“Fragments of the Past”: Political Prints of Post-war Singapore

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As pointed out by Walter Benjamin, history can be made up from discarded fragments that do not necessarily fit into any established narratives. He described the surviving shards of the past as “fragments of true historical experience which have been scattered by an explosion”.

Indeed research on the history of woodblock prints in Singapore often depends on such shrapnel and debris that are left out of the master narrative of the island state’s postwar political history, the so-called “Singapore Story”. One has to count on the personal anecdotes of artists, on their oral testimonies of their involvement in the decolonization struggle of 1950s and 1960s Singapore.

One such story was related by Tan Wee Huan, a 1955 graduate of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, who retired from being a graphic artist and had returned to painting fulltime. After graduation, Tan worked as an artist for The Straits Times. In 1955, he was asked by the People’s Action Party (PAP), the ruling party of Singapore since 1959, to carve a woodcut print for their first anniversary publication, People’s Action Party 1st Anniversary Celebration Souvenir (27-11-1955). That he did when he went down to Punggol to attend a PAP rally given by Lim Chin Siong, the strongest leftist PAP leader in the 1950s. After he had finished the woodblock print, he brought the print down to the PAP Tanjong Pagar branch and was paid $2 by Lee Kuan Yew, the future Prime Minister of Singapore, for his work.

The print accompanied a Chinese article credited to Lee entitled “Our Stance”. It depicts a PAP rally from the point of view of a blue-
collar worker (as suggested by the attention given to the muscles and sinews of the arms) who is raising both arms in support of the party and an expression of the mood of inevitable victory in the fight against colonialism in the 1950s. Independence and democracy was to be achieved by group action and party activism as indicated in the Chinese wordings below the print.

Such stories were only recovered during the research process done for “History Through Prints: Woodblock Prints In Singapore”, an exhibition on the history of woodblock prints in Singapore that ran at the Singapore History Museum (SHM) from August 1998 to June 1999. It was a show held in conjunction with the Printmaking Society (Singapore). These historical fragments highlight the ephemeral nature of woodblock prints. Tan neither kept the print nor remembered the publication that his print appeared in, much less preserved the block. It was only when a photocopy of the image was presented to him that he identified it as his work.

As all prints come in series, there isn’t any one and original print. Due to this, photocopies were thus used in the 1998 SHM woodcut exhibition when the prints could not be found. Such was the case with Tan’s PAP rally print. But that also meant that the museum could not purchase certain works because no existing print could be found. None of Tan’s work and Lee Kee Boon’s woodblock prints could be “collected” as they did not survive the ravages of time. Lee was a contemporary of Tan at NAFA in the mid-1950s. His “Blood And Sweat” is an important visual document and a lasting image of the issues of Chinese education and Nanyang University (Nantah), especially in the light of the recent debate on the revival of the so-called Nantah spirit and the renaming of the university back to Nantah. Fortunately, there was a print on the fund-raising activities for Nantah by Choo Keng Kwang that was exhibited and eventually bought by the SHM for its collection. “Charity Ride for Nantah” is a visual depiction of the famous collection drive by rickshaw riders in Singapore in 1954 (Fig. 1). This event is still much remembered by the ’50s generation as a milestone for the common men doing their bit for the greater good, something we do not see much of in today’s society. But more on the SHM’s woodblock print collection later.

In short, these prints reflect the post-war history of Singapore and its road to independence and nationhood. However the history
of woodblock prints in Singapore, despite the vibrancy of the medium in the 1950s and 1960s, has not been well documented until the 1998 exhibition. The formation of the Contemporary Printmaking Association in 1980 did not keep the tradition of woodblock printing alive as it promoted new printmaking methods then. It was only when the association was renamed Printmaking Society (Singapore) in January 1998 that interest in woodblock printing was revived through its participation in the SHM woodcut print exhibition.

Research on the contentious areas of Singapore’s political past, especially in relation to the state’s use of art and culture for nation-building, is limited. The pre-1942 history of woodblock prints has been documented in Yeo Man Thong’s seminal *Essays on the History of Pre-war Chinese Painting in Singapore*, especially his articles on the importance of Dai Yunlang, a Straits-born artist-activist who brought Lu Xun’s Modern Woodcut Movement to Singapore in the 1930s. Dai’s essays and woodblock prints in *Wenman Gie* (*World of Culture and Cartoons*) and *Jinri Yishu* (*Today’s Art*), two art supplements he edited for *Nanyang Siang Pau* between 1935 and 1936, would greatly influence the post-war development of woodblock prints as a medium of social and political expression in the 1950s and 1960s.\(^7\)
Art teacher Foo Kwee Horng updated Yeo's work in his research on the pre-war history of woodcuts and cartoons in Singapore for his MA dissertation at the National Institute of Education in Singapore.

