

# Session 3: Khoo Sui Hoe

6 November 2020  
Email Interview



*Khoo Sui Hoe was the first manager-curator of Alpha Gallery upon its establishment in 1971. His monumental painting *Children of the Sun* (1965) was a central feature of the exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art & Architecture in Southeast Asia* (1969–1989). In this conversation with Gillian Daniel, Khoo looks back on his long practice and his activities with Alpha.*

Gillian Daniel:

Your painting *Children of the Sun* was one of the key works in the exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art & Architecture in Southeast Asia* (1969 – 1989) [STV], which took place at National Gallery Singapore from 19 November 2019 to 29 November 2020. The 1965 painting was instigated by the pioneering architect Datuk Seri Lim Chong Keat and displayed in the lounge of the Trade Union House at the Singapore Conference Hall. How did you first meet Datuk Seri Lim and how did this commission come about?

Khoo Sui Hoe:

In 1965 at 26 years old, I won the first prize in the “Oil” category of the Malaysian Art and Craft Competition. Shortly after, that same year, I held my first one-man show at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur.



Khoo receiving the first prize at the Malaysian Art and Craft Competition from Kalsom Abdul Rahman, first wife of Khir Johari, then-Malaysian Minister of Education, 1965

55 years ago, there were not many public places for showing art in Malaysia, apart from the early National Art Gallery, the British Council and the American International Assurance [Editor’s note: known today as AIA Group] building. The British Council was a free-standing building located on a hill, surrounded by shady trees.

I exhibited 33 oil paintings at the British Council and had a grand opening. The exhibition was sponsored by the Malaya Arts Council, which was then chaired by the renowned architect, Datuk Kington Loo. It was covered by the press and I was even interviewed on local television. My parents—my folks who lived far away in Kedah, where I was born—saw me on TV!

Something delightful soon followed: my debut in Kuala Lumpur led me back to Singapore, where I had studied at the

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) from 1959 to 1961. My show at the British Council attracted many collectors. Among them was an architect, Lim Chong Keat, who bought two of my paintings. He asked if I could deliver the paintings to him in Singapore after the show closed.

Fresh from his studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Chong Keat had set up his architecture office in his flat at the Ngee Ann Building on Orchard Road. He also rented a weekend place, where he welcomed me to stay and paint. It was a one-room cottage by the sea wall in Pasir Panjang, so there I stayed and painted.



View of 291 Pasir Panjang Road from the sea, 1965

Chong Keat was then busy with the new Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House. It was the major civic project which he and his partners, under the name of Malayan Architects Co-Partnership, had won in an open competition to select an architect. He asked me to make sketches for *in situ* murals for the large, curved walls on the ground floor.

So, I quickly made two sketches and passed them to the Ministry of Culture. I waited for quite some time, but they never returned the sketches to me. As Chong Keat mentioned in his opening keynote for STV in 2019, the government was launching their campaign on anti-yellow culture at the time. They wouldn't have liked the half-naked women in my sketches. That plan for the two murals at the Conference Hall thus never materialised.

So as consolation, Chong Keat suggested that I should attempt a really large work to be displayed as a painting, as he felt my motifs were monumental and muralistic. He showed me a wall space at the old premises of the United Overseas Bank (UOB) where large works could fit. I was immediately excited by the challenge to attempt a 2.5 metre-by-2.5 metre work to fit the space, then thinking that no other artist in the 1960s had produced such a huge painting. I told myself, "That's going to be a challenge—a big challenge!"

I checked with the art supplier, Straits Art Commercial Company. [Editor's note: known today as Straits Art Co Pte. Ltd.] Even the largest imported ready-made canvas rolls did not meet that width. But very thoughtfully, the frame shop made the extra effort to help me sew two lengths of canvas together to reach my desired measurements. I ordered two such canvases and hired a lorry to deliver them to Pasir Panjang. With a helper holding onto the huge canvases, the lorry suddenly looked like a boat with sails heading to the sea.

GD:

What happened when those canvases were finally delivered to you?

KSH:

When those two huge blank canvases arrived at 291 Pasir Panjang Road, I jumped to start on one of them right away. I made some sketches with mainly human forms. I was challenged by the size and was conscious of how I should

deal with something to be viewed from a distance. I made one sketch after another. But in the end, I could not wait to finalise it, so I began to paint strokes directly onto the canvas.

