



AGUS
SUWA
GE

FILIPPO
SCIA
SCIA

FOREWORD

by Ahmad Mashadi
Head, NUS Museum

As two distinct practices, the works of Agus Suwage and Filippo Sciascia are remarkable for their common allusions to the questions of human acuity, and the quest of the unknowable. Bali-based Filippo Sciascia (b. 1972, Italy) references light as a fundamental artistic device whose properties are endowed with both scientific and metaphorical qualities. 16th century Western techniques involving the study of lighting offered ways of perceiving depth of field. It dramatises subjects rendered through a play of shadows and their intensities, introducing subjectivities that heighten concepts, such as the divine, from the benign atmospherics to the cathartic intensity of light cast from above. The light and its intensity thus can be traced to the dual struggle in scientific reasoning and the metaphysical, which Sciascia enacts in his paintings and installations. To heighten his focus on light as the basis of pictorial representation and reception, Sciascia devises works that are monochromatic, characterised by strong contrasts, their light caustic – baking and cracking the picture surface. The image, often drawn from a photographic source, and its significance become fraught with uncertainty, caught in limbo between its appearance and meaning.

If Sciascia's works can be described by a play of light's intensity or brightness, Agus Suwage's (b. 1959, Indonesia) works in this exhibition offer an interplay between text and image, akin to the tradition of illuminations found in manuscript art or oriental miniatures. While Agus' practice may be described by his appropriation of iconographic elements drawn variously from history and popular culture, works presented in this exhibition exclusively engage the notions of mortality, desire and self, referencing Greek mythology and psychoanalysis. As is often the case, he obscures easy reading, placing or displacing associated ideas to new or unfamiliar contexts. Repulsion and desire, morbidity and seduction, the sinister and the ornamental, are not contrasting

concepts, but rather conjoined parts of a totality. The final compositions appear cool rather than strident, as interplay of contexts mediated by humour or irony, at times self-deprecating as he recast meanings or knowledge as predicaments rather than triumphs.

The thoughts and works of Sciascia and Suwage should not be seen as dialectical constructs. Rather, they are intertwined meditations, each as a journey conditioned by the struggle of knowing and the limits of self, punctuated by transient moments of illuminations and illuminance, never absolute, and always provisional.

We would like to congratulate and thank the artists, Agus Suwage and Filippo Sciascia, for this important artistic partnership. Although the works have been conceived separately by each artist, we are indeed fortunate to have witnessed a collaboration between two influential artists in the region. As the NUS Museum continues to highlight significant modern and contemporary practices in Southeast Asia, we are also grateful to the Langgeng Art Foundation, especially its Founder, Deddy Irianto for his vision and dedication for the project and Joanna Lee, consultant to Langgeng Art Foundation. For their research and commentary of the artists' works for this exhibition, we would also like to thank the curator, Karen Lim and writers for the catalogue, Rifky Effendy and Agung Hujatnikajennong, without whom the exhibition would have not been possible.

MESSAGE

by Deddy Irianto
Founder, Langgeng Art Foundation

The exhibition, ***Illuminance***, featuring Agus Suwage and Filippo Amato Sciascia, at the NUS Museum is based on the desire to observe the conceptual development of Indonesian contemporary art practices, but with a different approach.

As one of the most important and influential figures in the Indonesian art world, perhaps even in Southeast Asia, Agus Suwage has extensively and expansively explored a range of artistic possibilities in his painting, sculpture and installation art. His works from the series of self-portraits, historical icons and skeletons show us a high degree of intensity that he has invested in his exploration. These personal explorations of social issues, relating to identity and humanistic values, are done through the lens of irony.

Filippo Sciascia is an Italian multi-disciplinary artist who works in the media of painting, photography and video installations. He has been living and working in Bali since the mid-nineties. Unlike the works of his predecessors and other expatriate artists who live in Bali, Sciascia's works do not contain the traces of Balinese culture and nature which have so often influenced his colleagues. Instead, Sciascia's works continue to be a search for the essential values of the visual world, an exploration of the pictorial tensions between painting and the imaging technology of the new age. He continues to question painting as an art practice that is not merely about representations but also about specific philosophical issues.

