

Singapore: Prestigious Friend of the Arts Award for the Delegation's contributions to the arts

It was a win for #CulturalDiplomacy as the European Union (EU) Delegation to Singapore received its first national arts award.

The Delegation's efforts to deepen the EU-Singapore and EU-ASEAN partnership through arts and culture were recognised last night at Singapore's prestigious Patron of the Arts Awards where Minister for Culture, Community & Youth Edwin Tong was the guest-of-honour. Ambassador Iwona Piórko received the award for the SEA AiR (Studio Residencies for Southeast Asian Artists in the European Union) project.

Two successful cycles of this pioneering programme saw six artists from Southeast Asia travelled to six EU countries, creating connections in the spirit of Global Gateway. At the end of their residencies they presented their art works in two specially curated exhibitions that were part of Singapore Art Week, the region's biggest and most significant contemporary arts week.

Says Ambassador Piórko: "It is an honour to receive the Friend of the Arts award and to be able to strengthen ties in creative and sustainable ways through this made-in-Singapore programme. SEA AiR was launched in 2022 when the EU and ASEAN commemorated the 45th anniversary of their partnership. It is only fitting that it concluded in 2024 - another landmark year, which marks 20 years since the establishment of the EU Delegation to Singapore."

Through SEA AiR we have been able to drive further the development of Southeast Asia's contemporary art scene and the initiative serves as a springboard for dialogue between European art institutions and Southeast Asian artists premiering artworks here in Singapore – the thriving engine and beginning and end point of this very inspiring project.

SEA AiR was jointly developed by the Delegation, the Nanyang Technological University's Centre for Contemporary Art (NTU CCA) Singapore and funded by the EU's Foreign Policy Instruments. #EUForeignPolicy

Instituted in 1983, the Patron of the Arts Awards celebrate and recognise organisations and individuals who have contributed significantly towards the development of the arts. The European Union has received the award for the first time in Singapore.

SEA AiR Artists & Institutions

Cycle 2

Priyageetha Dia (Singapore – residency at Jan van Eyck Academie, Netherlands)

Ngoc Nau (Vietnam – residency at Rupert, Lithuania)

Saroot Supasuthivech (Thailand – residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien Germany)

Cycle 1

Hoo Fan Chon (Malaysia - residency at HIAP – Helsinki International Artist Programme, Finland)

Citra Sasmita (Indonesia - residency at WIELS Brussels, Belgium)

Vuth Lyno (Cambodia - residency at Villa Arson Nice, France)

SEA AiR Cycle 2 Highlights: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S40ggZZquvc>

SEA AiR Cycle 1 Highlights: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrJJ-nb793U>

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SEA AiR – A pioneering arts project for our times

The exhibition celebrates EU-Asean ties and embodies the rich spirit of dialogue and exchange that are hallmarks of the relationship between the two regions. **By Iwona Piorko**



ON JAN 10, 2023, the European Union Delegation to Singapore – together with the Nanyang Technological University's Centre for Contemporary Arts – will present the inaugural SEA AiR (Studio Residencies for Southeast Asian artists in the EU) exhibition at Gillman Barracks.

SEA AiR forges and fosters peer-to-peer cultural and artistic connections between Europe and South-east Asia, with Singapore in the key role as 'engine' of the programme and the site where its creative outcomes are shared with the public.

We embarked on this pioneering project in a milestone year as the EU and Asean commemorated the 45th anniversary of their dialogue relations in 2022. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong attended the Asean-EU Commemorative Summit in Brussels last month to mark this landmark year.

On Dec 15, 2022, the substantial conclusion of a new digital partnership between the EU and Singapore was announced in Brussels. This partnership expands the robust EU-Singapore relationship into the digital realm, which has a transformative potential for the future of our economies. The digital partnership builds on long-standing cooperation between the EU and Singapore on trade, research and technology. It will also serve as a strategic pathfinder for closer region-to-region digital connectivity.

