

**THE
BODY
AS A
DREAM**

A SINGAPORE ART STORY



22nd January

27th March
2021

Lenne Chai
Yanyun Chen
Cheong Soo Pieng
Faris Heizer
Liu Kang
Ng Eng Teng
Ruben Pang
Aisha Rosli
Teng Nee Cheong
Zulhairi Zulkiflee

The notion of “embodied identity” has been an enduring point of intrigue throughout time. Indeed, what do our bodies say about us? How does the representation of bodies shift our understanding of one another? In societal interactions, the body is seen as the most direct marker of identity – one that is unavoidable but ultimately unreliable.

The body is in many ways a dream. Whether it is the fantasy of masculinity, bodily symbols of cultural identity, or the idealisation of the family unit, this presentation explores how the human body is used to express visions of what is and what could be.

Depictions of individuality and human relationships thread through the exhibition, and provide insight into the shift in generational concerns from Singapore’s post-independence era to the present times. Juxtaposing artworks from significant figures in modern Singapore art with those by an emergent generation of contemporary artists, the audience is invited to explore continuities between the past and present, as well as interrogate the lines between the real, desired and imagined.



THE HUMAN BODY IN NATURE: ANOTHER WORLD

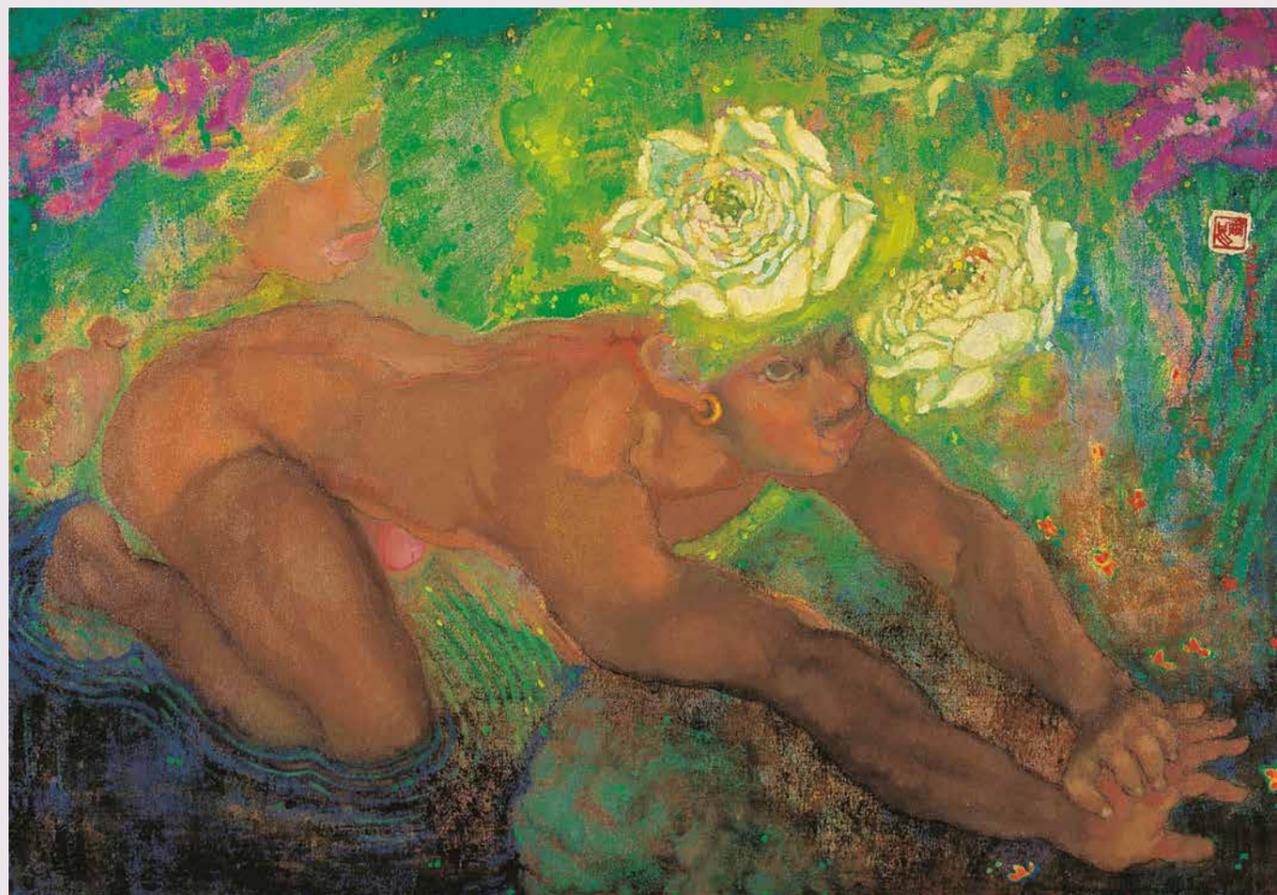
Expressions of the human body in nature contribute to a fantasy away from our urbanised world. In the oil paintings and charcoal drawings of modern painter **Teng Nee Cheong** (1951-2013), figures disengage from a recognisable time, history and geography. Instead, they adorn motifs inspired by theatre and cinema, namely hibiscuses, fireflies, indigenous masks and so on. These envelop the characters in an other-worldly light as they leisurely inhabit a space of spectacular colour. As suggested in the monograph, *Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, Nee Cheong's sensual depictions of the nude stand as a counter-point to the laws and morals of our society, which have moved him to create a kind of "escapism from the real world." True to his fantastical realm, his charcoal figures, with their swirling lines of sinew and muscle, seem to emerge as reflections in the water, as if they could dissolve at any moment.

Similarly presenting the human body in nature is photographer **Lenne Chai** (b. 1991), whose series *Boys I Trust*, 2020, illustrates a veiled response to masculinity in 21st century Singapore. Unlike traditional media portrayals of men as stoic and virile, Lenne's boys reside languidly in an airbrushed quarry of Pulau Ubin. The trio is seen swimming, climbing trees and laughing together, signalling total comfort amongst themselves and with the photographer. Contrary to what its title suggests, however, *Boys I Trust* presents not a world of complete safety, but rather, an imagined one. They portray a desired vision of trusting relationships. Much like Nee Cheong's dreamscape, Lenne's romantic compositions hint at the beautiful, but unrealised possibility of intimacy.

Indeed, the meanings produced by a masculine body changes with its beholder, audience, time period and intersection with other cultural identities. Referencing ideas of the Malay male in both the mid-20th century and in today's era, artist **Zulkhairi Zulkiflee** (b. 1991) fashions a complex portrait of

Malay masculinities throughout time. His exhibited works reinterpret Nanyang artist Cheong Soo Pieng's *Malay Boy with Bird*, a 1953 painting that features strange and exotic identifiers such as a tropical plant, Songkok, red shirt, blue-toned skin and an exposed buttock. In Zulkhairi's works, these details of the rural Malay boy are creatively fused with the contemporary stereotype of the 'Mat Motor,' which refers to a Malay motorcycle enthusiast. Employing images of a motorbike, helmet and censored buttock, he further transforms Soo Pieng's original painting by using contemporary mediums involving a lighbox, collage of digital prints and helmet bag. With such amalgamation of tropes from the past and present, Zulkhairi's figure simultaneously conforms to and challenges stereotypes of the Malay male. It signals the question: how can we respond to societal perceptions of our own identity? It seems a difficult task to disassociate with such stereotypes, seeing that the only options are to follow or deny them.

While Zulkhairi's works interrogate individual Malay tropes, the Malay figures in the exhibited painting of Nanyang artist **Liu Kang** (1911-2004) exist within a larger complex of material culture in Southeast Asia. The artist spent many years in China, France, Malaya and Indonesia – experiences which guided his life-long inquiry into what makes a "place." In *Resting*, 1965, Liu Kang situates people in their communal environments, which for him is central to identity-making. Women and children relax in the midst of their 'natural' rural environs. Upon closer look, we also observe that small pieces of *batik* cloth are attached directly onto the canvas, a transplant from real-life textures and patterns that captured Liu Kang during his travels. Rather than focus on individuality, *Resting* provides a compelling study of the relationship between identity and cultural materials, as the figures serve a paradisaal image of tropical life in the region.