While this exhibition may not have been a direct collaboration between both artists, somehow their works seem to echo one another. Their works appear to deliberate on the fundamental values of being human and the fluidity of movement between the realms of life and death.

Langgeng Art Foundation wishes to thank Ahmad Mashadi, Karen Lim, Cheryl Teo, Michelle Kuek, Tan Li-Jen, Donald Lim and Devika Murugaya from NUS Museum for whom the exhibition would not have been possible.



AN INTRODUCTION: CURIOUS CREATURES OF HABIT

by Karen Lim

Illuminance initially started out as a suggestion by Filippo Sciascia to Agus Suwage to work on a joint exhibition of collaborative works. Their dialogues revolved around their distinctive practices and how their current practices might find meeting points on which their collaboration might be mounted. The process throughout was informal and as time passed, both artists developed their exhibitionary contributions while keeping in mind the themes each intended to explore. Further negotiations were made with the curator on the placing of works in the gallery to echo, connect and dialogue.

The works of Suwage and Sciascia on display are mostly new pieces created in recent months. An insightful visual narrative of interconnected and non-linear multi dimensional works

LIFE

The use of skulls and skeletons as imageries surfaced in Suwage's works since as early as 1995 in works such as "Monolog". He resurrected the imagery in 2003 and in 2006 makes its reappearance again on the current body of works in the exhibition. The skull is also a fetish motif used by Suwage on various objects including a series of product designs - the Vespa scooters for example and jewelry.

I visited Suwage at his studio on 29 June 2010 as a preparatory trip for the exhibition. In the course of our conversation, Suwage responded to a question regarding the significance of skeletal remains to him. "Bone is more

Nothing is static or absolute and everything starts with self.

Agus Suwage, 2010

Life in any form never finds its own balance. There is always a continuous fall and rise.

