



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.

Present and Away

27 July 2025

Moderator:

- Dr. Adele Tan | Senior Curator, National Gallery Singapore

Speakers:

- Sonny Liew | Artist and Author of *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*
- Suzann Victor | Artist and SG Representative for 49th Venice Biennale
- Zulkhairi Zulkiflee | Artist-Curator

Introduction

The final panel of the symposium, "Present and Away," moderated by Adele Tan, explored the experiences of three artists who have lived and worked both in Singapore and abroad. In different ways, the three artists have been both "present" in Singapore and "away" from it, their works bearing the marks of distance, return, and negotiation. The discussion considered questions of form, commissioning, national framing, and the possibilities of failure.

Framing metaphors

Tan opened by reflecting on the exhibition title *Artist's Proof*, connecting it to the printmaker's test impression, the proof of concept, and even the "proofing" of bread dough. All these "proofs," she suggested, reveal processes of trial, risk, and becoming. These metaphors, she suggested, aptly describe Singapore's art ecosystem—constantly being tested, scrutinised, and in-process. She also positioned the panel around presence and absence: how artists' time away from Singapore inform their practices, and how audiences can be both attentive and imaginative elsewhere.



Artist presentations

"What would happen if a minister did performance art? Would it be a collaboration? Recognition? Something else entirely?"— Sonny Liew

Sonny Liew opened by recounting the unexpectedly fraught production of his commissioned work, **P.A.P. x P.A.**—figurines of Singapore's founding leaders Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam, and Goh Keng Swee that were produced overseas under tight deadlines. Modeled after the aesthetic of collectible action figurines, the figures went through many rounds of revision and were only delivered a day before the exhibition opened, during installation. "It was stressful," Sonny admitted. Conceptually, the figurines themselves were not simple portraits, but juxtaposed political icons with references to performance art, an art form once banned in Singapore. They reference Singapore's fraught history with performance art in the 1990s, when the state retracted funding from unscripted performances. By placing the founding fathers in the context of performance art props—bags of blood, tofu, a cigarette—Sonny's work treads a fine line between critique and whimsy.

"The whole idea of this work is that you can't see everything."— Suzann Victor

Suzann Victor presented **Be/Longing**, part of her long-term *Singapore River* series, concerned that the river had been historically depicted through male perspectives. She began with a question: why was the Singapore River, such a vital lifeline of the city, so often depicted in watercolour by male artists? Her response was to draw on archival postcards and photographs of anonymous figures, assembling them into collaged images, then reassembling them into collages viewed through Fresnel lenses that fracture and obscure. The work thus resists full visibility and undermines the "imperial gaze" of colonial imagery embedded in colonial postcards, with images captioned simply "Singapore: Malay Woman." Suzann sought to dismantle this imperial gaze, and her fractured compositions insisted on privacy for these anonymous figures. The work situated the river within broader regional currents, extending beyond the local—in **Be/Longing**, the river even opened out to the sea, a gesture toward wider regional flows of labour and migration.

"Memory can cling to the most ordinary forms." — Zulkhairi Zulkiflee

Zulkhairi Zulkiflee introduced his pavilion-based commission, **Untitled (Monuments in Conversation)**, inspired by the ubiquitous but often overlooked concrete shelters in HDB estates that are scattered across estates and often sit unused. For him they carried an "affective resonance," reminding him of his youth and community. He reimagined the pavilion as a monument by using vintage maps and digital processes, collaging these maps and paper cuttings into layered images that evoke personal memories of youth and community. The process was logistically messy—one version traveled with a friend from Chicago, before he settled on a digital format for durability. The project began during a residency before his MFA in Chicago and concluded upon his return, marking it as a work of both departure and homecoming. But conceptually, the point was simple: that memory can cling to the most ordinary forms.



Form and decision-making

The panel examined how artists choose form and medium. Victor emphasised creating “pictorial privacy” for figures otherwise subject to colonial taxonomies. Liew described considering alternative formats—board games, pop culture objects—before arriving at figurines, which he felt best carried the intended tensions. Zulkhairi explained his preference for collage and layering, which allowed him to complicate the photographic image.

