

Report

## S.E.A. Focus and Singapore Art Week 2019

By Diana d'Arenberg  
Singapore, 1 February 2019



Yeo Kaa, *WUD YA DO IT*, Yavuz Gallery, S.E.A. Focus, Singapore (24–27 January 2019). Courtesy S.E.A. Focus.

**Art fairs are like the Hydra—chop one head off and several more sprout up in its place. This month saw the inauguration of two new fairs in Asia alone, with Taipei Dangdai kicking off in the third week of January, followed by S.E.A. Focus**

the very next week in Singapore (24–27 January 2019). February also sees the launch of the first edition of Frieze I.A. with the first Art SG set to happen in

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galleries from Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world'.

Part of Singapore Art Week, S.E.A. Focus (S.E.A. stands for South East Asia) launched just as Art Stage Singapore was abruptly cancelled, days before it was set to open its ninth edition, leaving 45 participating galleries who had already paid for attendance in the lurch. (With visitor attendance dropping from 51,000 in 2015 to 26,500 last year, the 2018 edition already showed signs of a sad decline.) Art Stage director Lorenzo Rudolf, who transformed a modest Art Basel in the 1990s into a mega-fair and developed the concept for Art Basel Miami Beach, blamed declining exhibitors and lack of interest on Singapore's difficult art market.



S.E.A. Focus, Singapore (24–27 January 2019). Courtesy S.E.A. Focus.

In contrast to Rudolf's assertions, Singapore has been trying to position itself as a regional arts and culture hub in recent years. The government put SGD 420.8 million into arts and heritage in 2017, and a new five-year plan introduced by the National Arts Council in 2018 aims to invigorate the city-state's literary, performing, and visual arts sectors by increasing support for freelance professionals, fostering



international partnerships, and cultivating audiences, among other aims. With the launch of the Singapore Biennale (2006), the School of the Arts (SOTA) (2008).

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been forged.

S.E.A. Focus, a project of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, is a product of this movement. The boutique fair intends to spotlight regional art, representing 26 Singaporean and regional galleries and artists. 'We saw a gap in the marketplace dedicated to Southeast Asian art,' fair and STPI director Emi Eu explained in a speech delivered during the vernissage, which buzzed with local and regional collectors. That night, Filipino artist Yeo Kaa, dressed as a human-sized, pink-haired doll, smashed her way through suspended, wide-eyed kawaii piñatas, spraying fluorescent paint and glitter all over her dedicated booth with Yavuz Gallery.



S.E.A. Focus, Singapore (24–27 January 2019). Courtesy S.E.A. Focus.

Emerging art from the region was spread out across three tents in the Gillman Barracks arts complex, with galleries from Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and Japan. A soil-covered floor accompanied sculptures, paintings, and drawings by Malaysian artist Shooshie Sulaiman at Tomio Koyama

Gallery's booth, drawing on the culture of her homeland and personal memory. Jan Manton Art from Brisbane displayed walls of hand-painted cut-out metal wall

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puppetry from Jakarta by Indonesian-Australian artist, Jumaadi. Sydney- and Singapore-based Sullivan+Strumpf showed a series of engraved stone monuments in marble and granite by Singapore-based artist Dawn Ng, one bearing the words of green foods and objects (*Green*, 2017), another a list of don'ts (*DON'T*, 2018).

From further afield, Los Angeles gallery Commonwealth and Council presented several elegant abstract sculptures and drawings on paper that played with the idea of doubling by Colombian-Korean L.A.-based Gala Porras-Kim, a young artist whose work in recent years has been shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Hammer Museum.



Dawn Ng, *DON'T* (2017). Engraved granite. 90.8 x 37 x 37 cm; *Perfect Stranger* (2017). Engraved Rosso Atlanta marble. 27.6 x 72 x 28.3 cm; *Box* (2017). Engraved Red Marinace marble. 45.6 x 28.4 x 28.4 cm; *Green* (2017). Engraved green marble. 81 x 23 x 23 cm (left to right). Exhibition view: Sullivan+Strumpf, S.E.A. Focus, Singapore (24–27 January 2019). Courtesy the artist.