I realised I actually felt happier dealing with the large dimensions. I love painting human figures. At my first one-man show, the largest of my paintings was around 1 m<sup>2</sup>. Very few artists painted larger than that in the 1960s. At the more common size of 80 cm<sup>2</sup> or 1 m<sup>2</sup>, I could compose with only one or two figures comfortably.

But here, I was given a dimension of 2.5 m<sup>2</sup>, which allowed me to play with more human figures and to enrich the painting with whatever elements I wanted. I enjoyed that kind of generosity and kept playing with different compositions. At the same time, I was thinking of how artists in the old days depicted figures in Dunhuang in China or the Ajanta Caves of India.



Other than human figures, I introduced elements of nature. First, I placed the sun in the centre, then came the rocks and trees. I then came to tackle the problem of the seam, which was quite disturbing to the eye. But easily enough, I figured out how to turn it into part of the painting by making it into the water line. And it worked!

As a matter of fact, the whole stretch of canvas was leaning near the sea wall. It just so happened that a shadow of the house's structure was partly thrown onto the painting. I thought that was inspiring, so I adopted it as part of the composition.

Everything seemed smooth and easy, as I was immersed in the work of creativity. I could smell the breeze under the tropical sun and hear the waves in my sleep at night. I painted for a few hours and walked half a mile each day, passing by Haw Par Villa to reach a coffee shop for my cup of coffee or to eat a plate of rice for my supper. I was 25 and single. Life was easy.





Khoo by the sea, 1965

I don't remember how long it took me to complete the painting and I don't remember why I named it *Children of the Sun* even before I finished. I'm not sure how, but I did it—successfully created it in Pasir Panjang in Singapore.

The success of my large-scale *Children of the Sun* prompted me to quickly continue on to another large canvas. It was like I was provided a stage on which to leap and dance. This time, I changed from a canvas with square dimensions to one with a span of 1.2 metres-by-3.6 metres—like a mural.

I chose the classic theme of weddings. I believe they have been painted continuously throughout the history of art, but I thought I had something unique to say about this region of Southeast Asia.

To conceive and to compose the painting was not a problem. I had one male figure and one female figure sitting together under a tree of unity—a sort of bond of marriage. Like *Children of the Sun*, I introduced other figures in this painting: a bather in the river, a face hiding behind the rock, and a boy under the shade with a hand up in greeting. One by one, they entered the scene. There was no wedding ceremony; instead, the well-wishers were to be three standing birds lined up before the bride and groom.

The result was a painting of bright colours, full of joy and delight, yet calm and serene. The symbols of nature are shown: the great sun, a cliff of rock, plants and the trunk of a tree—so distinctive and clear like a reflection on water. Man and woman, boy and girl—they are all rendered with different coloured skin. My use of blue for the man was influenced by folk paintings in India. The creeping bather’s striped towel creates an optical effect, linking to trends in contemporary art of the time.



Khoon in front of *Golden Wedding* (1965), now in the collection of UOB



Artists Tay Bak Koi (left) and Tay Chee Toh (right) helping to hold up *Golden Wedding* for a photograph, 1965



GD:

Were you alone at Pasir Panjang, just you, the cottage and the sea?

KSH:

Chong Keat would sometimes drop by in the evenings. He came to watch how I progressed. He would just watch—never made comments, never said how he felt. He might have chatted, but he never discussed what I painted or how I painted. Once, when I ran out of cigarettes, he volunteered to drive in the dark to get a pack for me.

Although Chong Keat never commented when I worked on *Children of the Sun* and after, he remained a sharp writer and critic of my work. He would eventually contribute a write-up for my monograph.

GD:

Let's go back a little in time. You mentioned that you studied at NAFA from 1959 to 1961. Could you share more about your time there?



Khoo writes in his journal at 291 Pasir Panjang Road, 1965

KSH:

I actually started out wanting to be a journalist. I have been journaling since my younger days. I have always loved reading, though I was initially restricted to Chinese translations of writers such as Ernest Hemingway, O. Henry, and Maxim Gorky,

alongside many books of Chinese writers like Lu Xun, Cao Yu and Eileen Chang. I loved writing short stories and modern poems, and some were published in Chinese local newspapers and monthly literary magazines.