SEA AiR embodies the rich and growing spirit of dialogue and exchange that are hallmarks of the relationship between the EU, Singapore and Asean.

In the spirit of deepening our regional exchanges in the first cycle, Malaysian artist Hoo Fan Chon did a residency at HIAP, the Helsinki International Artist Programme in Finland; Indonesian artist Citra Sasmita was offered a residency at WIELS in Brussels, Belgium; and Cambodian artist Vuth Lyno did his residency at Villa Arson in Nice, France. They were selected from a pool of 24 candidates nominated by curators and artists.

WIELS, Villa Arson and HIAP are established European art institutions with a long history



of running residency programmes. Each institution offered the artists a three-month residency and an opportunity to create new works, inspired by their experiences, engagements and interactions with the public in Europe. Unexpectedly, the residencies unfolded not only in the midst of a new surge of the Covid-19 pandemic but also during the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The timing and context serve as yet another reminder why support for the arts and creating platforms and projects that support people-to-people connectivity and encourage diversity, dialogue and discourse matter even more in our deeply fraught times.

We have in SEA AiR, a made-in-Singapore programme to further drive the development of South-east Asia's contemporary art and serve as a springboard for dialogue between European art institutions and South-east Asian artists.

Dedicated to artists who have not yet had a significant professional experience in Europe, SEA AiR pivots the creative and cultural ex-

change between the EU and Singapore and Asean, enabling us to highlight a region that has historically been under-represented in most artist residency programmes in Europe.

It is indeed a privilege for us to have Singapore as the beginning and end point of this inspiring project.

Sparking conversations among the wider community, this show fittingly opens during Singapore Art Week allowing visitors from here, the region and beyond to immerse themselves in this artistic project. They get to experience first-hand how journeys and cultural exchanges shape art and art practices.

Serving as a perfect complement to the long-running European Film Festival, SEA AiR widens the European Union Delegation to Singapore's cultural file.

As I look ahead to what will certainly be another eventful year, SEA AiR shows us how cultural diplomacy can shape artistic practices. Artists through their naturally creative narratives offer us not just beauty and hope but provoke us to think deeper about our world and issues confronting us.

The shaping of this unique project together with NTU CCA and our many European partners has allowed us to focus on what we share and what connects us.

The writer is the European Union ambassador to Singapore.

Hoo Fan Chon, Citra Sasmita, Vuth Lyno: *New Works*, the inaugural SEA AiR exhibition, runs from Jan 10 to Feb 5, 2023. The show is part of Singapore Art Week. Admission is free of charge. *Creative Trajectories*, a talk by the three artists, will be held on Jan 11, 6-7.30pm at the venue at Gillman Barracks.



Malaysian artist Hoo Fan Chon's *Along the Waves in Search of the Great Bird* (2019), a wood carving painted in acrylics and partially gilded in gold leaf.

| Close-Up |

Cultural Exchange

Iwona Piórko, the European Union ambassador to Singapore, on how the delegation is bringing together the EU and the Asean region through art. *By Hashim Nurin Hashmi*

In the short time since Iwona Piórko began her term as the European Union (EU) ambassador to Singapore in September last year, she has acquainted herself with not only the people—government, business and youth leaders included—but also the culture. In particular, the food—she can already tell apart her nasi lemak from nasi padang—and the local arts scene.

When we sat down for this interview in end-January, Piórko was enthusiastic about her experience with Singapore Art Week, having explored the city's visual arts season with her family over the weekend. This gave her insight into the region's art and artists, even more so with the EU Delegation to Singapore's new artist residency programme, which was jointly launched with the Nanyang Technological University's Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (NTU CCA Singapore) to celebrate people-to-people connectivity and diversity.

The Studio Residencies for Southeast Asian Artists in the EU (SEA AIR) initiative offers selected artists, especially those who have not had significant exposure in Europe, a three-month residency at some of the most prestigious arts institutions in an EU country. They will have the opportunities to create new works, which will

be presented in a group exhibition curated by NTU CCA Singapore and planned for the next Singapore Art Week.

