arts-entertainment/the-regions-story-told-through-art.

issued as a stamp in 1967 which transformed the work into a nationalist symbol; suggesting that the recognition from the colonial power was an impetus for the independence movement.

On the other hand, art critic Bharti Lalwani asked about the connections between the three paintings: "were these artists aware of one another at all, or of each other's aesthetic and social contexts? The museum does not provide information in this regard, nor are shared or contrasting traits evident in its specific selections."[161] The link between the artists' shared overseas education and international acclaim is thus a tenuous one that distracts from the modern underpinnings of these paintings. In the individual wall text for Raden Saleh's *Borschbrand* (Forest Fire), the same colonial recognition of the awards the artist received in Holland was reiterated. Therefore, this new regional narrative—that the NGS writes by situating modern Southeast Asian art from nineteenth century colonialism—renders recognition from the West as a focal point since it is the very marker for charting the development of modern Southeast Asian art.

This thesis does not pin the problematics of this regional narrative on the choice to begin modern Southeast Asian art history in the nineteenth century, but rather the excessive significance that it accords to the colonial powers that were in place at that time and how this presentation potentially discredits the Southeast Asian artists' ingenuity of expression and modern art development. The NGS's decision to mark the starting point in Southeast Asian art history during this period also coincides with other art historical and historical scholarship which examined the role of colonialism in describing and imagining Southeast Asia and do so without the privileging of the colonial masters. These include Sarah Tiffin's *Southeast Asia in Ruins: Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century* (2016), Farish Noor's *The Discursive*

[161] Bharti Lalwani, "Singapore's New National Gallery Dubiously Rewrites Southeast Asian Art History," *Hyperallergic*, February 1, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/271919/singapores-new-national-gallery-dubiously-rewrites-southeast-asian-art-history/.

Construction of Southeast Asia in 19th Century Colonial-Capitalist Discourse (2016), and Gareth Knapman's *Race and British Colonialism in Southeast Asia* (2016) respectively.

In fact, in the seminal text on Southeast Asian and Asian art *Eye of the Beholder: Reception, Audience, and Practice of Modern Asian Art* (2006), German art historian Werner Kraus's essay titled "First Steps to Modernity: The Javanese Painter Raden Saleh (1811–1880)" examined how the nationalist discourse was begun by Southeast Asian artists at an earlier time through the case study of Raden Saleh's *The Capture of Prince Diponegoro* (1857) and marked "the beginnings of modern art and modernity in Java."[162] Kraus located Saleh's practice in European historical painting and discussed the context of nineteenth century Europe but dedicated most of the essay elaborating on the subject-matter of Saleh's painting and how it was "among the first to introduce the topic of history and historical painting to Southeast Asian art."[163] Kraus concluded:

> The discussion of Saleh's *The Arrest of Diponegoro* proves that the beginning of modernity was not just a transfer of Euramerican ideas about art and the representation of the world to the East. This early example shows that the first productions of modernity were also strongly embedded in local cultural constructions. And here, I believe, we see a basic pattern that is not restricted to the beginnings of Indonesian modernity alone. Other Southeast Asian traditions—the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand—show similar developments.[164]

Thus, Kraus' close reading of Saleh's *Diponegoro* stated the importance of the European influences in the artist's life, be it through his experience in the environs of the coloniser, his education, as well as his travels, without diminishing the artist's own interest and intent in

[162] Werner Kraus, "First Steps to Modernity: The Javanese Painter Raden Saleh (1811-1880)," in *Eye of the Beholder: Reception, Audience, and Practice of Modern Asian Art*, ed. John Clark, Maurizio Peleggi, and T. K. Sabapathy, University of Sydney East Asian Series 15 (Sydney: Wild Peony, 2006), 30.
[163] Kraus, "First Steps," 52.
[164] Kraus, 52-3.

historical paintings and how his works came to be a critical starting point for Indonesia's modern art.

Therefore, the curatorial decision for the exhibition *Between Declarations* to begin in the nineteenth century, catalysed by the colonial systems of that period, skews the reading of modern Southeast Asian art history towards the colonial powers of that time and lessens the agency of the Southeast Asian artists. It has positioned the origin of the artists' nationalistic development within the framework of their colonial masters' legacy. In fact, the extent of the colonial presence is reasserted halfway through the exhibition in Gallery 4, where visitors are confronted by an abrupt insertion of paintings by European traveller-artists and how they viewed the exotic and sensual Southeast Asia, illustrated through idealistic paintings of women.[165]

This thread of colonialism continues in *Reframing Modernism.* Taking place from March to July 2016, *Reframing Modernism* was a significant breakthrough for the NGS. The first international collaboration for the museum, it placed a Singapore art institution side-by-side with the internationally renowned Centre Pompidou. The curatorial team consisted of Centre Pompidou curators Catherine David and Nicolas Liucci-Goutnikov, and the NGS curators Eugene Tan, Lisa Horikawa, and Phoebe Scott. The large-scale exhibition featured 51 artists from Europe and Southeast Asia and 217 artworks. About half of the artworks in the exhibition were on loan from the Centre Pompidou and the other half from various collections in the region and beyond.

The title of the exhibition *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond* encapsulates the NGS's message of changing the way modernism is understood—from a European perspective towards the rest of the world to one where

[165] Katrina Stuart Santiago, "The Art of SEA: Identity and Integration," *The Manila Times Online*, March 26, 2016, https://www.manilatimes.net/the-art-of-sea-identity-and-integration/252286/.

Singapore becomes the centre of the Southeast Asian regional narrative. This tension between Western and Southeast Asian modernisms was the main concern highlighted in the exhibition catalogue. In the catalogue's first essay, the curators began by introducing some of the challenges faced and the solutions and methodologies they devised to overcome them. For Horikawa and Scott, who wrote on behalf of all curators involved, one concern was not to curate according to "shared stylistic rubrics" since this might lead to a repeated privileging of the West as the origin of all modernist styles. Indeed, this is something which the curators cited as an issue that the exhibition *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues* (2005) faced.[166]

The curators' communication followed an artist-centric approach with curators from the NGS initiating the discussion. They nominated a list of Southeast Asian artists to Centre Pompidou's curators who then selected artists from their collection whose practice resonated with the Southeast Asian artists' concerns. There was hence an explicit effort to make the works of Southeast Asian artists the origin of the discussion, with artists from the West chosen as a response.

However, while the merits of a partnership that brought valuable and significant artworks from the collection of the Centre Pompidou to a Singaporean and Southeast Asian audience was laudable, it also set an uneasy stage reminiscent of the unequal relationship between the West and the Orient. A visual presentation of acclaimed Western masters beside lesser-known Southeast Asian artists prompts a search for disparity between the two, a constant comparison of the perceived original and its adapted results. An arrangement of comparing between the West and Southeast Asia has been criticised by Tagore, whose founding of Santiniketan was positioned against British colonial education and strove to

[166] Horikawa and Scott, introduction to *Reframing Modernism*, 10.

provide a comprehensive education "based on the redefinition of modernity."[167] Tagore had stated:

> To be modern was defined as a fully autonomous state distinct from the acquisition of appurtenances of the Western world: one needs not and must not imitate the West to be modern.[168]

The visual arrangement of exhibiting modern Western paintings beside those from Southeast Asia thus creates a preliminary hurdle—the curators, in writing the exhibition texts and in considering the exhibition hanging, had to first overcome the perpetuated hierarchy of the West supremacy in art history. While this was an issue that the curatorial team wished to confront (as laid out through the methodology and framework), this premise was not necessary for a meaningful presentation of modern Southeast Asian art.

In fact, this visual relationship in *Reframing Modernism* would most likely have been faced with opposition from the Burmese artist, Bagyi Aung Soe (b. 1924, Myanmar), also featured in the exhibition, who remarked: "When someone calls me the Burmese version of Picasso, it really hurts. I would rather be hit in the face. To be compared to Picasso is the worst insult."[169] For Aung Soe, the comparison to Picasso was "likely interpreted as a subjugation of his artistic sovereignty and distinction."[170] Aung Soe's experience at Santiniketan was a transformative experience, for his favour of Western art and initial desire to study in Europe or North America was replaced by a perspective that appreciated and took pride in traditions specific to the locals.[171] In *Reframing Modernism,* the works of Bagyi Aung Soe are exhibited in the same gallery as Pablo Picasso, whose works are featured at the entrance. Though not displayed side by side, with artworks by the renowned modern artist

[167] Ker, "Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art," 12.
[168] Ker, 13.
[169] Bagyi Aung Soe, written communication with Sonny Nyein, Yangon, c. 1985, quoted in Ker, "Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art," 13.
[170] Ker, "Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art," 13.
[171] Ker, 13.

