



STUDENT-LED TOURS

A QUEER GAZE

Seeing and Being Seen

by GENESIS PHAN

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Seeing and Being Seen

Queerness is slippery—a defiance of definition, or rather, a definition shaped by its very lack of definition. It encompasses those who do not fit within conventional cis-heterosexual narratives. Without such formal categorisation, how might we recognise queer bodies in art, or even in the everyday? *A Queer Gaze: Seeing and Being Seen* suggests that queerness is not just something to be seen but a way of seeing—one that shapes and reshapes the gaze itself.

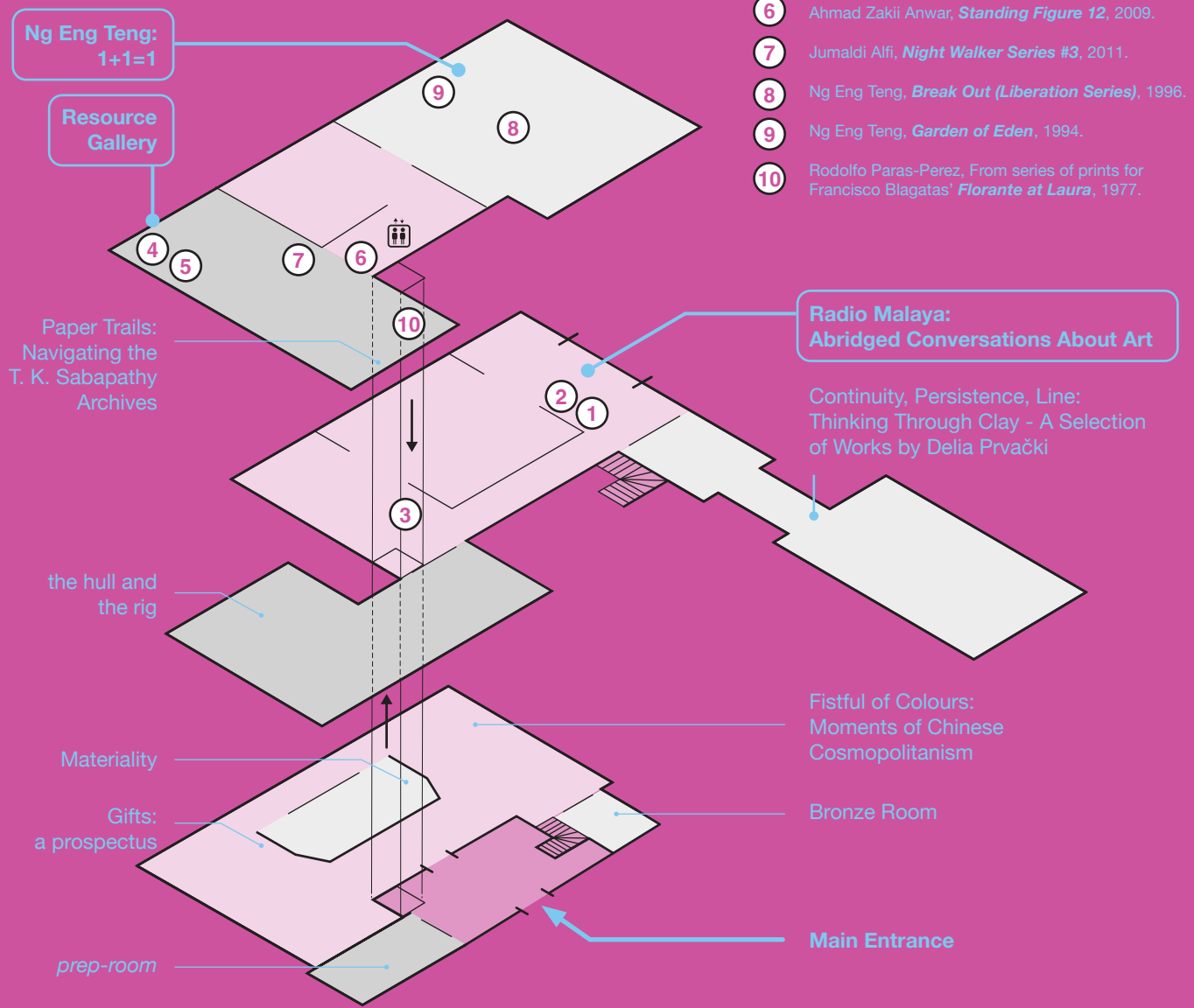
This tour begins at *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art*, introducing how artworks and artefacts can be read as queer and why such readings matter. On the Top Floor, the pieces in the Resource Gallery challenge the problematics of queer interpretation and queerness' resistance to being read. This tension continues in *Ng Eng Teng: 1+1=1*, where abstract bodies further complicate the notion of queer visibility. Finally, the tour returns to the Resource Gallery to explore how even seemingly heterosexual narratives can be queered.