The earliest writings on the post-war history of woodblock prints were done by the practitioners themselves, who wrote rather reminiscently of the 1950s woodcut scene. Cartoonist Ong Shih Cheng (pen-name: Ong Yih) wrote many articles about woodblock prints and artists that, fortunately for researchers, have been compiled in his essay collections. Ong was one of the two editors of Selection of Woodcuts and Caricatures by Singapore and Malayan Artists, an important collection of woodcuts and cartoons published in 1955. An original copy of the book was exhibited at the 1998 SHM woodcut show, donated by the other editor of the book, Ho Kah Leong, an ex-PAP Member of Parliament.

The other two practitioners who wrote about the history of woodblock prints in Singapore were Foo Chee San and Tan Tee Chie. The current president of the Printmaking Society (Singapore), Chng Seok Tin also wrote about Singaporean printmakers. The general books on the history of Singaporean art only touched on woodblock prints briefly in their discussions on the Equator Art Society of the 1950s and 1960s. The focus of Singapore's post-war art history has always been on the Nanyang Style, focusing on Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen Li Ying and Lim Cheng Hoe. The only scholarly work which treated woodblock prints as a crucial part of Singapore's art history was an MA thesis by Joyce Fan, the co-curator of the 1998 SHM woodcut show. She also curated the National University of Singapore Museums' 2002 woodcut exhibition.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the woodblock prints of the 1950s did not enter the mainstream historiography of Singapore's art history until 1998 (despite pioneers like Cheong Soo Pieng dabbling in woodcut and contributing a print in Selection of Woodcuts and Caricatures by Singapore and Malayan Artists) was the politically sensitive nature of the works. Interestingly, 1998 was also the year Lee Kuan Yew released volume one of his memoirs, in which he acknowledged the contributions of the Chinese students in Singapore's struggle for independence. The leftist energies and elements of the '50s have now been given a reprieve. It could be
taken that it was now “sanctioned” to show these political works again. For example, Lim Mu Hue’s “Love” (1962), a scene of injured demonstrators being cared for by friends, was reprinted in the book *Singapore: Journey into Nationhood*, released in conjunction with the 1998 National Education show, *The Singapore Story*. A similar scene is found in Koeh Sia Yong’s “Visiting the Injured” (1958) (Fig. 2), one of the many prints SHM bought for its collection after the 1998 woodcut show. Friends or colleagues, possibly union representatives, were portrayed as caring for the injured worker and his poor family. Such pro-worker images were common in the works of woodcut artists in the 1950s and ’60s. Koeh’s “Complaint (Pineapples Plantation Incident)” (1967) (Fig. 3) is an impressive print measuring 30 by 30 cm that epitomizes the social realist art movement in Singapore — it is a powerful piece of social commentary that agitates for political action against the greedy capitalists. Other works by Koeh that expressed the plight of the common men include “Illegal Hawking” (1957) (Fig. 4) and “Indian Workers Laying Electric Cables” (1958) (Fig. 5). The latter is an interesting representation of the workers, emphasizing not only their harsh working conditions but also their masculinity. This is not just a depiction of the suffering workers; it can also be read as an image of empowerment of the labouring class, to which society owes its present success and stability. The quiet dignity of the worker can be found in Koeh’s “Indian Worker at Bukit Merah Bricks Factory”
In Koeh’s print, the Indian worker is seen in contemplation, perhaps of the future. The multicultural character of Singaporean art is reflected in Koeh’s choice of subject, Indian workers.
Fig. 7

Fig. 8
However, Indians were depicted rather harshly in Choo Keng Kwang’s “13th May Incident” (1954) (Fig. 9). This print is a visual document of the 513 incident in 1954 in which the Chinese students clashed with the British authorities over the issue of national education. The Singapore Police Force (as identified by the tag on the left sleeve of the Indian policeman) was sent in to disperse the demonstrating students. A violent clash resulted in over 20 people injured and 48 students arrested.\(^{15}\) Choo was clearly on the side of the students in his fierce depiction of the Indian policeman who is seen swinging his baton at a female Chinese student. The political nature of this work is reflected in the tag on the policeman’s uniform — 513.\(^{16}\) Not surprisingly, the woodblock for this print only “resurfaced” in recent times. Choo had actually given it to another artist friend for safekeeping as the threat of detention without trial by the British authorities was very real in the 1950s. Today, this woodblock has since been exhibited at the Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan and at the 1998 SHM woodcut show.

