# Sculpting Life

## The Ng Eng Teng Collection

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**NUS** MUSEUM

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## Foreword

Ahmad Mashadi, Head, NUS Museum

The sensual quality of Ng Eng Teng's sculptures belies their ambiguous and ambivalent nature. Their elegant lines, truncated and manipulated bodily forms, textured surfaces and restrained colours merge to form 'poetic objects' that appeal to our sensorial responses as audience. Yet these are underlined by a conceptual complexity that was often masked or coded. This exhibition, consisting of a broad selection of pieces from NUS Museum's Ng Eng Teng Collection, seeks to represent the broad development of Eng Teng's practice, and in doing so hopes to encourage its access and highlight its productive capacity as objects of research and study.

The first donation of 760 pieces of sculptures, maquettes, drawings and paintings, was made by the artist to the National University of Singapore in 1997. By 2001, the collection was enhanced with a second and a third donation, consisting of works completed between 1991 and 2000, bringing the total number of works in the collection to date to 1,106. These donations provided a comprehensive account of the artistic practice of Ng Eng Teng (1934 – 2001), one of the region's most significant and prolific modern sculptor and vigorous in his experimentations and investigations.

A monograph *Ng Eng Teng: Art and Thoughts* was published with the first donation in 1998. Authored by NUS based art historian T.K. Sabapathy, the publication detailed development of Eng Teng as an artist; from his tentative engagements with art during the mid 1950s, his formal training at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and Stoke-on-Trent in UK, his short practice as an industrial pottery designer in Ireland, to his sculptural practice in Singapore up to the early 1990s. Sabapathy traces these developments by outlining Eng Teng's conceptual and formal interests from 1955 and beyond. The study comprehensively surveys critical junctures of Eng Teng's practice, identifying pivotal moments of the artist's personal history, his innovations and accomplishments. It is also significant for its analysis of the body as a subject in modern art in Singapore. In particular, Sabapathy focuses considerable attention on Eng Teng's various encounters with the figure, his attitude, approaches and articulation of the body referenced to the modern condition.

In concluding his study on a group of works completed by Eng Teng in 1990, Sabapathy remarked "consequently, interpretations of form and meaning will have to be constructed on ambivalent grounds". It foregrounded a later major exhibition presented by NUS Museum in 1999 which featured the second group of donations of sculptures and drawings completed after 1991. Curated by Constance Sheares, the exhibition *Bodies Transformed: Ng Eng Teng in the Nineties* dealt with the bolder and perhaps the most radical period of Eng Teng's practice – during which he advanced his interest in the figure and its poetic value, but transforming it in ways that are surprising, humorous, ambiguous and even shocking. Sheares identifies the Eng Teng sculptures as 'poetic' objects, yet regard "the metaphoric force of these strongly figural and humorously fanciful works" as a powerful strategy of invoking "associative connections, but at the same time refuse to confirm them. Each work has many possible readings ... They hide as much as they reveal, serving as containment as well as projections".

In 2003, *Configuring the Body: Form and Tenor in Ng Eng Teng's Art* was launched with the intention to "give rise to curatorial schemes" focusing on works from the artist's third and final donation. To do this, its curator T.K. Sabapathy assessed prevailing and potential readings of Eng Teng's works from formal and conceptual perspectives. Significantly, he prospected Eng Teng's position and status in modern sculpture making, identifying the symbolic and emotive resonance that pervade the otherwise formal investigations. As such Eng Teng's practice may be productively located as an interlocutor between various ideas such as the body and its representation in modern and contemporary expressions, body as site of discourse, and psychoanalysis as an interpretative device. Indeed, these artworks are generative in prompting multifarious approaches, readings and outcomes.

This exhibition *Sculpting Life* is motivated by a number of interests: to assemble a body of works that represent salient themes and conceptual perspectives of the artist and in doing so, to highlight continuities and transformations, as well as strategies developed by the artist at different times of his practice; by adopting an 'archival approach' of display, including the display of maquettes, drawings and paintings, to encourage and facilitate a range of readings, so as to highlight the significance and interpretative possibilities of the collection as a scholarly or curatorial resource. This reference to the agency of interpretation and reading is critical, as it acknowledges the associative potentials and the ambivalence of meanings stressed in varied ways by Sheares and Sabapathy, as well as the capacity of the collection in accommodating a range of approaches and emphasis, among which may include investigations into conceptions on gender, sexuality, the body as metaphor, the individual in its societal context, and the articulation of new critical strategies.

Along with the provision of a permanent space for the display of works by Ng Eng Teng, the NUS Museum had also provided a temporary gallery hosting exhibitions that facilitate projects that may be read alongside the formal and conceptual interests identifiable from the practice of Eng Teng. Sabapathy's 1989 essay 'Vital Images of Life, Sculpture of Ng Eng Teng' is instructive as a curatorial metaphor: "It has to do with giving ideational, emotional and social subjects images that have sensual appeal and formal coherence."

Break Out, 1995
Stoneware, glaze, gold paint

Ng outside his Joo Chiat studio with his bronze sculptures, *Hopeful* (left) and *Wondering* (right), c.1997

## Introduction

Foo Su Ling

Ng Eng Teng (1934 – 2001), a painter and ceramist by training, is recognised as one of Singapore's most innovative sculptors. The artist made three generous donations of his artworks to the National University of Singapore (NUS), in 1997, 1998 and 2001, putting no conditions on his gifts except that they would not be sold or separated.

Having benefited from both formal and informal instruction, Ng was a firm believer not only of learning and experimentation, but also in sharing his knowledge. Those whom he mentored remember him as an unassuming teacher, generous in imparting his vast expertise and philosophy in art making but never imposing in his views. He believed that his works showcased a highly explorative approach and offered great educational value. Naturally, he thought of donating them to an educational institution and NUS came first in his mind.[1]

Along the artist's vision of making the collection accessible for education, NUS Museum has, over the years, held a number of shows based on the donations. The current exhibition, *Sculpting Life: The Ng Eng Teng Collection*, adopts a largely archival approach to provide a substantial cross-sectional view of Ng's practice. It introduces key facets of Ng's life and practice and in so doing provides the background and foundation from which a myriad of comparative and interpretative accounts may be initiated. The range of Ng's works presented – sketches, paintings, maquettes, sculptures, figurines and pottery – makes this a conducive setting for further research into the artist, his creations and aspects of the Singapore art scene during his lifetime.

The breadth and depth of the Ng Eng Teng Collection allow for meaningful comparative analysis when it is placed alongside creations by Ng's contemporaries as well as works of other artists exploring similar themes, media and techniques. With this in mind, the gallery has been conceived to accommodate short term ancillary exhibitions; the discourses advanced through these temporary shows will promote viewing of the Ng Eng Teng Collection in diverse ways.

*Sculpting Life* has three main sections: *The Formative Years; Body / Form / Perspectives; and Materials / Processes / Public Art*. A presentation of Ng's works at NUS' University Hall highlights aspects of the artist's experimental approaches.

*The Formative Years* considers the types of art making Ng was exposed to during his years as an art student, and the teachers who left their imprint on his development and career. Ng initiated his artistic interests by taking up informal lessons but soon after received a formal art education at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and built a strong foundation in drawing and painting. A survey of Ng's drawings and sculptures reveals that even in these early years, he displayed a deep interest in the figure, its significance, and its ability to express the human condition. These themes, central to his sculptural practice, were developed and refined over the span of his career.

Ng's passion for art making and his determination were evident from the start. Although beset with earlier ailments, he graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and went on to receive further training in ceramics in the United Kingdom. Upon graduation, Ng was offered the position of a designer at an Irish pottery factory and worked there for two years before returning to Singapore to start his own art studio.

*Body / Form / Perspectives* looks at Ng's evolving approaches in articulating the figure and related thematic concerns. At the onset, the artist preferred the representational. Body parts, the musculature and facial expressions were rendered in relative detail favouring realism while exploring their expressive qualities. The 1980s and 90s saw Ng developing an abstract language where the figures were simplified and stylised but still conceived to convey the range of human emotions.

For Ng, art was for expressing ideas, feelings and values; hence the communicative value of a piece of artwork was an aspect never to be compromised and the form was most meaningful when it also had an accompanying message. By clustering Ng's works into fluid and overlapping subthemes, this presentation offers a range of readings that encourage further investigations and speculations. The groupings serve as a guide in apprehending the topics Ng explored but they are by no means definitive. Viewers are encouraged to respond by way of reclassifications which promote other viewpoints and fresh discourses.