A number of booths showed artists with practices that reflect and expand on personal experience. At Melbourne's Niagara Galleries, Lao-Australian artist Savanhdary Vongpoothorn's abstract acrylic and coloured pencil on perforated

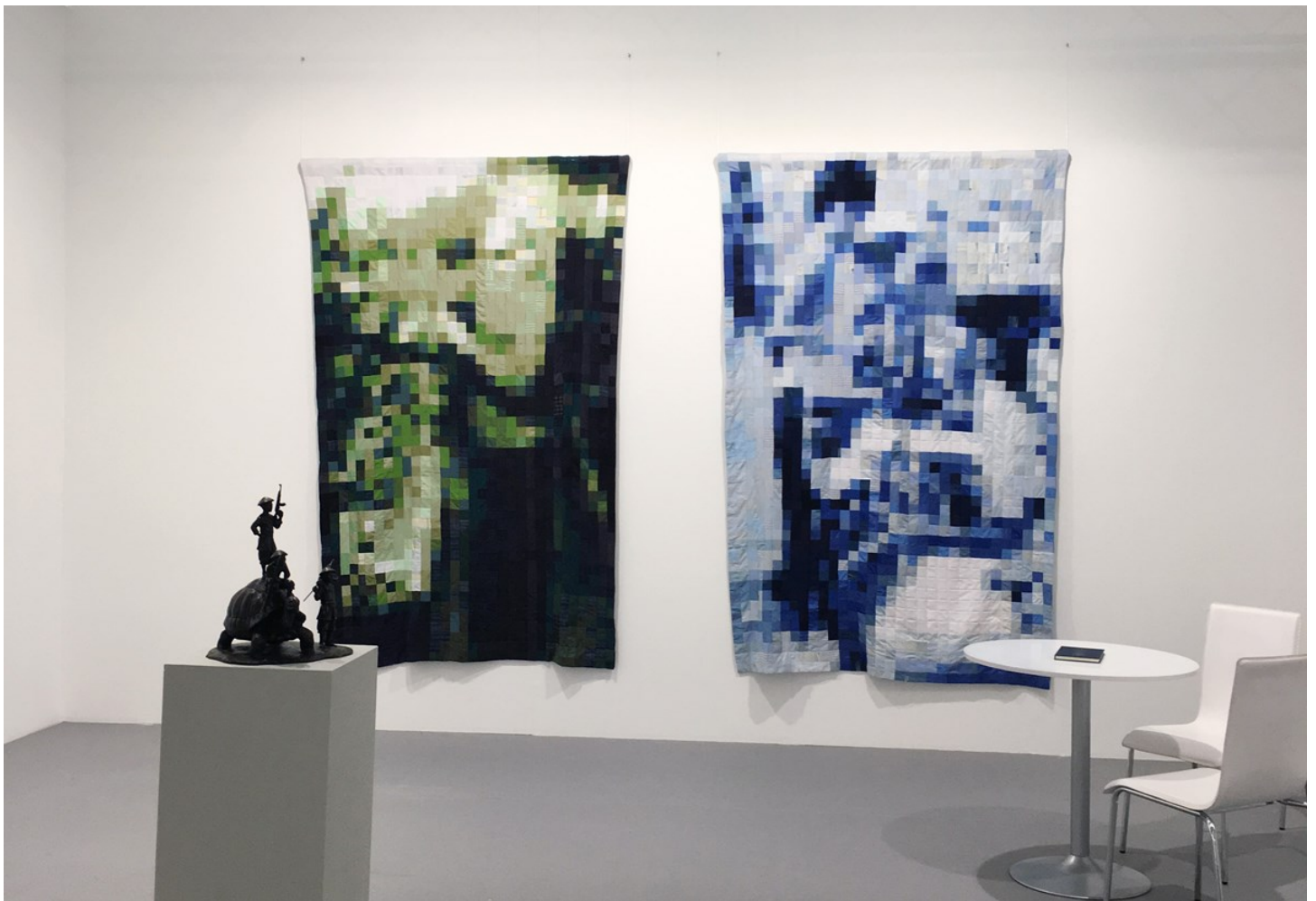


canvas works from 2011 to 2018 commanded attention. The artist, who came to Australia as a refugee, often explores the idea of living in two cultures. Fusing

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modern abstract art, Vongpoothorn incorporates elements of Theravada Buddhism into repetitious, painted, and punctured canvases, with series titles that include 'Interlace', 'Net', and 'Resound'.

Taipei-based Galerie Ovo presented a bright booth of colourful narrative works on paper—some on flattened cartons—by young Taiwanese artist Ni Jui Hung, which fuse pop and miniature painting styles. Drawings like *The Chart To Hell* (2017), a beach scene that includes a pink dolphin with red globules pouring out of a wound and a girl riding on a broom stick, were shown alongside a series of psychedelic back-lit clock installations that portray the artist in various states of idealised womanhood—such as the perfect housewife, a chic woman travelling to Paris, or a loving bride holding her husband.



Nguyen Manh Hung, *Checkpoint* (2016). Bronze, edition 3 +1AP; Vo Tran Chau, *Green* (2018). Used clothes. 255 x 165 cm; *Blue* (2018). Used clothes. 255 x 165 cm. Exhibition view: Galerie Quynh, S.E.A. Focus, Singapore (24–27 January 2019). Courtesy Galerie Quynh.

