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Eric Khoo

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What Singapore's Artistic Future Holds

A dedicated community of private art collectors has quietly expanded their passion beyond acquisition to nurture talent, preserve heritage, and propel Singaporean art onto the global stage.

By **Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE**



Hilmi Johandi's 'Great World City; New World' (2017) was inspired by now-defunct amusement parks and bridges linking Singapore's past and present



'The First Brick' (2021) by Wong Keen depicts Samsui women at a construction site

As Singapore celebrates its 60th year of independence, a landmark exhibition is rewriting how the city-state tells its story. A deeply personal yet nationally resonant showcase, "Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60" reveals how art serves as a mirror for collective memory and identity.

Singapore entrepreneur Chong Huai Seng and his daughter Ning Chong are steering the event. This private initiative exemplifies a powerful trend in Singapore: local collectors are not simply acquiring art, but also shaping the city-state's artistic future. They are also filling critical gaps institutions alone cannot address.

Chong, who has been collecting art since the 1990s, describes the exhibition at Artspace @ Helutrans (on until 17 August 2025) as his "love letter to Singapore".

"From my perspective, art welcomes diverse perspectives and offers new ways of reflecting on our history," he says of the

90-plus artworks from his private collection. From 1940 to 2025, they trace his life's journey and Singapore's development from a fledgling state to a global city.

"Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60" features more than 50 artists (mostly Singaporeans), including Cultural Medallion recipients Cheong Soo Pieng, Chua Mia Tee, and Lee Wen. The list also includes established names like Tang Da Wu, Wong Keen, Ming Wong, and John Clang, as well as exciting new names, such as Israfil Ridhwan, Khairulddin Wahab, Loi Cai Xiang, Dawn Ng, Shavonne Wong, Ng Joon Kiat, and Hilmi Johandi.

More than a retrospective, it is also the first time Chong has commissioned artworks—11 new pieces, along with an original musical composition—specifically for an exhibition to capture the dynamics of the country's creative scene. "Nurturing local talent, particularly the younger generation, is

incredibly important to me as we envision a sustainable future for the arts in Singapore," he says. "Commissioning allows us to move beyond mere patronage and become direct catalysts for creation."

THE COLLECTOR'S ROLE BEYOND POSSESSION

Singapore's private collectors have become increasingly influential in recent years. No longer passive connoisseurs, they have become progressively involved in the art ecosystem, organising exhibitions, supporting residencies, funding publications, lending or donating works to institutions, and creating art spaces.

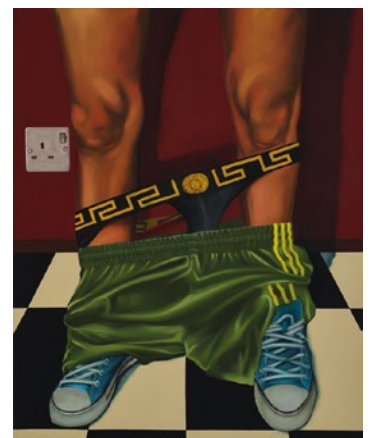
Take The Culture Story. Founded in 2017, it shares the Chongs' collection with other art lovers, engages the broader community, and inspires greater interest. As he insists, "For Singapore's art and artists



Chong Huai Seng of The Culture Story



'Plucking Chickens at Loong Yick Kee Restaurant' (1958) by Hor Kwok Kin



'Real Life' (2023) by Israfil Ridhwan



'What has to be, will be' (2024) by Joel Seow

to thrive, we private collectors should look beyond personal acquisition and actively foster public interaction with local art.”

Another example is Primz Gallery, established by prominent Singaporean collectors Linda Neo and Albert Lim in 2014. Their shows explore socio-political themes and encourage deeper engagement with Singapore and the region, often in conjunction with Art SG and SEA Focus’s VIP programmes.

To date, they have curated eight exhibitions, including Jane Lee’s solo shows in 2017 and 2023. Known for her thickly layered, tactile surfaces and process-driven style, Lee’s ‘Melt VII’ (2017) was sold by Sotheby’s for \$190,500 in July 2023.