Teng Nee Cheong
(Singaporean, 1951 - 2013)

Equator's Rhapsody Embraced with Glee, 2001
signed and dated "nee cheong 2001", and stamped with artist's seal, upper right
oil on canvas
81 x 116 cm

Provenance
Collection of the artist's estate

Literature
Contemporary Modern: 50th Anniversary Commemoration, Modern Art Society Singapore, 2014, p. 261
Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier, Gajah Gallery, 2010, p. 90



Teng Nee Cheong
(Singaporean, 1951 - 2013)

Untitled, 2001
signed 'nee cheong' and stamped with
artist's seal, lower right.
charcoal on paper
62 x 120 cm

Provenance
Collection of the artist's estate

Literature
Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier, Gajah
Gallery, 2010, p. 91

"I find this pose suggestive and erotic. Like – a stalker from behind, a face slowly emerges from behind – as a hand reaches out. The Balinese love 'mandi-ing'(bathing) in the many rivulets and streams or where spring-water flows – gleefully nonchalant – or at least they used to be. Today (2010), younger Balinese prefer bathing in their bathrooms, at home behind closed doors with all the modern conveniences. Pollution of river water and streams will definitely further scare away bathers, young and old, from their happy communion with nature."

- Teng Nee Cheong



“Many if not all my paintings with figure-in-landscape, deal with a personal indulgence that contains my uninhibited decadent imagination and recollections of the many places and people I’ve come across and from which my joy is derived.”

- Teng Nee Cheong

Teng Nee Cheong
(Singaporean, 1951 - 2013)

Untitled, 2002
charcoal on paper
106 x 62 cm

(Accompaniment to *Untitled*)

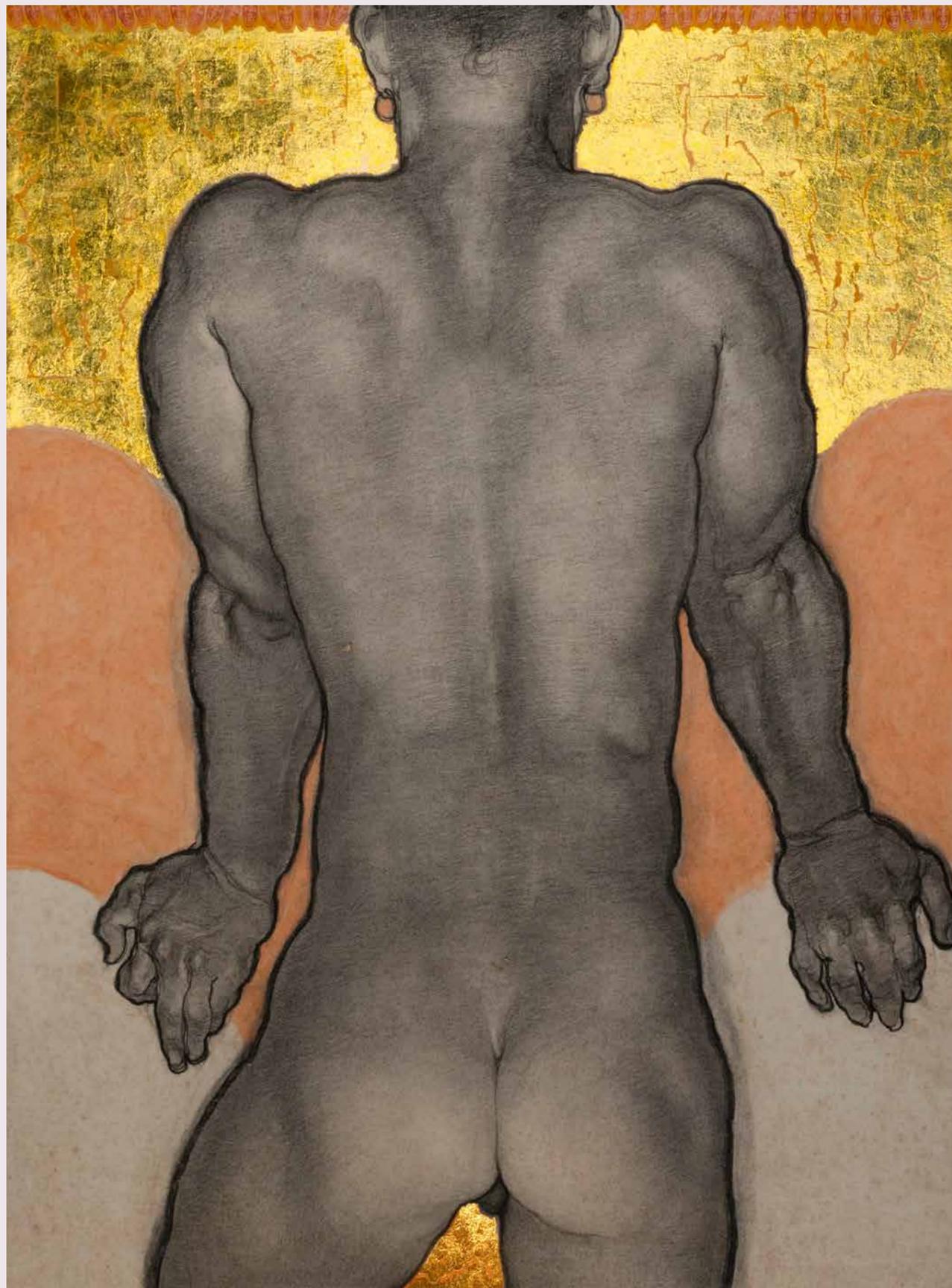
Literature
Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier,
Gajah Gallery, Singapore, 2010, p. 92



Teng Nee Cheong
(Singaporean, 1951 - 2013)

Untitled
oil on canvas
200 x 76.6 cm

Provenance
Collection of the artist’s estate



Teng Nee Cheong
(Singaporean, 1951 - 2013)

Nak Moey Siam, 1980
charcoal, gold leaf and pigment on paper
112 x 83 cm

Provenance
Collection of the artist's estate

Literature
Sabapathy, T. K., *Embodiment | Sentience*,
The Private Museum, Singapore, 2018, p. 34,
illustrated in colour

Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier, Gajah
Gallery, Singapore, 2010, p. 116, illustrated
in colour

Exhibited
Embodiment | Sentience, The Private Museum,
Singapore, 2018



Lenne Chai
(Singaporean, b.1991)

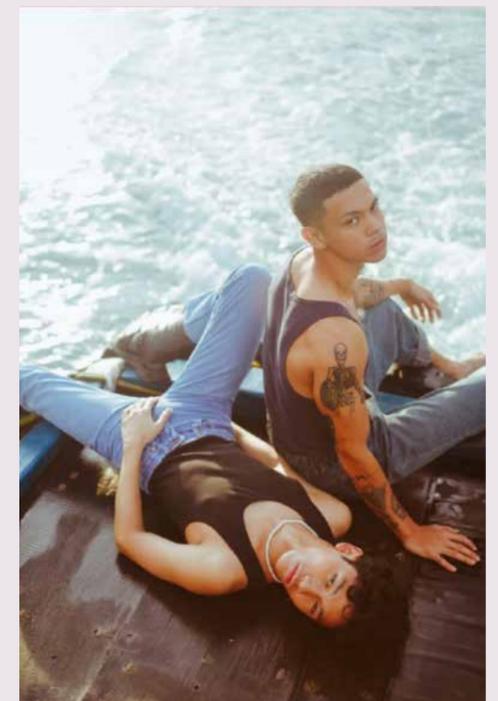
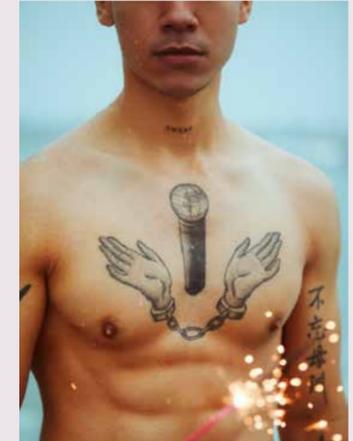
Boys I Trust, 2020
10 photographs
each photograph individually available as archival C-print on Diasec or
framed archival C-print

Small: ~ 30 x 25 cm | edition of 10
Medium: ~ 80 x 60 cm | edition of 5
Large: ~ 120 x 80 cm | edition of 5



“Where does boyhood end, and manhood begin? This series was photographed in the haze of summer heat, inspired in part by Lim Kwong Ling’s photos of Singapore in the 60s’, and my own increasingly complex feelings about masculinity in 21st century Singapore.”