\(\text{Fig. 9}\)
Not all of Choo’s works in the SHM woodblock print collection are political. For example, “People’s Restaurant” (Fig. 7) and “Roadside Hawker” (1955) (Fig. 10) depict a part of Singapore’s social history that has come to pass. The details in both prints are worth examining as they are revealing of the behavioural habits of the hawkers and their customers back then. In fact, such roadside stalls are a favourite topic for other woodcut artists as well, e.g. Tan Tee Chie’s “Transaction” (1953) (Fig. 11), Lim Mu Hue’s “Satay Seller” (1966) (Fig. 12) and Lee Boon Wang’s “Open-air Market” (1976) (Fig. 13).

These woodblock prints are also equally important as historical documents of events that happened in the past. They helped to preserve our social memory of national emergencies such as the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire. This disaster is captured poignantly in Koeh’s “Scene of Bukit Ho Swee Fire” (1961) (Fig. 14). A mother’s loss of her home and surrounded by her children is etched firmly in the audiences’ minds once they encounter this print. This is not Koeh’s first attempt at carving that sense of loss in losing one’s home. 1957’s “Flood at Potong Pasir” (Fig. 15) gives us a good idea of what that area was like when compared to today’s housing estate in the opposition.
Political Prints of Post-War Singapore

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

32 / The Heritage Journal
Fig. 13

Fig. 14
ward. Lim Yew Kuan’s “After the Fire” (1966) (Fig. 16) is distant in its perspective of a tragedy, but the desolation could be felt nonetheless. This is especially so given the size of this print, L74.1 cm by W54.4 cm.
On this point, I would recommend researchers to see the actual prints to get a better feel of the works in discussion. For example, “13th May Incident” (Fig. 9) is newly printed for the 1998 show, which indicates to us that the woodblock still exists. A lot of the other prints displayed and eventually bought for the SHM collection were old prints that survived the passage of time such as Foo Chee San’s “Mat Weaving” (1966) (Fig. 17), Chieu Shuey Fook’s “Malay Hawker” (1954) (Fig. 18) and Koeh’s “Digging Drainage at Potong Pasir” (1957) (Fig. 19). The latter is of interest to the art historian as it shows the process and alterations made to the print by the artist — white-out was being used for this print. Such details could not have been seen if one only studied the reproductions in catalogues.

The production and support of such strong social realist works by the state in the late 1950s and early 1960s can be contextualised by the need to create Malayan art in the early years of self-government. Social conscious art groups such as the Equator Art Society (past and present members of the society included Lim Yew Kuan, Koeh Sia Yong, Lee Boon Wang and Chua Mia Tee) co-organised the
first National Day local art exhibition sponsored by the Ministry of Culture in 1960, showing their strong support for the leading leftist party at that time, the PAP, and vice versa. In the Foreword by Lee Khoon Choy, Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, for the catalogue of the above exhibition, Lee wrote:

*In a society which is in the process of being moulded into a homogeneous whole, artists have a special social responsibility to help the people have a better understanding of their surroundings and their lives. To that extent art should be for the people. Art should reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people. A brush in the hands of a dreamer is no better than a pen in the hands of the writer of pornographic literature... The search for a Malayan art form will be quite futile if art is not creative. But we can only produce high quality works of art if our painters look for their themes from the things and people they see around them daily.*

Woodcut artists mentioned in this article such as Lim Mu Hue, Lee Kee Boon, Foo Chee San, Koeh Sia Yong, Tan Tee Chie, Chieu Shuey Fook, Lee Boon Wang participated in the show, although not necessarily exhibiting their woodblock prints.

However the social realist art style that was dominant in the 1950s and earlier had to give way to art styles and topics that were more palatable to a new nation from 1965 onwards. The state encouraged the creation of artworks that reflected local themes and scenery such as the Singapore River, Chinatown and Samsui women, and nodded to the emergence of a modern abstract art tendency in Singapore art that came about with the formation of the Modern Art Society in 1964.