Neo explains why they shifted from Western art to local Singaporean art: “Supporting local artists and art is a natural progression... The local art scene can only

thrive with homegrown collectors like us.”

Convinced that private collectors must do more than purchase works to sustain the legacy of Singaporean artists, Neo and Lim donated 10 Lim Tze Peng artworks to the National University Museum in 2015. These were exhibited during “The Evening Climb: The Later Style of Lim Tze Peng” in 2016.

Neo extended her contribution to the scene by serving as chairperson of Oh! Open House, championing alternative storytelling through activities such as art walks around Singapore. She also co-founded Art Addicts Anonymous, a grassroots initiative that introduced new art lovers to the scene. During Singapore Art Week 2024, 15 collectors presented “Chronic Compulsions: Selected Works From Art Addicts Anonymous” at The Private Museum.

SHINING THE LIGHT ON FORGOTTEN OR LITTLE-KNOWN ARTISTS

Singapore-based collector Krystina Lyon, who describes her pieces as personal rather than private, emphasises the similar ethos of connection and sharing: “I do not collect art for investment or legacy.”

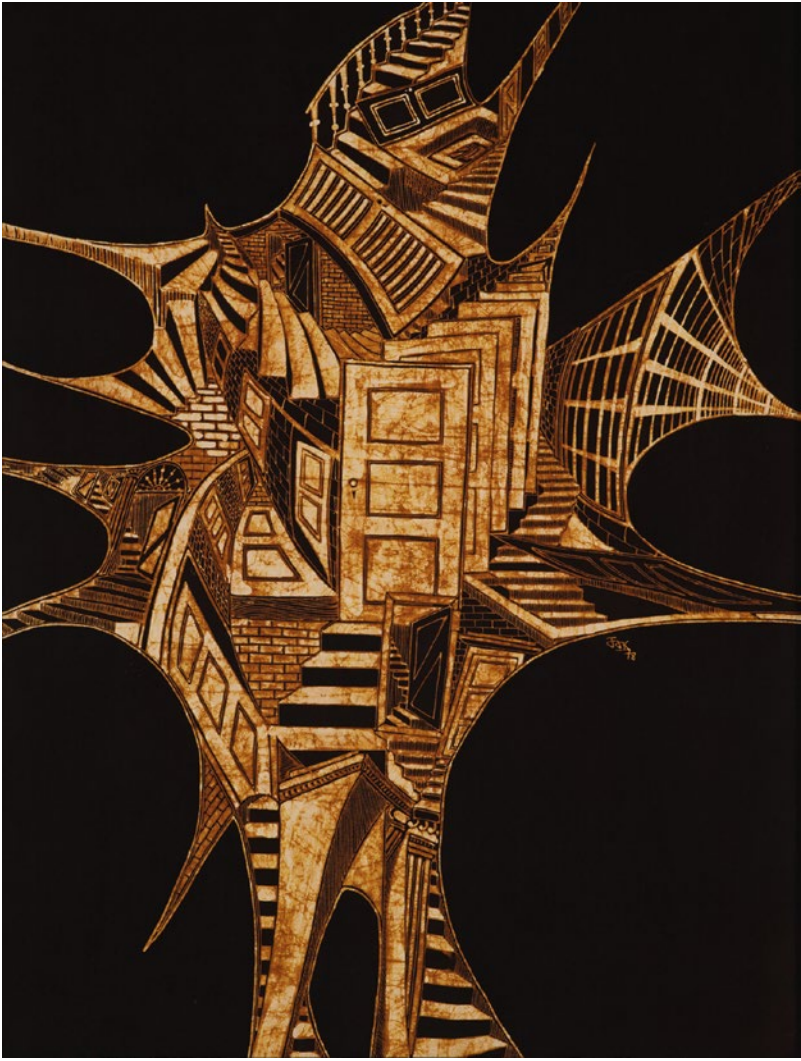
She elaborates further on the unique position of private collectors: “Unlike institutions, which must work within clearly defined acquisition policies and long-term



'Political Landscape(s): The Great Dispersal—Workers' Party, Hougang, 2015 001' (2015) by Darren Soh



'Untitled (Monuments in Conversation)' (2025) by Zulkhairi Zulkiflee



'Neighbours' (1978) by Sujak Rahman

mandates, personal collectors can take risks, supporting artists at pivotal moments. We can bring visibility to voices that might otherwise remain overlooked: artists who challenge dominant narratives around gender, identity and belonging.”

