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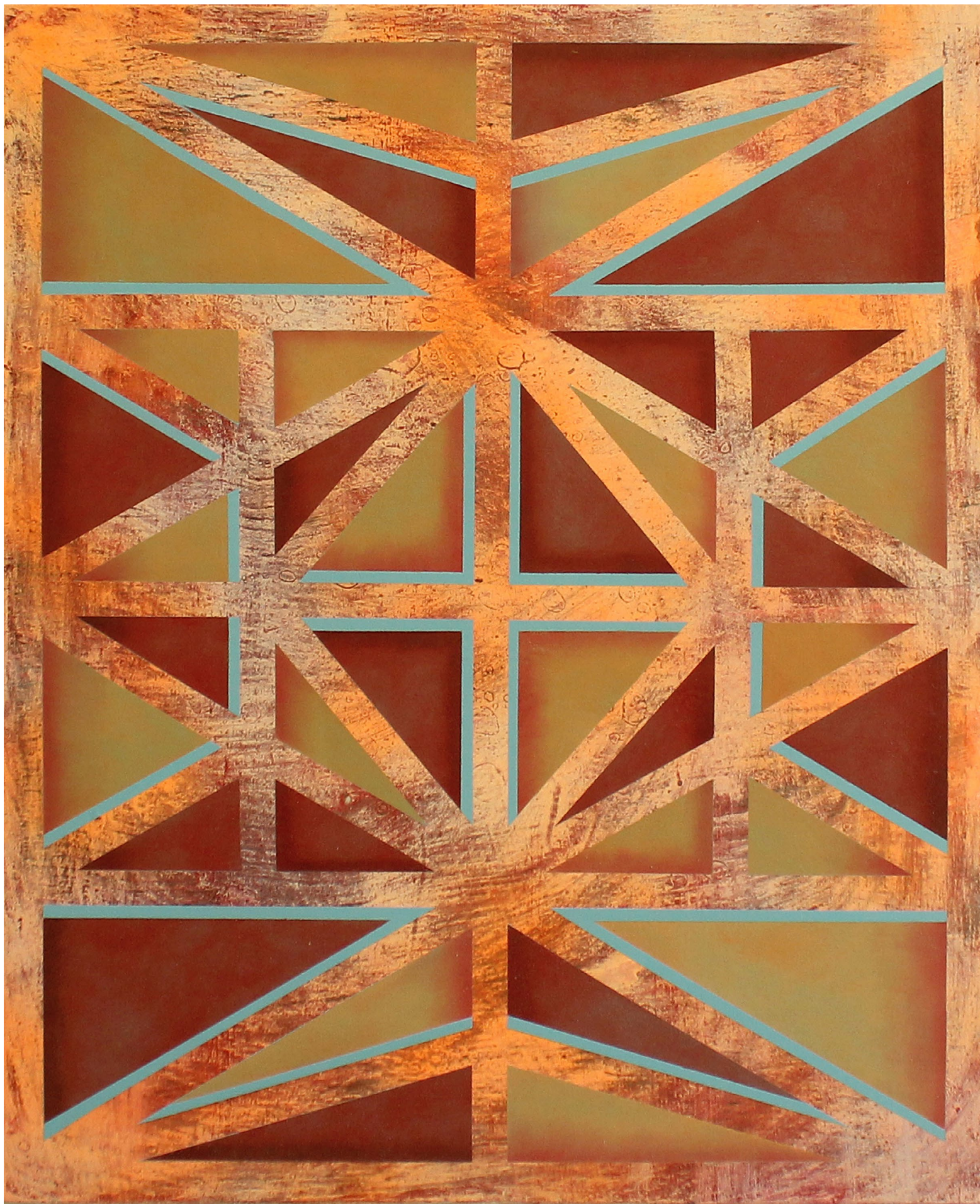
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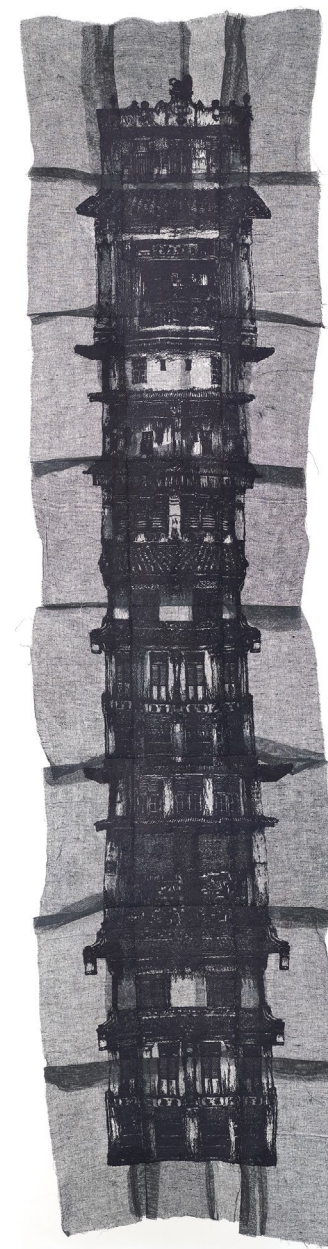
HOW TO BUILD AN ART COLLECTION

