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**3 D E C A D E S O F W O R K**

**Private**  
**MUSEUM**

SINGAPORE

**D A N C I N G**

**W I T H T H E**

**C O S M O S**

**K U M A R I**

**N A H A P P A N**

**3 D E C A D E S O F W O R K**

**CURATED BY JOHN Z. W. TUNG**

*Dancing with the Cosmos: Three Decades  
of Work from Kumari Nahappan*  
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# P R E F A C E

BY AARON TEO

*Dancing with the Cosmos: Three Decades of Work From Kumari Nahappan* is a significant exhibition that marks a milestone in the history of The Private Museum Singapore. As we proudly unveil our new home at 11 Upper Wilkie Road, we are delighted to present this inaugural exhibition, which encapsulates the essence of artistic evolution and enduring partnerships.

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Founded in 2010 by the dynamic father-daughter duo, Mr Daniel Teo and Ms Rachel Teo, The Private Museum has stood as a beacon of artistic expression, fostering art appreciation and embracing the power of the arts, culture, and heritage. Precisely two years ago, in 2021, we bid farewell to our former home at 51 Waterloo. Having spent a fruitful 11 years there, we embarked on a journey to discover a new space capable of ushering us into a new chapter, while captivating an expanding audience and beyond. After a journey of many trials and successes, our new abode, a historical building with over a century of stories woven into its walls opens its doors to embrace and showcase the significant artworks of Kumari Nahappan on 31 August 2023.

The idea for this special collaboration was conceived in 2020, driven by my deep admiration for Kumari

Nahappan's extensive art practice, which spans an impressive three decades. Amidst her captivating works that have found admiration worldwide and the numerous public commissions of her sculptural creations rooted in the soils of Singapore, I found the enduring connection with our museum's founding chairman, Mr Daniel Teo, particularly special. The history and endearing friendship between them cemented the making of this exhibition.

In the 1990s, Mr Daniel Teo and his partner, Mr Björn Wetterling, embarked on a business venture that led to the establishment of the Wetterling Teo Gallery, a pioneering art space nestled within the charming confines of a quaint shophouse at 3 Kim Yam Road, Singapore. It was at Kumari's Masters Programmes' presentation in 1995, that Mr Teo and Mr Wetterling were introduced to her significant work—a large-scale installation titled *360 Vessels from the Temple*. This monumental creation was an avant-garde marvel, bold and unconventional in the pioneering years of the Singapore art scene, as installations were rare manifestations those days. Both of them were deeply impressed by the artistic ingenuity and bravery shown by the then-budding and vibrant artist. This encounter marked the inception of their journey together, which blossomed into a lifelong bond nurturing a collaborative spirit that would endure through the years.

Since those formative years, Wetterling Teo Gallery, along with Wetterling galleries in Europe, presented more than 20 solo and group exhibitions with Kumari across Singapore, Europe, and the United States, etching her indomitable presence into both the local and international art landscapes. In the exhibition, you will find this remarkable installation reimaged and renewed as a sculptural piece, aptly titled *Reincarnations* consisting of two towering pillars, adorned with over 720 vessels—like

the lasting bond between Mr Teo and Kumari, the artistic journey of the work has truly come full circle and multiplied twofold!

As we introduce *Dancing with the Cosmos*, an homage to Kumari's profound artistic journey, we want to express our sincere gratitude to all those who have played a pivotal role in materialising this project. Our curator, John Tung, has been indispensable in shaping this exhibition, breathing life into Kumari's body of work. Without the harmonious dance between the artist and the curator, this exhibition would not have been possible. We also wish to acknowledge our valued partners, sponsors, and friends including the National Arts Council, Helutrans Art Move, AVS printing, the hardworking exhibition team, as well as Currency for putting together the design of this publication. Finally, our immense gratitude extends to our most treasured art historian in Singapore, Mr T.K. Sabapathy, for generously sharing his wisdom and invaluable insights in his foreword.

The exhibition is not merely a major survey of her practice; it is a celebration of an artist who has intricately danced with the cosmos, embraced the constellations of creativity, and revisited her origins in art and life. Kumari Nahappan's journey is a profound testament to the power of art to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, reminding us the importance of the work that artists do.

AARON TEO

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR  
THE PRIVATE MUSEUM SINGAPORE



# FOREWORD

BY T.K. SABAPATHY

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Kumari Nahappan is exhibiting at The Private Museum, inaugurating it in its new premises at 11 Upper Wilkie Road. The show reconnects the artist with Daniel Teo, the founding chairperson of this facility, re-enlivening a professional relationship forged in the 1990s and which shaped their lives in the worlds of art. A little more on this later.

Titled *Dancing with the Cosmos*, it is the first extensive, monographic exposition of Kumari Nahappan's work and practice. It spans three decades from the 1990s to date. On display are paintings and three-dimensional productions – some conceived as sculptures and others (re-) presented as installations. The latter consists of edited re-configurations of presentations created for particular exhibition spaces and durations. They are now installed, positions in new premises that are vastly different from their respective, initial sites. Not surprisingly their material constitutions, arrangements, and appearances are effectively altered into assuming identities as new works enlisting new receptions; works that bear faint kinships to their original birthings. Their display resonates with prevailing spatial design of the building and with atmospheric perceptions from within and without the building as a habitat. In these respects, the exhibition as a display

T.K. SABAPATHY

is vividly yet discreetly choreographed by the curator and his colleagues, whose aims/intentions are described in the briefs accompanying the exhibition.

The scope is historical, yet the showing of the works is not overly weighted by historicalness. The declared intention is to enliven the unfolding of this artist's practice fluidly, gliding into discerning connections and pausing to mark differences. Links between clusters of works produced at particular moments and gaps differentiating productions prompted by new conceptions, are intimated, suggested... in the manner of unravelling movements in dance.

The presiding curatorial impetus is in beholding colour. On one hand, colour apprehended materially and sensually. And in other respects, colour absorbed subliminally and transcendently. To dance with the cosmos is to unhesitatingly yield to such prospects.

I return to the note inserted at the beginning, i.e. connections between Kumari Nahappan and Daniel Teo. In 1994 a joint venture was entered by Wetterling Gallery in Sweden and Daniel Teo in Singapore, to establish an art gallery for displaying contemporary art globally. Wetterling Teo Gallery was sighted at 3 Kim Yam Road. Kumari Nahappan commenced her art practice professionally with this gallery, presenting her works in one-person expositions in Singapore and internationally. The present exposition marks a kind of homecoming for Kumari Nahappan and Daniel Teo.

T.K. SABAPATHY

30 AUGUST 2023

“My aim was to communicate the notion of time in a form of arrangement and to represent universal Eastern and Western perspectives. To do this I had to create my own ‘cosmos’ and then the story unfolded itself.”

— KUMARI NAHAPPAN,  
IN CONVERSATION WITH  
T.K. SABAPATHY, 2011



# SPECULATIONS ON THE PRIMACY OF COLOUR

BY JOHN Z. W. TUNG

“Colours, textures, planes and things are not fixed and finite; their relationships to one another in space and time are continually altering and transforming.”

— T.K. SABAPATHY, *FLUXION*, 2013.

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It is clear that Kumari Nahappan is a prolific and accomplished artist. In addition to numerous international exhibitions, significant awards and recognitions, she is well known for her large-scale public sculptures and her interdisciplinary practice that spans sculpture, installation and painting. Over the past three decades, her works’ association with natural subjects reflect her deep connection to the environment, as well as her cultural roots.

Her creative journey has been marked by a blend of inspirations, including her traditional Hindu upbringing, her training in interior design, and her explorations of colour and symbolism. Her metaphorical use of natural elements like saga seeds, chilli peppers, and more, in her work showcases her deep understanding of their potential energies and significance—making challenging concepts such as time, space, and ritual accessible to an expansive audience demographic.



In *Dancing with the Cosmos*, a chronological account—as is often customary with such surveys of an artist’s career—has been sidestepped in place of an organisational system that prioritises colour. Such a decision was predicated on three motivations. Firstly, as articulated in the curatorial statement: the desire to highlight the non-linear progression of artistic development and continuities; or quite simply, the recurrence of themes and motifs across her practice. Secondly, to give emphasis to the sensorial qualities (imparted by colour) and duly recognise its predominance within her practice. And finally, to chart an alternative approach to studying her oeuvre from T.K. Sabapathy’s comprehensive discussion of the first two decades of her practice in *Fluxion* (2013).