- Lenne Chai



Lenne Chai
(Singaporean, b.1991)

Boys I Trust, 2020
10 photographs
each photograph individually available as archival
C-print on Diasec or framed archival C-print



Zulkhairi Zulkiflee
(Singaporean, b. 1991)

Malay Boy (Posterior) (after Cheong Soo Pieng), 2020
lightbox with fabric print
87 x 122 cm
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Exhibited
How to Desire Differently, Nanyang Academy of
Fine Art, Singapore, 2020



Cheong Soo Pieng, *Malay Boy with Bird*, 1953

“In this work, I’m thinking of Malay masculinities, one being an imagination of Malay males whose identity revolves around the motorcycle. I’m thinking of the intersections of such sub types and how Cheong’s painting and its eccentric framing has creatively spurred a Malay male artist like myself to disidentify with specific tropes while shifting the lens towards an expanded vision....”

- Zulkhairi Zulkiflee



Zulkhairi Zulkiflee
(Singaporean, b. 1991)

Sketch #001 (after Cheong Soo Pieng), 2020
signed and dated "Zulkhairi Zulkiflee 2020", lower middle.
collage of digital prints and tape on acid-free texture paper
30 x 42 cm



Zulkhairi Zulkiflee
(Singaporean, b. 1991)

Bust (Kepala), 2020
custom-printed helmet drawstring bag on stretch fabric
26 x 35 x 28 cm



Liu Kang
(Singaporean, 1911 - 2004)

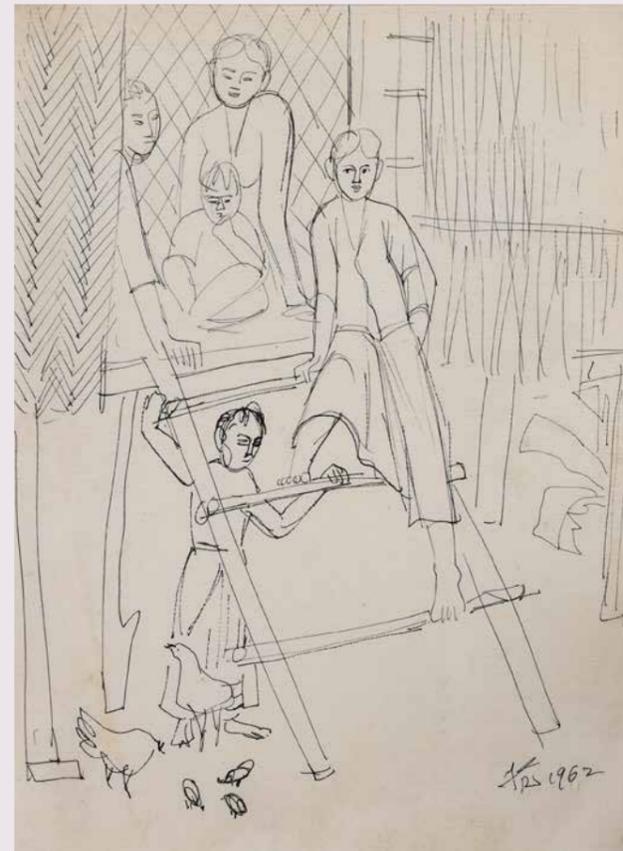
Resting, 1965
signed and dated '抗 1965', lower left.
oil and batik fabric on canvas
125 x 85 cm

Provenance
Collection of the artist's estate

Literature
Liu Kang, *Liu Kang at 88*, Singapore Soka Association,
Singapore, 1998, p. 39, illustrated in colour

Ho Yue Weng, *Liu Kang at Ninety*, Singapore Soka
Association, Singapore, 2000, p. 57, illustrated in colour
Yeo Wei Wei, *Liu Kang: Colourful Modernist*, National
Gallery Singapore, Singapore, 2011, p. 55, illustrated
in colour

Exhibited
Liu Kang at 88, Singapore Sokka Culture Centre,
Singapore, 1988



Liu Kang
(Singaporean, 1911 - 2004)

Drawing of Resting
pen on paper
30.5 x 22.5 cm

(Accompaniment to *Resting*)



Georges Seurat
(French, 1859 - 1891)

La Nourrice, c. 1880-1881
pencil on paper
17 x 11 cm

Private collection, Singapore

*"Frankly, Western material civilisation has indeed
provided a lot of enjoyment in life. Its scientific
inventions have contributed considerably to
society. However, the purity of the human soul
has been polluted and peaceful temperaments
have been ruptured... you have no opportunity
to lose yourself in nature, and you are unable to
be with your good friends throughout the year.
Where has freedom gone?"*