Picasso displayed at the very front of the gallery, the beginning point for the narrative of modernism is physically established for each visitor, starting with Picasso and followed by other artists including Aung Soe.

On the other hand, the issue of presenting colonial recognition as a hallmark of modern Southeast Asian art's success was aptly critiqued in curator Horikawa's catalogue essay for *Reframing Modernism*. Titled "The Nativist Impulse in Modernism: Case Studies from Multiple Centres," Horikawa explained that the aspiration for a local modernism—explored through the terms "nativist," "primitivist," "folk," and "vernacular"—often induced a tension between "Self and the Other in the course of the consumption and reception of artworks."[172] The first example Horikawa cited was Galo B. Ocampo's *Brown Madonna* (1938), which depicts the conventional theme of Madonna and Child through local, Filipino figures instead of Caucasians. When the work was first exhibited in 1938, it drew criticism, but was later affirmed by Mons. Joseph Billiet, Apostolic Prefect of the Mountain Province who praised it and encouraged "further artistic efforts to represent religious subjects in the mould of the native mind."[173] Horikawa noted that "the affirmation of the nativising effort of a Filipino artist by the non-indigenous Catholic priest mirrors the colonial condition in which artists like Galo B. Ocampo operated, whereby the Self is acclaimed through affirmation by the Other."[174]

Hence, even though Southeast Asian artists longed for a modernism of their own—evoked in this case through Ocampo's proclamation of the Filipino identity—the dependence, awareness, and significance accorded to recognition from colonial, Caucasian figures were

[172] Lisa Horikawa, "The Nativist Impulse in Modernism: Case Studies from Multiple Centres," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 65.
[173] Furusawa Yuria, "Brown Madonna Painting by Galo Ocampo: Its Early History and Possibility of Retouch," presented at the 2015 International Summer School for Doctoral Researchers on the Philippines at the Ateneo de Manila University from 26 to 29 July 2015, quoted in Horikawa, "The Nativist Impulse in Modernism," 67.
[174] Horikawa, "The Nativist Impulse in Modernism," 67.

still inherently substantial in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, and influential in the development of modern Southeast Asian art. In short, the Southeast Asian "self" was always and only ever derived by way of an affirmation from the colonial "other."

Furthermore, Ocampo's work was later chosen as the cover for a magazine published by the Japanese Propaganda Section during the Occupation, utilised as a unifying tool by the new colonial masters against the old.[175] Ocampo's *Brown Madonna* (1938) was exhibited in India, Japan, and the US, suggesting further instances of negotiation of creating an "other." The NGS's role in perpetuating the need for colonial recognition through its emphasis in its curatorial strategies and texts is thus further problematic. Though highlighted as an issue in this catalogue essay for *Reframing Modernism,* the NGS's very employment of this approach in *Between Declarations* is a key feature.

To a lesser extent, the continuation of the colonial narrative was present in the artists' biographies through an emphasis on their respective art academies and the curriculum that was founded by colonial administrators and transplanted Western schools of thought. Scott traced how the Beaux-Arts model of the School of Paris was foundational to NAFA in Singapore and EBAI in Vietnam. These institutions became new centres of modernism in Southeast Asia. Scott noted that the acknowledgement of certain stylistic features of French modernism was still necessary. These features became "prestigious signifiers of the modern" in Southeast Asia, and/or were integrated with local aesthetic practices.[176] However, Scott's assessment was even-handed, setting up the significance of the artists' educational background as a prelude to their individual development and impact on modern Southeast Asian art.

[175] Horikawa, 67.
[176] Scott, "Authority and Anxiety," 19.

Therefore, in *Reframing Modernism,* an acuity of colonialism's impact was observed in instances where a balanced approach was sought in separating the achievements of modern Southeast Asian artists from direct Western impulses. However, the premise of hanging artworks from the West together with those from Southeast Asia present a hurdle for the exhibition's stated goal, since visitors begin with the starting point of knowing and understanding Western modernism before Southeast Asian modernism—the result of a visual comparison achieved through the hanging is a constant identification of areas in the Southeast Asian artworks that mimic or seem derivative of the Western masterpieces which hang beside it.

3.2 Southeast Asia as a Homogenous Region?

In the NGS's regional narrative, Southeast Asia is presented as a homogenous collective; modern Southeast Asian art is hence identifiable through the characteristics that the NGS has highlighted. Across the diverse countries in this region, the NGS has selected commonalities as characteristics of regional Southeast Asian art. The NGS thus aimed to present a unilateral understanding of modern Southeast Asian art; selecting and displaying artworks which demonstrate these characteristics, and then identifying these works as canons in Southeast Asian art history through its exhibitions. Two features of the NGS's proposed regional narrative are: one, situating modern Southeast Asian art in colonialism and two, a Southeast Asian modernism built on comparisons to Western modernism. From this narrative of colonialism as the starting point, the NGS identifies similarities across Southeast Asian countries: the direct outcome of colonisation in terms of activities in Southeast Asian countries (i.e. the setting up of schools by foreign teachers), the struggle for independence against colonialism, and the rise of nationalism pre and post-independence.

In *Between Declarations,* these regional commonalities were communicated through the exhibition's four themes: "Authority and Anxiety," "Imagining Country and Self," "Manifesting the Nation," and "Re:Defining Art." The four themes marked a trajectory of modern Southeast Asian art through colonialism and independence, where art in Southeast Asian countries was produced because of colonial presence in the form of art education (in the example of EBAI), and later as a response against foreign presence, as a reaction based on a need to articulate and create national identity.

The homogenising of Southeast Asia by the NGS has created a main narrative which excluded alternative histories. For one, only Southeast Asian artists and artworks which fulfil the criteria of the above commonalities were exhibited within the NGS's narrative. Also, this led to an omission of aspects in artists' practices which do not adhere to these regional similarities. Also, even for artists whose works are accompanied by a recorded documentation of these commonalities, a tendency for the NGS to look for and read these regional similarities in the artists' other works—which do not have the same documentation—was highly probable. Therefore, the NGS's homogenising of Southeast Asia which manifested in the exhibitions' and institutional regional narrative created a filter for which modern Southeast Asian art would be read, researched, communicated, and displayed.

In *Between Declarations,* the sense of a homogenous region was built on visual similarities between artworks, as well as through the erasure of communist histories throughout the exhibition. In Gallery 3, Southeast Asian landscape paintings (from different countries) were grouped due to pictorial depiction of the local landscape. The simple thematisation presumed that the artists' expression of their connection to their land were responses to colonial ambition.[177] While it is always difficult to ascertain an artist's intention without clear documentation, the hasty conclusion of an urgency for nationalism expressed

[177] Santiago, "The Art of SEA: Identity and Integration."

through the painting of landscape does not lend itself to a meaningful understanding of modern Southeast Asian art's development.

Furthermore, in adherence to the NGS's regional narrative, communist presence in Southeast Asia was erased through the absence of its mention on all wall texts as well as curatorial essays. In the NGS curator Phoebe Scott's dissertation, the role of communism in modern Vietnamese art had been stated, but this is erased from the NGS's exhibition.[178] The impact of communism varied from country to country in Southeast Asia, and all Southeast Asian nation-states have felt its impact significantly. It was first introduced in Southeast Asia in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in certain nation-states, became a movement against the colonial. In the example of Vietnam, Scott stated in her dissertation that "the ascendancy of Communism in the form of the nascent Vietnamese Marxist-Leninist state in the period between 1945 and 1954 can also be understood as part of the trajectory of an 'alternative modernity.'"[179] Scott situated works by Nguyen Gia Tri and To Ngoc Van "within the cultural modernity that was a result of the transition from colonialism to Marxism-Leninism."[180] Understanding the trajectory from colonialism to communism in Vietnam is hence key to examining modern Vietnamese art, and its glaring absence from the exhibition keeps the development of modern Vietnamese art within the colonial.

In the methodology of *Reframing Modernism* as conveyed in the exhibition catalogue, the curators claimed their main rationale was to decentre the traditional narrative of Western modern art. It thus seemed that Southeast Asian modernism was to undergo a reframing that accords it autonomy outside of Western definitions of modernism. However, this notion of reframing became unclear as the development and position of Southeast Asian modernism(s) in individual nations prior to this exhibition is not laid out extensively; as visitors, we are thus

[178] In this aspect, the NGS's curators curate according to the NGS's framework of a regional narrative that homogenises the region, a situation where only selective parts of their art historical research are included.
[179] Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist," 28.
[180] Scott, 29.

unsure what exactly is being "reframed"—a Western-centric Southeast Asian modernism, or the unmentioned individual modernism(s) present in each Southeast Asian country.