*Materials / Processes / Public Art* examines the materials widely employed in Ng's artistic productions, namely clay, ciment fondu and bronze. Each material involves a distinct production process, requires unique facilities and entails different methods of finishing. In this respect, sculpture as an art form demands not only artistic creativity but sound technical manufacturing knowledge from a practitioner aspiring to excel in the profession. Consequently, Ng's mastery of three different media, and his proficient works in others such as aluminium and stainless steel, is further testimony of the artist's talent and his appetite for learning. Amongst the materials he worked with, the durable, economical and versatile nature of ciment fondu made it Ng's choice for public sculptures. This section concludes with a glimpse of the artist's contemplations when proposing designs for public art, and the differences as well as similarities in his approach towards public and studio productions.

Increasingly, NUS Museum seeks to establish satellite exhibitions in various parts of the campus to enhance access to the collections. A selection from the Ng Eng Teng Collection is currently displayed at University Hall. In *Spirit of Experimentation: Works by Ng Eng Teng at University Hall*, Magdalen Chua observes the thread of experimentation weaving through these exhibits and discusses them along two main trajectories – abstraction as a means of revisiting traditional themes, and the innovative transformation of sculptural forms from static pedestal bound displays to lively kinetic objects. Chua views the artist's interest in putting new ideas to trial, and his awareness of societal concerns, as a mirror to NUS' vision of shaping an engaged community, passionate about learning and zealous in adding value to the human experience.

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ENDNOTES

1 Leong Weng Kam, "Get the feel of a pioneer's art", in *The Straits Times*, Life!, 18 March 1998.

Pondering, 1991
Ciment fondu

## Sculpting Life: The Ng Eng Teng Collection

Foo Su Ling

### THE FORMATIVE YEARS

This section highlights aspects of Ng Eng Teng's life and training during the early years of his quest towards an art career. As a student at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and later in the United Kingdom from the mid1950s to mid1960s, he undertook a range of investigations – drawing and painting of figures, portraitures, still life and landscapes – as was customary in the art conventions and training of that period. Besides this formal training, he also experimented with three dimensional forms and materials, making the best of whatever facilities were available to him.

Even in his early artistic productions, he displayed a keen sense of regard and empathy for the human condition; this would become a key trait in his works, setting him apart from other modernists of his generation.

Head of John the Baptist, c. 1960-61
Terracotta



#### Early Art Education

Due largely to his health, Ng's early art training was sporadic. His first art course was at the British Council where, for a few months in 1955, he learnt painting whilst concurrently receiving outpatient treatment for tuberculosis.[1] Students had to personally prepare raw materials for the classes and Ng recalled this experience as having provided him with a good understanding of paint materials and canvas.

In 1956, Ng enrolled at NAFA but his freshman year ended prematurely due to a recurrence of the illness.[2] Spending about a year recuperating at his uncle's home in Terengganu, he attempted to capture the sights of the northern Malayan state in drawings and paintings. However, he was dissatisfied with the results and determined that he needed formal training to acquire the necessary techniques for art making. Ng returned to Singapore in January 1958. Whilst working as a trainee artist, he took art classes at Liu Kang's 'Morrow Studio', learning pastel drawing and oils. He also attended a short Chinese Brush Painting course at the YMCA in Shenton Way.

In late 1959, Ng rejoined NAFA as a second year student. Being Singapore's only fine art school in those days, NAFA was the training ground for many who would become well known in the art world. Amongst Ng's contemporaries, whose works form part of NUS Museum's collection, were Seah Kim Joo (Fig. 1), Wong Kian Ping, Thomas Yeo and Wee Beng Chong.

Fig. 1
Seah Kim Joo, 1959
Ink and pencil on paper

The curriculum at NAFA was developed along two main tracks – Western oil painting and traditional Chinese ink painting.[3] From Ng's accounts and the relatively small number of his Chinese ink paintings in this collection, it appears that Ng placed greater emphasis on honing his skills in the former.

> Attending Chinese painting class was optional; if you wished to, you could go and watch demonstrations, go back and paint and present your work at the next lesson and the instructor will comment or he may add a few strokes to correct the work.[4]

Freedom to explore the range of Western art traditions provided Ng with a strong grounding in figure drawing and portraitures, skills which would empower him to pursue a varied approach in figuration for his sculptural productions.

On the NAFA teachers who had left deep impressions on him, Ng recalled Georgette Chen (Fig. 2) and Cheong Soo Pieng.

Fig. 2
Georgette Chen, 1960
Ink on paper

> Georgette Chen was teaching the final year students in the main building; during intervals, I would peer through the window and watch Mdm Chen with awe. I knew she was a great artist. I wished to be taught by her one day.
>
> … when I re-enrolled in 1959, I was taught by her. She spoke Mandarin, English, French and Malay – all fluently. I was thrilled to be in her class…
>
> Mdm Chen was a quieter artist. There was much sensitivity and quality in her works. Her colours were very rich in tones and shades; a precise and accurate painter, she would mix her colours very accurately in the palette and each stroke she put on canvas counted. … Some of my early paintings had a touch of Mdm Chen, and that was the time when I was exploring and experimenting with different styles and ideas from different teachers. Cheong Soo Pieng has also left quite a bit of his imprint on my paintings.
>
> I am lucky in many ways to have been taught by all the five pioneer artists. … Cheong Soo Pieng, to me, was the greatest. We looked forward to seeing his new works every year in Singapore Art Society Exhibition. You can be sure there would be something new and interesting from him each year. As a result, in the following year, you would see a few following him in terms of style, images or colours, something of Soo Pieng.[5]

Fig. 3
Alexandra Brickworks, 1959.
Oil on board

Fig. 4
Portrait of Jean Bullock, c. 1960
Terracotta

Sculpture was not offered in NAFA's curriculum so Ng taught himself three dimensional art making by referring to books, learning through trial and error

and getting occasional advice from those who practised this art form. Ng used plaster and clay for his early sculptures; pieces made of the latter material were brought to Jurong or Alexandra Brickworks (Fig. 3) for firing. In 1959, a chance meeting with Jean Bullock (Fig. 4), wife of a British air force educator, marked the beginning of Ng's foray into sculpture making in ciment fondu. Bullock was a sculptor already familiar with the medium and whilst helping her with the casting, Ng benefited from her knowledge.

> I learnt a lot from her and considered her my teacher. If not for her, I would not have been working in ciment fondu.[6]

Georgette Chen noticed Ng's interest in ceramics and, upon his graduation, she encouraged him to take a course in pottery.[7] Ng's parents were reluctant at the prospect of their son going abroad to study art as they had hoped he would be an architect; however, believing in the value of a good education, they eventually gave their blessings. Unfamiliar to the options available to him, Ng sought the advice of the British manager at the Alexandra Brickworks who recommended the North Staffordshire College of Technology in Stoke-on-Trent. When classes started, Ng was taken aback that he had in fact been accepted for an advanced industrial pottery designer's course even though he had no foundation in the subject. Trying to acquire the fundamentals in a short time was very hard work, but he persevered and eventually finished the course. Some of Ng's impressions of Stoke-on-Trent are recorded in *View of Stoke-on-Trent from North Staffordshire College of Technology* (Fig. 5) and *From an English Window (132 Oxford St., Stoke-on-Trent)* (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5
View of Stoke-on-Trent from North Staffordshire College of Technology, 1962
Watercolour on paper

Fig. 6
From an English Window (132 Oxford St., Stoke-on-Trent), 1962
Ink on paper

Ng spent the following year at the Farnham School of Art learning studio pottery. After graduating from Farnham, he accepted the post of a designer at Carrigaline pottery factory in County Cork, Ireland working there for two years before returning to Singapore.

**Portraitures**

During his early art practice, Ng produced a significant number of portraitures, figure drawings and landscapes, interspersed with some still life and Chinese paintings. Portraiture was one of the dominant categories in art practices of that time; however, its proliferation in this collection is an indication of Ng's interest in human expressions and moods.

In his effort to deal with the formal and conceptual aspects of portraitures, Ng was drawn towards Georgette Chen's repertoire of techniques. Chen's fascination with drapery is manifested in a number of Ng's portraitures. In *Malay Girl* (Fig. 7), the soft fabric of the scarf flows from the head down the shoulders and over the right arm and left shoulder of the subject. Creases are formed on the sleeve as the material slides along the girl's arm and folds gather on her lap. The hands are given prominence; in a number of works, they are featured in the foreground either resting on the subject's lap or occasionally placed on the back of a chair. *Portrait of K. Akiyama* (Fig. 8) sees Ng adapting Chen's use of pastel colours and also the detailed illustration of prints and textures of the fabric.

Fig. 7
Malay Girl, 1960
Oil on canvas

Fig. 8
Portrait of K. Akiyama, 1960
Oil on canvas

Aside from formal portraitures, Ng also produced paintings with social themes. *Life is Hard* (Fig. 9) shows a woman who, despite her youth, is bent from hard labour. Exhaustion is inferred from her almost closed eyes, the bent knees suggest strain and difficulty in moving forward, and the outspread fingers clutching at the pieces of wood emphasise the effort expended in trying to keep the load balanced on her back. In *Old Age* (Fig. 10), the elderly lady stares ahead and seems engrossed and troubled. The veins, both at the side of her forehead and on her left hand, protrude distinctly, stretching the skin. Overall, the image is one of shrinkage and decline – 'a stage and position we all reach when we age'.[8] The outlook is grim and the mood of pessimism is heightened by the sombre colours of the subject's clothing and the black umbrella she holds.