BY BEVERLY YONG AND RACHEL NG, ROGUEART

Architects and designers have played a key role in art support and patronage in the years leading up to independence and the formation of Malaysia. In coming issues of AM, join us for conversations about their interest in and collections of art, and ways of sustaining and enlivening artistic practice and discourse. In this issue, we propose some guidelines for navigating the Malaysian art world and starting to build your own art collection.



Haffendi Anuar, *Window 10*, 2013, oil, acrylic and enamel paint on MDF board with powder coated steel frames, 63 x 51 x 2.5 cm, image courtesy Richard Koh Fine Art



Yim Sen Sum, *How Tall Will You Be? II*, 2018, embroidery on gauze, gauze dyed in acrylic, 205 x 52 cm, image courtesy the artist

What we recognise as modern art has been made, shown and even collected since the late colonial period in the hubs of Penang, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Today's Malaysian art scene has its roots in the late 1950s and 1960s, when educators, artists and enthusiasts began to set up art schools, studio-based practices, collective groups, a national art gallery, private galleries, even corporate art collections, based on a Western model. In the past 15 years, it has grown exponentially, with a bustling art market that now incorporates auction houses and an international art fair, and also more public spaces and a strong alternative current. The most seasoned collectors and galleries on the scene today have been around since the mid 1990s and early 2000s, with at least one much more senior collector still active.



Art Expo Malaysia 2019; image courtesy Art Expo Malaysia

It is an exciting time to be collecting art in Malaysia, as interest in art history gradually develops, artists and works are uncovered and discovered in the secondary market, and above all, approaches to art-making proliferate and diversify as younger generations of artists emerge. Some see collecting pioneer artists and modern masters as an investment in cultural heritage. Contemporary art collectors, meanwhile, support critical and creative ideas and aesthetics that help give shape to our today, and even our tomorrow.

If you are reading this, you probably already have an interest in starting an art collection. Yet with the noise that surrounds the global art market, the apparent exclusivity of galleries and collectors' circles, and the sheer diversity of artists working today, it may feel like a bit of a mystery as to where to start. There are no hard-and-fast rules or hidden secrets to 'successful' collecting, but here are some pointers for thinking about why you would start an art collection, practical considerations, how to plan and how to take it from there.

SEARCH WITHIN

Start by considering what draws you to art and to the artworks you are attracted to, and why you want to collect it. Art for you may be an aesthetic or intellectual pleasure, a means of understanding yourself or others. They could mean a cultural identifier, a piece of history, a marker of human genius, among other things. How you see and enjoy art should be the first guiding principle for building a collection – even if this completely transforms in the process.

Collecting art, however, is more than simply an extension of how you ‘consume’ art. In acquiring art, you bring it into your personal environment: the art you collect becomes part of how you express yourself and your interests. At the same time, you become an active part of a cultural economy.