On this final point, it had occurred to me early in the development of the exhibition that a chronological approach would have been, at best, supplementary to the historian’s material. At worst, an awkward plagiarism rendered in an exhibitionary format.

The desire to make apparent the non-linear progression of artistic development and continuities speaks to the intricate and multifaceted nature of creative expression. This concept underscores the fact that an artist’s evolution is not always a straightforward trajectory, but rather a complex web of influences, experiences, and ideas that intersect and shape their work over time.

It is clear through the exhibition that Nahappan’s development as an artist has not been solely about a gradual advancement from one style to another; it’s also about revisiting, reinterpreting, and building upon earlier themes. These phases have been driven by personal growth, changing external influences, and her own desire to explore different aspects of creativity. That being said, Nahappan’s deep connection with nature has been

“Nahappan’s development as an artist has not been solely about a gradual advancement from one style to another: it’s also about revisiting, reinterpreting, and building upon earlier themes.”

a mainstay in her works, and her practice is marked by the translation, visualisation, and aestheticisation of the natural forces she encounters, more than a simplistic re-presentation.

Within the first decade of her practice, three bodies of work evidence these traits that would be cemented within her practice. While her garden at her residence on Astrid Hill served as the muse for her series of botanical paintings that propelled her into the limelight, they sought to capture the energy and essence of the garden rather than the garden itself. Her Typhoon series of paintings, inspired by a distressing episode in Hong Kong—as a typhoon unfolded during her children’s flight departure—encapsulated the tumultuous conflict between the inner and outer storm. Moving into the realm of installation works, the emphasis on these energies remained apparent across works such as *360 Vessels from the Temple, Monument*, amongst others. In all of these examples, the aesthetic experience is marked by the visualisations of the otherwise unobservable and conceived to engage a diverse demographic (which is the case with Singapore’s cultural composition).

Over the following two decades, Nahappan’s practice incorporated an even broader array of materials—for instance, disused CD-ROMS, as in the case of *Auld Lang Syne*. This expansion into unconventional mediums not only showcases Nahappan’s artistic versatility but also underscores her commitment to exploring the intersection of technology, nostalgia, and contemporary art. The repurposing of the discarded CD-ROMs in *Auld Lang Syne* not only breathes new life into forgotten technology but also serves as a commentary on the fleeting nature of progress and the potential for beauty in the overlooked remnants of our digital past. The copper pots, originally employed in the installation of *360 Vessels from the*

“Nahappan is committed to exploring the intersection of technology, nostalgia, and contemporary art.”

“Nahappan’s engagement with colour goes beyond the visual, delving into the emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions that colours embody.”

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*Temple*, would also be renewed as a new sculptural piece titled *Reincarnations*—an allusion to its previous incarnations.

With these diverse materials being utilised, it goes without saying that Nahappan’s employment of colour is a dynamic and vibrant reflection of her themes as well. Her engagement with colour goes beyond the visual, delving into the emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions that colours embody. Drawing from her own heritage and the symbolism ingrained in colour within her culture, Nahappan weaves a tapestry of hues that resonate with profound meaning. These colours evoke not only the physical sensations but also the cultural and ritualistic contexts they represent.

It is worthwhile noting that the artist’s employment of colour by-and-large takes the Navagraha—the nine principal celestial deities in Hindu cosmology, each corresponding to a significant celestial body and associated with specific colours—as a setting off point.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, she does not remain bound to them persistently, as I shall elaborate below.

It is inevitable for colour to be understood differently across diverse cultural contexts arising from a multitude of factors. Symbolism and meaning attached to colours vary widely, with cultures attributing unique significance

<sup>1</sup> Surya, symbolizing the Sun, is associated with the colour red and represents one’s essence and vitality. Chandra, connected to the Moon and ascribed the colour white or pearl, is emblematic of emotions and mental faculties. Mangala, linked with Mars and characterized by the colours red or pink, stands for assertiveness and vigour. Budha, representing Mercury and associated with the colour green, signifies communication and intellect. Guru, or Jupiter, bearing a yellow or golden hue, symbolizes spiritual wisdom and expansion. Shukra, aligned with Venus and depicted in bright white or silver, governs artistic realms and affections. Shani, indicative of Saturn and assigned colours black or dark blue, represents life’s challenges and responsibilities. The ascending lunar node, Rahu, coloured smoky or dark, is symbolic of material desires and confusion, while the descending lunar node, Ketu, often multi-coloured, epitomizes detachment and spiritual inclination.

to each hue. Religious beliefs also play a role, as certain colours hold sacred or ceremonial connotations. Historical and traditional influences further shape colour perceptions, linking specific hues to periods, events, or even social classes. In this regard, with respect to an internationally exhibited artist, to what extent is a colour construed to mean the same thing across different spaces? To what degree do they elicit the same effect?

Fortunately, the musings of Rabindranath Tagore, the eminent Bengali polymath, provide us with encouragement by providing a valuable starting point for a belief in the universality of colours. Despite numerous and significant divergences from the two millennia of Western thought pertaining to colours preceding him, his perspectives still resonate deeply with the philosophical viewpoints of Plato, Aristotle, and Goethe.

I put it succinctly as so:

Plato championed the idea of an ideal realm, housing perfect Forms, far removed from their flawed counterparts in our tangible world. Tagore’s perceptions of colours, not just as sensory experiences but imbued with deeper, intangible essences, seem reminiscent of these Platonic ideals. Aristotle, meanwhile, approached colour more empirically, emphasising its existence through the interplay of light and darkness. While Tagore did appreciate the tangible attributes of colour—I highlight the *Gitanjali* in this instance—he went a step further by attaching emotional and spiritual weight to them, something Aristotle’s more observational standpoint had not delved into.

Amidst these colour philosophies, Goethe’s stands out as a harmonious blend of empirical observation

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and emotional introspection. He recognised colours as products of light and darkness interactions but also attributed specific emotional connotations to different shades. This duality in Goethe's theory was a forerunner to Tagore's belief that colours aren't merely observed; they're profoundly felt, acting as conduits for deeper emotional and spiritual insights. When viewed against the backdrop of these thinkers, Tagore's philosophy emerges as a seamless amalgamation of Platonic metaphysics, Aristotelian empiricism, and Goethean emotional resonance, exemplifying his talent for unifying the spiritual with the observational.

In an increasingly globalised world where cultures have become increasingly enmeshed with each other, a perceived universality of a colour's significance could be just as easily interpreted as the fallout from a cultural hegemony as dominant cultural narratives and media representations spread across borders. Yet, the argument that globalisation has been occurring since the dawn of time also holds merit when considering the historical interactions, exchanges, and interconnectedness between societies.

I recall my first conversation with Nahappan in November of 2021, where we had discussed how the ancient Greeks lacked a specific word for the colour "blue". The oft-cited example supporting this phenomenon draws heavily on Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, where the sea is often likened to the darkness present in the colour of wine.

Yet on the other bank of the Mediterranean, the ancient Egyptians did have a term and conceptual understanding for the colour blue, even distinguishing between its varied shades, and employing varied minerals bearing its

hues in the creation of vibrant artworks, including paintings, pottery, and decorations on various artefacts. The lapis that adorned Tutankhamun's funerary mask would later be employed as the iconic blue pigment of Western divinity, being used extensively in the biblical paintings from Botticelli to Ruben.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, the influential 20th-century philosopher, probed this intricate relationship between language and perception—highlighting the conspicuous absence of names for a myriad of colour combinations from everyday parlance. Rather than viewing colour concepts as mere descriptors of the external world, he posited them as constructs deeply entrenched in our linguistic practices and cultural milieu. His philosophy encapsulated the notion that our language's limits delineate our world's boundaries—a perspective that not only underscores the significance of linguistic structures in shaping discourse but also highlights the relational and contextual essence of our colour perceptions.

While the lack of a specific term for a colour in a language does not necessarily mean that people speaking that language were unable to perceive or distinguish that colour, it potentially reflects the differences in how colours were categorised and described within that culture. In classical Chinese, both blue and green were often referred to by the same term, "青" (qīng). This linguistic overlap exemplifies the "grue" phenomenon, wherein certain languages use a single term to describe both green and blue, indicating an absence of strict delineation between the two colours. Ancient Japanese, for instance, also employed a shared term, "青" (ao). As cultures and languages evolved, distinct terms for these colours emerged. This linguistic feature aligns with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that suggests our perception of the world can be subtly influenced by language.

