

The art of buying art

Singapore Legends

It is possible to collect artworks by renowned Singapore artists without busting the bank. Here's how



Ong Sor Fern
Senior Culture Correspondent

Few have the chance to own artworks by pioneer Singapore artists such as Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng, as prices have hit the high six figures in the past couple of decades.

But there are second-generation artists as well as a whole range of active Cultural Medallion award recipients whose works are still affordable.

An interested buyer can even get pieces priced under \$5,000 if they look hard enough. Extend that limit to the Affordable Art Fair's top tier of \$15,000, and a lot more options open up.

Potter Iskandar Jalil, for example, has what gallerist Patricia Liang calls "bread and butter works" for sale for less than \$5,000. These are smaller pieces which are less complex technically, but still collectible.

"He wants to keep his works affordable for Singaporeans," Ms Liang says of the 79-year-old artist, whose larger works can go on the block for more than \$10,000.

There is a catch. Iskandar's output is slowing and demand is high.

Ms Liang, 51, who organised his last exhibition at the Japan Creative Centre in November, used a ballot system as there were more buyers than pieces available.

In the end, 10 buyers went home empty-handed while 66 works found new homes.

Considering that some young Singapore artists are pricing their works at \$5,000 and above, getting a work by an older artist who has been in the business for 30 years at the same price range can be considered a bargain.

Mr Khairuddin Hori, 44, of Chan + Hori Contemporary, a gallery at Gillman Barracks, estimates that about 15 per cent of his stock is priced under \$5,000.

He says: "Works by artists from Singapore are generally priced much higher than those of their peers from the region though, mainly due to the high cost of living and operating here."

Singaporeans have become more affluent but gallerists here note that they still seem hesitant when it comes to buying art, especially works by Singapore artists.

Artcommune Gallery's Mr Ho Sou Ping, 47, observes: "Singaporeans are scared of buying art. But it is fun. There are parties and events to go to. They don't have to be scared."

Last week, the biggest art collectors' event here, Art Stage Singapore, was cancelled on provisional liquidation after its sudden cancellation on Jan 16, just nine days before its public opening.

While that may be the end of Art Stage Singapore, there are other avenues for buyers to pick up quality art, including those by Singapore masters.

Here is a step-by-step guide.

sorfern@sph.com.sg



Artist Thomas Yeo at his home with his favourite artwork made in 1967 which is not for sale. ST PHOTO: SAHIBA CHAWDHARY

1 LOOK AT ART

The first step is simply to go to galleries and look at as much art as possible.

There are plenty of galleries in Singapore which offer a range of works from established and upcoming Singapore artists. There are always exhibitions and shows.

You can then figure out what you like and what you do not like.

Ms Ning Chong, 34, who runs The Culture Story together with her father Mr Chong Huai Seng, 68, at Thyse Hong Centre, says: "The onus falls on the individual to make the effort to learn. You have to look and figure out what you like."

On a more practical note, learn about the artist's resume, where he was educated, when and where he has exhibited his works, and whether they are collected by national institutions.

These are good gauges for the artist's technical accomplishments as well as his standing in the art world.

Mr Khairuddin says such homework is even more important for those who buy purely for the sake of investment.

"For decisions that are tied exclusively to investment, with the intent of reselling in secondary markets, buyers need to be precise in their research and pick artists that are 'confirmed', with consistent presence and a good track record in auctions."

Artcommune Gallery's Mr Ho Sou Ping says his gallery has access to several thousand works which may not be displayed, so if you do not see anything you like, just ask. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHONG

Unframed works can cost less, but be mindful that proper framing also helps protect the piece. This is especially important in Singapore's humid weather.

Ms Chong says she is mindful of buyer considerations when she builds a show.

"We always make sure there's work that spans a range of price points, but without compromising the quality of the show."

A gallery's space is limited, so what is displayed is only the tip of the iceberg.

2 LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVE MEDIA, GENRES OR ARTISTS

A large Thomas Yeo work in acrylic on canvas can set you back by more than \$20,000 as he may sometimes work on a piece for two or three years and this effort is reflected in the price.

But at his last exhibition at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in April last year, he offered a series of gouache on paper landscape works, some of which were priced less than \$15,000.

While Yeo says he does not do prints as he has never "clicked" with the medium, there are more than a few artists who have worked in the medium.