- Liu Kang

THE BODY AS A DREAM

A SINGAPORE ART STORY

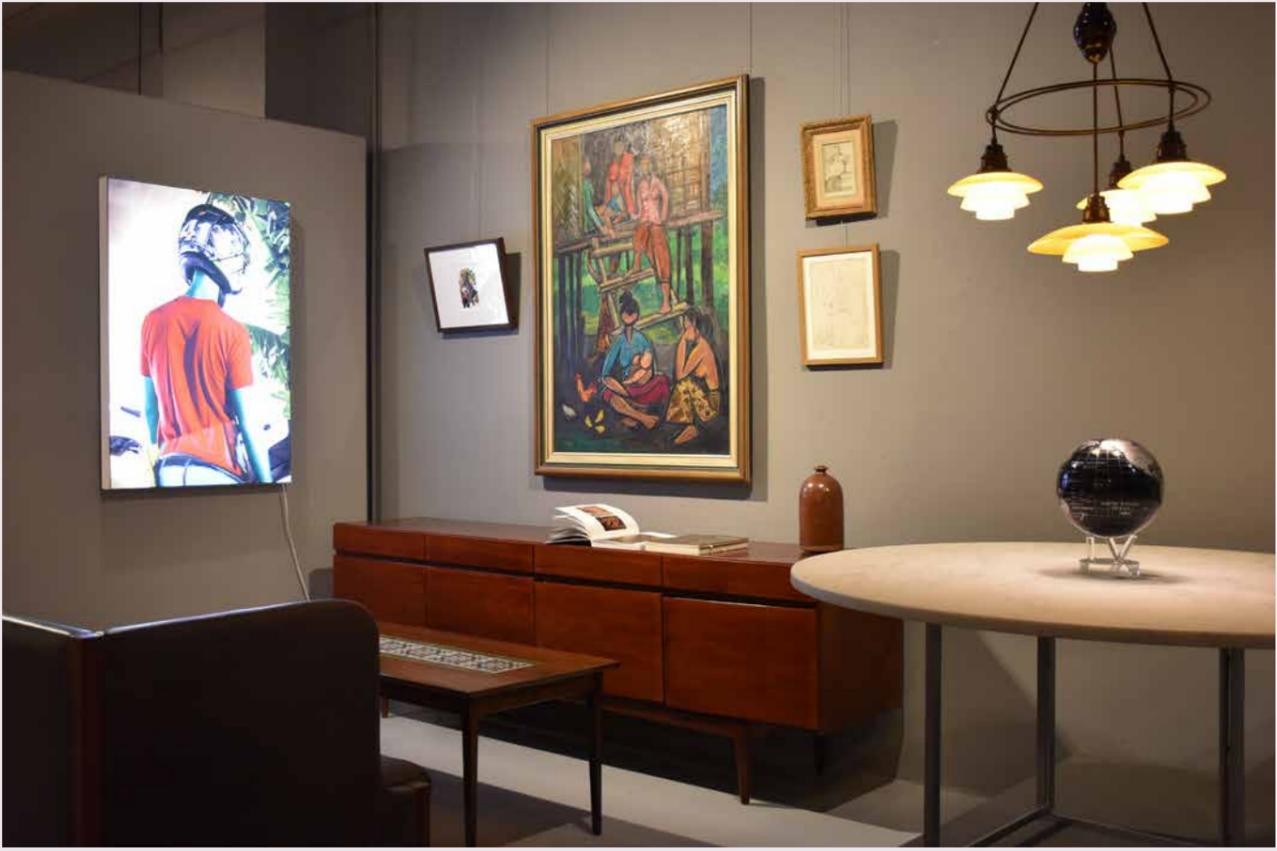
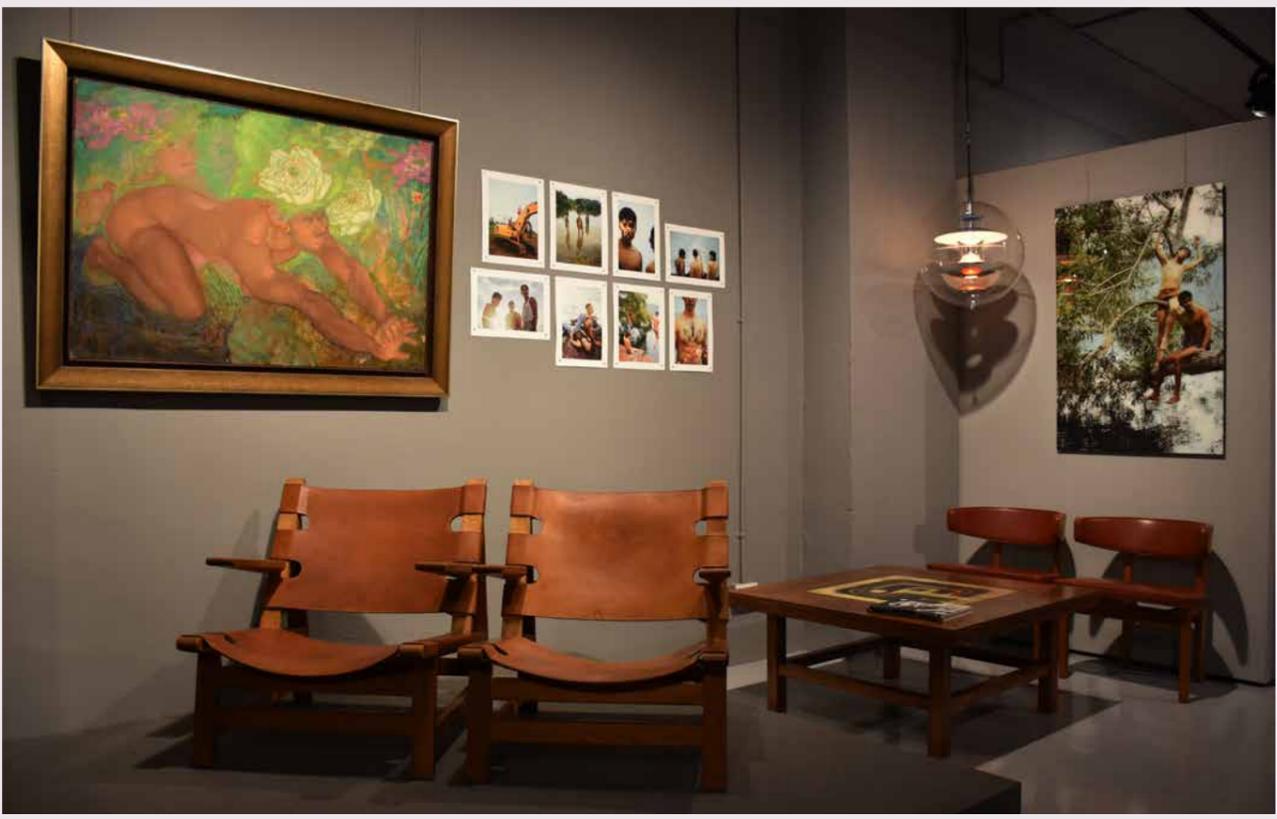
22nd January — 27th March 2021



The notion of "embodied identity" has been an enduring point of intrigue throughout time. Indeed, what do our bodies say about us? How does the representation of bodies shift our understanding of one another? With so much of society based on the importance of looks and observation, the body is seen as the most direct marker of identity – one that is unavoidable and ultimately, unreliable.

It is in many ways a dream. Whether it be the fantasy of masculinity, bodily symbols of cultural identity, or the idealisation of the family unit, this presentation explores how the human body is used to express visions of what is and what could be.

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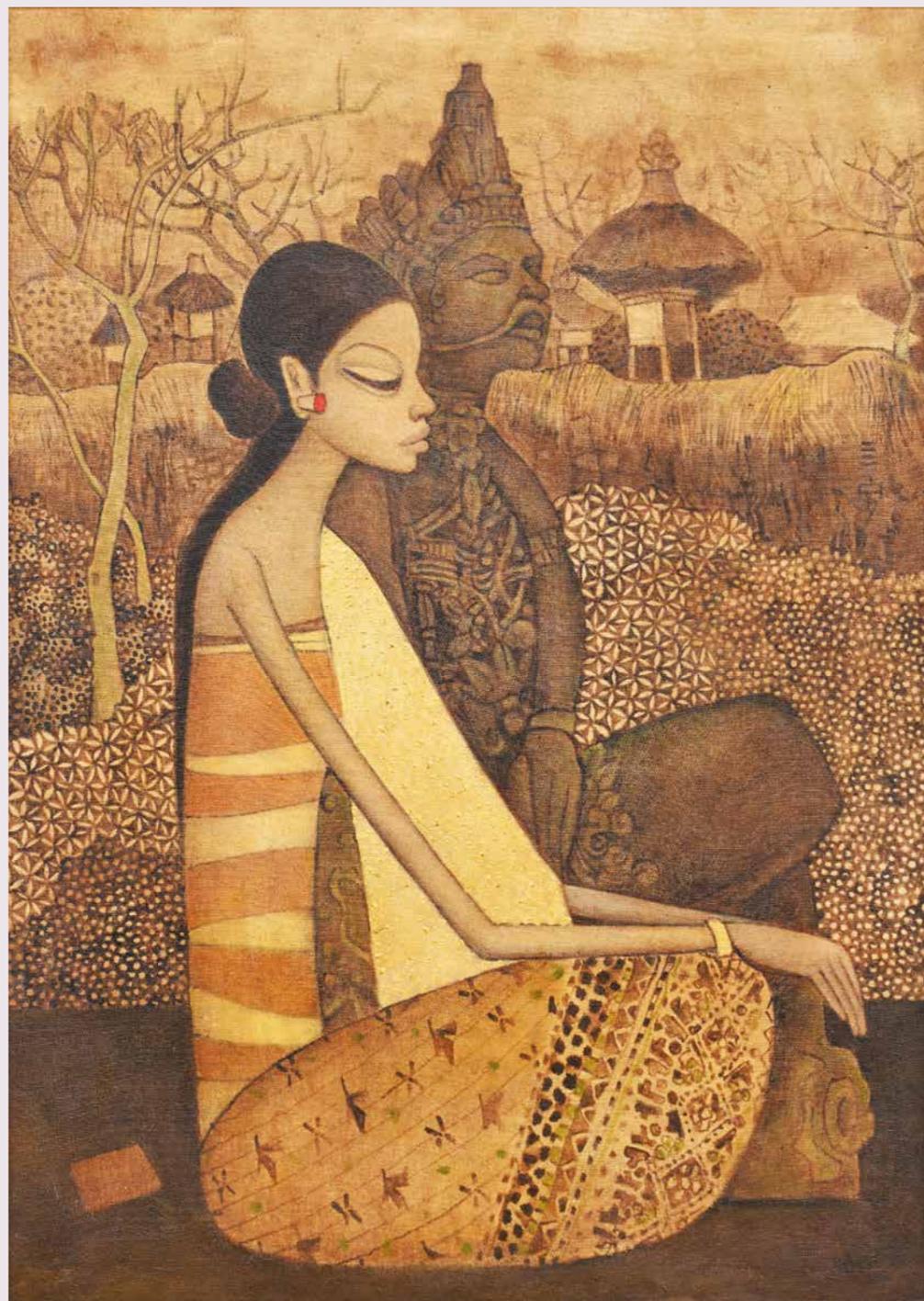
THE GENDERED SUBJECT: IDENTITIES IN RELATION

