

PREFACE

Discovering the Big Picture of Southeast Asian Art

by Michelle Chin

When Marjorie Chu first opened her art gallery in Singapore in 1971, she hoped that the gallery could be a bridge or link between artists, art lovers and collectors. She opened Raya Gallery in Cuscaden House Hotel (now the Hotel Boulevard) and when the hotel was remodelled she moved Raya Gallery to the Specialists' Centre. The gallery was renamed Art Forum in 1980 when it moved to the Promenade. In 1989 Art Forum Pte Ltd relocated to its current premises - a 1920s terrace house which was brilliantly converted into an exhibition space. On the upper floor of this two-storey house there is an office and a stock room. The art collection is displayed on a rotating basis.

Before she opened her first gallery, Marjorie had an interesting career for 10 years as an accountant. Apart from working full-time, she was married and raising two young children. She was very interested in art, so she attended whatever exhibitions were held in Singapore, including the St. Andrew's Mission Hospital Charity exhibitions organised by Dr. Earl Lu. In order to understand art in general, she often visited the Singapore Art Museum, and Dr. Earl Lu was instrumental in introducing her to Chinese brush painting at the extra-mural lectures organised by the University of Singapore. Marjorie also attended a course on contemporary painting in London which taught her how to read a painting. She began by collecting sculptures by Ng Eng Teng and paintings by Lee Man Fong and Thomas Yeo.

When Marjorie decided to leave the accounting profession, she wanted to set up a business that would allow her to spend more time with her family. Because Marjorie is an accountant, she thinks like one. Firstly, having decided to set up her own business, she deduced that an art gallery required the least capital because she could take works on consignment. Secondly, she realised that she must also have a bread and butter business. In the event that no-one bought any paintings, she set up a side-business of custom framing. Marjorie thought that if she put her investment into mouldings which she could turn over three times in a year, she could then turn over her stock faster than if she put all of her investment into paintings. She guessed correctly that it would not be possible to realise her investment in a painting so quickly. If she was lucky, she might sell the painting on the next day or maybe she would have to keep it for ten years or more, as has been the case with many of the works which are in her collection. The custom framing business also proved to be a good way of getting new clients. When they came to the gallery, they looked at the works and they would often buy.

After opening her gallery, Marjorie continued to attend exhibitions held in Singapore. She acknowledges that the Alpha Gallery showed her the way to the *avant garde* artists of the time. She met many artists at Alpha Gallery, including Goh Beng Kwan, Khoo Sui Ho, Thomas Yeo, Anthony Poon and Choy Weng Yang. During the 1970s, she bought many paintings there, including works by Khoo Sui Ho and Goh Beng Kwan, and she first saw the works of Malaysian artist Latiff Mohidin at Alpha Gallery.

When Marjorie saw paintings by the Singapore Pioneer Artists and their students who had found new inspiration on their travels to Indonesia and Malaysia, she realised that being in Singapore meant that she was part of Southeast Asia. At that time, Marjorie and her contemporaries were

very excited about the formation of ASEAN. There was free trade and free movement between these countries as well as a feeling of solidarity. Until this day, she thinks of ASEAN as the five original founding member countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Singapore. Marjorie decided that she should make every possible attempt to look at the art of those five countries and that is why her collection focusses on the contemporary art of ASEAN. Although she now also has a modest collection of contemporary art from India, Australia and Japan, these works do not form the focus of her collection.

Marjorie says, "During the 1970s, I realised that I am more than a Singaporean, I am a Southeast Asian, so I followed the trail of the Pioneer Artists and went to the ASEAN countries to see for myself. In my search for artists in Southeast Asia, I used exactly the same technique that I had used in Singapore: I went to museums, exhibitions, arts colleges, and I spent as much time as possible meeting and talking with local artists." She also began long friendships with dealers in the region, especially Arturo Luz in the Philippines and Hendra Hadiprana in Jakarta, both of whom were important mentors for the young gallerist.