Regardless, across the 2900-year span between “King Tut” and Ruben, the employment of lapis lazuli has been consistently marked by its scarcity and associated high prices—even in the present day. This scarcity adds yet another intriguing layer to the exploration of colour symbolism, as the availability and cost of certain pigments have historically influenced their usage in art. The rarity of blue pigments throughout history, especially the prized lapis lazuli used in the Egyptian and Renaissance artworks, underscores the profound value assigned to this colour: the use of blue carried both aesthetic and symbolic significance, often signifying divine or spiritual realms due to its exclusivity.

While not working with lapis per se, Nahappan’s employment of blue is fully cognizant of such parallels. A devout Hindu, the colour holds multifaceted symbolic significance, embodying various spiritual, cosmic, and emotional connotations. One of the most prominent associations of blue in Hinduism is with the divine realm, the blue skin of Krishna, Vishnu and other deities signifying their divine natures. Yet beyond these divine associations, blue in Hinduism is also connected to various emotions and states of being, symbolising tranquillity, depth, and the vastness of the cosmic ocean.

This vastness, often encapsulated in the term “ananta”, denotes endlessness and mirrors the infinite depths of the cosmos and the boundless expanse of the soul. Nahappan’s utilisation of blue, thus, is not just a visual stimulant but also an emotional and philosophical conduit. It directs the viewer’s attention to these grander narratives of existence and spirituality, of which Nahappan is both a student and a narrator. Therefore, despite drawing on her personal heritage and spiritual beliefs, Nahappan’s use of colour operates as a universal language – although it is important to note that

the universality of such a language doesn’t stem from a shared understanding of each hue, but rather from the emotional and sensory reactions that colours evoke instead.

The same is relevant in apprehending Nahappan’s paintings that serve as visual meditations on profound concepts such as time, cosmic energy, and ritual. These canvases are a fusion of colours and forms that challenge easy interpretation, leading viewers on a journey to explore the layers of meaning embedded within them. In order to meet these universal ends more effectively, her strategic colour choices are complemented by appropriate techniques—expressive brushstrokes suggesting depth, texture, and movement; harmonious compositions—in the case of her paintings, and material choices and their configurations in the case of her installations. In this respect, whether or not a viewer comprehends the exact cultural or historical significance behind each shade, they can still connect with the emotions that the colour spectrum represents.

In her installations, sculptures, and paintings, colour is both an anchor and a flight. It grounds her pieces in their cultural and historical roots, yet also allows them to transcend these boundaries and communicate on a broader, more universal plane. For even if colour perception blends elements of biology, cultural nuances, and individual experiences, numerous responses to colours appear consistent across humanity, rooted in evolutionary adaptations and collective experiences. Furthermore, the notion of colour as a potent medium of nonverbal communication resonates profoundly within these contextual associations. The capacity of colours to convey nuanced emotions and abstract concepts transcends linguistic barriers and cultural distinctions, thereby fostering a universal understanding.

“In order to meet these universal ends more effectively, her strategic colour choices are complemented by appropriate techniques.”

“In her installations, sculptures, and paintings, colour is both an anchor and a flight. It grounds her pieces in their cultural and historical roots, yet also allows them to transcend these boundaries and communicate on a broader, more universal plane.”

This intrinsic universality of colour's communicative potential is apparently manifest in the artistic oeuvre of Nahappan, where her adept utilisation of the colour red assumes a paramount role. Red, across many cultures and contexts, has consistently been associated with strong emotions and vital life forces. Its vibrancy is often linked to the pulse of life, love, but also often danger and warning. The colour red has been observed to elicit specific physical reactions in individuals—leading to increased heart rates, raising blood pressure, and evoking heightened alertness. Such reactions might be rooted in our evolutionary history, where red often signified important cues in the environment, from ripe fruits to potential threats.

With respect to *Anahata*, a titanic site-specific work originally commissioned for the Singapore Biennale 2013 and comprising over 4 tonnes of saga seeds in that incarnation, the artist's deployment of the colour amplifies the theme of latent power and potential inherent in the seeds. The saga seeds, with their vivid hue, become emblematic of the life-force they contain, underscoring the potency and energy of these seeds, waiting for the right moment to unleash their full potential. Furthermore, the heart chakra, or Anahata, in Hindu beliefs is symbolically represented by the colour green. Yet, Nahappan's decision to represent it with red seeds offers an intriguing juxtaposition, inviting viewers to connect with the installation not just spiritually but also viscerally, tapping into innate physical responses that the colour tends to induce. On a broader level, the use of red reinforces the universality of the installation; while the title and the concept may be deeply rooted in Hindu cosmology, the colour inevitably transcends specific cultural or religious contexts.

“Nahappan's decision to represent the heart chakra with red seeds offers an intriguing juxtaposition, inviting viewers to connect with the installation not just spiritually but also viscerally, tapping into innate physical responses that the colour tends to induce.”

Colour, in its radiant spectrum, is more than just a physiological response to light; it serves as a window into the intricate fabric of human experience and the cosmos. Its influence extends beyond the visual, reaching into the realms of emotion, culture, and philosophy. Kumari Nahappan's artistic voyage into the depths of colour offers an entrée into its multifaceted world. While her works mirror her personal and cultural ethos, they also resonate on a universal scale. However, to understand colour's primacy solely through its aesthetic and symbolic capacities is to only skim its profound depths.

Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle laid the foundations for understanding colour, with thinkers like Goethe later weaving it intricately with human emotions and consciousness. But it is Rabindranath Tagore's musings that add a spiritual and cosmic dimension to this tapestry. Nahappan mirrors Tagore's beliefs that the universe is a harmonious interplay of opposites, and art, including the use and perception of colour, is an expression of humanity's communion with this universe. For Tagore, colour, like music or poetry, is a means to transcend the mundane and connect with the divine. It's a medium through which we experience a oneness with the world. Considering Nahappan's art through the lens of these thinkers elevates it from being just visual narratives to cultural, historical, and spiritual explorations.

Wittgenstein highlighted the relationship between language, culture, and perception, implying that our understanding and appreciation of colours might be both constrained and enriched by our linguistic and cultural lenses. In the age of globalisation, these lenses have only multiplied, adding layers of complexity and depth to our perception of colours. Nahappan's artistry, deeply entrenched in her personal lexicon of colour, offers a rich tapestry for viewers from varying backgrounds. Each

“Nahappan’s art challenges us to see beyond the obvious, to seek connections, and to revel in the harmonious dance of the universe.”