Lyon, who collects contemporary Southeast Asian women artists, believes her role goes beyond collecting and includes connecting people, ideas and generations through interviews, informal mentorships, and publishing. Her forthcoming book on her collection, *You Are Seen: Women’s Contemporary Art Practices in Southeast Asia*, set to launch at Art SG 2026, promises to further amplify underrepresented voices.

By creating space for more women to see themselves reflected in contemporary art, she hopes to contribute to “a deeper, more inclusive culture of collecting in Singapore and beyond”.

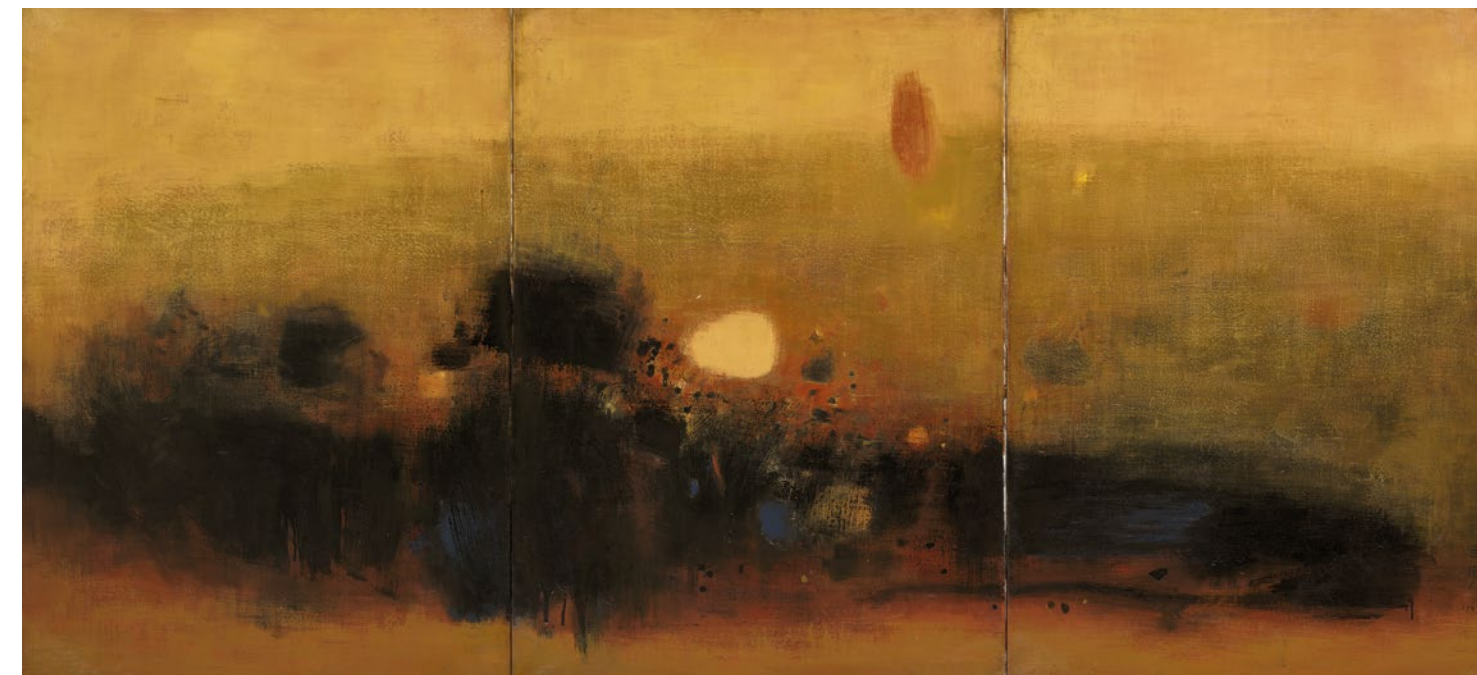
Lyon’s collection features many female artists who contributed to shaping our cultural identity, including sculptor Han Sai Por, conceptualist Suzann Victor, and abstractionist Kim Lim. The recent resurgence of interest in Lim, with her auction record of \$168,000 for ‘Ronin’ (1963) at Sotheby’s Singapore sale last January, spotlights a growing appreciation of previously unnoticed voices in art history.

