

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**New perspectives on Southeast Asian artistic practices at National Gallery  
Singapore with *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art***

*A new exhibition exploring how desire, the body, and sexuality have shaped artistic expression across Southeast Asia.*



Installation view, *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art*. National Gallery Singapore 2026.

**SINGAPORE, 20 April 2026** – National Gallery Singapore presents *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art* (R18), a new exhibition that explores desire, the body, and sexuality as powerful forces shaping artistic expression across the region.

Opening on 24 April 2026, the exhibition brings together over 70 works from the pre-modern to the contemporary, including regional loans. Spanning different periods and contexts, the exhibition offers a new perspective on Southeast Asian art, showing how pre-modern cultural narratives continue to shape contemporary artistic practices and how artists engage with identity, intimacy, and the human condition.

As a leading visual arts institution in Southeast Asia, National Gallery Singapore continues to expand the scope of what a museum can meaningfully engage with. This exhibition underscores

the Gallery's commitment to presenting rigorous, thought-provoking programmes that invite audiences to encounter art in ways that are both intellectually grounded and deeply human.

### **Reframing desire in Southeast Asian art**

The exhibition title, "Passion is Volcanic", draws inspiration from Nanyang artist Liu Kang's 1953 essay *Trip to Bali*, in which he observed that erotic forms of desire could act as creative forces for questioning and change. Building on this idea, the exhibition approaches the erotic as a lived, felt experience that shapes how we think, know, and relate to others. Bringing together both canonical and lesser-known works, the exhibition re-examines how desire and the body have been represented across Southeast Asian art, revealing not only continuities and transformations over time, but also alternative perspectives that challenge dominant narratives of art history.

*Passion is Volcanic* positions desire as a vital force that shapes how we think, create, and respond to the world. Spanning pre-modern references to contemporary practices, the exhibition reveals how desire informs artistic expression across time, shaping ideas of identity, intimacy, and the human condition.

Dr Patrick Flores, Chief Curator and Project Director of the exhibition, says, "Art and desire have always been intertwined, yet conversations about pleasure and the body remain shielded in the region's public sphere. *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art* engages with these themes in a considered and meaningful way and demonstrates how complex subjects can be approached with intellectual rigour and curatorial care. This exhibition invites us to look beyond familiar or simplified ideas of the erotic, exploring how desire is not fixed, but shaped by culture, history, and power. It opens up a more layered understanding of Southeast Asian art, one that centres lived, embodied experience as a vital force in artistic practice."



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Spanning painting, sculptural installation, photography, and video, the exhibition brings together a diverse range of artists and practices, examined through the lens of the erotic, with focused spotlights on key figures and movements. It invites visitors to reflect on how representations of the body and desire shape not only artistic practices, but also how we understand identity, intimacy, and the spaces we inhabit.

### **Tracing how artists have portrayed the human body through shifting ideas of desire**

Organised across three sections – **Asian Mythos and Ritual**, **Conventions of the Erotic**, and **Public Arenas/Private Interiors** – the exhibition traces how desire has been expressed, contested, and reimagined across different cultural and historical contexts.

The exhibition opens with **Asian Mythos and Ritual**, exploring how the erotic has long been embedded in spiritual and cosmological narratives, where desire intersects with power, transformation, and the divine. Works in this section invite visitors to see the body as a bridge between the human and the sacred, where emotion, nature, and spiritual ideas converge.

The next section, **Conventions of the Erotic**, examines how artists have reworked the body and its representation, challenging inherited traditions and redefining the aesthetics of desire in postcolonial Southeast Asia. Works by artists such as Liu Kang, Nhek Dim, Bagi Aung Soe, and

Basoeki Abdullah show how the nude was used as a symbol of liberation and modernity. Other artists such as Alfonso Ossorio, Sharifah Fatimah, and Lim Chong Keat moved beyond academic realism to explore new expressive and symbolic forms within postcolonial contexts.

The exhibition's concluding section, **Public Arenas/Private Interiors**, explores how artists engage with sexuality, identity, and social norms, bringing intimate and often marginalised experiences into public discourse. Set against rapidly changing social and cultural contexts in the late 20th century, artists began to reimagine desire in response to shifting moral boundaries, the rise of mass media, and the effects of globalisation. In these works, the intimate and the public intersect, explicit imagery becomes a form of critique, while feminist practices reclaim agency and challenge the objectification of the body. This section also highlights the presence of diverse voices in Singapore's art history and reflects how contemporary practices have expanded representations of the body across painting, installation, performance, and photography.

