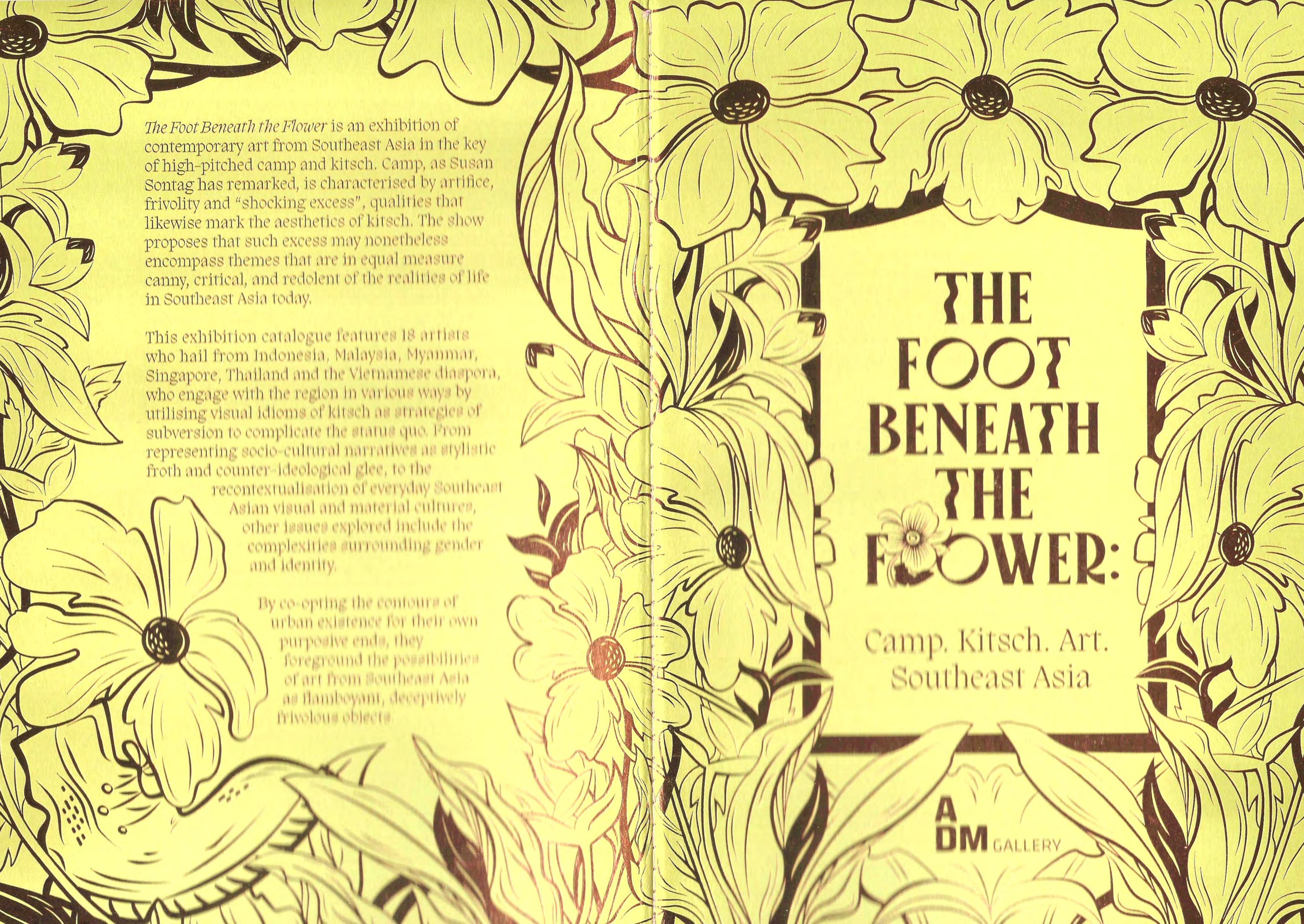




The Foot Beneath the Flower is an exhibition of contemporary art from Southeast Asia in the key of high-pitched camp and kitsch. Camp, as Susan Sontag has remarked, is characterised by artifice, frivolity and "shocking excess", qualities that likewise mark the aesthetics of kitsch. The show proposes that such excess may nonetheless encompass themes that are in equal measure canny, critical, and redolent of the realities of life in Southeast Asia today.

This exhibition catalogue features 18 artists who hail from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and the Vietnamese diaspora, who engage with the region in various ways by utilising visual idioms of kitsch as strategies of subversion to complicate the status quo. From representing socio-cultural narratives as stylistic froth and counter-ideological glee, to the recontextualisation of everyday Southeast Asian visual and material cultures, other issues explored include the complexities surrounding gender and identity.

By co-opting the contours of urban existence for their own purposive ends, they foreground the possibilities of art from Southeast Asia as flamboyant, deceptively frivolous objects.

THE FOOT BENEATH THE FLOWER:

Camp. Kitsch. Art.
Southeast Asia

A
DM GALLERY

Message

MICHAEL WALSH

CHAIR, NTU SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA

Since the School of Art, Design and Media Gallery opened in 2011 it has offered an exceptional range of exhibition programming that has simultaneously complimented the teaching and research foci of the school and diverted critical currents of contemporary art in Asia into the heart of Nanyang Technological University.

ADM is renowned internationally for its expertise in Design Art and Media Art, its position at the forefront of interdisciplinary and industry relevant research, and its compelling blend of technology and the arts to create the nexus at which creativity and innovation thrive. Professionally, our Master of Art in Museum Studies & Curatorial Practice is the first of its kind in Southeast Asia and prepares graduates for the highly complex and diverse museum and gallery landscape in the region and beyond.

The ADM Gallery is the space in which all of the above converges; the meeting point where the school's abundant and diverse energies embrace those

of renowned artists and curators who wish to challenge and interrogate the complexity of the rapidly changing world in which we live. *The Foot Beneath the Flower: Camp. Kitsch. Art. Southeast Asia* is one such exhibition. Guest-curated by writer, curator, and specialist in Malaysian contemporary art, Louis Ho seeks to articulate, and differentiate, the aesthetics of camp and kitsch and elucidate how its motivations stem from the complex socio-cultural dynamics of the region.

