

An Exploration on the Representation of the Nation through Art Exhibitions in Singapore and Philippine:

Comparing *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century* at National Gallery Singapore and *The Philippine Contemporary: to Scale the Past and the Possible* at Metropolitan Museum Manila

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Question: Compare two or three exhibitions on Southeast Asian art on Southeast Asian art, from any period, anywhere in Southeast Asia. In order to do this, you must first select, explain, and defend your methodology/ies for comparison. These may include visual analysis, or discussion of social, political, cultural, or other historical context/s, or some other means. To what extent does your comparison of these two or three exhibitions suggest difference and disparity between times and locations in Southeast Asia, and to what extent does it suggest characteristics that are shared within the region?

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1. Abstract

This essay is going to compare the exhibitions *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century* at National Gallery Singapore and *The Philippine Contemporary: to Scale the Past and the Possible* at Metropolitan Museum Manila and explore on how the representation of the nation of Singapore and Philippine are displayed within and beyond the exhibitions.

The first part of the essay gave an overview of the two exhibitions, on their structures, themes, and narratives. Followed by establishing the methodologies are used to compare the two exhibitions. The second part of the essay is going to explore the entangled relationship between history and the exhibition, by comparing different elements in Singapore and Philippine history to gain an understanding of the exhibition, and on the other hand, comparing the collection in order to understand the social, cultural and historical development in the two countries. Last part of the essay is going to give a critical reflection on the modernity in Southeast Asia and what we can learn from comparing the two exhibitions.

2. An Overview of the Exhibitions

Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century is the largest permanent exhibition in National Gallery Singapore, opened along with National Gallery Singapore 2015, spread over level 3 to 5, to nearly 3,000 square meters; the exhibition features 400 artworks present a cohesive regional narrative about Southeast Asian modern art from the late 19th century to the present. The exhibition draws from Singapore's National Collection as well as a selection of important artworks from collections in the region, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand

The exhibition is curated chronically with 4 themes: **Authority and Anxiety (19th to early 20th century)**: the birth of modern art in Southeast Asia in the significant social changes of the 19th century; **Imagining Country and Self (1900s to 1940s)**: the growth of art schools in Southeast Asia and influenced by western art; **Manifesting the Nation (1950s to 1970s)**: the style of social realism documented political events and issues during and after World War II; **Re:Defining Art (post 1970s)**: using a wider range of approaches and materials concerned with political and cultural issues.¹

The Philippine Contemporary: to Scale the Past and the Possible is the permanent exhibition at Metropolitan Museum of Manila from 2013. The exhibition features 220 artworks from early 20th century

to the present in the Philippine, on the second floor of the gallery. This exhibition tries to map the history of modern and contemporary art in the Philippines.

The exhibition is divided into 5 themes, with a mixture of timeline, location and subject: **Horizon (1915-1964)**: images making preceded Spanish colonialism and in the course of time was shaped by the spiritual demands of the colonial religion; **Trajectory (1965-1983)**: the modernism of Philippine began with the opening of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. **Latitude (1984-present)**: activities in art worlds became more dynamic and collectives emerged to forge collaborative involving communities and lying beyond the solitary studio and the individualist career; **Sphere (Bacolod)**: A focus on Bacolod as an art world with its own history and practitioners is a case in point; **Direction (Naturaleza)**: movements and conditions of recent and current art and calibrates the modern in relation to the contemporary.²

3. Methodologies on Comparison

The reasons of picking these two particular exhibitions is that both are permanent exhibition at a national art institution in Singapore or the Philippine, hinting the importance of the collection to their nation, yet the curatorial approach is very distinct from each other; while **Between Declarations and Dreams** holds a collection across Southeast Asia Art and **The Philippine Contemporary** is focusing on a local context.*

Art History and art exhibition is directly connected and essential to each other; histories shaped the formation of the exhibition in terms of the collections and curatorial narratives, while the exhibition is reflecting the social and cultural context of society at a given time or place, archiving part of the history from objects to ideas, then transcending through time that makes history.³

The essay is going to discuss the relationship between the histories of the two nations and the portrayal of the nation's modernity through the two defining exhibitions. Simply put, by comparing the history of Singapore and Philippine helps to understand more about the exhibitions, on what are showed and why they are showed or why things are decided and done in certain ways and vice versa, comparing the exhibition can help to understand the history.