Marjorie sought out every artist whose work interested her. She would then either buy as many of their works as possible, or take some work on consignment. "I had no particular agenda or wish list. I relied on my eye and intuition. This has proven to be successful. Financially, I did well and I managed to cover the escalating rents for my gallery premises. However, I consider that my real success lies in my network of artists and dealers throughout Southeast Asia," she says.

After many years of collecting art, Marjorie realised that it was important to document her collection so that others might be able to understand its scope and meaning. She started by attempting to explain the works to her own family, and the text for this book actually began in the form of a letter to her daughter Audrey. Since Marjorie knows all the artists whose works she has collected, she knew that she could analyse and explain their works. However, when she started to write, she discovered that she couldn't type fast enough, so she tried a type of software that would (supposedly) type the words as she spoke. This method also proved to be unsuccessful: it seemed that the software couldn't recognise all of the words, especially as there were Indonesian, Thai, Filipino, Malaysian and Chinese names, as well as many terms such as *ikat*, batik and lost wax appearing in her writing. Marjorie also discovered that she couldn't simply record the text into a tape recorder and then have the text transcribed. Whenever she listened to what she had recorded, she would erase it all.

Eventually Marjorie decided that the only possible method might be to dictate to someone with eye contact, as if she was giving a lecture. That is where my part in this project started, and after accumulating many hours of recorded information during each trip to Singapore, I would then transcribe, edit, doctor, chop, change, and ensure that the text still sounded like Marjorie's voice. It is interesting that this writing project was made possible by the fact that - just like Maria Callas who couldn't sing in a recording studio and therefore all her recordings had to be done at live concerts - Marjorie had to perform to a live audience in order to record the material for her book. Most of the recordings were done in Singapore. Due to the flurry of activity at the gallery during the daytime, Marjorie and I would often find that the best time to work would be late at night through to the early morning hours, but unfortunately this sometimes meant that her audience might start to nod off to sleep on the sofa. Another memorable recording session took place during a bumpy train trip from Bandung to Jogjakarta, and we also recorded some of the material during trips to Bali, Jakarta and Magelang in Indonesia. The whole project was a thoroughly enjoyable learning experience which opened my eyes to the big picture of contemporary Southeast Asian art.

Rather than dividing the book into chapters about artists classified by country, we realised that it was more interesting to jumble up all the artists from the various countries into chapters that focussed on particular genres such as life drawing, still life, figurative paintings, landscapes, sculpture, abstract art, and so on. In this way it was possible for Marjorie to compare the differences between artists' styles and concepts in the various countries of Southeast Asia. She could also make cross-references between art and craft: her interest in Southeast Asian art has led her to study woven textiles, wax resist batik techniques, lacquer, ceramics and bronze casting. One chapter focusses on field trips with artists to Bali, Australia, China, India and Scotland; and there are three chapters focussed on individual artists - Srihadi Soedarsono, Goh Beng Kwan and Chua Ek Kay.

During the process of documenting her collection, Marjorie realised that she had discovered important elements in the language of contemporary Southeast Asian art, summarised by the following points:

- Chinese brush techniques have transcended ink on paper
- the influence of craft, ritual and folk colours on art
- black and white are accepted colours in Southeast Asian art
- preference for vertical and horizontal composition
- paper and canvas are equally important media in art

We would like to thank Audrey Reeve for her critical reading and provocative questions during the editing process; Mary Tolman for her thorough proof-reading of the final draft; Chen Shen Po for her dexterity in locating the various maps which were then hand-drawn by Marjorie Chu; and Pandu for his expertise in manipulating the colour-corrections of the scanned images.

As we worked on the final revisions of the text, we could see the magnificent Borobodur temple only a few hundred metres away. At that moment, we realised that *Understanding Contemporary Southeast Asian Art* is the most appropriate title for this book because Marjorie is most interested in contemporary Southeast Asian art, and she understands the "Big Picture" of Asian art.

* Michelle Chin is a writer and translator. She coordinated the publication project *Understanding Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*.