Some artists will change the way we think about the world, influence the ways other artists work, gain widespread critical recognition, and you may wish to be part of supporting them or simply own a work they have made. Others may speak to where or who you are, your love of colour, say, or you may just admire the way a particular artist ‘does things’.



Chang Yoong Chia, *Portrait of HRH Chang Yoong Chia*, commissioned by his *Minions, Ants and Termites*, 2006, wings glued with lacquer on glass, 74cm x 58.5 cm, private collection, image courtesy the artist



Chong Kim Chiew, *Ringgit Malaysia (we create the value of art, from zero to infinity)*, 2019, tape on canvas, 90 x 180 cm, private collection, image courtesy the artist



Fadilah Karim, *Routine #2*, 2020, oil on canvas, 152cm x 122cm, Collection of Yayasan Ilham; image courtesy Segaris Art Centre

As underlined by a collector, “At the most fundamental level, the collector provides a means for an artist to produce work they want to make.” Collectors take on a certain responsibility as patrons, caretakers or even tastemakers.



Chang Yoong Chia, *Self portrait as a landscape*, 2008, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, private collection, image courtesy the artist

CONSIDER ART'S VALUE

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“Is art a good investment?”

This is a common question, and RogueArt’s answer is always yes, if you take its value as being more than financial. However, if you see art primarily as an asset class, this undervalues it substantially.

As a collector, you put in money, time (and ideally research), but the ultimate value of your collection lies in what you and others can glean from it. In building a collection, you are building a body of knowledge, and through its process you may draw daily pleasure, experience the joys of discovery, cultivate deeper understandings, support careers and find opportunities for generosity – and there are intangible benefits such as meeting interesting people.

Of course, you may be lucky enough to have a few works you are able to sell on in times of need. On top of that, donations to national institutions afford some tax benefits. On the other hand, you may end up down the line finding that you need to rent an apartment or want to build a museum to accommodate your burgeoning collection.



A private collector's apartment, Kuala Lumpur, image RogueArt

BE PRACTICAL



A private collector's storeroom, image RogueArt

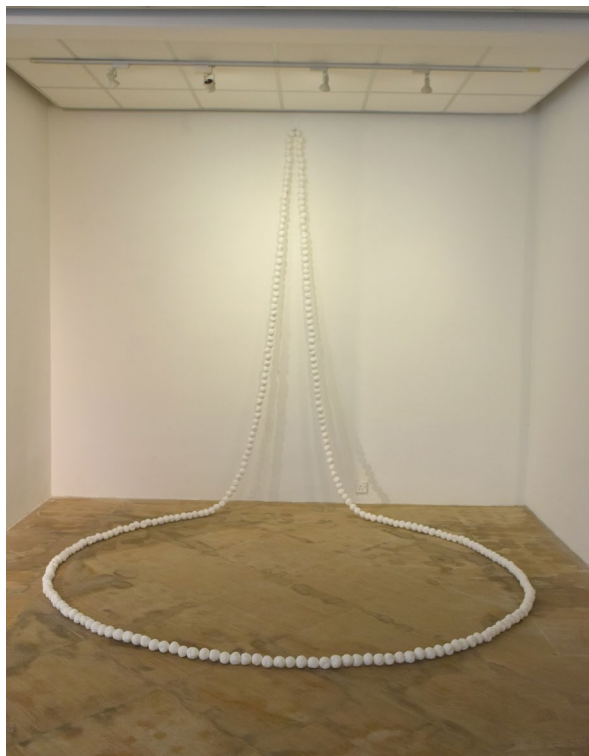
Do think about scale and budget. Whether you start out collecting a group of works for yourself or for the house, to support a few artist friends, or you have institutional-scale ambitions, you should have an idea more or less how much you are able or wish to spend on art on an annual basis. With prices ranging from a few hundred to a few hundred thousand ringgit you will have to do research into the works you are interested in and how much they may cost.

