

# How art and museums help us know the world

Art opens a doorway to such knowledge and the power of the unconscious, writes the chairman of the National Gallery Singapore.

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For *The Straits Times*

One of the skills I honed over time is the understanding of issues, people and situations through tactile experience.

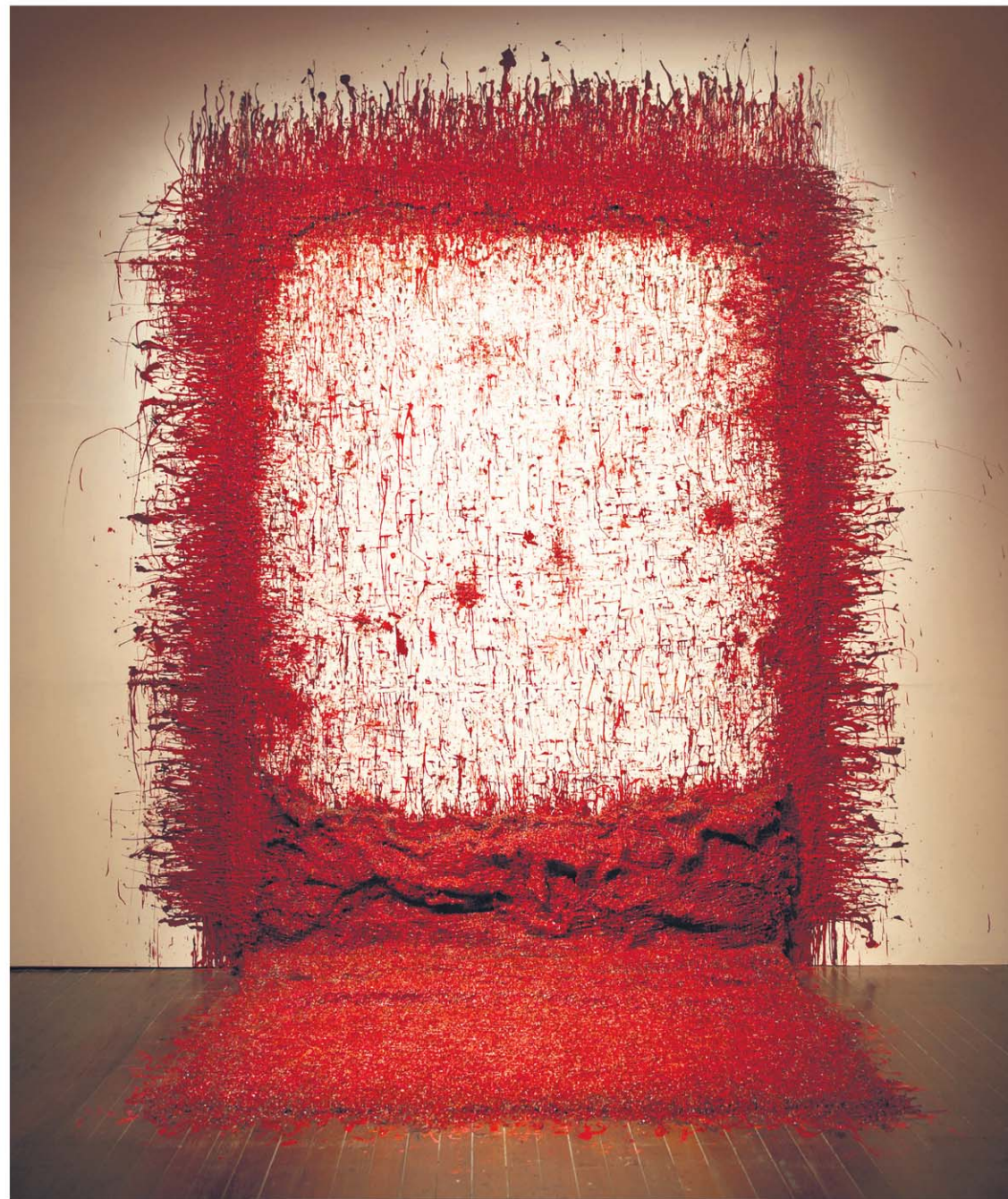
This direct way of knowing has been an important mode of being and learning for me, allowing me to know something by being physically present in the moment versus knowledge derived from reports and books.

In fact, all of us have been familiar with this since we were babies and toddlers, through our earliest experience as learners. Direct knowing is related to unconscious learning; both approaches entail the opening of the self through the senses. And these ways of knowing for me are fundamental to the cultivation of open minds.