Reflective of the tendencies amongst Nanyang artists, **Cheong Soo Pieng** (1917–1983) too utilised regional objects to shape the identity of his stylised bodies. In *Contemplation*, 1977, the female possesses elongated limbs and almond-shaped eyes reminiscent of *wayang kulit* puppets, encapsulating a distinct figural style that Soo Pieng developed in the late 1970s. The figure's visual resonance to Southeast Asian motifs is further emphasised by the juxtaposition of her living flesh with a Balinese stone sculpture. Rendered in similarly cross-legged positions, they rest side by side with elegance and serenity, displaying both the textured *batik* patterns on fabric and the delicately carved floral elements on the sculpture's headgear and torso. With this contrast of living and sculptural forms in sepia tones, the overall painting composition speaks of complete balance and harmony with one's environment.

The air of tranquility is disrupted in the painting *Will it be Over?*, 2020, by **Aisha Rosli** (b. 1998), who explores the complexity of female identity and contemporary gender relations. Like Soo Pieng, Aisha presents a two-figure composition filled with intricate patterns. Instead of peace, however, *Will it be Over?* puts forth an uneasy narrative of dominance. From behind, a male character gropes the chest of a luxuriously-clad female figure, whose black eye hints at a troubled history. Their ambiguous expressions, coupled with the wire lattice in the foreground, further insinuate a sense of control and confinement. Similar to the lines in Nee Cheong's 'liquified' charcoal drawings, Aisha's wispy brushstrokes build upon an otherworldly arena, albeit one that captures unsettling contortions of desire and fear.

Close by, contemporary painter **Faris Heizer** (b. 1997) exhibits *Returning the Favour*, 2020, where the dynamics between genders likewise take centre stage. Looking at the works of both Faris and Aisha, we are drawn to the prominent hands of their male figures, which suggest their role as the one 'acting' as opposed to being 'acted upon.' While the male's action in Aisha's work is self-serving, Faris' character moves in service of his female companion. He adopts the position of a masseuse and quite literally 'returns the favour,' in response to the more common relationships between female masseuses and male white-collar workers. Simultaneously hopeful and grim, Faris' caricatured bodies confront conventional gender roles that still exist today.

Referencing Cantonese–Hainanese marriage traditions, artist **Yanyun Chen** (b. 1986) presents the installation *娘 (Bride)*, 2019, which narrates a woman's life before marriage. Employing textual and visual devices, the work includes red lanterns that display the Chinese words 取 (*qu*, meaning take) and 嫁 (*jia*, meaning give), both of which could express the verb 'to marry,' as well as 囍 (*xi*, meaning double happiness), a common symbol of marriage. They hang formidably above three camphor chests, also known as dowry chests, which are traditionally used to transport the bride's belongings to her marital home. In place of clothing, bed linens and tableware, however, these chests contain life-sized charcoal drawings of a woman's torso, prompting the ominous metaphor of giving away one's own body. Under the lanterns' red glow, we are prompted to ponder upon the true meaning of marriage, which traditionally revolves around ideas of compromise, or the negotiation between giving and taking.



Cheong Soo Pieng
(Singaporean, 1917 - 1983)

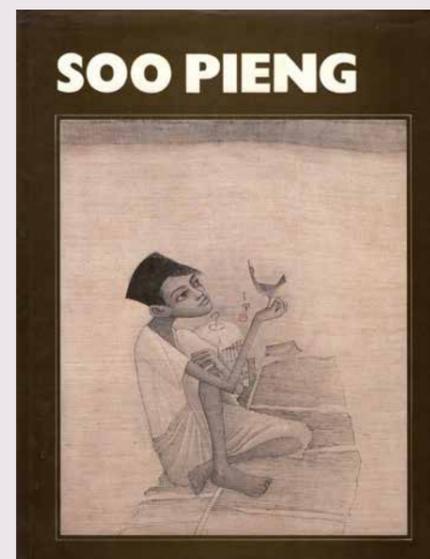
Contemplating, 1977
signed in Chinese, middle right; signed and dated 'Soo Pieng 77' and titled in Chinese '巴里女郎' and affixed with gallery label, on the reverse.
oil on canvas
101.5 x 71.5 cm

Provenance
Collection of the artist's estate

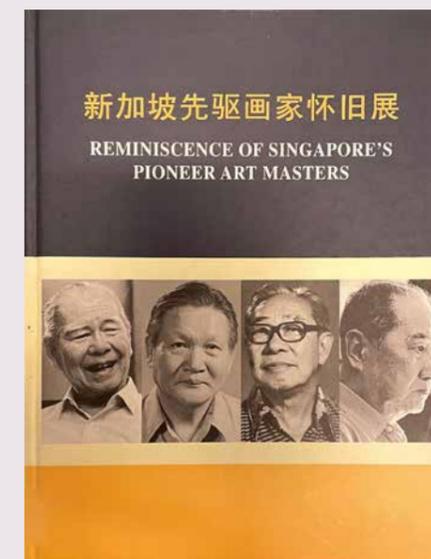
Literature
Yu Loon Ching, *Soo Pieng*, Summer Times, Singapore, 1983, pl. 24, illustrated in colour

Reminiscence of Singapore's Pioneer Art Masters, The Singapore Mint, Singapore, 1994, unpaginated, illustrated in colour.

Exhibited
Singapore, *Reminiscence of Singapore's Pioneer Art Masters: Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi*, 11 - 22 March 1994