Fig. 9
Life Is Hard, 1960
Oil on board

Fig. 10
Old Age, 1960
Oil on canvas

Fig. 11
Sorrow, c. 1959
Plaster of Paris, painted black

The economic and political conditions in the late colonial period stimulated the production of artworks based on social realist themes. Ng's constant tussle with health heightened his sense of empathy towards the struggles of others and inspired a number of early paintings and sculptures featuring those in psychological distress. *Sorrow* (Fig. 11) is one of the few sculptures in this collection made from Plaster of Paris. The intensity of suffering is expressed through the exaggerated stretching of the subject's neck, her enlarged eyes reveal the horror she is experiencing, and a wail emanates from the contorted lips.

**Figure Drawing**

At NAFA, figurative study was compulsory. However, due to prevailing social and cultural norms, nude life drawing was rare and the subject was taught using plastercast (Fig. 12).

> Life drawing was a subject that I had always wanted to do even before I left NAFA. We were desperate for life drawing in NAFA but were not allowed; the nearest we had was when a European lady volunteered to pose in a bikini, reclining and facing the wall; we only painted her back view (Fig. 13). And imagine we had to close all doors and windows![9]

Fig. 12
Study of Plaster Cast Figure, undated
Oil on canvas

Fig. 13
Reclining Figure in Bikini, undated
Oil on board

Whilst studying at Farnham in 1963, Ng had the opportunity to explore the nude subject. Back in Singapore, he resumed this practice in 1991 with a group formed by a few art teachers.[10] *Very First Life Drawing* (Fig. 14) and *Thinking* (Fig. 15) are examples from Ng's life drawing practice at Farnham and in Singapore respectively. In the same way that he expressed emotions through sculptures, Ng used life drawing to interpret and convey the essence of the subject's personality.

> In my view, it [life drawing] is not so much to learn but to express and to interpret and, hopefully, to be inspired by it. In my life drawing, I try to make the figures as sensitive and sensual as possible and that, to me, is the purpose of having a model. ... I have to be 'truthful' to the subject. So what I try to do is to put life and bring out the spirit of the sitter, apart from concentrating on technique.[11]

Fig. 14
Very First Life Drawing, 1963
Pencil on paper

Fig. 15
Thinking, 1992
Coloured pencil on watercolour paper

Through life drawing, Ng gained a comprehensive understanding of the challenges in figurative representation, a knowledge which would facilitate his handling of more complex issues relating to figuration in sculpture. It was also from this diligent pursuit that ideas for the Torso-to-Face series emerged.

**Landscapes**[12]

By the 1950s, the kampong or village had become a conventional theme in landscape paintings.[13] It provided a contrast against the urban setting and was generally approached in a lyrical way, as the epitome of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. The rural landscape and its inhabitants became iconographic expressions of indigenous Southeast Asia pursued enthusiastically by students at NAFA, led by their teachers.

Whilst some artists focused on the scenery, others were more interested in the cultural activities. Ng's *Kampong* (Fig. 16) is an example of the former. Dwellings on stilts nestle amongst swaying trees providing the sensation of serenity and, despite the absence of inhabitants, the perception of a life that is simple and idyllic.

Fig. 16
Kampong, 1958
Oil on board

Fig. 17
Mending Nets, 1961
Oil on board

Indigenous culture described through its people, activities, food and clothing inspired rich visual expressions. *Mending Nets* (Fig. 17) was a familiar activity as the region was highly dependent on fishing. These contraptions were lengthy, usually stretching for a few yards, and Ng saw this as an opportunity to apply a compositional scheme advanced by Cheong Soo Pieng in the 1950s. The picture progresses in oblique angles along a vertical plane, starting from the man in the foreground and moving in a zigzag fashion on the shore, finally concluding at the boat in the horizon. Art historian T.K. Sabapathy describes this method of rendering the landscape as 'a radical way of synthesising aspects derived from the design of hanging (vertical) scrolls and of the easel picture.[14]

Fig. 18
After the Fire I, 1961
Oil on board

Fig. 19
End of History, 1961
Oil on board

The tragic aftermath of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in May 25, 1961 moved a number of artists to produce works commenting on the victims' plight. Cheong Soo Pieng's frequent use of strong vertical lines to segment a composition [15] is referenced in Ng's *After the Fire I* (Fig. 18). The charred trunks and branches located at various distances from the viewer – to the left of the foreground, at the centre, and randomly scattered in the background – draw attention to the massive scale of destruction. Protruding menacingly in all directions, these soot black organic remains heighten the gloom and evoke a sense of eerie silence at the scene. The central trunk demarcates to the right a few houses which retain a semblance of their original structure, helping us to envisage what used to stand in place of the rubble which dominates the landscape.

*End of History* (Fig. 19) is another portrayal of the 'heavy, wounded, brooding mood'[16] accompanying the demolition of a significant landmark. For many, the physical landscape is closely associated with lived experiences and memories; place provides a tangible way to relate to people, occasions and encounters in life. The destruction follows a dilution or erasure of these memories and invokes an acute sense of loss. Ng's landscape productions such as *After the Fire I* and *End of History* may be sparse in their representation of the human figure but extremely compelling in insisting on the primacy of emotions and the human condition.

ENDNOTES

1 T.K. Sabapathy, 'Conversation between Ng Eng Teng and T.K. Sabapathy' in T.K. Sabapathy, *Ng Eng Teng, Art and Thoughts* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1998), 141 – 173; here 142 – 144.

2 Sabapathy, 'Conversation', 144 – 146.

3 Kwok Kian Chow, *Channels & Confluences* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 23.

4 Sabapathy, 'Conversation', 147.

5 Ibid., 148 and 150 – 151.

6 Ibid., 150.

7 Ibid., 153.

8 Ibid., 172. This was how Ng described *Declining Man*, another of his works commenting on the plight of old age.

9 Ibid., 155.

10 Constance Sheares, 'In Conversation: Constance Sheares and Ng Eng Teng' in Constance Sheares, *Bodies Transformed, Ng Eng Teng in the Nineties* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1999), 43 – 52; here 44.

11 Ibid., 44.

12 In Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 31 – 35, the author makes a distinction between landscape and genre pictures, the latter being art featuring 'scenes derived from daily life in particular social situations and conditions'. In this essay, landscape is used generically to encompass both physical and cultural landscapes; the former comprising nature and transformations to nature as a result of human activity (such as housing, farmlands), and the latter being the social, economic and political activities of those who occupy the physical environment.

13 Ibid., 32.

14 Ibid., 32 and 49.

15 Kwok, *Channels*, 42 – 44.

16 Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 45.



## BODY / FORM / PERSPECTIVES

For Ng Eng Teng, the human figure was a fundamental form which facilitated new investigations and discoveries.

> I want to express humanist themes in my work and what better way than through the human figure ... The human figure best expresses feelings and ideas because it is closest to us, it is what we can relate to best.[1]

Throughout his practice, Ng pursued varied strategies in rendering the body, initially favouring realism, and subsequently adopting a more abstract and stylised language. From these explorations emerged a diverse range of works which are informative in understanding the artist and his perspectives.

**Dreaming**, 1992
Bronze

**Stylisation and Abstraction**

In the 1980s and 90s, Ng actively engaged in strategies of simplification and stylisation.

> I see my work developing from a more realistic and elaborate to a more stylised and simplified expression … I am striving for this elusive and enigmatic balance [between expressiveness and simplicity] … [2]

Ng approached simplification in two ways, expressing emotive perspectives on the one hand and form on the other. Where expression is the key to messaging, such as in *Looking Ahead* (Fig. 20), *Hopeful* (Fig. 49) and *Wondering* (Fig. 50), the facial features such as eyes, mouth and nose, are rendered in detail. Other parts of the body are simplified, existing only for structural support or as a means to give compositional balance. The limbs are reduced to stumps and serve as the base or as a support for the head. This strategy of abbreviation is also seen in *Modesty* (Fig. 21) but in this case, the hands, being positioned to cover the vital areas, also places emphasis on the message.

Fig. 20
Looking Ahead, 1987
Bronze

Fig. 21
Ng Eng Teng and three of his works (from left) Modesty, 1986; Drippy Dancer, 1990; and Hostage, 1981

*Red Maiden* (Fig. 22) and *Head* (Fig. 23) are indicative of the second approach. Here, both the facial and anatomical features are reduced to their fundamental geometric or organic shapes. Form and profile take precedence and are stylised to communicate the essence of the subject matter. The body of *Acrobat* (Fig. 24) is stretched and exaggerated to represent the contortions that these performers are capable of.