The unprecedented global pandemic has forced us to take a long hard look at ourselves, to reassess our norms, our relationship with the environment and each other, our legacies, and our visions of a post-pandemic world. Art should be at the forefront of that self-examination. ADM's gallery will continue to rise to these challenges and to offer an academic forum in which reflection and critique foster inspiration and change. *The Foot Beneath the Flower: Camp. Kitsch. Art. Southeast Asia* is the latest of these timely discussions.

Foreword

MICHELLE HO

GALLERY DIRECTOR

Preparations for the exhibition, *The Foot Beneath the Flower: Camp. Kitsch. Art. Southeast Asia* with guest curator Louis Ho began a year ago as part of the ADM Gallery's interests in deepening research on Southeast Asian contemporary art, particularly from the lenses of lesser established narratives in culture and history. The discourse and theory surrounding "camp" and "kitsch" in the last century have well been expounded by theorists such as Susan Sontag and Clement Greenberg, at times pitting the aesthetics of the garish against high art. The stylistics of the excessive as well as their intended outcome by artists may yet have critical currency in Southeast Asia. The exhibition features 18 artists who deploy camp and kitsch as strategies of subversion to represent complexities surrounding the social, political and historical issues in this region, giving a space for marginal and occluded voices such as those from the refugee and queer communities, and others suffering from gender or race-based bias.

This exhibition also occurs at a time when the world has irrevocably changed, with the widespread consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic altering how society at large have to interact and work. In present times where urgencies of livelihood and health have taken greater precedence, it is all the

more a sobering moment to reflect on the purpose of art, and how acts of creativity may yet offer comfort and substance amidst uncertainty.

Artist ren zi's work presents a metaphorical landscape of apocalyptic hues, enriched by nuances of Southeast Asian symbolism. Featuring the archetype of "The Trickster", an ominous future of a post-Covid society is being nourished with motifs of regeneration, harking towards a world with a new way of being. In *HOMEBOUND*, artist Daniel Kok presents works made during Singapore's near two-month lockdown, (also known as "circuit breaker" in Singapore when the city state came to a standstill) where he learnt macramé, and used this craft of knotting for home improvement projects. Also known for his work in bondage art and performance, Kok's new work during this time repurposes the aesthetics of erotic art into one of utility and humour, allowing for a sense of meaningful engagement and delight amidst isolation.

I hope that the exhibition *The Foot Beneath the Flower* can nonetheless provide some respite, and be a reminder of how art remains essential, even in such times of ambivalence. The ADM Gallery would like to thank curator Louis Ho, and all the artists, and collaborators who are part of this exhibition.

Beneath the Bloom a Foot

LOUIS HO

"Oh! help me, heaven," she prayed, "to be decorative
and to do right!"

– *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, Ronald Firbank

"Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth."

– *Manservant and Maidervant*, Ivy Compton-Burnett

This is an exhibition of seemingly frivolous, fey things, an efflorescence of flamboyant façades festooned, almost fetishistically, with a superfluity of decorative frills and frippery. Here is a congregation of objects ornate, overdone and ostentatious, a cornucopia of tchotchkes and curiosities a-swirl in a kaleidoscope of surfaces, textures and colours, visual conceits conjured up in the key of high-pitched camp and gleeful kitsch. Like the fantastically foppish creatures that Ronald Firbank – the campiest, canniest promulgator of purple prose around – painted with an immoderate palette the bruised blue of a young violet just opening its virginal bud to the proboscis of a Bacchanalian-minded bee, these *objets d'art* appear to the viewer as if of a vision

of "a shapely page (of sixteen) with cheeks fresher than milk", the sweet sap for a satyr's mid-day dream of debauchery amid a downy field.

The scented ambrosia of the sweetest fruit, however, sings forth to the fetid fly. The exhibition, the title of which inverts that of Firbank's novel, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, is an exercise in reverse: unpalatable realities gussied up in a gaudy gown, the odours of a large, metaphorical foot emanating from beneath a perfumed bloom. Lying just beneath the excess and extravagance of these works is a hard, cheerless core, lambent as the pellucid pearl of a teardrop, a small, salty secretion softly scintillating on the cheek of a sorrowing

princess or a stricken socialist. Here is a checklist of the realities of urban existence in 21st century Southeast Asia, a simmering stew of identity politics, socio-economic marginalisation, political distress, gender disparity and historical contestation, like strident, staccato cadences that sharpen a melody otherwise mellifluous with gay sentiments, a lilting Firbank-ian tune set to a chorus of Ivy Compton-Burnett's baleful *bon mots*.

Camp and Kitsch: The Blooming

The lineages of camp and kitsch are particularly Western constructs, and much has been said by Western commentators about camp and kitsch. "The word camp itself", one writes, "is protean and duplicitous as much as it is slippery"² The commonly accepted etymology is a derivation from the French *se camper*, meaning "to posture", and the Italian *campeggiere*, "to stand out."³ An early moment of camp, according to another, "comes from 18th century France. Looking back on Marie Antoinette and Louis XIV's reign as French monarchs in the late 1700s, their lavish lifestyle could be ascribed to camp sensibility. The powdered, poufed hair, the generous ball gowns, and the gold-adorned palace all exhibit the level of ostentatiousness expected of camp"⁴ In the twentieth century, the seminal explicatory text, has proven to be Susan Sontag's, who laid the theoretical foundations, in 1964,

with *Notes on "Camp"* – which stands as, if not the original text, then at least the earliest attempt to systematically define the parameters of the field.

So influential were her ideas that the blockbuster exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum's Anna Wintour Costume Center in 2019 took its titular cue from her, dubbing itself "Camp: Notes on Fashion". Sontag's ideas are now considered canonical – ironically so – and worth revisiting here, if only for her valiant attempt at a serious stab at a sub-cultural phenomenon (a harbinger, one would like to think, of what was to come later in the decade). The central premise of camp, she avers, is its "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."⁵ She attempts to sketch a discursive map of the terrain through a list of fifty-eight points. Camp is "a certain mode of aestheticism" (point no. 1)⁶; examples of the "canon of camp" include Tiffany lamps, Swan Lake and, indeed, the novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett (no. 4). It is the "corny flamboyant femaleness" and "the exaggerated he-man-ness" of movie stars of the 50s (no. 9). Camp is "epicene" (no. 11), the "spirit of extravagance" (no. 25) and loves the "old-fashioned and out of date, *démodé*" (no. 31). It is the "sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalisation of experience" (no. 36). It is about "style" (no. 40), an attempt to "dethrone the serious" (no. 41), and the province of the dandy (nos. 45 to 49) and the homosexual (nos. 51 to 53).