"We present this pioneering project in a milestone year as the EU and Asean celebrate the 45th anniversary of their dialogue relations. SEA AIR embodies this spirit of dialogue and exchange that are hallmarks of the relationship between two regions," the ambassador explains. "While we will have events commemorating this special milestone, we like to do things that bring us closer to the people, something that they can associate themselves with—and art is definitely one such area."

The programme will run in two cycles and three participants have been selected for the first one, from 24 candidates nominated by curators and artists from across Southeast Asia. Hoo Fan Chon from Malaysia, Citra Sasmita from Indonesia and Vuth Lyvo from Cambodia, each with artistic practices distinct from the other, will head to three equally diverse art institutions: HIAP—Helsinki International Artist Programme in Finland, Wiels in Belgium and Villa Arson in France respectively.

All three institutional partners have long histories of running residency programmes, and will provide

the right environment for the artists to develop their respective practices through curatorial mentorship, peer-to-peer discussions and public engagements.

The ambassador offers this insight: "When it comes to exhibitions on Asian art in Europe, the focus is often on China, Japan and South Korea, much less on Southeast Asia. However, this is starting to change—and I think the Asean region is very attractive for Europe in the discovery of art that is unexpected."

Singapore will be at the heart of the SEA AIR programme. "It is perceived internationally as a hub for the region, very often for investment, trade and commerce, but it is the same for the arts because it is here where projects such as SEA AIR are put together. I am excited to see the results next year. We have given the artists liberty in terms of what they will create, but I hope that they will be inspired by this European experience," enthuses the ambassador.

The EU and its 27 member states have long been involved in the cultural scene in Singapore. One such example is the annual European Film Festival—the 31st edition opens in May at The Projector—which offers a window into the world of European cinema. "Cultural diplomacy is important to the EU with issues that touch us in the same way, so we understand how closely we are connected and how we can shape and address [those issues] together," the ambassador elucidates.

The delegation also looks at a range of issues such as trade, foreign policy, science, technology and education.

Its focus areas include climate change, digitalisation and global recovery from the pandemic.

The ambassador grew up in Poland. She was eight when martial law was introduced during the communist regime and shares that "one of the things I remember from my childhood and young adult years was the restriction on travel". When travel became possible later, after the democratic changes in the 1980s with the labour movement called Solidarity, for which its leader Lech Wałęsa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, she became "immersed in the culture of many European cities that I couldn't visit before".

And it was in the same spirit that she and her family came to Asia. While this is her first stint living and working in Asia, she has travelled extensively across Southeast Asia with her family.

With countries opening up and travel resuming, we ask the ambassador on where to go in the EU for arts and culture. "I will always encourage the discovery of what's not immediately obvious," she says. "People would go to the places they know or heard of anyway, so I'd encourage them to discover the diversity of Europe."

"Whether in the arts or everything else, the ambassador considers the 'exchanges with people from all walks of life' as most important. "Of course, I come here with a vision of the EU for the region," she says. "That's the framework, but the priorities are shaped through my everyday conversations with people."

Teller
The Scene
34

Clockwise, from left: European Union ambassador to Singapore, Iwona Piórko; Thomads (2011), an installation of double-sided photographs by Cambodian artist Vuth Lyvo; Indonesian artist Citra Sasmita puts ink and acrylic to create *Hold in Timor*; *Morph Project II: The Harbour* by The Harbour Spirits (2019)



Teller
The Scene
35

34

LIFE & CULTURE

A video still of *Virtual Resonance* by Pratyajeetha Diva, a digital artwork by Pratyajeetha Diva, 2023. PHOTO: NODD MANU

SEA AIR: Passages of discovery through the arts

The studio residencies for Southeast Asian artists in the EU embody the rich spirit of dialogue and exchange that are hallmarks of the relationship between the two regions. *By Iwona Piórko*

ART is not just a powerful tool for sharing stories and emotions; it also helps to shine a light on our world in creative ways.