Fig. 22
Red Maiden, 1991
Stoneware, pomegranate red glaze

Fig. 23
Head, 1991
Stoneware, oil paint & glaze

Fig. 24
Acrobat, 1994
Stoneware, coloured clay inlay

Communicative emphasis was a key aspect of Ng's art making; he felt that an aesthetically inspiring form would have greater impact if it also incorporated some subject matter or meaning which was universally understood. [3] This aspiration for viewers to grasp the narrative content of his works often led to contemplations on how abstraction could be applied in an accessible manner.

> …I feel the abstraction can be taken a stage further. I have only distorted certain features and eliminated parts of the body… But each component of the figure is treated realistically. It is a way of making my work expressive and easily identifiable, but it could be a restriction … I have to resolve this contradiction in my art, wanting to please myself and at the same time serve society. [4]

These experiments with abstraction led to thoughtprovoking creations especially when used as a tool for social commentary. *Masked in Blue* (Fig. 25) represents both a torso and a face. As a torso, the censorship technique used by publishers is depicted where body parts considered obscene are masked over; as a face, the tapes have implications of one being prevented from seeing or speaking of the offending subject. *Modesty II* (Fig. 26) is also a visual interplay of the torso and face representing censorship through the carved out body parts and at the same time suggesting restrictions to sight and speech through the removal of eyes and mouth. The artist's reaction to heavy censorship was one of surprise (Fig. 27) since nudity had no obscene connotations in his mind.[5] The dark brown coating gives the impression of a figure tightly bound in a tube, perhaps suggesting constraints to artistic practices dictated by social norms and values.

Fig. 25
Masked in Blue, 1996
Stoneware, glaze

Fig. 26
Modesty II, 1991
Stoneware, glaze, oil paint

Fig. 27
Surprised I, 1995
Stoneware, slip, glaze

Fig. 28
Split V, 1977
Ciment fondu, copper sheet, paint, lacquer

In 1961, Ng painted *End of History* (Fig. 19) as a 'reminder of the consequences of the wilful removal of the physical fabric of human settlements.[6] He advanced this theme in the 1970s through sculptural forms. *Split V* (Fig. 28) is from a series of abstract depictions about the artist's sentiments towards demolition work in Chinatown. For Ng, demolition of the built landscape meant the fragmentation of human memories and experiences.

> It was like a split to the heart of Man. Humanity, represented by the broken chips and textural surfaces of crumbling walls, was torn asunder and mankind reduced to a jigsaw puzzle. Sometimes the parts do not fit.[7]

**Play**

Ng Eng Teng's explorations into stylisation and abstraction are often accompanied by a sensibility characterised by wit, humour and play. This *joie de vivre* is depicted in the exuberance and excitement of kids at play as in *Freedom Child Over Hill* (Fig. 29). The child is active, carefree and always ready to launch off into adventure. A set of figurines on animals use the trademark bulbous shape which Ng derived from his experiments with pots. The features of some animals are exaggerated to highlight their defining characteristic, such as the enlarged round eyes of *Owl* (Fig. 30).

Fig. 29
Freedom Child Over Hill, 1975
Stoneware, part glazed

Fig. 30
Owl, undated
Stoneware

Ng's enthusiasm in stretching the limits of design and materials gave rise to another innovation – mobile sculptures.

> When you make shapes with tiny bases, they start to move, so I thought why not allow movement? With a crescent base, they start to rock and if it's a completely spherical piece, you can also make them roll. [8]

*Tension* (Fig. 31) and *Flat Torso* (Fig. 32) show Ng's way of bringing sculptures, literally and figuratively, down from the pedestal [9] and encouraging the audience to interact and participate with his creations; this was a projection of the artist's belief that sculptures should have room for 'the whimsical and light-hearted'.[10]

In some cases, the use of rocking and rolling motions enhanced the sensation Ng wanted the sculpture to impart, and at the same time provided a lighthearted touch in the treatment of otherwise serious issues. *Tension* is about a man struggling for his dear life. A loss of control would mean an immediate falling over; this precarious situation, as well as the immense challenge of 'clutching on for dear life', is amplified when the sphere is rolling.

Fig. 31
Tension, 1972
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer

Fig. 32
Flat Torso, 1971
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer

In another body of works, Ng injects wit to creatively transform parts of the body to encompass multiple identities. *Jester* (Fig. 33) shows a head and neck but also alludes to the phallic form. *Sitting Torso* (Fig. 34) is a body resting on the lower limbs which are folded such that only the thighs and knees are visible. From the shape, the phallic form is also projected, thus superimposing the female torso to the male sign.

Fig. 33
Jester, undated
Ciment fondu

Fig. 34
Sitting Torso, 1994
Stoneware, coloured clay inlay

This mischievous metamorphosis of the body is further employed in the Torso-to-Face series. In *Small Eyes* (Fig. 36), which evolved from drawings such as *Abstract Torso II* (Fig. 35), the eyes and breasts are interchangeable depending

Fig. 35
Abstract Torso II, 1992
Coloured marker on watercolour paper

Fig. 36
Small Eyes, 1994
Stoneware, slip, glaze

on whether one envisions the object as a face or torso. The series developed from Ng's drawing exercises.

> ... the Torso-to-Face series ... came about from doing these [life] drawings...at each session I see an image of a face looking at me from the body, and this impression gets more intense each time. [11]

**Perspectives**

Nourished by his observations of the human condition, Ng explored a range of ideas, energies and emotions which he shaped into three dimensional forms offering us a perspective of the artist's own interests and concerns. The major themes which Ng explored over an extended period were family; the psychological states; and self.

*Family*

Family was close to Ng's heart. He spoke fondly of his parents, recalling the rambutan tree which his mother grew in the garden and his father's support of and assistance with his kiln building project at home.[12] The wish to be near his parents was one of the motivations for Ng's return to Singapore in 1966 even though he was doing well as a designer at Carrigaline pottery factory in Ireland.

> Another reason why I came back was for my parents; they were getting on in years. ... after I had done so well in health and life, I thought I must come back before it was too late.[13]

Ng was a keen observer of the family unit, individuals in the unit, relationships amongst family members and their interdependence.[14] Being a centre where children learn values and interactions with people, the home and family is the core of humanity.[15] From these studies, production on the mother and child series emerged which later included father and child and works on children.

The mother and child productions are composed in a variety of ways. In *Mother and Twins* 2000 (Fig. 37), each child is supported by the mother and sits contented and restful in her arms. *Mother and Twins* 1988 (Fig. 38) is similar in its portrayal of the calm and secure child in the embrace of the parent but here, the form is simplified and the child represented only as a head supported by the mother's palm. The mother's arm can be viewed alternately as her own limb or as the body of the child. In *Madonna and Child II* (Fig. 39), the child starts to assert some independence and although unsteady, seems intent on being on his feet. The mother supports the child in his endeavours but maintains control.

Fig. 39
Madonna and Child II, 1990
Bronze

Fig. 40
Over Mother's Head, 1990
Bronze

Fig. 41
Hands Full, 1975
Ciment fondu, paint

*Over Mother's Head* (Fig. 40) shows the child attaining almost complete freedom and riding joyfully on the mother's head; *Hands Full* (Fig. 41) works on the same idea but in simplified form. This composition became increasingly popular in Ng's works and offers a few possible readings, one being the greater independence a child seeks as he grows. Created in a period when Singapore's family planning programme was actively promoted, these works may also be contextualised as an exploration of the effects that the successful campaign had on the parent child dynamics.

In the early 1970s, Ng started producing works on the father and child and also explored compositions of parents with their children. In *Responsibility II* (Fig. 42), the father holds the child on his shoulder. This arrangement plays with the idea of the father shouldering the responsibility of caring for his offspring but is also indicative of Ng's perception of a father's role:

> A father is like a mountain overlooking the valley which is the child, very attentive, guiding and guarding from afar...Sometimes we see a father carrying a child, or a child sitting over his shoulder which a mother does not do. This to me is a father's way of guiding a child to be brave, looking ahead with confidence.[16]

Fig. 37
Mother & Twins, 2000
Bronze

Fig. 38
Mother and Twins, 1988
Bronze

Fig. 42
Responsibility II, 1985
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer



Whilst traditional division of household labour defined the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the homemaker and caregiver, there has been more emphasis in recent decades on the essential role of the father in a child's upbringing. The emergence of the father and child works echoes early attitudinal changes in society towards greater involvement of fathers in parenting.