¹ Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot in Five Novels* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 1 – 94. See p. 4.

² Fabio Cleto, "The Spectacles of Camp" in Andrew Bolton et al. *Camp: Notes on Fashion* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), p. 1/13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sophie Shaw, "The Performative History of Camp", *CR Fashion Book* (April 2019). Accessed online at <<https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/a27170612/history-camp-met-gala-theme-fashion-designers/>>. Last accessed August 5, 2020.

⁵ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, USA: Laurel Edition, Dell Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 277 – 293. See p. 277.

⁶ Sontag, p. 279.

It is, above all, “a sensibility (as distinct from an idea)”⁷ that is ultimately untellable, merely show-able.

(May we think of citationality as a form of textual drag, a miming of another writer’s voice? If so, this essay is at least, partly, the literary equivalent of a wig and sequins, a performance of another.)

Sontag’s list reads exhaustively, and is ultimately exhausting, a kitchen sink of qualities, and qualifications, and dimensions, and conditions, and examples, and allusions and references that feels laboriously self-defeating towards its end, a serious and seriously belaboured exercise in delineating something so amorphous as the spirit of a sensibility. Filmmaker Bruce LaBruce remarks, rightly, that “Sontag’s camp manifesto of camp was published almost fifty years ago, and it’s clear that it is no longer adequate to lump together all styles and modes of camp. Distinctions must be made ...”⁸ And make distinctions he does, though it is to an almost absurd degree. According to LaBruce’s own anatomising – perhaps in semi-mocking homage to Sontag’s eye-roll of a roll-call – there is a veritable cornucopia of subcategories of camp these days: classic gay camp, bad gay camp, good straight camp, bad straight camp, high camp, low camp, ultra camp, bad ultra camp, quasi-camp, subversive camp, reactionary camp, liberal camp, conservative camp, intentional camp, unintentional camp, good intentional straight camp.

“I would go so far as”, he proclaims, “to argue that “camp” has replaced “irony” as the go-to sensibility in popular culture, and it has, at the risk of generalisation, long since lost its essential qualities of esoteric sophistication and secret signification, partly owing to the contemporary tendency of the gay sensibility to allow itself to be thoroughly co-opted ... I will argue that now, in this moment, the whole goddamn world is camp.”⁹ Indeed, the aesthetic of camp, in the twenty-first century, is so firmly established – and celebrated, if the Met exhibition was any barometer – as a category of cultural and sartorial expression, with or sans irony, that it seems to have migrated from being Sontag’s “fugitive sensibility” to an almost universal export, along with the English language and Mickey Mouse and Elvis.

... And then, of course, there’s kitsch, so often interchangeably associated with camp. The precursor to what we would today label as kitschy was identified by the doyen of art critics, Clement Greenberg, as the “rear-guard”, in contradistinction to the avant-garde. “True enough” he writes, “simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc, etc.”¹⁰ The realm

of mass culture, of course, has evolved drastically since the essay first appeared in 1939, and anyone would be hard-pressed to recognise popular graphic design or Hollywood movies in general as kitsch; these days, perhaps, the term immediately calls to mind a material register of cheap, cheaply produced knick-knacks and gewgaws, from “I heart New York” t-shirts to garden gnomes to Chairman Mao magnets to Elvis and Mickey Mouse memorabilia and merchandise galore. The common denominator, by one account, is its low status: “No matter how we classify its contexts of usage, kitsch always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy. Such inadequacy is often found in single objects whose formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention.”¹¹ It may be a subjective affair to rationalise the “cultural content or intention” of garden ornaments or fridge magnets, but, not unlike camp, kitsch seems to be self-defining in the eye of the beholder, and aesthetic inadequacy – a lack of appropriate concern for visual balance, symmetry or just plain old good taste, whether deliberate or contextually defined – the unquestioned and immediate criterion of judgement here.

Greenberg, however, seemed to accurately describe one particular aspect of kitsch at least: its function as a form of opposition to high culture, or perhaps cultural hegemony. Elsewhere, the acknowledgement that “kitsch is no more a fixed category than schlock or camp” is accompanied by a

similar declaration: “What is important is their persistently subordinate relation to the dominant culture, by which they are defined as examples of ‘failed taste.’”¹² The aesthetic rear-guard, from camp to kitsch, seems united by various tropes, from its excess to ironic value to visual delinquency, but it is the notion of failure that the present exhibition explores – failure not in and of itself, but failure as a cultural response, a means with which to resist, and to subvert, the impositions of hegemonic socio-cultural and political forms. Here, the idea of a *devant-garde* is marked by its deliberate failure to conform to cultural and stylistic standards generally deemed to fall within limits of acceptability. If hegemony is to be understood, qua Antonio Gramsci, as a network of ideological forces rather than physical domination, the relations it engenders a mixture of coercion and consent, then it is only to be understood as a dyadic phenomenon, seldom witnessed without its counterpart: contestation (in whatever form).

Camp and Kitsch: Southeast Asia

The *devant-garde* operates as the other term of a dichotomised relationship with the avant-garde, the latter an active complex of experimentation, the former a passive-aggressive denial or subversion of hegemonic frameworks. What camp and kitsch represent, then, are not so much a specific sensibility or a visual style, but stand, rather, as embodiments of what they are precisely not: signifiers of

⁷ Sontag, p. 277.

⁸ Bruce LaBruce, “Notes on Camp/Anti Camp”, a paper presented at a conference in Berlin in 2012. Archived on LaBruce’s personal website at <<http://brucealabruce.com/2015/07/07/notes-on-camp-anti-camp/>>. Last accessed August 5, 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3 – 21. See p. 9.

¹¹ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 234.

