

NTU Museum presents an exhibition featuring
selected artworks from the NIE and NTU permanent
art collections embedded with a fictional narrative.

Sites & Nature: A Collection of Remembering

The background of the entire page is a painting. It depicts a coastal scene with several small boats on the water in the foreground. In the middle ground, there are buildings, possibly a village or a small town, with a prominent structure that looks like a lighthouse or a tower. The style is somewhat impressionistic or painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette. The overall mood is nostalgic and serene.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

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Sites & Nature: A Collection of Remembering

22 September to 27 October 2023
Monday to Friday, 11am — 5pm

THE NIE ART GALLERY
1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616

CURATOR
Dr. Wang Ruobing

ASSISTANT CURATORS
Celeste Tan Jia Mei
Skye Mo

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

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CHAPTER ONE

ON REMEMBERING AND ARTISTIC IMAGINATION: AN INTRODUCTION

WORDS BY DR. WANG RUOBING, CELESTE TAN AND SKYE MO

“WE MUST WELCOME THE
FUTURE, REMEMBERING
THAT SOON IT WILL BE THE
PAST; AND WE MUST RESPECT
THE PAST, REMEMBERING
THAT IT WAS ONCE ALL THAT
WAS HUMANLY POSSIBLE.”

GEORGE SANTAYANA¹

“Sites & Nature: A Collection of Remembering” is conceived as an immersive exhibition that aims to evoke memories inspired by the permanent art collections of the National Institute of Education (NIE) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU Singapore). Things, such as a river, trees, birds, flowers, monkeys, etc, visualised in the selected artworks offer a site for remembrance, a site for reconnection, a site for imagination and a site for conversation. This exhibition also creates a voyage, guiding visitors along the chronicles of a fictional figure, revealing the evolution of Singapore’s iconic locales — the Singapore River and the Singapore Botanic Gardens — or more broadly, the city development and the natural environment of Singapore. Besides the artworks and the fictional story, the other components — archival materials, furniture, artefacts, plants, etc — are exquisitely interweaved to curate a distinctive sensory experience that enhances the sense of remembering Singapore’s journey from a bustling port city to a flourishing garden metropolis.

¹ Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed. *The Philosophy of George Santayana* (Northwestern University Press, 1940), 560.

EXHIBITION SPACE



THE ARTWORK SELECTION

The artworks shown in the exhibition are carefully selected from the NIE and NTU permanent art collections, a modest collection of contemporary and Southeast Asia art. As the late Professor Lee Sing Kong, former director of NIE, has said that “this [NIE] art collection preserves elements of the past while providing a platform for reflecting on the present and perhaps the future; it demonstrates that history is indeed diverse and can be completed from multiple perspectives”,² both collections have a critical role in interpreting the past and future of Singapore. This is the first time that an exhibition aims to look into both collections from an overarching perspective, exploring not only what have been collected by the country’s second-oldest autonomous university, but also what artists have documented in relation to Singapore’s history through their artistic practices.

This selection of artworks mainly focuses on two sites, the Singapore River and the Singapore Botanic Gardens, due to the large percentage of the collections depicting nation building and the change in our natural environment. The chosen artworks include pieces by both local and international artists, including prominent Singaporean artists Lim Tze Peng, Tang Dawu, Han Sai Por, Chong Fah Cheong and Lim Hwee Tiong, and international artists Lucy Davis and Alison Wilson. The views from both local and international artists offer diverse and rich interpretations in capturing and encapsulating the essence and moments of Singapore’s development through their artistic imagination, through landmarks such as General Post Office, Coleman Bridge and the old houses at Clarke Quay, etc. The artworks are also created in various forms and mediums, including Chinese ink, watercolour, print-making, oil, chalk, charcoal, mix-media, etc, demonstrating the vibrant artistic practice of our local art scene. The artworks included in this exhibition are treated as living rather than static, allowing visitors to consider the artworks’ trajectory in understanding the constituting role of both the collections.

THE STORY-TELLING

The exhibition adopts the story-telling method in making connection with the artworks, visitors and research. Against the backdrop of Singapore in the 20th century to the present day, a fictional story is written based on a man born in Singapore in 1906, who was deeply rooted in the Singapore River area, and worked at the Botanic Gardens. Through the character’s intertwining lens intersecting with the artworks and research, the exhibition presents Singapore’s history through creatively interweaving historical time stamps, such as coolies on the river, the colonial era, the Japanese invasion, city development and landscape changes in establishing a nascent nation.

More specifically, based on the selection of artworks, the fictional story conjures up two key local phenomena — Singapore’s intricate economic botany trade and colonial past. The story seeks to highlight the charisma of a personal chronicle, a captivating blend of resilience during a turbulent era and enchanting encounters. The narrative functions as a staged fiction that delves into the societal significance of being a ‘botanic enthusiast’ and the enchanting, artistic ambience it exudes. It offers a fresh reading point in appreciating the selected artworks, prompting visitors to introspect on their own relationship with the development of the city.

The story is audio narrated by three local retirees. Functioning like an audio guide, the recording can be downloaded by visitors and played on their own devices while walking through the exhibition. With the accompaniment of audio voices, the exhibition content is materialised acoustically to enhance the visiting sensory experience and offers a personalised experience for all visitors.

2 *The NIE Collection* (National Institute of Education, Singapore, 2011), 2.

MULTI-LAYER NARRATING

Besides the story-telling, the exhibition also puts in great effort in enhancing the visitors' sensory experience and knowledge through multi-layer narrating, i.e., domestic installation setting and the use of archival materials, old furniture, artefacts and living plants.

The exhibition thoughtfully transforms the white box exhibition space of NIE Gallery into calming blue interval rooms. Each room is defined by a time period offering a chronological time sense. Furthermore, the exhibition skilfully intersects old furniture, books, plants, artefacts (such as old iron, suitcases, etc) and archival materials (such as stamps, postcards and maps, etc) with the display of artworks to stimulate a homely ambience, leading visitors to enter the exhibition as if entering from hall to living room to balcony to study room etc.

These additional materials introduced to the exhibition perform as agencies to create representations of time, inviting visitors to see underlying social and environmental connections in embracing artistic imagination. Pairing these materials with the artworks because "objects too have agency"³, as philosopher Bruno Latour has claimed, aims to leave traces and illustrate the connectedness of these materials with people. The incorporation of these agencies ultimately enhances the comprehension of the exhibition content. It gives visual clues to follow the story in embracing the visual arts, and unfolding a chronological progression of the character's distinct yet inter-relatable life and experiences.

TO REMEMBER

Ultimately, "Sites & Nature" is an exhibition dedicated to remembering through situating the insights from the collections of the country's second-oldest autonomous university, NTU. As philosopher George Santayana has eloquently argued, "We must welcome the future, remembering that soon it will be the past; and we must respect the past, remembering that it was once all that was humanly possible", revisiting the past is to provide a framework for the interpretation of the present and the future, and to appreciate the "humanly possible" of our pioneers in building a flourishing garden metropolis.⁴

Nevertheless, remembering requires knowing. In this exhibition, visitors are offered an informative account of what the artists remember, within a capacity exercised by individuals through artistic expressions. A unique fictional stage is created in order to facilitate the action of remembering. On this stage, visitors not only can move through the blue rooms appreciating more than 40 works from the collections, but also be informed via the multi agencies carefully intersected in between, such as story-telling, archival materials, artefacts, furniture and plants, in conjuring a sense of knowing. This unique exhibition invites audiences to celebrate and preserve the essence of Singapore's heritage for generations to come, fostering a sense of stewardship towards the city's environment and cultural legacy.