The discussion also touched on the relationship between image and text and extensions and afterlives. All three acknowledged that writing plays a significant role in their practices, whether through explanatory text, adaptation into other media, or newsletters and essays that document the process. Sonny acknowledged film and theatre adaptations of his graphic novel, but said he preferred to let others do these translations, noting “The challenge is always to be faithful but also different.” Zul described starting a Substack newsletter while in Chicago—an unusual choice for an artist, but one that let him share the excess thoughts and fragments that didn’t fit into artworks, reflecting that writing often clarified what made him leave tacit. Suzann agreed: words and images, she said, were always in dialogue.

Presence, absence, and failure

When asked what they noticed when leaving and returning to Singapore, Victor pointed to the “landscape of amnesia” created by the constant demolition of architecture. “Architecture shapes us,” she said, “and yet we keep tearing it down.” Liew reflected on how minority-majority dynamics became more visible to him abroad. Zulkhairi emphasised the importance of curiosity, suggesting that Singapore would benefit from greater openness to unfamiliar art and ideas.

The question of failure generated debate. Victor argued that her own once-controversial performances illustrate how “failure” can later be reframed. Liew noted that the economic realities of sustaining an artistic career remain challenging. Zulkhairi proposed that experimentation requires messiness and imperfection, and that artists must allow themselves to fail in order to discover new directions.

Commissions and risks

Audience questions focused on the dynamics of commissioned work. Both Liew and Zulkhairi said the process had been smooth, with clear communication and autonomy. Liew observed that commissions sometimes reduce decision fatigue by providing thematic parameters.

“It was love at first sight—and also a moment of panic. How would this be received in 2025?”
— Ning Chong

Commissioners present in the audience (Ning Chong and Chong Huai Seng) described their own anxieties, particularly around Liew’s figurines, which risked overshadowing the exhibition’s centrepiece, the bust of Lee Kuan Yew. Ultimately, they chose to proceed, emphasising that private collectors also assume risk in commissioning work.



Singapore at 60

The panel considered whether the exhibition's subtitle, Singapore at 60, constrained or enriched the works. Tan asked whether the show might have worked better without it. Victor argued that art made in Singapore can still speak globally, and that local focus need not be parochial. Liew suggested that artists cannot control how their work is received internationally. Zulkhairi provocatively recommended "more navel-gazing," framing insularity as potentially productive for identity formation. Audience members noted that the subtitle provided a useful time-stamp for reflection in the context of a milestone anniversary.

Conclusion

"It's okay to be messy. Perfection is not always the goal." — Panel closing reflection (Adele Tan, moderator)

The panel concluded by highlighting risk as a recurring theme. Whether through contested references to performance art, fractured depictions of the river, or the elevation of everyday structures, the works demonstrated that presence and absence, success and failure, are integral to artistic practice.

Alternative Recap

Moderated by Adele Tan, this final panel reflected on the experiences of artists who have worked both within and beyond Singapore. Tan framed the discussion through the metaphor of "proof"—from printmaking, concept-testing, and even bread-making—as a way to think about risk, trial, and becoming in Singapore's art scene.

Sonny Liew spoke about the production of his commissioned figurines of Singapore's founding leaders, which juxtapose political figures with props from 1990s performance artwork, walking a line between critique and play. Suzann Victor presented **Be/Longing**, a work drawn from archival postcards of the Singapore River, fractured through lenses to resist full visibility and dismantle the colonial gaze. Zulkhairi introduced his pavilion-based work, reimagining overlooked HDB structures as monuments through collage and digital layering, marking both a departure from Singapore for his MFA programme and a homecoming upon return.

The conversation examined questions of form, visibility, and medium; the interplay of writing and image; and the extensions of artworks into other media. Reflections on leaving and returning to Singapore raised themes of architectural amnesia, minority/majority dynamics, and the value of curiosity. Discussion on failure highlighted risk as necessary to experimentation, with failure reframed as part of process rather than outcome.



Audience questions opened onto the challenges of commissions, which both Liew and Zulkhairi described as supportive and structured. Commissioners Ning Chong and Chong Huai Seng shared their own anxieties over risk—particularly with Liew’s figurines potentially overshadowing the show—but emphasised the importance of courage. On the framing of “Singapore at 60,” responses varied: Victor stressed local art’s global resonance, Liew noted artists cannot control reception, and Zulkhairi provocatively suggested “more navel-gazing” as a way of deepening identity.

The panel closed on the reminder that risk, imperfection, and openness remain central to artistic practice—proofs in themselves of art’s ongoing processes.

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