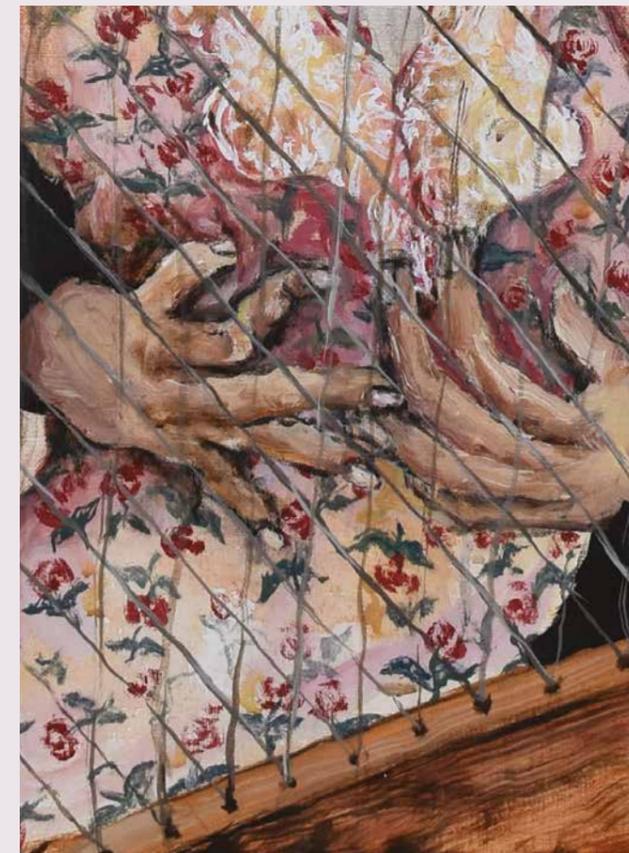
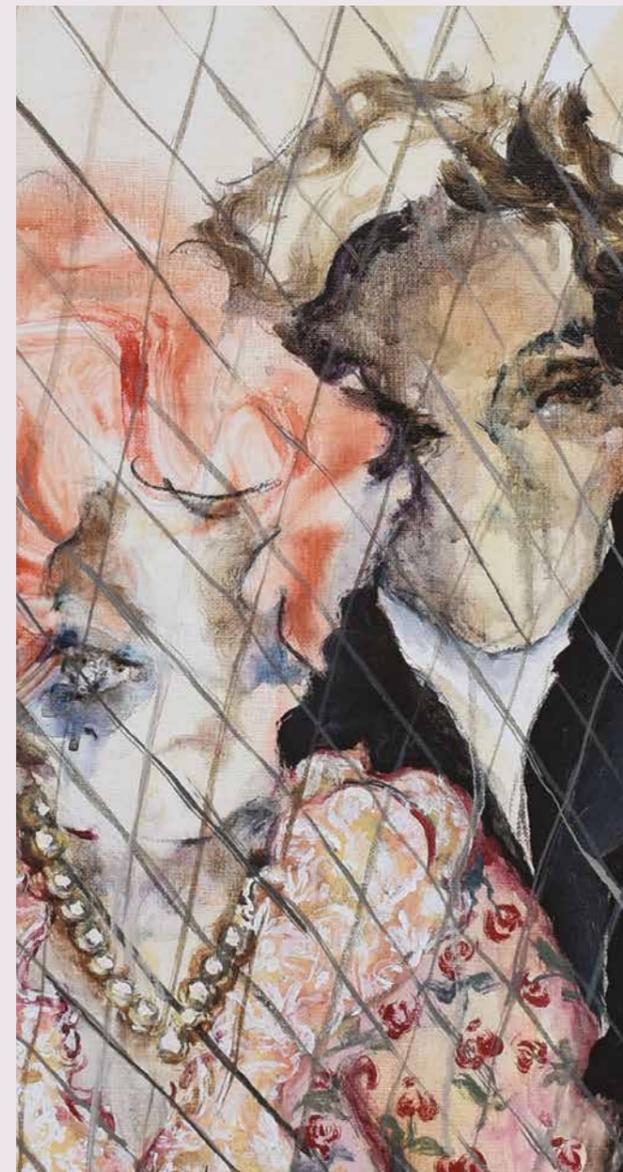
Yu Loon Ching, *Soo Pieng*, Summer Times, Singapore, 1983.



Reminiscence of Singapore's Pioneer Art Masters, The Singapore Mint, Singapore, 1994.

"When the story of art in Singapore is finally told, Cheong Soo Pieng will assume a preeminent stature... he will emerge as a formative presence in accounts of modern art in Southeast Asia as a whole."

– T.K. Sabapathy



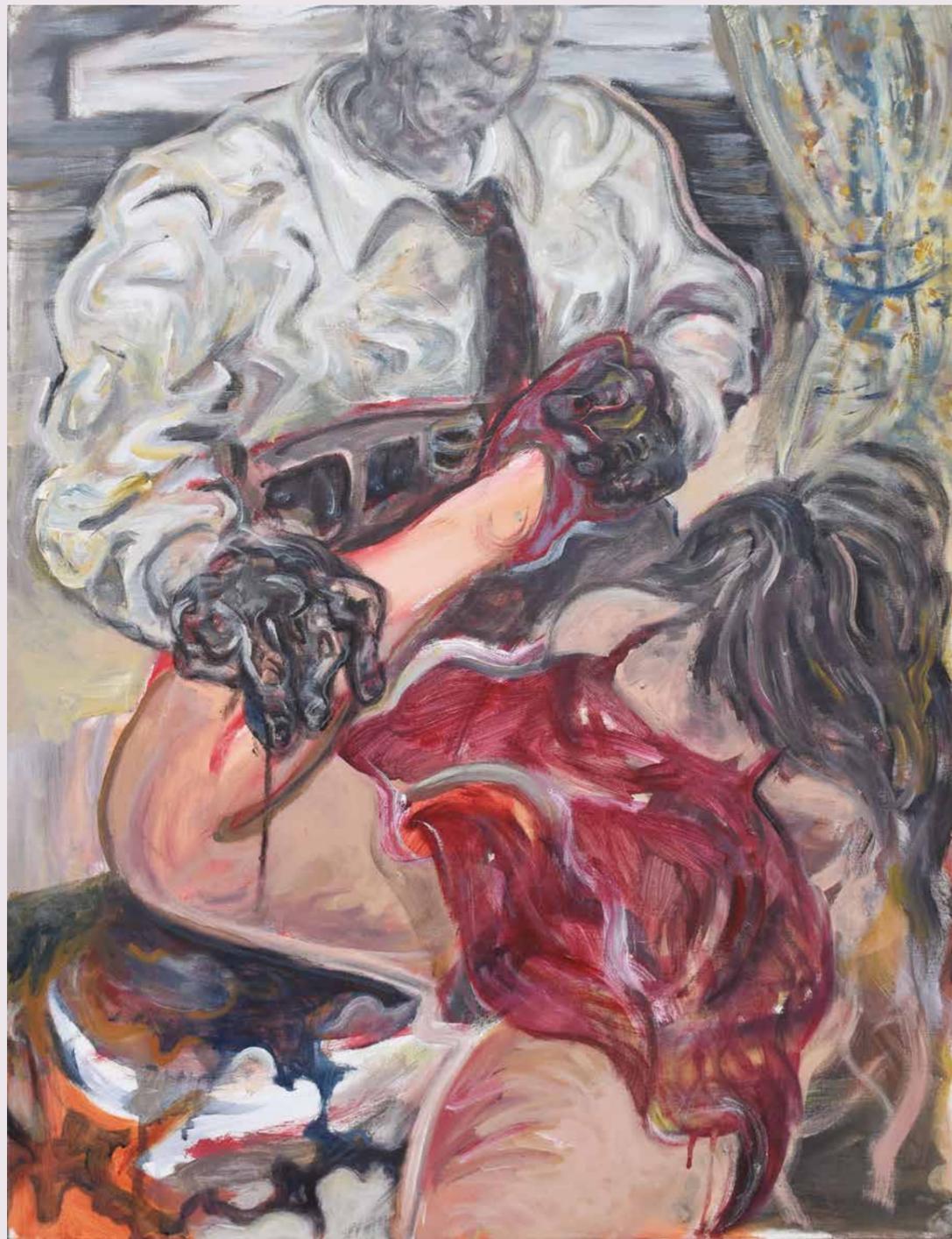
Aisha Rosli
(Singaporean, b. 1997)

Will it be Over?, 2020
signed, titled and dated "will it be over? 2020", on the reverse.
oil on linen
90 x 70 cm

"Will it be Over? is part of the Black Eye Series (BES). BES highlights the aftermath of different situations and can be suggestive of multiple things eg. crying, insomnia, bruise etc. For this painting, Will it be Over? is showing the male character fondling the female character's breast."

This act might display the male as the dominant one in the relationship. In actuality, the posture and pose of the female is very nonchalant and expressionless. This shows that she's used to it and just putting up with the male character's behaviour by letting him do whatever he wants."

- Aisha Rosli



Faris Heizer
(Singaporean, b. 1998)

Returning the Favour, 2020
signed and dated "2020", on the reverse.
acrylic on canvas
101 x 76 cm



"My paintings are normally of playful figures existing in a rather abject reality. This painting in particular depicts a whimsical scene where the roles are reversed of a masseuse and a white collared worker. I wanted to evoke a sense of uncanniness by painting the woman, fully clothed with her heels on being massaged softly by a masculine and stocky built man."