*The Human Condition*

Psychological or emotional frailty was a dominant theme in Ng's works. *Dejected* (Fig. 43) is a product from his interaction with a boy whom Ng talked out of 'doing harm to his life'. The artist recorded this incident at the back of the canvas (Fig. 44):

> Several years before painting
> persuaded a boy from doing
> harm to his life. An orphan
> finding this world too cruel,
> and lonely, without money and...
> .....and LOVE

Fig. 43
Dejected, 1960
Oil on canvas

Fig. 44
Dejected – back of canvas

Exploration of the human condition continued through the late 1960s and 70s with a series of sculptures representing figures wasting away or experiencing various forms of distress and agony. In *Frustration of a Loner on a Rock* (Fig. 45), the anguish and intensity of suffering is emphasised through the tensed muscles, stretched in some parts and clumped into knots in other areas. Yet another grouping contains figures curled inwards in a crouching position. The protagonist in *Fear II* (Fig. 46) wraps his limbs around the body; his concerns are internalised and there is a reluctance to engage with the world. The eyes are deeply recessed and peer with apprehension conjuring a sense of bewilderment and dread. Such works compel viewers to confront the darker side of life and may be uncomfortable for some; even so, Ng felt the need to be open and forthright in communicating these emotions – 'In truth I see beauty'.[17]

Fig. 45
Frustration of a Loner on a Rock, 1973
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer

Fig. 46
Fear II, 1978
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer

Observing the lives of others provided Ng with inspiration for his art; however the artist also participated actively in society, lending a hand or a listening ear to those in need. In the mid1990s, he taught his craft on a weekly basis at the Agape Centre, an organisation providing support for the rehabilitation of ex-drug addicts and troubled youths. Ng's impact is remembered by the director of the centre who recalled that the problems of the inmates overwhelmed the artist but he never used it as an excuse to avoid the sessions. Furthermore, he always treated them as his equal.[18] A former inmate, who has since become a potter, attributes his accomplishments to the mentoring and encouragement provided by Ng.[19] Ng sums up his philosophy of actively participating in life and society:

> Art is life. ... You have to feel what is around you. I do not think you can be a hermit, ... There are those who withdraw from reality; but I do not work in that way. [20]

*Self*

In studying art productions and their contents, one is often tempted to correlate the works to phases or aspects of the artist's life as a potential for seeking greater insight into the individual behind the creations.

Fig. 47
Self Portrait, 1983
Pencil on paper

Fig. 48
Self Portrait, c. 1967
Oil on canvas

Both Sabapathy and Sheares explored the autobiographical nature of Ng's works. Through a viewing of the artist's self portraits produced from 1961 to 1967, Sabapathy assessed the linkages between episodes in the artist's life and the moods depicted in his self portraits.[21] Periods of uncertainty in Ng's life were associated with portrayals of self in a preoccupied and divested state, withdrawn and unwilling to be sociable such as in *Self Portrait* 1967 (Fig. 48). In times of greater optimism, such as when the artist had just returned from the

United Kingdom, the image of self was confident and conveyed a willingness to interact and engage with the viewer (Fig. 47).

Continuing the analysis along this trajectory, a reading of the series on figures in distress offers clues about the prevailing mood of the artist in the decade immediately after returning to Singapore. In 1967, his proposal to start a pottery programme at NAFA did not materialise. For two years, he was unable to find a job suited to his ceramics qualifications and was depressed,[22] a feeling aggravated by recollections of the years he had already lost due to his struggles with tuberculosis.

> … time is my only enemy, because I didn't have the early working period I had planned for. The unhappiness is reflected in my sculpture. I just want to make people aware of misery and poverty, … [23]

The artist also had kidney and heart complications since the 1970s, a fact that he hardly shared with anyone till the 1990s.[24] The anxieties of livelihood, frustrations at the lack of opportunity in the ceramic arts, and possibly apprehension about more wasted years from illness are not unlike the sentiments embodied in works such as *Frustration of a Loner on a Rock*, *Fear II* and the entire range of figures in distress.

Fig. 49
Hopeful, 1992
Bronze

Fig. 50
Wondering, 1992
Bronze

An examination of NUS Museum's collection reveals that production of figures in distress ended in the early 1980s. The mother and child works continued but in general, the artist leaned towards more abstract and simplified art forms in the later decades. Of particular interest is the series of bronze sculptures comprising works such as *Looking Ahead* (Fig. 20), *Hopeful* (Fig. 49) and *Wondering* (Fig. 50) which, both in visual presentation and naming, suggest a more optimistic outlook in life. The figures sport generally relaxed postures and a measure of composure in their expressions. One is persuaded to draw parallels between this change in mood and the breakthroughs that the artist had achieved locally and internationally through a decade of struggle.[25]

ENDNOTES

1 Constance Sheares, 'Ng Eng Teng, Interview' in T.K. Sabapathy (ed), *Change: 20 Singapore Artists: A Decade of Their Work* (Singapore: P. Mowe, 1991), 26 – 37; here 27.

2 Ibid., 27.

3 Ibid., 27.

4 Ibid., 28.

5 Constance Sheares, *Bodies Transformed, Ng Eng Teng in the Nineties* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1999), 42.

6 T.K. Sabapathy, *Ng Eng Teng, Art and Thoughts* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1998), 45.

7 Chia Wai Hon, 'Mankind As Jigsaw' written in 1991, reproduced in Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 189 – 190; here 190.

8 Marie-Ann Tay, 'The Sculptor Who Went to the Olympics' in *Singapore Tatler*, December 1988: 91.

9 Ibid., 91.

10 Chia Wai Hon, 'Ng Eng Teng's New Image' written in 1972, reproduced in Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 184.

11 Shearas, *Bodies Transformed*, 45.

12 Huang Hui Ling (executive producer), *Tuesday Report: Sculpting Joo Chiat* (xing qi er te xie: Lao jie fang. Diao su Ruqie), Singapore: MediaCorp News, 1999, Videorecording in Mandarin. Reference: TR 99/39, Profile of Ng Eng Teng.

13 T.K. Sabapathy, 'Conversation between Ng Eng Teng and T.K. Sabapathy' in Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 141 – 173; here 161.

14 T.K. Sabapathy, 'Vital Images of Life' written in 1989, reproduced in Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 192 – 197; here 194.

15 Sabapathy, 'Conversation', 165.

16 Ibid., 166.

17 Peter Ling, 'Ng Eng Teng is a Creative Man' in *Weekend*, The Sunday Mail Magazine, Singapore, 25 July 1971: 12.

18 Tan Lek Hwa (executive producer), *Portraits*, Singapore: MediaCorp News, 2003, Videorecording, Reference: Episode 6, Profile of Ng Eng Teng.

19 Ibid.

20 T.K. Sabapathy, '6 Dialogues: Ng Eng Teng' in T.K. Sabapathy, *Sculpture in Singapore* (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1991), 43 – 48; here 47.

21 Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 38, 53 – 58 and 74.

22 Sabapathy, 'Conversations', 161.

23 Ilsa Sharp, 'Ng Eng Teng, Potter and Patriot' in *Arts of Asia*, Hong Kong, Arts of Asia Publications, May – June 1971: 17.

24 Tan Lek Hwa (executive producer), *Portraits*.

25 Arthur Hullett, 'Man on a lonely road' in *The Asia Magazine*, Singapore, Distributed with the Sunday Nation, 5 August 1979: 25. By this time, Ng had already held solo exhibitions in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Adelaide, London, Dublin and Paris. He had also received a number of significant local commissions as well as overseas ones at United Overseas Bank in Hong Kong, World Bank in Washington and the headquarters of the Singapore Mission to the United Nations in New York.



## MATERIALS / PROCESSES / PUBLIC ART

Ng Eng Teng experimented with different materials for his sculptural works but had a greater affinity for clay, ciment fondu and bronze. His motivation for making art stemmed from the wish to put his thoughts and emotions into visual and tangible forms so that they could be shared with others.[1] Consequently a key criterion in the selection of a medium was how well it would allow him to express these ideas and feelings. Explaining his preference for bronze over stainless steel, Ng said:

> … I utilise materials that can be accommodated to my thinking … I feel bronze is so warm and inviting … I feel I can respond to it, cooperate with it … Steel does not call out to me in this way… [2]

Closely related to the affinity for certain materials was his preferred sculpting technique. Ng learnt from experience that the subtraction method of sculpting where the material was chipped or scraped off to produce the form did not suit his temperament. He was more inclined towards the additive approach of building up, shaping and modelling which allowed for reworking until he was satisfied.[3]

This section looks at the stages in Ng's art making, from conceptualisation to execution, and covers some basic production and finishing techniques he employed.

Ooophs!, 2000
Ciment fondu, oil paint

## Developing an Idea

A survey of the collection reveals that sketches and drawings were the genesis of Ng's sculptural artworks. He had a firm regard for drawing skills and felt that the ability to accurately represent the world in two dimensional space provided the crucial foundation for more advanced art making such as abstraction and three dimensional constructs.[4]

*Yoga Posture into Form* (Fig. 51) is an instance of how Ng translated things arising from the surroundings into ideas for artistic works. As the lady practising yoga attempts to pull her feet towards her raised head, her back is fully arched with only the stomach resting on the ground. This posture is at the core of the reclining figure which was developed and given features and form in works such as *Acrobat* (Fig. 52), *Wealth* and *Contentment* (Fig. 53).