She underlines the vital behind-the-scenes role Singapore-based collectors play in raising the profile of pioneer and contemporary generations of Singaporean artists: “Beyond acquiring works, many of us also serve as informal ambassadors, introducing local artists to curators, institutions and collectors abroad. We lend to international institutions and exhibitions, participate in dialogue, and share context needed for deeper appreciation.”

Auction houses have observed surging interest and record-breaking results. In the first half of 2025, Singaporean collectors increased spending on art and luxury at Christie's Hong Kong by nearly 20 percent.



'Still Life with Big Durian' (circa 1965) by Georgette Chen



'Nature's Inspiration' (1963) by Cheong Soo Pieng

A RISING MARKET, A RISING TIDE

Singaporean collectors are now major players in the rising visibility and valuation of homegrown artists, both domestically and abroad. Auction houses like Sotheby's and Christie's observe surging interest and record-breaking results. In the first half of 2025, for instance, collectors increased spending on art and luxury at Christie's Hong Kong by nearly 20 percent. Southeast Asia, led by buyers in Singapore, was the third highest buying market (following mainland

China and Hong Kong) in Christie's sales of 20th- and 21st-century art in March 2025.

Sotheby's also reported a 60 percent increase in Singapore-based bidders in the company's global sales since 2022 when it relaunched art auctions in the city-state after a 15-year hiatus. Significantly, 20 percent of new buyers at its Singapore auctions are 40 years or younger—a signal of generational renewal.

Jasmine Prasetyo, Managing Director of Sotheby's Southeast Asia, echoes the critical role of local backing: "The success of a nation's artists begins domestically.

It is very important for Singaporeans to support Singaporean artists." Singaporean and Southeast Asian collectors have grown increasingly active in Sotheby's Asia and global auctions, but the former have demonstrated a strong, consistent commitment to collecting local modern and contemporary artists, while expanding their interest in international names.

Dexter How, Vice President and Senior Specialist for 20th/21st Century Art at Christie's Asia Pacific, affirms: "We see Singaporean clients proudly and avidly collecting Singaporean artworks across the modern and contemporary eras, focusing on rarity and quality in a selective market. This speaks to a desire to connect with their culture and heritage, as well as enthusiasm for supporting homegrown talent."

This uptick coincides with the global recognition of Singapore's modern masters, particularly pioneers of the Nanyang style of painting. Known for her still-lives and portraits, Georgette Chen's 'Still Life with Big Durian' (circa 1965) snagged a world auction record by fetching HK\$14,290,000 (S\$2,332,611) at Christie's Hong Kong in May 2023. This was just six months after her 'Still Life with Rambutans, Mangosteens and Pineapple' (circa 1960s) sold for HK\$13,050,000.