If you decide to collect contemporary art, accept that not everything in your collection will last for centuries and be easily hung on a wall. Although paintings remain the most popular medium for artists and collectors in Malaysia, you shouldn't miss out on the rich seam of works being made in sculpture, found materials, textile, ceramics,

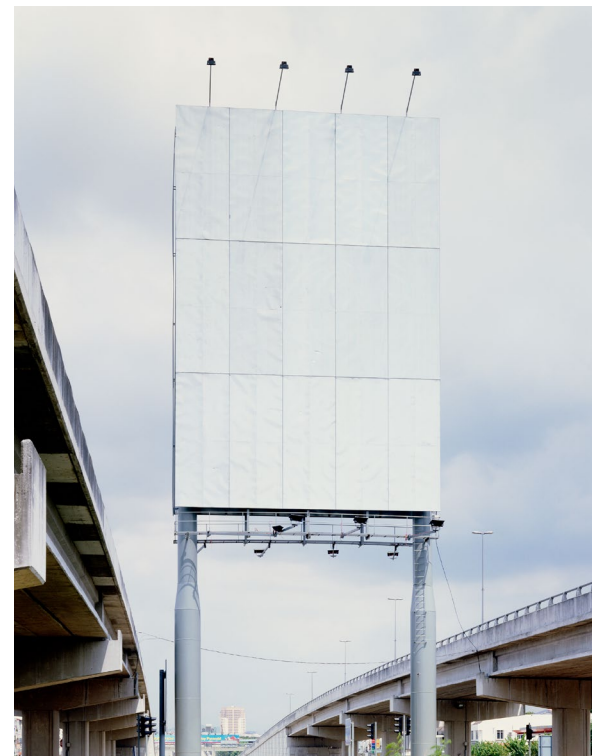
print, photography, video and other digital media, or as multimedia installations.

Even conceptual, performance, relational art that cannot be bought as objects may be supported or documented in your collection. There are ways to display, store and care for works made in these 'un-conventional' media – and for these, check in with artists and galleries who should be able to advise.

Consider allowing some budget for care and conservation, and insuring your collection or specific works.



Kim Ng, *In the faith of a thought*, 2020, cast porcelain and copper wire, fired at 1080°C, size variable, collection of Rimbun Dahan, image courtesy the artist



Eiffel Chong, *Mathematical equations with emotional contours*, 2008, C-Type Photographic Paper. 101.6X127 cm, image courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art

NOTES ON PRICING
Before you make a purchase, here are some things to know about what you are paying for:

- 1 The pricing of artworks (for primary sale) is loosely tied to an artist's following and experience, and somewhat to their material, size and complexity. With the research-based or collaborative nature of some contemporary art, pricing may factor in the cost of research, collaborators, assistants, and so on.
- 2 Generally, artists and galleries keep to a standard pricing for each series or period of works. Prices may be raised incrementally, or in response to increased demand or sustained higher prices achieved at auction. Auction estimates for works by living artists tend to hover slightly below gallery pricing to entice interest.
- 3 Drawings and other works on paper are often priced lower than paintings on canvas. Although needing a bit more care, these are a good entry point to collecting. Works in edition, such as prints, photographs, videos, digital works and cast sculptures are also generally more affordable.
- 4 A gallery's commission may range from 20 to 50% – the cost of representing an artist and mounting exhibitions can be high. This commission is paid by the artist/seller to the gallery – it does not mean that the value of the work is 80 or 50% of the gallery price. It is best practice to respect gallery pricing, especially for works in a current exhibition (regular clients and supporters can hope for some privileges such as early notifications and first refusal on upcoming works, and occasional discounts). Some artists do not have exclusive or regular gallery representation, but in principle keep the same pricing in and outside of galleries and exhibitions.
- 5 Auction houses take commission from both seller and buyer and will state rates in their catalogues. Auctions help guide on market price, but do note only a small proportion of artists are represented at auction.