In Eugene Tan's curatorial essay, he argued that abstraction in Malaysia and Indonesia developed as an organic response that both adapted and subverted Euramerican abstraction for specifically localised use, setting up a comparison between Southeast Asia and the West. He cited the art practices of Malaysian artist Latiff Mohidin and Indonesian artist Ahmad Sadali to support his case. Tan opposed American critic Greenberg's association of modernism and abstraction where the resultant modernist abstraction rejects representation. Instead, Tan contended for abstraction to be comprehended as "a way of (re)presenting the unpresentable, or about interrogating representation itself through painting."[181]

Malaysian artist Latiff Mohidin's paintings from his *Pago-Pago* series (1964-9) are imaginary takes on his Malay heritage. In Mohidin's works, one can detect traces of shapes and structures that can be found in Southeast Asia, but at the same time the work is abstract. Sabapathy termed this new iconography as reflecting the essence of Southeast Asia.[182] Ray Langenbach also recognised this as "a critique of Euramerican modernism" by "hijacking the western modernist 'quest for social authenticity' in 'archaic' and 'primitive' forms and consciousness."[183] Links may be drawn from Indonesian artist Ahmad Sadali as well, whose art practice transitioned from cubistic landscapes to more abstract expressions that gave voice to Islamic spiritualism; an understanding of the self, one's surroundings, and the entire universe.[184] What was not mentioned in the essay is a shared feature beyond iconography that sees a correlation between modernisms in Malaysia and Indonesia, and that is of spirituality.

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[181] Eugene Tan, "Reframing Representation: Abstraction and Modernism in Southeast Asia," in *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century*, ed. Sze Wee Low (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 185.
[182] T.K. Sabapathy, "Pago-Pago to Mindscape," in *Pago-Pago to Gelombang: 40 Years of Latiff Mohidin,* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1994), 26, quoted in Tan, "Reframing Representation,"186.
[183] Ray Langenbach, "Annotated Singapore Diary: 26 December 1993-17 May 1994," *ArtAsiaPacific* 1, no. 4 (1994): 89, quoted in Tan, "Reframing Representation,"187.
[184] Tan, "Reframing Representation,"187.

Rajah notes that throughout the 1980s, "many Malay artists pursued a purely abstract art… to recast Malaysian Modernism within the sanctity of Islam and in the spirit of an ascendant ethnic nationalism."[185]

In the same essay, Tan also highlighted the development of modernism in Indonesia to set the context for Sadali's practice. In a separate essay, Indonesian artist, curator and theorist, Jim Supangkat argued for a *kangunan* framework that opposed the *Mooi Indie* idealised scenes favoured by the Dutch, and instead espoused a reflection of social realities, manifesting a sensibility of character against colonial notions of art and aesthetics.[186] Though used as a comparison in Tan's case study, Latiff Mohidin and Ahmad Sadali's works are not displayed together.

In deciding not to exhibit artworks by these artists together, the curators chose not to highlight this link between Malaysian and Indonesian modernism, and not to exemplify the Indonesian *kangunan*. The famed "father of modern Indonesian art," S. Sudjojono's similar rejection of the *Mooi indie* aesthetic expressed his opposition against exoticised themes he saw to be of European modern-art inheritance.[187] This would have provided an additional platform for comparing and identifying the different strands of *kangunan* within Indonesian modern art.

Observing the Indonesian artists whose artworks were exhibited, only the works of Affandi and Emiria Sunassa were exhibited in proximity. While Affandi is a well-known Indonesian artist with his own museum, Sunassa has been mostly left out of the study of Indonesian art history. The presentation of a canonical artist beside one who has been forgotten brings to mind a systematic privileging of narratives within Southeast Asia and within individual countries themselves. Since *kangunan* is a relatively well-known concept,

[185] Rajah, "Towards A Southeast Asian Paradigm," 31.
[186] Tan, "Reframing Representation," 187.
[187] Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History,* 26.

the choice to not highlight it reflects the curators' decision to not give emphasis to a specific country's art history over another; choosing to evoke "a sense of the singularity of the practices of individual artists… plac[ing] the emphasis on modernism as a set of individual responses to the modern, rather than privileging teleological and developmental perspectives."[188] However, this methodology made for an incomplete comparison of Southeast Asian and Western modernism since the former's development is disregarded.

The above examples have demonstrated an unconsolidated approach to *Reframing Modernism* with varied responses. While the curators have foregrounded this in their introduction, emphasising a sense of "openness" and an aim to "offer different and multiple entry points into modernism,"[189] the open-ended approach created an inability to reach a resounding conclusion of the exhibition's intention, since the understanding of each artist varied in framework.

Therefore, in *Reframing Modernism* and *Between Declarations,* a sense of the region was maintained over the unique, individual modernism(s) of Southeast Asian countries. An approach of presenting Southeast Asia as a regional whole is not incorrect, but in choosing not to present the unique differences, a comprehensive outlook of modern Southeast Asia is lost, since it is the viable differences that lend a greater understanding of how the region should be read. In addition, the institutional agenda and state objectives become apparent; for a set-up of Southeast Asia in this manner provides alignment to Singapore's narrative. *Reframing Modernism* reinforced Singapore as the regional hub, while the erasure of communism parallels the state's silence on its political movement and impact within the country.

[188] Horikawa and Scott, introduction to *Reframing Modernism*, 17.
[189] Horikawa and Scott, 14.

3.3 Dominant Art-Historical Narrative with Singapore as the Centre

Through the exhibition *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism,* the NGS's resultant regional narrative has been built in accordance to Singapore's national agenda of being the centre for Southeast Asian art. While the scope was always regional, Singapore's position comes to the fore through the emphasis on its national icons and how they contributed to Southeast Asian art. This was most directly brought across through the exhibition design and hang of artworks by Singapore-based artists Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen whose artworks are relegated to their own standalone section in *Reframing Modernism.*

In *Reframing Modernism,* the intention of the exhibition to present modernism from a Southeast Asian perspective was waylaid by the conflicting exhibition hanging and narratives presented. To begin, the choice of Nguyen Gia Tri's monumental artwork *The Fairies* to open the exhibition was an apt choice; the detailed elaboration of the artist's medium of lacquer painting brings across the modern Vietnamese innovation. However, in its pairing with Henri Matisse's *Interior in Yellow and Blue*, the focus on the Western modernist feature of pictorial flatness distracted from Gia Tri's lacquer mastery. The opening essay had explained the exhibition layout as such:

> Each artist is represented by small bodies of work… Certain artists are, however, represented only by a single important work, creating punctuations with the visual and spatial flow. The exhibition is built up by connecting one artist's body of work to another, in a network-like structure, based on shared or intersecting approaches to modernism, ways of working and conceptual orientations. This is reflected in the exhibition design, which aims to offer different and multiple entry points into modernism, to unpack the problematics of influence, hierarchy and linearity. Visitors

> are encouraged to view the exhibition in a non-linear manner, and to explore the associations between artists and artworks.[190]

With the exception of the comparative case studies brought across in the curatorial essays, the consequential observation for most visitors would be associations drawn from similarity in colour palette, subject-matter, or style.

The focus accorded to the Singapore artists added further to the confusion. In Scott's essay, her presentation of Cheong Soo Pieng against the backdrop of French modernism made the cosmopolitanism of the artist the main highlight. In this case, the role of Paris as an art centre from which modern styles were spread was similarly paralleled with NAFA's role in Southeast Asia as an art school of the region, a central point from which Singapore's art education was disseminated to artists from neighbouring countries. Also mentioned in Scott's essay was Singapore-based artist Georgette Chen (the only other Singapore-based artist in *Reframing Modernism*), and that both their overseas art education and network allowed them to take on roles of influence within Malaya: Chen as a teacher at NAFA and Cheong in his art career and development of the Nanyang style. Scott hence argued that NAFA's role in Singapore exerted influence on other Southeast Asian countries—and helmed the position of a cultural hub, similar to what Singapore envisions for itself today. It is also significant to note that both Chen and Cheong belong to the group of Singapore pioneer artists whom are actively studied, documented, and collected in Singapore for the Nanyang Style.