My argument is that there was a shift in the mid-1960s of the state’s endorsement of the social realism style to art styles and themes less political in nature. Images of the workers and social realism’s inherent radicalism were deemed not conducive to a ruling party trying to build social cohesion and consensus nor for a new nation trying to attract foreign investments. Even though the proponents of the social realist school like the Equator Art Group continued to
support nation-building, the state saw the need to consolidate the kind of culture Singapore should have.

By the early 1960s, the government had stated its preference in its *State of Singapore Annual Report 1961*:

> The cultural policy of the government is based on the belief that for successful nation-building in a multi-racial society it is necessary to evolve a common way of life, a common acceptance of similar ideas and values and norms of social conduct, a common system of emotional response and above all a common idiom of artistic expression reflecting and idealizing these systems.\(^\text{18}\)

Certain art forms lend themselves to social satire and subversion of establishment views, such as woodcuts.\(^\text{19}\) Despite Equator Arts Group’s pro-Singapore stand, woodcuts were deemed too “left” for the establishment, as could be discerned from the language used in their 1966 exhibition catalogue foreword:

> Our art society has been in existence for ten years. Throughout this rather long period, we have come to realise that the development of the genuine school of art is a tedious and painstaking journey and also an arduous and endless struggle. Only those indefatigable artists who, having known the value of the genuine school of art, can push their way out in this society which is fraught with the temptation to personal aggrandisement in all its devilish forms. The value of the genuine school of art lies in the fact that it does not lose its integrity amidst the ugly commercial dealings belonging to the decadent bourgeois. Instead, it always works to faithfully reflect or expose the very root of the reality of life, to spread the Truth, the Virtue, and the Beauty of this world.

Such statements from *The Fifth Art Exhibition of the Equator Art Group 1966* did not endear the group to the government, who was geared towards internal social and political stability in order to attract overseas investments and business. Compare this with the foreword from the 1965 Modern Art Society exhibition: “Modern
Art is [therefore] an effective and essential means to promote better understanding amongst the various countries in the world."

Apolitical art was promoted for such domestic and external reasons. Left on its own, art was deemed too unstable for the liking of the state. Abstract art, on the other hand, was diametrically opposed to the radicalism in the social realist art style. Social realist art was direct in terms of its messaging. Black and white woodblock prints were perfect for the medium they usually appeared in, the Chinese press. But modern abstract art, with formalistic concerns and colours, required interpretation by curators and critics, exhibited in museums and galleries. In that sense, with the de-emphasising of social realist art and the promotion of modern art in the late 1960s, the utilitarian role of art was taken away from the masses and the understanding of art was placed in the hands of professional art reviewers and museum administrators. Art could be said to be “controlled” by state agencies who now dictated its interpretation by giving support to a form that required such a construal approach.

In the 1969 Modern Art Society exhibition catalogue, the society declared the primacy of pictorialism: “Modern art is mainly expression of form, ideas are only of subsidiary importance.” As noted by art critic, T.K. Sabapathy, “Modern Art Society and its practices relegated the neo-traditional and realist tendencies to the past and ‘yoked’ the practice of Singapore art to world art.” The abstract tendencies in local art in the 1970s were not accidental. It was promoted by the state as Singaporean art of an international style that could be presented to the rest of the world. This embrace of modernism could be read as part of the government’s intention to redraw racial fault lines and to de-emphasize ethnic identities in Singapore, given the racial riots of 1964 and 1969. Other clues laid in the changes made in the educational system in 1966, which introduced a bilingual policy for secondary schools. English was made the first language and official language for business and communication due to its international usefulness and role as a social glue.

While the rise of abstract art in Singapore could be a reflection of the fast changing urban landscape in the 1970s and thus explain the need for local artists to rethink their methods of representation in a more conceptual and abstract manner, the fact remains that abstract art was safer for a young nation seeking to consolidate the
views of its people with regard to politics, culture, identity and the future of Singapore. That future, it seemed, lay with the number of foreign manufacturing investors who were willing to set up shop in Singapore. A more progressive art style was deemed necessary to project the modern image of Singapore to the West. Thus there was a monetary incentive for local artists to turn to abstract art as they sold well to government agencies for display in their offices in Singapore or missions overseas. Even trainee art teachers in the 1970s were told to focus on abstract art and not social realism.24

