

THE GIFT

sam
singaporeartmuseum
CONTEMPORARY ART IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

collecting
entanglements
Embodied
Histories

What is in a gift?

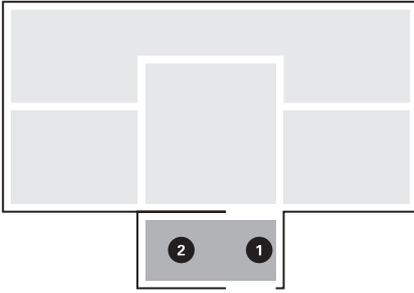
From social act to cultural performance or philosophical concept, the apparently ordinary act of gifting is in fact ambivalent and paradoxical, and consequently a source of fascination, vexation and debate. Unlike the economic transaction, the gift is more than the object of its exchange. It is an embodiment of an expansiveness of spirit by the giver, that often obliges its receiver, and may even unintendedly become an onerous burden.

The exhibition, *The Gift*, is part of a broader project titled *Collecting Entanglements and Embodied Histories* that is developed as a dialogue between collections of four museums. The conversations extend into four related exhibitions that include artwork exchanges. This exploration of collections also uncovers histories of collecting—of gifts received, rare discoveries unearthed, and acknowledgements of significance. As with the gift, the value of these accumulated objects confer upon the collection stature and prestige, but also impose a duty of care and responsibility for these riches.

Yet a gift may not necessitate reciprocation or result in obligation. Without a return, the receiver simply yields to the gift. After all, it is the asymmetrical condition of power and obligation that gives the gift its meaning. For it is not the gift itself but its performance of interrelation that binds the bodies it intertwines, leaving its trace in object and memory.

A gift is only a gift if it is entangled.

Collecting Entanglements and Embodied Histories is a dialogue between the collections of the Singapore Art Museum, Galeri Nasional Indonesia, MAM Contemporary Art Museum, and Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, initiated by the Goethe-Institut. Its exhibitions are curated by June Yap, Anna-Catharina Gebbers, Grace Samboh and Gridthiya Gaweewong.



① **Joseph Beuys** (b. 1921, Germany; d. 1986, Germany)
Energiestab

1974

Copper and felt

415 × 0.9 cm

Collection of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie,
Marx Collection

Energiestab (Energy Staff) embodies key material and conceptual aspects of Joseph Beuys' influential practice that may be traced back to

his ideal of Eurasia as an expanded frame defying boundaries delineating cultures, and even aesthetics. For Beuys, Eurasia was characterised by a nomadism that came to the fore for him during World War II, after a near death experience in 1944 over Crimea whilst serving in the German Air Force. The plane Beuys was in was shot down and he recalled then being saved from the crash by Tatars who wrapped him in fat and felt to keep him warm.

While this narrative is considered somewhat mythical, it transformed Beuys' aesthetic practice. It contributed significantly to the development of his distinctive aesthetic, and speaks to the multiple interests and cosmology to which Beuys subscribed. These include notions of healing expressed in the insulative material of felt, and the energetic and spiritual symbolised in the element of copper. On the latter, energy is related to the body, performance and acts of creation, exemplified in his lecture tour during his first visit to America in 1974 titled "Energy Plan for the Western Man," in which he extolled artistic freedom. As for the form of the staff, besides its shamanistic connotations—also a reference to the Tatars—its function recalls the shepherd and its associations of a guiding force and a companion to those who wander.

② **Salleh Japar** (b. 1962, Singapore)
Born out of Fire

1993

Acrylic on canvas, plexiglass, lightbulb, wood and hunt paper

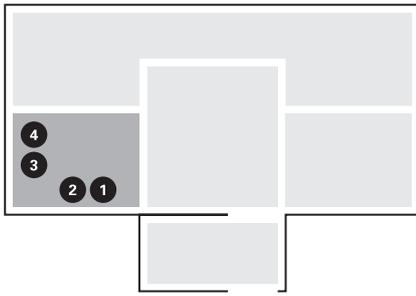
Dimensions variable

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Salleh Japar's artworks invite contemplation on identity, representation and values. However these weighty topics are given to open, subtle and non-prescriptive interpretation.