¹² Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 54 – 77. See p. 64 for both quotes.

mainstream attitudes, politics, lifestyles and orientations. Here, it is the cultural contexts and everyday realities of life in Southeast Asia in the twenty-first century that provide the frameworks through are, among others, as the trans-formed bodies of transgender and genderqueer individuals; a campy vision of a refugee camp in Thailand; glitzy, kitschy repurposings of everyday textures and objects common to low-income, working-class neighbourhoods in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur; cuddly stuffed sculptures that embody notions of alterity and otherness, as well as subjective emotional states otherwise inarticulable; a shrine for an imaginary eunuch deity, a testament to the occlusion of queer histories in Asia.

Here are objects that fail, very ostentatiously and obviously, with fuchsia and lavender and slime green and gilt and plastic beads and squishy forms and red lights and phallic symbols and unbecomingly (homo-)erotic tableaux, to live up to popular, middle-class ideas of decorum and respectable taste. They seem embarrassingly and all too obviously indulgent, indigent, impertinent – visual cues that would suggest doubt, dissent and dissatisfaction with the status quo. The exaggerated excesses and artificiality of camp are clearly evinced, for instance, in Stephanie Jane Burt's and Samuel Xun's fabric installation, *Bai Barbarella Chow*, which was commissioned for the exhibition.¹³ The work exemplifies Burt's interest in textures and tactility, and Xun's predilection for palettes and materials

that are characteristic of camp aesthetics. Featuring a variety of smooth, shiny surfaces, and adorned with sparkling, glittery accents, it is oriented around a c-stand, a reference to pole dancing culture; it also boasts filmic inspiration, as the title suggests. The performativity of the body, whether before an audience or the camera, underpins the conceptual contours of the piece – especially female and queer bodies, the other-ed objects of the (heterosexual) male gaze. "Artifice is used here as a weapon", the artists observe, "where the body once wounded begins to develop an amour, positioning itself as a defense against society's ridicule. If this is the starting point that we relate and empathise with, this project would serve as a foundation of collaborative dialogue where we attempt to build a site of resistance, inverting perceived weakness into strength."¹⁴

Similarly, Kawita Vatanajyankur's *Work* videos is focused on corporeal capacities, and the gendered societal space that the female body, as well as its labour, inhabits. The series, of which *The Scale*, *The Scale of Justice*, and *The Lift* are included here, is incongruously light-hearted at first glance, with the artist employing her own body as mechanical implements such as weighing scales and a basket in a pulley system, often performing against a saturated, candy-coloured background: pink, yellow, blue, green. Like the famous Thai smile, however, its undertones are far less straightforward. Vatanajyankur's performances are, as is clear, feats of

endurance, the lengths to which she pushes her physical limits paralleling the ordinary experiences of working-class Thai women who often undertake both domestic chores and commercial labour without the aid of electronic devices common to first-world economies. Her body, like that of Burt's and Xun's substitute anatomy, is also objectified here, a fact made abundantly clear in her live works, where her skin-tight, flesh-coloured attire and squeals and grunts of exertion – especially the latter – charge the performance with an apposite sexual energy.¹⁵

ren zi's mural, *that which shall be restored, that which has been irrevocably changed*, depicts an apocalyptic, post-Covid universe that they – the artist prefers the gender neutral singular-plural pronoun – dreamt up as a retrofuturistic landscape, the stylistic syntax of which is as much indebted to the visuals of superhero comics as to the motifs of various indigenous Austronesian communities across archipelagic Southeast Asia. The protagonist is a hybrid of "The Trickster" archetype, familiar to many mythological systems, and the contemporary figure of the trans-individual, resulting in a genderqueer superhero/ine of ambiguous morality and principles. "It is as much response to the state of the world", ren zi notes, "as it is expression of the ambivalence towards aspects of queerness appropriated by heteronormative society. With queerness so neutered through normalisation, transgendered communities assume the mantle of being vanguard of the radical frontier. By prodding the

boundaries of socio-political acceptance and discomfort, they undertake the trickster's role and functions."¹⁶

Indo-Burmese Richie Htet's series of diminutive paintings, *Dream of an Indian Ocean*, pictures the Asian male body as an object of queer desire – an overtly sexualised, fetishised figure, its overweening masculinity softened by epicene motifs such as flowers, pearl necklaces and translucent fabrics. While his work is premised on imagery typically witnessed in traditional Indian painting, particularly Mughal miniatures, its corporeal iconography inflected to align with the lineage of camp, it also alludes to an increasing awareness of racial and representational issues surrounding Asian identity in queer culture, which, along with the modern gay rights movement, was birthed in the West.¹⁷ The occlusion of Asian bodies in the contemporary LGBTQ universe has been a reality much commented upon and Htet has here reimaged same-sex desire within a same-race dynamic, recuperating the possibilities of homosexual identity beyond the dictates of a Western-centric discourse and the privileging of white bodies.

Other works in the exhibition elude depictions of the body, recontextualising instead the material cultures of various phenomena – from working-class neighbourhoods to folk traditions – as camp or kitsch. Khairullah Rahim's and Haffendi Anuar's works engage with the quotidian physical realities of the locales they live or work in: the former with Boon Lay, in

¹³ Please refer to write-ups for individual works, elsewhere in this publication, for a fuller description.

¹⁴ In an e-mail to the author, dated April 26, 2020.

¹⁵ In reference to a performance by the artist on the opening night of her solo exhibition, "The Repetitiveness of Work", at Project Fulfill Art Space in Taipei, Taiwan, on July 20, 2019.

¹⁶ In an e-mail to the author, dated April 6, 2020.

¹⁷ See, for one, the chapter, "Re-orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World", in Joseph A. Massad's *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Singapore, and the latter, Kuala Lumpur's Ampang. Both utilise objects found in their respective neighbourhoods, recreating the circuit of everyday things typical of these lower-income precincts. The glamorising of otherwise routine, ordinary articles, from tableware to plastic beads to car paint and floor mats, foregrounds issues of socio-economic class. The genre of the still-life, to turn to art historical sources, provides an analogue here: according to Norman Bryson, still-life painting turns on a distinction between megalography and rhopography.¹⁸ The first is the stuff of history painting and portraiture, trafficking in suitably broad themes of mythology, religion, literature and history, and allegories of the great and the good. The second stems from the Greek *rhopos* (trifling things, or small, inconsequential goods), portraying that which the prescriptions of the previous category programmatically omits from its range of subject matter, i.e. the unsung material base of life, the foodstuffs and drink and creature comforts so sensually depicted by painters of centuries past.