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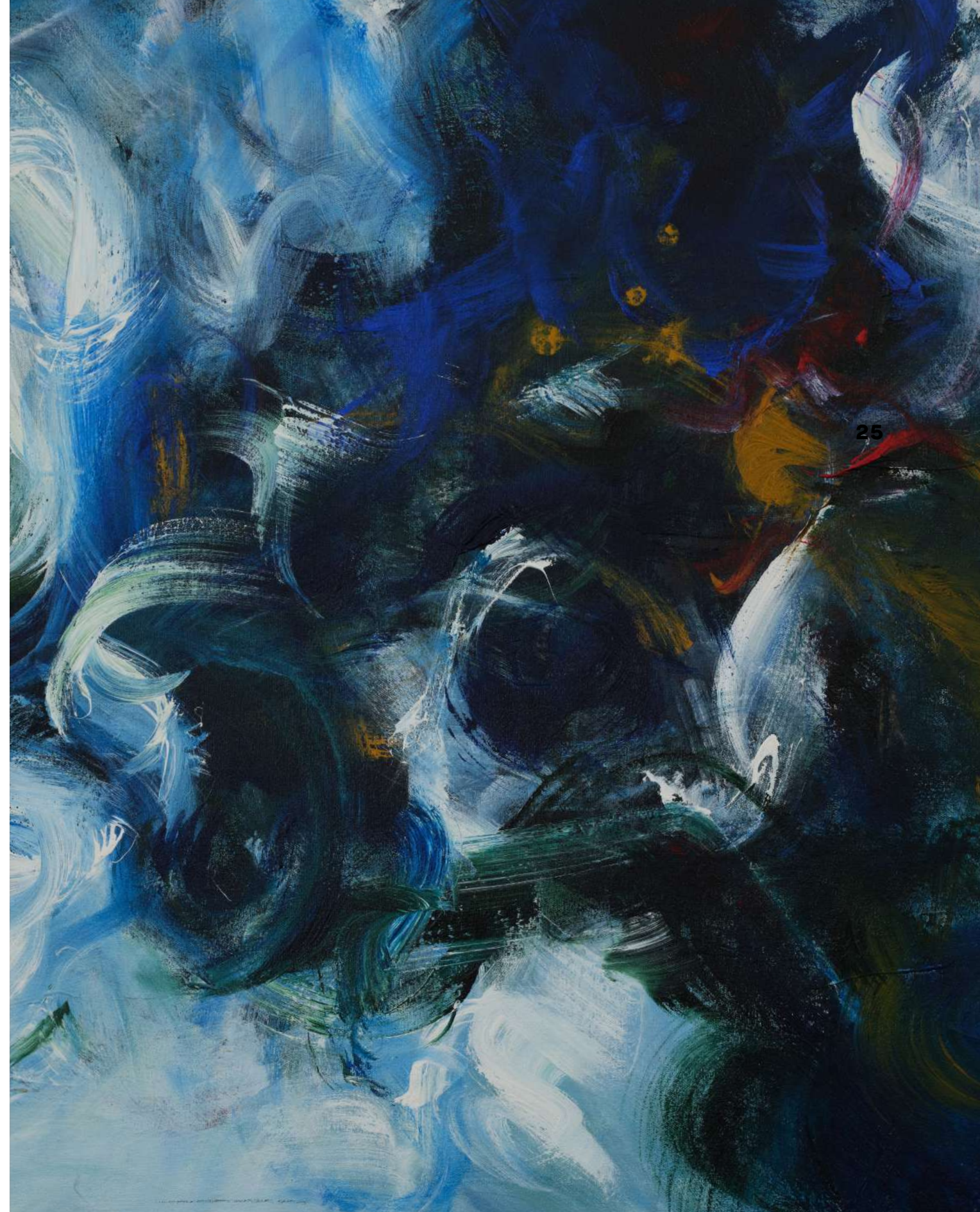
JOHN Z. W. TUNG

piece becomes a confluence of personal, cultural, and universal interpretations, blending together in harmony, much like Tagore’s envisioned unity of the universe.

At the close of this essay, I return to the quote from Sabapathy that we commenced with. Ruminating on the relationships between “colours, textures, and planes”, it seems inevitable that their “relationships to one another in space and time are continually altering and transforming”. After all, our existence is inevitably defined—at least in part—by us blasting through the cosmos at 2 million kilometres an hour. Kumari Nahappan’s art challenges us to see beyond the obvious, to seek connections, and to revel in the harmonious dance of the universe, but also embark on a transcendental voyage into the shared meanings of human existence.

JOHN Z. W. TUNG

INDEPENDENT CURATOR AND EXHIBITION MAKER



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**SELECTED  
ARTWORKS &  
INSTALLATION  
VIEWS**





# PORTE COCHERE

SELECTED ARTWORKS & INSTALLATION VIEWS



**REINCARNATIONS (360 VESSELS FROM THE TEMPLE) (1995/2022)**  
COPPER VESSELS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

ARTIST COLLECTION

D A N C I N G W I T H T H E C O S M O S

T H R E E D E C A D E S O F W O R K F R O M K U M A R I N A H A P P A N



DANCING WITH THE COSMOS

KUMARI NAHAPPAN  
THREE DECADES OF WORK

Since the early 1980s, Malaysian-born Singaporean artist Kumari Nahappan's interdisciplinary practice has explored themes of time, perception, and installation. Engaged with a myriad of fractured histories, she combines—often in a playful and ritualistic—characterized by intense meditation and careful employment of materials, her artists' attention to layout usually to engage with other senses or spaces.

Taking inspiration from the Hindu cosmological notion of cyclical time, *Dancing with the Cosmos* brings together works from a 30-year timeline in an exhibition that seeks to emphasize the congruence and resonance of all things that Nahappan has engaged with. Rather than engage with the artist's practice in a chronological manner, the organization of works by color is a deliberate attempt to highlight the non-linear progression of artistic development and continuity. In this respect, each interactive space becomes representative of a diversity of themes, and a measurement of elements over its expanse of time.

The pluralistic readings from each work offer profound understanding of existence, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all things, and the eternal cycles that shape our universe and beyond. As we immerse ourselves in Nahappan's kaleidoscope of color, we simultaneously connect with the richness of these countless universes, each with their own cycles of creation and dissolution.

— JOHN Z. W. TONG, CURATOR

EXHIBITION VIEW OF DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN

Since the early 1990s, Malaysian-born Singaporean artist Kumari Nahappan's interdisciplinary practice has spanned painting, sculpture, and installation. Engaging with a myriad of themes, Nahappan's works engage with phenomena that have fascinated humanity for millennia – time, space, rotors, and ritual. Characterised by constant evolution and varied employment of materials, the artist's artworks go beyond visually to engage with other sensorial realms.

Taking inspiration from the Hindu cosmological notion of cyclical time, *Dancing with the Cosmos* brings together works from a 30-year timeline in an exhibition that seeks to emphasise the congruence and recurrence of themes that Nahappan has engaged with, rather than engaging with the artist's practice in a chronological manner. The organisation of works by colour is a deliberate attempt to highlight the non-linear progression of artistic development and continuity. In this respect, each intimate space becomes representative of a diversity of themes, and a recurrence of interests over an expanse of time.

The pluralistic readings from each work offer profound understanding of existence, emphasising the interconnectedness of all beings and the eternal cycles that shape our universe and beyond. As we immerse ourselves in Nahappan's fields of colour, we simultaneously contend with the existence of these countless universes, each with their own cycles of creation and dissolution.

— JOHN Z. H. TONG, CURATOR

# ARRIVAL HALL

SELECTED ARTWORKS & INSTALLATION VIEWS



*ONCE UPON A TIME/AULD LANG SYNE (2023)*  
MIXED MEDIA, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

ARTIST COLLECTION

D A N C I N G W I T H T H E C O S M O S

T H R E E D E C A D E S O F W O R K F R O M K U M A R I N A H A P P A N



**DANCE OF SURYA I (2004)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
184 X 118 CM



**DANCE OF SURYA II (2004)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
184 X 118 CM



**DANCE OF SURYA III (2004)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
184 X 118 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *TOWARDS BEAUTY'S END*,  
TRAVELLING EXHIBITION IN AUSTRALIA, 2005/2006







***BOTANICAL GARDEN*** (1993)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
124 X 184 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *TROPICAL VIBRANCE*,  
CULTURAL CENTRE ART GALLERY,  
LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, SINGAPORE, 1993





***TROPICAL VIBRANCE* (1992)**  
**ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,**  
**124 X 124 CM**

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *TROPICAL VIBRANCE*,  
CULTURAL CENTRE ART GALLERY,  
LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, SINGAPORE, 1993



# FUNCTION

SELECTED ARTWORKS & INSTALLATION VIEWS



*TROPICAL VIBRANCE II* (1991)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
126 X 126 CM

*THE GARDEN PART III* (1992)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
126 X 126 CM

*THE GARDEN PART II* (1992)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
126 X 126 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION

D A N C I N G W I T H T H E C O S M O S

T H R E E D E C A D E S O F W O R K F R O M K U M A R I N A H A P P A N



EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*

T H E P R I V A T E M U S E U M S I N G A P O R E

# SOPHIA STAIR

SELECTED ARTWORKS & INSTALLATION VIEWS



*DROP DROP DROPPINGS (2022/2023)*  
SAGA SEEDS, PLASTIC BAUBLES,  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

ARTIST COLLECTION

D A N C I N G W I T H T H E C O S M O S

T H R E E D E C A D E S O F W O R K F R O M K U M A R I N A H A P P A N

Caroline Terrace





EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*

T H E P R I V A T E M U S E U M S I N G A P O R E



EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*

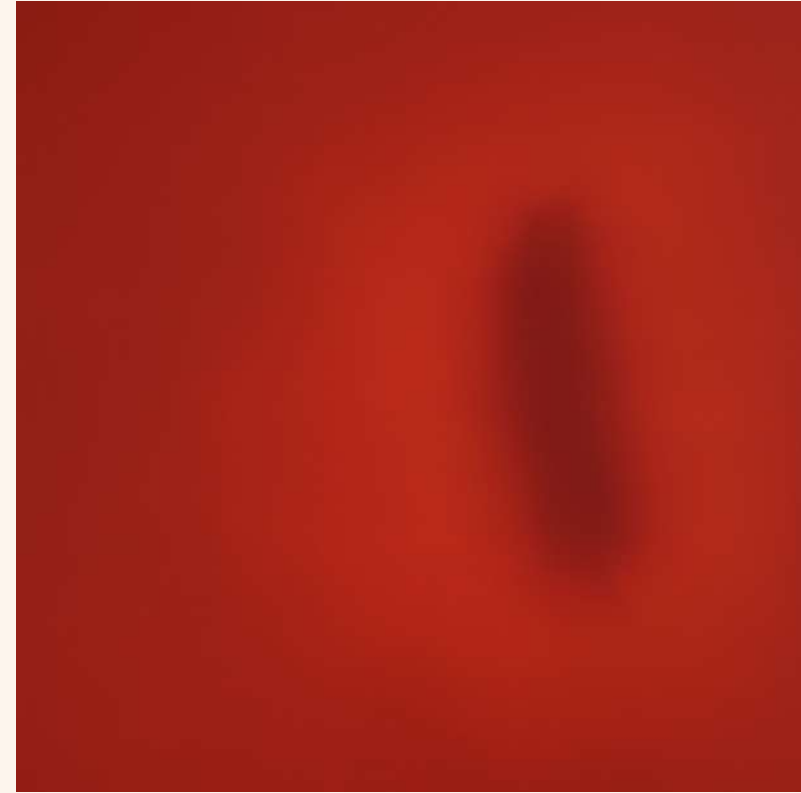
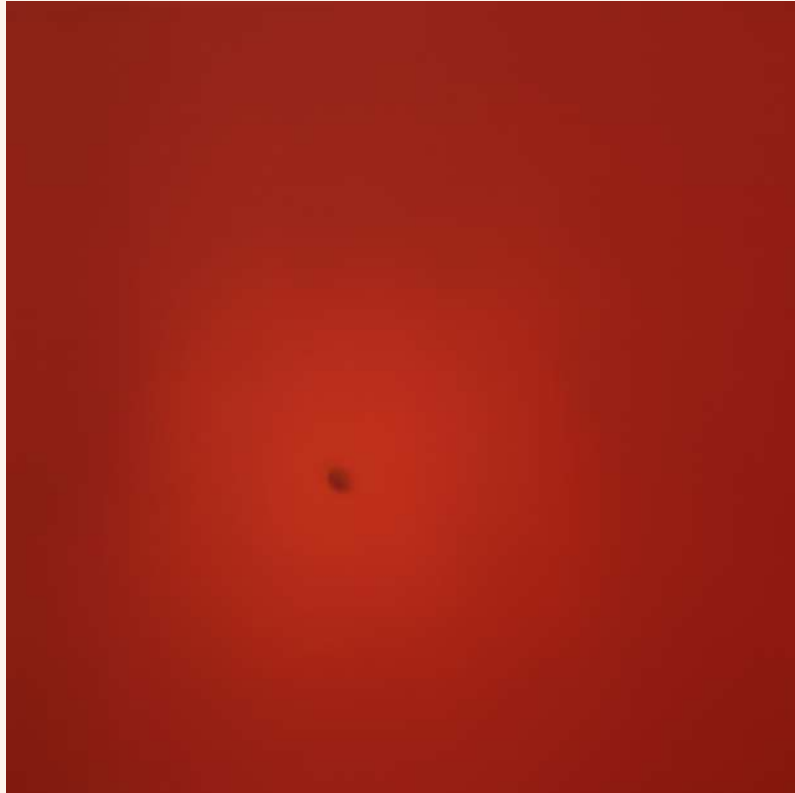
THE PRIVATE MUSEUM SINGAPORE





**ANAHATA (2013/2023)**  
**SAGA SEEDS,**  
**DIMENSIONS VARIABLE**

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT THE SINGAPORE BIENNALE 2013,  
SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM, SINGAPORE, 2013/2014



*DROP ONE* (2007)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
167 X 167 CM

*DROP TWO* (2007)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
167 X 167 CM

*DROP THREE* (2007)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
167 X 167 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION



*RED TRAIL* (2009/2010)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
130 X 200 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION

Caroline Verandah





**MONUMENT (1996/2023)**  
FABRIC, TURMERIC POWDER, MIRROR,  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE



ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *THE NEW CRITERIA IV*,  
THE SUBSTATION, SINGAPORE, 1996



EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*





*REFERENCING I* (2013)  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPYRUS,  
186 X 128 CM



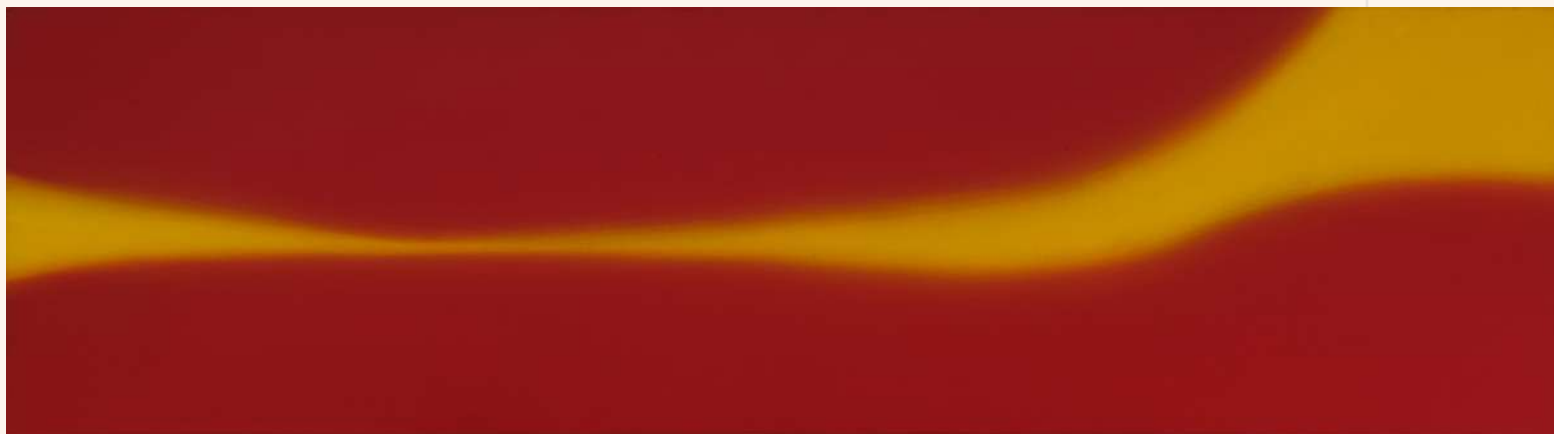
*REFERENCING II* (2013)  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPYRUS,  
186 X 128 CM



*REFERENCING III* (2013)  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPYRUS,  
186 X 128 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION





**MAYA TWO (2005)**  
ACRYLIC ON LINEN,  
47 X 169 CM

**MAYA THREE (2005)**  
ACRYLIC ON LINEN,  
47 X 169 CM

**MAYA FOUR (2005)**  
ACRYLIC ON LINEN,  
47 X 169 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *KUMARI NAHAPPAN: A SOLO EXHIBITION*,  
CHAN HAMPE GALLERIES, SINGAPORE, 2010