These works, because they can be

reproduced, tend to be priced lower than the more labour-intensive oil and acrylic works.

Ms Rita Targui, 49, gallery director of STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery, lists a whole roll call of established Singapore artists who have produced print works at STPI during residencies, ranging from Han Sai Por and Suzann Victor to Chua Ek Kay and Jimmy Ong.

While there is the perception that print is secondary to artists' core practice, Ms Targui says: "I would encourage collectors to keep an open mind about discovering works on paper and embrace both the conceptual and production possibilities."

Another route to bargain-hunting is to check out certain overlooked artists and genres.

Mr Ho points out that works by artists such as Nafa founder Lim Hak Tai and watercolourist Ong Chye Cho, who co-founded the Singapore Watercolour Society, can still be had for less than \$10,000.

A pair of couplets by noted calligrapher and poet Pan Shou costs between \$3,000 and \$6,000, as calligraphy is an under-appreciated art form in Singapore.

Occasionally, galleries will also do special events, such as Chan + Hori's Instagram flash sale last year where it gathered 30 artists to create and sign a postcard-sized work of art, each priced at \$250.

As the artists were a mix of newcomers and established names, buyers had a chance to score a bargain if they were savvy enough to recognise a veteran artist's style.



Artcommune Gallery's Mr Ho Sou Ping says his gallery has access to several thousand works which may not be displayed, so if you do not see anything you like, just ask. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHONG

Mr Ho says his gallery has access to several thousand works, either in storage or available for sale from collectors.

Another open secret in the art world is that you can pay in instalments if you have built a relationship with the gallery or the artist.

Veteran painter Thomas Yeo recalls allowing one collector, a university lecturer, to pay him in

instalments for a \$5,000 work about 30 years ago.

Mr Ho adds that even some rich collectors will negotiate with galleries to pay for six-figure sums in instalments.

But gallerists are quick to add such requests are usually entertained on a "case-by-case" basis, so this is more reason for budding collectors to attend events to get to know gallerists and artists.



Painter Yeo Hoe Koon is easily contactable via Facebook. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

4 TALK TO THE ARTISTS

All the artists The Sunday Times spoke to say they are happy to chat with potential buyers and discuss their art. Artists are usually present at openings, but there are other ways to meet them.

Veteran painter Thomas Yeo, 82, says he is happy to open up his studio at Telok Kurai Studios, or even his home where he stores works, to collectors.

Painter Yeo Hoe Koon runs a small space, Echo Art Galerie, at Tanglin Shopping Centre and is easily contactable via Facebook.

The sprightly 84-year-old says with a conspiratorial smile that his prices also depend on "ren qing wei" - a Chinese phrase referring to the quality of relationships. Prices for his works start from as low as \$2,000, depending on its size and whether it is framed.

Sculptor Chong Fah Cheong, 73, conducts small workshops where potential collectors can interact with him. "I would rather the people who are interested in my work get to know me in a more meaningful way."

The Sculpture Society (Singapore) helps facilitate Mr Chong's workshops, so track its web page for information.

In this wired age, even the older artists are plugged in with web and Facebook pages, complete with contact details. Cultural Medallion recipient and visually impaired artist Chng Seok Tin, 73, says if you are shy, then just check out her website and Facebook pages: "Have a look first, then get in touch with me."

Her works are also available at the Singapore Association for the Visually Handicapped, where a portion of the sales goes towards the charity.

Mr Chong adds: "Singapore is small. It's not hard to find us."

Singapore masters for less than \$5,000



HAN SAI POR, 76, SCULPTOR
Renowned for her marble and granite works, this Cultural Medallion recipient is inspired by nature, which provides her with motifs of forests, plants and seeds for her works.

Work: Tropical Fruit 10, powder pigment, shaped cotton paper, sculpted colour abacca paper pulp, 8 x 22 x 20cm, \$2,500, from STPI - Creative Workshop & Gallery



GOH BENG KWAN, 82, PAINTER

This Cultural Medallion award recipient studied Chinese ink and oils with another Singapore master, Chen Wen Hsi, before leaving to deepen his artistic practice in New York.