At work, I apply direct knowing in the way I make decisions. For how much can I learn from a paper? Yes, it provides data, a proposed solution, but how can I know these things for myself? A paper gives me an initial perspective but it doesn't help me to know the issue for myself. Only when I know something beyond the verbal and the conceptual, only when I have come into contact with it through my senses, can I have conviction about what needs to be done.

I believe that art has played a role to develop in me this unconscious way of knowing. Because of my father's friendship with artists, many of them pioneers of the Nanyang Style, I grew up with art as part of family life. I didn't think of my childhood encounters with art as cultural experiences. Nor has art ever been an academic subject or about collecting objects of monetary worth. Being immersed in art and living with artworks at home from an early age made art inseparable from my sense of self. Spending time this way seeded in me understanding and knowledge gained through abandonment to the senses. The same immersion in any kind of experience, be it cultural or social, gives birth to a direct and unconscious way of knowing.

When I was at university, I read



*Status*, a three-dimensional mixed media work by Jane Lee that stretches from floor to ceiling. There is a reminder here that intelligence and knowledge are not fully encompassed by thought, says the writer. PHOTO: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

some books to develop my understanding of art and aesthetics. One of the art historians I came across then was Herbert Read. He wrote: "The work of art is in some sense a liberation of the personality; normally our feelings are inhibited and repressed. We contemplate a work of art, and immediately there is a release."

I find much truth in this, as well as in Read's succinct definition of an artwork as being present "not... in thought, but in feeling". Fundamentally, art is feeling, and this is what gives art its indescribable sense of mystery.

Mystery and power are qualities that strike me immediately and

make an artwork memorable for me. This is what happened when I first saw Jane Lee's *Status*.

Measuring 5m by 4m, this is an enormous three-dimensional mixed-media work stretching from floor to ceiling.

Before a work like this, my way of knowing is direct and sensory. And the encounter is a sign of what all art embodies, not just visual art, but the other arts too. There is a reminder here that intelligence and knowledge are not fully encompassed by thought.

Likewise, a spiritual journey is mysterious for it cannot be fully explained, but instead raises questions such as can this be, how

can this be? Through art we are reminded all the time of this question: How can you know the unknowable?

We don't know everything and we certainly can't know it all with our heads. When Mr Lee Kuan Yew died, most people in Singapore, whether young or old, felt the impact of his passing. Even the young who knew little about him sensed the change. That memorable experience of a nation coming together to mourn the passing of a leader shows that the collective unconscious of any society is extremely important in bringing us together.

That is why it is crucial to

understand the power of and tap into the collective unconscious. While the conscious can be dismissed quite easily because it can be argued against or denied, the unconscious seeps into you – its presence is nascent and latent.

On the level of the individual person, our emotions and gut are part and parcel of how we grow and develop. Direct and unconscious ways of knowing take place when we allow ourselves to take stock of what our gut is telling us. The ability to harness our emotions and gut actually plays a huge role in making us useful and effective later on in life. On the level of a society and a nation state, our emotional well-being as a body of persons is key not only to the present we inhabit, but the future we are building.

Underpinning our work at the National Gallery is our belief in the role of the museum in cultivating a sense of shared identity.

I want to draw attention to the museum as a place of community, a place where we can learn about ourselves as a society and as a people. Through its display of iconic works by our artists, available for the public to see up close, the National Gallery allows Singaporeans to discover aspects of their psyche or inner life that they may not be aware of ordinarily; it develops the sensory, tactile parts of our being, our direct way of knowing.

Someone spoke to me recently about how art can help with understanding diversity. Through encounters with provocative works of art, we are actually exploring possibilities, getting in touch with diversity, which means the museum provides us a safe space to be provoked and challenged.

Art can help us create a society that's open to possibilities, to discourse, where people are open to expressing and learning without fear.

As a person begins to build his or her experiences through unconscious enjoyment and direct discovery, the path of understanding becomes less narrow, there is more room for understanding difference and diversity, for empathy and compassion.

The museum thus serves as a platform for the expression of a people's collective unconscious through their singular responses to art. Hence, it can nurture a greater spirit of exploration and experimentation.

How can a society grow and develop if it doesn't believe in embracing the unknown and the unknowable? When we as individuals are no longer fearful of things we don't know, we can truly embrace diversity of thought, people and culture.

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• The writer is chairman, National Gallery Singapore and chairman, NUS Board of Trustees. This article was written with author Yeo Wei Wei, and adapted from a lecture delivered at the Singapore Teachers' Academy for the Arts conference on arts education.