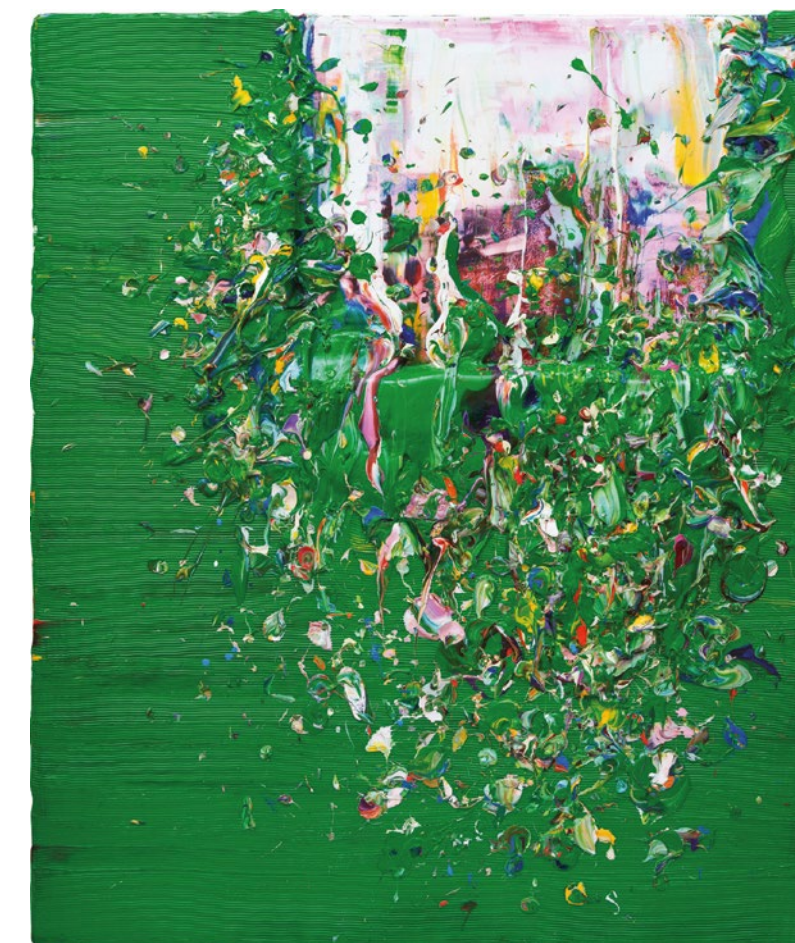
Meanwhile, Cheong Soo Pieng's 'Nature's Inspiration' (1963) hit HK\$11,507,000 at

Christie's Hong Kong in November 2023, setting a world auction record for the artist. Liu Kang, known for his vibrant depictions of Balinese scenes, achieved a personal record with 'Pounding Rice' (1953), which went for \$698,500 at a Sotheby's Singapore auction in 2023.

Lim Tze Peng, the Singaporean national treasure celebrated for his Chinese ink paintings and distinctive calligraphic style, achieved HK\$1,250,000 with 'Singapore River Scene' (1983) at Christie's Hong Kong in 2021. Tan Swie Hian's 'Portrait of Bada Shanren' (2013), one of the most expensive artworks sold at auction by a Southeast Asian living artist in 2014, topped the list at \$4.4 million at Poly Auction in Beijing.



