

ON MALAYAN THINKING, FEELING AND DESIGNING: THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF IDENTITY

30.12.23

The Malayan Generations had dreams of being a free people after decolonisation. They lived through the 1950s to the 1970s when it was an intense period of political ferment and intense creativity searching for an authentic politics and culture true to our people and place. The Malayan Soul was not to last though, in the ensuing onslaught of Globalisation.

This ferment expressed itself in politics, multiracialism, poetry, literature, art and architecture then.

I began to understand the struggle better when I retired from practice. All throughout, as a Malayan, I struggled against Western Styling but I did not fully understand why and what it was that left me yearning for something real and not fake.

This essay is my attempt to explain what the struggle was among the Malayan generations manifested in poetry, art and architecture in the immediate postcolonial period. Also why is Malayan-ism fading away as Western-ism takes a grip on the new generations especially in the major towns and cities of Malaysia and Singapore. Then again, a new era is emerging, the challenge of New Asia...

THE IMMEDIATE POST-COLONIAL ERA

The period of intense creativity did not last long but it was an exhilarating period from the 50s to the late 70s before Global Media driven Western styles and norms became overwhelming.

I will start with three most distinctive works by architect Lim Chong Keat's Singapore Conference Hall, the Seremban Mosque and the Jurong Town Hall and the most distinctive work by Alfred Wong, The National Theatre.



This is Lim Chong Keat showing Minister of Law K M Byrne the model of the winning design of the Singapore Conference Hall in 1963



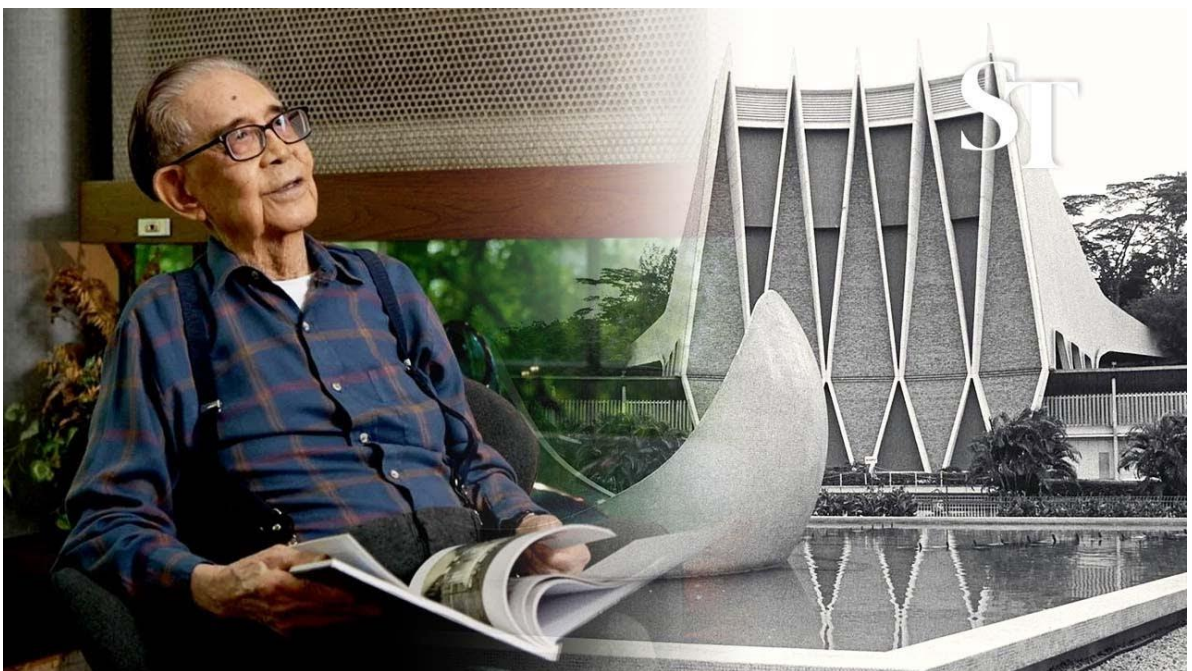
Singapore Conference Hall completed in 1964



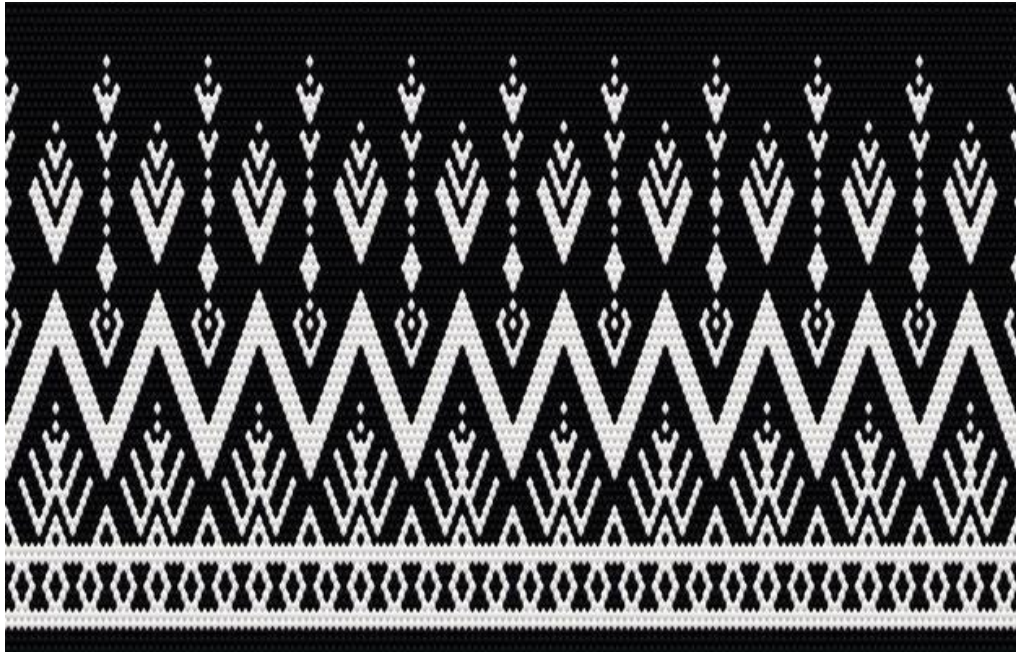
Seremban Mosque completed in 1967



THE Jurong Town Hall completed in 1971



Alfred Wong was the designer of the National Theatre in 1963. His design was selected from five submissions because I think it fitted the 1959 newly elected PAP's Aneka Regam Rakyat cultural program.