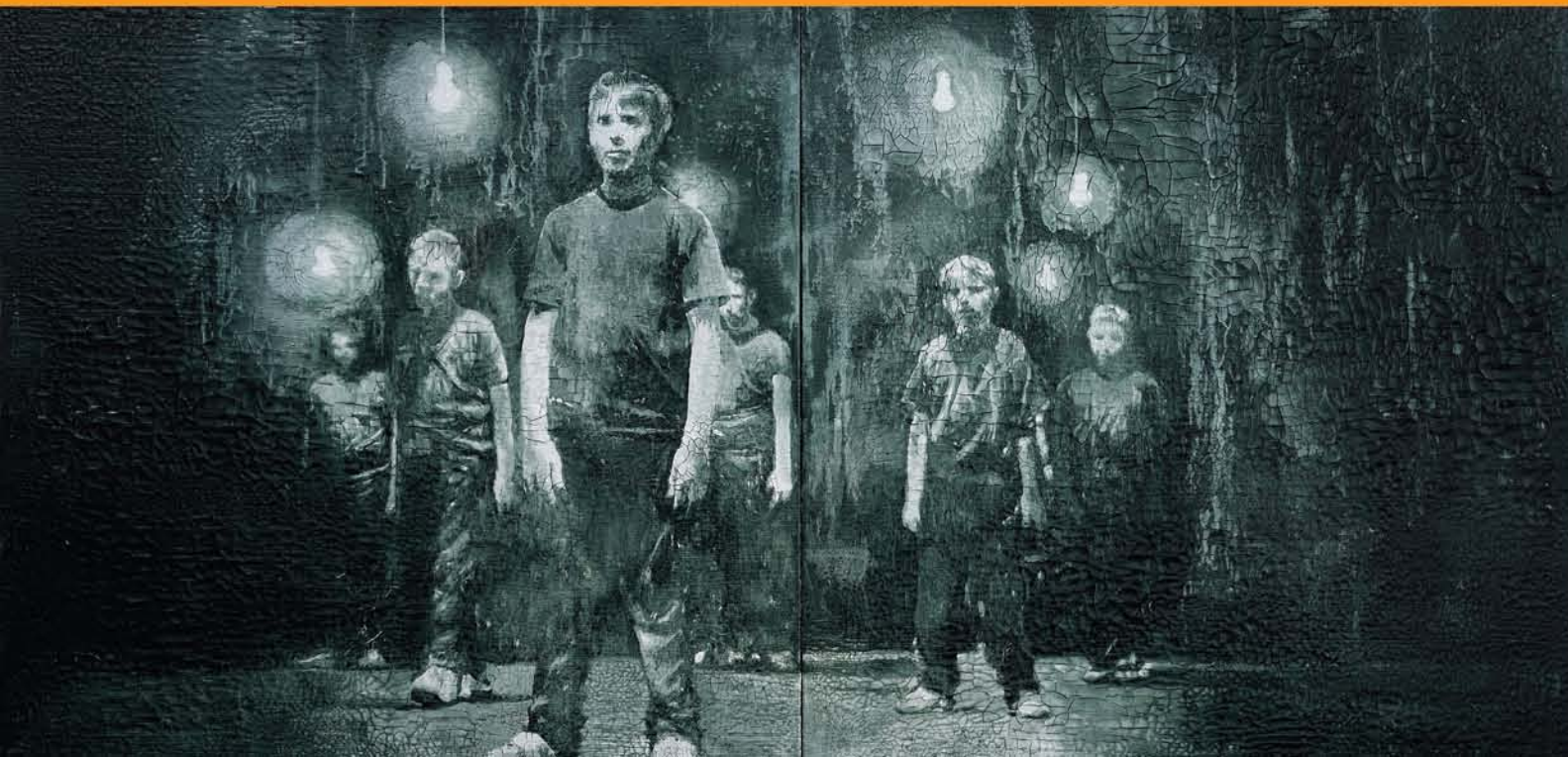
Filippo Sciascia, 2010



Suwage's collection of skulls, puppetry and memorabilia.

Skulls have been ubiquitous on clothing as they were in 16th century contexts. In the 16th century Europe, the study of the human anatomy was a necessary part of an artist's education; indeed knowledge of the anatomy was considered a positive artistic attribute. Skulls were also

often seen in many self portraits. They were associated with saints and gentlemen and at times, cast their aura over the visual imageries. In general, the understanding of skulls and skeletons in the 20th Century may seem to be a preoccupation with death. Nevertheless, skull iconography remains strong in the 21st Century as seen in youth,



reveals the appropriation of iconographies, which are distinctive to both the artists' creative processes. There is a certain intensity and obsession with skeletons and light as subject matters, integrated from a multitude of sources through the use of decorative patterning, photographs, objects and the natural sciences. The works explore the intersections of life in a convoluted way; cerebral yet intuitive responses in search of wisdom and the transcendental, along with the formation of personal and spiritual identities.

permanent than flesh," he explained, and then went on to second guess himself, "but bone is not permanent either." His obsessive interest with skeletons started at a young age, when he collected objects of skulls, skeletons and puppetry. Suwage recalled that his first artwork of a skull was self-made. He later found an anatomical model in China and has since been using it as a mold. The anatomy and the skeleton are for Suwage value-laden iconographies, associated with the "loss of attributes such as nudity, gender and sexuality"¹ as stated by Supriyanto.

¹ Supriyanto, Enin., 'Inanimate Performance' in Agus Suwage: *Still Crazy After All These Years*, Indonesia, 2010, p 422.

