

PRESS RELEASE

October at the NUS Museum: between war and the artist, art and the tropics

Singapore, Tuesday, 8 October 2019 — This October, NUS Museum unveils two new exhibitions surveying the art historical in the region from distinct positions:

Wartime Artists of Vietnam: Drawings and Posters from the Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran Collection is a powerful presentation, offering a refreshed curatorial focus on the individual agency of wartime Vietnamese artists and their dual identity as artists and soldiers.

tropics, a many (con)sequence by artist Kent Chan, examines the art historical closer to home, converging on the tropics as a means to understand its bearings on notions of aesthetics, colonial fantasies, and modernity.

Wartime Artists of Vietnam: Drawings and Posters from the Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran Collection

Opening night: 30 October, 7pm
NX1 Gallery

Featuring 200 pieces created in a range of mediums, the exhibition at NUS Museum reconsiders the Dato' N. Parameswaran collection of Vietnam War era artworks in terms of the artists and their will to express a personal regard, drawn from conviction, ambivalence, and circumspection.



On the March (1963), metal etching on paper, Duong Ngoc Canh

Hailing from diverse backgrounds, many of the North Vietnamese artists served as guerrilla artists in Vietnam's two resistance wars. Despite being tasked to communicate a common struggle and to uplift morale, many of them stepped beyond the battlefield and notions of collective purpose to assert their creativity within the theatre of a seemingly endless conflict around them.

The artists' works can also be seen as continuities of the struggle for the modern in periods of political and social disruption. Set against the backdrop of anti-colonial movements, these visual records brought together encounters with French, Chinese and Soviet artistic and political ideas, providing unique insights into the artists' responses to the complicated relationships between art and propaganda.

Through the drawings, woodcuts, posters and paintings presented, these broader contexts permeate the exhibition, mediated by individual artistic approaches that adapted to the exigencies of content. Created between 1953 and 1992, the works indicate a diversity of formal emphases and sensibilities, articulated in the lines, colours and forms, and ranging across various media specificities.

In particular, the works of eight major artists will be placed under the spotlight. They include: Huyuh Phuong Dong (1925-2015), Pham Luc (1943-), Nguyen Thanh Chau (1933-2012), Huy Toan (1930-2007), Pham Thanh Tam (1932-), Huynh Van Thuan (1921-2017), Le Tri Dung (1949-) and Van Da (1928-2008).

"By uncovering the stories and ambiguities behind each piece, this exhibition considers the agency of the wartime artist in the production of their artworks, tracing the trajectory of their responses to war and to their dual identity as artists and soldiers," says curator Sung Yunwen. "The pieces presented represent these men at various points in their experience of conflict and development as artists, highlighting the tensions between artistic work and the eventualities of war."

For more information on the collection, please refer to Annex A.