In my late teens, I briefly taught at two Chinese primary schools in Kedah. But after the Education Department abruptly terminated my post one day, I teamed up with my classmate—who later became known as Morena Longbow—and took a train to Singapore.

That was when Singapore was awakening to political transformation. I looked for a job and applied to two Chinese newspapers, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* and the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*.

But I did not get an answer from either of the two newspapers, and my savings were exhausted. So, I ended up taking a job to become a cement labourer. Working in groups of three in a shack, we produced concrete slabs for pedestrian use in Queenstown. Although I was physically overstrained under the burning sun every day, I managed to continue writing at night. I eventually managed to do a series of stories for *Nanyang Siang Pau*.

But shortly after, my parents traced me down and finally found me in Singapore. They were shocked and broken-hearted when they found me in the shack. My mother became so stressed, it took a toll on her mental health. My father worried about my safety working with rough labourers. They tried to get me out of that "low-down, unworthy job"—in their words. After they failed to persuade me to go back up north, they wanted to secure me an office job under a ceiling fan or put me in a school. But due to their limited time in Singapore, they compromised with me on my perfunctory request to attend NAFA, a school I was not really serious about and they never thought worthy.

But life changed dramatically once I was financially supported to enter NAFA in 1959. The old mansion at 49 St.

Thomas Walk opened my eyes to a wondrous world. Since it provided me with the tremendous fun of creativity, I occupied myself more with painting than writing. I gave up my dream of being a journalist and became a painter instead.



Khoo at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, c.1959

In my three years of art studies at NAFA, I chose Western art classes but slipped in some Chinese ink. We also did charcoal sketching, as well as watercolour and oil painting classes. In charcoal sketching class, we were trained to create a good sense of perspective and strict, accurate drawings of human features. Students used a stick to measure at eye level for accuracy and precision. Madam Georgette Chen was a petite little lady who would walk among the students to find and correct many mistakes, until one day she was given a pillow to sit on. Mistakes by students were then somehow greatly reduced! Very neat hair style, very neat *cheongsam*—she was a person of culture. She was also multilingual in Mandarin, English, French and Bahasa Melayu. We all loved her.

During watercolour and oil classes, we had still-life scenes and live models. For still-life painting, I was always

nominated to shop for fruits, vegetables, flowers or dried fish heads. Mr. Cheong Soo Pieng would arrange them in a porcelain bowl and add a piece of fabric for a tablecloth, or simply hang it up as background drapery.

The models were usually volunteers from our own class. Students at NAFA were multi-racial: there were Chinese, Malays, and Caucasians. I remember my female Malay classmates, such as Rohani Ismail, posed especially well for portraiture. We also got an Indian gardener once to sit for three hours. There was no nudity allowed—the closest was a Caucasian lady student in her bikini, lying face down. After the class was over, one of the students easily erased the thin bikini to present a nude painting. Quite unexpectedly, one day we had Usha, a young lady of Thai origin, be our guest model.



Khoo (left) with Rahmat Ahmad (second from left), Ibrahim Hussein (second from right) and Ng Eng Teng (right) at NAFA, 1961

Unlike charcoal sketching classes, oil painting classes allowed free expression. Students were encouraged to evolve and to act independently. But some students got carried away and ended up abstracting far away from the original still-life references. Mr Cheong was sharp enough to remind students—usually in Hokkien—when to stop. I think this is something important for an artist: to realise his motifs but to learn when to stop.



Khoo (left) and model Usha (second from left), with fellow NAFA students, c.1959–1961



Khoo poses as a life-drawing model in a charcoal sketching class, NAFA, c.1959–1961

That said, even the teacher sometimes got carried away when correcting our works. This was so much so that I imitated the signature of Cheong Soo Pieng on one of my works because it so much resembled his own style after his correction. It was almost completely 100% a piece by Cheong Soo Pieng, except the signature was, alas, not authentic!

GD:

Could you share more about your first solo exhibition at the Singapore Conference Hall in 1966?