'Boats and Shophouses' (1960) by Georgette Chen



'Melt VII' (2017) by Jane Lee



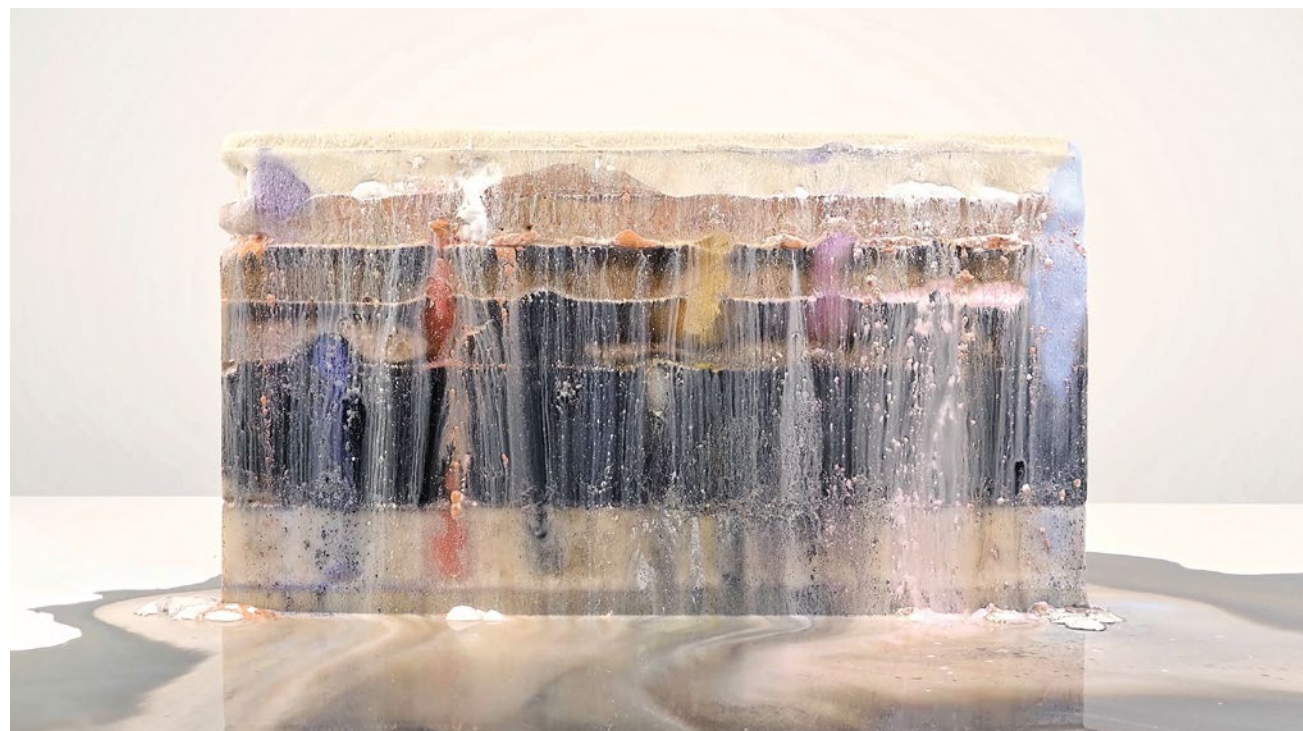
Christie's Asia Pacific's Dexter How says Singaporean collectors want to connect with their heritage



Local support is key to an artist's success, says Jasmine Prasetyo of Sotheby's Southeast Asia



'Darkness' (1960s) by Cheong Soo Pieng



'Avalanche I, Time Lost Falling in Love' (2021) by Dawn Ng



Art collectors Albert Lim and Linda Neo

THE NEW WAVE: VISIONARIES OF CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE

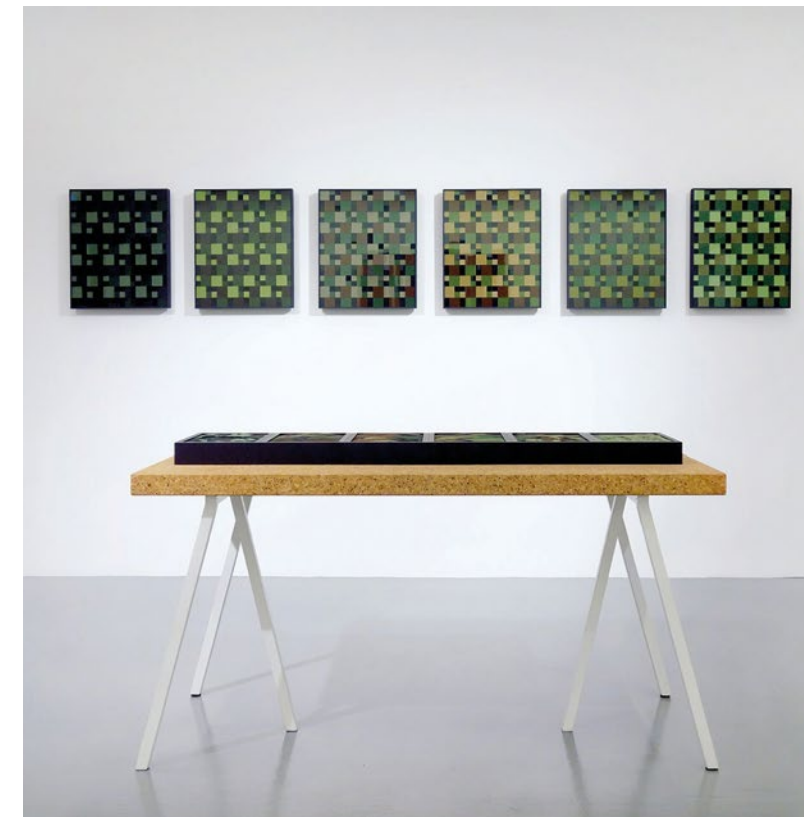
There is also a vibrant wave of mid-career and emerging Singaporean artists paving new paths. In diverse media, they address urgent themes such as climate change, identity, urbanisation, and technology. In international biennales, these reflect collectors' concerns and questions.