Fig. 51
**Yoga Posture into Form**, undated
Ink and collage on paper

Fig. 52
**Acrobat**, 1988
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer

Fig. 53
**Wealth** (right) and **Contentment** (left), 1974
Ciment fondu, painted
Located at NUS' University Cultural Centre

Fig. 54
Maquettes of **Wealth** (right) and **Contentment** (left), undated
Ciment fondu, painted

Before transforming the ideas in his sketches to the final product, Ng was known for making maquettes (Fig. 54) as a means of experimentation. These scaled down pieces facilitated the testing of composition and balance, allowed for refinement of proportions, and also made it possible for Ng to investigate how far a design could be stretched. Clay was the dominant medium for Ng's maquettes. However, for large commissioned works which would eventually be cast in ciment fondu, the same material was used for the maquettes.

The sketches, sketch books and maquettes in this collection are valuable for further analysis of Ng's art making process; they offer a glimpse into the methodical way in which the artist took his ideas from preliminary concept to final production, the experimentation he was engaged in and possible factors which influenced his design decisions.

## Clay

Even though he was widely quoted as favouring ciment fondu for sculpture making, clay had a significant place in Ng's practice. Aside from sculptures, most of Ng's maquettes and the original models for ciment fondu casts were rendered in clay. He would use clay for conceptualising the design and only when he was fully satisfied would a casting be carried out.[5]

Used in the production of bricks for the construction industry, clay was readily available in Singapore during the 1950s and 60s; consequently, Ng used this material for his early sculptures. He purchased the clay from Alexandra or Jurong brickworks and used their kilns for firing the finished works.[6] Naturally, the artworks were not given priority and Ng recalled the unpredictability and frustration – lost, broken or vandalised sculptures as well as those that became stuck to the bricks. After he was introduced to ciment fondu, Ng made less figurative works in ceramics [7] and was deeply reacquainted with the material again only when he went to the United Kingdom to study pottery.

Fig. 55
**Vase**, undated
Stoneware, marbled, clear-glaze

Fig. 56
**Teapot with Two Cups II**, 1963
White earthenware with dancing figures

Ng studied industrial pottery during his first year in Stoke-on-Trent, followed by a year of learning studio pottery at Farnham. He became an accomplished potter and upon graduation worked for two years as a designer in a pottery factory in Ireland. *Vase* (Fig. 55) and *Teapot with Two Cups II* (Fig. 56) are examples of the more conventional ceramics he produced in the early stages of his pottery practice. His earnestness to pursue the ceramics art form is evident from the gas kiln that he built after returning to Singapore. With an interior height of four feet, this was constructed in the kitchen of the family home with blessings and assistance from his father.[8]

Even after became an established sculptor, Ng continued his practice in pottery. By then, he was less concerned with making functional pottery and instead preferred untraditional forms where the pots might be distorted or contained figurative or symbolic meanings.[9] *'Woman' Teapot I* (Fig. 57) is an example of how Ng advanced his practice of figuration into the arena of pottery. The head of the woman acts as a lid; the bent left arm resembles the teapot's handle; the rotund stomach is part of the pot's body and provides a stable base as well as a support for the spout, which is formed by the angled right arm with an upturned palm.

Fig. 57
**'Woman' Teapot I**, 1992
Stoneware, glaze

Fig. 58
Ng Eng Teng (left) with members of Studio 106 group doing Raku firing at Sam Mui Kwang Pottery Works in 1993 [10]
Photograph courtesy of Mr Chua Soo Kim

From the 1980s till early 90s, ceramists would gather twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at Ng's studio except when he was away from Singapore.[10] Referred to as the 'Studio 106 group' (Fig. 58), the members' chosen medium was clay. They discussed techniques, exchanged ideas and learnt from Ng who would share the knowledge and experiences from his overseas trips. Ng was their acknowledged leader and mentor but he allowed members to develop in their preferred direction, providing guidance when necessary.[11] Led by Ng, this group also held a series of exhibitions called 'Claytivity'.

For a time in the 1990s when Ng was making the torso-to-face series, he worked mainly in ceramics [12] and actively experimented with a variety of surface treatments. Red Maiden sports a pomegranate (or oxblood) red finish which took Ng halfway across Asia to perfect. Ng tested the recipe for this glaze locally but, due either to the recipe or firing conditions, was unable to achieve the desired blood-red effect.[14] As a result, he went to a pottery factory in China to work on this form of glazing. The sculpture is coated with a glaze rich in cupric oxide.

During the firing process, the exacting conditions in the kiln invoke a chemical reaction, known as reduction, forming cuprous oxide ($Cu_2O$) which gives the dazzling red to the sculpture.

*Fallen Crown* (Fig. 59), which required three firing,[15] is another of Ng's experimentation with techniques and surface finish. The crown was coated in blue crystal glaze and fired to 1,200 degrees centigrade. Clay was then used to build a cocoon around the crown, a spiral wire with a ceramic sphere was attached and the whole piece fired at 1,000 degrees centigrade. The cocoon became a bisque after the firing, making it strong enough to withstand the third process which was pit firing. In pit firing, a pit is either dug into the ground or built upwards with bricks. The pit is filled with sawdust on which the object to be fired is placed. Copper carbonate and salt are sprinkled around the object which is covered with more sawdust. A fire is built above the pit and left to burn overnight. Resulting from pit firing, decorative patterns of black, white and pink appear on the bisque.

Fig. 59
**Fallen Crown**, 1991
Stoneware, glaze, copper wire

## Ciment Fondu

The varied qualities of ciment fondu made it one of Ng's preferred medium for sculpture. The artist saw the flexibility and practicality that the material offered and was not deterred that collectors might be ambivalent about investing in works made of cement, a less prestigious material.[16]

> Ciment fondu is a very beautiful material. You can stain it to different colours and, should it be damaged, you can repair it back to its original condition.[17]

Ciment fondu is a mixture of cement with one or more aggregate material. The cement acts as the binding agent for the mixture whilst the aggregate material, which is granular, gives the mix its strength and texture. Ng made his ciment fondu works using the casting method.[18] A full scale model of the required sculpture is first made, possibly in clay, and this is used to prepare a mould. Once the mould hardens, the clay model is removed, the mould is cleaned and a coat of parting agent applied.

The required sculpture can now be cast. The casting process involves applying a layer of ciment fondu over the mould surface followed by a layer of glass fibre.[19] Alternating layers of ciment fondu and glass fibres are built up until the required thickness of the cast is achieved, with the final layer being the cement mixture.

When necessary, metal wires are used to reinforce delicate areas such as the nose. Wire mesh is also included in the layers of the cast as reinforcement. If the mould comprises a number of pieces, the process is repeated for each section, after which they are assembled and held tightly together. The mould assembly is covered with a piece of damp cloth or placed in a plastic bag with some water and left to cure. When the ciment fondu has cured, the mould is chipped off to reveal the cast. Flaws on the cast have to be made good before applying the finishing. Using this casting method, the sculpture is hollow and, especially for larger works, the reduced weight facilitates movement and transportation.

Fig. 60
Cleaning and applying a new coat of paint to Wealth in September 2006

Ng's ciment fondu sculptures are mainly finished with a coat of paint followed by a layer of lacquer. The material and treatment make these sculptures durable and only infrequent maintenance is required even when placed in an outdoor setting (Fig 60).

**Bronze**

Practical considerations play an important part in an artist's choice of materials. The absence of a foundry in Singapore delayed Ng's foray into bronze [20] even though he had long been interested in using this medium. Only when he was in Australia in 1987 was Ng introduced to bronze casting and there he made his first piece *Looking Ahead*.[21] He found that bronze allowed for more extensive rendering; shapes made from the metal could be stretched more substantially and also made thinner, widening his options for geometric and abstract compositions.

> It allows me to create more attenuated or extended shapes such as elongated arms and necks, and even flowing and tapering hair which would not be possible in ciment-fondu or ceramics because of their brittleness.[22]

The properties of bronze are exploited in works such as *Hopeful* and *Wondering*. These sculptures were made during trips to Thailand in 1992 [23] and sport the 'flowing hair' which Ng spoke of, as well as a general fluidity in constitution.

Ng used the lost wax process for casting the bronze pieces. This method involves building an investment mould around a wax model or wax cast.[24] The mould is placed in a kiln, where the investment material hardens and at the same time the wax is melted away leaving a cavity within the mould. Molten bronze is poured in to fill the cavity. Once the mould has cooled, it is chipped away revealing the sculpture.