Eros Kai Thanatos #1 (2010), is an elegant and sophisticated attempt at rendering the anatomy in a highly aestheticised manner over anatomical accuracy. It is worthy of note that Suwage groups the watercolour pieces of skeletons and flora as an installative suite, thereby reinforcing their unification through gesture and landscape, to facilitate a comparison of the different views. He has also given this series of skulls a sense of motion that further adds to the impression of animation: each section shows a different profile that collectively suggests a journey rather than death. The variety of flowers - rose, lotus, hibiscus and frangipani - are symbolic and are to be read as signifying beauty, purity, divinity, protection and the fragility of life. When read together with the detailed paintings of the jaw bone, teeth and skulls, *Eros Kai Thanatos #1*

medium has technical demands on application and skill including the control of water and colour constitutions to create transparency and depth, all within a limited time frame. For Suwage, the attraction of the medium, are the very demands as well as the rewards the process-sensitive medium offers in producing personal and distinctive outcomes. Each painting comes out as an individualised piece, the product and the testament of its process. For Suwage, working with watercolour is a form of training, one that challenges him to remove himself from the technical aspect of his practice. This process differs from his approach to oil paintings, where the tendency is to fall back on a set of approaches developed from his design methodology. Here, he may start with a photograph as a pictorial base towards planning out desired compositional



pop culture, as well as in contemporary art. Contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman, Marina Abramovic and Damien Hirst have also used skulls or skeletons in their works, in which skulls are presented for contemplation.

encourages contemplation on the cyclical nature of life and its ephemeral being.

Materials in art making have increasingly been given personal iconological significance by the artists. Artists are ascribing new meanings to the materials and their ability to convey experiences in "real time" in the process of art making. *Eros Kai Thanatos #1* is a series of watercolour paintings, which are not studies of a work but seen as a work in itself. Explaining his process in making the watercolour works, Suwage said: "Making these paintings require a discipline as I need more concentration, physically and mentally". The act of painting in watercolour, becomes a personal challenge to him as the

imageries in his paintings. In *Eros Kai Thanatos #1*, each image appears as a separate entity on different pieces of paper, only to come together as a consolidated and intuitive installation.

Tobacco juice is also used in these new watercolour works. A homemade concoction made from boiling tobacco, the juice is used as a background colour for the works. This experiment creates a natural sepia colour, that Suwage is fond of which he is unable to achieve in ready made paint medium. His excitement is undeniable when he explains how he experimented and perfected the making of tobacco juice. Suwage had started using tobacco juice in an earlier watercolour work titled: "*Self Healing Series*" (2005).

"*Self Healing Series*" displays Suwage's auratic performance of himself. *Eros Kai Thanatos #1* and "*Self Healing Series*" manifest on his contemplative stance, mediating upon the mysteries of life and wellbeing. Thus the use of tobacco juice as a medium becomes symbolic for Suwage. "Smoking is one of my personal self healings,"² he explained, without irony. We see Suwage here thinking through the ultimate realities of life and death to arrive at what becomes for him, a new sanity and even serenity. This process becomes invigorating for Suwage through psychological and spiritual circumstances, a rationale he asserts repeatedly that working on the watercolour series is a therapeutic experience.

Suwage appropriates his own works and often uses humor to



Tobacco juice concoction in a bottle in Suwage's studio. Tobacco is considered as one of the most important plants in shamanistic practices: drinking the juice alone channels a source of visions. At times, it is used in healing practices and is considered a medicine.

balance heavy or difficult themes. He deals with issues on ambiguity, irony and the oppression of minority, using pigs and crows as signifiers. *Siklus* (2010), presents five 24K gold plated crows on a mound of fifty sets of skeletons made of graphite as the main source of material. Despite its macabre theme, it is a playful work and one without irreverent intentions. "I sympathise with crows as they are scavengers and are considered as omens of bad luck. I decided to glorify the crows by gold plating them." It is evident that Suwage's works were not without a sense of humor. Contrary to *memento mori* tradition, *Siklus* sidesteps death to redirect attention to life and the transcendental living.