³ Bruno Latour, 'Third Source', in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford, 2005), 63–86.

⁴ Paul, *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, 560





CHAPTER TWO

THE STORY

THE FICTIONAL NARRATIVE AND CHARACTER ARE INSPIRED
BY AUTHENTIC HISTORICAL EVENTS AND FIGURES;
ALL INCLUDED ARTWORKS IN THE STORYTELLING ARE
THE CURATORIAL TEAM'S INTERPRETATION.



1906: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

“Singapore was simply one large warehouse, to which Madras sent cotton cloth; Calcutta, opium; Sumatra, pepper; Java, arrack and spices; Manilla, sugar and arrack; all forthwith despatched to Europe, China, Siam, &c. Of public buildings there appeared to be none. There were no stores, no careening — wharves, no building-yards, no barracks, and the visitors noticed but one small church for native converts.”

From Celebrated Travels and Travellers by Jules Verne, 1881.

I was born in 1906. I only came to realise later that it was a special year.

My parents are Teochew, coming from the Chaoshan region in China. Our home in Singapore was in Kampong Melaka near Clarke Quay¹, known colloquially in Teochew dialect as Cha Jung Tau, meaning “harbour for ships carrying firewood.”

Running across bridges and jumping into water² are some of my earliest memories. The kampong was always bustling with energy and noise.

Back then, river transportation was dominated by the Teochew community. Most twakows (traditional Chinese cargo boats) were owned by Teochews. Our twakows were all painted red, distinct from the more colourful Hokkien twakows with red, green, and white mixed boat-heads. But no matter tongkangs (also called lighters), twakows, prows, or junks, they all transported firewood and sacks of goods. Those sacks contained “nutmeg, gambier, coffee, pepper, and pineapples,” my father explained. However, they weren’t meant for us. They were meant for the West. I grew up watching lighters transfer goods to twakows, and witnessed the meticulous stacking and covering of goods by coolies when rain threatened.

I attended a teochew school named Tuan Mong School on 52 Hill Street. In 1913 it moved to an old Chinese building at River Valley Road. Today that building is known as The River House. Behind the school was a godown that stored gambier, owned by a gambier gangchu (merchant) from Johor by the name of Tan Lock Shuan.

Clarke Quay³ was dotted with godowns, recognisable by their oversized jack roofs, which help dissipate heat. Hoo Ah Kay Whampoa’s ice house also stood in Clarke Quay, but my favourite building was Pineapple King Tan Tye’s canneries; the delightful aroma of pineapples always made me hungry.

My father worked as a clerk for the legendary businessman Mr. Whampoa. It was through him that my father learned English, and he subsequently taught me before I went to St. Joseph’s institution.

1
Wan Soon Kam
Old House at Clarke Quay
1993
Mixed media
760 x 750 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

2
Chong Fah Cheong
Kampong Kids
c. 1999
Bronze sculpture
320 x 230 x 470 mm
Collection of NIE

3
Lim Tze Peng
Singapore River
2008
Ink and colour on paper
3840 x 1620 mm
Collection of NTU Museum





1922: RIDLEY AND BIRDWATCHING

When I was 14, I had to start working. Thanks to my father's connections with Mr. Whampoa, I secured a minor position at Botanic Gardens⁴ instead of working on the river. As a leading member of the Agri-Horticultural Society, he allocated a section of land from his Tanglin plantation for the Botanic Gardens.

Mr. Whampoa had a splendid garden called 'Nam-Sang-Fa-un' on Serangoon Road. I recall visiting this garden with my father, marvelling at the rockeries, aquariums, bonsai, and well-trimmed topiaries. Mr. Whampoa generously opened his garden to the public during Chinese New Year for gatherings.

In the 1920s, the Botanic garden appeared rather primitive to my untrained eye: green lawns, green trees... Too much green, with European-style houses sporadically dotting the landscape. But it was here that I was taught things like how strong sunlight will destroy chlorophyll; that's one of the reasons the leaf turns yellow (or what they called the 'chlorotic appearance') of the imported rare plants. I also heard some great stories: When Henry Murton was the Superintendent, the garden had a zoo which included rhinos, kangaroos, and monkeys.

When I joined the Botanic Gardens, it was under the direction of Isaac Henry Burkill (1912 — 1925), who succeeded Henry Nicholas Ridley (1888 — 1912), more famously known as "Mad Ridley". Director Burkill, the second director, contributed greatly to economic botany and steered the garden to become an independent scientific research institution.

Since I knew English, I was sent to be director Burkill's pitchboy and often followed him around.

The Economic Garden was one of our frequent destinations. Set up during Murton's time, it focused on cultivating plants and seeds for commercial plantations. This effort extended beyond rubber to crops like sago, sugarcane, and indigo.

Even though expanding the economic garden was Henry Murton's primary aim, the Burmese Banyan tree⁵ was still one of his favourites in the garden. "See, the Banyan tree was already sizeable even back in 1877." A researcher showed me an old photo of it.

While reading the aged documents of Ridley, I read and heard a lot about him and his fascination with rubber: The inaugural patch of Pará Rubber trees was planted in 1876, a mere 22 specimens from London's Kew Gardens. Ridley pioneered a breakthrough

4
Allan Chan
*Enchanting Mood
at Botanic Gardens*
2005
Watercolour
750 x 620 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

5
Allan Chan
Banyan Tree
2010
Watercolour
775 x 645 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



V-shaped cut in the bark that could be reopened periodically to extract latex while preserving the tree's life, which is much more sustainable than the old 'harvest-then-die' method. And there are more tricks: I read that tapping before dawn yielded more latex than tapping in the afternoon.

Recognised as the "father of the rubber industry", Ridley relentlessly pushed for rubber's adoption, encouraging plantation owners to cultivate it. The invention of the pneumatic tire by John Boyd Dunlop in 1888 sparked a global rubber demand and proved that Ridley wasn't so mad. Though the demand didn't start until 1906. Interestingly, that's the year I was born. Maybe I was destined to work at the Botanic Gardens. By 1917, the Botanic Gardens provided and sold seven million rubber seeds from the Economic Garden, just as the rubber boom was in full swing.

Ridley also loved birds. I found a pamphlet with his "*Birds in the Botanic Gardens, Singapore*" included. His words paint a vivid and playful picture and show his great passion for our feathered friends.

"I had one (small black and white Hornbill⁶, *Anthracoceros convexus*) in captivity for some time which became very tame and was wonderfully clever in catching bits of bread thrown at it. It used to be very quick at catching sparrows⁷ if they imprudently flew through its cage. When caught it would crush them with its powerful beak and throwing them up in the air catch and swallow them."

"Woodpeckers⁸, or 'Burong Gelatu' of the Malays, are not uncommon, though less so in localities where there is much dead timber left standing."