**Public Art**

Ng Eng Teng was commissioned to produce artworks for public spaces both locally and abroad. Whilst his gallery sculptures were created mainly for self expression, works sited in public areas were designed with the aim of enhancing the location and projecting its identity but with practicalities taken into account. These were not the only considerations, however; Ng's philosophy that art should encompass substantive subject matter extends to his public art. The initial stage in the commissioning process was spent on conceptualising theme, space and design.

> First you have to listen to the commissioners and try to understand the clients, and their desire for a piece of sculpture; and then go away and research on suitable design, to tell a little story and to enhance the site.

> You have to study the site first. I usually view the surrounding areas too, and if the sculpture is meant for a building, the design and line of the building need to be taken into consideration … the size and volume of the work have to be suitable to the location.

> … the completed sculpture has to be safe for the public, no unnecessary low protrusions endangering people. You should not design a sculpture with cavities that will collect rain water and breed mosquitoes. The work should not invite people to vandalise it.[25]

Fig. 61
Balance (Maquette), undated
Ciment fondu, painted

*Balance* (Fig. 61) is an example of the artist's penchant for storytelling through his works. Created in 1981 for the first ASEAN Sculpture Symposium, the work which stands at Fort Canning Park has five sections. The base is a four sided column which ends in a pyramidal top. Three spheres, one on top of the other, are balanced on the pyramid. On the top sphere rests an arc with a slit at the lower end.

> It symbolises how one has a lot of balancing to do in life. This applies too even on the government level. We have to always strike a balance with the countries around us. A country won't progress if it sticks to a stubborn ideology, without balance.[26]

Cultural sensitivity was an important consideration when making public art. Referring to a pair of sculptures entitled *Spirit of Man* (Fig. 62 & 63) that he produced for Terminal 1 of Singapore's Changi Airport, Ng explained why abstraction was adopted:

> … I chose to produce abstract forms for the sculptures … so as to avoid offending particular sensibilities, those who find representation unacceptable.[27]

Fig. 62
Spirit of Man I (Maquette), undated
Ciment fondu, painted

Fig. 63
Spirit of Man II (Maquette), undated
Ciment fondu, painted

Of his overseas commissions, the one which received much attention was the enlarged 2.7 metres of *Portrait* for the 1989 Olympic Games in Seoul. Ng was delighted at the opportunity to display his work alongside almost 200 international sculptors.[28] The original sculpture which caught the attention of the representative from the Olympic Committee is currently situated at NUS' University Hall (Fig. 72).

ENDNOTES:

1 T.K. Sabapathy, 'Conversation between Ng Eng Teng and T.K. Sabapathy' in T.K. Sabapathy, Ng Eng Teng, *Art and Thoughts* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1998), 141 – 173; here 173.

2 T.K. Sabapathy, '6 Dialogues: Ng Eng Teng' in T.K. Sabapathy, *Sculpture in Singapore* (Singapore: National Museum Art Gallery, 1991), 43 – 48; here 47.

3 Ong Choo Suat, 'Formidable and Challenging' in Signature, Times Publishers for Diners Club Singapore and Malaysia, April 1974: 11.

4 Ong, 'Formidable and Challenging': 11.

5 Constance Sheares, 'In Conversation: Constance Sheares and Ng Eng Teng' in Constance Sheares, *Bodies Transformed: Ng Eng Teng in the Nineties* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1999), 43 – 52; here 43.

6 Sabapathy, '6 Dialogues', 44.

7 Ibid., 44.

8 Sabapathy, 'Conversation', 161.

9 Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 69 – 70.

10 Personal Communications with Singapore Potter Mr Chua Soo Kim who started joining the Studio 106 group on Tuesdays from 1984.

11 Personal Communications with Mr Chua Soo Kim.

and

John Tan Pang Chiau, 'Studio 106' in Clativity 91 (Singapore: Studio 106, 1991), 3.

12 Sam Mui Kwang Pottery Works originally located at Jalan Hwi Yoh was the former site of a dragon kiln owned by Mr Chua Soo Kim's family.

13 Sheares, 'In Conversation', 43. Sheares noticed Ng's absorption with ceramics during this period and asked the artist if he no longer worked on ciment fondu.

14 Ibid., 50.

15 Ibid., 46 and 48.

16 Sabapathy, '6 Dialogues': 46.

17 Sheares, 'In Conversation', 43.

18 Ibid., 43.

19 John W. Mills, *The Technique of Casting for Sculpture* (London: B.T.Bastford Ltd, New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1967), 70 – 79.

and

Chandra Mohan (Executive Producer), *Profile – Ng Eng Teng, Sculptor*, Singapore: Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, 1977, Videorecording.

20 Arthur Hullett, 'Man on a lonely road' in *The Asia Magazine*, Singapore, 5 August 1979: 21; distributed with Sunday Nation.

and

Sabapathy, '6 Dialogues': 46.

21 Constance Sheares, 'Ng Eng Teng, Interview' in T.K. Sabapathy (ed), *Change: 20 Singapore Artists: A Decade of Their Work* (Singapore: P. Mowe, 1991), 26 – 37; here 27.

22 Ibid., 27

23 Sheares, *Bodies Transformed*, 29.

and

Hullet, 'Man on a lonely road', 29.

24 Mills, *The Technique of Casting for Sculpture*, 125 – 133.

25 Sabapathy, 'Conversation', 170 – 171.

26 Richard Lim, 'Embodied … Spirit of ASEAN' in *The Straits Times*, Singapore, 27 June 1981. Ng was explaining to the writer the meaning of *Balance*.

27 Sabapathy, '6 Dialogues', 46.

28 Marie-Ann Tay, 'The Sculptor Who Went to the Olympics' in *Singapore Tatler*, December 1988, 90.

and

'People' in Asiaweek, February 24, 1989.

## Spirit of Experimentation: Works by Ng Eng Teng at University Hall

Magdalen Chua Wen Xian

Ng's artworks sited at University Hall are emblematic of the artist's spirit of experimentation. The limits of form, techniques, and materials in sculpture making are explored, with the body still figuring as a central theme. The artist's engagement with the depth and range of human emotions are apparent in the way that these works provoke thought on the conditions of life, be they circumstances specific to a time, community, or universally encountered.

Throughout his years of sculptural practice, abstraction was used to investigate the properties of materials, and propensity for the body to be conceived of in different ways. In *Family Group* (Fig. 64) and *Refugees (Flight II)* (Fig. 65), the bodies of individual family members are fused, a departure from his earlier works where bodies, though presented as part of a family unit, were sculpted as distinct family members. [1] The physical conjoining of the bodies of the family members can be seen as an extension of Ng's earlier works which dwell on the relationships between parent and child.

Fig. 64
**Family Group**, 1981
Ciment-fondu, paint, lacquer

Fig. 65
**Refugees (Flight II)**, 1981
Ciment-fondu, paint, lacquer

Several of Ng's works reveal his use of geometric abstractions, from the faintly cubist appearance of *Refugees (Flight II)*, to the geometric forms of *Head Profile* (Fig. 66), and *1 + 1 = (3/3 ed)* (Fig. 67).[2] The shaping of these forms was itself a means to experiment with different materials.

Fig. 66
**Head Profile**, 1990
Aluminum, paint

Fig. 67
**1 + 1 = (3/3 ed)**, undated
Aluminium, paint

> I like to try out different materials. For the first two weeks of working on *1+1=1*, I used aluminum. Following that, I did a piece in ceramic stoneware, and later in stainless steel, and brass…People find these geometric forms not so appealing. I suppose, time will tell. Usually new works take a few years for people to understand and accept. [3]

Envisaging the head and human figure as abstracted forms in *Moon Face* (Fig. 68) and *Tall Dancer* (Fig. 69) respectively, Ng releases the body from portraitist and figurative obligations.[4] Primary and organic shapes are distorted and exaggerated in imaginative ways to create evocative forms. [5]

Fig. 68
**Moon Face**, 1997
Stoneware, glaze

Fig. 69
**Tall Dancer**, 1990
Ciment fondu, paint, lacquer

*Survival* (Fig. 70) and *Yin Yang* (Fig. 71) are works in which Ng experiments with presentational strategies through a suite of mobiles with crescent or spherical bases which are allowed to rock. These kinetic forms question the physical placement and regard of sculpture by moving them down from the pedestal and bringing them closer to the audience. Realizing that the effect of a mobile's movement is best demonstrated with the viewer's intervention, Ng displayed these sculptures on the floor, in his second solo exhibition in 1972. [6]

Fig. 70
**Survival**, 1973
Ciment-fondu, paint, lacquer

Beyond experimenting with properties, techniques, and materials, several of the artworks bear the imprint of an artist conscious of societal and human conditions depicted through the use of binary opposites. In particular, *Portrait* (Fig. 72), of which the two angles on the top bullet-like component "denote the contradictions or duplicity of man" [7] in crying for both peace and war; *Refugees*

*(Flight II)* inspired by Vietnamese refugees [8] and conveying the sense of unity amidst fear; and *Love Hate IV* (Fig. 73) and *Yin Yang* expressing opposing emotions or principles in life.