Together with art lovers from the region and beyond, I am looking forward to seeing how travels, cultural exchanges and the real-time shaping of our world have impacted and shaped the art practices of three talented artists from the region who are part of the second cycle of SEA AIR Studio Residencies for Southeast Asian Artists in the European Union.

For me, experiencing the art in this truly inspiring project and setting is an unforgettable journey. This is reflected in the exhibition title of SEA AIR Cycle 2: *Passages* references the artists' journeys across geographical and cultural boundaries from one continent to another; the cultural exchanges that take place during this time; and the continuous development of ideas as they return to their home countries to create the thought-provoking art works you will get to see in this exhibition.

This week the exhibition opened on Tuesday, 26 June. I will be experiencing the artworks in the presence of the artists. Pratyajeetha Diva from Singapore who did her residency at Joz van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands, Ngoc Mai from Vietnam who did her residency at Rūpait in Lithuania, and Saroot

Saroot from Thailand who did her residency at Stedelijk Beelden in Germany.

Through SEA AIR, we drive further the development of South-east Asia's contemporary art scene. The initiative serves as a springboard for dialogue between European art institutions and Southeast Asian artists.

These established European art institutions have a long history of running residency programmes and offered the artists a three-month residency and an opportunity to create

new works, inspired by their experiences, engagements, dialogues and interactions with the public in Europe. In the current geopolitical context, the artists also experienced the narratives dominating the European political and social landscapes.

This artist residency programme launched jointly by the Delegation of the European Union to Singapore and Nanyang Technological University's Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (NTU CCA) celebrates people-to-people connectivity and diversity. Through the second cycle of this annually made-in-Singapore programme, the EU deepens its ties with Singapore and the region in the spirit of the Global Gateway initiative, which connects people around the world in sustainable ways.

SEA AIR is dedicated to artists who have not yet had a significant professional experience in Europe. It enriches the creative and cultural exchange between the EU, Singapore and Asean, enabling the EU to highlight a region that has historically been under-represented in most major residency programmes in Europe.

The programme has built through two cycles a rich repository of art practices that resonate and connect beyond borders. The artists in the first cycle, Hoo Fan Chon from Malaysia, residency at the Helsinki International

35

LIFE & CULTURE

A screenshot of Pratyajeetha Diva's *Sap Sonic* and *Sap Script* installation mock-up render, 2023. ILLUSTRATION: PRATYAJEEHTHA DIVA

We are privileged to premiere *Passages* in Singapore as part of the much-anticipated Singapore Art Week 2024. This provides a platform for celebration and an opportunity to connect with audiences from the region and beyond, and spark ideas, conversations and exchanges.

Artist Programme, Finland, Citra Sasmita (Indonesian residency at Wiels, Brussels, Belgium) and Vuth Lyvo (Cambodian residency at Villa Arson, Nice, France) have had successful career trajectories, with regular showings in established exhibitions and biennials around the world.

The programme was started in 2022 when the EU and Asean commemorated the 45th anniversary of their partnership. It is only fitting that the second cycle is concluded during another landmark year, on this occasion for EU-Singapore relations, since 2024 marks 20 years of the establishment of the EU Delegation to Singapore. SEA AIR embodies the rich spirit of dialogue and exchange that are hallmarks of the relationship between the two regions.

We are privileged to premiere *Passages* in Singapore—the thriving engine and heartbeat and end-point of SEA AIR—as part of the much-anticipated Singapore Art Week 2024. This provides a platform for celebration and an opportunity to connect with audiences from the region and beyond, and spark ideas, conversations and exchanges.

The writer is the European Union Ambassador to Singapore. SEA AIR Cycle 2 Exhibition: *Passages* opened at NTU CCA Gillman Barracks on Nov 26 and runs till Jan 26, 2024. The exhibition is part of Singapore Art Week 2024.

A virtual reality still of Saroot, Singapore's first foray in VR. SAROOT, SINGAPORE, 2023. PHOTO: PRATYAJEEHTHA DIVA

[On CNA 938 \(Radio Interview\)](#)