In *Born out of Fire*, three scorched canvases reveal symbols drawn from the world around us. An arrow, a bridge, a doorway, a mountain, a tree invoke concepts of direction, connection, thresholds, and of life itself. These symbols are simultaneously universal in form, familiar across cultures and belief systems, yet personal when read within the context of one's daily life. For Japar, this elemental approach also speaks to a deeper experience, of the spiritual and profound. Here, the element of fire is used to evoke the power of transformation. This association was inspired by his time in Australia encountering the regenerating force of bushfire—considered destructive but necessary, particularly in the case of gum trees.

Such transformation was at the core of the historic 1988 collaboration, *Trimurti*, by Salleh Japar, S. Chandrasekaran and Goh Ee Choo, presented at Goethe-Institut, Singapore. Within *Trimurti*, their different practices were interwoven, even as they drew from each other, to create an energetic space to reflect upon the inter-dependent cycles of creation, destruction and preservation.



① **Ahmad Sadali** (b. 1924, Indonesia; d. 1987, Indonesia)
Gunungan Emas (The Golden Mountain)

1980

Oil, wood and canvas

80 × 80 cm

Collection of Galeri Nasional Indonesia

Gunungan Emas references the form and significance of the mountain in landscape, culture and art. “Gunung” translates as “mountain,” a geological formation that may expand in definition

from a physical elevation to a signifier of power, divine forces and even spiritual connection. Mount Meru exemplifies this broadening of assignment—it is considered sacred in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology and the centre of the universe. Closer to Java is, of course, Mount Merapi that is also revered, even as its active volcanic status presents a risk for those in its vicinity.

Commonly symbolised as a triangle, the mountain in Ahmad Sadali’s painting assumes a fuller pyramidal form, revealing to the viewer its peak embellished in gold. While Sadali is often considered the “father of abstract painting” by scholars of Indonesian art, *Gunungan Emas*’ textured and complex material composition suggests an examination of the qualities of mountain that extends beyond formalism into a contemplation of the universal and spiritual. Even the precise application of gold leaf is not simply intended as a statement of value, but speaks also to the enduring quality of the elemental. This aesthetic conjunction of material, shape and symbol conveys an ascendance that is nevertheless deeply rooted in the world.

② **Salleh Japar** (b. 1962, Singapore)
Gunungan II

1989–1990

Painting and mixed media

107 × 102 cm

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Salleh Japar continues his exploration of symbolic vocabulary in *Gunungan II*, distilling the shapes and associations of forms encountered in the world around us, including the spiritual and transcendental. His works from this period are inspired by his travels to Australia’s outback and historic cultural sites across Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar, and reflections on their cultural and symbolic connections. In the 1994 exhibition *5 Directions: Recent Artworks by Five Young Singapore Artists* curated by Choy Weng Yang, Japar said, “There are symbols in my work. Symbols are realities contained within the nature of things. It is through symbols that one is awakened; it is through symbols that one is transformed; and it is through symbols that one expresses.”

Japar attempts to find a harmonious balance between such symbols in *Gunungan II*, leading to a new configuration. The result is a formal composition that also resonates with energy. The dynamism produced by the tensions and connections between the symbols is encapsulated in the pendulum-like elements, whose orientation is directed by gravity rather than the painted surface. This vitality is enhanced through material and colour in the work—the ash from a fire, a string the colour of blood and markings that trace the hand of the artist.

③ **Korakrit Arunanondchai** (b. 1986, Thailand)
Painting with History: Thailand's got talent 2012.
I wonder where Duangjai Jansaonoi is now?

2018

Gold foil, inkjet print on canvas, gel medium, bleached denim and stretcher

218.4 × 162.6 × 3.8 cm

Collection of MALLAM Contemporary Art Museum

④ ***Painting with History: Burning the Universal "I"***
in a Western narrative is one way of looking at this painting

2018

Inkjet print on canvas, gel medium, bleached denim and stretcher

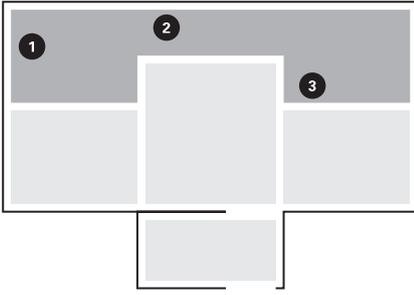
218.4 × 162.6 × 3.8 cm

Collection of MALLAM Contemporary Art Museum

Korakrit Arunanondchai challenges the genre of history painting—typically representational depictions of scenes or narratives of events, characterised by didactic intent—with his remix of “history” and “painting.” Begun in 2013, the series, *Painting with History in a Room Filled with People with Funny Names*, manifests in a range of formats from paintings on acid-washed denim to video installations featuring mannequins, performers, denim-pillows and occasionally lasers, but are all nevertheless rooted in a few key subjects.