Rasa Rahsia by Riaz Ahmad Jamil, August 2020, exhibition view, image courtesy The Back Room



Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, *Standing Forms*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 119 x 119 cm, Malaysian and Southeast Asian Art Auction 23 August 2020, image courtesy Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers

BUILD A BASE, EXPLORE THE TERRITORY

Galleries are the best place to start for experiencing and learning about artists' work. Cultivating a rapport with gallerists can be key to your collecting strategy.

The most serious galleries are more than just places selling art. Representing artists over different stages of their careers, they hold exhibitions and talks, document and publish. Most represent Malaysian artists, but a handful also bring in artists from around Southeast Asia.

Visit gallery websites to get a gauge of their artists and their approach, and hone in on a handful to visit regularly. Put yourself on gallery mailing lists to keep up to date.

Art fairs are a good place to compare galleries, discover a broad range of artists, meet people and catch up. Galleries also make a big effort to bring strong works to fairs.

While the pandemic has meant that Art Expo Malaysia has been on hold, it has also prompted most international fairs to go online. This provides great opportunities for browsing fairs such as Art Dubai, Art Basel Hong Kong and Taipei Dangda.



Chang Fee Ming, *Never to be Forgotten*, 1997, watercolour on paper, 56 x 76 cm, Coming of Age: Modern & Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, London, 9 November 2017, image courtesy One East Larasati.

Auctions are useful for seeing what is being sold on the secondary market (artists don't usually consign directly to auction) and survey market values. Henry Butcher and KL Lifestyle are established houses locally, while Malaysian and other Southeast Asian works do appear at the bigger international houses. Browse previous catalogues and consult others before jumping in with a first-time bid.



The Body Politic and The Body (December 2019–April 2020), exhibition view, Ilham Gallery, image courtesy Ilham Gallery

SEE AND KNOW MORE

Today, many argue that the mainstream ways of collecting art can be limiting and exclusive, and so there is also much to be discovered beyond, at events and spaces run by artist collectives and curators, graduation shows and on various online platforms.

Visit exhibitions at the National Art Gallery (currently closed for renovations) and other public institutions, where works are not customarily for sale. Institutional shows are important for providing depth and context, and expanding audiences for and conversations around art. Also become familiar with institutional collections.

Get to know what artists do better through previous catalogues and reviews (much is now online), and speaking to them if you can. Though not all artists choose to connect with collectors, you can often follow them on Instagram or Facebook, or through their websites.

Speak to gallerists, curators, writers and other collectors, and follow them online – most are very open to sharing with and encouraging fellow enthusiasts. It's good to visit and discuss exhibitions with other collectors.

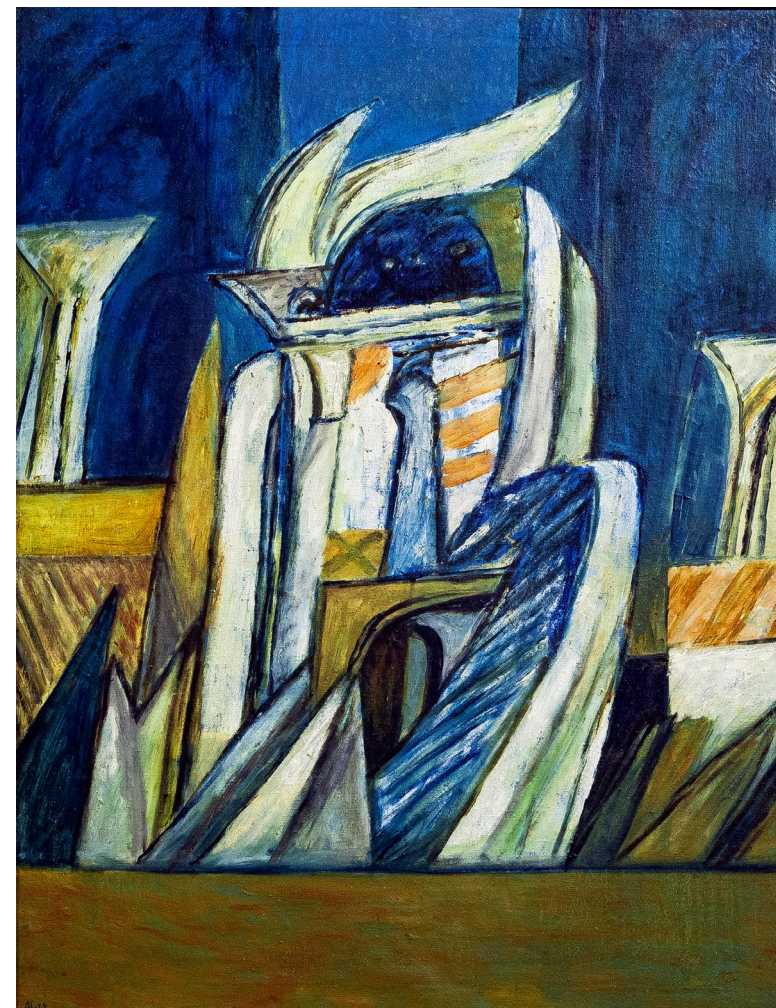
Lastly: Read! Art is a conversation, and there's a wealth of information and commentary out there.