LIGHT

Everything that is seen enters the human eye as a pattern of light qualities. We discern forms in space as configurations of brightness and color. Shelter, cave and dome are forms we encounter in Filippo Sciascia's allegorical works - a metaphor for light and a notion of ideals and realities - similar to a camera or a human eye capturing light. Acquiring the light becomes Sciascia's interest and photography is used as the tool for this purpose. Lyrical, poetic and hypnotic, Sciascia's artworks invoke cinematic and photorealistic approach and treatment, questioning the roles of painting and the artist in contemporary art. Sciascia asserts: "the birth of art had a purpose, but as soon as camera was invented, art has lost its



Suwage's works are developed from a multitude of sources, including decorative motifs from pattern and design books.

purpose as one now does not need an artist to paint a portrait. The alphabet is man-made, whereas drawing is a natural and fundamental thing in humans, and we seem to have forgotten that."

The monochromatic works in the exhibition of varied media in painting, video and photography are seen in the primary colours of black, white and green. Sciascia's *Lux Lumina* (2010), a three channel video piece at the end of the NX Gallery, seduces viewers into a ritualistic performance where the protagonists are in search of light. The video's predominant colours are in black and white as Sciascia states that "both are opposing colours from the spectrum of light" and in his

opinion, “these colours represent a search for balance.” He further explains the origins of this work, which references Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, representing an extended metaphor, contrasting the way in which we perceive and believe in what is reality. For Plato, the discovery of the true source of being was made possible by departing the shadowy cave of human affairs and entering into the archetypal light in search for knowledge, truth and goodness. Each scene in the *Lux Lumina* incorporates light to signify a spiritual and ritualistic desire in our daily activities seeking for the truth. Similarly, the appearance of light has often symbolised holiness and a common element in sacred visions. In all religion, light and radiant colour signifies humanity’s encounter with the divine. Sciascia paints a group of children accented

his works. He claims that he is inspired by Joseph Beuys’ conceptual approach in devising formal vocabulary, layered with meaning and metaphor. His artworks are infused with mythological, historical and personal resonance and he feels that, “there is no difference between any media or ready-mades. All works have the same value as they intermediate and create their own meanings. There are works that lose the value and yet there are some that are useful for a while.” His works act as a diary, a recording of his daily events and sporadically, he destroys them as he experiences and moves past a phase where the works become irrelevant in his life. The transience of a medium also becomes a subject matter used by Sciascia in his paintings, which are painstakingly made and highly tactile.



Siklus being made at the foundry.

Graphite, a two-dimensional art medium is appropriated and used to create three-dimensional sculptural forms. The skeletons and crows were

produced in a foundry; each piece laboriously produced by hand, from the graphite concoction to be set in the mould, the hand painted eyes, feet and body of the crows, to the individual set of skeletons.

under a blaze of light which is positioned above and in front of them in *Lumen Sutilis* (2010). Light here delineates the light of intimacy and refuge and can only exist in relation to the darkness in the painting. As a centering force, it denotes home and provides a locus for a spiritual journey. These children are seen keeping vigil on the sacred horizons, as beacons signaling the presence of the holy and transcendence of the mundane. The association with light here symbolises infinite truth, ordering attributes of a spiritual home in a relative chaos of a secular experience.

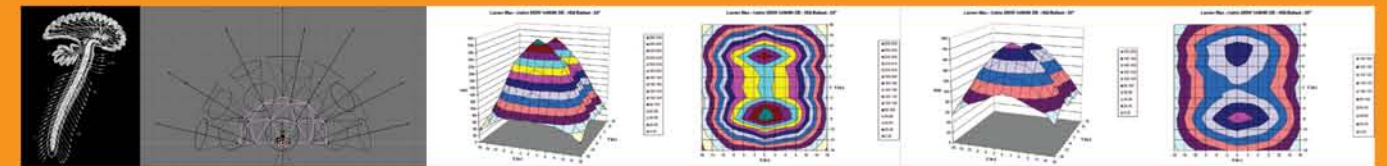
Sciascia’s practice reveals a certain restlessness in the artist and an obsessive pursuit with the experimentation of making