*Children of the Sun* in Khoo's exhibition at Singapore Conference Hall, 1966



Artists Cheong Soo Pieng (in suit) and Lai Foong Moi (on his left) at the exhibition opening, 1966

KSH:

In 1966, Chong Keat helped to organise and to present my first one-man show in Singapore. He was the architect and designer of the Singapore Conference Hall, as I mentioned earlier, so he knew best how to incorporate an art exhibition into his building. Among 40 new works were four huge paintings, including *Children of the Sun* and *Golden Wedding*. They dominated the bright space of the foyer. The crowded audience included Frank Sullivan from Kuala Lumpur and my mentors Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen. They were there to listen to the

show's opening speech given by then-Education Minister Encik Rahim Ishak. I was happy to see such a spectacular occasion, highlighted by such huge paintings, for the first time. Of course, Chong Keat has a story to tell of how Frank Sullivan tried and failed to acquire *Children of the Sun* for the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur after the exhibition. [Editor's note: Read Issue #0 in this series for this anecdote by Lim Chong Keat]



Frank Sullivan (left), Abdul Rahim Ishak (right) and Piroska Feher-Rajaratnam, wife of S. Rajaratnam (second from left) with Khoo (second from right) at the exhibition opening, 1966

GD:

What transpired after this solo exhibition at the Conference Hall?

KSH:

After several exhibitions in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Penang, I began to visit foreign countries in 1968—first to meet up with the important Indonesian artist Affandi at his studio in Yogyakarta, then I took a train to see Pratuang Emcharoen in Thailand.

I had helped Pratuang stage a show in Singapore before this. I was heading to Bangkok to prepare for my then-upcoming one-man show at the Trio Gallery. I had hand carried 16 of my paintings from Malaysia, but they were unfortunately destroyed in a frame shop fire. Pratuang helped by hosting me, so that I

could carry on painting in his homeland. He came with his family to welcome me at the Hua Lamphong train station.



Artists Thawan Duchanee (centre) and Prayoot Phakpol (left) at Khoo's exhibition in The Trio Gallery, Bangkok, 1968

At the opening of my show at Trio, the Malaysian Ambassador Tengku Ngah Muhammad stressed the importance of cultural exchange in the show's commencement address. Pratuang Emcharoen and Thawan Duchanee were among those who came for the opening.



Khoo (right) with artist Anzai Shigeo (left) in Tokyo, 1969

Since I enjoyed pretty good sales at Trio, I could then afford to fly from Bangkok to Hong Kong, then Taipei to Tokyo. I spent

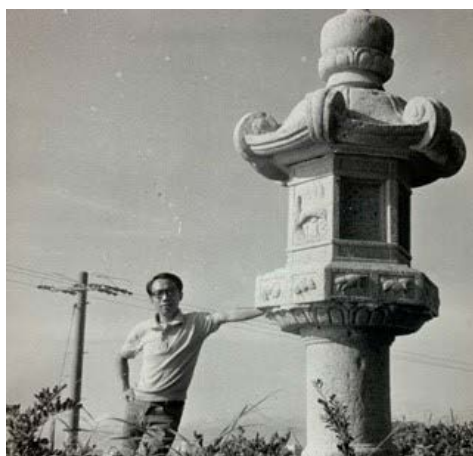


two months travelling in Japan. Japan was like a window to the West for me. I queued to see Paul Klee at Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama. I met artists like the photographer Anzai Shigeo and the pop artist Okamoto Shinjiro, as well as many other people from all walks of life.

Although I did not speak Japanese, I managed to make friends by reading and writing *Kanji*. I hitch-hiked from Tokyo to Hokkaido, took a boat trip to Kyushu, and sailed to Okinawa, all



Khoo (right) with Taiwanese artist Kuo Tong Rong (left) at the Paul Klee exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama, 1969



Khoo on his way to Hokkaido, 1969

during the devastating typhoon season. These ambitious trips allowed me to see more and to experience life deeply until I got tired. I then came home to get married. I was 31 years old.

GD:

This would have been 1970. How did Alpha Gallery come about shortly after that in 1971?

KSH:

In 1971, I took my new bride to Singapore. That was when Chong Keat proposed the idea of setting up an art gallery. He had a branch of his architecture office on Alexandra Avenue by then, far away from the city centre. There was a vacant shop in the same row as his office. Back then, Alexandra Avenue was a short lane with about ten shophouses on one side of the street, with most facing the rail tracks below ground level. 7 Alexandra Avenue was chosen to be the future Alpha Gallery. Unlike its neighbours, it enjoyed sitting opposite an open space. Once in a while, an invisible train would pass by below ground level, heading north for Malaysia.