"The absence of crows⁹ from Singapore seems very strange. especially to visitors from India and Ceylon (current Sri Lanka), where these birds are so much in evidence. The common crow (*Corvus splendens*) I have not seen south of Pekan, where it is common."

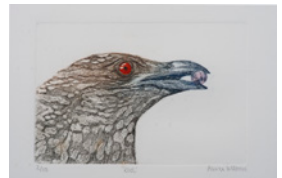
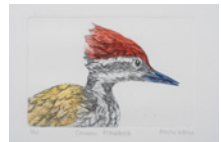
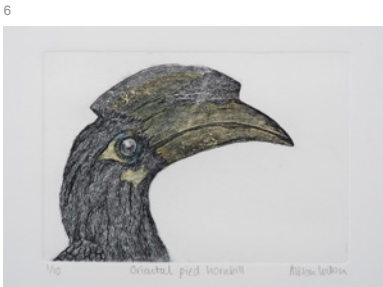
By 1925, the Economic Garden closed down to make space for Raffles College. Ridley's small article sparked my interest in birds, and I started looking for them everywhere.

6
Alison Wilson
Oriental Pied Hornbill
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

7
Dominic Fondé
Sparrow
2013
Biro on watercolour paper
490 x 415 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

8
Alison Wilson
Common Flameback
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

9
Alison Wilson
Koel
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 2/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of NTU Museum





1931: HOW THE GARDENS BEGAN

Lorries had largely replaced bullock carts as the primary means of transporting goods on roads. On the river, I discovered that the goods had changed: bales of rubber, pineapples, sacks of coffee, and rice on twakows. My knowledge from working in the garden helped me discern their origins and destinations.

I know pineapples are grown as an intercrop alongside slow-growing rubber trees. Even though the soil in Singapore was poor, it somehow produced the best-tasting canned pineapples. I also noticed a decline in the number of goods transported on regional vessels. This was attributed to the effects of the 'economic depression', a topic I overheard being discussed at the Gardens.

There were rubber sheets bundled into bales weighing as much as 100 kilograms that required careful stacking within the twakows to ensure stability and even weight distribution. Due to the cumbersome nature of baled rubber, handling it posed a challenge; I recall witnessing a coolie struggle to grip those unwieldy bundles properly.

Intrigued by working with the British at the Botanic Gardens, I explored stories from their angle and how they affected our local lives.

I saw many lightermen enjoy an evening drink of toddy (palm wine) or listen to traditional storytellers after a long day of labour at Coleman Bridge¹⁰, named after its designer, Irishman George D. Coleman.

It was disheartening for Mr. Coleman to discover that the bridge named after him suffered from poor construction. Eventually, the flimsy bridge was replaced by an iron bridge which still stands during my lifetime.

Coleman's first Singapore project was actually very close by, at Fort Canning¹¹.

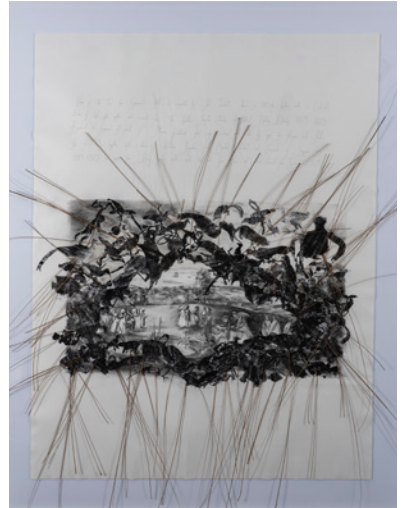
10
Ong Kim Seng
Coleman Bridge
Year unknown
Watercolour
800 x 630 mm
Collection of NIE

11
Lucy Davis
'In which 'A view of a town from Government Hill' reveals and conceals encounters with residents'
2009
Charcoal, woodprint collage on paper
1840 x 2290 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

10



11



In 1823, while Raffles and his wife Sophie travelled to Bencoolen in Sumatra, Coleman designed Raffles House¹² in preparation for Raffles' use. Raffles was quite impressed by it.

"We have lately built a small bungalow on Singapore Hill where though the height is inconsiderable, we find great difference in climate. Nothing can be more interesting and beautiful than the view from this spot... The tombs of the Malay Kings are close at hand, and I have settled that if it is my fate to die here I shall take my place amongst them; this will at any rate be better than leaving my bones at Bencoolen. If it pleases God, we still live in the hope of embarking for Europe towards the end of the year."

Stamford Raffles, Extensive Speculations of the Chinese, Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles Singapore, January 21, 1823

However, I never saw the house since it was demolished forty years before I was born. I also learned that this was the first site of Singapore's Botanic Gardens.

Around 1822, Danish Nathaniel Wallich proposed to Raffles to set up a garden for botanic and experimental cultivation at Fort Canning¹³.

The first site was established on the lower slopes of Government Hill: starting with 125 Nutmeg trees, 1000 Nutmeg seeds, and 450 Clove trees, which laid the foundation for Singapore's spice industry.

"I am laying out a botanic and experimental garden, and it would delight you to see how rapidly the whole country is coming under cultivation. My residence here has naturally given much confidence, and the extent of the speculations entered into by the Chinese quite astonished me."

Stamford Raffles, Extensive Speculations of the Chinese, Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles Singapore, January 21, 1823

12
Allan Chan
Top of Fort Canning Park
2003
Watercolour
600 x 490 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

13
Allan Chan
Fort Canning Park
2002
Watercolour
775 x 645 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

12



13



Coleman's work spanned both Boat Quay and Raffles Place, the location of Singapore's inaugural land and reclamation initiative. The region previously occupied by these hills was transformed into Commercial Square and eventually evolved into Raffles Place.

Most folks don't realise, that in 1819, Raffles's longest stay in Singapore was just 31 days. Fast forward to 1824, he left with a cart of treasure and never came back.

In contrast, Coleman left and returned, leaving a long legacy of outstanding design and local craftsmanship that developed under his influence, even after he died in 1844. Coleman was buried at Fort Canning's old Christian Cemetery, which he designed. I visited his grave once; it is located at the higher end of the slope side of the cemetery compound. On his grave, you'll find an inscription:

Sacred to the memory of
George Doumgold Coleman Esquire
of Drogheda Ireland

Who was for many years the superintendent of
Public Works in this settlement
The important duties of which department
He was acknowledged to have discharged with zeal and ability
While the many Public Improvements
Which he originated and carried Into effect
Will long attest the value of his services
Died 27th March 1844

As for myself, I met a young lady¹⁴ who asked for directions in the Gardens. She was impressed by my knowledge of birds and trees. We started dating, and a year later we were married in a small ceremony. Mr. Whampoa helped with the expenses.

Little did we know that the years ahead would be some of the most difficult for the country.

14
Iskandar Jali
Slab Work
2015
Stoneware
525 x 120 x 275 mm
Collection of NIE





1942: THE WAR YEARS

Around 1932, I was moved to work as a foreman with the new assistant director, Dr. Edred John Henry Corner (1929 – 1945), under Director Eric Holttum (1925 – 1949).

