



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.

Proof of Concept — The Artist's Role in a New Nation

26 July 2025

Moderator:

- Paul Tan | Chief Executive Officer, Community Foundation of Singapore, Former Deputy Chief Executive, NAC; Poet

Speakers:

- Adeline Chia | Independent Art Writer, Reviews Editor at ArtReview Asia
- Dr. Seng Yu Jin | Director (Curatorial, Research & Exhibitions) at National Gallery Singapore

Introduction: Framing the “Proof of Concept”

Moderator Paul Tan opened the panel by situating the conversation within the broader theme of nationhood. Citing historian Tan Tai Yong's keynote, he noted that Singapore's founding was marked by uncertainty—what he called the "improbable nation." The panel, titled *Proof of Concept: The Artist's Role in a New Nation*, asked what it means to test, trial, and improvise culturally.

Just as early leaders grappled with survival, artists helped shape the nation's “soul”—not only reflecting society but also building it. The discussion considered the artist's role and position within state frameworks, how art engages with history, and how detours in the nation's development complicated Singapore's cultural narrative.



National vs. Nationalistic: Beyond Boundaries

“The National is not the same as the Nationalistic. One opens outward, the other closes in.” — Seng Yu Jin

Dr. Seng Yu Jin began by distinguishing between the “National” and the “Nationalistic.” Nationalism, he argued, is often tethered to the state and its apparatus—flags, parades, official histories. By contrast, what is considered National can be expansive in nature; they allow art and culture to extend beyond fixed borders, geographical or otherwise. This framing opens Singapore to its deep entanglements with the rest of Southeast Asia, where shared cultural histories—between Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, Chinese and Indian cultural histories—circulate and cross national lines.

Seng cited National Gallery Singapore’s new permanent exhibition, *Pathways and Detours*, as an example of how curatorial narratives can resist linear, triumphant progress stories. The nation’s history, he reminded the audience, is filled with ruptures. The merger with Malaysia in 1963 and the separation in 1965 are examples of detours that unsettle a neat teleological arc. To speak of the national, then, is to acknowledge complexity, plurality, and porous connections, not only to the region but also to global circuits.

Adeline Chia agreed with Seng, noting that while exhibitions such as *Artist’s Proof* avoid overt nationalism, they cannot help but contribute to a form of nation-building. National surveys and art histories, she argued, always participate in the construction of a singular national identity. Yet this identity is not fixed but fluid and evolving: it is debated, negotiated, and sometimes uncomfortable. For Chia, the challenge is how to tell these stories without prescribing a fixed narrative while leaving space for ambiguity.

Art, History, and Ambiguity

A recurring theme was the entanglement of art and history. Artworks often become touchstones for national memory, not only reflecting history but actively shaping it. Chia highlighted Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class* (1959) as a work that crystallises this intersection. Painted in the year of self-government, it depicts ethnically Chinese students learning Malay in a classroom. The painting encapsulates both aspiration and unease: the embrace of Malay as a national language and the discomfort of negotiating identity across ethnic and political lines. For Chia, the painting’s unresolved tension is its strength; unlike state narratives that strive for clarity, art often insists on ambiguity.

“Unlike state narratives that strive for clarity, art often insists on ambiguity—and it is in this discomfort that nationhood resides.” — Adeline Chia

Seng Yu Jin added that art histories in the region have often been written through nation-state frameworks, reinforcing borders rather than complicating them. By foregrounding detours and marginalised voices, curators and writers can disrupt this tendency. He emphasised that art must not be instrumentalised solely as a vehicle for nation-building; artists should retain their agency in producing work that resists or refuses official narratives.



Revisiting Cultural Policy: “Bread Before Poetry”

The panel also interrogated longstanding narratives about Singapore’s cultural policy. In the 1960s and 70s, politicians often asserted that “poetry is a luxury we cannot afford” and that culture must come only after bread-and-butter concerns. Seng Yu Jin recalled the missed opportunity of the 1950s, when plans for a \$100,000 national art gallery fell through. It was not until 1976 that the National Museum Art Gallery opened, by which time decades of potential acquisitions had been lost.

Audience members added historical anecdotes: S. Rajaratnam, Singapore’s first Minister for Culture, struggled to secure funding from Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee, whose memos repeatedly ignored requests for arts spending. The National Theatre at Fort Canning, built in 1963, was funded not through state coffers but through public donations under the “\$1 a brick” campaign.

Chia reflected on how this pragmatism still shadows cultural policy today. While Singapore now boasts a thriving infrastructure of museums and galleries, questions remain about whether art is valued intrinsically or primarily as a tool for image-making and creative-economy agendas. She urged a shift toward trusting audiences and citizens as discerning participants, not passive recipients of state-led narratives.