Alfred may not admit that he was fully aware that the front pattern of his design of the National Theatre reflected batik patterns and therefore it in line with the cultural-political program of the new government's cultural effort to meld together the diverse mix of peoples and cultures in the process of building the Nation.

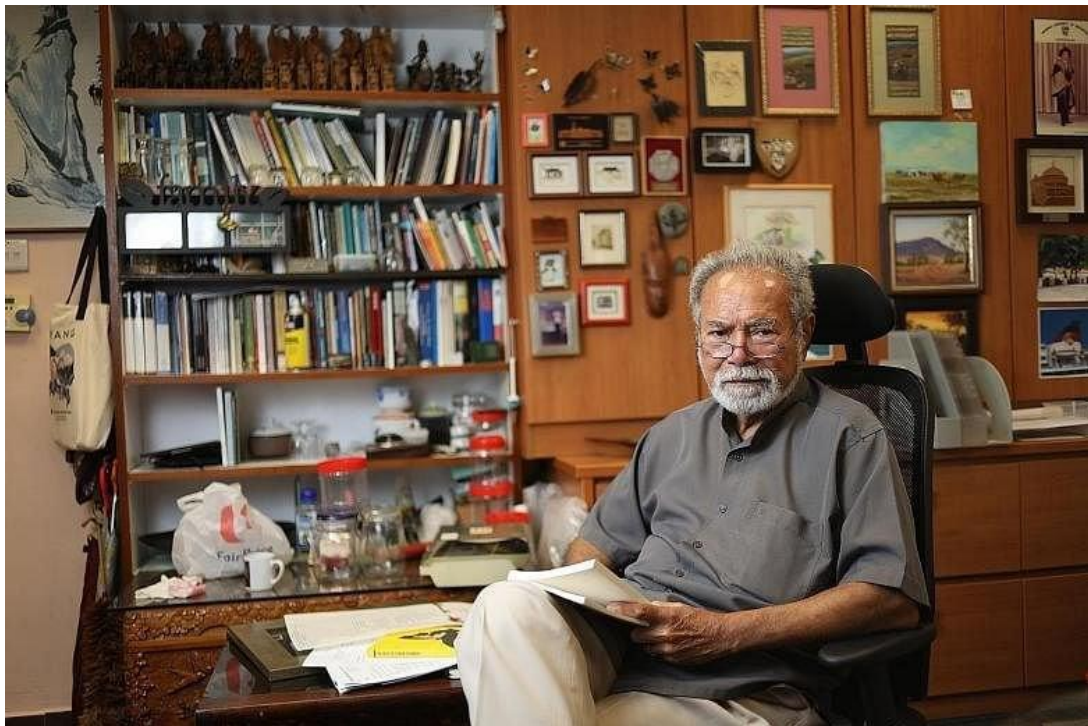


Prior to the building of the National Theatre, cultural performances were held on the steps of City Hall.

Aneka Ragam Rakyat (people's culture) was initiated by the Ministry for Culture in 1959. It was an experiment in inter-cultural admixture. The National Theatre was the main venue for these very popular performances.

LET ME NOW DISCUSS THE CULTURAL CHALLENGE OF
THOSE TIMES AND IMPACT AT THE DAWN OF NATION
BUILDING AFTER DE-COLONISATION

THE MOST ELOQUENT VOICE IS FOUND IN POETRY



The example of Malayan poet, Edwin Thumboo

*by Edwin Thumboo
from Ulysses by the Merlion (1979)*

We do but merely ask,
No more, no less, this much:
That you white man,
Boasting of many parts,
Some talk of Alexander, some of Hercules.
Some broken not long ago

By little yellow soldiers
Out of the Rising Sun...
We ask you see
The bitter, curving tide of history,
See well enough, relinquish,
Restore this place, this sun
To us... and the waiting generations.

Depart white man.

Your minions riot among
Our young in Penang Road
Their officers, un-Britannic,
Full of service, look
Angry and short of breath.

You whored on milk and honey
Tried our spirit, spent our muscle,
Extracted from our earth;
Gave yourselves superior ways
At our expense, in our midst.

Depart:
You knew when to come;
Surely know when to go.

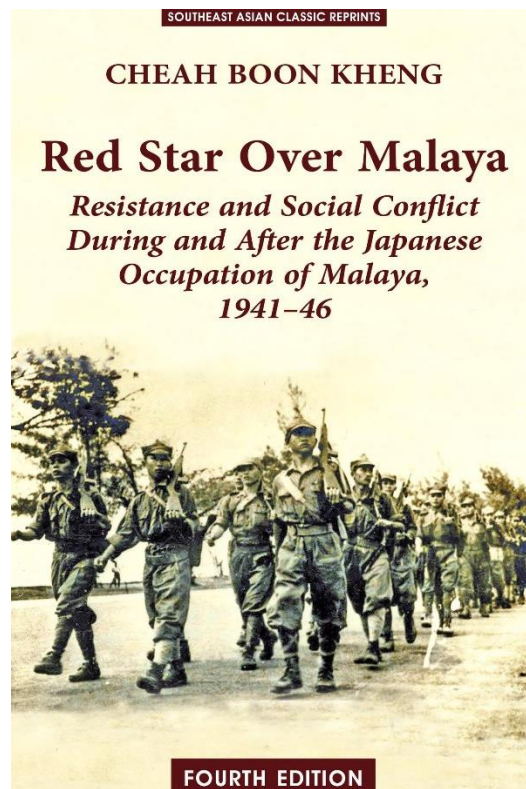
Do not ignore, dismiss,
Pretending we are foolish;
Harbour contempt in eloquence.
We know your language.

