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Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, Volume  
4, Number 1, March 2020, pp. 163-166 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd



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[ Access provided at 10 Apr 2020 11:29 GMT with no institutional affiliation ]



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# Some Critical Reflections on Designing and Teaching an Asian Modern and Contemporary Art Histories Programme

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When I convened what was then—in 2010—a pioneering programme in Asian modern and contemporary art histories (the MA in Asian Art Histories Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore), there were many questions relating to terminologies, pedagogical structure, philosophical positioning, as well as methodological challenges that needed to be addressed. As Asian modern and contemporary art histories was a new field of academic study, there were virtually no precedents to benchmark it against. But this also provided an opportunity to generate new discourses, new knowledge and new methodological approaches from the research done by faculty and students.

At the core of these questions is the term ‘Asia’, itself a historical and political and indeed discursive construct as much as a geographical entity. The Programme circumvented the limitation imposed by this term by adopting a thematic or topical approach as a pedagogical strategy, rather than a country-based one as with most programmes that deal with pre-modern Asian art. Lessons for each theme or topic are supported by visual examples drawn from Southeast Asia, South Asia (notably India) and East Asia. By doing so, it ran the risk of pre-supposing a certain ‘regional coherence’. The Programme is conscious of this conundrum and the challenge has been to navigate between and across local, national, regional and global narratives, and understanding the particularities of individual contexts as much as any cross-cultural currents. One of the aims of the Programme is also to allow further interrogation of the

[ **Southeast of Now**  
Vol. 4 No. 1 (March 2020), pp. 163–66 ]

connectivities between the art, artists and art worlds of the countries that make up Asia and Southeast Asia.

In recent years, the Programme has come to focus increasingly on the Southeast Asian region as it is where its knowledge, expertise and resources lie. The opening of the National Gallery, Singapore in 2015 has also made artworks, exhibitions and archival materials of the Southeast Asian region much more accessible, and such experiential learning will undoubtedly have pedagogical and research implications on the way that Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art histories are being taught and received.

The MA Programme was structured to move beyond the Western epistemic tradition and ontological definitions of art as well as its limitations in understanding the diverse art practices of the region. This becomes all the more challenging in a modern and contemporary art history programme in terms of trying to appropriate these paradigmatic concepts and contextualizing them within the art writing, histories and practices of the region. It became necessary as a result to foreground and problematise these concepts at a theoretical level (together with alternative concepts developed to explain local and regional contexts such as multimodernisms, neo-traditionalism and decoloniality), so that students understand that the unique local conditions and contexts of the region, such as the encounter with colonialism and belatedness in art historical developments, mean that the 'modern' and the 'contemporary' cannot be discussed in strictly Euro-American terms.

The use of the plural 'histories' rather than the singular 'history' was much debated. The use of the plural 'histories' in the title of the Programme represents its philosophy and, in many ways, its theoretical position. The plural 'histories' is an assertion that the diverse traditions, cultural specificities as well as complex racial, ethnic and religious mix of the region do not conform neatly to preconceived and stereotypical ideas of a homogenous 'Asia', the 'Orient' or 'Other', as seen through the lens of Western paradigms. It suggests the intersecting histories (and art histories) of the region, as well as the engagement of the countries in the region with one another, their shared historical experiences and confrontation with the West. By taking this approach, the Programme affords variegated and multilayered readings and considerations of Asian art, reflected in the complexities of the historical specificities and cultural traditions and complicated by the specificities of social and political contexts within and beyond national boundaries. The use of the plural 'histories' thus defies any attempt to homogenise Asian art into a singular history' that does not take into account the complex processes of tradition and change that have shaped and continue to re-shape it.

There was also the question of time frame. Although the Programme's scope covers the modern and contemporary periods from the 19th century to the 21st century, such a linear sequencing is avoided in the module structure and pedagogical approach of the Programme. For example, both modern and contemporary examples are juxtaposed during lessons to illustrate a particular issue or case study, which also reflects the rather ambiguous relationship between these two terms in the context of the region's art historical development. Being an art history programme, there is also the question of the historicization of the contemporary. What should the historical distance be between the time of what is produced and what is being taught and how does this impact on what students can or cannot research? As such, there is this tension between the need to keep current of the art scene and the need to maintain a certain distance in order to research, write and evaluate with a more critical eye.

The pedagogical approach of the Programme is predicated on the position that Southeast Asian art histories should be taught on its own terms as far as possible. But how do we do this without falling into essentialist tendencies and still be able to engage in a global discourse? The Programme had sought to develop pedagogical strategies that tried, in very deliberate and selective ways, to move away from the Western lens of looking at art history by, for example, privileging the reading of texts by Asian scholars (or Western scholars who have formulated alternative models of studying Asian art), by provoking students to think of the possibilities and limits of Western methodologies in framing Southeast Asian art and by recontextualizing theories and terminologies that have a Western point of origin.

The year 2019 marks the 10th year of the MA in Asian Art Histories Programme. The Programme continues to evolve in a rapidly changing art ecosystem of the region. In the first few years of the Programme's existence in the early 2010s, where discourse of the field was under-developed and secondary materials were scarce and were approached via Western art theory and other non-regional material, students needed to do fieldwork as a primary form of research. Writing and research in the field have grown exponentially in the past decade. However, I am still of the view that field research such as interviews and archival research are vitally important in building up discourse in a relatively new field. Primary fieldwork will also allow students to research and write about Southeast Asian art histories from the perspective of the various players and practitioners of the region. I am delighted to say that students and graduates of the Programme have made and continue to make original contributions to the field through their primary research, which have helped to build up the regional art historical discourse.

The final point of reflection is the challenges of running an MA programme with students from a diversity of background and of not having a corresponding BA programme that could have provided students with the relevant training and knowledge. This is mediated by instituting a bridging course that offers a series of introductory lectures and basic texts to build up the foundational knowledge of students before they start the actual programme. The lectures include pre-modern Asian art, Western modernism as well as basic art theory and key art historical concepts that will equip students with the necessary knowledge to cope with the more intellectually challenging readings and lessons when the programme starts.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Jeffrey Say** is the programme leader of the MA in Asian Art Histories Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts. As an art historian, Say undertook pioneering research on the history of sculpture in pre- and post-war Singapore. His co-edited work, *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art* (2016), remains a critical anthology for researchers, curators and students on Singapore art. He is currently working on a second volume, which is a reader on Singapore modern art. Say is a public advocate of the importance of art and art history to Singapore. He is a frequent speaker at the National Library, museums and art spaces.