One has to admit that it is difficult to provide empirical evidence to detect this shift in Singapore’s art movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Government cultural policies were not explicit in the kind of art the state chose to support nor were political speeches and statements revealing. Often the researcher has to depend on anecdotes from artists about the state of art emphasis and education, and comb through old art exhibition catalogues to sieve out the nuances of that period, which further underscores Benjamin’s idea of history as “fragments of the past”. For example, while 1966 saw the exhibition of the first post-war woodcut show, the so-called Six Men Show held at the National Library Lecture Hall between 15 to 18 October and opened by the Minister of Culture, Lee Khoon Choy, that event also marked the zenith of social realist art in Singapore.25 It would take 38 years for another major woodcut show to happen, the 1998 SHM woodblock print exhibition.26 On the other hand, modern art exhibitions have grown from strength to strength since the first showing in 1963, co-organised by Ho Ho Ying among others. Another strong indication of the state’s position on the use of art in society was stated in this message from Kwan Sai Kheong, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education for the Singapore Teachers’ Art, Craft and Photography Exhibition catalogue:

*The current emphasis on the importance of vocational training reinforces the role of Art and Crafts. Skill alone in the handling of tools is not sufficient. Aesthetic considerations have also to be taken into account. Children who can combine skill with a discriminating feeling for forms, shapes and colours will eventually make better craftsmen. In our industrialization programme, artists as well as craftsmen...*
will be needed to design and make the goods that can compete in the world market.\(^{27}\)

This statement is a far cry from Lee Khoon Choy’s foreword for the 1960 National Day art exhibition catalogue. The emphasis was on design of products that could be sold to the rest of the world. This turn towards an “internationalist” role of art and art education in Singapore was to continue throughout the 1970s, as seen in the National Art Education Seminar 1977: Seminar on Art Education in the Singapore Context Reports, a seminar organised by the the Singapore Art and Crafts Education Society and the Ministry of Education. A forum on “The Future of Art Education in Singapore” focused heavily on “Art and Industry” and “Art and Design Consciousness”, mirroring today’s Ministry of Information and The Arts’ emphasis on design and patentship.

However, my discovery while going through the SHM woodcut collection was that social realism in woodblock print did not completely die out after the late 1960s. Lee Boon Wang’s “Iron Workers” (Fig. 8) done in 1980 is a throwback to that bygone age of socialist ideals expressed in the image of the common men doing their work with a quiet sense of dignity. This print shows how social realism as an art style would have progressed in Singapore. Technically, Lee’s work improved on the woodblock prints of the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the detailing of the facial expression of the iron workers. However Lee was not the only one still dabbling in social realism in the 1970s. Chua Mia Tee, fellow Equator Art Society member and brother-in-law of Lee, painted a memorable oil entitled “Workers in the Canteen” in 1974 in strong social realist tones, although this work is not as strong as his earlier “National Language Class” (1950). But those were merely twilight’s last gleaming. The age of social activism in the arts had passed.

Throughout the 1980s, the history of woodblock prints was “buried”. Only in some artists’ catalogues were their woodcut works featured e.g. Lim Mu Hue’s 1990 catalogue of his artwork.\(^{28}\) But after 1998, artists and their families were willing to show and identify these woodblock print works, previously signed under pen-names. For example, Ang Chee Theng used his 1953 print, “Labourers”, taken from Selection of Works by Young Artists, for his profile in the 1999
Political Prints of Post-War Singapore

dition of the Singapore Art Society Artists’ Directory. Compare this to his entry in the 1993 edition of the Singapore Artist Directory, which used a “safer” oil painting to represent his work. Other recent art catalogues that featured woodblock prints from the 1950s and 1960s include The Selected Work of Choo Keng Kwang (2002) and See Cheen Tee: Artist Extraordinaire (2001).

These prints, to paraphrase Barbara Tuchman, serve as distant mirrors of our political past, when ideals rode strong and the guiding principle of art was not aesthetics but how it could serve the people. Art and history have been relativised in recent times by the post-modern turn. The history of woodblock prints in Singapore reminds us of a time when art made a political difference in our lives.

NOTES


5. Even nightclub hostesses contributed their hard-earned incomes to raise funds for the university. See Kee Pookong and Choi Kwai Keong, A Pictorial History of Nantah (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, 2000).