Together, these sections reveal how artists across Southeast Asia, including those in regional collections, have explored themes of desire not only as subject matter, but also as a way to examine norms, express perspectives and imagine different ways of being.

### ***Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art at National Gallery Singapore***

*Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art* (R18) will be on view from 24 April to 30 August 2026 at the Level 4 Gallery, National Gallery Singapore. The exhibition is rated R18 and intended for visitors aged 18 and above; valid identification will be required at entry. *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art* is a ticketed exhibition, with tickets priced at \$5 for Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents, and \$8 for other nationalities. For more information, please refer to the attached annex or visit our website at [www.nationalgallery.sg/PassionisVolcanic](http://www.nationalgallery.sg/PassionisVolcanic).

Media assets are available through this [link](#).

- [Annex A](#): Sections and Key Artworks



For more information, please contact:

**Tate Anzur**

Fabiola Susilo

[NGSteam@tateanzur.com](mailto:NGSteam@tateanzur.com)

+65 9389 5038

**National Gallery Singapore**

Nicolette Ann Michael

[nicolette.michael@nationalgallery.sg](mailto:nicolette.michael@nationalgallery.sg)

## **About National Gallery Singapore**

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution and the largest modern and contemporary art museum in Southeast Asia. Dedicated to making art accessible to all, the Gallery engages audiences of all ages through its exhibitions, educational programmes, and public festivals.

Home to the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian art, the Gallery is redefining the region's art history through pioneering research, strategic acquisitions, and thoughtfully curated exhibitions. By offering new perspectives, it recontextualises the region's artistic contributions within global narratives.

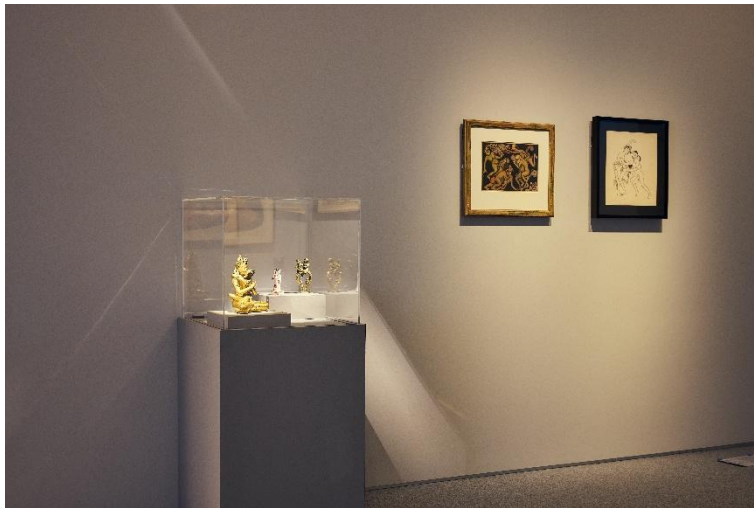
Located in the heart of the Civic District, the Gallery is housed in two national monuments – the City Hall and former Supreme Court – making it an iconic cultural landmark where architectural grandeur meets deep historical significance.

A vibrant cultural destination, the Gallery has been ranked among Asia's Top 10 most visited museums by The Art Newspaper since 2019. It has also received accolades at the Singapore Tourism Awards, including "Best Leisure Event" for Light to Night Festival 2020 and "Outstanding Leisure Event" for Gallery Children's Biennale 2021.

As a registered Charity and an Institute of Public Character, the Gallery relies on public support to expand its collection, advance research, and bring art to more people, shaping cultural discourse and inspiring creativity for generations to come.

**Annex A: *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art Sections and Key Artworks***

**Asian Mythos and Ritual**



Installation view, *Passion is Volcanic: Desire in Southeast Asian Art*. National Gallery Singapore 2026.

The first section, **Asian Mythos and Ritual**, traces how the erotic in art and culture has long reflected the spiritual bonds between humans and the divine across Asia. In these contexts, desire is not separate from the sacred, but part of a broader understanding of the body's connection to nature and the divine.



Artist unknown. *Vajradhara and Prajnaparamita*. c. 14th–15th century. Gilt copper alloy, 22.8 × 16.3 × 15.5 cm. Gift of Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple. Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board, Singapore.

This is reflected in Buddhist and Hindu art, shaped by Tantra, where erotic union symbolises cosmic perfection. In *Vajradhara and Prajnaparamita* (14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century), a gilt-copper sculpture depicts Vajradhara, the highest state of enlightenment, in an intimate embrace with Prajnaparamita, the mother of all Buddhas. Their tender kiss expresses the union of male and female qualities of wisdom and compassion, visualising key principles of Tantric Buddhism and offering a view of desire as a pathway to spiritual understanding.