Fig. 71
**Yin Yang**, 1986-87
Ciment-fondu, paint, lacquer

The selection of artworks speaks of Ng Eng Teng's creativity and exploration in his sculptural practice. Coupled with his awareness of the issues faced by individuals and society, this set of sculptures parallels the University's vision of shaping a dynamic community with a passion for learning and discovery, adding value to NUS and the wider community.

Fig. 72
**Portrait**, 1986
Ciment-fondu, paint, lacquer

Fig. 73
**Love Hate IV**, 1996
Stoneware, oil paint & glaze

Locating Ng's artworks at University Hall in relation to the exhibition at NUS Museum is also reflective of the ongoing dialogue between the Museum and the University, and the Museum's role in actively contributing to the academic life and intellectual pursuit of the NUS community.

ENDNOTES

1 T.K. Sabapathy, *Bodies & Figures: An Overview of Ng Eng Teng* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 2002), 19.

2 Constance Sheares, 'Poetic Metaphors: Sculptures by Ng Eng Teng' written in 1991, reproduced in T.K. Sabapathy, *Ng Eng Teng, Art and Thoughts* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1998), 186 – 189; here 187.

3 Constance Sheares, *Bodies Transformed, Ng Eng Teng in the Nineties* (Singapore: NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 1999), 47.

4 T.K. Sabapathy, *Configuring the Body: Form and Tenor in Ng Eng Teng's Art* (Singapore : NUS Museums, National University of Singapore, 2003), 57 – 58.

5 Sabapathy, *Art and Thoughts*, 136.

6 Sabapathy, *Bodies & Figures*, 17.

7 Sheares, 'Poetic Metaphors', 187.

8 Sabapathy, *Bodies & Figures*, 19.

Ng Eng Teng (left) with members of Studio 106 group doing Raku firing at Sam Mui Kwang Pottery Works in 1993
Photograph courtesy of Mr Chua Soo Kim (third from right)

Ng Eng Teng with art historian T. K. Sabapathy at the artist's studio, 1996

## Artist's Biodata

**NG ENG TENG**
**Born 12 July 1934, Singapore. Died 4 November 2001, Singapore.**

1955
- Enrolled in art classes conducted by the British Council, studying painting

1956
- Enrolled in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA); discontinued studies after a few months due to illness; submitted to the care of Dr Ng Yew Seng, an uncle, in Kuala Terengganu for about one year

1958
- Returned to Singapore; employed as trainee-artist by Shaw Brother and later at Fortune Advertising. Studied privately with Liu Kang

1959
- Met Jean Bullock who was instrumental in introducing him to ciment fondu, a material which he continued to employ throughout his practice. Began to exhibit work in group shows, displaying painting and sculptures

1959-61
- Reenrolled in NAFA completing studies and majoring in painting; attended classes taught by Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng

1962-63
- Pursued study of industrial pottery at North Staffordshire College of Technology in Stoke-on-Trent, England

1963-64
- Studied studio pottery at Farnham School of Art, England

1964-66
- Resident designer at the Carrigaline pottery factory in Ireland. Travelled to see England and other parts of Europe

1966
- Returned to Singapore, set up a studio and built kiln at the family residence at 106 Joo Chiat Place

1969
- Began a full-time career in art, after 2 years as a visual aids officer at the International Planned Parenthood Federation

1994
- Appointed Fellow to The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore (NUS) since 9 June

1997
- Donated 760 artworks to NUS

1998
- Made second donation of 173 artworks to NUS

2001
- Made third donation of 162 artworks to NUS

**EXHIBITIONS**

1959
- 10th Singapore Art Society exhibition, Singapore
  Exhibited one piece, *Miss Vogue*

1960
- 11th Singapore Art Society exhibition, Singapore
  Exhibited *My Sister*, the only sculpture in the exhibition

1961
- 12th Singapore Art Society exhibition, Singapore
  Exhibited *Aboriginal Woman*, one of two sculpture works in the exhibition

1962
- 13th Singapore Art Society exhibition, Singapore
- Two-Person Sculpture and Painting Exhibition with Katherine A. Schmid, National Library, Singapore

1963
- Society of Staffordshire Artists' Spring Show, Hanley Museum, Staffordshire, UK

1964
- Open Exhibition of the Work of Younger Craftsmen, Crafts Centre of Great Britain, London, UK

1965
- Dublin Spring Show, Dublin, Ireland

1966
- National Art Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

1967
- Exhibited in the first Singapore sculpture exhibition, National Library, Singapore

1969
- ASTA Convention Exhibition, Contemporary Sculpture Centre, Tokyo, Japan.
- Salon Malaysia, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

1970
- First one-artist exhibition of sculpture, painting and ceramics, National Library, Singapore

1972
- Second one-artist exhibition of sculpture, painting and ceramics, National Library, Singapore
- Adelaide Art Festival, Lidums Art Gallery, Adelaide, Australia
- Four Singapore Artists, The British Council Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
- Sculpture, Visual Arts Centre, Silpakorn University, Thailand

1975
- 14 Ceramic Artists, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1976
- Sculpture and Pottery, East and West Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
- Inaugural Exhibition, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1980
- Contemporary Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan

1981
- First ASEAN Sculpture Symposium, Fort Canning Hill, Singapore

1985
- Contemporary Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan
- International Ceramics Exhibition, Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
- Sculpture and Pottery, Alpha Gallery, Singapore

1986
- Contemporary Asian Art Show, Museum of Modern Art, Seoul, Korea

1987
- Transformation Image, Contemporary Ceramics in Singapore, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1988
- Sculpture, Gomboc Gallery, Western Australia
- World Invitational Open Air Sculpture Exhibition, held with the 1988 Seoul Olympics, South Korea

1989
- Sculpture, East and West Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
- Claytivity 89, Goethe-Institut Art Gallery, Singapore

1990
- Urban Artists: 25 Years of Singapore Art, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1991
- Sculpture in Singapore, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
- Claytivity 91, Goethe-Institut Art Gallery, Singapore

1993
- Art in Asia, World Trade Centre, Singapore

1994
- Singapore Showcase, World Trade Centre, Singapore

1996
- Claytivity 96, Goethe Art Gallery, Singapore

1997
- Inaugural exhibition held in conjunction with Ng Eng Teng's first donation to NUS, NUS Museums, National University of Singapore

1998
- A Thematic Approach to the Works of Ng Eng Teng, NUS Museums, National University of Singapore

1999
- Ceramitivity: the first statement, The Centre For the Arts, National University of Singapore
- Bodies Transformed: Ng Eng Teng in the Nineties, NUS Museums, National University of Singapore

2002
- Bodies & Figures, NUS Museums, Singapore
- Ceramitivity: the second statement, Centre For the Arts, National University of Singapore

2003
- Configuring the Body: Form and Tenor in Ng Eng Teng's Art, NUS Museums, Singapore

2005 – 2006
- Sculptures of Ng Eng Teng, NUS Museums, Singapore
- Ceramitivity 2005: a portfolio, NUS Centre For the Arts, National University of Singapore

**AWARDS & HONOURS**

1961
- Tagore Centenary Open Painting Competition, Gold Medal, Singapore

1962
- Silver Medal, Nanyang University Open Painting Competition, Singapore

1970
- Second Prize, Ceramics section, Craft Competition sponsored and organized by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board

1974
- London British Council Artist Travel Grant to England

- Pingat Apad, awarded by the Association of Artists of Various Resources for contribution to the development of visual arts in Singapore

1981
- Tan Tsze Chor Art Award Medal for Sculpture, Singapore Art Society
- Cultural Medallion Award, conferred by the Government of Singapore

1990
- ASEAN Cultural Award of Visual Arts (Sculpture)

1998
- Honorary Doctorate, National University of Singapore

2001
- Montblanc Patron of the Arts Award

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- Singapore potter, Mr Chua Soo Kim, for sharing snippets of his interactions with Ng Eng Teng as well as information and photographs on the activities of Studio 106 group.
- Singapore Press Holdings for supporting this exhibition through providing press articles relating to Ng Eng Teng and allowing us to use and display them.

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## 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 Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the ***Straits Chinese Collection***, will be located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

# **NUS** MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre

50 Kent Ridge Crescent, National University of Singapore

Singapore 119279

Tel: (65) 6516 8817

Website: www.nus.edu.sg/museum

Email: museum@nus.edu.sg

Opening Hours:

10am – 7.30pm (Tuesdays – Saturdays)

10am – 6pm (Sundays)

Closed on Mondays & Public Holidays

**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.

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NUS National University of Singapore

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