My father felt his master's voice,
Obeyed, but hid his grievous, wounded self.

***I have learnt:
There is an Asian tide
That sings such power
Into my dreaming side:
My father's anger turns my cause.***

***Depart Tom, Dick and Harry.
Gently, with ceremony;
We may still be friends,
Even love you... from a distance.***

Poetry speaks in such eloquent ways that architecture can only hint at. This poem says it all in struggle to be true to my self, my people and my place...



No Red Star but the fight to free the Creative spirit continued

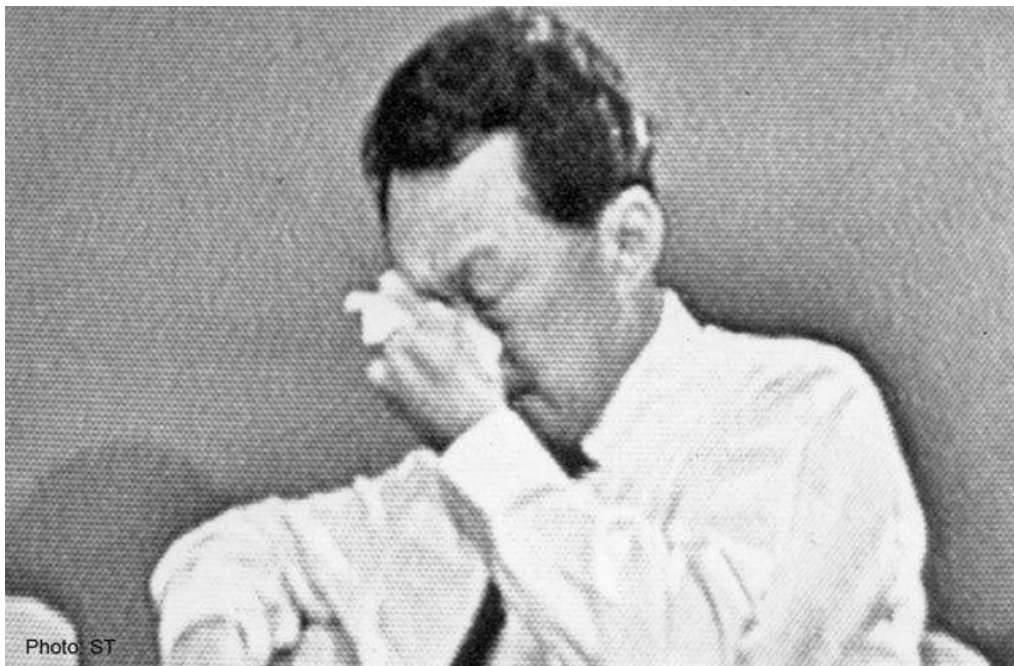
MY ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: TO BUILD A NEW NATION!

Lim Chong Keat had the greatest impact on us students. He is the only Malayan architect though educated in Britain and America retained his attachment to Malayan culture and the natural environment. This attachment he brought to us at the only architecture school at the Singapore Polytechnic in 1959. He imbued in us not only knowledge of modern architecture but also sensitised us to the virtues of kampong houses and kampong crafts. The first batch graduated in 1964 and plunged straight into the Nation Building Era.

Britain granted Malaya independence in 1957, Singapore limited self-government in 1959 and full Independence came in 1965 after departure from Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew cried...

The politics was rife with contestations between the hard left, the middle left and the soft left. The soft left, the PAP won...the dream was to unite with Malaya, that failed and Singapore was left adrift...

WHY DID LEE KUAN YEW CRY?



Why Lee Kuan Yew cried has many reasons we can only guess at. For one he was of the Malayan Generation who saw no separation between the two territories. He knew that without the Malaysian hinterland he would have to serve the Anglo-American order as Singapore would have to be totally dependent on Foreign Direct Investment and thus to be totally servant to their requirements. This is something free-spirited Malaysians like him abhor but the new generations think it is normal.

All Malayan creativity ended after 1965 when Singapore left Malaysia to become a **“Global City”** after losing the Malaysian hinterland. The national agenda

changed dramatically. Singapore had to look West instead of looking East!

As a Malayan I too resented the sense of servitude to the tastes and styles of the Imperialist West. I therefore refused to be a service provider to any foreign consultant. I also stood somewhat clear from the Western Modernist style many mistake as progress; the sheer steel and glass box aesthetic such as these were, to me a copout from real invention:



This

Or this

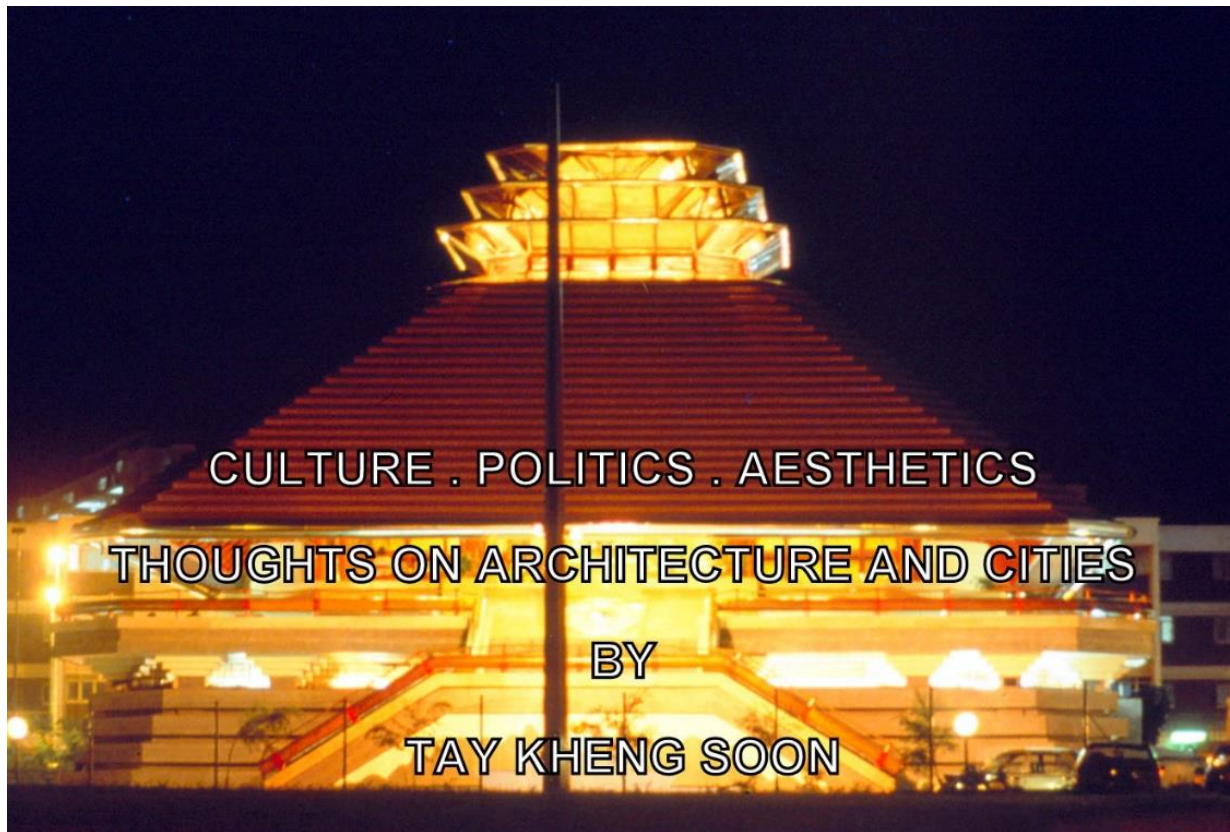


Or this



I strived to invent a new aesthetic true to climate, geography and transformative cultural iconography. I did what the Nanyang Artists did years earlier, be regional and local and discover authentic themes in who and what we are but not copying the past but transforming it into the present.

THIS ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF MY EFFORTS:





House in Saigon



KK Hospital



Dairy Farm Condo



Kwan House



Golden Mile Complex



People's Park Complex



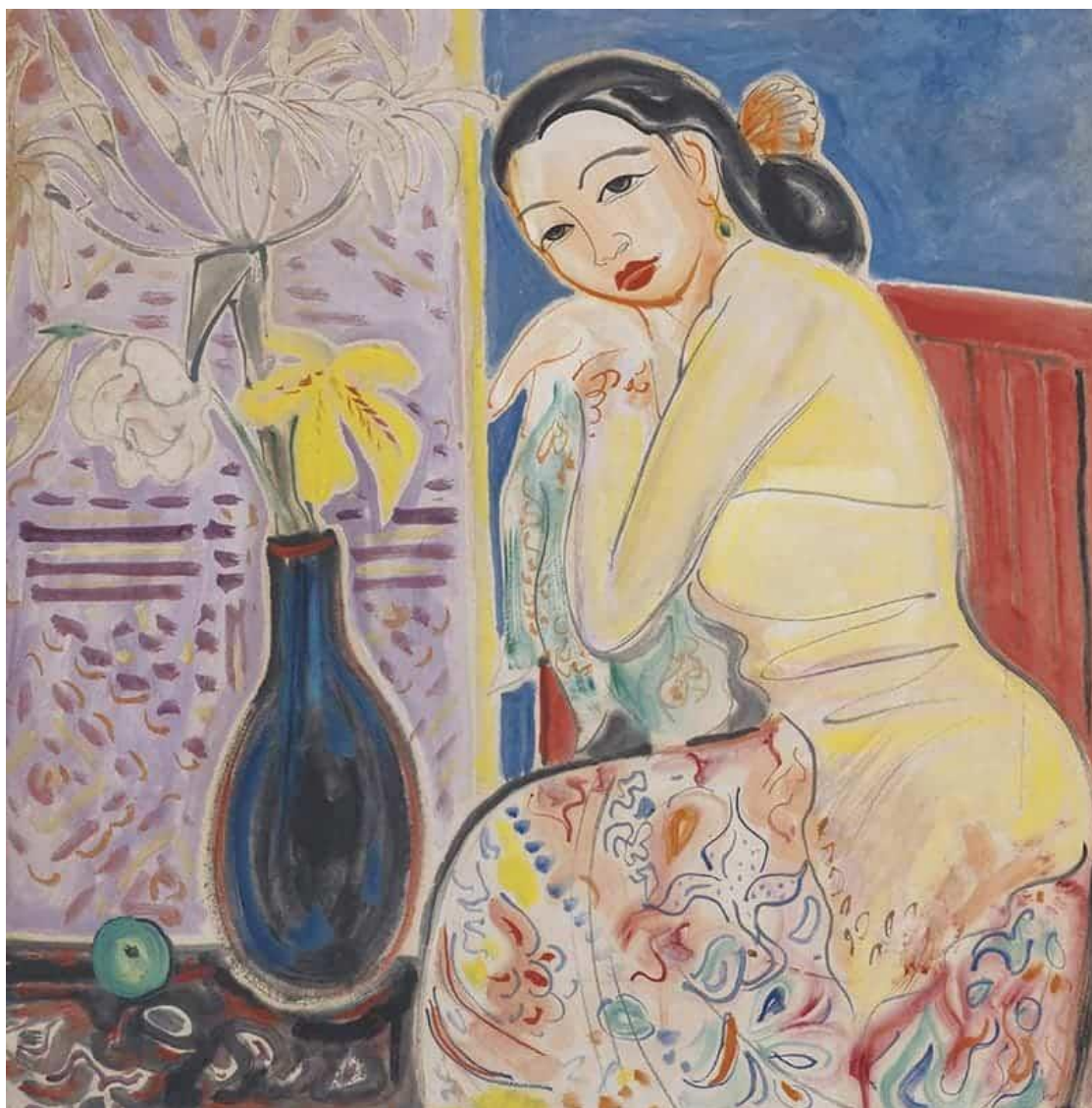
The bamboo pyramid hall in Kampong Temasek in Sungei Ulu Tiram, Johore 2015