Ho Chi Minh Trail (1971), black pencil on paper, Huynh Van Thuan

An artist's endurance under the pressures of war

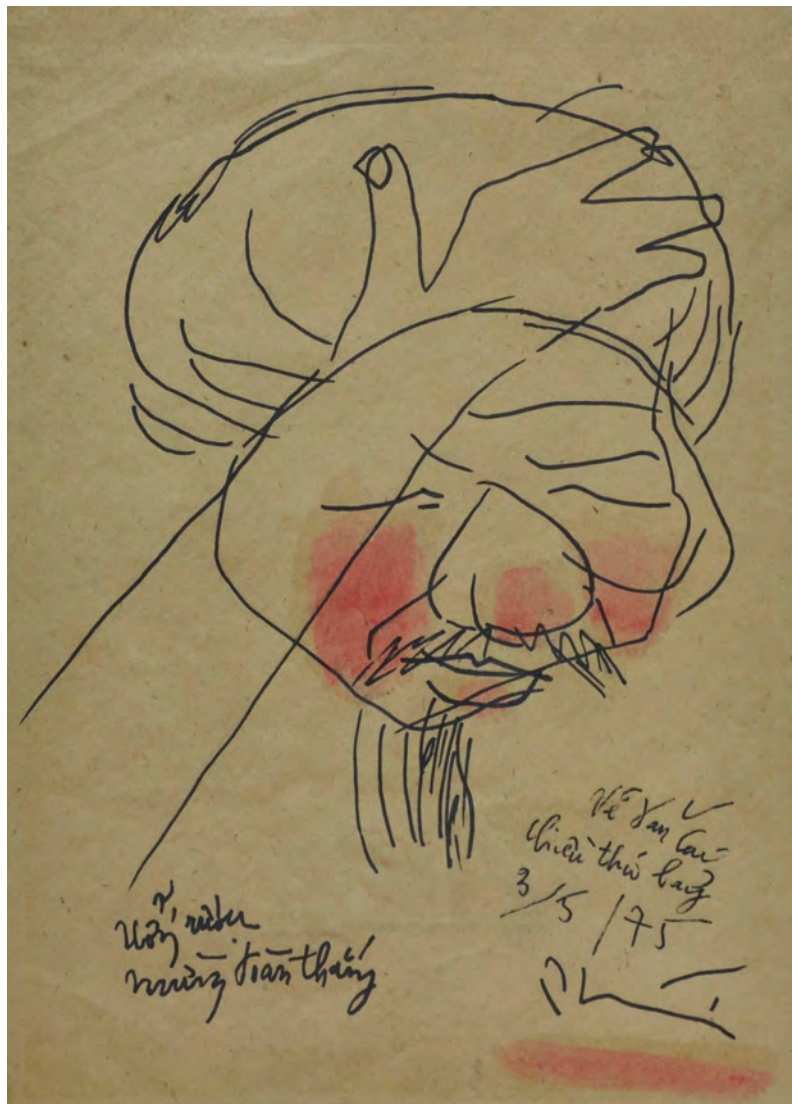
"...I carried thirty-six kilos on my back, sugar, fish sauce, clothes, painting materials, paper, watercolours and brushes."

Nguyen Thanh Chau, *Mekong Diaries* (2008).

"...Through my whole life I have worked on art together with war, with always the fear of war."

Huynh Phuong Dong

While the term 'wartime art' tends to elicit perspectives of specific experiences of conflict, the titular invocation also redirects attention towards each artist as an independent actor, tracing their practices that often began with formal training in art schools around Hanoi and Saigon. An enduring commitment to their craft despite the gruelling circumstances can be gleaned from the text accompanying each featured artist in the exhibition.



Drew Van Cao, Saturday Afternoon Drinking Alcohol to Celebrate the Total Victory (1975), black marker pen and watercolour on paper, Bui Xuan Phai

Complementing these artistic trajectories are excerpts from poems and memoirs written during or after the wars. As a preamble for the exhibition, “*our generation has never slept...*” is an allusion to a line from the famous poem *A Soldier Speaks of His Generation* (1973) authored by Vietnamese poet Thanh Thao (b. 1946). The inclusion of text juxtaposed with image is a gesture to suggest the intersecting concerns between the artists and other writers in their milieu, even as intentions and purposes may diverge.

Wartime Artists of Vietnam: Drawings and Posters from the Ambassador Dato’ N. Parameswaran Collection speaks to the predicaments of an entire generation fully submerged in war and emerging from its ruins.

Opening programme

At the official launch on 30 October, Dr Kenson Kwok, who is known for his role as the founding director of Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum and The Peranakan Museum will be opening the programme. This will be followed by an introduction of the exhibition before the curatorial tours commence.

Wartime Artists of Vietnam: Drawings and Posters from the Ambassador Dato’ N. Parameswaran Collection will be open from Thursday, 31 October until 27 June 2020.

tropics, a many (con)sequence | An Exhibition with Kent Chan

Opening night: 24 October, 7pm
Ng Eng Teng Temporary Gallery



Seni (2019), three-channel video installation, wood and acrylic sheets, Kent Chan. Image courtesy of the artist.

Following from the film *Seni* (2019) screened at the NUS Museum on 20 March this year, Kent Chan debuts the exhibition *tropics, a many (con)sequence*. Positioned as a two-fold inquiry into the tropical imaginary that continues to frame aesthetics and artistic identities, the presentation seeks to grasp the artistic agency of individuals from the “tropics”, while exploring the motivations that perpetuated and cemented notions of identity.

Conflating history with art history, a consistent cinematic language that incorporates music, spoken text, written text and images permeates the presentation. Trope imagery and manifestos are prompted in the exhibition, marking the striking consequences these developments in art have had on modelling and perpetuating identities.