Within this title is a riff on the Western art historical canon and the burden that this history places upon a contemporary artist from Thailand. Arunanondchai’s use of denim can be traced back to a controversial televised “body painting” session in 2012 by go-go-dancer, Duangjai Jansaonoi, in the competitive programme *Thailand's Got Talent*. Jansaonoi’s performance sparked a public debate on aesthetics that was amplified by the uproar over her nudity as she painted using her bare torso. In Arunanondchai’s paintings, denim takes on associations of popular and consumer culture, performing a critique of the binary of high and low, and establishing its own framework for aesthetic creation.

The process of producing these paintings involved a burning of canvases which Arunanondchai photographed, and subsequently used these images to replace their charred portions. In this way, he arrested the moment of their transformation that acts as a starting point for his exploration into the subjects of historical time, rebirth, enlightenment, the self and the spirit.



① **Dolorosa Sinaga** (b. 1952, Indonesia)
Solidarity

2000

Bronze, remade in fiberglass

110 × 43 × 83 cm

Open edition

Collection of the artist

Commissioned by Goethe-Institut Indonesia

Solidarity is a powerful personification of unity and resistance against the May 1998 riots in Indonesia,

which impinged brutally on women's rights and freedoms. The sculpture features seven female figures standing shoulder-to-shoulder with hands interlinked, and a single clenched fist raised up in the air. The figures' postures and expressions reveal their psychical interiority, shaped by trauma: their faces are raised to the sky with mouths agape in anguish, their bodies dramatic in their closeness, pressing tightly against each other to resemble an impenetrable wall of unanimity.

Such investigations into the "grammar of the body"—the study of its states and activity for the articulation of sculptural expressions—are key to Dolorosa Sinaga's practice. Her works draw on the figure of the woman in motion, as a way of signalling and embodying direct and sensual modes of experiencing the phenomenon of being alive.

Read in the context of Sinaga's active involvement in political activism, this work is a critical homage to the everyday humanity and idealism used to confront key issues ranging from human rights to the struggle for democracy in post-New Order Indonesia.

② **Ampannee Satoh** (b. 1983, Thailand)
The Light (24:31)

2013

Set of 8 photographs, pigment print on paper

180 × 120 cm (each)

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

In *The Light (24:31)*, the body is regarded as the site for a complex circulation of identity effects as well as multiple and mutual associations. Eight live-sized portraits feature subjects swathed in black cloth burqas. At first sight they appear as conventional representations of veiling practices, however upon closer look one notices slivers of their bodies framed by the darkness of the fabric.

For Ampannee Satoh, the body that is considered precious and thus protected is also a source of individual identity and autonomy. Her portraits highlight the complexities of interpretations of the body's presentation, and draw from Satoh's background in a predominantly Muslim province of Pattani, Thailand, where the consequences of cultural identity, nation state and faith on life are keenly felt. *The Light (24:31)* considers the range of meanings invested in veiling practices, and reads the practice through Satoh's own perspective.

③ **Donna Ong** (b. 1978, Singapore)
The Caretaker

2008

Multimedia installation

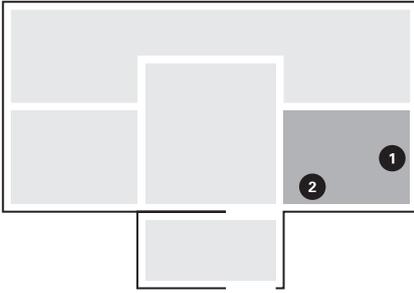
8 × 5 × 2.7 m

Collection of Singapore Art Museum

In this work, Donna Ong creates a fictional setting that extends the history of the *Friendship Doll Project* initiated by American missionary, Reverend Sidney Gulick.