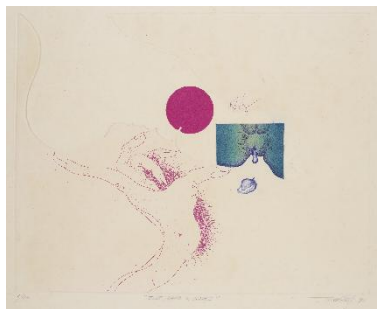


Agnes Arellano. *Haliya Bathing*. 1983. Coldcast marble sculpture and crushed marble stones, 30 x 104 x 100 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.



Nguyễn Quân. *Altar*. 1992. Ink on paper, 83 x 303 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.

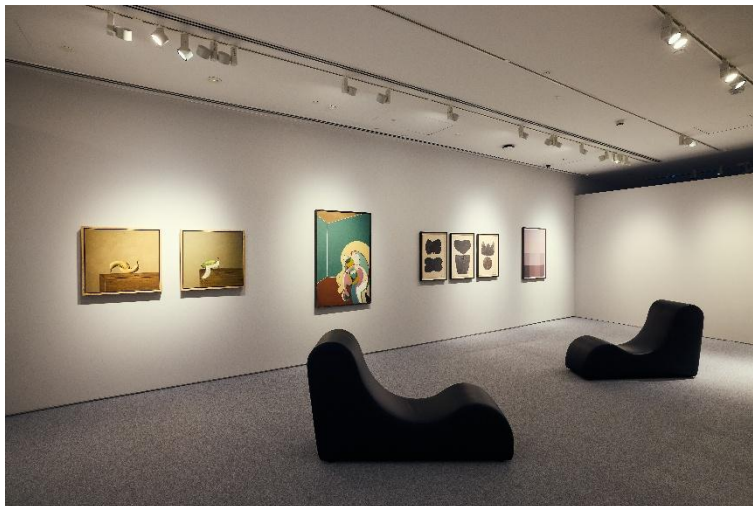
Such ideas persist in enduring cultural narratives in which feminine figures or principles assume complex roles. In Agnes Arellano's *Haliya Bathing* (1983), the artist reimagines the Bicolano warrior goddess of the moon through her own body, depicted in a childbirth position. Concentric circles of crushed marble radiate from the figure, evoking fertility, planetary movement, and feminine creative vitality. Nguyen Quan's *Altar* (1992) further explores the interplay between the body and the sacred, reimagining the Vietnamese altar through an ink painting flanked by two lacquered figurines, suggesting the sensuality of the female form through abstraction.



Long Thien Shih. *Hand, Foot and Hair*. 1971. Etching and blank embossed cut-out aquatint, 39 x 48 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. © Long Thien Shih.

More intimate, embodied understandings of desire emerge in Long Thien Shih's *Hand, Foot and Hair* (1971), which references the activation of sexual energy through touch. Across these works, desire moves between the sacred and the corporeal, shaping how the body is understood within the cycles of life, death, and renewal.

### **Conventions of the Erotic**



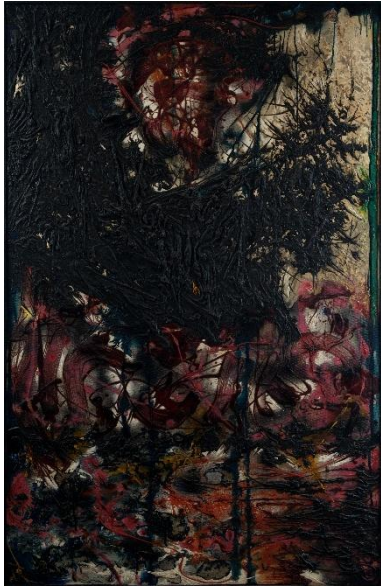
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**Conventions of the Erotic** examines how artists have reworked the body and its representation, challenging inherited traditions and redefining the aesthetics of desire in Southeast Asia. While the study of the nude was central to academic training, artists in the region began to move beyond these conventions.



Liu Kang. *Scene in Bali*. 1953. Oil on canvas, 127 x 85.5 cm.  
Gift of the artist's family. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Liu Kang's *Scene in Bali* (1953) exemplifies this shift. By moving away from studio models to painting outdoors, he depicts bathing figures, connecting the female form to Bali's landscape, and expressing a sense of passion central to the island's artistic identity. In doing so, he presents the nude not only as a formal subject, but as a symbol of vitality and modernity.



