

Of Terrains and Landforms

(Works by Tang Da Wu, Salleh Japar, Ahmad Sadali and Higashiyama Kaii)

Welcome to *The Gift*, an exhibition that is part of a multi-venue curatorial project titled *Collecting Entanglements and Embodied Histories*. This project traces stories, counter-histories and absent narratives, and how these are interwoven in nation building and identity formation. Our exhibition takes a closer look at the nature of relations, affinities and influences through the concept of the gift — in its gesture of giving and returning, as well as how this act is performed and remembered.

Hello. My name is Joella Kiu, and I am an Assistant Curator at the Singapore Art Museum. Today, I'll be taking you on a tour of a selection of artworks and objects within the exhibition, and will expand on their concepts and connections.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said to his peer, Bertrand Russell, “You think the world is what it looks like in fine weather at noon day. I think it is what it seems like in the early morning when one first wakes up from deep sleep.” With this in mind, instead of going through defined categories and fixed meanings, I'd like to invite you to explore this exhibition with the eyes of someone who has just woken up from their slumber.

Let's begin at dawn.

We'll start with a work by Tang Da Wu. Let's go to the centre of the gallery space, towards the central plinth that houses a modulating series of surfaces and works. Laced between the ridges of an undulating washing board is a single plaster boat that seems to be moving upstream, against the odds. This work was made in memory of the Thai ecological conservationist, Seub Nakhasathien. It is a quiet piece, and the artist intended for it to be placed close to the ground. With its low and unassuming placement, one might almost miss it. Yet, I see it as a compelling piece that is testament to Nakhasathien's life, work, and purpose. His conservation work inspired a whole generation of young forest patrol officers — an enduring legacy that persisted beyond what he may have thought was possible.

Moving down this central display, you'll see a series of antiquarian books that similarly speak to the ideas of historical legacy. In the early 20th century, various European travellers and amateur archaeologists set out for Central Asia. Here, these books document their expeditions. As they trekked through this vast terrain, Sir Marc Aurel Stein and Albert von Le Coq came face to face with the cities and artefacts of the Khotanese, Tangut, and Loulan peoples. In illuminating this little-known corner of history, we were interested in questions such as: How should we think about these excavations today? What does custodianship of these cultural artefacts mean? How should the stories of these civilisations be told?

When you first entered this main gallery space, you would have passed by two works by Salleh Japar and Ahmad Sadali respectively. These works are hung on the wall, across from *Monument for Seub Nakhasathien* and the antiquarian books we were just looking at. Both works centre around the *gunungan*, or cosmic mountain, an important spiritual motif in Javanese mythology. It represents the pinnacle of spiritual synthesis, knowledge, and communion. Whereas this sacred symbol is invoked through abstraction and colour fields in Sadali's work, Salleh's rendering laces together found objects, pigments, and organic material. Although both artists are entangled within similar cultural lineages, the differences between their works speak to how using the physical to represent the spiritual can be very complex.

When you're ready, let's turn to our right. Beside Sadali and Salleh's canvases are works by Higashiyama Kaiti. Whilst Sadali's and Salleh's works pay homage to the mountain as a metaphysical entity, in Higashiyama's paintings the mountain is a forbidding physical landform. A prolific painter, Higashiyama is known for his deft explorations of painterly landscapes. The two books on display within the nearby display case are compilations of Higashiyama's most significant paintings. In his youth, Higashiyama spent a significant amount of time in Germany, and some of his works reflect the spirit of cosmopolitanism found in that country. These publications and prints were gifted to the National Library by local artist Tan Swie Hian, and were in turn loaned to us for this exhibition. Thus, yet another link was added to this ever-expanding chain of gifting and receiving.

We opened this tour up with a conversation between Whitehead and Russell. It illustrates just how things might take on varying nuances and hues, even between peers. You might come back to the gallery another day and see the works in a different light. After all, these works contain multiple meanings and composite stories, and subsequent encounters with them might reveal different perspectives. As biologist Merlin Sheldrake writes, “between the two poles lies a field of possible opinion”.

Written and read by Joella Kiu