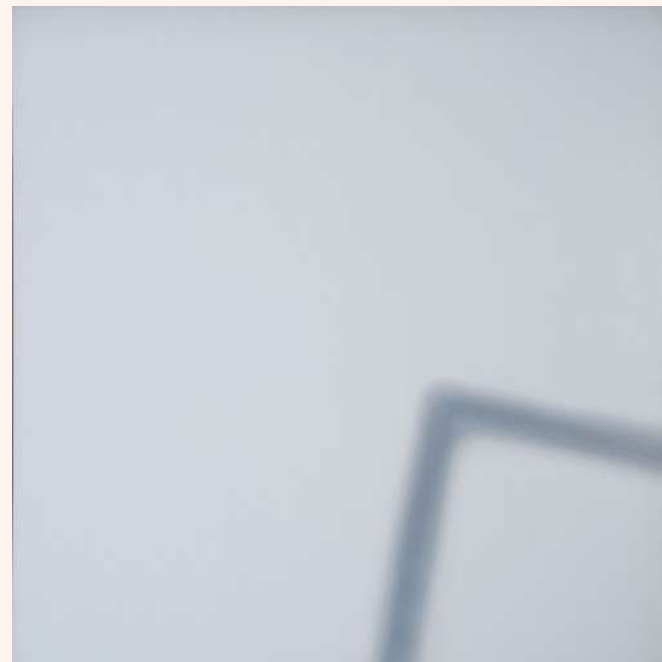
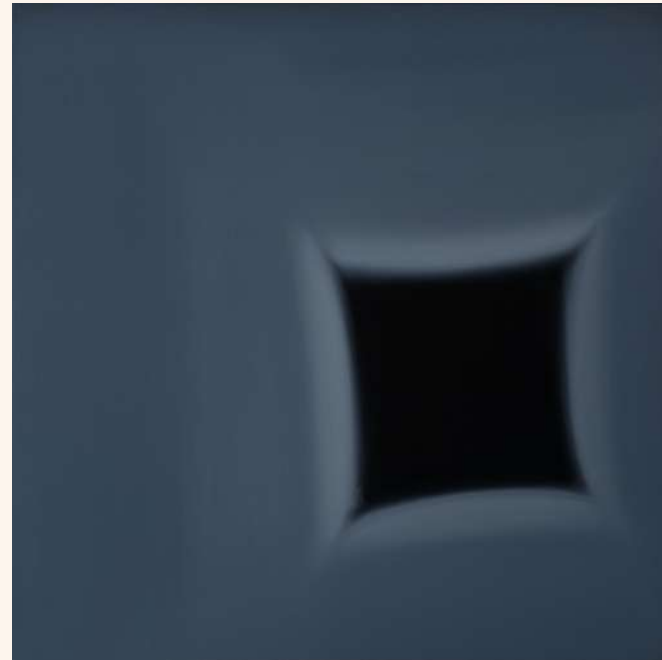
Emily Alcove





EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*





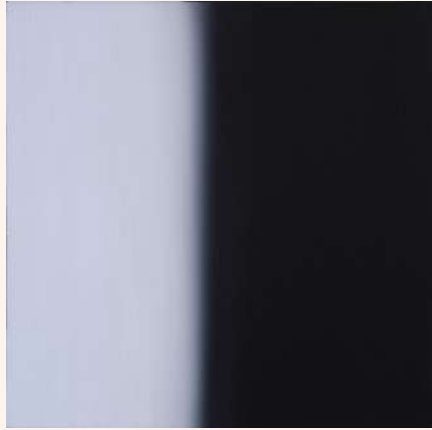
**5 SQUARES WITHIN II (2003)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
100 X 100 CM

**6 SQUARES WITHIN III (2003)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
100 X 100 CM

**4 SQUARES WITHIN IV (2003)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
100 X 100 CM

**4 SQUARES WITHIN I (2003)**  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
100 X 100 CM

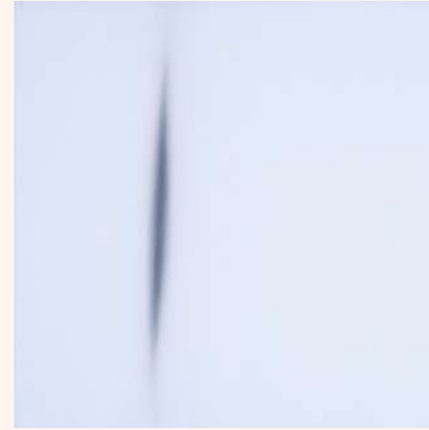
ARTIST COLLECTION



*PAGE SIX (E) (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*POOJA ONE-O-SIX (4) (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*PAGE ONE (F) (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*PAGE ONE (E) (2003)*  
CURRENT SERIES  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*POOJA ONE-O-ONE (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*PAGE SIX (F) (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*POOJA ONE-O-SIX (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM



*POOJA ONE-O-EIGHT (2003)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
61 X 61 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION



*CURRENT 02/04 (2007)*  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
69 X 135 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION



EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*

T H E P R I V A T E M U S E U M S I N G A P O R E





*COSMIC TRUMPETS* (2000–2022)  
FIBREGLASS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

ARTIST COLLECTION





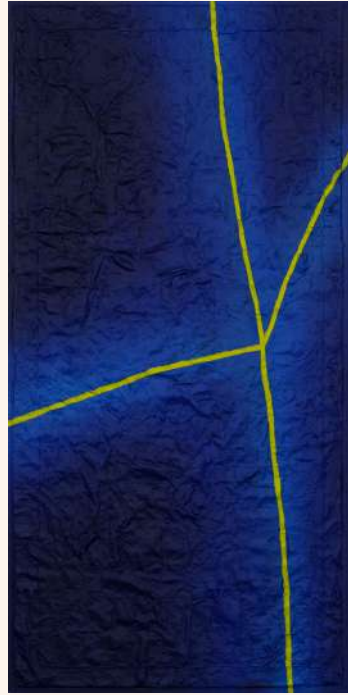
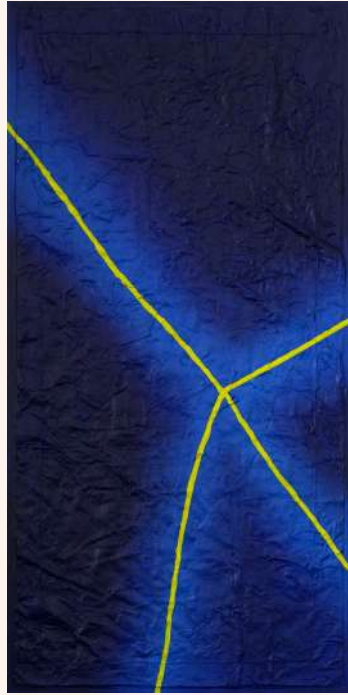
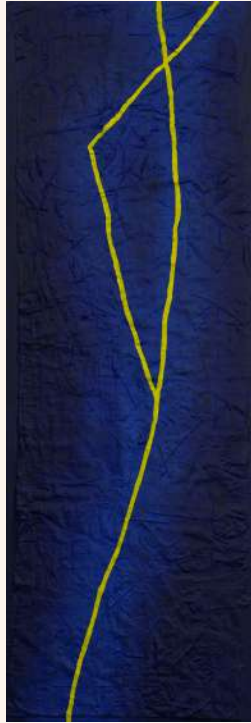
*DESTINATION X (C)* (1994)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
78 X 93 CM

*DESTINATION X (E)* (1994)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
78 X 93 CM

*DESTINATION X (F)* (1994)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,  
78 X 93 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION





*LIGHTNING* (2020)  
MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD,  
130 X 45 CM

