

Rare LKY bust at heart of show exploring Singapore identity



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It begins, like so many Singapore stories, with former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In 2014, a phone call came from London for art space The Culture Story's co-founder Chong Huai Seng.

The widow of British sculptor Sydney Harpley was housekeeping. Would he be interested in acquiring the artist's proof – an artist prototype – of a rare bust of Mr Lee, made with his permission in 1982?

"It was like the Holy Grail of collecting," says Mr Chong, 74, still visibly emotional from this stroke of luck. He compares it to discovering a missing van Gogh – at which point, his daughter Ning Chong, 40, goads him into repeating his moniker for the prized item: "The Mona Lisa of Singapore."

The 70cm-tall melancholic likeness – the artist's proof of the only bust Mr Lee was ever persuaded to pose for in his lifetime – is the fount of a mammoth new show at Art-space@Helutrans in Tanjong Pagar Distripark.

Artist's Proof: Singapore At 60, which opens on July 13, encompasses 95 works by more than 50 mostly Singaporean artists. Mr Chong terms it his "legacy project" 10 years in the making.

In the past two years, he has found himself unwittingly sourcing for works to plug the gaps in the amorphous narrative.

"This one show basically took up seven years of our budget, so you can imagine the cost. But there's only one opportunity to do a 60th-anniversary show, and I thought we should spare no expense, either time, money or resource."

The final roster reads like a who's who of Singapore art history. Ms Chong, who once led projects like the Singapore Pavilion at Venice Biennale while working for the National Arts Council, put "a hard stop date" to the project after it threatened to mushroom out of control.

In setting the show along four themes – including the diaspora story and the relationship of Government, artists and people – curator Kwok Kian Chow says the team was not confined by the nation's borders.

"Singapore has always been much larger," he says. The earliest work exhibited is by Malaysian watercolourist Yong Mun Sen, instrumental in the founding of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, made in 1948.

Eleven new commissions were made by Singapore artists around the globe, from Berlin-based Ming Wong and Bangkok-based Shavonne Wong to artist duo Chow and Lin in Beijing and Zulkhairi Zulkiflee in Chicago.

Mr Kwok says Zulkhairi's idea of "worlding" was instructive in how Singapore – and the show – could create its own larger realities. The artist collages pavilion structures in his work, which he sees as shorthand for how people have engaged with official monuments to evolve more personal, day-to-day meanings.

Zulkhairi says over e-mail: "Being Singaporean to me is a constant mode of becoming. It demands experimentation and critical thinking."

This experimentation lies in pushing artistic language too. The Culture Story has commissioned an unexpected set of caricature toy figurines from illustrator Sonny Liew, titled P.A.P. x P.A., and a music piece composed by 29-year-old Koh Cheng Jin, who lives in New York.

Their contemporary media are worlds apart from the paintings of pioneer Nanyang artists, but Mr Kwok says they are imperceptibly talking back.

A recent visit to the National

Gallery Singapore helped him realise the persistence of these "landmark pieces of Singapore artistry". In Hilmi Johandi's layered painting, one discerns scenes of P. Ramlee's cinema and Chua Mia Tee's National Language Class.

Mr Kwok says: "They are respectful as well as being critical in thinking about where we could go to in terms of expression. Even if they have not directly inherited from the Nanyang artists, there's a lot of to and fro, interfaces and mutual conversations going on."

Mr Chong diagnoses a more fundamental disruption: "A lot of them now are so exposed to the art world that their works are bought by museums like MoMA and Tate Modern. The younger artists are carrying the Singapore flag way beyond what the Nanyang artists were able to do, yet many of them are still not accepted by local collectors."

The most recent work he acquired for the show is *Be/Longing* by Suzann Victor, who founded the ground-breaking art collective 5th Passage in the early 1990s.

This circular painting of Southeast Asian migrants distorted by a screen of lenses ended up being the final piece of the jigsaw. Mr Chong thought it was an important connector to Singapore's regional heritage, while Ms Chong had been pushing for more women artists from that period.

For Mr Kwok, who once programmed Victor in 1997 when he was director of the Singapore Art Museum, it provided the conclusion to his curatorial text. He says the title *Be/Longing* perfectly captured the tension between "be", "longing" and "belonging" that the show, meditating on what home is, wants visitors to confront.

Mr Chong, who has commissioned two other LKY portraits without his approval, points out that Mr Lee once said of the Harpley sculpture: "I only agree to this commission if the bust is not shown publicly in Singapore as long as I'm alive."

He adds: "As long as I'm alive" is important. What happens after that? He left it to the Government and to the people."

ARTIST'S PROOF: SINGAPORE AT 60

WHERE Art-space@Helutrans
Tanjong Pagar Distripark,
39 Keppel Road

WHEN July 13 to Aug 17, 10am to
6pm (Tuesdays to Sundays)

ADMISSION Free

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