History was also a subject that resonated between booths. Timoteus Anggawan Kusno's installation with Seoul-based gallery The Columns. *Forget Hannv Land*

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issues of historical memory and postcolonial experience in Indonesia. At Galerie Quynh, based in Ho Chi Minh, 33-year-old Vietnamese artist Vo Tran Chau explored issues surrounding labour, consumption, and waste with pixelated quilts based on photos from the 1960s depicting workers in Vietnamese textile factories. These textile mosaics are comprised of thousands of squares cut from used clothes illegally sent to Vietnam, with each quilt reflecting distinct cultural and political climates of north and south Vietnam during the conflict with the U.S.

Alongside S.E.A. Focus, Gillman Barracks' roster of galleries played host to a number of exhibitions. ShanghART Singapore delivered a nature-derived art exhibition by Indonesian artist Boedi Widjaja, *Rivers and lakes Tanah dan air* (7 December 2018–17 February 2019), which takes Singapore's historic Fort Canning Hill as a point of departure. Hangzhou-based artist Cheng Ran, who calls Hangzhou 'the new Berlin', was in focus at OTA Fine Arts (*The Lament: Mountain Ghost*, 12 January–23 February 2019). Richard Koh Fine Art collaborated with Marc Straus, to show a site-specific installation conflating Western minimalism with Eastern Mono-ha by Jong Oh.