Corner stuttered but was mostly a cheerful person. When he came to Singapore, he recuperated in hospital for a while due to contracting whooping cough. He took the opportunity to learn Malay while he recovered. Corner was a very tall man, who always drove around in his two-seat rugby car. His speciality was fungi, but he was a man of many talents.

Outside the Botanic Gardens, Ridley's influence was evident; by 1935, almost 40% of Singapore's land area was covered by rubber plantations (including the NTU campus where you stand now). At the same time, the invention of the chainsaw set off a wave of logging destruction¹⁵.

It was because of this ruthless and noisy new tool, which could cut down a tree in minutes, that convinced botanists to prevent the perpetual loss of Singapore's remaining forests. It threatened ancient trees and the enclosed ecosystems they nurtured. Corner and Holttum passionately embarked on extensive written appeals, advocating preserving as much of the ancient forests as possible.

“If therefore we want to preserve Bukit Timah forest, we cannot permit further encroachment of any kind. And this forest is the only considerable area of primitive hill forest in the island... It contains many hundreds of species of native plants, many of which have been totally exterminated in the rest of the island, or soon will be exterminated when the urgently necessary building programmes are implemented. This forest is unique; it is also irreplaceable.”

Richard Eric Holttum, “Bukit Timah Forest: For Posterity!”
The Straits Times. 29 March 1950.

“But the forests, which show how trees were made, are going. They are vanishing nowhere faster than from the alluvial plains where the vestiges of the last creative phase of plant life, that prepared the way for the modern world, may survive. The modern mouth is the people's, and theirs the new retaliation. Before machines the forest is defenceless. Human progress is clearing it with gathering speed to plant crops of quick returns.”

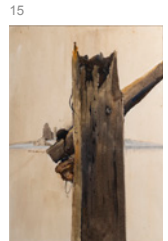
Edred John Henry Corner (1954), *The Life of Plants*

Out of his love of nature, Corner wanted to write a book for people to find beauty and inspiration in Singapore. Corner approached it from the angle of ‘Phytogeography’. Even though the book included 950 different trees, it did not touch on the majority of trees in the primitive forest. The subject of tree typology was too big even for Corner. “The trees are mighty; the botanist is puny as he stumbles among their roots and gropes for fallen fruits and flowers,” he wrote.

“We have chosen trees¹⁶ as our subject because all the native richness of Malaya depends on the integrity of its forests. If a delight in trees and a respect for their majesty can be created, even among a small body of persons, our country will never suffer the tragic domestication which many lands tamed have undergone.”

15
Lim Hwee Tiong
Wood
1985
Watercolour
865 x 1080 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

16
Lucy Davis
‘Pokok ranjang jati –
teak bed tree’
2009
Woodprint collage on
paper
2540 x 1840 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



16

He wrote those words in the first edition preface for *Wayside Trees of Malaya*, based almost entirely on his observations. Corner wrote the book in simple speech since he despised 'technical jargon.'

For many who don't know, many of the botanic specimens included in *Wayside Trees of Malaya* are collected by his 'Botanic Monkeys'¹⁷.

The idea came to him during his trip to northern Malaya around 1937. He spotted some monkeys collecting coconuts and had an epiphany to use them to collect specimens for the Gardens since he did not intend to cut down any tall trees (neither was he good at climbing). When he returned to Singapore, he brought back five Berok monkeys or Macaques. He named all his monkeys in Malay; two of his favourites were called Puteh (meaning white, from his pale fur) and Jambul (meaning a crest from the dark patch on his head).

During the training, he gave orders in Malay; one of his monkeys knew twenty-four Malay words: 'mari' for come, 'lari' for run, and 'chari' to signal 'search'. Sometimes he'd point out fallen flowers or fruits, yelling "ambil lagi" would bring more, and 'bukan, naik lagi' would get the monkey to climb up even more.

As a reward, Mr. Corner often fed the monkeys lemonade. Once, Puteh gathered samples from twenty-four sizable trees in a row before witnessing Corner open the lemonade flask. This irresistible beverage signalled lunchtime, prodding Puteh's sole course of action: plunging down the tree for a sip.

"If a berok sat on my shoulder, my hair was always subject to grooming. When I walked along with one, he would clutch hold of the hair at the back of my head, just as he had clutched the long hair on the sides of his mother when a baby. The naughty Puteh discovered in so doing that he could surreptitiously flick off my spectacles. Once, in the forest, I spent a humiliating twenty minutes searching for them. A little hand working stealthily towards an ear alerted me."

Excerpts from *Botanic Monkeys*

17
Chen Wen Hsi
Gibbons
Year unknown
Colour and ink on paper
1160 x 680 mm
Collection of NIE
Inscription: 文希南洋作



17

Corner was proud of them, and rewarded Jambul and Puteh as “being the first apes to enter colonial service.” As official members of colonial service, they were paid a wage of \$127 Malayan dollars per year. Of course, payment was made in rice, bananas, and raw eggs.

The monkeys brought him lots of joy and quite a lot of trouble at the same time.

In 1942, he suffered a savage attack from one of the monkeys, and it disabled his right arm. He decided to release them when the Japanese invaded Singapore. It was a blessing in disguise, as he was unable to join the Singapore Volunteer Force because of his condition.

During the Japanese Occupation¹⁸ Singapore was renamed Syonan-to¹⁹. Supposedly due to respect for scientists, a few Japanese professors took administration roles in Botanic Gardens, and ‘protected’ some staff so they could remain in their positions. Corner was interned in the Gardens²⁰ and instructed to continue his horticultural work. I was fortunate to survive the war. However, many relatives and my parents died during those horrid years.

The staff of the Botanic Gardens was not spared²¹. Many were sent to work on the Siam-Burma Railway, including Assistant Curator John Charles Nauen; whom I never saw again.

Corner's friendship with the Japanese had given him infamy as a ‘traitor’. He tolerated it to protect the Botanic Gardens and Raffles Museum's collection, records, and archives. When the Japanese left, the collection remained untouched.

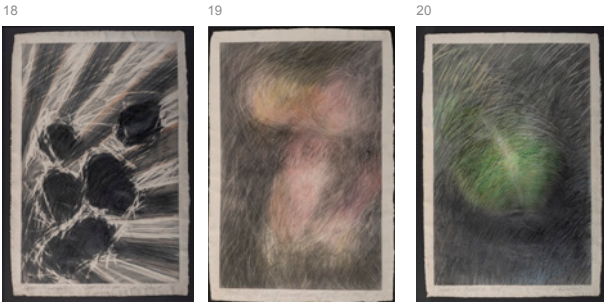
In 1945, after the war ended, Corner left for England. I didn't see him off, but he did send me a Christmas postcard that he had reunited with his family. My daughter, born just before the war, said Corner should have written more.

18
Tang Da Wu
Memory of the Sun
1996
Chalk on paper
850 x 1190 mm
Collection of NIE

19
Tang Da Wu
Jantung Pisang
1998
Chalk on paper
1950 x 1300 mm
Collection of NIE

20
Tang Da Wu
Under a Banana Leaf
2000
Chalk on paper
850 x 1190 mm
Collection of NIE

21
Han Sai Por
Leaves from Enclosing Space
2003
Charcoal on paper
1800 x 1490 x 60 mm
Collection of NIE





1952: A NATION ADRIFT

After the war, Singapore was changing, and so was the river.