In appropriating the trope of *rhopos*, the artists dislocate these objects, raising them to the level of megalography. Insisting on their public presence of these expendable, mass-produced commodities that otherwise exist on the periphery of the social imagination, rendering them susceptible to critical notice through strategies of refashioning, the works of Khairullah

and Haffendi stand as commentaries on the class structure and social hierarchy of two of Southeast Asia's most advanced economies.

Camp and Kitsch: Re-crafting the Body

Non-conforming identities and deviant bodies are a recurring motif in this exhibition, but perhaps none more so than Anne Samat's *Wide Awake and Unafraid*, which presents a matrix of campy flamboyance, kitschy materiality, socio-cultural heterodoxy and, perhaps most surprisingly, an embrace of Southeast Asian lifeworlds – specifically, traditional craft. This piece, in particular, encompasses the major themes of “The Foot Beneath the Flower”, and bears sustained scrutiny here.¹⁹ As is characteristic of much of Anne's oeuvre, it assumes the form of a wall-bound assemblage, constructed out of various craft-based artefacts and found objects, vaguely evoking the abstracted form of a humanoid anatomy. The primary components of the installation are instantly recognisable. A face is implied by a round tin; above it, the bristles of a broom head provide headgear of sorts. One then comes across the innards of the body: a spoked hub cap represents the womb of the feminine figure, and a long, dangling column, which trails all the way to the ground, signifies a spine. It is also here, crucially, that the most salient craft elements of the piece are encountered. Using the *songket*

technique practised primarily in the east coast regions of peninsular Malaysia, the artist has replaced the use of gold and silver threads with metal forks and short wooden sticks, creating a train of these objects by interweaving them, weft-wise, with the threads. Two long rows of rakes, radiating outwards from the central core, seem almost to mimic arms, dangling down from which are lengths of threads, bearing various trinkets and household items.

For present purposes, the desired reading of Anne's output would necessarily encompass the facts of her personal history, the biographical contours of her life as those have shaped her specific thematic and material modes. One fact, in particular, stands out: she was born to a Malay-Muslim family in Malaysia, and suffering from an early age from gender dysphoria, she underwent gender reassignment surgery in 1996, and has lived as a woman since then. Perhaps surprisingly, Anne has stated that her Malay-Muslim identity, however complicated by her personal life choices, informs her artistic practice in fundamental ways; “roots”, to use her term of choice, features as a central trope in her work.²⁰ If, as has been pointed out, gender and sexual atypicality is “concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalises, rearticulates and makes visible the normative linkages that we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body [and] the social

roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy”²¹, then what is disrupted here are linkages between Malay-Muslim identity and issues of gender, both meeting in the motif of the transformed body. It is by reading her status as an LGBTQ individual into the presence of craft in her work that the breadth of the artist's divergence from the body politic of the country's Malay-Muslim mainstream becomes clear, especially since *Wide Awake and Unafraid* was intended as a statement for queer rights in Malaysia:

“I’ve always considered tolerance and respect to be a crucial part of self-expression. Basic rights today however – whether ascribed to religion, equality, happiness or liberty – are being interpreted narrowly, so as to restrict freedom and discriminate against communities. Among the frequent targets of discrimination are women and the LGBTQ community…… These taboos are so often shaped by fear, the same fear that comes into play when politicians call for enforcement of their religious laws. Freedom remains a fundamental piece of the fabric that makes up our democracy.”²²

The practice and discourse of craft has remained a vital, vibrant strand in the circuits of contemporary art in Southeast Asia. Across the art-making ecosystems of the region, contemporary artists have drawn upon a broad spectrum of native craft traditions, ranging from batik and rattan to lacquer and woodcarving –

¹⁸ See the chapter, “Rhopography”, in Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Portions of the discussion in this part of essay were originally included in a paper, *Queer Craft and Radical Cuts: Transgenderism and the Malay-Muslim Body in the Work of Anne Samat*, presented in September 2018 at the annual International Seminar of the Faculty of Liberal Arts of Thammasat University (LATU), “Super diversity and Coexistence in Our Changing World”, in Bangkok, Thailand.

²⁰ Biographical facts about, and quotes from, the artist, unless otherwise stated, derive from an oral interview conducted with her in Kuala Lumpur in July 2018.

²¹ See Susan Stryker's “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies” in *The Transgender Studies Reader (Volume 1)* eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

²² *Wide Awake and Unafraid* was produced for a group show, “Contemporary Chaos”, at the Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium in Norway in 2018. The artist's statement accompanied the work then.

examples include Yee I-Lann, Sopheap Pich, Phi Phi Oanh and Bui Cong Khanh, among others – to generate visually referential and critically inflected objects. These works channel the processual and stylistic markers of said traditions as recuperative gestures, collapsing allusions to the material cultures of Southeast Asia's past with (often implicit) statements about the critical potential of autochthonous histories and traditions, channelling traditional modes of objecthood into their work as means of making critical statements; using craft, finally, as an aesthetic position. It would not be unreasonable to understand Anne's work within this dynamic, of the manipulation of materials as a form of resistance against broader cultural norms and social privilege.

As has been pointed out, the ontology of craft is a highly circumscribed one: "Craft is either seen as a practice with a long tradition of working with specific materials, or as a practice based on a certain approach to the working process. In short, the conceptual frame for craft is often seen as premised on "tradition", "material", or "process."²³ In the case of Anne's figural assemblages, it is the juxtaposition of the handmade and the factory-produced, the craft-y and the readymade, that generates contextual anxieties, a slippage between the modern machine and time-bound processes than lends her work a telling tension. The inflections of craft-based techniques here, to put it another way, are significant in a manner that recalls the resistance of heteronormative prerogatives

and presumptions by the contumacious presence of the queer, of marginalised identities and expressions that refuse the imposition of overdetermined categories. Craft and queerness, then, are twinned in their parallel positions of alterity to hegemonic cultural discourses and configurations; they are, in Anne's work, both saliently other.