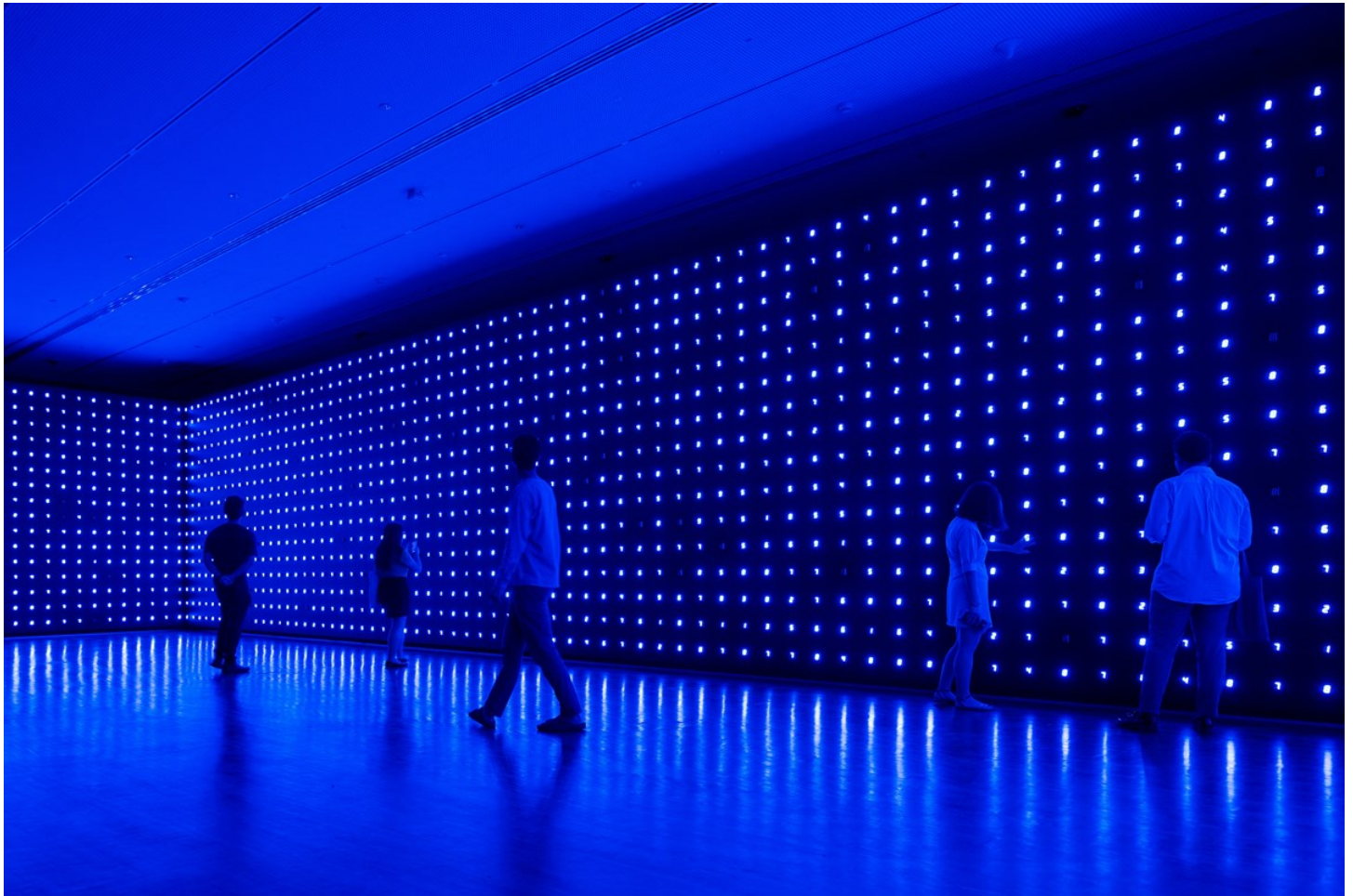




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*Object* at ArtScience Museum and the National Gallery Singapore (16 November 2018–14 April 2019), which includes the greatest hits of minimalism, exploring how the movement was inspired by Asian philosophies and artistic styles. Represented artists include Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Richard Long, and Cuban-American artist Carmen Herrera, as well as Asian minimalists Zhang Yu, Tan Ping, and contemporary artists whose work expands on minimalism, like Hong Kong-based Morgan Wong. A Sound Room dedicated to minimalist composers features a programme of music by John Cage, Arvo Pärt, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, as well as precursors to minimalist music like Erik Satie and Arnold Schönberg.



Tatsuo Miyajima, *Mega Death* (1999/2016). LED, IC, electric wire and infrared sensor. Dimensions variable. Domus Collection. Exhibition view: *Minimalism: Space. Light. Object.*, National Gallery Singapore (16 November 2018–14 April 2019). © Domus Collection and Tatsuo Miyajima. Photo: National Gallery Singapore.

The Singapore Art Museum (SAM), currently under renovation, showcased emerging talent in its 2018 *President's Young Talents* prize exhibition at its 8Q annex (4 October 2018–27 January 2019). Organised by SAM, this mentoring, commissioning, and awards exposition is aimed at nurturing emerging artists

under the age of 35, with its seventh edition featuring five Singaporean artists: Zarina Muhammad, Yanvun Chen, Debbie Ding, Weixin Ouek Chong, and Hilmi

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Chong was the recipient of the grand prize with her bold, playful, and sensual installation *Sft crsh ctrl* (2018), consisting of digital images, textile installations made of latex, silk, and fur (including a butt-plug adorned suspended furry sculpture), video, and sound that explored online subcultures and fetishes. Visitors were invited to touch the items on display to a fetishistic soundscape of scrunches, scratches, and slurps found on ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) websites. Not your usual day out in Singapore.



Weixin Quek Chong, *Sft crsh ctrl* (2018). Exhibition view: *President's Young Talents*, Singapore Art Museum (4 October 2018–27 January 2019). Courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

There was also a programme of artist open studios around the city, encouraging visitors to interact directly with artists including Ruben Pang, Guo-Liang Tan, Mike HJ Chang, Cheong Kah Kit, and Dawn Ng. Private collections were highlighted at ArtScience Museum's *IMPART Collectors' Show 2019: Fabulous Monsters* (17 January–2 February 2019) and *Of Dreams and Contemplation: Selections from the Collection of Richard Koh* at The Private Museum (23 January–3 March 2019).





the time of Art Week had still not heard back from Art Stage organisers, nor been notified of any reimbursement.

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This sense of community marked Singapore Art Week in 2019, with S.E.A. Focus offering a welcome shift. As one young Singaporean art advisor and collector remarked: 'It's a nice change. The pace is more laid back. It feels more like a community, and less like a luxury shopping mall.' A contrast to comments heard during Taipei Dangdai, with some gallerists stating their plans to skip a number of the larger art fairs in 2019 altogether, and one collector attending the new Taipei fair complaining about large art fairs doing nothing more than 'encourag[ing] a production-line approach to art-making.'



S.E.A. Focus, Singapore (24–27 January 2019). Courtesy S.E.A. Focus.

Overall, dealers were pleased, with Richard Koh Fine Art reporting a sold-out booth of works by Singaporean artist Faris Nakamura. 47 Canal and Jan Manton Art also reported sales to collectors in the region. Several local collectors, like Michelangelo and Lourdes Samson and Dr John Chia and Cheryl Loh, opened up their homes for VIP groups.



Perhaps S.E.A. Focus is a timely and welcome panacea to the homogenisation of experience brought on by traditional market-based art fairs. 'Look, the art market is

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commented. 'I think S.E.A. has created a more accessible fair. There is a context.' The collector pointed to Art Basel Cities as an example of the future: '[Art Basel] know that the art fair model can't be sustained forever. So, they're trying to create an art ecology in a host city—like Buenos Aires. It's art beyond the booth or a freezing convention centre. It's art in the context of culture, of history, and politics.' —[O]

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