6. This event remained firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of the older generation. Recently, Lianhe Zaobao columnist, Han Sanyuan wrote about his memories of the rickshaw charity drive in his weekly column. See Lianhe Zaobao, 21 Feb. 2003.

7. See Dai’s article on woodcuts in Nanyang Siang Pau, 20 Sept. 1936. However one must acknowledge that it was not just Dai who spearheaded the woodcut movement in Singapore in the 1930s. Credit must be given to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and its first principal, Lim Hak Tai for
encouraging the study of woodcuts in the late 1930s and 1940s. Many of the woodcut artists active in the 1950s were all graduates of NAFA.


13. See note 2.

14. Koeh did an oil painting similar to “Illegal Hawking” called “Here They Come! (Escaping Hawkers)” in the mid 1950s. This painting is in the Singapore Art Museum collection.


16. Joyce Fan was able to identify the figure on the top right hand side of the print to be the artist himself. Choo had done a self-portrait and put himself in the midst of the action as one of the students, as could be seen in the school uniform he is wearing. However his positioning within the print is that of the bystander, an observer, although his sympathies were with the student body. See Fan, “Social Commentary in Prints During the 1950s and Early 1960s.”


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*The Heritage Journal / 43*
Political Prints of Post-War Singapore

19. For a detailed discussion of this, see Frank and Dorothy Getlein, *The Bite of the Print: Satire and Irony in Woodcuts, Etchings and Lithographs* (New York: Bramhall House, 1963).

20. In 1964, there was a “pen-war” between Ho Ho Ying, president of the Modern Art Society and members of the Equator Art Society in the Chinese press. Ho accused the Equator Art Society of corrupting art with politics and as a result lacking in direction and creativity in their works. Ho’s article appeared in *Sin Chew Jit Poh* on 20 June 1964 and reprinted in Ho Ho Ying, *Art Essays* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1999), pp. 26–8. Equator Art Society responded in its 1965 show catalogue: “We deeply believed that art, like any other field of study, can only be achieved through constant and serious practice and study. Unfortunately, there are artists who are only trying to copy Western art which has not the least of our local flavour. This certainly is not the art that serves to help uphold our national dignity and to help in our nation building.”

21. These quotations taken from the collaterals of the “Singapore Modern Art in the 1970s” show at the Singapore Art Museum, 17 November 2002–16 February 2003. For more on the modern art movement in Singapore, see Ho, *Art Essays*. Ho, the longtime president of the Modern Art Society, advocated the clear separation of art and politics, p. 81.

22. However it seems that despite the strong showing of annual shows by the Modern Art Society and the tacit support it received from institutions, there was an initial public resistance against Western abstract art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as it was identified with Western decadence and individualist values.


24. Information provided by Amanda Heng, 18 Dec. 2002. Heng also mentioned that art teachers in the early 1970s advice their students to avoid “sensitive” topics when participating in art competitions. 12 Apr. 2004. It is strange that abstract art was taken up by Singapore in the 1970s for its apoliticalness, just when it was exposed in the West for its political agenda. In 1974, an *Art Forum* article entitled, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War” revealed the conspiracy between the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of America. The CIA had covertly funded some of MoMA’s international exhibitions of American abstract art as part of their cultural mission to counter Soviet communism and the social realist style the Soviets expounded. The MoMa exhibitions were touted as expressions of “freedom and purity”, silently positioned in ideological contrast to the supposedly regimental nature of Soviet art. See Toby Clarke, *Art and Propaganda in the 20th Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* (London: The Everyman Art Library, 1997), pp. 8–9, 130. Also see Serge Guilbaut (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
Equator Art Society itself disbanded in 1972. Again one can point towards the circumstantial evidence of the arrest of four Nanyang Siang Pau senior executives a year earlier for mixing culture and politics, leading to their detention without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Could this event be linked to the disbanding of Equator Art Society and the general decline of social realist art in Singapore? There is no record of a visual artist being detained under the ISA for political activities, although in the mid 1970s, theatre activists like Kuo Pao Kun was detained. The “real” story behind the closing of the Equator Art Society in 1972 remains a mystery.

Interestingly, several pieces from the Six Men Show were exhibited again in the SHM show (e.g. Choo Keng Kwang’s “Hawkers” and Lim Yew Kuan’s “Attap Singapore”) and were purchased by the museum for its collection.

The exhibition was held at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 12–18 October 1968.


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