Chen and Cheong's art genealogy and career as cosmopolitan artists were the main arguments of Scott's essay, instead of their interpretations of the Post-Impressionistic, Fauvist and Cubist style (which have been studied by other art historians).[191] Keeping in line with the curatorial methodology of allowing works from Southeast Asia and Europe to

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[190] Horikawa and Scott, introduction to *Reframing Modernism*, 14.
[191] Seng Yu Jin, "Cheong Soo Pieng," in *Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary (2 Volumes)*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 120.

engage in dialogue, Cheong's works could have been displayed beside Picasso; not only for a direct study of the Cubist style and how the Southeast Asian artist utilised it to depict his locale, but for an added reading of how Cheong experimented extensively. Chua remarked that Cheong's artistic exploration differed from Picasso; they are, on the one hand, a series of reactions to Picasso's formal challenges, but "one could go a step further and ask how looking at Cheong's art might make Picasso's newly relevant" since there were "moments of cultural alienation and recovery in Picasso's oeuvre" that Cheong's work could have offered a different entry point in.[192]

Should this "sense of the singularity" of individual artistic practices had been the main concern (as previously mentioned in the catalogue's introductory essay), then Chen and Cheong were accorded the most prominent individuality in the exhibition's hanging.[193] The standalone significance on the two artists was reinforced in the gallery's layout, with Chen and Cheong exhibited side by side in the centre of Gallery 1, and without other artworks in proximity for a direct visual comparison. Therefore, the notable difference in the presentation of Singapore and Southeast Asian artists designated a slight differentiation in message. The consequential exhibition narrative that was established through its hanging positioned an elevation of Singapore-based artists in Southeast Asia, especially with regard to the regional role of NAFA expounded in parallel to Paris' status in the art world.[194]

[192] Chua, "Exhibiting Modern Asian Art," 468.
[193] Horikawa and Scott, introduction to *Reframing Modernism,* 17.
[194] Scott also featured Leonard Tsuguharu-Foujita, Le Pho, Nguyen Gia Tri, and Bui Xuan Phai in her essay but focused on their stylistic development and influence, and not their position as a cosmopolitan artist. See Scott, "Towards an Unstable 'Centre,'" 19-28.

Chapter Four
Constructing Modern Southeast Asian Art History Through Exhibitions

Over the last four years, the NGS has positioned itself as the generator of key modern Southeast Asian art historical narratives. This thesis has examined how curatorial strategies work towards the formation of canons through the exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* at the NGS. Important works by the artists Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng have been used as central anchors to the narrative of a modern Southeast Asian art history that is concentrated on key events and influence from the West. The introduction of colonialism to Western modernism was posited as the beginning of Southeast Asian modernism, and this was further sustained by an identification of Western modernism in Southeast Asian art. This narrative was expounded through the selection and display of these works which were then reaffirmed as masterpieces through exhibition texts and publicity materials by the museum.

Besides the NGS, there are other national institutions in the region that have also produced modern Southeast Asian art historical narratives through exhibitions, albeit on a smaller scale. These narratives—which may be counter or complementary—have been produced through solo and/or group exhibitions which focus on the artworks and artists of their countries. These are significant, as many Southeast Asian artists are usually recognised as masters within their own countries' national narratives, before being incorporated into a regional, modern Southeast Asian art narrative. The acquisition and exhibition activities by these smaller national institutions in the region thus also add to the discourse in modern Southeast Asian art history.

This thesis' approach of looking at exhibitions can be useful for the study of other Southeast Asian art exhibitions, whether modern or contemporary, particularly where the curatorial frameworks purport to espouse a regional perspective. Examples of such

exhibitions include *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* (2013) and *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* (2017). While these two exhibitions showcase contemporary rather than modern Southeast Asian art, their curatorial strategies and exhibition mechanics may be critically analysed to reveal the workings of the respective institutional agendas of the Mori Art Museum and The National Art Center, Tokyo in Japan, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in the US respectively.

In the concluding catalogue essay of *Reframing Modernism,* Asian art historian John Clark proposed categorising Southeast Asian art exhibitions' approaches. However, Clark's categorisations have practical limitations when applied to the two case study exhibitions at the NGS. This classification of group exhibitions was over-simplified as it assumed that what the exhibition's curators claimed to do is can then be observed in the resultant show. As analysed in this thesis, the study of curatorial strategies revealed the nuanced tensions in the institutional intentions behind the organising of such exhibitions.

4.1 Art Historical Narratives by Other Key Institutions

Within Southeast Asia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have established their own art historical narratives through exhibitions in their national museums and institutions which serve a nationalist purpose. Four such major institutions include the Fine Arts Department, Thailand (Bangkok); Balai Seni Visual Negara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (National Art Gallery); the National Gallery in Indonesia (Jakarta) and the National Museum of the Philippines (Manila). Their exhibitions of modern Southeast Asian art inform the region's discourse of modern Southeast Asian art history.

Prior to the NGS's showing of Nguyen Gia Tri's works, the artist was already recognised in his native country Vietnam as a prominent modern Vietnamese artist. Nguyen

was posthumously awarded in 1989 and 2012 for significant contributions to Vietnamese art. In Vietnam, the Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum is the primary museum for the country. Located in Hanoi, the museum holds the national collection of nearly 20,000 objects. The Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum also played a role promoting the artist and proposed two lacquer paintings by Nguyen as national treasures for the government's recognition. These were *Vuon Xuan Trung Nam Bac (Spring Garden of Center, South and North)* (1969-1989), which was the last and the largest painting by the artist, measuring 540 cm by 200 cm, and *Binh Phong (The Background)* (1944), which is unique for having two distinct paintings on both sides of a wooden screen.

Nguyen's *Vuon Xuan Trung Nam Bac (Spring Garden of Center, South and North)* is monumental for two reasons: first, it was created with many lacquer techniques and hence the largest example of the artist's lacquer mastery, and second, for its choice of subject matter. The work depicts young women from the north, central, and south of Vietnam in traditional dresses, united in a common journey towards the spring festival. This is emblematic of the artist's desire of a peaceful and prosperous Vietnam.[195]

With only eight paintings recognised as national treasures by the Vietnamese government,[196] these two paintings by Nguyen are canons in Vietnamese modern art history.[197] As recent as September 2018, the artist was also the subject of a solo retrospective which featured many of his sketches for this work, and was organised to commemorate the 110th anniversary of the artist's birthday as well as the 52nd anniversary of the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum's founding.[198]

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[195] "Museum Marks Anniversary of Painter Nguyen Gia Tri's Death," *Vietnam News*, June 29, 2013, http://vietnamnews.vn/life-style/241408/museum-marks-anniversary-of-painter-nguyen-gia-tris-death.html.
[196] Ha Thu, "Eight Protected National Art Treasures," *VnExpress International*, May 14, 2019, https://e.vnexpress.net/news/life/culture/eight-protected-national-art-treasures-3919731.html.
[197] Ha Thu, "Eight Protected National Art Treasures."
[198] "Exhibition Introduces Sketches by Lacquer Master Nguyen Gia Tri," *Nhan Dan Online*, June 30, 2018, https://en.nhandan.org.vn/culture/item/6334602-exhibition-introduces-sketches-by-lacquer-master-nguyen-gia-tri.html.

In comparison to the NGS's presentation of Nguyen's works, the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum and the Vietnamese government's recognition of the artist focuses on the artist's technical achievement in lacquer mastery and readings of the visual messages of his works which centred on a nationalistic outlook for the country's well-being. For Vietnam, these narratives are more essential than the education the artist received at the EBAI. As demonstrated in this example, the narratives presented by other smaller institutions in the region have been vital in providing an alternative to the NGS's dominant art historical narrative. In addition, as national recognition of Nguyen's place in the art history of Vietnam took place locally before the NGS's exhibitions, the local activities of individual Southeast Asian countries and their museums are thus also important indicators of the potential direction(s) in which modern Southeast Asian art history will develop—beyond the attempt by the NGS to craft a master narrative for the region.

In Southeast Asia, apart from the four major institutions mentioned above, national institutions with substantial collections of modern art include the following: Cultural Center of the Philippines; Metropolitan Museum of Manila, Philippines and the Silpa Bhirasri Memorial National Museum, Bangkok, Thailand. Other noteworthy institutional collections include the public universities Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, University Sains Malaysia (Tuanku Fauziah Museum and Gallery, University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur) and the Chulalongkorn University Museum, Bangkok, Thailand. The privately-owned University of Santo Tomas Museum, Manila, Philippines is also significant as the oldest museum in the Philippines, with a collection dating from the seventeenth century.