First, the essay is going to compare the art history in Singapore and Philippine from the late 19th century to the present, and how that is reflected from the collections of artworks through styles or subjects; Then, by comparing the history and social values in Singapore and Philippine, to seek the reasons causing

the differences in curatorial narrative and priorities of the two exhibitions; thirdly, to compare the representation of each exhibition and how are they significant in the contemporary art history in Singapore and Philippine, and further explore whether Singapore and Philippine share a similar trajectory towards the contemporary Southeast Asia art history.

** The reason of choosing **Between Declarations and Dreams** to **Siapa Nama Kamu?**, another permanent exhibition about Singaporean artists in National Gallery Singapore is because the essay is going to comparing the curatorial decision on the reasons of having a regional collection rather than a just local collection.*

4.1 Comparing History and Curatorial Approaches

The history of Singapore and Philippine is significantly different from each other, in terms of the formation of the countries, colonization background, social groups to modern development as so. These factors are what differing the curatorial narrative whether showing a national collection or a regional collection.

Looking back the history of the founding of Philippine, the inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago had developed into different tribes by 1000 BC; and during the pre-colonial period (900 AD – 1565), traditional art had been developed including religious art, tribal craftsmanship and so. Philippine was invaded and colonized by the Spanish during the 16th century.⁴

Philippine has a vast background for its own pre-modern art history and the nation's modernity is claimed to begin during the Spanish colonial era, where adaptation of religious paintings and architectures of churches were commissioned to produce by the Filipinos. By the late 18th century, the art scene in Philippine is shifting from religious to academic style under the influence in Europe.⁵ The first formal art school in the country, the Academia de Dibujo y Pintura, established in 1823, closed in 1834 and re-opened again in 1850, with professors from Spain.⁶ The western brushwork with the subject of Filipino became popular among Europe in the 19th Century. Several



The Palay Maiden by Fernando Amorsolo, Philippine

Filipino painters had the chance to study and work abroad including Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo who became the first international Filipino artists when they won the gold and silver medals in the 1884 Madrid Exposition.

The richness of the content during Philippine's modernity and how that is historically significant to the nation explained the importance of *The Philippine Contemporary* as a temporary exhibition that begins with modern artwork of Philippine as one of the milestones in the nation's art history.

Singapore is a much newer nation comparing to the Philippine so to their art history. In 1819, the port of Singapore was established by Sir Stamford Raffles, who opened the port to free trade and free immigration on the south coast of the island. By 1827, the population of the island was composed of people from various ethnic groups including, Chinese, Malay, Indian etc. rather than having their own tribes like in the Philippine.⁷



Forest Fire by Raden Saleh, Indonesia

With a large population of Chinese, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was established in 1938, where Nanyang style, a significant art movement in Singapore, dominated the artistic climate in Singapore during the 50s to 80s.⁸

The collection of Singaporean artwork is exhibited at the *Siapa Nama Kamu?* that is a smaller scale exhibition than *Between Declarations and Dreams*.

One of the reasons I believe the curatorial thoughts behind of having a regional collection is because of the national collection is lack of significances toward a more universal understanding of 'modernism',

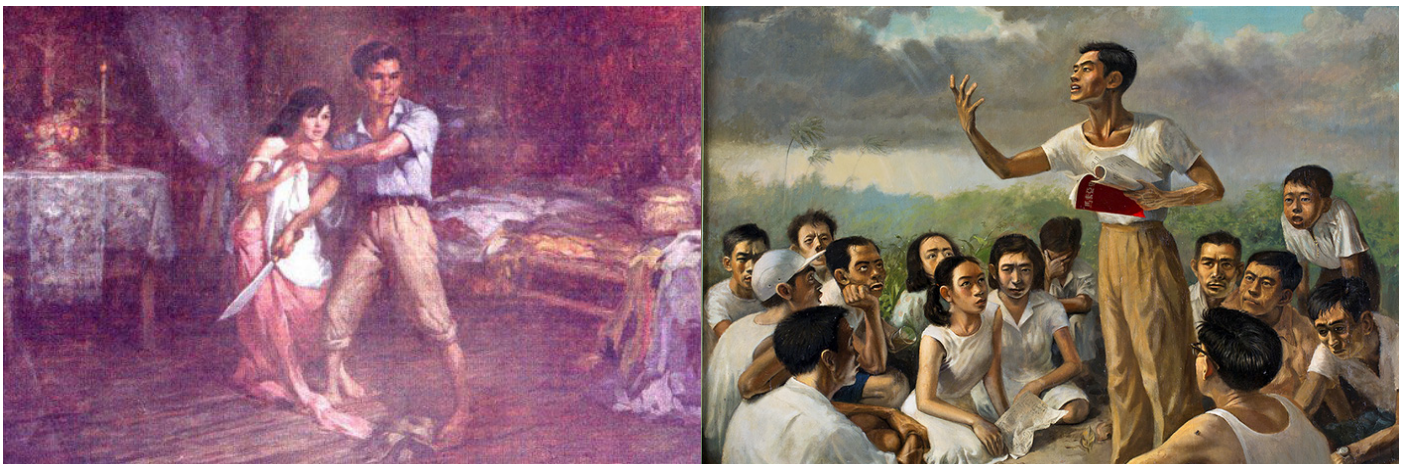
Singapore art history is branched under the multiracial context and the impact of British colonization during the 18th century. During this period, most schools under the British Colonial system taught watercolor, charcoal and pastel lessons under its main art scheme while the more distinguished Chinese language-based schools such as Chinese High School often taught a combination of Western oil and Chinese ink paintings.