Through this journey, queerness is engaged as both subject and method—unsettling fixed meanings, resisting rigid interpretations, and opening up new ways of seeing.

On Cover:

Rodolfo Paras-Perez, From series of prints for Francisco Blagatas' *Florante at Laura*, 1977; Woodblock print, 27 x 42 cm.

NUS Museum Floor Map



- 1 Tan Tee Chie, *Persuading*, 1958.
- 2 Lim Mu Hue, *Those who are not involved view the matter clearer*, 1966.
- 3 Jimmy Ong, *Shoebox series* (Excerpt), c.1983 - 1987.
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PERSUADING

1

Woodblock print was a popular medium for raising awareness for sociopolitical issues in Singapore from the 1930s to the 60s. Considering that Tan Tee Chie was a left-leaning artist who sought to explore topics like the everyday struggles of marginalised people in his other artworks, it is possible that this woodblock print might be of a man persuading another man to engage or perhaps disengage in social vices.

In a queer reading of the work, the power dynamics in the title 'Persuading' create a tension that could be eroticised when read closely with the physical intimacy between the two men and their secluded surroundings.

While the bounds of male platonic friendship have shifted through the ages, our current understanding of heteronormative male friendships have cast a queer gaze on the work. Is this necessarily a problem?



In Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art.

Tan Tee Chie, **Persuading**, 1958; Ink on paper, 20.5 x 31 cm.



In Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art.

Lim Mu Hue, **Those who are not involved view the matter clearer**, 1966; Ink on paper, 20.5 x 15.2 cm.

THOSE WHO ARE NOT INVOLVED VIEW THE MATTER CLEARER

2

Another woodblock print, *Those who are not involved view the matter clearer* seems to playfully allude to how the exclusion of women within male-dominated society may nonetheless afford them greater lucidity into social matters.

Although both *Persuading* and *Those who are not involved view the matter clearer* portray homosocial spaces, the latter resists a queer reading. Here, the women are placed in an open space, focused on a game of *congkak* rather than each other. Even as we consider that this judgement may be clouded by how female homoeroticism often goes unnoticed due to societal norms around female closeness and assumptions of monogamy, this piece seems to occlude possible erotic intimacies between the women.



In Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art.

Jimmy Ong, **Shoebox series** (Excerpt),
c.1983 - 1988; Photographs, various sizes.

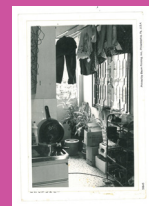
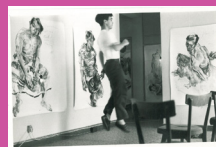


SHOEBOX SERIES

3

Jimmy Ong's personal photographs capture his art, residence, and community, including an altar for Goh Choo San, the first known Singaporean gay man to die of AIDS. This series of photographs was not made to be a formal work of art, but rather served as the artist's personal collection of memories of the 80s that were "too 'sayang'" to be destroyed and later given to the NUS Museum alongside sketches.

Within these photographs, the presence or perception of a queer body allows us to access a queer space – a domestic and public space being queered by the body. Printed on translucent paper and loosely pinned, their fragility mirrors the ephemeral nature of queer perception and remembrance, questioning how queer narratives persist over time.



LADY CONVERSING WITH HER SAKHI IN A GARDEN

4

The term 'homosexuality' was only coined in the 19th century, marking a shift from an act to an identity rooted in Western constructs of gender and relationships. How, then, do we understand queerness in cultures where such a concept did not exist? Is it appropriate to impose these frameworks onto historical contexts, or should we rethink how we define queer history?

Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India (1996) by Giti Thadani defines *sakhi* relationships as bonds between women that ranged from platonic to erotic, sometimes formalised through ritual pledges. In *Lady conversing with her Sakhi in a Garden*, the intimate nighttime setting, enclosed by blooming flowers, evokes secrecy and sensuality. With the women occupying the lower half of the composition, our gaze is drawn into their private world, blurring the boundaries between friendship and romance.



In Resource Gallery.

Unknown, *Lady conversing with her Sakhi in a Garden*, India, Rajasthan, 18th C; Mineral & vegetable dyes (pigments) on paper, 24.5 x 18 cm.