Apart from the Chulalongkorn University Museum, all the aforementioned institutions loaned artworks to the NGS's exhibitions *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*. Among these institutions, the National Museum of the Philippines, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and the Fine Art Department, Thailand have signed a Memorandum of

Understanding (MOU) with the NGS. The purpose of the MOU has been to facilitate greater exchange of artworks, knowledge, and expertise between partners.[199]

This partnership between the NGS and the national institutions of the Philippines was particularly crucial for the NGS's duo exhibition *Between Worlds: Raden Saleh and Juan Luna* (2017), as the NGS relied heavily on research specialists and lenders based in the Philippines to secure the artworks loans for the show. [200] For this exhibition which comprised over 80 artworks, only three were from Singapore's National Collection, demonstrating the NGS's necessity of securing strategic partnerships with its regional neighbours. In fact, a lack of partnership with Indonesian art institutions could have resulted in fewer significant Indonesian masterpieces being exhibited at the NGS. The NGS curator Syed Muhammad Hafiz commented that they were unsuccessful in obtaining Raden Saleh's masterpiece, *Gevangenneming van Diponegoro* (The Arrest of Prince Diponegoro, 1857) since it is in the Indonesian presidential collection.[201] As Singapore's National Collection only began to actively collect Southeast Asian art in the past twenty-five years,[202] these partnerships were especially valuable for access to the important works kept in the respective collections around the region.

For these regional institutions, the relationship with the NGS has been one of ambivalence. While the display of these artworks in the NGS clearly elevated the artists' prestige, it was at the same time a co-opting of these countries' national narratives within the NGS's Singapore-centric agenda. By loaning artworks in their collections to the NGS, these

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[199] "National Gallery Singapore Annual Report 2016," Issuu, accessed July 17, 2019, https://issuu.com/nationalgallerysingapore/docs/national_gallery_annual_report_2016.
[200] Portia Ladrido, "Juan Luna's 'Spoliarium' on Virtual Display at National Gallery Singapore," *CNN*, March 5, 2018, https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2018/01/05/juan-luna-national-gallery-singapore.html.
[201] Ladrido, "Juan Luna's 'Spoliarium.'"
[202] Liu Kang's speech in 1995 stated how he was rejected by the Singapore government twice for funds to acquire significant works. See The Substation, *Art vs Art: Conflict & Convergence* (Singapore: The Substation, 1995), 12-14, quoted in Yvonne Low, "Re-Evaluating (Art-) Historical Ties: The Politics of Showing Southeast Asian Art and Culture in Singapore (1963-2013)," *Seismopolite Journal of Art and Politics* (blog), accessed June 16, 2019, http://www.seismopolite.com/re-evaluating-art-historical-ties-the-politics-of-showing-southeast-asian-art-and-culture-in-singapore-1963-2013-i.

institutions' artworks become accessible to a larger audience and attract scholarly interest, simply by virtue of the wealth of resources and networks at the NGS's disposal. The value of their collections also became heightened in the process, as the artwork gained prominence from being exhibited and associated with the NGS's brand as a Southeast Asian art museum. However, these institutions may also have to compete with the NGS for acquisition of their national masterpieces when available in the open art market. With more financial resources dedicated to the collecting of Southeast Asian art, the NGS often stood a better chance of acquiring such important works and has become a custodian of many of the region's modern Southeast Asian artworks through its acquisitions. To echo the problematics of the NGS positioning itself as Southeast Asia's art museum as discussed in Chapter One, the NGS's acquisitional activities is another reason for consideration. Currently the largest public collection of Southeast Asian artworks in the world with over 8,000 artworks acquired, Singapore's National Collection has continued to be the most well-funded in the region. As such, Singapore has not only collected the region's masterpieces, but also frames the regional modern art narrative by way of the NGS and its exhibitions. The NGS hence has the means to acquire the region's art and decide their place in the narrative of modern Southeast Asian art.

4.2 Alternative Approaches to Curating Southeast Asian Art in the Contemporary

In Southeast Asia, the contemporary has been envisioned as developing from and after the modern,[203] the two terms thus bearing linear temporal connections in their art historical narratives of the region. Often, themes of the contemporary have been grounded in past historical events which happened during the country's period of modern art as well. More art historical scholarship has been dedicated to writing about contemporary Southeast

[203] Gunalan Nadarajan, "Not Modern: Theses on Contemporary Art," in *Contemporary Art in Singapore*, ed. Russell Storer, Eugene Tan, and Gunalan Nadarajan (Singapore: Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2007), 23.

Asian art. However, they have been connected through similar issues of regionalisation in the articulating of a "Southeast Asian" identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world's art history. As argued in this thesis, exhibitions of Southeast Asian art have been the primary sites for the construction of art history. This was applicable to contemporary Southeast Asian art exhibitions as well, and to a great extent, as there were more institutions interested in the display of contemporary art. As such, an examination of contemporary Southeast Asian art exhibitions has also been meaningful in observing the different approaches that have been used in comparison with that of the NGS.

Apart from the NGS's *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*, two other exhibitions of Southeast Asian art which have been curated with a regional perspective are worth noting here. *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* (2013) and *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* (2017)[204] have been selected for this brief analysis as they were organised in a similar recent time frame to *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism*. *No Country* and *SUNSHOWER* were equally invested in the framing of the regional vis-à-vis a nation-centric approach, utilising an approach comparable to the NGS of identifying central themes across Southeast Asian art. However, the analysis of *No Country* and *SUNSHOWER* through their exhibitionary texts and design also revealed the underlying agendas of their respective institutions, hence reinforcing the merit of reading exhibitions and proving the efficacy of the template this thesis argues for.

From February 22 to May 22, 2013, *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* was installed at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, and later travelled to the Asia Society, Hong Kong, and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore. The exhibition was part of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, a multi-year collaboration that charts contemporary art practice within three geographic

[204] Henceforth referred to as *No Country* and *SUNSHOWER* respectively in this thesis.

regions: South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa—with South and Southeast Asia slated as the first iteration. Funded by UBS, artworks from these exhibitions were also acquired by the Guggenheim Museum, marking the museum's new direction of building its institutional collection from these regions. With 22 artworks exhibited, *No Country* was significant for being the second largest group exhibition of contemporary Southeast Asian art shown by a major art institution in New York City.[205]

Curated by Singaporean curator June Yap, *No Country* adopted the approach of viewing South and Southeast Asia as a collective group, and not by defining the region through discrete nation-states.[206] In the exhibition's press release, Yap stated that the exhibition was intended to present the diverse artist practices and themes explored by the contemporary artists and in doing so "simultaneously challenge the privileging of nation and national narrative as the basis for understanding aesthetic practices from different countries."[207] Thus, we should understand the regional approach of *No Country* as more than just a curatorial direction for the exhibition; it is an opposing stand against the demarcation of Southeast Asian art history through national boundaries. It was hence significant that the title of the exhibition was *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* and not "No Country: Contemporary Art *of* South and Southeast Asia." While the naming of regions delimited the exhibition's foci, it also emphasised the exhibition's deliberate attempt to avoid representing the regions, and problematising concept of regionalism at the same time. Yap divided her essay with two sub-headings of "Nation" and "Community" and brought forth her arguments against the simplistic application of these lenses onto the reading of the "region."

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[205] The more broadly-scoped Asian art exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (1996) organised by the Asia Society, New York City and curated by Thai curator and art historian Apinan Poshyananda was monumental for being the first group show of contemporary art from selected Asian countries in the U.S.

[206] June Yap, *Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative 1: South and Southeast Asia*, (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publ, 2013), 2.

[207] "Guggenheim Presents No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia," Guggenheim (blog), February 21, 2013, https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/guggenheim-museum-presents-no-country-contemporary-art-for-south-and-southeast-asia.

The communal aspect of South and Southeast Asia was not found across the regions due to a unified exertion of external influences but brought across through a desire for community-building artistic exchanges, a "sociability [noted] among the region's numerous artist communities."[208] This desire for community, "embodied in the idea of communism," was examined from within—a manifestation of individual goals, and not as an exogenous force applied across the regions. Examining Yap's essay, the curatorial approach was suitable for the small group exhibition with two large and separate regions to undertake. Instead of striving for overarching thematic commonalities, the relationships that arise in the exhibition were more organic and driven by individual artistic practices. *No Country* claimed to step away from the "narratives of nation and border" in defining and understanding the concept of region and regionality.[209] By eschewing the unifying idea of nationhood, each artwork, while viewed within the context of the artist's intention and background, maintained an apparent separation from works by other artists originating from the same country.[210] Therefore, one of the most important aspects of *No Country* was its insistence that artists and their respective artworks should not and cannot be reduced to their respective nations or regions.

SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now (2017) was installed at the Mori Art Museum and The National Art Center, Tokyo from 5 July to 23 October 2017. It was the largest exhibition of Southeast Asian contemporary art in Japan to date, featuring over 190 works by 86 artists. In her essay for the exhibition catalogue, curator Mami Kataoka expressed her hope for an exhibition experience "that takes its point of departure from the meanings of individual works and the narratives of the artists," and does

[208] Yap, *Guggenheim,* 9.
[209] Yap, 12.
[210] This curatorial approach however, is not without detractions. As an exhibition about regions, the absence of markers such as a prevailing national narrative or historicisation meant that every work required the preliminary knowledge of each artist's unique contextual background before the viewing and appreciation of the work, creating a heavy and tiresome dependence on the exhibition's wall texts for a North American audience unfamiliar with Asian art. See Holland Cotter, "Acquired Tastes of Asian Art," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/22/arts/design/no-country-new-asian-art-at-the-guggenheim.html.

so in the varying scales of "individual and nation, nation and region (in this case, Southeast Asia, or Asia more generally), region and world, or past, present, and future."[211] This statement expressed a desire to place the artworks as the originating point from which the rest of the exhibition—including the themes and issues related to Southeast Asian art—would be explored. In another part of the essay, Kataoka reiterated that *SUNSHOWER* did not seek to "interpret Southeast Asia through the framework of individual nations… it makes a concerted effort to present a sense of shifting perspectives that operate between the different scales involved in regional communities, cities, countries, and the Southeast Asian region, by taking its starting point from the artworks of the individual artists."[212]

The opening theme of "Fluid World" set the tone for the artist-centric *SUNSHOWER.* The introductory wall text provided a brief overview of the difficulty in defining "Southeast Asia"—whether this was done through the political association of ASEAN, or geographic delineations such as mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, or through the shared histories of colonisation and Japanese occupation during World War Two. *SUNSHOWER* attempted to circumvent this difficulty by highlighting the "coexistence of a wide variety of ethnicities, religions, and cultures" brought about by human mobility across borders.[213]

Two features of this exhibition distinguished it from the other exhibitions mentioned in this thesis: first, how the relationship between Southeast Asia and Japan was a vantage point for the curatorial direction and exhibition narrative; second, the emphasis on ASEAN, a political alliance between the eleven member-nations, which often has not been given much attention at all in Southeast Asian art exhibitions. An institutional state-supported exhibition, *SUNSHOWER* was another affirmation of Japan's interest in collecting and presenting

[211] Mimi Kataoka, *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* [Tokyo: Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, Japan), The Japan Foundation Asia Center (Tokyo, Japan), The National Art Center, Tokyo (Tokyo, Japan), 2017], 273.
[212] Kataoka, *SUNSHOWER,* 276.
[213] Kataoka, *SUNSHOWER,* 45.

Southeast Asian art. But the premise of a Japan as a former colonial power of the region it now strove to represent is a daunting task. Here, Kataoka charted the history of ASEAN and the region's cultural connections with Japan, particularly in art, the economic flows between Southeast Asia and Japan as well as the history of Japanese occupation. The use of ASEAN as a framework was also attributed to art historians Masahiro Ushiroshoji and Redza Piyadasa, both of whom have written on its efficacy.[214] In addition to the exhibition's wall texts that were meant to describe each section as well as the artworks' information, *SUNSHOWER* featured a full wall panel about ASEAN—a map with the member-nations in a bold typeface, the political alliance's history, as well as brief overviews of each member-nation. This was included in the catalogue as well. Therefore, while there was an explicit curatorial conceit to not utilise a nation-centric approach, the notion of the nation was still very much put forward through the emphasis on ASEAN. All countries were profiled briefly by its area, population, and capital. Subsequently, each individual country's profile provided further information such as demography, government, as well as a timeline of the country's history. As much as the exhibition strove to focus on the artworks—the cultural exchange and "coexistence" over borders—what came to the fore were the differences in territorial and population size.

For art critic Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, this approach contradicted the curatorial intention:

> Though less tethered to geographic demarcations, a narrative based on social and economic shifts is nevertheless subject to other, no less institutional imperatives—namely, the promotion of heavily redacted histories of development by the authoritarian regimes that belong to ASEAN. Like many sprawling contemporary art exhibitions, 'Sunshower' is caught in a double bind, attempting to extricate artists and

[214] Kataoka, 282.

artworks from identitarian frameworks while still operating within the rigid politics of international relations.[215]

SUNSHOWER was at once an art exhibition, as well as a political act of mapping the power dynamics of Southeast Asia through the lenses of ASEAN. While all institutional exhibitions are to an extent manifestations of state motivations, the impetus for *SUNSHOWER* was more keenly felt as such. An exhibition meant to introduce the Japanese audience to Southeast Asian art, *SUNSHOWER* was also a likely consolidation of multiple Southeast Asian art exhibitions installed in Japan. Here, the growing collection and presentation of Southeast Asian art in Japan may be read as an attempt to cement the latter's influence in the art and culture of the region.

As with the NGS's two exhibitions, *SUNSHOWER* and *No Country* shared the similar intention of leaving a nation-centric curatorial approach for an artist-centric viewpoint that offered insight into the Southeast Asian region but achieved varying degrees of success. Of the two, *No Country* possessed the advantage, as a smaller exhibition, of producing a focused survey on contemporary Southeast Asian art. However, one must also note that the exhibition's premise in being an acquisition show for the Guggenheim Museum (with five other Southeast Asian artworks acquired but not exhibited, bringing the total of acquired works to 27) suggests a curation motivated by the art market and its available inventory. With acquisition as the main priority, works in existing collections would not be considered, and artists who have been faring well in terms of acquisition value would also be prioritised over artworks that might have been more suited for the curatorial direction. As for *SUNSHOWER,* while there was an intention of shifting from the boundaries of the "nation," the attention

[215] Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, "Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia, 1980s to Now," *ArtForum*, accessed June 16, 2019, https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201708/sunshower-contemporary-art-from-southeast-asia-1980s-to-now-71254.

accorded to ASEAN as a framework proved more divisive and jarring in setting up the comparisons across different countries.

Viewing all four exhibitions in comparison, *No Country, SUNSHOWER, Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* shared the same urgency (as outlined in each exhibition's curatorial essay) to shift the discourse from a nation-centric understanding of Southeast Asian art towards a regional outlook. This intention was telling of a desire to form a regional Southeast Asian art that brings diverse countries—their artists, art history, art schools, artistic styles and techniques—into a master narrative malleable to other agendas. In the case of the NGS, the resultant Southeast Asian art narrative was punctuated by the canonisation of works by Nguyen Gia Tri and Cheong Soo Pieng as markers for modern Southeast Asian art. As highlighted in the previous sections, this was informed by Singapore's National Collection and Singapore's national policy of promoting the country as a cultural centre for Southeast Asia. The NGS's modern Southeast Asian art narrative was also steeped in the history of colonialism and the presence of foreign powers, reinforced through the emphasis on the EBAI and the NAFA, and the new chronology that began in the throes of nineteenth century colonialism. Not surprisingly, this clearly paralleled Singapore's own historical narrative at large—one that celebrates British colonial presence.[216]

A noteworthy point is how these two exhibitions, as well as *Between Declarations,* all refer to exhibitions that have been installed in the past (which I have also observed in other exhibitions not mentioned in this essay). There was a strong awareness of what has already been done, a judgment of what still needs to be done, and an active urgency to fulfil the identified gap. These references supported the case to study the exhibition history of Southeast Asian art. In a practical sense, the stating of past exhibitions established a lineage

[216] See Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

and, in a way, paid homage to significant exhibitions for their contribution to Southeast Asian art and art history. This implied that each exhibition was not organised *ex nihilo* or curated in a vacuum but built upon past exhibitions' curation and their production and dissemination of knowledge and research.

4.3 Future Directions for the Study

For further research into the role of exhibitions in modern Southeast Asian art history, a third component—the broad curatorial approach— can add to the study of exhibitionary texts and design by enabling effective observation across multiple Southeast Asian art exhibitions. This broad curatorial approach was the starting point for each exhibition, marking the posture from which the exhibitionary texts and design develop. In his closing essay for the catalogue of *Reframing Modernism*, John Clark outlined and critiqued five curatorial approaches in presenting Southeast Asian art: First, to take Euramerican tendency and compare and fit Asian exemplars based on a stylistic and intellectual rubric; second, to focus on a single country's work; third, to utilise a thematic comparison that look at tendencies within Asian art culture and then link these to international tendencies; fourth, to present a binational comparison within and across the region; and lastly, to look at Asia or Southeast Asia as a totality within which various themes can be fitted.[217]

Clark offered examples of exhibitions within each category and concluded with the advantages or disadvantages he perceived for each category. His categories were useful for my study in curatorial approaches but presented limitations in his way of classifications. For example, the first and third category sees a comparison drawn between Southeast Asia and the rest of the world; but it is difficult to objectively pinpoint whether an exhibition has

[217] John Clark, "Parallel Modernities: Approaching Modernity in Art Outside Europe and America," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 241–43. Italics mine.

maintained a perspective from the inside out (category three), or outwards in (category one). Although *Reframing Modernism* claimed to be an exhibition that would present and look at modernism in Southeast Asia on its own and without the historical baggage of using Western perspectives, I observed in the curatorial essays a lack of recognition of modernisms within individual Southeast Asian countries.