He pushes gesso as a main material, dealing with the paint medium as a sculpture, building layers to create three-dimensional surfaces. Applying gesso thickly and repeatedly, he allows the medium to crack and evolve on its own. He becomes fixated with each crack and fills it with adhesive, to contain, stabilise and to keep it alive. These paintings become reliefs rather than two-dimensional works. Resin, acrylic, Vinavil adhesive and gesso are used along with a mixture of marble powder, sand or cement to construct his paintings. Sciascia began working with this technique while living in Florence years ago. It began as an accident when a painting he was working on was falling apart and he was challenged to experiment with materials to address the issue.

The highly textured surfaces of his paintings usually take between one to three weeks to achieve, during which time he might apply a background colour. Occasionally, the image may come later or interchangeably. These significant cracks create a contrast to the image in the painting and become the basis of all his paintings where the cracks evolve, change and take on an ephemeral life of their own.

The evolution of Sciascia’s works is cyclical, symbols are appropriated from previous works and occasionally, these works become sacrificial, painted over and evolved into new works, as observed in *Domus Completus* (2010), where previous paintings are treated in black colour and used as a part of this installation. Sciascia’s multidisciplinary practice

Illuminance presents an attempt to examine deeper into the works of Suwage and Sciascia. Concepts acquired may not necessarily be what we grasped by our perceptual experience of the physical objects. Communication and collaboration thus become essential to honour the artists’ intent and at the same time, extend the continuous dialogue of the work itself. Both artists’ unending desires for experimentation in their practice and the nature of their works have changed our perception of what art is. The medium used in their works cannot be seen purely as objects because they are linked closely to the personality of each artist. They both deal with their inner selves and their works allow varied readings of the psyche – the conscious and unconscious; and highlight the soul as an ephemeral being. As each artist has a different



Images are based from his scientific research for Domus Completus. Sciascia’s creative process includes an unyielding fixation with searching and gathering information as instanced by his initial research on

melatonin, which led him to understand the form and function of the pineal gland, which he adapted for the installation, *Domus Completus*.

and the evolution of his works act as a metaphor on his own self-examination and the belief that all things are connected and life is transient.

experience of transcendence through his creative process, this becomes a recognisable feature of his physical and psychological healing, and provides intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. The enigmatic works of Suwage and Sciascia encapsulate romanticism succinctly: an emphasis on the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary and the transcendental.

LIST OF WORKS

AGUS
SUWA
GE



An Offering to Ego, 2007
Installation graphite
60 x 350 x 150 cm
Collection of Artist



Dead Poet Society, 2007
Burnt wood, wood and iron
275 x 35 x 50 cm
Collection of Artist



Eros Kai Thanatos #1, 2010
Watercolour and tobacco juice on paper
56 x 42 cm each, 40 panels
Collection of Artist



Eros Kai Thanatos #2, 2010
Watercolour, tobacco juice and gold leaf on paper
228 x 229 cm
Collection of Artist



Siklus, 2010
Graphite polyester and gold plated brass
235 x 220 x 220 cm
Collection of Artist



Domus Completus, 2010
Mixed media installation
Variable size
Collection of Artist



Domus Incipit, 2010
Mixed media installation
Variable size
Collection of Artist



Lumen Praecipuus, 2010
Oil on canvas
190 x 170 cm
Collection of Artist



Lumen Sutilis, 2010
Oil, gesso and melatonin pills on canvas
340 x 180 cm
Collection of Artist

FILIPPO
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SCIA



Lumen Unicus, 2010
Oil and gesso on canvas
180 x 170 cm
Collection of Artist



Stills from **Lux Lumina**, 2010
Video
Collection of Artist



Lux Lumina Sutilis, 2010
Oil on canvas
180 x 150 cm
Collection of Artist



Manifesto (Part 1 and 2), 2010
Mixed media installation
Variable size
Collection of Artist



Manifesto (Part 3 and 4), 2010
Mixed media installation
Variable size
Collection of Artist

BIOGRAPHIES



AGUS SUWAGE

Agus Suwage was born in Purworejo, Central Java, on 14 April 1959 and now lives in Yogyakarta. He studied graphic design at the Bandung Institute of Technology in West Java from 1979 to 1986 and participated as an artist in residence at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia (1996) and at the Museum of Modern Art in Saitama, Japan (1999-2000).