Prompted by the Immigration Act passed by the United States Congress in 1924, the Reverend's project began with a celebrated gift of blue-eyed dolls from the United States to Japan as a signal of goodwill in 1927. Japan reciprocated by sending lavishly adorned kimono-clad dolls to America. Unfortunately, the subsequent bombing of Pearl Harbour and World War II caused relations between the countries to sour, and these dolls, which were seen as ambassadors and representatives of their respective countries, bore the brunt of the rising enmity. Many dolls were destroyed, de-acquisitioned from museum collections or stored out of sight.

In Ong's return to this historical moment, a caretaker appears who seems to be watching over the memory of the dolls. Also embedded within this scene are videos where time is seen to pass in a rising and setting light, bearing witness to their existence and presenting the dolls as finally meeting amicably.



① **Holly Zausner** (b. 1951, United States)
Second Breath

2005

Super 16 mm film, digitised, colour and sound (stereo), 10:16 min

Collection of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

2005 purchased by the Freunde der Nationalgalerie

Second Breath presents a portrait of Berlin's long and intractable history through Holly Zausner's dramaturgy. Inspired by her time living and working in the city in the 1990s, Zausner created a series

of three outsized figures made from rubber silicon and knitted material. This film features Zausner interacting with these figures in a sequence filmed at key landmarks in the city, including the Potsdamer Platz, Neue Nationalgalerie, Spree River, and the now-demolished Palast der Republik. In every scene, we see the heft of the figures counteracting her manoeuvres of them, turning the idea of the body as a metaphor for the weight of history from abstraction to physical reality.

Zausner's interaction with the figures, through the gravity of her own body, gives shape to the various environments. In regarding the city as a stage, Zausner implicates the space and the objects and bodies within it. Her choreography presents a series of diverse and non-linear scenes and situations that invert the conventional coordinates of familiar sites, interrupting their daily operations and rendering new subjectivities.

② **Bruce Nauman** (b. 1941, United States)
Body Pressure

1974

Wall, text and poster

Dimensions variable

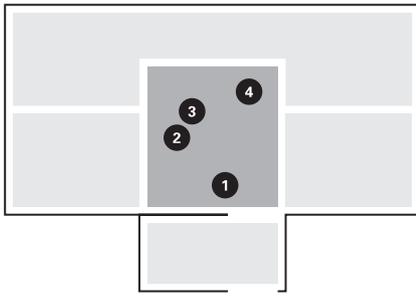
Friedrich Christian Flick Collection im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin

The body is a potent device in Bruce Nauman's somatic works, drawing our attention to seemingly banal movements. A familiar example of this is his early solo video performance, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968), where Nauman's repetition of this exercise not only marks space but also the limits of the body. For Nauman, even the unembellished body is rich with possibilities to explore.

Body Pressure combines Nauman's conceptual and performative approaches.

Unlike many of his other works, it is the audience rather than Nauman himself who is the performer here. *Body Pressure* features a set of instructions that invite the audience to introduce their body to the unyielding surface of a wall, encountering and becoming conscious of its resistance. This then leads to an examination of the self as being on the other side of the wall pushing back, as well as a study of their body—its shape, muscular tensions and sensations. As the work transitions from a physical to mental exercise, the wall seems to suddenly disappear and all that is left is the body itself, simultaneously familiar yet experienced anew.

Please feel free to take an artwork poster from the stack on the plinth.



① **Tang Da Wu** (b. 1943, Singapore)
Monument for Seub Nakhasathien

1991
 Wood and plaster
 Dimensions variable
 Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Tang Da Wu is a seminal figure in the development of contemporary art in Singapore, known for his critical installation, sculpture, and performance works. *Monument for Seub Nakhasathien* continues

Tang's explorations into issues of environment and ecology. It was made in memory of the Thai ecological conservationist, Seub Nakhasathien, hence deliberately empathetic and less conventionally monumental relative to the memorial produced by the state.