Therefore, with reference to Clark's categories, it is more worthwhile to maintain a broader vantage point with only three categories: a comparison between Southeast Asian art and Western art history (collapsing Clark's first and third category), Southeast Asia as a cohesive whole and finding threads of commonalities between countries (adapted from Clark's fifth category), and a comparison between Southeast and South Asia (similar to Clark's fourth category). Exhibitions that are examples of these categories are as follows:

- Comparison between Southeast Asian art and Western art history (*Realism in Asian Art,* 2010; and *Reframing Modernism,* 2016 staged at the NGS)
- Southeast Asia as one cohesive whole—finding threads of commonalities between countries (*Negotiating Home, History and Nation,* 2011 staged at the SAM; and *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, 2017 staged at The National Art Center, Tokyo and Mori Art Museum)
- Comparison between Southeast Asia and South Asia (*No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia,* 2013 staged at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Asia Society, Hong Kong, and Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore; and *Singapore Biennale,* 2016 staged at the SAM)

A working template on curatorial frameworks enables readers to see at a glance a comparison of exhibitions across exhibitionary discourse, curatorial approach, exhibition layout etc., in the hope of inviting academics to contribute and further refine this examination (Appendix B). This framework was also constructed with reference to Bruce Altshuler's compendium,

Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions that Made Art History, which spans two volumes (published in 2008 and 2013). The books have been cited as being among the most important references available on the subject of exhibitions. Information on exhibitions is also communicated in a standardised format, including the exhibition title, location, date, curator, itinerary, artists, catalogue title. There is also additional information such as the number of artists and artworks, as well as the total attendance. Each exhibition's chapter begins with the listed information, followed by an introductory paragraph by Altshuler on the exhibition, and some remarks on its impact within the art world. This is followed by photographs and images—sometimes featuring the cover of the exhibition catalogue, and installation photographs of the show which allow visitors to see how the works were hung, and which other works were hung in proximity. Lastly, a section titled "Documents" includes texts related to the exhibition, such as excerpts from the catalogue, reviews from art magazines and journals, letters of correspondence between organisers, and/or excerpts from curators' travelogues. These private letters made public allow readers a behind-the-scenes perspective on the invisible negotiations and relationships, such as rejection letters from artists and their reasons for not participating, as well as suggestions for their replacements.

Hence, an examination of exhibitionary texts and design that this thesis has presented, coupled with a knowledge of the broad curatorial approach is a point of departure for the study of modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions and their contributions to art history. By displaying key information about these exhibitions in a clear table, an overview of significant exhibitions would inform subsequent observations and comparisons (as elaborated in the previous chapters). As exhibitions reference and build upon each other, it is hence imperative that in-depth studies of exhibitions are compared to one another, as this would enable a charting of the exhibitionary landscape and resultant art historical narratives. In addition to Nguyen and Cheong, who were studied in detail in this thesis, there are other modern

Southeast Asian artworks that have been highlighted as canons in the NGS's narrative. These include works by Latiff Mohidin (b. 1941, Malaysia), Raden Saleh (b. 1811, Indonesia), and Juan Luna (b. 1857, Philippines). While an in-depth study of these artists' works in exhibitions at the NGS is beyond the scope of this thesis, a similar reliance on colonial presence has been observed in the resultant narrative. There remains a need for in-depth examinations of exhibitions vis-à-vis the role they play in modern Southeast Asian art history, a conscientious taking apart of modern Southeast Asian art exhibitions as identified in the thesis' proposed template.

4.4 Conclusion

The study of exhibitions is central to the scholarship of modern Southeast Asian art history. The close examination of the exhibitionary texts and mechanics behind the hanging of artworks by Cheong Soo Pieng and Nguyen Gia Tri in *Between Declarations* and *Reframing Modernism* revealed the connections between the organisation, curation, and study of exhibitions. The sheer amount of research and literature that has been produced as an accompaniment to each art exhibition is a contribution to art history. These texts, however, should not be separated from the exhibition, but studied holistically. Apart from exhibition catalogues that are easily referenced and accessible to all, less documented aspects of the exhibition are also valuable. These include exhibition design and hanging, wall texts and labels as well as other peripheral material written for the exhibition. By maintaining a cohesive view of how an exhibition is realised, our understanding of SEA artworks produced in the 20th century benefits from reading the motivations behind decisions that directly impact the eventual end product of exhibition and publication. The exhibition's inherent purpose in displaying works of art goes beyond its function as a platform but bears further implications on art historical scholarship in the way it is studied and framed. Furthermore, the institution

ascribes value onto works of art, imbuing each work with proof of art historical significance. This value is later interpreted in the art market through its increase in monetary value.

This thesis' focus on the NGS has provided a perspective on the institution's role and responsibility in curating exhibitions within the context of Singapore and Southeast Asia. By choosing to critically analyse the role of the NGS, the inextricable relationships between state, museum, and exhibition have been brought to the fore. As the state funds the museum that is organising the exhibition, there is a line of organisational hierarchy that is naturally adhered to and this has been revealed in the reading of the NGS's exhibitions. This thesis' study of how an exhibition comes into being has been complemented by a critique of the state and/or museum's objectives; the art exhibition is not only a display of art-objects, but a tool of affirmation and reinforcement with regard to the process of political socialisation.

In the case of the NGS, the twin mandate of presenting Southeast Asian art and Singapore's art has been foreshadowed by other art historians,[218] but this thesis is the first to present a detailed study of how the inherent agenda and tensions can be identified in the curatorial strategies, as made visible in the exhibitionary texts and design. Bearing in mind the scale of the NGS in relation to other national institutions in the Southeast Asian region, its mission to represent Southeast Asian art has carried significant weight in the construction of modern Southeast Asian art history. This has been made evident in the wealth of activities undertaken by the museum over the past four years: exhibitions, academic conferences, publications, and publicity.

Taking the study of exhibition histories as a new field within art historical scholarship, this thesis has proposed several possible approaches as to how exhibitions may be studied, for example, by drawing on writings of exhibition history by art historians. The

[218] See Nora A. Taylor, "Introduction: Who Speaks for Southeast Asian Art," 6 and Yvonne Low, "Re-Evaluating (Art-) Historical Ties."

study of exhibitions positively impacts the growth of good practices in archival documentation, contributing to a new field within art history that generates meaningful observations. Advances in technology and the accessibility of resources has also enabled such studies to be prioritised by exhibition-makers.

The regional perspective championed by the NGS has placed the narrative of modern Southeast Asian art history among the world's art histories. However, the cost of its dominant narrative has erased the diversity of Southeast Asian countries and put Singapore's interests at the forefront. In this regard, the NGS's efforts to build up this dominant art historical narrative of modern Southeast Asia recalls the colonial positions that had been popular in the past. In line with the current movement that questions the prevalence of earlier center-and-margins theories in art history—where established Western art historical narratives are re-examined and artists who were previously excluded from said histories are now highlighted[219]—the existing and established modern Southeast Asian art historical narratives require an urgent re-examination. As exhibitions have been the main sites for production of Southeast Asian art historical narratives, detailed analyses of the ways in which these narratives have been formed through exhibition histories is the next necessary step in furthering the study of Southeast Asian art history.

[219] See *Peripheries*, proceedings of Global Art History and the Peripheries, Paris, 1st ed., vol. 3 (ARTL@S BULLETIN, Spring 2014), accessed January 10, 2019, https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol3/iss1/.