In Resource Gallery.

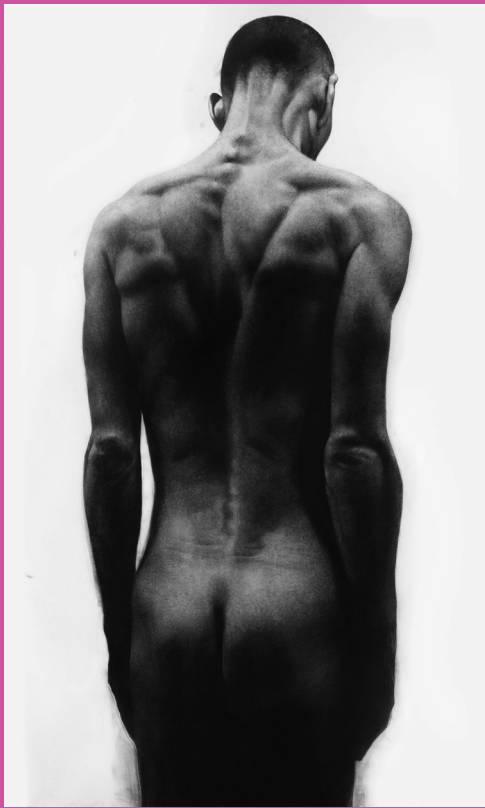
Unknown, *Lady being offered Wine by her Sakhi (companion)*, India, Rajasthan, 18th C; Mineral & vegetable dyes (pigments) on paper, 25 x 19.5 cm.

LADY BEING OFFERED WINE BY HER SAKHI

5

In *Lady being offered Wine by her Sakhi (companion)*, a *sakhi* holds out a cup of wine to her lady, who is either getting dressed or undressing, with her clothes and ornaments scattered on the ground. Influenced by Sufism, the motif of wine represents pleasure and a passionate relationship with the 'Divine Beloved'.

It is possible to read the scene as erotic, where the *sakhi* is the only one privy to the lady's bare breasts. These illustrations offer a glimpse into possible queer narratives in Mughal courtly life, exploring evolving concepts of erotic and platonic relationships.



In Resource Gallery.

Ahmad Zakii Anwar, *Standing Figure 12*, 2009; Charcoal on paper, 200 x 144 cm.

STANDING FIGURE 12

6

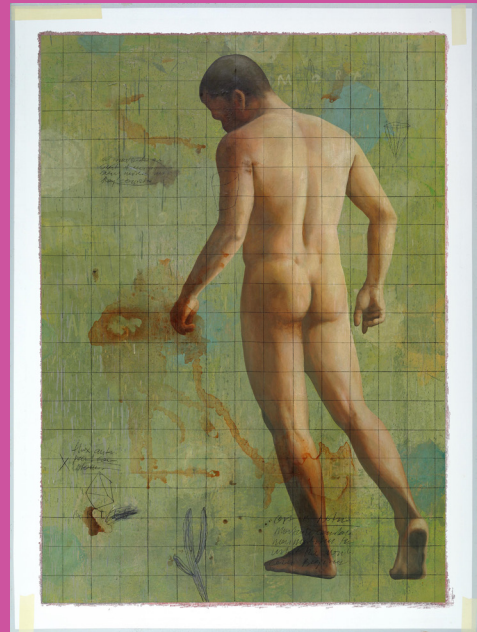
Standing Figure 12 by Ahmad Zakii Anwar is part of a series of charcoal drawings of the same man in various positions in order to provoke an examination of the human body and the social relations binding it, and thus the gap between reality and perception of reality. Desire and sexuality, Zakii has stated in an interview, are unavoidable undercurrents in his work as they invite the viewers to employ a male gaze when contemplating the male body in these charcoal drawings. Rather than the figure being queer, the work suggests that it is the gaze of the viewer that renders the figure to be queer.

NIGHT WALKER SERIES #3

7

The doodles and scribbles that mark Jumaldi Alfi's work playfully invite the viewer to search for clarity and meaning in what the symbols and words might represent, while also denying any conclusion. In doing so, the viewer is asked to put into conversation their knowledge of iconography with the artist's own interpretations of the symbols.

In *Night Walker #3*, the male nude, the graffiti, toilet tile grids, grime and its title seem to evoke the idea of cruising. In a world where queerness is often associated with deviancy and disease, *Night Walker #3* could be seen as alluding to a queer body that celebrates itself and refuses to be read cleanly.