Nakhasathien was a fervent and passionate activist and scholar, who campaigned tirelessly for the protection of Cheow Lan Lake, Thungyai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, and Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary. Nakhasathien faced an uphill battle, with a series of challenges that eventually proved insurmountable. Nakhasathien took his own life at the age of 40. This grave event galvanised action, including the establishment of the Seub Nakhasathien Foundation. Nakhasathien's admirable conservation work went on to inspire a generation of young forest patrol officers—an enduring legacy that has persisted beyond what he perhaps dreamt possible.

Tang's monument recalls Nakhasathien's bravery and valiant pursuit through the depiction of a fragile boat heading upstream. This imagery incidentally references a Thai idiom “เข็นครกขึ้นภูเขา” that translates to pushing a millstone up a hill, referring to a difficult or impossible task.

② **Gabriel Barredo** (b. 1957, Philippines; d. 2020, Philippines)
One

1999
 Mixed media
 69.5 × 57.7 × 17.4 cm
 Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Gabriel Barredo's assemblages are at once uncanny and fantastic. Deftly composed using a complex assortment of found objects and extant materials, a sense of being and aliveness pervades and lingers, drawing the viewer into Barredo's labyrinthian worlds. While *One* does not possess the movement of Barredo's later works as a pioneering kinetic artist, it certainly evokes it, with its mechanical intricacy and precision suggesting the hand of a watchmaker.

The head of a serene Buddha is split open to expose a bedecked santo statue of a Spanish noble. Their countenances appear contrasting, yet strangely in tune with each other. In fact, they literally share a winged torso that opens to reveal a mixed cast of crucifixes, gods, goddesses, saints and monks, in a curious mingling that comes across in an intense combination of mystery and sacredness.

In the context of *The Gift*, *One* may be viewed in relation to the expeditions of imagination and possibilities, as much as the interrogation of the human condition, its binaries and struggles.

③ **Anthony Lau** (b. 1933, Malaysia; d. 2016, Malaysia)
Space Eggs

1970

Aluminium

23 × 52 × 25 cm (each)

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

In Anthony Lau's works, concept and subject are vividly brought to life through his precise use of material. These forms with their tails recall comets; their surfaces are deliberately buffed but not polished, creating the impression that they are in motion or else have been. While the moonwalk was an achievement in the Cold War race to space, Lau's *Space Eggs* appears to be headed in a different direction—aesthetic rather than political or national—even while caught up in the excitement and possibilities of human exploration and new frontiers.

Space Eggs may be considered an exceptional work by Lau, who is regarded as a pioneer of modern sculpture in Malaysia and more widely known for sculptures with themes of nature and elements, such as *Spirit of Fire/Jin Api* (1959), *The Cockerel/Ayam Jantan* (1963) and *Forest/Rimba* (1967). According to records, *Space Eggs* was first presented at the 13th National Art Exhibition in 1970 at Balai Seni Lukis Negara. This was after Lau received a Fulbright scholarship in 1968 for further studies at Indiana University, USA, and also the year following the first moonwalk in 1969 by American astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin.

④ **Ho Tzu Nyen** (b. 1976, Singapore)

The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia: F for Fold

2021

Artist's book in collaboration with Currency Design

Configurations variable

Collection of the artist

Commissioned by Goethe-Institut Indonesia

F for Fold continues Ho Tzu Nyen's ongoing meta-project, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (CDOSEA), begun in 2012. The dictionary is framed as an alternative approach to reading Southeast Asia, presenting a layered perspective of concepts, motifs and biographies that respond to the histories, cultures, and experiences of the region. Its collection of terms, organised following the English (Latin) alphabet, was first presented as an online platform. The work has taken other forms since, including as filmic and theatrical works, as well as installation. Here, it manifests as an endless physical book with imagery extracted from the Dictionary's database of audiovisual material, its concertinaed pages providing a porous and polyphonous viewing experience which echoes the amorphous constellation of meanings comprising Southeast Asia.

Amongst the Dictionary's entries, the letter "Y" resonates with *The Gift* in its reference to the concept of yielding. "Yielding" in the Dictionary is used to characterise the region's acquiescence to colonial conquest that is attributed to the act of perceiving. To see is to yield, to allow the self to be transformed by what is seen: "you move into the interior of images, just as images move into you," the Dictionary's narrator whispers. Applied to *The Gift*, it then suggests that receiving a gift is to yield to its obligations and transformative effects.