Camp and Kitsch: Unhappy Queers

However, what may be of even greater interest here, beyond the recuperation of occluded female labour and the gainsaying or co-optation of modern industry, is the notion of craft as a cultural stance, an aesthetic position. This position is one that dovetails with the imperatives and contours of queer theory. Queer theory, one commentator remarks, was responsible for reversing derogatory associations of queerness, and elevating it to one embodying forms of alterity:

"The tactic of ambiguity embodied by *queer* resists stereotypes and enables identities to encompass 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances' that renders labels and classification simplistic. *Queer* expresses a noncomplicity with systems that create and proliferate those stereotypes, which themselves establish and regulate power structures."²⁴

The *devant-garde* aesthetics of the works in this exhibition – its embrace of exaggeration

and artifice, its inversion of the values of beauty and taste, fashioning awkward-looking household objects into aesthetic excess – sit all too comfortably with the non-conformist signification of its craft elements, surprisingly enough. They suggest ways of being in the world that are ill at ease with its prevailing strictures and structures. That a substantial number of works in the exhibition engage with themes of queerness seems to be a territorial hazard; campiness and kitsch, after all, have always represented a space where the LGBTQ community, in particular, have felt comfortable in, becoming a cultural signifier, for whom the modern discourse of gay rights is a non-native Western import that arrived late in the twentieth century.

Perhaps that ill-at-easiness may also be read as unhappiness, a form of *affirmative* unhappiness. Sara Ahmed writes: "To narrate unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world, even if we are not given a vision of the world as it might exist after the walls of misery are brought down."²⁵ The ideal of happiness as it circulates in contemporary culture is, according to her, more than just an emotion, but a "redescription of life as a project", an "instrument", and "a means to an end, as well as the end of the means".²⁶ The promise of happiness has attached itself to various objects and objectives: Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, which refers to the sort of happiness earned from a life of virtue and reason; the blandishments of capitalism, which holds our happiness as the result of material accumulation;

the glow surrounding the exemplars of heterosexual marriage and reproduction.

Yet, that is less than the whole picture, for the model of the life well-lived within classical Greek philosophy, for one, was based on system of socio-economics that involved self-ownership, material security and leisure time, which were luxuries afforded only to the elite. The historic privileging of heterosexual conduct similarly ensures that the rights of those whose love takes certain politically and socially recognisable forms are secured, and that of those who deviate from those forms are not. What, then, does it mean to be unhappy, and to be affirmatively unhappy in this part of the world, here and now? Perhaps unhappiness simply entails, in Ahmed's words, "an active disbelief in the necessary alignment of the happy with the good"²⁷, of the equivalence between happiness and positive feelings and productivity and income and consumerism and love and family as defined by state diktat. Perhaps unhappiness "might appear as feelings ... or moods that linger without direction, aim, or purpose, which are only loosely attached to points of view"²⁸ – feelings, in other words, that do not serve the needs of state or capitalism or society or ways of life, simply because to be 'happy' would be to accord with the ill-fitting frameworks of those configurations.

Beneath the fragrant bloom of the good life, then, *et voilà* – a big, unhappy foot.

²³ Louise Mazanti, "Super-Objects: Craft as Aesthetic Position" in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 59–82. See p. 59.

²⁴ Lacey Jane Roberts, "Put Your Things Down, Flip It, and Reverse It: Reimagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory" in *Extra/Ordinary*, pp. 243–59. See p. 245.

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 107.

²⁶ Ahmed, p. 10.

²⁷ Ahmed, p. 89.

²⁸ Ibid.



*that which shall be restored, that which
has been irrevocably changed, 2020*
Vinyl sticker
625 x 315 cm

ren zi

SINGAPORE

As ren zi puts it, "The Covid-19 pandemic bears elements of an apocalypse, forcing the world at large to reconsider life-as-we-know-it. Assumptions, routines, sense of time ... overturned." Here, that apocalypse, as dreamed up by the artist, assumes the form of a retrofuturistic landscape that simultaneously mines the past for narratives of being in the world, while projecting a future of shifting, fluid subjectivities. This post-Covid universe is informed by both the visual language of superhero comics as well as the cultural cosmos of various Austronesian peoples.

Its protagonist is derived from "The Trickster" archetype found across a wide range of mythologies, hybridised with the contemporary figure of the trans-individual who may inhabit any number of gender

or sexual identities. The result is an ambiguous, genderqueer superhero/ine who embodies the tension between order and disorder, and morality and relativity, navigating their way through a fantastical, virus-ravaged realm comprised of motifs from a number of indigenous lifeworlds. Visible is the sinuous form of the *aso*, a dog-and-dragon chthonic deity of the Dayak people that here represents the forces of disruption unleashed by the pandemic, as well as images of beaded suns and stars from ceremonial textiles, called *Lawo Butu*, of the Ngada community of the Flores islands, which resemble the spiked sphere of the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen. The trans-trickster protagonist is clad, at various points throughout the landscape, in the ceremonial garb of the Nias and the Minangkabau.



Artists

Anne Samat (b. 1973, Malacca, Malaysia) graduated in 1995 from Mara Institute of Technology, Malaysia with a Bachelor Degree in Art and Design (textile design). Samat creates unique and colourful totems inspired by ancient tales of her ancestry by using intricate weaving of Malaysian Songket textiles, synthetic fibers, rattan sticks and other found objects. She has received numerous awards such as the Jurors' Award Open Show Malaysia in 2014, Top Ten Malaysian Female Artists in 2013, and the Incentive Award by Shah Alam Gallery in Selangor, Malaysia in 2012. Her recent exhibitions includes *Sultanate in the Eye*, *Monarchy at Heart*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2017), *Contemporary Chaos*, Vestfossen Kunstlaborium, Norway (2018), *Stories We Scare Ourselves With*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, Taiwan (2019), and *SPECTROSYNTHESIS II – Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, Bangkok, Thailand (2019).

Arahmaiani (b. 1961, Bandung, Indonesia) is one of Indonesia most respected multi-disciplinary artist whose work explores a range of issues revolving around politics, globalisation, religion, violence, feminism, sexuality and geopolitical Islam. She has shown, and performed widely in museums and biennales including the Venice Biennale (2003); Biennale of the Moving Image, Geneva (2003);

Gwangju Biennale (2002); Bienal de São Paulo (2002); Performance Biennale, Israel (2001); Biennale de Lyon (2000); Werkleitz Biennale (2000); Bienal de la Habana (1997); Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia (1996); and the Yogya Biennial (1994). Her recent exhibitions include her solo show *The Past has not Passed*, in Museum MACAN, Jakarta, Indonesia (2019-2019), *Solidarity as A Means of Action* in Haifa Museum, Israel (2019-2020) and *After Hope* in Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA (2020).