In Resource Gallery.

Jumaldi Alfi, *Night Walker Series #3*, 2011; Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm.

BREAK OUT

8

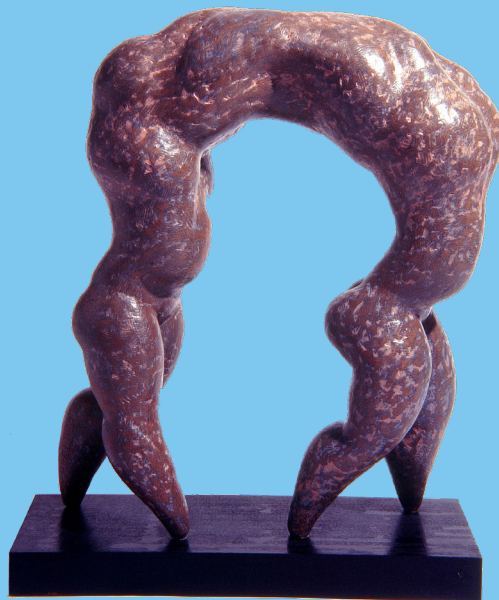
In an interview with Constance Sheares, Ng Eng Teng refuses to unpack the meaning of his *Liberation Series*. Rather than leaving the meaning of the piece entirely up to us, however, he instead encourages the viewer to interpret the artist's intention and translate the codes that he has embedded in the artwork.

The sculpture appears to blend elements of the human nude and face, featuring breast-like eyes and a phallic-looking face with a disembodied hand. The work challenges and makes abstract the human figure, presenting a potentially queer body that teases and refuses classification, offering an open space for new ways of seeing and understanding identity.



In Ng Eng Teng: 1+1=1.

Ng Eng Teng, *Break Out (Liberation Series)*, 1996; Stoneware, glaze, gold paint, 59 x 27 x 31 cm.



In Ng Eng Teng: 1+1=1.

Ng Eng Teng, *Garden of Eden*, 1994; Stoneware, coloured clay inlay, 58 x 46 x 20 cm.

GARDEN OF EDEN

9

Garden of Eden alludes to a reimagination of the Abrahamic creation story, where Adam and Eve are humanity's first ancestors. The figures lack discernible sexual characteristics and merge to form an arch supported by four points, diverging from Ng Eng Teng's usual bulbous base. This composition raises questions: does the *Garden* consist of two figures joined, or one walking on four legs? Unlike commonly understood heterosexual reproduction, where bodies create new life, *Garden of Eden* seems to envision a queer future. It suggests a union that doesn't result in reproduction but creates something new—a single entity formed from two, where 1+1=1.



In *Paper Trails: Navigating the T. K. Sabapathy Archives*.

Rodolfo Paras-Perez, From series of prints for Francisco Blagatas' *Florante at Laura*, 1977; Woodblock print, 27 x 42 cm.

KISS

10

Donated to NUS Museum by T.K. Sabapathy, *Kiss* is a two-coloured woodblock print from Rodolfo Paras-Perez's artist book on the Filipino epic *Florante at Laura*. The scene, bathed in moonlight and surrounded by leaves, initially appears to show two women in a passionate kiss, yet it depicts a man and a woman. This ambiguity raises the question: can a depiction of heterosexual love still be considered queer? With its sensuality and the ambiguous gendering of the figures, *Kiss* introduces a queer element that emerges through perception.

In this tour, we've encountered various artworks—some overtly queer and others less so—that embody the flickering nature of the queer body. The queer body comes into existence through the viewer's interpretation; by gazing queerly, we see the queer. Queerness, shaped by colonial notions of gender and sexuality, is a troubled concept, but its playful elusion of fixed categories allows for limitless potential in meaning-making and unmaking. In its unrecognition, queerness paradoxically becomes visible, reminding us that the act of seeing and interpreting queerly opens new possibilities for understanding.

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As a university museum, NUS Museum's mission is to actively facilitate intellectual and cultural life within and beyond the University. With a distinct focus on Asia, the Museum contributes to and facilitates the production, reception, and preservation of knowledge through collections development and curatorial practice. The Museum is a cultural hub, developing partnerships within NUS, the culture and heritage industry, and the global knowledge community. Located at the University Cultural Centre, NUS Museum comprises nine galleries and additional ancillary spaces which host a wide range of exhibitions, module collaborations and supporting programmes that contribute to the cultural and interdisciplinary conversation within NUS and beyond.



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