Hokkiens had taken over control of the river trade. That didn't mean Teochews were forgotten; with other modern transportation methods like trucks and aeroplanes, the river's significance as a trade route began to decline. Large cargo ships could no longer navigate the shallow river and port activities shifted to other locations.

One day, I saw a red-bearded white man taking pictures at the river. I was intrigued and said to him: "Are you taking photos of the coolies?"

"Yes, I am. I love boats and the vibrant lives on them. My name is Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill; I work at the Raffles Museum."

We struck up a conversation, and he was interested in my job at the Botanic Gardens. He became excited and asked me if I had any knowledge about birds. I told him about Ridley's bird essay and some amateur research I had dabbled in over the years, I went on to share some observations I have made in the Botanic Gardens about local species such as the Wren²², the Oriental White-Eye²³ and the Pied Wagtail.

He then spoke about his life. Gibson-Hill arrived in Singapore during the Japanese invasion and interned at Changi Prison as a POW. He used jail time to illustrate books such as *Introduction of Malayan Birds*. Claiming to be a non-professional ornithologist²⁴, Gibson-Hill wrote articles and books, including *A Guide to the Birds of the Coast* (1949) and *A Checklist of Birds of Singapore Island* (1950). He proudly shared with me his amazing collection, including Robert Cushman Murphy's *Logbook for Grace* (1947) and Cathay magnate Loke Wan Tho's *A Company of Birds* (1957).

22
Dominic Fondé
Wren
2014
Biro on watercolour paper
550 x 623 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

23
Dominic Fondé
Oriental White-Eye
2014
Biro on watercolour paper
550 x 623 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

25
Alison Wilson
Laughing Thrush
2014
Etching aquatint and
hand colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

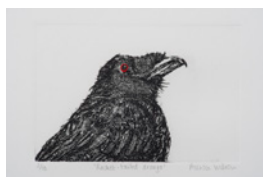
26
Alison Wilson
White Collared Kingfisher
2014
Etching and hand colouring
(ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

27
Alison Wilson
Racket-tailed drongo
2014
Etching and hand colouring
(ed 2/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

23



27



25



26



22



Loke's book was a lovely surprise. I couldn't imagine a busy businessman like him hiding in the wild and waiting for hours, even days. I like how he wrote about the Laughing Thrush²⁵, the White-collared Kingfisher²⁶ and the Tailed Drongo²⁷. I recalled seeing them on a trip with Mr. Corner at the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve.

However, most of the time Gibson-Hill spoke about boats²⁸.

Before he set up the Boat Room at the Raffles Museum in 1952, Gibson-Hill had already penned several articles about all the vessels frequently spotted in Singapore's waters: Malayan prahus and sampans, Indian dhows, and Chinese tongkangs and twakows. He asked me to pay attention to the shape of twakows: squat and beamy, a 'toad-like' version of the bumboat sampan; the flat-bottomed feature is specifically designed for the Singapore River.

I occasionally followed him on his photography walks. Besides boats and river scenes, he also documented the architectural landmarks²⁹ around the river, including Empress Place³⁰, the General Post Office³¹ and the new Bank of China Building.

By this time, my children were growing up. There was talk of Malayan independence. I wondered how it would affect the Gardens and the River.

I had another child; a son. My wife said he was like a monkey and said I should not have spent so much time with Corner's Monkeys!

24
Goh Beng Kwan
Pu Tu Lu – Crane's Paradise
1997
Mixed medium collage
1250 x 1250 mm
Collection of NIE

28
Lim Cheng Hoe
Bumboats
1960
Watercolour
720 x 600 mm
Collection of NIE

29
Allan Chan
Singapore River
2013
Watercolour
720 x 570 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

30
Ong Kim Seng
Empress Place
2003
Watercolour
1052 x 852 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

31
Tong Chin Sye
General Post Office
1980
Watercolour
1250 x 905 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

24



28



29



30



31



1963: CHANGING OF THE GUARD

I was happy that Humphrey Morrison Burkill became director of the Botanic Gardens in 1957. He ran it until 1969. My career was coming full circle: I started my career under his father's leadership in this garden and would retire as he took up the same position. It was a tough position to be in during this time. Singapore was undergoing the transition from British Colony to 'Malayanization', and he would be the fourth director in eight years after Holttum.

You could say H.M. Burkill was born for the job. He was born in the Botanic Gardens at the Director's House, which is now known as Burkill Hall as a tribute to him and his father's shared directorship of the Botanic Gardens.

This resonated deeply with me, as I shared a similar bond with the Burkills, just as the building did. The history of Burkill Hall leads back to Mr. Whampoa again. He was instrumental in the building of the Director's house.

Hoo Ah Kay Whampoa signed on the Director's House builder's plan about 1867; the two-story hall was built for Lawrence Niven, the garden's first manager and landscape designer, and possibly recruited by Mr. Whampoa. I wonder if my father helped to deliver the signed construction plan.

Somewhat in 1964, I read in the newspaper that the 'Nam Sang Hua Yuan', later known as the Bendemeer House, was demolished for redevelopment. This news saddened me deeply, as I fondly recalled the water lilies that once graced its garden. Their absence left a void, compelling me to seek solace by visiting Swan Lake³² in the Botanic Gardens. The lake used to have a rare blue *Nymphaea* in the pond.

But when I visited, I saw all the water lilies had vanished.

"It's gone!" a gardener working around Swan Lake shouted at me. He explained, "Just a few months ago, we caught six odd-looking turtles and countless 'Aruan' (a predatory fish) in the pond. They ate all the water lilies; that's why they failed to bloom this year."

"We drained the water, like how we once did to capture the crocodile. We found the culprits!"

"Capture the crocodile?" I asked, sensing a mystery I had yet to hear of.

32
Allan Chan
*The Pond at
Botanical Garden*
2010
Watercolour
655 x 540 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



32

The gardener laughed out, “Yes! About 70 years ago, a crocodile escaped into the pond and bit one of the gardeners. That’s the last time the pond was drained. The older workers often recount how sad it was to clear all the flowers — especially the gorgeous giant water lilies³³!”

That was disappointing, but at least I learned something new about the Garden’s history.

While the water lilies were gone, the Orchids³⁴ were blooming.

Director Holttum’s crowning achievement was the Orchid Enclosure. It was established within the Botanic Gardens a few years before Singapore’s independence. I often brought my family to visit. Among all the Vanda, Oncidium, Dendrobium, and Pararachnis orchids, my favourite is the *Oncidesa Goldiana*. Its delicate yellow petals sway like a graceful ‘Dancing Lady’ in the breeze. In Teochew, we affectionately term it “Tiao Bu Huey”.

When Singapore became independent, the Gardens took a leading role in greening our nation.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced a plan on 12 May 1967, that “will transform Singapore into a beautiful garden city with flowers and trees, without waste and as neat and orderly as possible.”