Stephanie Jane Burt (b. 1988, Singapore) is an artist whose practice spans from sculptural installations to fictional prose. She completed her studies at Glasgow School of Art, where she received her Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Painting and her Master of Fine Arts. Her work invites the viewer to explore dialogues between her installations and their settings through a fictional narrative at times referencing film and literature. Some of her recent shows include *Lock Route*, Gillman Barracks, Singapore, (2017), *Suppose, there is A*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore, (2017), *Discipline the City*, The Substation, Singapore, (2017), *Art Jakarta* (2017), *Gender Hierarchy*, Grey Projects, Singapore, (2019), *ISCP Open Studios*, New York, (2019), and *What is the current that presents a behaved waist*, Yeo Workshop, Gillman Barracks, Singapore, (2020).

Samuel Xun (b. 1994, Singapore) is Singapore-based fashion designer and multidisciplinary artist whose practice includes fashion, installation and graphic art. He graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts with a Bachelor in Fashion Design & Textiles. Xun's work marries theatricality with wit, and subvert gender archetypes, examining the intersection of queerness with the clothed body, expressed through material culture, exaggerated silhouettes, and high aestheticism.

Chong Yan Chuah (b. 1992, Malaysia) is a multidisciplinary artist who works with digital art, drawing, painting, sculpture and installation. Graduating from Newcastle University with a degree in Architecture and the Architectural Association School of Architect, he explores the intersection of the physical environment in which we live in and fictional worlds that he creates to challenge the perception of space, reality and experience. His first solo exhibition, *27 Years of Lazarian Delights*, was shown at The Back Room, Kuala Lumpur, in 2019. His other exhibitions include *Bodycathexis*, *Wonderwall*, The Backroom, The Zhongshan Building, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2020), *Kyphosis*, The Backroom, The Zhongshan Building, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2020) and *Fragments of Lazarian Delights*, ZARCH gallery space, Singapore for Singapore Art Week.

Joshua Kane Gomes (b. 1993, Malaysia) graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 2017, where he studied under the Tuition Grant for Art Institutions, awarded by the Ministry of Education, Singapore. He is also the recipient of the Cheong Kam Hee Art Prize in 2017. Gomes' practice explores the themes of identity and space. Documenting his mental processes and states through the art-making process, he peeks into the grey areas between cold rationality and sentimental sensibility.

His recent exhibitions include a solo show titled *These Things We Do*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2019), *Emerging: Collecting Singapore Contemporary - Selections from the DUO Collection*, The Private Museum, Singapore (2020), and *New Works*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Malaysia & Singapore S.E.A. FOCUS, Gillman Barracks, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore (2020).

Haffendi Anuar (b. 1985, Malaysia) received an MFA at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford (2019-2020). Anuar explores the progress of Southeast Asian countries by linking notions of progress and modernity to the natural process of organic growth in the natural world through sculptures, paintings and drawings. Using history of art, digital technology, nature and local contexts, he creates works with found images, objects and artistic styles from digital and local sources. Anuar was featured in the publication '100 Sculptures of Tomorrow' by Kurt Beers, published by Thames and Hudson in 2019. Recent exhibitions include *Empty Vase*, Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai, China (2019) and *Haffendi Anuar & Nadia Waheed: For the Few and the Many*, BEERS London, United Kingdom (2019).

Hoo Fan Chon (b. 1982, Selangor, Malaysia) currently resides in George Town, Penang. He is the co-founder and a member of an art collective, Run Amok Gallery. He completed his BA Photography at the London College of Communication in 2010 and has exhibited locally and internationally. Hoo's practice often involves the exploration of cultural and social constructs and the interdependent yet antithetical relationships between the dominant and the subservient. He was selected as one of the participants for the Japan Foundation Asia Center Curators' Workshop (2015-2017) and participated in No Man's Land Residency Project – Nusantara Archive in Taiwan (2017-2018). He took part in the third edition of

Makassar Biennale (2019) and recently co-curated *Bayangnya itu Timbul Tenggelam* – Photographic Cultures in Malaysia (2020).

Richie Htet (b. 1995, Myanmar) is an artist, illustrator and image-maker based in Yangon. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts in Fashion Illustration at the London College of Fashion, UK. As a queer Myanmar artist, Htet explores the themes of the human figure, eroticism, identity, the empowerment of female energy, as well as the reinterpretation of historical gaze and human sexuality using his own experience growing up in a conservative society. His recent exhibitions in Myanmar/Art, Myanmar include *&PROUD*, (2018), “*I’m not trying to seduce you*” (2018) and a solo exhibition *A Chauk*, (2020).

Johann M. Fauzi (b. 1962, Singapore) is an artist whose practice is focused on the conceptual framing of Singapore landscape at the intersections of Classical and Romantic periods, as well as question ‘otherness’ and the position of a Malay person in Singapore. A collector of objects and paintings from the 13th to the 19th centuries, Fauzi fuses his interest in such material culture with oil painting. Graduating in 2019 from LASALLE College of the Arts, he has participated in exhibitions and art fairs, such as *Artist Emergent*, The Print Gallery, The Arts House, Singapore (2015), *Without Formality*, Singapore (2018), Singapore and *Pride of the Mangoesteen*, Clifford Change, Singapore (2019), and *Jemputan*, a solo exhibition at Comma Art Space (2020). He was also showcased in Singapore Bicentennial show at ArtScience Museum Singapore (2019).

Khairullah Rahim (b. 1987, Singapore) is a multimedia artist whose practice spans across painting, assemblage, video and photography. His works explore the narratives and experiences of marginalised communities whose identities may not align with social norms, and engage with the use of everyday ready-mades and found objects. In 2019, Khairullah participated in the 2019 Singapore Biennale and he was an award recipient of

the 2017 IMPART Awards for Visual Art. His recent exhibitions include *Objects of Desire*, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, New York (2019), *SPECTROSYNTHESIS II – Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok, Thailand (2019), and *Gathering of Flocks*, Yavuz Gallery, Singapore (2020). He is a part-time lecturer at LASALLE College of the Arts and currently an MFA Visual Arts candidate at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, New Jersey.