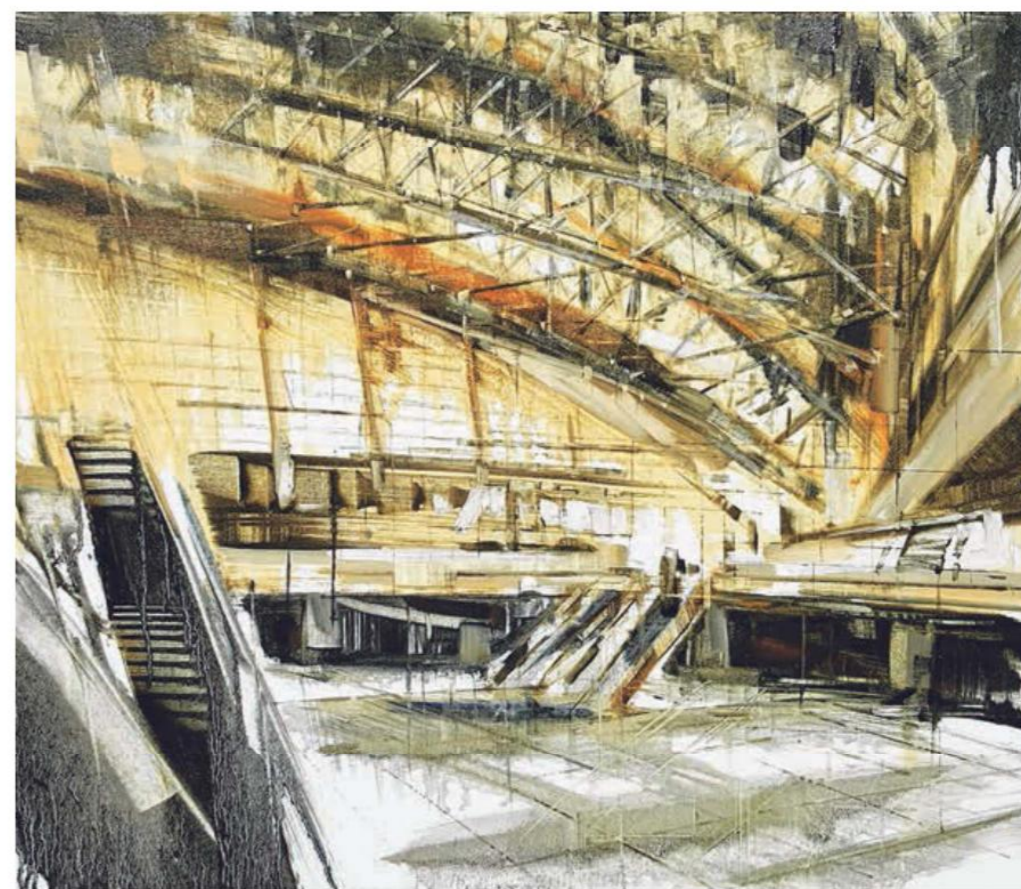
Work: Call Of The Mountain, mixed media, 26 x 24 inches (framed size), \$4,000, from Eagle's Eye Gallery



CHOO KENG KWANG, 88, PAINTER

This first-generation painter works mainly with oils, and pieces can go for six-figure sums. His vivid woodcuts, which capture visceral scenes of Singapore's post-war realities, can be had for under \$5,000.

Work: Stove Maker, woodblock print, 17 x 15 inches (framed size), \$3,000, from Eagle's Eye Gallery



BOOSZE YANG, 53, PAINTER

Boo trained at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and is known for his technique in which he drips, combs, scratches and wipes paint on the canvas.

Work: Incheon International Airport, oil on canvas, 60 x 70cm, \$4,400, from Utterly Art

ARTWORKS LESS THAN \$15,000:
See C4



JASON LIM, 53, CERAMICIST AND PERFORMANCE ARTIST

His work for the Singapore pavilion at the renowned Venice Biennale in 2007 featured a 250kg porcelain chandelier which he created, then shattered. Lim also has smaller works, such as this piece which challenges traditional notions of ceramics.

Work: Germination, glazed stoneware, 100 x 36 x 11cm, \$3,200, from Gajah Gallery

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Programme

09:30 AM	Registration
10:00 AM	Welcome Address and Book Launch
10:20 AM	How Families Can Help
10:45 AM	It takes a Village. Role of the Multi-disciplinary Team in Treating Eating Disorders
11:00 AM	The "Me" in Recovery. Self Empowerment in Recovery
11:15 AM	Stories of Hope
11:30 AM	Q & A
11:45 AM	Refreshment

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