In the early days of the 1960s and 1970s, there were not many art galleries in Singapore. I can remember one by the name of Meyers Gallery at the Raffles Quay. Later on, other gallerists like Donald Moore and Della Butcher tried their luck at business centres like Orchard Road. To set up a gallery far away from the city, like at Alexandra Avenue, was beyond imagination. But Alpha did it.

Chong Keat said he was happy to provide a location and take care of renovating the premises. He left it to me to find fellow artist members and to form a registered company. I began by recruiting Abdul Latiff (who was later known as Latiff Mohidin), Choy Weng Yang, Goh Beng Kwan, Tay Chee Toh, Qwek Wee Chew, Yeo Hoe Koon, Thomas Yeo, and Arthur Yap. We also invited Mr Woo Sek Chee of International Press, our printing company, to be Chairman. Tay Chee Toh was to be Treasurer, and myself, Manager-Curator. At our first meeting

of the member artists, I made it clear that because I was an artist, I needed to paint. I could only help for one year, then someone else would have to take over.

The grand opening of Alpha was officiated in 1971 by the elegant Mrs S. Rajaratnam, the Hungarian wife of the Minister for Culture. I remember her entering the gallery, which was full of colourful balloons. It was a good gathering of art lovers—a pleasant surprise for them to meet the distinctive artists from Singapore and Malaysia. All paintings on the white walls were highlighted by professional lighting. There were flowers from well-wishers and guests holding glasses of champagne. I assured the audience that what they were seeing were quality works of international standard and they viewed them with admiration. I was excited and encouraged that we received such a crowd at a location so far away from the city. After the show, guests were encouraged to each take a balloon home. It was a sweet and unforgettable evening.

GD:

What directions would Alpha's exhibitions and programmes take from that point on?

KSH:

As manager and curator, I presented local artists and also arranged for foreign artists to show in Singapore. Making space for artists to exchange views was important to me. It was even more important for the locals to see works from other countries. I was kept busy running between embassies to invite diplomats to officiate each show, and I believe we were successful in bridging different cultures.

Following the inaugural exhibition, I worked extremely hard, organising 13 shows altogether in my first year. In addition to solo exhibitions, such as one featuring the works of the Indian great master Jamini Roy from the collection of the British writer Austin Coates, we held a fundraiser to benefit refugees in Bangladesh and participated in a trade

show at the Great World Amusement Park. Looking at a list of future exhibitions, our guests could not wait for the next opening. They made Alpha the main attraction of Singapore's art community. I knew we were growing—and growing fast.



Khoo at Alpha Gallery, Singapore, 1971

GD:

How was the succession of managers decided? What was their impact and did the direction of Alpha change over the years?

KSH:

The shows were so tight and frequent that I became totally exhausted. But I kept my promise to finish one full year. When the time came to pass the baton, that old classmate of mine, Morena Longbow, came along again. He was a quiet loner but highly intellectual. I thought he was the best person to write for our exhibition catalogues. I trusted him to take over.

Following my one-year tenure, I moved to Cameron Highlands, where I rented a Malay house and set up my new painting studio. With the green hills and an open sky, I enjoyed painting in a cool climate.

Alpha meanwhile had steadily gained a place in the art community and proved to be important to society. Commercial galleries in Singapore did not survive easily in those days, but we managed to sell good art to individual collectors. UOB,

which had by then set up a permanent collection committee, also picked their choices from time to time. This was one of the many ways it managed to carry on and grow.

While I enjoyed Cameron Highlands, I had not forgotten Alpha. After finishing a few paintings, I visited Singapore and there I found it in critical financial trouble. Longbow left a note admitting that he had issued a cheque of a substantial amount, so much so that Alpha's funds were completely wiped out. The Alpha committee had to hold an emergency meeting. Longbow did not explain where the money had gone to and so he was eventually dismissed. Later, we heard that he had been supporting a rock band in purchasing a drum set!

I stayed back to look for a candidate. This was something that did not come easily. Despite the challenge, I found Anthony Poon, an artist I had earlier invited to show at Alpha. Anthony had just come back from his art training in the UK. He painted interestingly shaped canvases with colourful stripes, in a kind of Op Art style. I proposed the Manager position to him. I could understand his hesitation looking at the very fragile situation before him. But maybe it was because of my persistence, or maybe it was because of his love of art—our mutual passion in art—that Anthony Poon became the third Manager-Curator.