33
Chua Ek Kay
Awaiting a Dragonfly
2002
1230 x 960 mm
Print (ed 16/30)
Collection of NIE

34
Tan Khim Ser
Orchid
Year unknown
Chinese ink on paper
760 x 935 mm
Collection of NTU Museum
Inscription: 香远益清
戊子年八月钦赐画

33



34



As a newly independent nation, numerous crucial matters demanded attention, and typically, trees and gardens do not fall into that category. Nevertheless, Singapore was an exception to this rule. The 'Garden City' policy greatly emphasised Singapore's parks and street planting. The Botanic Gardens flourished during this time.

As a staff of Botanic Gardens, I witnessed researchers and experts contribute to the Garden City campaign: Dr Chang Kiaw Lan from the Herbarium, the first female doctor I knew, was in charge of the advisory for Mr. Lee's Tree Planting Campaign. Coincidentally, her tutor in Cambridge was E. J. H. Corner.

When the garden city vision later expanded to the creation and maintenance of recreational parks and gardens, the Director's House was turned into the School of Horticulture in 1972. Its role was to equip public officers and students with theoretical and practical horticultural training.

In February 1972, Queen Elizabeth visited the Gardens and was captivated by the Saffron Spray orchid. It was renamed as the Dendrobium Elizabeth³⁵.

Three months later, I officially retired. I moved away from the Singapore River; at about the same time when the government demolished Ellenborough Market, or Teochew Market as it was better known.

My daughter was growing up. There were more opportunities for women, and she managed to get a place in university to study engineering, of all things!

35
Juneo Lee Eng Keong
*P-modern and the Yellow
Coloured Flower*
2000
Acrylic on bisque fired
ceramic mounted
on wood
1235 x 1210 x 135 mm
Collection of NIE

35





1977: CLEANING UP THE RIVER AND THE GREENING OF SINGAPORE

“Every time I return to Singapore after a few weeks’ absence, and see the trees, palms, green grass, and free-flowering shrubs as I drive along East Coast Parkway from the airport into the city, my spirits rise. Greening is the most cost-effective project I have launched.”

Mr. Lee wrote in his book *From Third World to First*.

Despite being retired, I stayed up to date on the Tree Planting campaign.

I regret not having a chance to confirm with Dr. Changhow how much Corner’s *Wayside Tree of Malaya* inspired her while she was an advisor on the tree-planting campaign. From my limited knowledge, choices of trees are made for particular reasons.

Rain trees³⁶, Acacia^{37, 38}, and Angsana trees have massive crowns that offer a lot of shade. Sea apple and curtain creepers proliferate quickly, while yellow flame trees, dark pink Frangipani and purple Bougainvillea add colour to the city. Last but not least, once-forgotten fruit trees like Binjai, Kundang and Balonglong enhance the diversity.

36
Han Sai Por
Brain Tree
2016
Felled trees
(Albezia saman)
540 x 560 x 980 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

37
Han Sai Por
Discovery (Bones/Joints)
2016
Felled trees (Acacia sp)
500 x 470 x 1380 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

38
Han Sai Por
Organism
2016
Felled trees (Acacia sp)
400 x 490 x 1250 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

36



37



38



Through the 70s and 80s, while Singapore was still finding its way, the environment, cleaning and planting were key themes in its development.

Despite moving away from the river, I kept returning to it.

A new hawker centre was set up next to Boat Quay in 1973. It was convenient but filthy: the hawkers dumped everything into the river, which made the smell even worse. During low tide, one could see animal carcasses, human waste, and rotting food floating down the river. Horrifyingly, during high tide, kids still swam in the river!

Chia Hearn Kok, a teacher who grew up near Boat Quay, shared his memory: "A distinct feature of our swimming style was that our heads were always above water because of the stench from the animal and human wastes and the rubbish... One of our favourite antics was to catch a ride to the Elgin Bridge on the heavily loaded tongkangs that plied the river by climbing onto the rubber tyres on its sides."

It would be unfair to say that the colonial government didn't try to clean up the river. They had attempted to do so in 1905, 1919 and so on to improve the river aesthetically and hygienically while reducing congestion. However, the rivers had been 'sick' for over a century; the ultimate solution was to widen and raise all the bridges to allow greater access to vessels.

Besides planting trees, PM Lee Kuan Yew also launched a decade-long campaign, starting in 1977, to clean up the Singapore River. The river was dredged, the river walls were rebuilt along its entire stretch, and a 6 km promenade was constructed along both banks.

A major component of the cleanup was relocation. About 4,000 squatters, hawkers, and vegetable sellers, whose daily waste flowed into the river, had to be moved. Public housing³⁹ was found for the squatters, while street hawkers were persuaded to move to hawker centres. 800 bumboats were towed to Pasir Panjang.

After that, the river slowly healed and its water was no longer so horrid. I still won't swim in it any more though!

My son and daughter were both married and I became a grandparent. I enjoyed bringing my grandchildren to the river and the gardens and telling them stories.

39
Lim Cheng Hoe
Kallang River Bank
Year unknown
Watercolor
820 x 660 mm
Collection of NIE



39



1990: THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

As the old Chinese proverb says: "Trees planted by the forefathers benefit their future generations."

By 1984, the water in the Singapore River was clean enough that a mass swim was organised in mid-May. Some 400 brave participants took the plunge for the first-ever swim across the Singapore River.

Suppose you ever walked along the Singapore River today; you won't miss the sculpture next to Cavenagh Bridge⁴⁰ of kids plunging into the water. I acquired the sculpture prototype by chance. The artist had another sculpture at the Botanic Gardens called Chang Kuda, which captured another great scene of childhood play. He knows us well!

As the groundwork for Singapore's new green skyline was laid, the state's green policies and high-rise buildings made room for nature to flourish, even vertically.

"No other project has brought richer rewards to the region. Our neighbours have tried to out-green and out-bloom each other. Green was positive competition that benefited everyone — it was good for morale, for tourism, and for investors. It was immensely better that we competed to be the greenest and cleanest in Asia.."

Excerpts from Lee Kuan Yew's *From Third World to First*

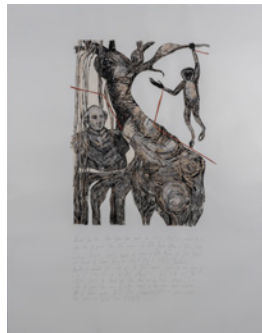
To make my retirement life colourful, I conducted more research into the history of the Gardens. I found out that famous philanthropist Cheang Hong Lim donated funds to the Gardens to build an octagonal iron structure named Monkey House, just a few years before I joined the Botanic Gardens; I looked into William Farquhar⁴¹ and Alfred Russel Wallace's⁴² expeditions and their encounters with monkeys; I also spend time looking through Farquhar's and Corner's botanic drawing collections. In a good day, I would follow Gibson-Hill's guide to visit other structures Coleman built, and birdwatch in the parks and Gardens...