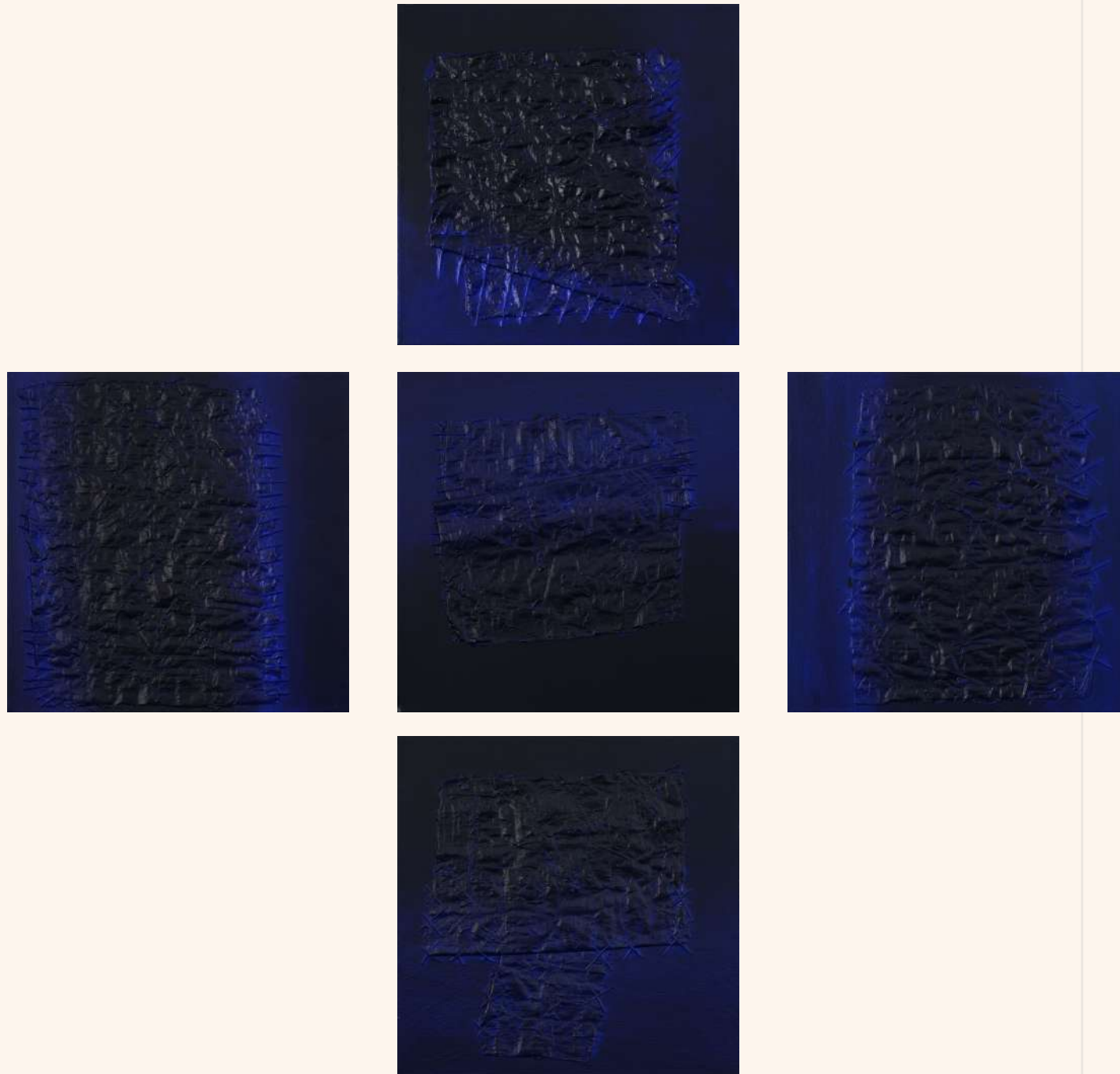
*CARDINAL #3* (2020)  
MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD,  
123 X 61 CM

*CARDINAL #1* (2020)  
MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD,  
123 X 61 CM

*CARDINAL #2* (2020)  
MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD,  
123 X 61 CM

*RIDING THE STORM* (2020)  
MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD,  
102 X 51 CM

ARTIST COLLECTION



*ONE PLUS FOUR* (2019)  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS  
46 X 46 CM EACH, POLYPTYCH

ARTIST COLLECTION

Sophia Alcove

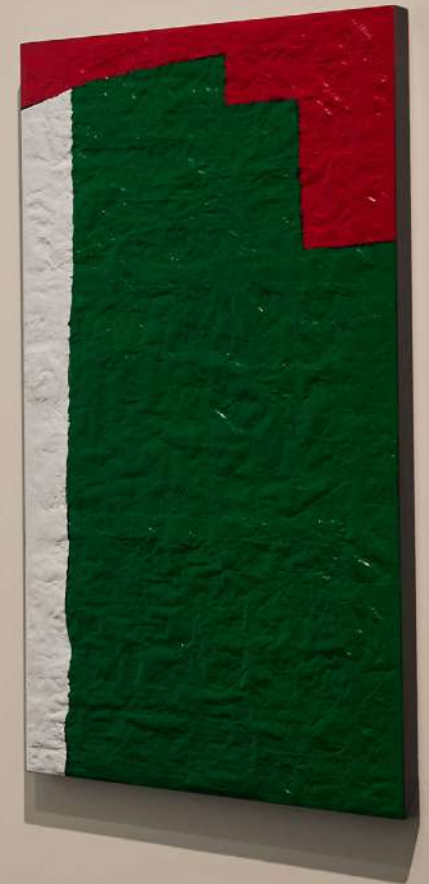




*TRANSCRIPT: READING BEYOND* (2015)  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
200 X 150 CM EACH, TRIPTYCH

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT 5 STARS,  
SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM, SINGAPORE, 2015







*FRAMING RED #1* (2003)  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS,  
51 X 101 CM



*FRAMING RED #2* (2003)  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS,  
51 X 101 CM

*FRAMING RED #3* (2003)  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS,  
51 X 101 CM



ARTIST COLLECTION



EXHIBITION VIEW OF *DANCING WITH THE COSMOS: THREE DECADES OF WORK FROM KUMARI NAHAPPAN*

T H E P R I V A T E M U S E U M S I N G A P O R E



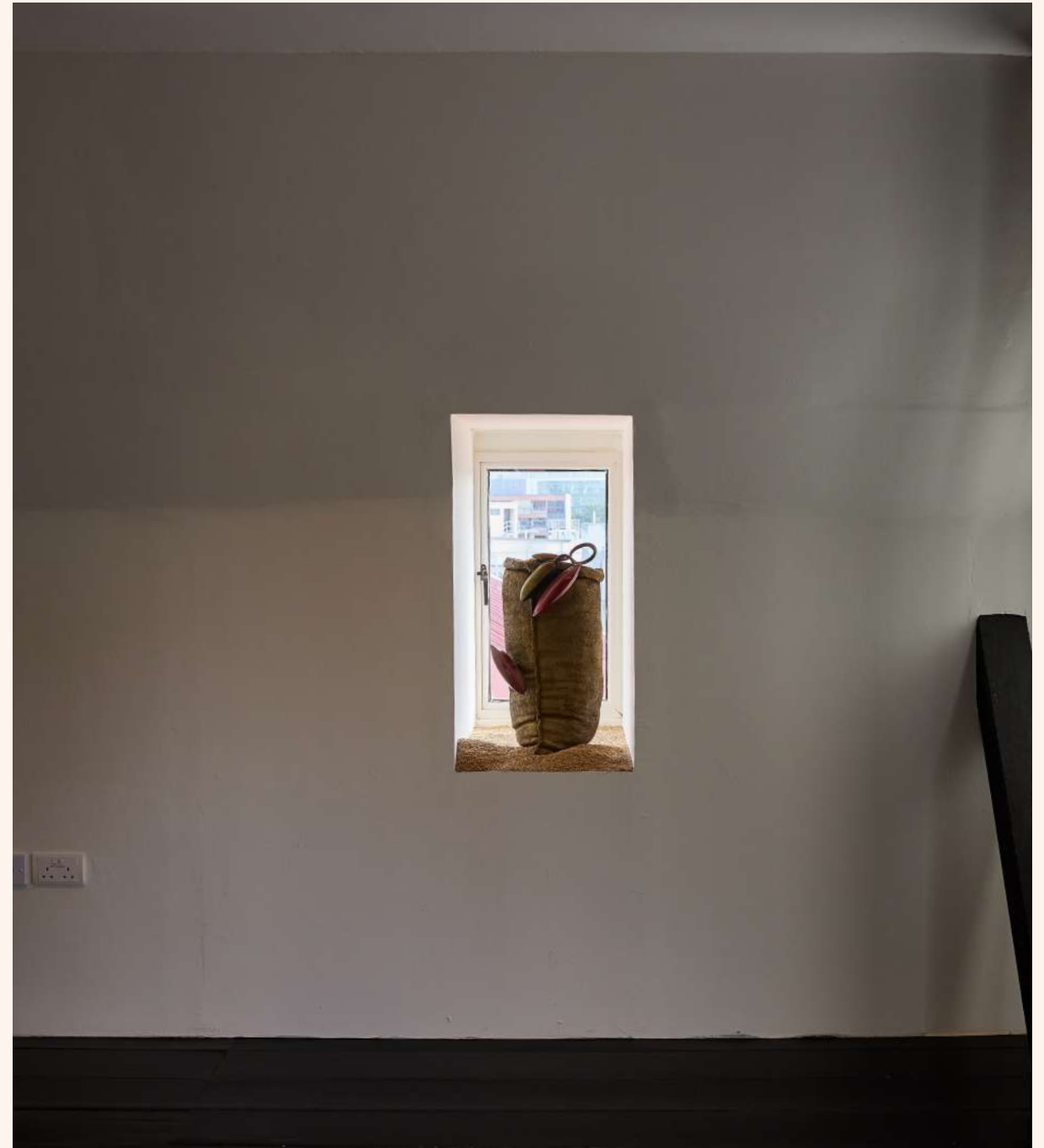
**WOVEN IN TIME (2008/2023)**  
UNHUSKED RICE, BRONZE,  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *WOVEN IN TIME*,  
SCULPTURE SQUARE, SINGAPORE, 2008

