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VISUAL ART

Works that captured the imagination

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PAINTINGS and three-dimensional art in the form of sculptures are a big part of Singapore's history which have done much to give us a sense of space and time. We pick 10 iconic works from the past 50 years:

Drying Salted Fish by Cheong Soo Pieng (1978)

This piece is also on the back of Singapore's 50-dollar note, and is a classic example of the early style of Singapore's pioneer artists who emigrated from China. They captured rural Malayan landscapes and trades, often in Chinese ink style and on paper. Cheong was part of the development of the Nanyang School together with Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang.

Chua Mia Tee's National Language Class (1959)

This work captures the zeitgeist of the 1950s and 1960s as Singapore was transitioning into Independence. A fine example of Social Realist work, the ideology it espouses is anti-colonial as well as nationalistic. Art must reflect life, believed Chua, who came to Singapore in 1937 and attended Nafa from 1952 to 1957.

Woodcut art

This art form has a special place in Singapore art history, where the first art exhibition dedicated to the medium was held in 1966, and featured the work of Lim Yew Kuan, Tan Tee Chid, Lim Mu Hue, See Cheen Tee, Choo Keng Kwang and Foo Chee San, most of whom were teachers at Nafa. Chinese Puppet Theatre by Lim Mu Hue captured a traditional art form in the Republic.

The Orchid (1970s)

The orchid is Singapore's national flower and its painterly likeness was best captured in the 1970s, by Sarkasi Said, using batik painting on textile. Singapore's "baron of batik's" public work is at Serangoon MRT Station, while his batik dresses are sold under Tzee Creation.

Wealth and Contentment (1978)

The companion ladies' pieces by Ng Eng Teng, was commissioned by DBS for Plaza Singapura in 1974. These reflect how our shopping malls included public art from the early days, and most will remember them in Plaza Singapura before its renovation. The works are fascinating for their scale and their unique iconography - women with sarong-style skirts, giant feet and exaggerated features, observes Bridget Tracy Tan, director of Nafa's Institute of Southeast Asian Arts & Art Galleries.

Void Deck (2000s)

For a contemporary breakthrough, Hong Sek Chern's Void Deck in 8 scrolls/panels is a Chinese ink work that alludes to the HDB common space, but is actually the interior of an empty MRT station. Bridget Tracy Tan, director of Nafa's Institute of Southeast Asian Arts & Art Galleries, notes how the painting incorporates Sek Chern's signature style of architectural perspectives, her Chinese ink background and uniquely Singapore spaces. This work was brought to the Sao Paulo Biennial in 2002.

Kumari Nahappan (2000s)

Kumari Nahappan is noted for her signature and iconic, monumental public art sculptures. The giant bronze chilli-pepper, Pedas Pedas (2006) was commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore, as well as the Saga (2007) at Changi Airport and the Nutmeg (2009) at ION Orchard.

Koh Nguang How (1980s)

Koh Nguang How's installations derived from his Singapore Art Archive Project (SAAP), is an unparalleled artist making cultural history his aesthetic material, thus charting as well the developments of the nation. Koh's documentation of the Artists Village between 1989 and 1999 has become a significant historical resource, says June Yap, independent curator and Curator of Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative.

Status (2009)

Status by Jane Lee is part of the Singapore Art Museum collection and it's a contemporary take on the age-old medium of painting. She's used the tactile structure and quality of paint to form the canvas itself. By resembling a frame or a doorway, Status also heralds this new approach and thinking about art.

Zakaria Zainal (2012)

In photography, Zakaria Zainal's anthology of portraits and anecdotes from retired Singapore Gurkhas in "Our Gurkhas" is a work of photographic art and also documentation. The men from Nepal serve in the Gurkha Contingent of the Singapore

Police Force, established in 1949. This series was first showed in Valentine Willie Fine Art's Singapore Survey 2012 and was published as a book in 2012.

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