Private Collectors and New Milestones

The discussion turned to the exhibition *Artist’s Proof: Singapore at 60*, the background for the symposium. Both speakers acknowledged the significance of such a large-scale, privately staged survey of Singapore art. Seng Yu Jin described it as a “milestone exhibition,” notable for its artist-centred approach and the commissioning of 11 new works. For him, *Artist’s Proof* demonstrated that nation-building in art cannot remain a solely top-down endeavour; private initiatives and ground-up efforts are equally vital.

Chia situated the exhibition within regional currents. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, she observed private collectors mounting politically charged exhibitions with their own collections, staging alternative narratives of national identity. Singapore’s collecting scene has been quieter, but *Artist’s Proof* signals a new willingness among collectors to take risks and invite public scrutiny. As she put it, “It takes bravery to put your collection—and your perspective on the nation—on display.”



Highlights from the Exhibition

Both panellists highlighted specific works that reframed questions of nationhood:

- David Chan's **#firefire** juxtaposes the 2013 Little India riot's burning ambulance with a more ambiguous campfire scene. For Chia, this pairing evokes both historical trauma and migrant workers' precarious citizenship status.
- Khairulddin Wahab's painting, **Landward** contrasts colonial cartographers with a figure holding a plant, staging two relationships to the land: one extractive, mapping and conquering; the other generative, cultivating and coexisting. The work invites reflection on whether Singapore's relationship to its environment and people is exploitative or nurturing.
- Israfil Ridwan's **Real Life** foregrounds queer desire, reminding viewers that LGBTQ Singaporeans are woven into the national fabric despite lingering ambivalence around representation. Chia praised the inclusion of such works as a sign that contemporary art is gradually carving space for diverse identities.

These examples underscored how *Artist's Proof* balanced nostalgia with provocation, offering viewers both familiar landmarks and new perspectives on what constitutes Singaporean art.

Citizens, Audiences, and Agency

An audience member asked where citizens stand in the constellation of nation, state, and art. Seng Yu Jin responded that the future depends on trusting individuals—not only artists but also audiences—to be capable of engaging critically with art and identity. National narratives should not “baby” audiences with pre-approved interpretations.

Chia echoed this sentiment, arguing that respect for autonomy is crucial. Audiences must be treated as adults, capable of grappling with discomfort and contradiction. Only then can art fulfill its potential as a space for reflection and negotiation, rather than a polished instrument for consensus.

Conclusion: Detours, Discomfort, and Proofs

The panel closed by returning to the metaphor of the “proof of concept.” Nation-building, like printmaking, involves trials, missteps, and provisional impressions. Singapore's cultural history is marked not only by linear progress but also by detours, absences, and contradictions.

For Seng Yu Jin, the lesson is that cultural development cannot remain state-engineered; it must be nurtured from multiple angles by different actors, including private collectors, artists, and communities. For Adeline Chia, the challenge is to embrace ambiguity: to acknowledge that nationhood is not always celebratory but often uncomfortable, unsettled, and unresolved.



In the end, the panel affirmed that art provides essential “proofs” of a nation’s becoming. By reflecting discomfort, amplifying marginalised voices, and resisting premature closure, art demonstrates that the nation is more an ongoing experiment than a finished product—one whose vitality depends on curiosity, risk, and the willingness to sit with uncertainty.

Alternative Recap

This panel examined the artist’s role in shaping a young nation’s identity, taking Singapore as a case study. Moderator Paul Tan framed the conversation around the “proof of concept”—how the formation of a nation is both experimental and uncertain, with artists acting as mirrors and architects of collective identity.

Seng Yu Jin distinguished between “the national” and “the nationalistic,” noting that the national can extend beyond borders, connecting Singapore to Southeast Asia and global currents, whereas the nationalistic is more rigidly tied to the state. He emphasised detours in history, such as merger and separation, as crucial to understanding national narratives beyond linear progress.

Adeline Chia stressed that national surveys inevitably construct and reaffirm a singular national identity, even if contested, and highlighted the enduring relevance of works like Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class* (1959), which captures the unease embedded in nationhood. Both speakers reflected on art’s entanglement with history—sometimes instrumentalised by the state, yet also revealing marginalised stories and offering ambiguity against simplified national narratives.

The discussion turned to the exhibition *Artist’s Proof*, seen as a milestone in privately staged surveys of Singapore art. Speakers noted its mix of nostalgia and curiosity, its commissioning of new works, and the bravery of private collectors in assuming risk and scrutiny. Specific works were highlighted for how they reframed nationhood: David Chan’s diptych juxtaposing the Little India riot with a campfire; Kai Lam’s reflections on colonial legacies; and Rafiqun Nabi’s queer-inflected portraiture.

Audience exchanges raised questions about state pragmatism—whether the old dictum that “culture comes after bread and butter” still lingers. Panellists argued for art as central to life, not secondary, and urged trust in individuals and citizens as critical participants in shaping cultural identity. The panel concluded that nation-building is never linear or comfortable; art, with its detours, ambiguities, and risks, provides the proofs through which new identities are tested.

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