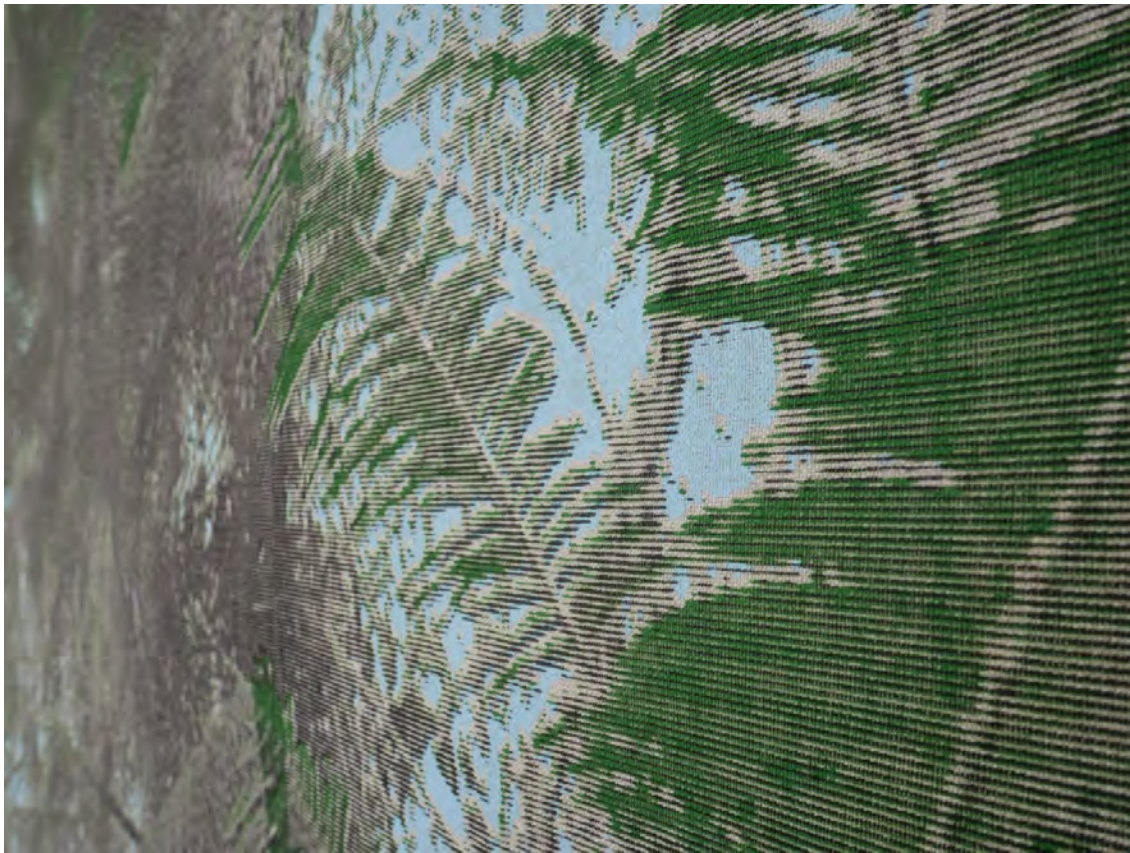
Deeply rooted in Chan’s practice that displaces the frame of modernity by enacting stories within primeval, lush settings, this presentation also further explores the interlocution between film representations and the art historical as a node from which symbols of the jungle and frontiers can be used to perceive state demands and colonial projections of the region.

Tracing *Seni*

“The Malay language had no word for art
Art of the Western world
Seni, the word came closest
and in time came to mean art.
Its introduction,
with modernity, came
a new epistemology!”

Excerpt from the film *Seni* (2019).

Bringing a series of images together in succession, audiences can expect to see a reworked version of *Seni* which forms the exhibition's locus, presented in different compositions from its earlier iteration. A three-channel film installation features as the main proposition in the presentation from which the other works deviate and respond to. In particular, a silkscreen work and vinyl cut-out highlight stills from the film, while a sound-piece and LED display extract its textual cues, distilling them into distinct parts.