Daniel Kok (b. 1976, Malaysia) is an independent choreographer, artistic researcher and curator whose performances have been presented across Asia, Europe, Australia and North America. In his works, Kok explores the idea of relational politics in spectatorship and audienceship. He was awarded the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council (Singapore). He is also the Artistic Director of Dance Nucleus, a space for artistic research, creative development and critical discourse for contemporary performance. Recent works include “*Bunny*” (2016), a rope performance in collaboration with Luke George (Melbourne) and “*xhe*” (2018), a durational performance/installation that premiered at the Esplanade (Singapore) and *LiveWorks* (Sydney).

Việt Lê (b. 1976, Vietnam) is an artist, writer and curator based in California, USA. His work examines the formats of pop music videos and place trauma, representation, sexuality, and spiritualities within the framework of visual studies, ethnography, queer theory and diasporic histories. His recent exhibitions include *vestige*, H Gallery Bangkok, Thailand (2015) and *lovebang!*, Kellogg University Art Gallery, Los Angeles, USA (2016). He has published in various journals with writings that has been translated into Chinese, German, Khmer, and Vietnamese, and is presently Associate Professor in Visual Studies at California College of the Arts (San Francisco & Oakland).

Geraldine Lim (b. 1996, Singapore) is a multimedia artist based in Singapore. Her practice explores the psychological context

of social alienation and the threats of the non-conforming and the strange. Working primarily with soft sculpture and video, she explores the idea of the in-between and the transgressive within objects and forms. Prior to pursuing a Master of Fine Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts, she was trained in painting and had received the People’s choice award for Cliftons Art Prize in 2016. She was also recently a nominee for her animated film, *Ouch*, in the National Youth Film Awards 2018.

Alvin Ong (b. 1988, Singapore) mines the Western and Eastern art history canon to create fragmented yet intimate paintings, often containing hints of technology and signifiers of specific locations. Released from the limitations of time and space within the physical world, Ong’s figures merge and collide across different perspectival planes. A graduate of the Ruskin School of Art and the Royal College of Art, he has exhibited at the Singapore Art Museum (2007, 2012, 2013); Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore (2010); Peranakan Museum, Singapore (2015); Northampton Contemporary, UK (2017); National Portrait Gallery UK (2018) and Royal Academy of Arts, UK (2018). His works are collected by the Peranakan Museum (Singapore), ILHAM Gallery (Malaysia); the Ingram Collection (UK), X Museum (China) and the Victoria & Albert Museum (UK). He lives and works in Singapore and London.

ren zi (conceptualised 2006, Singapore) is an autodidact whose practice focuses on how the individual/society makes, breaks and recreates reality through the “myth”. Rooted in philosophical idealism, cognitive psychology, science fiction, magic and Halberstam’s notion of queer failure, their works are expeditions into alternate worlds and psychic landscapes exploring the extremes of human possibilities as refutation of the status quo. Their most recent solo presentation *Singapore Twilight*, Art Porters Gallery, Singapore (2019), was the result of their time with The Arctic Circle Residency and Gwangju Museum of Art International Residency Studio Programme (2017 – 18).

Kawita Vatanajyankur (b. 1987, Thailand) is a Thai video and performance artist. Graduating from RMIT University with Bachelor of Fine Art in 2011, Vatanajyankur is known for her eloquent and powerful feminist practice as a performance artist, exploring the difficulties of hard physical labour expected of women in traditional Thai society. In 2015, she was a finalist in the Jaguar Asia Pacific Tech Art Prize, and was featured in the Thailand Eye Exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, London. In 2017, she presented at the *Islands in the Stream* exhibition in Venice alongside the 57th Venice Biennale. Other notable exhibitions include her presentation in the Bangkok Art Biennale (2018), the Albright Knox Art Gallery, New York (2019), *Looping Paradoxes*, Dip Contemporary Art, Lugano, Switzerland, (2019), *Field Work* at the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP), Sydney, Australia (2020) and *Unconstrained Textiles: Stitching Methods, Crossing Ideas*, Centre for Heritage Arts and Textiles, Hong Kong (2020).

Wong Lip Chin (b. 1987, Singapore) is an interdisciplinary artist whose practice spans across painting, installation and performance. Trained as a printmaker, Wong’s works revolve around multi-sensorial modalities in art that is expressed through themes concerning speculative or vernacular histories pertinent in Chinese folklore and historical events involving Singapore. Wong graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts with a Bachelor of Arts in 2009, where he also served as an adjunct lecturer from 2014 to 2018. His works has been showcased in exhibitions at STPI, Singapore (2007), National University of Singapore Museum (2009), Asia Culture Center, Gwangju, Republic of Korea (2015), Rarytas Art Foundation, Poznan, Poland (2016) and 2 Cavan Road, Singapore (2020), to name a few. Other projects include *Fetter Field: Singapore Performance Art Event* (2007); *DRIVE*, Gillman Barracks (2014) and a Singapore Art Museum Front Lawn commission (2016).

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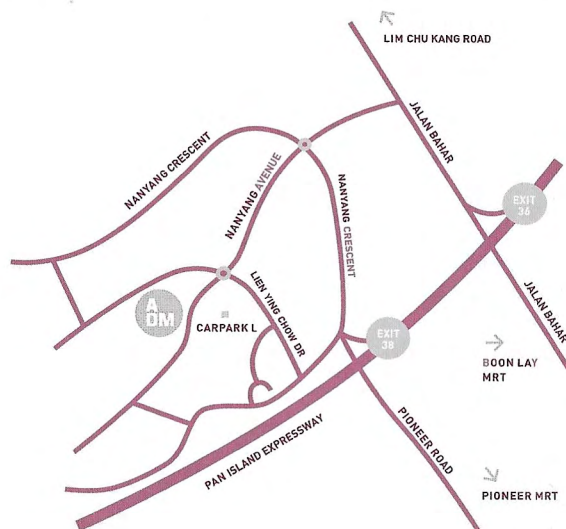
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