or more precise, the 'western modernism'. *Between Declarations and Dreams* begins with Indonesian Raden Saleh's Western-style oil paintings which assemble a familiar sense when it comes to the timeline of western art history. The exhibition is trying to insert a loosely but paralleled timeline on Southeast Asia modernity that comparable to the western modernity by including artwork in the Philippine or Indonesia, where the art style and techniques are significant in Europe; yet including other countries work in Southeast Asia such as Thailand in order to enrich the timeline with the odd forms distanced from the western modernism.

On the other hand, the reason behind having a regional collection can be explained as part of the political gesture. Among all the ASEAN countries, Singapore is the one with the fastest growth in economic despite its size and new history. Singapore had been packaging the nation as the art hub of Southeast Asia art⁹ and by having the biggest and representative collection of Southeast Asia artwork help to sell this image.

4.2 Collection and Social Reflection

By comparing the collection from the two exhibitions, the themes, the artworks and so, it reflects the social structure and cultural preference in Singapore and Philippine.



Defence of a Filipina Woman's Honour by Fernando Amorsolo, Philippine Epic Poem Of Malaya by Chua Mia Tee, Singapore

According to Dr. Eugene Tan, the director of National Gallery Singapore, claimed that the history of colonization and the experiences catalyzed a whole range of different values with the region's beliefs, ideas, and social structures¹. In *Between Declarations and Dreams*, the 4 themes are arranged by chronological categories of the nation histories: colonialism in the 19th century, nationalism in the 20th century, revolution in the 50s to 70s and post-modernism after the 70s; by applying a shared timeline as the narrative of the exhibition, it shows how similar ideologies have been developed on a regional scale, yet cherish the complexity and diversity in the region.

The direction of *Between Declarations and Dreams* is more toward showcasing the historical and cultural structure in Southeast Asia, where the artworks help the viewer to visualize the different aspects in life during that particular period around Southeast Asia. For example, in the section of Authority and Anxiety, there are oil paintings showing landscape in Indonesia with the view of volcano or villages; in the section of Manifesting the Nation that includes propaganda arts that in response to the WWII and Japanese invasion through different countries in Southeast Asia. The modernity of Southeast Asia is constructed through historical events, lifestyle, and ideologies and so that documented or reflected from the collection.

According to Dr. Patrick Flores, the Curator of *The Philippine Contemporary*, the exhibition tries to map



the history of modern and contemporary art in the Philippines; the past and the possible are gathered as distinct articulations of time and place as well as common experiences of passage.² The 5 themes of the exhibition is divided on 'the past' and 'the possible'; Horizon and Trajectory is about the past (modernism and post-modernism), Latitude as a transition from contemporary to the future; Sphere and Direction totally ditch the timeline and belongs to the possible, to show the diversity in the Philippine contemporary art scene.

The Philippine Contemporary is an exhibition that aims to display the dynamic and depth in the Philippine art scene, more like an inclusive celebration of Filipino art rather than a review of the art history. By showing modern and post-modern artwork as 'the past' is not about understanding the nation historically but rather how the past has open up opportunities to the future, to foresee what can be possible. As the themes Latitude, Sphere and Direction are discoursing that 'the possible' cannot be summed up in one way, when multiple movements, styles, and expressions on ideology are happening parallel y in the Philippine contemporary art scene.