**All these are some of my
attempts at an Authentic
Tropical Malayan Aesthetic**

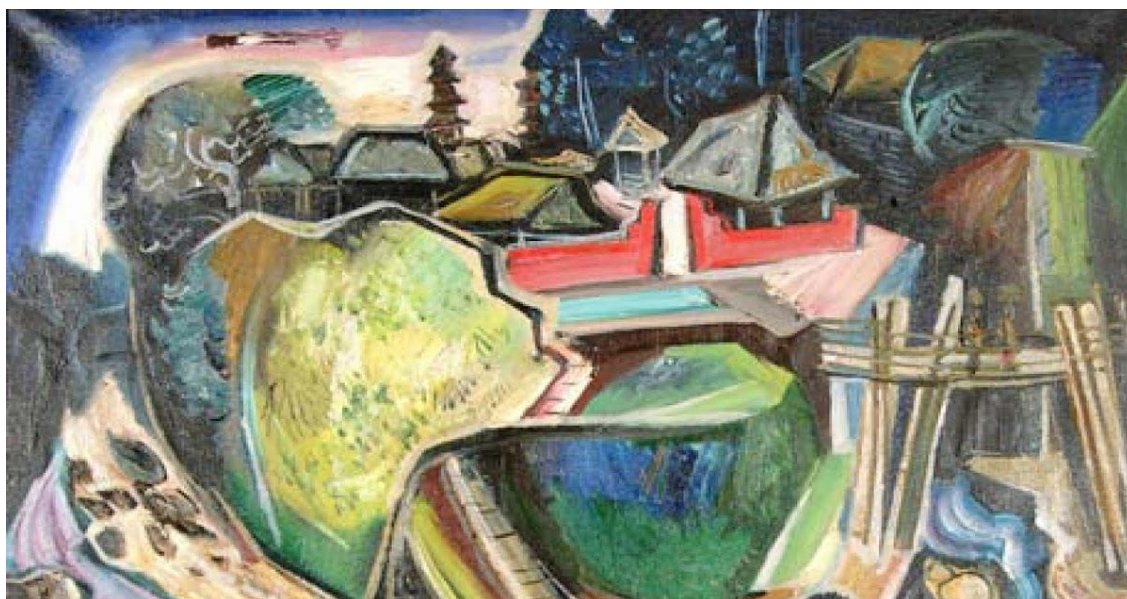
And now, the Nanyang artists of the 50s and 60s

The China Chinese artists who came to Malaya and Singapore in the 1950s strove to integrate their Chinese artistic techniques and sensibilities into the South East Asia Malay world. Artists like Chong Soo Pieng was prominent among these artists:



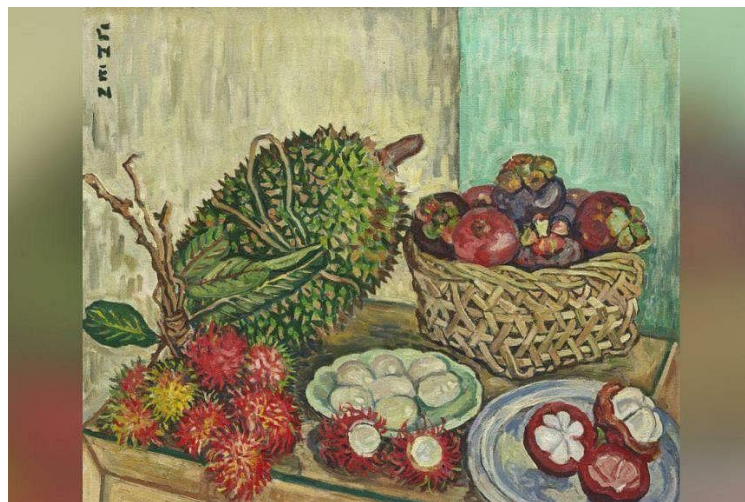


The Nanyang Artists went to Bali in 1952





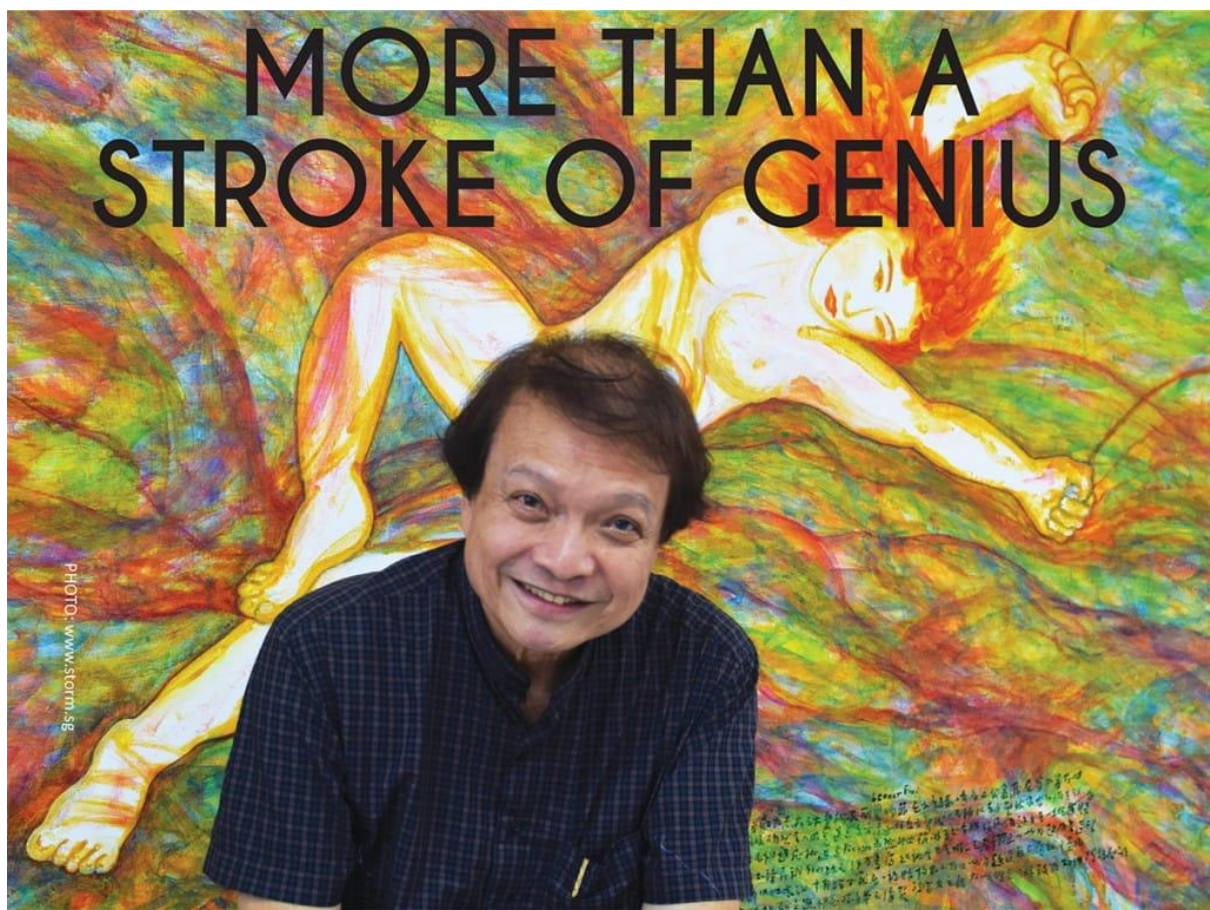
The Nanyang Artists in Bali



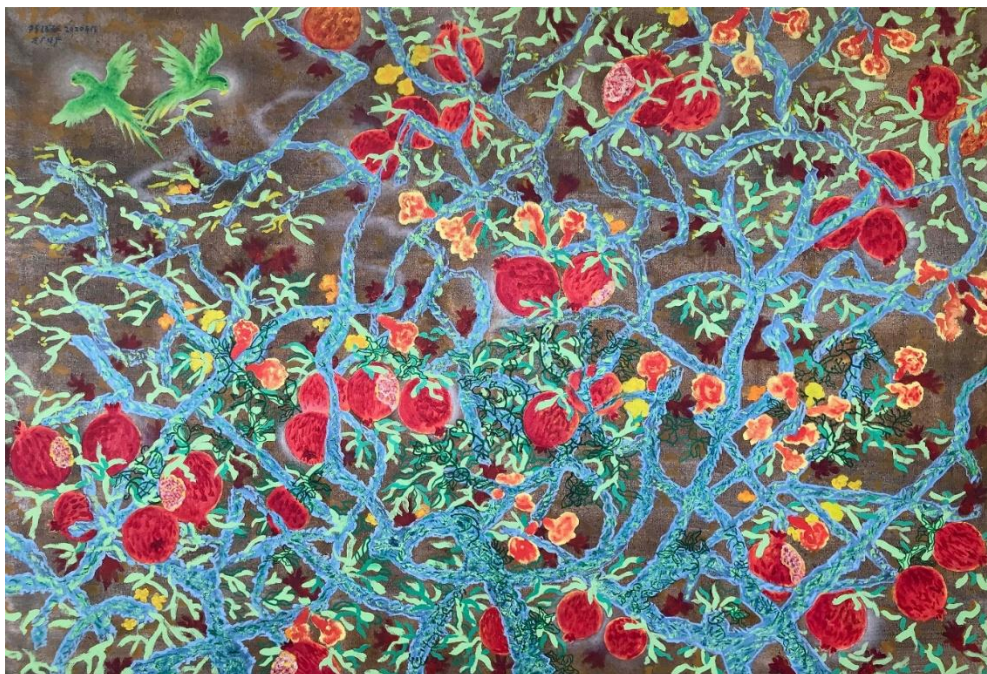
Georgette Chen, prior to being based in Malaya and Singapore from the 1950s onwards, she often travelled between Shanghai, Paris, New York and Tokyo. In 1982, Chen was awarded the Cultural Medallion. Though a modern painter in the western sense, she sought to find art in everyday things in Malaya and Singapore.

THE NEW ARTISTS

Tan Swee Hian was of course knowledgeable of the Modern Art of the West but being Chinese educated he was also fully aware of Chinese art, philosophy and spiritual traditions too. All these are manifested in his work. His experience in Nanyang University probably heightened his rebellious socio-political spirit and may have found its way into his art..



Swee Hian received the Singapore Cultural Medallion in 1987. He is a later-day free spirited Malayan of a different sort