- Faris Heizer



Yanyun Chen
(Singaporean, b. 1986)

娘 (*Bride*), 2019
charcoal drawings in camphor chests,
Teochew paper lanterns
Chest: 30 cm x 45 cm x 60 cm each
Lanterns: 116 cm x 151 cm x 75 cm

Exhibited
Stories of a Woman and her Dowry, Grey
Projects, Singapore, 2019



Stories of a Woman and Her Dowry

女娘妻母
Girl, bride, wife, mother

This is a story of a woman – and her dowry.

My grandmother and I have a tense relationship.
Her beliefs and my actions grate at each other, generations apart.
She was married in the 1950s: in a time when the value of a Straits
Chinese daughter is to be found in being wedded-off young,
virginal, ostentatiously decked in red and gold, with a substantial
dowry, for a suitable price. She was that woman.

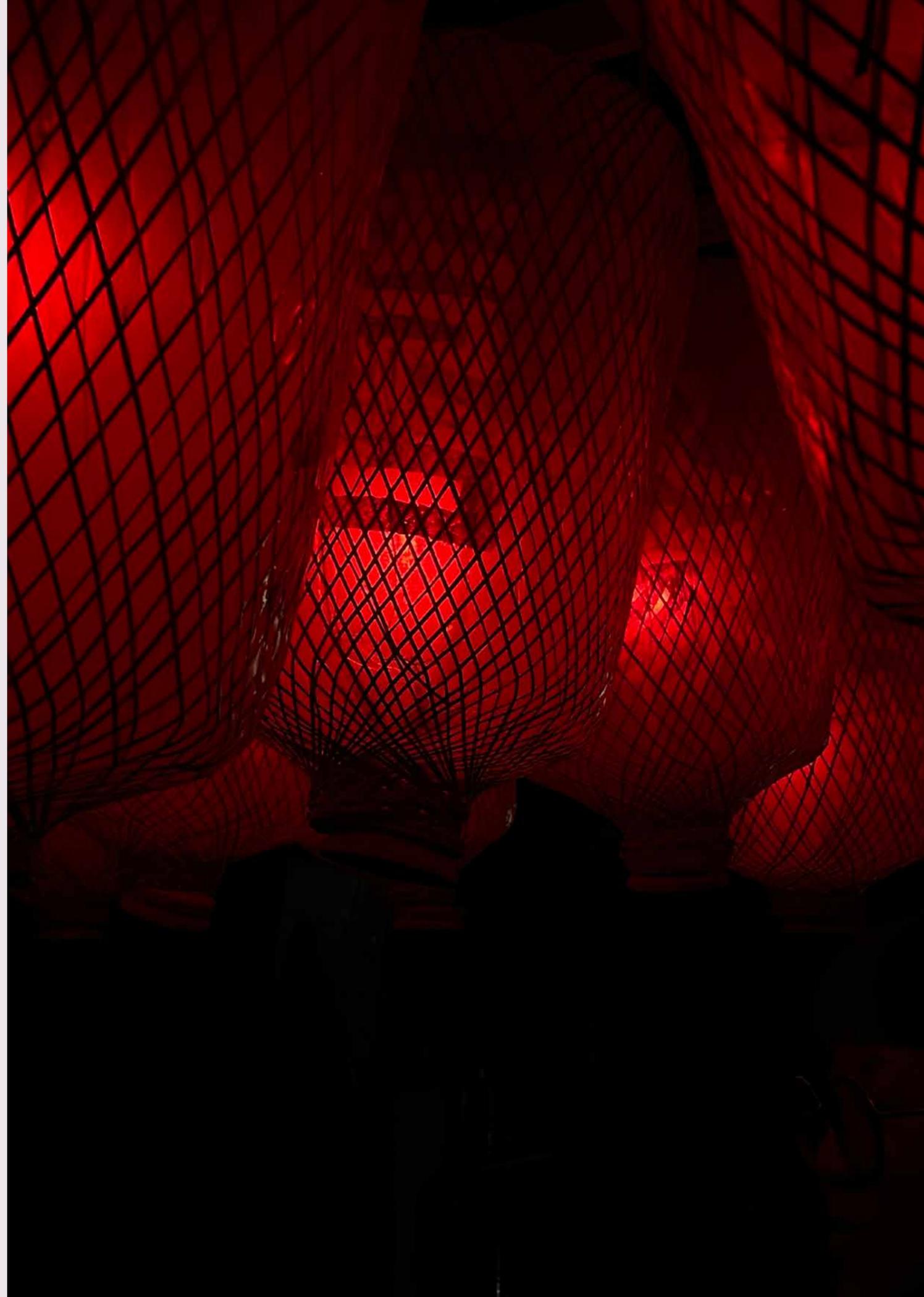
What is the price of a bride?
The dance of a marital economy—potlatch.
These dowry objects,
each a token of a price of a woman who came before me:
the price she was valued at; the price she paid.
To prove she had value.

I am not that woman.
I refuse to be priced;
so have no worth.
Will not be a good—
perhaps am no good.
Am questionable,
so constantly questioned,
put into question.

We reach a stale-mate—
Dowries remind us
of our broken conversation.

Worthless;
priceless.

娘
Bride
Dowries carted her
to a different name—
Renamed.
A maiden name
stores time
meant to be forgotten.