Suwage's painting was selected as the top ten best works in the Phillip Morris Indonesia Art Awards, 1996. Exhibitions that he had participated in, toured Indonesia, Australia, Japan, Germany, Holland from 1999-2003, the Gwangju Biennale in Korea in 2000, and the CP Open Biennale in Jakarta in 2003 and 2005. A solo show of his works toured Indonesia in 2004 and other solo exhibitions were held at Nadi Gallery in Jakarta, Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2002), and at Gallery National Indonesia, Jakarta (2003). Publications produced include *This Room of Mine* (1996) and *Still Crazy After All These Years* (2010).

Since the mid 1990s, Suwage has been a keen observer on the events that occur socially. These inspire him to make use of his self-portrait to demonstrate the extensive possibilities in dealing with the issues of identity, the body and the tension between the individual and the society. Using the element of *memento mori* (a Latin phrase that alludes to the cycle of life), his new works portray the value of human existence in a straight forward, anti-Cartesian way: the body as the centre of human existence. What we see is the end of Ego – with the skull and skeleton harmonising one's human and spiritual identity.



FILIPPO SCIASCIA

Filippo Sciascia is an Italian artist based in Bali. He was educated in the fine arts in Florence and Trieste, Italy and later in the United States. Since early 2000, Sciascia's paintings are known for their unique visual characteristics. For him, painting is a medium used to explore his complex ideas on image identification and creation, and his further attempt to identify issues of how the eyes see the world.

Sciascia's works chase the attendant effects of light. He explores artificial light as seen through mechanical digital optical technology. His paintings are characterised by intense contrasts of black and white areas. The general suppression and omission of middle tones; and the consequent loss of details into shimmering masses of ambiguous form results in a radical simplification of the image. Together with a new quality of painterly abstraction, it is as though he has managed to materialise light as a substance and form.

Sciascia continually delights in placing his images in relationship to the new visual representations of a reality coming from photographs, film and video media. In many of his solo projects, the complex relationships between photographic images, videos, films and paintings are presented simultaneously. This agglomeration of message / images that appears all together overlaps one another, until the boundaries between the real and the virtual eventually vanish. The pivotal process is the continual presence of Light.

NUS MUSEUM

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The **Lee Kong Chian Collection** consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the **South and Southeast Asian Collection** holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the **Ng Eng Teng Collection** is a donation from the late sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the **Straits Chinese Collection**, is located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

NUS Museum launched the NX Gallery in 2006. It is conceived as a contemporary art venue to showcase emerging artistic trends in Singapore, Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as to encourage critical curatorial and museum practices. For the NUS Museum, these aims afford an emphasis in partnerships within the University and beyond, underscored by the recognition that art and culture form a powerful nexus that connect different disciplines and institutional interests. Past exhibitions organised at the NX Gallery include *Picturing Relations: Simryn Gill and Tino Djumini* (May 2007), *Bound For Glory: Wong Hoy Cheong* (September 2008) and *Encountering Cheong Soo Pieng* (February 2010).



Getting Around:

SBS Bus No. 96 from Clementi Bus Interchange / No. 151 from Hougang Central Interchange / No. 33 from Bedok Interchange
SMRT Bus No. 188 from Choa Chu Kang Interchange.

NUS MUSEUM

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OPENING HOURS

10 am – 7:30 pm (Tuesdays – Saturdays)
10 am – 6 pm (Sundays)
Closed on Mondays and Public Holidays

