



IMAGE: THE CULTURE STORY (CHONG); COURTESY OF ARTIST'S PROOF; ARTIST'S PROOF (BUST)

A Collector's Imprint

Curated from the private collection of Chong Huai Seng, *Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60* offers a stirring meditation on identity, memory and nationhood, unfolding through more than 90 artworks and commissions by artists across generations *By Hashir Nuri Hashimi*

There is a quiet intimacy to collecting—something tender in the way one gathers what speaks to them, shaping over time an inner portrait of self.

For collector Chong Huai Seng, that portrait spans more than four decades. What began in the 1980s in the storied galleries of London's Mayfair gradually shifted eastward—first drawn by the post-reform energy of Beijing's 798 Art District and the rise of contemporary ink painting, before deepening into a focused exploration of modern and contemporary art from Singapore, Southeast Asia, and beyond. "Collecting art has always been about collecting memories," Chong notes. "And every artwork presented holds a story in itself."

A pivotal acquisition in 2014 shifted the arc of Chong's collecting: the artist's proof of a bronze bust of the late Lee Kuan Yew, sculpted by British Royal Academician Sydney Harpley. It remains the only portrait sculpture ever sanctioned by Singapore's founding prime minister. First exhibited at London's Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1983 with Mr Lee's personal written permission, the bust has never before been shown to the Singapore public—until now.

That singular work is the conceptual anchor of *Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60*, a landmark exhibition running until August 17 at Artspace@Helutrans. Comprising more than 90 works by over 50 artists, the show is drawn entirely from Chong's private collection. "I thought, at what point, on what occasion, should I show this very historically important work?" he reflects. The original commissioned bust, delivered to Singapore by

March 1983, was briefly displayed at the Istana and Parliament House, and is now part of the National Collection.

From that starting point emerged a curatorial vision—one that threads personal memory through national history. Presented by The Culture Story, the private salon Chong co-founded with his daughter Ning Chong, the exhibition is curated by Kwok Kian Chow, founding director of the Singapore Art Museum and now an independent curator and art historian. While Ning—herself a seasoned art advisor and founder of boutique advisory Family Office for Art—shaped the project's structure and programming, it is the

elder Chong's voice, resolute, warm and often deeply nostalgic, that echoes through the halls.

"In many ways, this exhibition is my profound love letter to Singapore," he says. "It's a reflection of the people, places and moments that have shaped my life and this nation." Some memories are intensely personal. Take Darren Soh's photographs of the now-redeveloped Golden Mile Complex, once a gleaming modernist icon and a regular weekend haunt in Chong's twenties. "One of my best friends' family developed the project. I used to stay in their penthouse and swim in the pool almost every weekend," he

This page: The artist's proof of a bronze bust of Lee Kuan Yew created by British artist Sydney Harpley in 1982.
Opposite page: Art collector Chong Huai Seng, co-founder of The Culture Story





Clockwise, from left: Installation view of *I'm Worth My Bread* (2025) by Chow and Lin; *P.A.P. x P.A.* (2025) by Sonny Liew, Singapore River (1983) by Siew Hock Meng



recalls. Also captured in Soh's lens is Selegie House—one of Singapore's first high-rise public housing blocks—where a younger Chong lived with his grandmother.

Spanning the 1950s to the present, the exhibition unfolds along thematic arcs: the transformation

of Singapore's built environment; the evolution of its art history; the diasporic identities of Singaporeans abroad; and the entanglements between art, state and society.

Many works mirror that transformation. Foo Tee Jun's *A Wedding in a Kampung* (c 1960s)



captures the spirit of a bygone communal era, while Siew Hock Meng's 1983 watercolour of bumboats on the Singapore River conjures Chong's time at the Economic Development Board, then housed in the Fullerton Building, now The Fullerton Hotel Singapore. "We'd go for lunch along the river for \$2 chicken rice, and as we ate, we'd watch the bumboats go by ... and the occasional rat," he chuckles.

Newly commissioned works—11 in total, spanning digital installations, paintings, photography and music—inject a vital contemporary pulse. Each responds to a single prompt: "What does Singapore, or being Singaporean, mean to you?" The results are layered, searching, sometimes provocative. Sonny Liew's *P.A.P. x P.A.* imagines hybrid superhero figurines of Singapore's political and art pioneers. For instance, pairing

Lee Kuan Yew with performance artist Tang Da Wu, in a cheeky nod to the former's famous declaration that "poetry is a luxury we cannot afford".

Berlin-based artist Ming Wong's *Merdeka Dream (No 1)* fuses cinematic nostalgia with digital abstraction, while Bangkok-based Shavonne Wong's *The Bubble We Call Home* explores the uneasy duality of safety and surveillance in contemporary Singapore. In *I'm Worth My Bread*, Beijing-based husband-and-wife artist duo Chow and Lin visualise GDP data as patterns of daily consumption through the lens of daily food purchases—laying bare the uneven realities behind Singapore's economic ascent. The exhibition's final gesture is a commissioned composition by New York-based musician Koh Cheng Jin. Titled *Passages*, the five-minute piece interweaves violin, cello, ruan and

cajón to evoke the evolving sonic rhythms of a nation.

"Art holds up a mirror to society," says Ning. "It reflects our heritage, values and identity. That's why we gave the artists complete freedom to express what they want to say—and how they want to say it." Its public programming extends the exhibition's spirit of openness and reflection. Beyond the collectors and connoisseurs, *Artist's Proof* invites school groups, seniors and neurodivergent children for guided tours. A two-day symposium explores the evolving role of art in nation-building.

Even the title is deliberate. An "artist's proof" is the first finished impression—the prototype before the final edition. "And that's how we want to think about Singapore," Chong explains. "Sixty years for a country is a very short time. We are still a work in progress." Perhaps that is the exhibition's

most resonant proposition: it does not seek closure. It invites dialogue—between generations, between past and future, and between private memory and public consciousness.

"I've lived in Singapore almost all my life," Chong muses. "But through this process [of putting together the exhibition], engaging with the art and the artists, I've come to see the country with new eyes. And I hope others will, too."

Beyond that, Chong hopes the exhibition will spark something more enduring: a desire to collect and support Singaporean artists. "We have works by over 50 artists in the show, but there are easily 500 more out there doing remarkable work. Many are still at the start of their careers, and their art remains accessible. I hope more people will take that step—to start collecting, start investing and help grow our local art scene."