

Multidisciplinary learning and an extension beyond an exhibition. Presenting a case study: *Constructed landscapes: Singapore in Southeast Asia* – Exhibition at the National University of Singapore Museum

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Abstract

An exhibition Constructed landscapes: Singapore in Southeast Asia is presented at the National University of Singapore Museum (NUS Museum) with the intention for teaching and research in various interdisciplinary levels and fields at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and exploring further development and opportunities within the education community in Singapore.

The year-long 2009 core exhibition presents a thematic and multidimensional approach on the Singapore landscapes and proposes a fresh reading and interpretation of the rich archive of artworks drawn from the museum's more than 50 year old Southeast Asian collection. Engagement is made with various teaching professors at NUS faculties from History, Geography, Sociology, South and Southeast Asian studies, Communications and New Media, Biological Sciences, and other tertiary level institutions to incorporate the exhibition as a teaching resource in their modules. Assignments are designed in-relation to course study and using the works as an informative platform for student's initial research.

In conjunction with the exhibition, forums and film screening are organized alongside five walking tours at specific sites in Singapore. This collective programming enhances intellectual discourse and critical thinking using various approaches to frame, cast contemporary issues of the nation, its city, architecture and the varied materials used in referencing the changing landscape.

Introduction

University Museums are essential to the academic experience and to the entire educational enterprise. But it is not new or surprising when University Museums worldwide are faced with adversity and decisions made to consider closing the museum, arranged and specified by senior administrative management without the involvement of museum staff and inputs from museum professionals. NUS Museum was also not spared and experienced 2 exercises. For three years (2005 – 2007), a special committee was set up by senior management to evaluate the closing of the museum and the potential sale of its collection to the state museums in Singapore. Two considerations raised were: a university's focus should be on education and not diversify its resources to manage a museum, and the university could gain a substantial amount from the sale of its collection.

As newly recruited staff at the museum, we were trying ways to inform the management that this University Museum (the only one of its kind in Singapore - the first Museum of art in Singapore and the then Malaya) was of historical importance to the University and the Nation, with its valuable collection and irreplaceable community service, have immense educational value. In order for the museum to show its relevance to its community and the richness of its collection, the permanent collection exhibition was immediately launched in late 2006 as an annual year-long series sourced from its Southeast Asian Collection.

History of NUS Museum and its collection

The University Art Museum (precursor of NUS Museum) was inaugurated in 1955 at the University of Malaya in Singapore. Michael Sullivan was appointed as the founding curator and lecturer in art

history (1954-60), started the collection in understanding modernity of Asia and the Malayan culture. This collection was instrumental in the teaching and study of Art History. Its holding of acquired paintings served as a vital archive and resource to interpret landscapes and themes in Singapore and Southeast Asia. The aims of the art museum in 1955 was to locate in the university a centre for study and enjoyment of art; provide a two year program in art history as a subsidiary subject; create a centre for research into the art and archaeology of Southeast Asia; gather a representative collection of civilizations that contributed to Malayan culture (SABAPATHY 2002).

In 1972, the vice-chancellor of the university conveyed his decisions to the Minister of Culture on his decision to close the art museum, citing two reasons: the disinterest of students in the study of art history and isolation of the art museum leading to the absence of visitors. The museum and art history department was closed on 31 January 1973 with the second curator, William Willetts' contract not renewed. Willetts who arrived at the University in 1963 was then approached to be the curator and art history lecturer at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur after Singapore's separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. The collection was divided into two and moved to be housed at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur in 1972. On 26 February 2002, the remaining collections from the University was housed together and named the NUS Museum at the University Cultural Centre in campus. The Museum's collection today is diverse, ranging from classical Chinese and Indian materials to modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art.

Re-looking at the permanent collection exhibition

How do we conceptualize this? Exhibitions from permanent collections are important to museums. They reflect on the identity of the museum and re-enforces its mission and mandate. The educational role of the museum is a major justification and important function. Without an art history department at the university, our current team at the NUS Museum sees the Museum as a catalyst – integral to NUS, supporting NUS' vision of being global knowledge enterprise, leading global university centered in Asia, influencing the future. Our four main collections and practices are a resource for teaching and research to help NUS transform the way people think and do things through education, research and service. The museum's value lies in very tangible ways beyond heritage sentimentality.

Keeping the notion of the UMAC 2009 conference theme in using the university collections to work in research and teaching, I would like to present *Constructed Landscapes* exhibition, which I co-curated, as a case study to illustrate my point.

While working on the 3rd change of the permanent collection exhibition at the NUS Museum, I asked myself the following questions:

- How can we do it differently than the last 2 exhibitions on our permanent collection?
- How do we tie in with the theme on Art & Environment in the University's Art Festival for 2009?
- How can we relook at the mission and objective of a collection, which was first introduced as a teaching collection in 1955? Sullivan's mandate
- How do we make it relevant to students in the University?
- How could the works be used as points of learning?

From a collection of 8,000 objects with over 200 pieces of modern paintings at the NUS Museum, works on landscape was most predominant. Naturally an exhibition on the theme landscape was birthed. From the start, I was determined to explore and present the polarity of landscapes - the real and the fictitious, to reflect on the commitment to the geographical focus of the collection, which need not be presented in a chronological order and also to present how landscapes are mentally constructed differently by each person, according to one's experiences. Thus, the exhibition was

conceptualized as a thematic exhibition bringing together varied media with an underlying abstract narrative that is able to further decontextualize and construct.