Alfonso A. Ossorio. *Clouds of Conscience*. 1956. Oil on masonite board , 153 x 97 cm. Gift of Fernando Zóbel. Collection of Ateneo Art Gallery. Image courtesy of Ateneo Art Gallery, Ateneo de Manila University. Reproduced with the permission of the Ossorio Foundation and Nicole A. Vanasse.



Julie Lluch. *LILY FOR GEORGIA O'KEEFE*. 2009. Terracotta with acrylic , 117 x 77 x 22 cm. Collection of BenCab Museum. Image courtesy of BenCab Museum.



Ahmad Zakii Anwar. *Sixty-nine 1*. 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 69 x 69 cm. Private Collection.



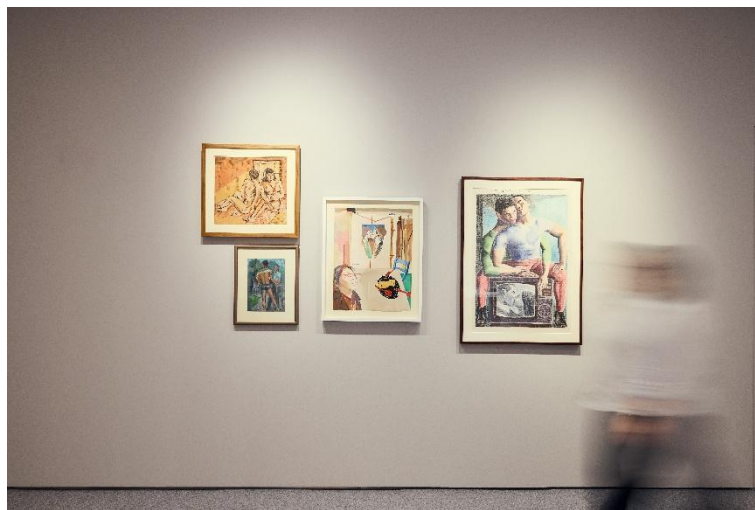
Ahmad Zakii Anwar. *Sixty-nine 3*. 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 69 x 69 cm. Private collection

Across the 20th century, artists increasingly abstracted and reimagined the body, exploring erotic meaning through form, material, and visual language. In *Clouds of Conscience* (1956), Alfonso

Ossorio uses dense materiality to evoke a visceral, bodily experience. Ahmad Zakii Anwar however pushes against prescribed abstraction toward the realist-symbolic in his *Sixtynine* (2000) series. By staging fruit in precarious couplings, Zakii utilises the aged texture of the skins to make his erotic implications more vivid, tactile, and humorous. This engagement with the corporeal continues in Julie Lluh's *Lily for Georgia O'Keeffe* (2009), which features an outsized terracotta sculpture of a lily that also pays tribute to the trailblazing American female artist. Here, the work offers a critique of patriarchy, gesturing toward the male gaze that has long shaped art history.

Together, these works reposition the studio as a space for experimentation, where artists rethink the body, intimacy and desire within postcolonial contexts.

### **Public Arenas/Private Interiors**



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The exhibition concludes with **Public Arenas/Private Interiors**, which explores how artists engage with sexuality, identity, and social norms in rapidly changing societies. From the late 20th century onwards, shifts in gender politics, media and globalisation reshaped how desire was represented and understood. In this period, the circulation of sexual imagery both reinforced social norms and exposed emerging moral tensions. What was once considered transgressive became central to debates around taste, visibility and cultural acceptability.

In Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's *Out* (2012), medical instruments used in gynaecological examinations are transformed into decorative objects. By decorating objects like the speculum, an instrument associated with clinical observation, with ornate glass beads, the artist challenges how the female body has been regulated and viewed, turning discomfort into critique while foregrounding the evolving experiences of women and the pursuit of women's rights within Asian societies.

Artists also began to explore diverse sexual identities and relationships, bringing intimate experiences into public discourse. Feminist practitioners, in particular, challenged the objectification of the body by asserting personal agency and the validity of private pleasure.



Lavender Chang. *Dissolving into the Same Breath #3*. 2024. Fine art archival print on rice paper, 90 x 73 cm  
Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

Lavender Chang's *Dissolving into the Same Breath #1-#3* (2024) reflects this shift. Using long-exposure photography, the work captures bodies in motion, visualising intimacy as fluid and evolving. Originally commissioned in China, the series follows couples reconnecting after periods of sexual absence, with their movements rendered as fleeting imprints dissolving into one another's embrace. First released alongside personal narratives, the work sparked wider conversations around intimacy and desire.

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