40
Helen Playford
1925 Cavenagh Bridge
Singapore
1993
Print, oil pastel print
(ed 2/20)
780 x 622 mm
Collection of NIE

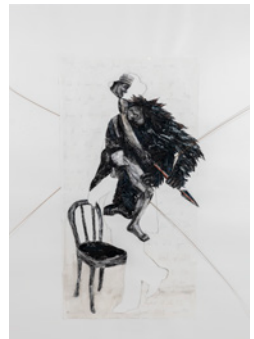
41
Lucy Davis
'In which William Farquhar meets a black handed gibbon'
2009
Charcoal, woodprint collage on paper
1840 x 2260 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

42
Lucy Davis
'In which Alfred Russel Wallace encounters an orang utan attacked by Dyaks' (Jacob and Angel)'
2009
Woodprint collage on paper
2140 x 1840 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

40



41



42

In 1990, Coleman Bridge⁴³ was the last bridge to be widened. And here marks the end of my story.

I am grateful that my life is intertwined with two sites that symbolise the growth of my country: if I wasn't by the Singapore riverside⁴⁴, I wouldn't have been able to witness the bustling trade and commerce built on the sweat and blood of coolies. If I hadn't been in the Botanic Gardens, I wouldn't have known how plants and the plantation economy laid the foundation of the Singapore trade. Most importantly, if not for the combination of both, I wouldn't have been as sensitive to the changes between and beyond.

To preserve my memories and the city's evolution during my lifetime, I started collecting artworks that echo my memories. Through these pieces, I aim to capture the city's evolution and transformation throughout the 20th Century. As for the 21st Century, I leave that task in your hands, my dear visitors, to carry forward.

43
Ong Kim Seng
Clarke Quay
2000
Watercolour
1000 x 790 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

44
Lim Cheng Hoe
Singapore river
1971
Watercolour
780 x 660 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

43



44



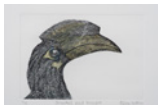
CHAPTER THREE

ARTWORKS, ARTISTS' AND CURATORS' BIOGRAPHY

ARTWORKS AND ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHY

Alison Wilson (b.1963, United Kingdom)

Alison is a printmaker and textile artist whose works reflect her deep interest in botany, birds, and the beach. Her art practice uses traditional printing and textile techniques, particularly etching and blind embossing. In 2010, she was awarded 1st Prize for 'Ocean Artist of the Year', Voice of the Ocean Competition at ADEX.



Oriental Pied Hornbill
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Common Flameback
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



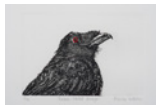
Koel
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 2/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Laughing Thrush
2014
Etching aquatint and
hand colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



White Collared Kingfisher
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 1/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



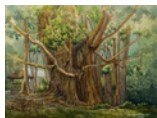
Racket – tailed drongo
2014
Etching and hand
colouring (ed 2/10)
445 x 395 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum

Allan Chan Pow Kieng (b.1943, Singapore)

Chan is self-taught and driven by his passion; he started sketching and painting with watercolour in the late 1980s. His decades of full-time employment in the creative and art industry gave him a unique style, that was realistic and orderly composed. Setting the mood of thoughtful serenity that captures and explores the subtle calm of urban life and the tranquil nature of Singapore.



*Enchanting Mood
at Botanic Gardens*
2005
Watercolour
750 x 620 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Banyan Tree
2010
Watercolour
775 x 645 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Top of Fort Canning Park
2003
Watercolour
600 x 490 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Fort Canning Park
2002
Watercolour
775 x 645 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Singapore River
2013
Watercolour
720 x 570 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



*The Pond at
Botanic Garden*
2010
Watercolour
655 x 540 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

Chen Wen Hsi (b. 1906, China; d. 1991, Singapore)

Chen was one of Singapore's pioneer artists and a key figure in Singapore's Nanyang art movement. He trained at Shanghai College of the Arts under renowned Chinese artist Pan Tianshou. As a Chinese ink painter and educator, Chen was at the forefront of the Chinese avant-garde movement, combining Western art with Chinese brush strokes in his painting.



Gibbons
Year unknown
Colour and ink on paper
1160 x 680 mm
Collection of NIE
Inscription:文希南洋作

Chong Fah Cheong (b. 1946, Singapore)

Chong is a sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient (2014), who works with wood, stone and bronze. His sculptures are whimsical and could be appreciated by all, often commenting on society and social issues. His famous public sculptures could be seen around Singapore capturing the essence of carefree childhood days and his exploration of Singapore's heritage. Chong continues to hone his skills and mentor young and new artists.



Kampong Kids
c. 1999
Bronze sculpture
320 x 230 x 470 mm
Collection of NIE

Chua Ek Kay (b. 1947, China; d. 2008, Singapore)

Chua is respected for his distinctive blend of Eastern and Western aesthetics, fusing traditional Chinese ink painting and calligraphy elements with western theories and techniques. He trained under ink master Fang Chang Tien of the Shanghai School. Chua was the first Chinese Ink painter to win the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year in 1991 and received the Cultural Medallion Award in 1999.



Awaiting a Dragonfly
2002
1230 x 960 mm
Print (ed 16/30)
Collection of NIE

Dominic Fondé FGE (b. 1974, United Kingdom)

Fondé is a professional glass artist and curator, who relocated to Singapore in 2006-2014. His artistic practice dwells on the technique of drill engraving, he then combines his passion for art and storytelling in his work, where he began to inscribe stories onto glass objects, he take a special interest in text and drawings, especially images of birds and feathers.



Sparrow
2013
Biro on watercolour paper
490 x 415 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Wren
2014
Biro on watercolour paper
550 x 623 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Oriental White-Eye
2014
Biro on watercolour paper
550 x 623 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum

Helen Playford (b. unknown, Australia)

An artist who is inspired by the pages of history. Helen has had many solo exhibitions, and is represented in Singapore, at the Australian High Commission, and the Singapore Cricket Club.



1925 Cavenagh Bridge
Singapore
1993
Print, oil pastel print
(ed 2/20)
780 x 622 mm
Collection of NIE

Han Sai Por (b. 1943, Singapore)

Han, a Singaporean sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient (1995), is best known for her stone sculptures. Han’s choice of materials is primarily governed by the purpose for which the work is made; specifically, the choice is determined by the symbolic reason or solutions. Her body of work often brings attention to scant regarded heritage, flora and fauna, making significant comments about the changing landscape often; in relation to Singapore.



Leaves from
Enclosing Space
2003
Charcoal on paper
1800 x 1490 x 60 mm
Collection of NIE



Brain Tree
2016
Felled trees
(Albezia saman)
540 x 560 x 980 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Discovery (Bones/Joints)
2016
Felled trees (Acacia sp)
500 x 470 x 1380 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum



Organism
2016
Felled trees (Acacia sp)
400 x 490 x 1250 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum

Dr. Iskandar Jalil (b. 1940, Singapore)

Dr. Iskandar is an eminent local ceramist. Awarded the Cultural Medallion (1988) and numerous cultural accolades. His works integrate Japanese and Islamic styles and are characterised as simple but robust, with richly textured surfaces. His signature blue glaze known as the ‘ Iskandar blue’, the use of twigs as embellishments and Southeast Asian motifs and Jawi calligraphy could often be seen in his works.



Slab Work
2015
Stoneware
525 x 120 x 275 mm
Collection of NIE

Juneo Lee Eng Keong (b. 1966)

Lee is an artist and educator, that takes an interest in issues of post-colonial identity and creates visual representations that respond to and articulate/translate one inner thoughts, his artworks act as a bridge and the outcome of the artist's inner monologues. Lee was a lecturer at National Institute of Education, Singapore.