GD:

Did you return immediately to Cameron Highlands after that?

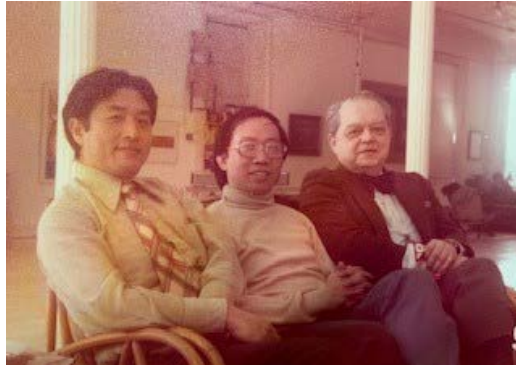
KSH:

My return to Cameron Highlands did not last very long. A letter soon came all the way from New York that I had been awarded a grant from the John D. Rockefeller III Foundation. I was excited and quickly prepared for the trip. After hopping from city to city in the Asia Pacific, I finally arrived in New York in 1974.

Although I was separated from Singapore by my busy schedule in the US, I continued to receive news of Alpha through letters from Goh Beng Kwan. It continued exhibiting during my absence in New York.



Khoo in New York, 1974



Khoo Sui Hoe (centre), a fellow grant recipient (left) and Director Porter A. McCray of John D. Rockefeller III fund (right), 1974

After a year and a half, I returned to Penang. I began to recruit artists to form Group Utara. Still, I kept a close watch on how Alpha was progressing. Anthony Poon was doing fine, and I understand that it was later placed in the good hands of Lim Chong Beng and Tay Kiam Hong; that it moved from Alexandra Avenue to Bukit Timah; and that Alpha enjoyed its long history of 17 years.

Time flies, and as Singapore developed and changed rapidly, Alpha Gallery and its neighbours eventually gave way to a larger building complex—Alexandra Avenue ultimately disappeared from the map of Singapore.

**Khoo Sui Hoe** is a US-based artist born in Kedah, Malaysia. His 1965 painting *Children of the Sun* was the first public art commission in Singapore. In 1971, he became the first Manager-Curator of Alpha Gallery in Singapore. In 1976 in Penang, he founded the Group Utara, consisting of artists from the northern regions of Peninsular Malaysia. Khoo has exhibited extensively in museums and galleries worldwide.

**Gillian Daniel** is Manager (Curatorial Programmes) at National Gallery Singapore.



This zine is an edited version of the original email interview.

All images courtesy of Khoo Sui Hoe and Lim Chong Keat.

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Copyedited by Patricia Lee

Designed by gideon-jamie

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About the Series

The “Another Initial Impetus” zine series explores the legacies of the seminal Alpha Gallery and its place in a formative period of Singapore’s cultural history. Sparked by a series of programmes organised in conjunction with the 2019 exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969 – 1989)* at National Gallery Singapore, each zine features individuals connected to the Alpha Gallery, as well as those who were inspired by or embody its spirit.



About Alpha Gallery

Yet another gallery: another four walls, another fifty pictures, another initial impetus. ALPHA is all this, too. And we believe, more as well.

—Arthur Yap, Introduction to the catalogue accompanying Alpha Gallery’s inaugural exhibition, October 1971.

The Alpha Gallery was as an artist-run cooperative gallery established in Singapore in 1971. It adopted a model of collective organisation where artists could share resources, enter and exit freely and actively contribute to burgeoning debates surrounding artistic production in an era of new modernity and rapid economic progress in then newly independent Malaysia and Singapore. The pioneering architect Lim Chong Keat was a catalyst and staunch supporter of the Alpha Gallery. Lim was inspired by the Bauhaus concept of a totality of knowledge, where the boundaries between disciplines like art, architecture, craft and design were fluid. Alongside becoming one of the most significant venues in Singapore for exhibiting contemporary art from the region, Alpha would thus also eventually become a place for the exchange of ideas between artists, as well as writers, cultural policymakers and architects, among others. Many members of these networks had also studied or practiced abroad, returning home during a critical juncture in Singapore’s history when it was considering urgent questions of postcolonial national identity. Against this backdrop, Alpha’s global outlook inspired a generation of artists and public intellectuals who went on to shape various fields of practice in Singapore.

