



Voices & Vision – Art Thought Leadership Symposium

Voices and Vision is a 2-day art thought leadership programme, on the occasion of **Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60**, that creates a space for meaningful exchange and deeper engagement with real-world issues. Join us in shaping the dialogue on our shared past, present, and future.

Artist's Proof: Singapore at 60 and Voices and Vision are presented by The Culture Story, produced by Family Office For Art.

Keynote

26 July 2025

Speaker:

Prof. Tan Tai Yong | President of the Singapore University of Social Sciences and Honorary Chairman of the National Museum, Co-Chair of the Founder's Memorial Committee

Recap

In his keynote address, Prof. Tan Tai Yong explored the crucial distinction between state-building and nation-building in Singapore's development. He opened by contrasting Singapore's experience with Jawaharlal Nehru's famous 1947 independence speech, which portrayed India's nationhood as the reawakening of an ancient civilizational identity. Singapore, Tan argued, had no such precedent—it was merely a colonial trading post, an artificial construct lacking any singular cultural foundation.

Anti-colonial movements in Singapore sought liberation from British rule but envisioned merger with Malaya rather than independent sovereignty. When Singapore unexpectedly gained independence in 1965 following its separation from Malaysia, citizens were compelled to embrace an entirely new national identity rapidly.

“Singapore did not set out to be a nation-state. It was a port city, a commercial centre, not a civilisation with a cultural core. Nationhood had to be constructed.”

Tan drew a sharp distinction between the swift establishment of state apparatus—laws, economic structures, and infrastructure—and the far more complex challenge of building a unified nation. Rather than accepting the default of a Chinese-majority state, Singapore's leaders strategically chose multiracialism as the foundation for national survival, formally articulating this principle in the National Pledge. Initially, nation-building was primarily a state-led initiative designed to create social cohesion among a diverse immigrant population.



By the 1970s, Singapore had also positioned itself as a global city, creating an inherent tension between fostering national loyalty and maintaining international openness. Tan emphasised that nation-building is an ongoing endeavour: national aspirations must continuously evolve to reflect changing demographics and contemporary realities. He concluded by underscoring the vital role that civil society and artists play in shaping Singapore's continuing identity formation.

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