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Appendix A: Significant Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art Exhibitions from 2006–2016

Year	Country	Institution/Organisation	*Title*
2006	Singapore	National Arts Council, Singapore	*Belief - Singapore Biennale*
	Singapore	Singapore Art Museum	*Telah Terbit (Out Now): Southeast Asia Contemporary Art Practice During the 70s*
	Australia	Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)	*The 5th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT5)*
2008	Singapore	National Arts Council, Singapore	*Wonder - Singapore Biennale*
	Taiwan	Eslite Gallery, Taipei	*Coffee, Cigarettes and Pad Thai: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia*
2009	Singapore	Singapore Art Museum	*Earth and Water: Mapping Art in Southeast Asia*
	Australia	Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)	*The 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT6)*
	Japan	Fukuoka Asian Art Museum	*The 4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale*
2010	Singapore	National Gallery Singapore	*Realism in Asian Art*
	Singapore	Singapore Art Museum	*Classic Contemporary: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art from the Singapore Art Museum Collection*
	South Korea	Arario Gallery	*Beacons of Archipelago: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia*
2011	Singapore	Singapore Art Museum	*Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011*
2012	Australia	Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)	*The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7)*
	Australia	National Portrait Gallery, Canberra	*Beyond the Self: Contemporary Portraiture from Asia*
	Singapore	School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore	*Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*
	Italy	Primo Marella Gallery, Milan	*Deep S.E.A.: Contemporary Art from South East Asia*
2013	Singapore	Singapore Art Museum	*Singapore Biennale*
	Thailand	Bangkok Art and Culture Centre	*Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia*

2014	Japan	Fukuoka Asian Art Museum	*The 5th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale*
	US, Travelled to Singapore and Hong Kong	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Asia Society Hong Kong Center	*No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia*
	Turkey	ARTER – space for art	*The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia*
2015	Singapore, Japan, Australia	Singapore Art Museum; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; National Museum of Art, Osaka; Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)	*Time of Others*
	Australia	Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)	*The 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8)*
	Singapore	National Gallery Singapore	*Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*
2016	Singapore	Singapore Art Museum	*Singapore Biennale 2016: An Atlas of Mirrors*
	Hong Kong	Osage Art Foundation	*South x Southeast*
	Singapore	National Gallery Singapore	*Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*

Appendix B: Template for Reading Southeast Asian Art Exhibitions

	Exhibition
Title	*Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*
Organiser	National Gallery Singapore, Centre Pompidou, Paris
Time/Duration	31 March to 17 July 2016
Venue	National Gallery Singapore
Number of Artworks	217
Number of Artists	51
Number of Southeast Asian Artworks	115
Number of Southeast Asian Artists	22
Southeast Asian Countries Represented	Six: Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand
Named Curatorial Approach	Southeast Asia as one cohesive whole, with its artworks put in conversation with works from Europe. Sense of the singularity of each individual artist is emphasised.
Exhibitionary Texts **- Excerpt from Press Release**	National Gallery Singapore today announced the launch of its first international special exhibition, *Reframing Modernism,* co-curated and co-presented with Centre Pompidou, Paris. This landmark exhibition is the inaugural exhibition at the Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery. *Reframing Modernism* will showcase more than 200 works from about 50 artists, with approximately half from Centre Pompidou and the other half from Southeast Asia. This will also be the first time that an exhibition displays significant Southeast Asian and European artists in parallel through its study of one of the most influential artistic and intellectual drives of the 20th century – modernism – from the perspective of Southeast Asia. *Reframing Modernism* challenges the existing paradigm of how modernist painting is presented. It brings to light previously unexplored perspectives which enrich the overall discourse. Taking a comparative approach, the exhibition reveals

	shared concerns between the artists and their bodies of work to create a new and different narrative of modernism.
Resultant Narrative of Southeast Asian Art	• The presence of colonialism in the nineteenth century was a catalyst for the development modern Southeast Asian art. • Across Southeast Asia, strands of similarities in modern art may be found through the shared experience of colonialism and a desire in Southeast Asian artists to build a national identity as a response. • In particular, art education which exposed Southeast Asian artists to Western modernism was key to the development of modern Southeast Asian art. This took the form of art schools founded by foreign artists and/or education received overseas. • These themes of colonialism and nationalism were expressed through paintings which referenced Western modernism in techniques, style, and/or subject matter. • Therefore, it is necessary to view the trajectory of modern Southeast Asian art in light of Western modernism.
Resultant Narrative of Each Country's Art History	• Singapore: NAFA was a point of congregation for artists all over the region, making Singapore a centre for Southeast Asian art. The Nanyang art style is the most important tenet of modern art in Singapore. The Nanyang artists were cosmopolitans; they received their art education overseas and successfully combined the techniques and styles of Eastern and Western art to create the Nanyang art style. • Vietnam: EBAI was the most important factor in the development of modern Vietnamese art. From a decorative form, artists experimented and elevated lacquer painting into a fine art technique which became a hallmark of modern Vietnamese art.

Exhibition Layout

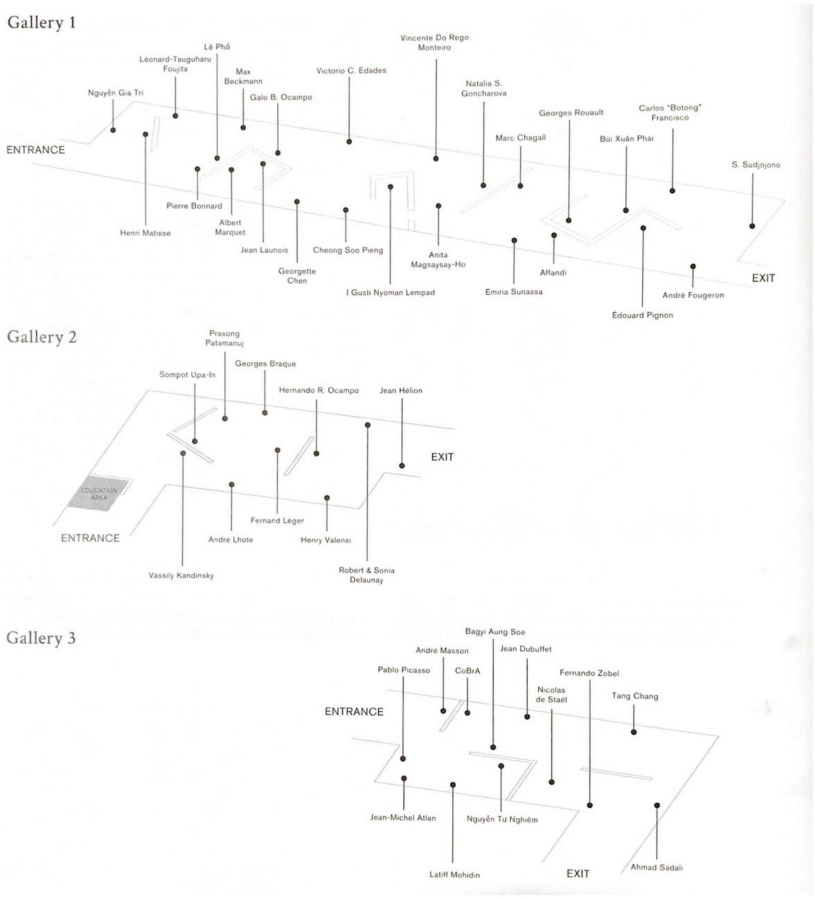

Fig. 7. Exhibition Layout of *Reframing Modernism* at the National Gallery Singapore, in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, edited by Sarah Lee and Sara Siew, 18. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016.

	Exhibition
Title	*Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*
Organiser	National Gallery Singapore
Time/Duration	24 November 2015 – ongoing
Venue	National Gallery Singapore
Number of Artworks	The exhibition is said to present "over 400 artworks" as mentioned on the press release, 306 are documented in the exhibition catalogue
Number of Artists	260 (as documented in exhibition catalogue)
Number of Southeast Asian Artworks	277 (as documented in exhibition catalogue)
Number of Southeast Asian Artists	245 (as documented in exhibition catalogue)
Southeast Asian Countries Represented	Eight: Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia
Named Curatorial Approach	Chronological presentation from the 19th century to the 1990s, works are organised thematically.
Exhibitionary Texts **- Excerpt from Press Release**	**National Gallery Singapore connects the dots to tell a regional story and history in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery** An exhibition of around 400 artworks will present a cohesive regional narrative about Southeast Asian modern art. The curatorial direction was announced today as National Gallery Singapore introduced its long-term exhibition *Between Declarations and Dreams* that will be presented at the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery. Presented chronologically from the 19th century to the 1990s, and conveying shared artistic impulses and historical experiences, the curatorial approach breaks away from national frameworks to tell the story of Southeast Asian modern art. The exhibition draws from Singapore's National Collection as well as significant loans from private and institutional collections. The Gallery is privileged to present a selection of important artworks on long-term loan from collections in the region, including from the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, as well as from the Southeast Asian

	collections of our MOU partners Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. The Gallery will also present newly-acquired nineteenth-century masterpieces by Raden Saleh and Juan Luna, as well as new acquisitions of Southeast Asian modern art by Fua Haribhitak, Chuah Thean Teng, and David Medalla, to name a few.
Resultant Narrative of Southeast Asian Art	• The presence of colonialism in the nineteenth century was a catalyst for the development modern Southeast Asian art. • Across Southeast Asia, strands of similarities in modern art may be found through the shared experience of colonialism and a desire in Southeast Asian artists to build a national identity as a response.
Exhibition Layout	Not available