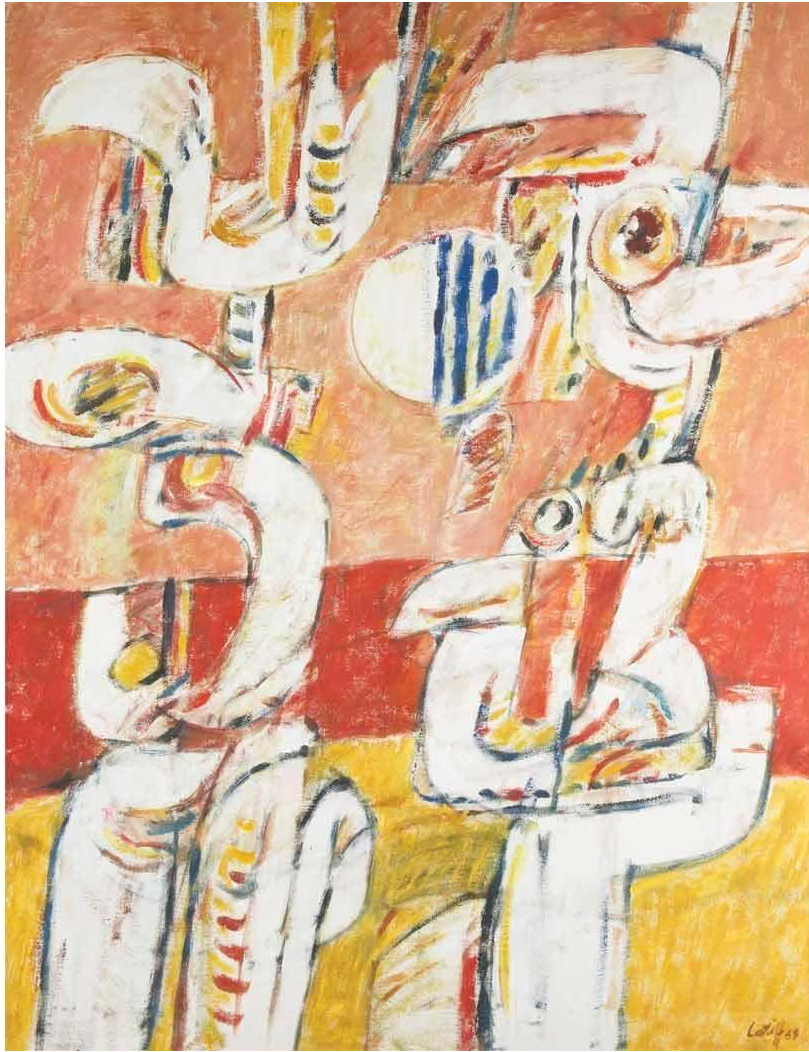


One of Tan Swee Hian's semi-abstract paintings



The truly indigenous Malaya-Singapore artist is Latiff Mohiddin. I have one of his Pago Pago paintings..





A series of Latiff Mohidin's paintings called Pago Pago were iconic done between 1964 and 1968.

Latiff's passion for painting and drawing was evident from an early age. At 11, he sold his first painting to the then British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Sir Malcolm MacDonald. He later came to be identified as "the magical boy with the gift in his hands" after his first exhibition at the Kota Raja Malay School in Singapore, a school that he attended before he was sent to Berlin to 'further' his artistic education in 1961.



Artist Khoo Swee Hoe is remarkably inventive



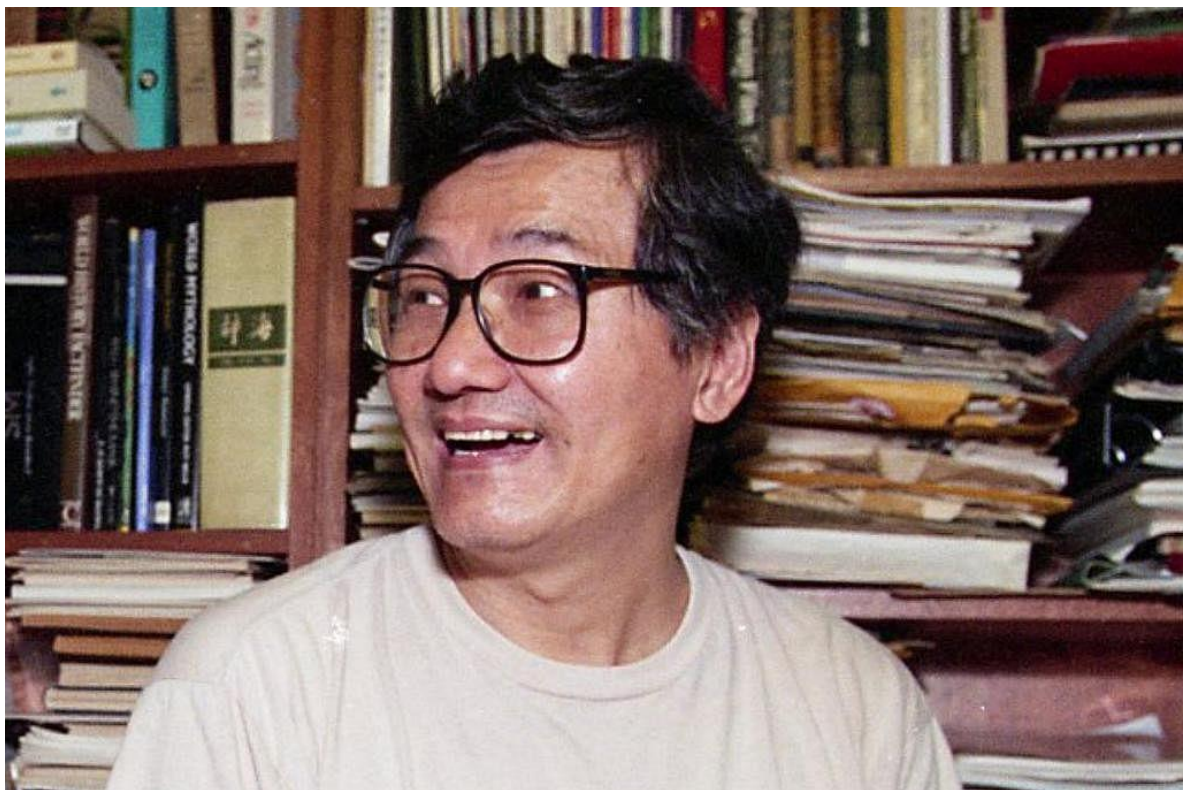
Children of the Sun expresses his race of people frolicking in blissful abandon..



As a Malayan based in Alfa Gallery in Singapore, Khoo Swee Hoe may have become tired of Malaysia's ethnic politics. That may be why he invented an abstract floating race of people he called KUKU in his imagined skyscape

A NEW GENERATION OF DIFFERENT ARTS PRACTITIONERS WERE INSPIRED BY THE MALAYAN SPIRIT OF KUO PAO KUN AT THE SUBSTATION, THE HOME OF THE ARTS HE CREATED.

In 1976, Kuo and his wife were arrested and detained without trial. Although the wife was subsequently released a few months later, Kuo was stripped of his citizenship and suffered more than four years of imprisonment while his wife looked after their two young daughters and ran their school alone. Upon release, Pao Kun plunged into the Arts.