Still film (2019), silk screen on fabric, Kent Chan. Image courtesy of the artist.

The premise of *Seni* itself is a speculation on the story of Ho Kok Hoe, then president of the Singapore Art Society who brought the first exhibition of Singaporean art to Europe in 1955, intimating the region's relationship between the tropics and modernity.

A narrative is sung in the film along with interjections of images from Ho's exhibition, while other curatorial inferences are invoked by means of staging archetypal art objects in the midst of humid, tropical forest scenes – a site that held the fascination of colonial governance.

Says curator Siddharta Perez ahead of the opening, “Chan’s works are interspersed with paintings from the NUS Museum’s collection which were created at the onset of the region’s historic period of decolonialisation. Set together, such encounters are both at once a retrospection on the notions of the rustic and uncharted, as well as a singular attempt to define the politics of the tropics.”

Opening programme

The exhibition launch on 24 October will feature readings of excerpts taken from the film *Seni*. The curator will be joined by artist Kent Chan to introduce the presentation to audiences.

For more information on the artist, please refer to Annex B.

tropics, a many (con)sequence will be open from Friday, 25 October until June 2020.

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Annex A: Dato' N Parameswaran's collection

Ambassador Dato' N Parameswaran began collecting drawings and posters from the Vietnam War when he was Malaysia's Ambassador to Vietnam. This undertaking took place during the early years of Vietnam's economic reform introduced in 1986, which coincided with a nascent attention to Vietnamese art, its history and contemporary direction. Continuing to grow after his ambassadorship, the collection comprises 1208 works including 858 drawings, 143 hand-painted posters, 74 printed posters, 74 woodcuts, 46 photographs and 13 paintings. The collection is one of the largest of its kind outside of Vietnam and has been on long-term loan to the NUS Museum since June 2015.

Wartime Artists of Vietnam is the fourth exhibition drawn from the collection and presented at NUS Museum.

- *Vietnam 1954-1975* (June 2015 to April 2016) explored the works as an important documentation of the Vietnamese response to the war, surveying subjects and concerns for future collaborations and research in Southeast Asian and Vietnamese art and history.
- *LINES: War Drawings And Posters From The Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran Collection* (July 2016 – July 2017) focused on drawing as a medium and how it was used in the period to beyond journalistic intent to capture physical nature of life around the battlefields.
- *"Who Wants To Remember A War?" War Drawings And Posters From The Ambassador Dato' N. Parameswaran Collection* (July 2016 to July 2018) explored how art was employed in an effort to move beyond the war period to build (and rebuild) a new narrative.

Each exhibition is supported with programmes such as panel discussions, talks and film screenings.

Annex B: Kent Chan

Kent Chan is an artist, filmmaker and curator based in Singapore. His practice revolves around encounters with art, fiction and cinema, exploring the links between aesthetic experience and knowledge production. He holds particular interest in the tropical imagination, and the relationship between moving images and the modern city. The works and practices of other artists often form the locus of his works that have taken the form of film, text, conversations and exhibitions. Chan is currently an artist-in-residence at the Jan Van Eyck Academie.

The making of the film *Seni* is supported by the National Arts Council, Singapore.

Annex C: NUS Museum

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NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions.

The Museum has over 8,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The Lee Kong Chian Collection consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the South and Southeast Asian Collection holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the Ng Eng Teng Collection is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient. A fourth collection, the Straits Chinese Collection, is located at NUS Baba House

NUS Museum is an institution of NUS Centre For the Arts.

Annex D: NUS Centre For the Arts

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Established in 1993, NUS Centre For the Arts (CFA) is a vibrant space for the appreciation of the arts and nurturing of the creative and inquiring spirit. CFA supports student engagement with the arts and the integration of the arts into the life of the University.

CFA includes the NUS Museum, NUS Baba House and a Talent and Development arm that oversees 22 student arts excellence groups. Through our myriad of programmes, practices, exhibitions, workshops and outreach, such as NUS Arts Festival and the ExxonMobil Campus Concerts, we enrich the university experience and contribute to the building of knowledge and transformation of students.

CFA also manages facilities such as the University Cultural Centre, with its 1700-seat Hall and 425-seat Theatre, and rehearsal spaces in Runme Shaw CFA Studios and University Town.