# ATTIC




## SELECTED ARTWORKS & INSTALLATION VIEWS



**WOVEN IN TIME (2008/2023)**  
UNHUSKED RICE, BRONZE,  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

ARTIST COLLECTION  
EXHIBITED AT *WOVEN IN TIME*,  
SCULPTURE SQUARE, SINGAPORE, 2008



# CURATOR BIOGRAPHY

JOHN Z. W. TUNG

John Z. W. Tung is an independent curator and exhibition-maker. In his former position as an Assistant Curator at the Singapore Art Museum (2015 – 2020), he curated and co-curated 9 exhibitions, alongside serving as a co-curator for the Singapore Biennale 2016, ‘An Atlas of Mirrors’, and the Singapore Biennale 2019, ‘Every Step in the Right Direction’. Three of the artwork commissions he curated for the biennales were finalists for the Benesse Prize, with one work winning the prestigious award. He is also the editor of the Singapore Art Museum’s first publication to chronicle its exhibition history, *Singapore Art Museum: An Index of Exhibitions (1994 – 2018)*. His recent appointments as an independent curator include Festival Curator for the 7th & 8th Singapore International Photography Festival (2020 & 2022), Associate Curator for the Open House programme, *For the House; Against the House* (2021, 2022 & 2023), and the Curator of the first exhibition to examine the significance of the ground-breaking Singaporean artist initiative *5th Passage – 5th Passage: In Search of Lost Time*. Projects he has produced include *The Forest Institute* (2022), a large-scale architectural art installation dedicated to secondary forest ecologies, and *The Gathering: 千岁宫* (2022), a pop-up Chinese garden-teahouse experience in Chinatown, Singapore.

JOHN Z. W. TUNG

To date, his close work with artists has realised more than 50 artwork commissions and site-specific adaptations ranging from the minute to monumental. In 2023, he was the recipient of the inaugural Tan Boon Hui Curatorial Prize.

He holds a BA (Hons) in Arts Management awarded by Goldsmiths, University of London (at LASALLE College of the Arts) and an MA in Cultural Management from the Chinese University of Hong Kong where he graduated on the Dean's List. He brings with him close to a decade of involvement across different fields in the arts, culture, and creative industry. Encompassing both creative and administrative roles, his experiences have spanned the curatorial, editorial, as well as pedagogical.

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# ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

KUMARI NAHAPPAN

Kumari is a prominent artist in Southeast Asia. Her practice encompasses inter-disciplinary genres, painting, sculpture and installations. She has forged a reputation for effectively reconciling the language of “international contemporary art” with her own vocabulary and developing a visual identity that is decisively shaped by her cultural roots and beliefs.

Kumari is celebrated for her iconic sculptures in landmark locations in Singapore including *Saga* for Changi Airport, *Nutmeg & Mace* for ION Orchard, *Pedas-Pedas* for the National Museum and *Pembungaan* for OUE Bayfront (the largest bronze mural in Singapore at over 45m) and other sculptures for corporate developments. Her sculptures have graced sites overseas including G Tower in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), the J.Y. Campos Centre in Manila (the Philippines), and Zongshan Park in Shanghai (China).

Kumari has received commendations in the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards and UOB Painting of the Year. She holds the honour of being the first foreigner and woman to be conferred the Ksatria Seni Award (2004) by the Museum Rudana in Bali. In 2011, she won the Artist of the Year Award in the 15th edition of the Shanghai Art Fair

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and was identified as a notable female artist in the book *Women Artists in Singapore (2011)*.<sup>1</sup>

For more than three decades, Kumari's artistic journey has seen her develop an extensive body of works, including paintings, sculptures and installations which have been exhibited internationally such as the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Seoul Art Centre in Korea, Museum Rudana in Bali, Museum der Kulturen in Basel and Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. In 2013, she enjoyed critical and popular acclaim for her installation *Anahata*, a monumental work comprising of 4000kg of saga seeds for the Singapore Biennale 2013. Her works have been exhibited at museums as well as in galleries in Sweden, Germany, London, Italy, New York, Australia, Hong Kong and China.

In her exhibition *CHANTING: ROSARY* at ANIMA MUNDI International Art Festival which was organised by Liquid Group in Palazzo Ca' Zanardi in Venice, Italy (2017), Kumari explored the idea of "seeds in rituals" in the form of a rosary bead to travel to Venice. In 2018, the 'journey of the saga' continued, where 30 of her saga seeds found a permanent home at The Sanchaya, Bintan, Indonesia.

In 2019, Kumari was invited by the European Cultural Foundation to exhibit in *Personal Structures* which ran parallel to the Venice Biennale. Kumari's monumental

<sup>1</sup> Monograph by T.K. Sabapathy in his book *Kumari Nahappan – Fluxion: Art and Thoughts*. T.K. Sabapathy has published extensively on art and artists in Southeast Asia. His writing has inaugurated important art historical trajectories for appreciating the modern and the contemporary in Southeast Asia. His monographic studies of artists, especially in Singapore and Malaysia, have established significant benchmarks in developing the critical literature on art and artists. He is currently an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Architecture (National University of Singapore) and consultant lecturer in the School of Art, Design and Media (Nanyang Technological University), where he teaches the history of art.

sculpture named *Talktime* was exhibited at The Marinaressa gardens, Venice. The sculpture on its return will find a home in Jurong Lake Garden, Singapore, sometime in 2020.

Recently, Kumari was invited by the Indian Heritage Centre in Singapore in an exhibition called *From the Coromandel Coast to the Straits: Revisiting Our Tamil Heritage*. An installation titled *Masala* was created by Kumari to create an experiential spice garden, celebrating a historical and cultural blend of spices to create a fascinating journey in the spice trail.





# **A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S**

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to our artist Kumari Nahappan and guest curator John Z. W. Tung; supporting partners and sponsors the National Arts Council Singapore, Currency Design, AVS Printing, and Helutrans Artmove for working with us to make this exhibition possible. Our special thanks to Mr T.K. Sabapathy for his insights and guidance, and for taking the time to pen the foreword.

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our Guest-of-Honour, Mr Alvin Tan, Minister of State, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth & Ministry of Trade and Industry, for officiating our opening at 11 Upper Wilkie Road.

**The Private Museum Board of Directors and Committees**

Daniel Teo, Goh Soo Khim, Rachel Teo, Dana Teo, Ng Siong Tee, Tan Kai Seng, William (Bill) Liu, Tan Suan Wee, Tan Chuan Yong, Claire Teo, Aaron Teo, Danton Teo

**Published by**

The Private Museum Ltd  
11 Upper Wilkie Road, Singapore 228120

**Designed by**

Currency Design

**Artist**

Kumari Nahappan

**Curator**

John Z. W. Tung

**Museum Team**

Aaron Teo, Tessa Sam, Mandel Yap, Claudia Lee, Anna Naveen, Jason Chan, Xu Shu Xuan, Natalie Ling, Ho Xin Yi

**Installation Team**

John Z. W. Tung, Carla Castle, Lewis Choo Li Wei, Bryan Sim Zhao Wen, Alethea W Soo, Chia Wei Ling

**Artwork and Exhibition Photography**

Studio W Photography

**About The Private Museum**

The Private Museum is a non-profit private museum in Singapore founded by Singaporean philanthropist, art collector and real estate developer, Daniel Teo, together with his daughter Rachel Teo in 2010. Fuelled by passionate patronage for the arts, the museum aims to be an alternative platform to bridge the gap between the private and the public. With a vision to promote art appreciation, the independent arts space engages local, regional and international audiences from all walks of life. The Private Museum is a registered Charity and Institution of a Public Character (IPC) since 2010 and 2015 respectively.

**Our Vision**

To be a leading, dynamic private museum in Southeast Asia and a national model in Singapore that engages, inspires and builds communities through art.

**Our Mission**

To serve as an independent platform in bridging gaps between public and private spheres through the exchange of ideas across cultures, educational initiatives, and artistic and curatorial collaborations with collectors and practitioners of the arts.

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