Concept: Exhibition as a learning module

In the modern age, knowledge is no longer shaped by the secret, enclosed, circulating structures of the Renaissance episteme; nor by flat, classificatory table of difference of the classical episteme; now knowledge is structured through a three dimensional, holistic experience which is defined through its relationship to people. The act of knowing is shaped through a mix of experience, activity, and pleasure in an environment where both the 'learning' subject and the 'teaching' subject have equal powers. Subject positions are more closely related than in the past; former divisions are now bridged in a number of different ways. Where both the object and the curator are decentred, the audience has new opportunities (HOOPER-GREENHILL 1992).

With the selected artworks and a brief curatorial concept, the exhibition was proposed to two architecture professors teaching History & Theory of Southeast Asian Architecture to seek their collaboration to use the exhibition in their module. Once agreed, the exhibition's intention was to reach out to varied audience with programs designed as part of the components in the exhibition. We included two forums (for academics and students), film screening and walking tours (designed to supplement the appreciation of static display, which public can now personally experience the specific site physically and spatially). Separate Walking tours were also conducted for the architectural students.

With the agreement of the professors, varied roles and responsibilities were identified – each of the professors moderated each forum session, conducted a walking tour and planned their teaching syllabus using the exhibition with images of the selected works compiled by the Museum. One of the professors later suggested to co-curate the exhibition with me.

1. The Intention of the exhibits – Makers of culture

Without an acquisition budget, works were borrowed to supplement the gaps in the collection. Borrowing these works allowed us to include young and unknown talents in Singapore, and to revive our Museum's permanent collection with a renewed understanding of the work placed in context. The idea was to put the art (but not necessarily art history) into the forefront of our thinking. Works selected were intended to embrace varied media in the exhibition. They are now used as tools for students' own research and learning in varied fields rather than art for art's sake. This encourages and enhances multi-disciplinary learning.

Presented in three sections – "Engagement", "Memory" and "Imagination", these mark themes on the subject of landscapes through paintings, drawings, textile, video documentation and sculptures. Personal and collective memories, imagination, relationships with physical spaces, may all be discerned in the works. The depiction of landscape may be seen as entailing a cultural process for an artist: it emerges from and corresponds to everyday experiences and beyond. The sites represented may be interpreted as material registers of the physical landscape, or as symbols, metaphors of ideals.

The Museum has been known for its collection of Woodblock prints. To further the education of our repeated audience and art students, contextual materials are added to the section on prints specifically using the drawings and materials to accentuate the process of woodblock print and also borrowing a woodblock from the artist's family. With static objects selected, a film work by a medical anthropologist, Ivan Polunin was included. One of the earliest to own a colored film in the 50s, Polunin took landscapes of Singapore in the 50s – 70s. The film provides a glimpse of the cultural activities of

Singapore then, such as activities around the port of the Singapore River, the Buddhist nun initiation, Indian Thaipusam rituals, Malay wedding – all these scenes reflect an active, dynamic form and process of a living landscape.

2. Designing the brochure

The brochure was intended to be given freely to students from the modules. With a focused intention of the exhibition specifically for teaching and research, the design and layout of the brochure was also kept in sync as a reference material for students' use. Contents in the brochure include curatorial writings, a page dedicated to the gallery's layout specifying the works, a referencing system for the works to be seen as thumbnails and public programs for the whole year were listed.

3. Programs – Diversity of voices, community based and audience driven

Programs were created to complement the exhibition while at the same time addressing contemporary concerns. These can be connected to multi-disciplinary learning and timely topics to art and to the museum. Speakers from disciplines in Singapore history, urban planning, architecture and building conservation were invited to share their papers. The two forums on pre-colonial and post colonial landscapes, attracted a diverse audience from members of public, academics, students and even new residents in Singapore.

4. Worksheets for students by students

With limited resources at the museum, without an educational officer and only one active docent, I had developed two types of worksheets for younger audience – a simplified version for seven to twelve years old and another for 13 to 16 year olds. These worksheets were immediately downloaded into the museum's website for teachers who were interested in bringing school groups without the need of a guided tour.

Extremely effective idea was getting student interns to design worksheets for students of varied levels. Besides having the intern's ownership on the worksheets, it was an eye opener to see how the intern understood the exhibition and took leadership in "teaching" by designing three new worksheets for audience who are six years and below.

Cold call – Multidisciplinary learning

For a 'living' exhibition to be a learning module in campus, let me illustrate my point through this diagram of a communicative circle, which shows the evolving process of an exhibition that engages the communities, extends beyond the exhibition and translates its value within the education community. Works/ objects are used for study (through brochures and guided tours); extends to research and learning for students (with the help of the intended design and layout of the brochures); through experiential learning (walking tours, forums and programs) and coincide programs with major national festivals and the university art festival. Using this communicative circle, assignments are developed by professors through existing modules taught. With the year long permanent collection exhibition in placed, other temporary exhibitions and projects are planned to accentuate the learning.

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