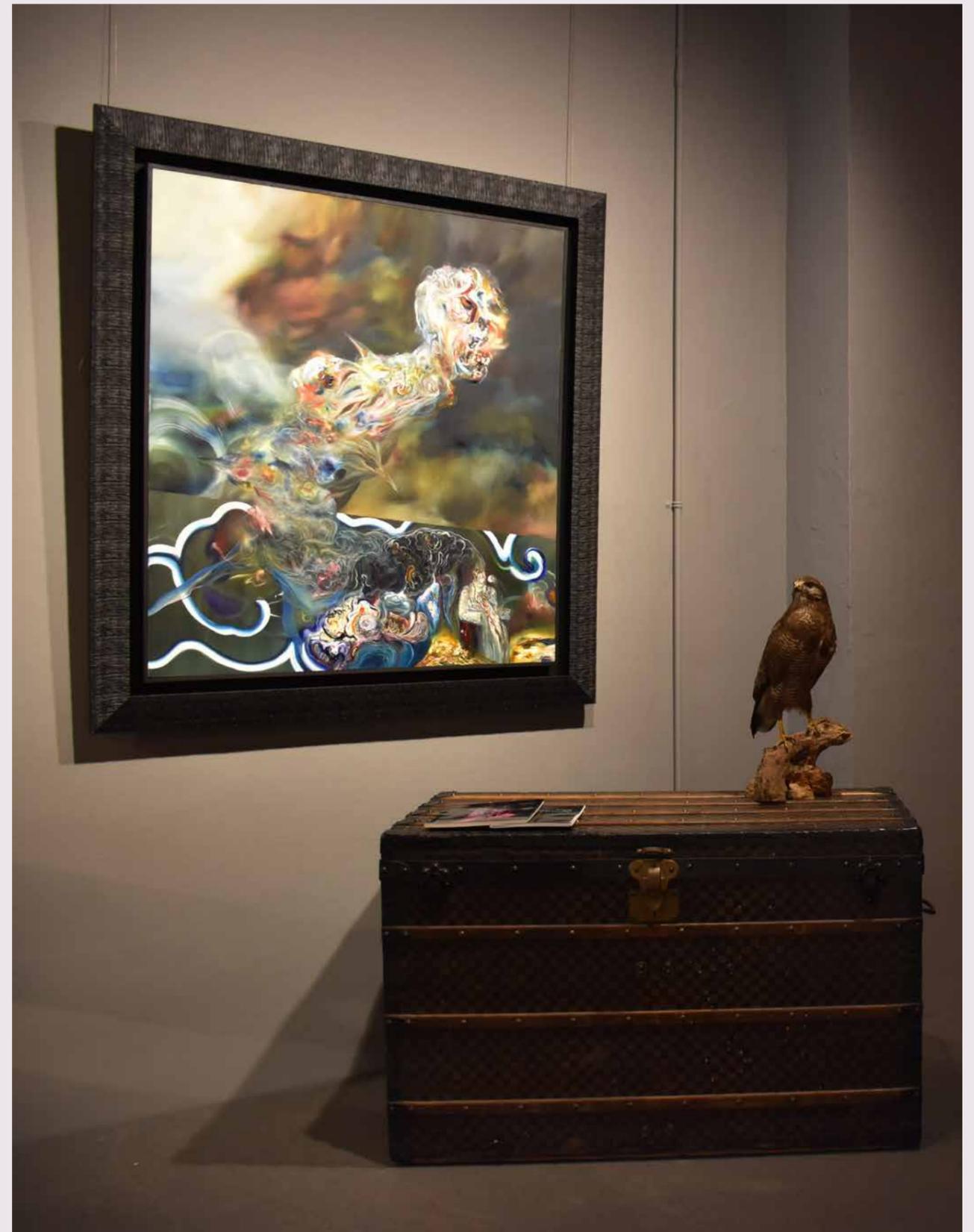


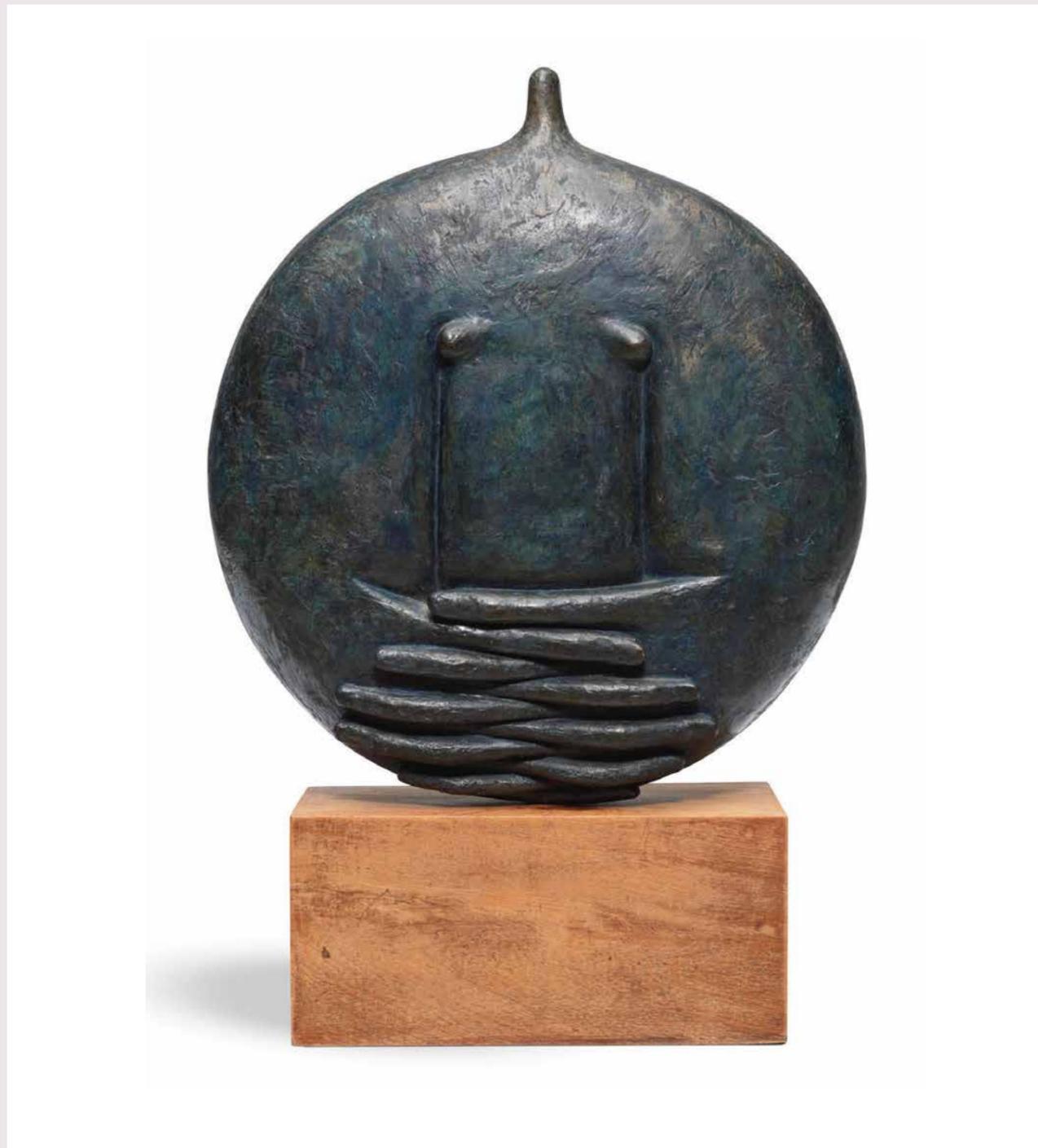
FRAGMENTATION AND THE EMBODIMENT OF FEELING

The human body is similarly fragmented in the sculptures of modern artist **Ng Eng Teng** (1934-2001), whose works involve the omission, simplification and amplification of bodily features. In *Untitled*, 1970s, the figure is reduced to essential forms, namely the head, chest, hands and rear. Having said that a “person assumes the form of a body, with enclosed emotions,” Eng Teng saw feeling in individual parts of our anatomy. In the case of *Untitled*, the figure’s hands arrest our gaze with their large size and interlocking configuration. This body language could signal a multitude of meanings: Is the figure in deep contemplation, or reserved in thought? Or perhaps in a broader sense, the figure’s large hands pay tribute to the values of protection and strength.

In stark contrast to *Untitled*’s aura of stability, the character in *The Spirit of Ecstasy* by painter **Ruben Pang** (b. 1990) embodies the feeling of lunacy. With its leaning torso, bulging eyes and gaping mouth, the figure gazes upwards in hysteria. Though intact, the body seems to be in constant movement, as if being pulled apart by billowing wisps of kaleidoscopic colours. Adding to the sense of disintegration is the inclusion of disparate motifs that at once harmonise and contrast with one another, specifically the combination of both soft and hard-edged clouds, as well as the rendering of English painter Francis Bacon’s pope in the style of contemporary artist Glenn Brown. Distorted and dramatic, his painting unveils complex projections of memory and fantasy, pointing to the difficulty of representing human identity as a whole.

Through the works of ten modern and contemporary artists, *The Body as a Dream: A Singapore Art Story* opens up visions of what we desire and observe. It seeks not to provide a comprehensive overview of bodily representation in Singapore but rather to encourage new connections between images of figures across identities and generations. Looking back, we might wonder at the societal norms present across time, whether much has changed, and how the body figures in it all.





"I suppose as one goes on producing works, one simplifies and seeks to get to the essence of the subject, the essence of a figure or a movement. In order to do that, I must not be fussy, to include and interpret everything; that stage seems to be over. What I am doing now is to leave out the non-essential areas and parts, and to develop more feeling. In spite of the abstraction in my later works, I still retain the hand, feet, mouth and eyes in many cases. I feel these are very essential and sensual qualities of a body, which convey much. You just have to put a hand on a correct part of the body and the emotion in obvious."

- Ng Eng Teng

Ng Eng Teng
(Singaporean, 1934 - 2001)

Untitled, 1970s
stamped with one seal of the artist.
ciment fondu
Sculpture: 39 x 34.5 x 8.5 cm
Overall: 50.8 x 34.5 x 11.8 cm

Provenance
Acquired directly from the artist
Private Collection
Bonhams Hong Kong, 11 October 2019, Lot 1165
Acquired from the above (Private Collection, Singapore)



Ruben Pang
(Singaporean, b. 1990)

The Spirit of Ecstasy, 2010
oil on canvas
112 x 100 cm



"I chose the title because it seemed to resonate and amplify the feeling of lunacy. The content is hysteria, a feeling of collapse, the kind of laughter that stems from helplessness."

- Ruben Pang



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