Compare to the formal display in the *Between Declarations and Dreams*, where well-documented object labels are presented and clear separation of rooms between themes, *The Philippine Contemporary* have a

relatively loose display manner that in responding to the curatorial direction. The exhibition has a relatively 'casual' display; the entrance is next to the exit, where modern works are right next to contemporary works, symbolizing the cycle in modern and contemporary art in Philippine; installations are scattered along the pathway and occupying every corner; with minimizing the use of object labels (or hidden intentionally?), the exhibition seems to be chaotic but only the one who is able to connect will notice the order from the careful curation.

4.3 Trajectory and Southeast Asia Art History

Exhibitions display objects in physical space, manifesting 'a network of forces – personal, economic, political and institutional that converge to shape them behind the scenes.'¹⁰ According to Andrew Sayers, former director of the National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of Australia, exhibitions is a space where a well-chosen selection of works of art can provide fresh insights into individual works and shared ideas; art museum displays both 'embody art history' and 'have led to new shapes for art history.'¹¹ In a simpler word, the art exhibition is a time-based proof of art history while constructing the art history.

Between Declarations and Dreams and *The Philippine Contemporary* have a different representation and interpretation to the local art history.

Between Declarations and Dreams is trying to get the audiences to relate to the objects and feel for the exhibition as much as possible, with the collection that is diverse in forms, subjects, and locations, reaching out to multiple timelines in global art history. The exhibition is in discoursing the unification of identities in the multi-culture nation and gestured as being the leader among Southeast Asia art history with a well established, representative, timeline-defying collection, targeted to an international status.

Compares to that, *The Philippine Contemporary* have a relatively intimate and internal meaning to the Philippine art community itself. The exhibition dedicated a bigger portion of it focusing on the contemporary art that reflecting different issues happening in the Philippine raise by Filipino artists; by including various forms of art that are not very usual in a national art exhibition such as graffiti and comic, it breaks down the categorization in art displaying. The 'messiness' is reflecting the reality on the vibrant environment in the Philippine art world, showing not just to the foreign viewer but to the locals, to understand that their own nation is breaking free from the stereotype of exoticism and post-exoticism in art history.

Although the trajectories are different for the two exhibitions, the paths seem to overlap when it comes to the prospect toward the possibilities of writing the Southeast Asia art history. *The Philippine Contemporary* is clear on the criticism on the mono-timeline in art history and the desire to move on, while the similar argument is reflected through the closing work of *Between Declarations and Dreams*: Untitled (Can we be ironic) (1996), by Simryn Gill, that encapsulates what the National Gallery might really be about to challenge what has been shown and seen, as a testing place for the limits and possibilities of art in a region.

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5. Critical Reflection: What We Learn from the Exhibition

'Modernity' in Southeast Asia Art History is very distinct from the modernity in the western countries; unlike European modernity, where a movement is adapted and happening cross countries that share a linear timeline, 'modernity' in Southeast Asia Art History is a loose reference to a period rather than a movement; it is referring to the period began around 18th century, western ideologies, fashions, and art-making techniques were blended in some of Southeast Asia Countries such as Philippine and Indonesia under the influences of European colonization. However, there is not a single 'modernity' that able to conclude all art happenings across Southeast Asia Countries. Modernity in different Southeast Asia country has their own significances, where the rich content of their pre-modern art and religious factors are an important aspect in shaping their modernity. The uneven in economic growth and politic development is also influencing the post-modernity and contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

By putting *Between Declarations and Dreams* and *The Philippine Contemporary* together, it demonstrated the complexity of curatorial practices behind a national collection and the possibilities of approaching the subject on 'nationality' through art exhibition in a totally different narrative. When curating for an exhibition with similar structure (a permanent art collection in a national institution running no less than 5 years), it must be driven by countless elements overpowering the purity of 'art', including politics and economics etc. The curatorial team must be careful on the balancing each element, and avoid of using the collection as a publicity to the nation, since the exhibition is impactful to the national reputation, but rather on tackling the national identities in various directions, with artworks talking on the same subject but as counter argument.

By comparing the two exhibitions, it reinforces the intertwined connection between art and history. To understand the history, go look at art created during that history;; to understand the art beneath the visual,

first have to understand the history of the artwork created and the history of the artist. It doesn't mean that art historian or curators who have a historical background is favored in curating but it is a necessity to curate with considering the historical background the artwork, when and where the art was created, how the artwork is reflecting the history and how it related to the contemporary history. Inspired by The Philippine Contemporary, it doesn't have to be a contemporary work to talk about the contemporary issues, art and ideologies are transcending through history; the meaning of the artwork is changing along time and the value of it needs not to bind by its historical background.

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