P-modern and the Yellow Coloured Flower
2000
Acrylic on bisque fired ceramic mounted on wood
1235 x 1210 x 135 mm
Collection of NIE

Lim Cheng Hoe (b. 1912, China; d. 1979, Singapore)

Lim was the leading watercolour artist of his generation and master of plein-air (outdoor) paintings, taking great interest in watercolour and the local art scene. He became one of the founders of the Singapore Watercolour Society. Largely self-taught, he studied painting under Richard Walker and is always seeking to hone his skills further, emphasised greatly in accuracy and observation.



Bumboats
1960
Watercolour
720 x 600 mm
Collection of NIE



Kallang River Bank
Year unknown
Watercolor
820 x 660 mm
Collection of NIE



Singapore river
1971
Watercolour
780 x 660 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

Lim Hwee Tiong (b. 1950, Singapore)

Lim, formally training in watercolour painting, graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and is a lifetime member of the Singapore Watercolour Society. Lim received many forms of recognition and awards. His works are collected by the National Museums of Singapore, UOB Art Collection and also in many private collections. During the early 90s, Lim was also commissioned by NTU Singapore to paint the campus landscape.



Wood
1985
Watercolour
865 x 1080 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

Lim Tze Peng (b. 1921, Singapore)

Lim, a Culture Medallion recipient (2003), is renowned for his Chinese calligraphy and Chinese ink creations that often depict post-independent Singapore. Lim believes it is his mission to document what was left of the old Singapore. His latest abstract calligraphy creation further shows his constant search for new expression as he applied colours to his calligraphy, which is seemingly modern yet holds true to traditional Chinese ink painting.



Singapore River
2008
Ink and colour on paper
3840 x 1620 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

Lucy Davis (b.1970, United Kingdom)

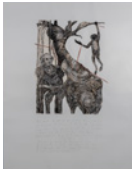
Davis is an artist and writer. Her interdisciplinary practice examines notions of nature in art and visual culture, science and indigenous knowledge, natural histories, materiality and urban memory primarily but not exclusively in Southeast Asia. The Migrant Ecologies Project is the product of her longstanding interest in the mid-twentieth century Singapore Modern Woodcut movement which later informed a six-year long, material-led cumulative series of investigations under the auspices of The Migrant Ecologies Project.



'In which 'A view of a town from Government Hill' reveals and conceals encounters with residents'
2009
Charcoal, woodprint collage on paper
1840 x 2290 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



'Pokok ranjang jati - teak bed tree'
2009
Woodprint collage on paper
2540 x 1840 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



'In which William Farquhar meets a black handed gibbon'
2009
Charcoal, woodprint collage on paper
1840 x 2260 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



'In which Alfred Russel Wallace encounters an orang utan attacked by Dyaks' (Jacob and Angel)'
2009
Woodprint collage on paper
2140 x 1840 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

Ong Kim Seng (b. 1945, Singapore)

Ong, a self-taught, eminent water-colourist and Cultural Medallion recipient (1990), is the first and only Singaporean and Asian artist outside the USA to be a member of the prestigious 138-year-old American Watercolor Society. Ong's attention to detail and immaculate technique in expressing the contrast between light and shadow is seen in his depiction of local scenes.



Coleman Bridge
Year unknown
Watercolour
800 x 630 mm
Collection of NIE



Empress Place
2003
Watercolour
1052 x 852 mm
Collection of NTU Museum



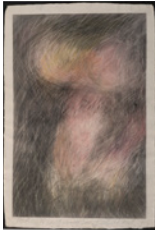
Clarke Quay
2000
Watercolour
1000 x 790 mm
Collection of NTU Museum

Tang Da Wu (b. 1943, Singapore)

Founder of The Artist Village in 1988, Tang is known for spurring artists to experiment with alternative art-making and approaches. Tang's practices are deeply reflective and constantly engaging, responsive with and to the everyday social-cultural reality, introducing and giving attention to what he sees through his art. In 2007, Tang was one of four artists that represented Singapore at the Venice Biennale. Tang is currently a lecturer at NIE, Singapore.



Memory of the Sun
1996
Chalk on paper
850 x 1190 mm
Collection of NIE



Jantung Pisang
1998
Chalk on paper
1950 x 1300 mm
Collection of NIE



Under a Banana Leaf
2000
Chalk on paper
850 x 1190 mm
Collection of NIE

Tong Chin Sye (b. 1939, Singapore)

Tong Chin Sye is a 2nd generation Nanyang artist—painter who works with multi-medium. Trained in both Western and Chinese art, his works show a distinct quality that blends the beauty of Chinese calligraphy in his oil and watercolour works. As an avid traveller, he is inspired by architectural and cultural matters, often painting the rapidly changing cityscapes and streets of not just Singapore but various cities.



General Post Office
1980
Watercolour
1250 x 905 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum

Wan Soon Kam (b. 1943, Singapore)

Wan is a watercolorist and acrylic painter best known for his tranquil landscapes, rustic kampongs (village), and street scene paintings. Wan often uses diverse painting techniques, combining acrylic and watercolour in his paintings. Influenced by his formal training in commercial art and his experience as an illustrator. He was also awarded by the Ministry of Culture in 1977 for his contribution to the arts.



Old House at Clarke Quay
1993
Mixed media
760 x 750 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum

Goh Beng Kwan (b.1937, Indonesia)

Goh, a Cultural Medallion artist (1989), is prominent for his abstract collage works. While embracing his East-Asia heritage he was moulded by his exposure under the tutelage of renowned Singapore pioneer artist Chen Wen Hsi in the 1950s. His collages that are created through a process of layering create varied tones, depth and texture where the incorporation of Chinese artistic principles and traditional calligraphic strokes could be clearly seen.



*Pu Tu Lu –
Crane's Paradise*
1997
Mixed medium collage
1250 x 1250 mm
Collection of NIE

Tan Khim Ser (b. 1943, Singapore)

Tan is a well-known local artist and educator who has been championing and promoting art in the Singapore Community. In 1972, he founded the Life Art Society, teaching generations of artists throughout the decades at various grassroots organisations and clubs. Proponent in Chinese Calligraphy and ink painting, trained in both Chinese and Western painting, his work has been included in the private and public collections of museums around the world.



Orchid
Year unknown
Chinese ink on paper
760 x 935 mm
Collection of
NTU Museum
Inscription: 香远益清
戊子年八月秋賜画

CURATORS' BIOGRAPHY

Curator

Dr. Wang Ruobing is an artist, educator, independent curator and academic based in Singapore. Her research concentrates on environment, sustainability and transcultural discourses, particularly on contemporary art in China and Southeast Asia.

ruobingwang.com

Assistant Curators

Celeste Tan is a multidisciplinary art practitioner. Her artistic and curatorial approach is marked by a keen sensitivity and curiosity towards materials, contexts, and subjects, which fuel her exploration of the inherent possibilities within the arts.

celeste-tjm.com

Skye Mo is a design researcher, curator, and writer, specializes in the social and environmental impacts on design and architecture. Her work has appeared in major Chinese design publications, and she has curated projects and exhibitions in London.

THE FINALE

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