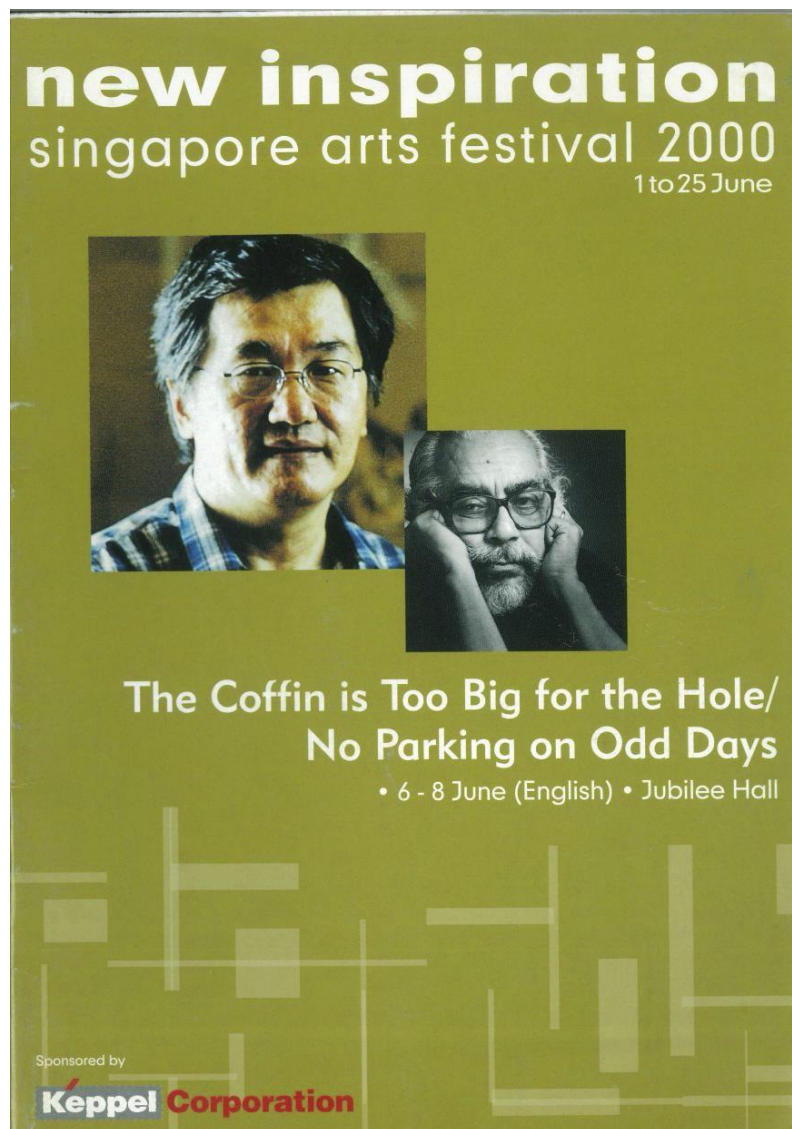
PLAYWRIGHT KUO PAO KUN



THE SUBSTATION AT ARMENIAN STREET



This play was a major breakthrough being the first multilingual inter-generational play addressing the disconnect created by the government's language policy which despite the multi-ethnic nature of Singapore it portrayed interpersonal relations with humour.



What is it about? A man recalls the bizarre happenings at his grandfather's funeral in this Kafkaesque play. The cortege arrives at the burial site only to realise that the coffin is too big for the hole. As he tangles with the authorities over what to do with the coffin, what ensues in this brief monodrama is a powerful allegory for Singapore's restrictive bureaucracy, its growing homogeneity and what it means to be of a "standard size".

THE FREE SPIRITED MALAYAN LIVES ON IN THIS YOUNG SINGAPORE POET AND PLAYWRIGHT ALFIAN SA'AT.



One Fierce Hour is Alfian Sa'at's first and breakout work. It was hailed as 'truly a landmark' for Singaporean poetry when it was published in 1998 when he was just 21 years old.

Singapore You Are Not My Country **by Alfian Sa'at**

Singapore you are not my country.
Singapore you are not a country at all.
You are surprising Singapore, statistics-starved
Singapore, soulful Singapore of tourist brochures
in Japanese and hourglass kebayas.
You protest, but without picketing, without rioting,
without Catherine Lim,
but through your loudspeaker media,
through the hypnotic eyeballs of your newscasters,
and that weather woman who I swear is working
voodoo on my teevee screen.

Singapore, what are these lawsuits in my mailbox?
There are so many sheaves,
I should have tipped the postman.
Singapore, I assert, you are not a country at all.
Do not raise your voice against me,
I am not afraid of your anthem although the lyrics
are still bleeding from the bark of my sapless
heart.
Not because I sang them pigtailed pinnafores
breakfasted chalkshoed in school
But because I used to watch telly till they ran out
of shows.
Do not invite me to the podium and tell me to
address you properly.

I am allergic to microphones and men in egosuits
and pubicwigs.

And I am not a political martyr,
I am a patriot who has lost his country and
virginity.

Do not wave a cane at me for vandalising your
propaganda with technicolour harangues,
Red Nadim semen white Mahsuri menses the
colourful language of my eloquent generation.
Your words are like walls on which truth is graffiti.
This has become an island of walls.

Asylum walls, factory walls, school walls, the walls
of the midnight Istana.

If I am paranoid I have learnt it from you,
O my delicate orchid stalk Singapore,
Always thirsty for water,
spooked by armed archipelagoes,
always gasping for airspace,
always running to keep ahead,
running away from yourself.

Singapore why do you wail that way, demanding
my IC?

Singapore stop yelling and calling me names.
How dare you call me a chauvinist,
an opposition party,
a liar,
a traitor,
a mendicant professor,

a Marxist homosexual communist
pornography banned literature chewing gum
liberty smuggler? How can you say I do not
believe in The Free Press autopsies flogging
mudslinging bankruptcy
which are the five pillars of Justice?
And how can you call yourself a country,
you terrible hallucination of highways and cranes
and condominiums ten minutes drive from the
MRT?

Advertisement

Tell that to the battered housewife who thinks
happiness lies at the end of a Toto Queue.
Tell that to the tourist guide whose fillings are
pewter whose feelings are iron
whose courtesy is gold whose speech is silver



**YES, TELL THAT TO THE URBAN PLANNERS WHO ARE
TRYING HARD NOT TO BE OURSELVES BUT TO BE A
NEW YORK OF THE EAST BUT WE DO HAVE A SOUL TO
LOSE...**