Neo's collection, for instance, includes Donna Ong and Heman Chong. Using found objects and installation, the former creates dreamlike realms, while Chong explores incompleteness in his first major survey exhibition.

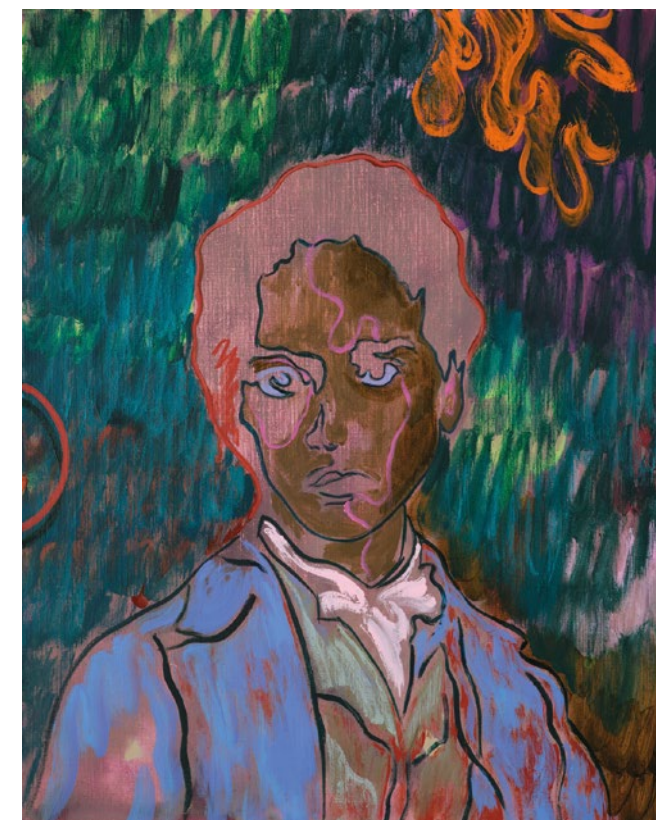
Dawn Ng, another up-and-coming artist, uses vibrant colours and everyday materials to explore time, memory, and nostalgia. In Wyn-Lyn Tan's abstract landscapes, subtle textures evoke mood and atmosphere, while Melissa Tan's intricate sculptures depict natural forces and rock fragments.

Then there is Ho Tzu Nyen, perhaps the most international artist of his generation, who is the artistic director of Gwangju Biennale 2026. In his multi-layered artworks, he relates Southeast Asian histories and myths with scholarly precision and theatrical flair. Five of his multimedia installations from over a decade of work are being featured at Luma Arles in France.

Through "Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60", Chong hopes to inspire more people to collect art. Private patronage can make Singaporean art a global force. "It is a testament to how private patronage can propel Singaporean art onto the global stage and contribute to the growth of our cultural landscape." ²¹



From the 'Four Colours Make a Forest' series (2017-2021) by Donna Ong



'Ali' (2021) by Khairulddin Wahab