Some artists will change the way we think about the world, influence the ways other artists work, gain widespread critical recognition, and you may wish to be part of supporting them or simply own a work they have made.

USEFUL ART RESOURCES

A quick guide on what to look up and who to follow.

- For an overview and directory of today's ecosystem, download CENDANA's Visual Arts Ecosystem Map cendana.com.my.
- The National Art Gallery have also set up a directory at gogallery.my.
- Keep track of exhibitions by following Art Seni on Instagram, and Malaysian Art Galleries' Facebook group.
- Institutional and corporate collections which regularly exhibit include National Art Gallery, Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, USM (collections.mgtf.usm.my), PETRONAS (galeripetronas.com.my), Bank Negara (museum.bnm.gov.my) and Ilham Gallery (ilhamgallery.com).
- Some private collectors like Zain Azahari (fb.com/galerizkt), Pakhrudin Sulaiman and Bingley Sim open their collections by appointment; Ken Gallery showcases Dato' Kenny Tan's collection (kenholdings.com.my/kengallery/); and you can browse Farouk and Aliya Khan's collection at afkcollection.com. Follow @nikmfahmee on Instagram for his stories of encounters with artists.
- Auctions keep their catalogues and results online: see hbart.com.my and kl-lifestyle.com.my
- For local reviews and art commentary, follow: The Star, The Edge Options, Suara, SeniKini (by National Art Gallery), BURO., Artklitique, Penang Art District's Editorial and CENDANA's Lensa Seni.
- For the region and beyond: Popular platforms tailored to collectors include Ocula (ocula.com), Artsy (artsy.net) and Larry's List (larryslist.com); or try Collecteurs.com. For in-depth regional coverage: Art Asia Pacific and Asian Art News magazines by subscription, online Plural Art Mag (pluralartmag.com) and Art & Market (artandmarket.net) for free.
- If you like art books check out Kinokuniya, Ilham Gallery Shop, Rogueish Books (roqueish.asia).
- Research libraries: NAG (to re-open October), Galeri Petronas, Ilham Gallery, and RogueArt (at A+ Works of Art). Do look up the Narratives in Malaysian Art series for a range of insights into Malaysian art history, infrastructure and discourse.



Latiff Mohidin, *Pago-Pago*, 1966, oil on canvas, 117 x 92 cm, Koleksi Seni Tenaga Nasional Berhad, image courtesy Tenaga Nasional Berhad



Recommended reading: *Narratives in Malaysian Art Volumes 1–4*, published by RogueArt

ROGUEART are contemporary Southeast Asian art specialists who have worked in this field since the 1990s. Founded in 2008 and based in KL, RogueArt focuses on the creative, strategic and organisational management of art and cultural projects, exhibitions, collections and publications. Current directors: Rachel Ng and Beverly Yong.

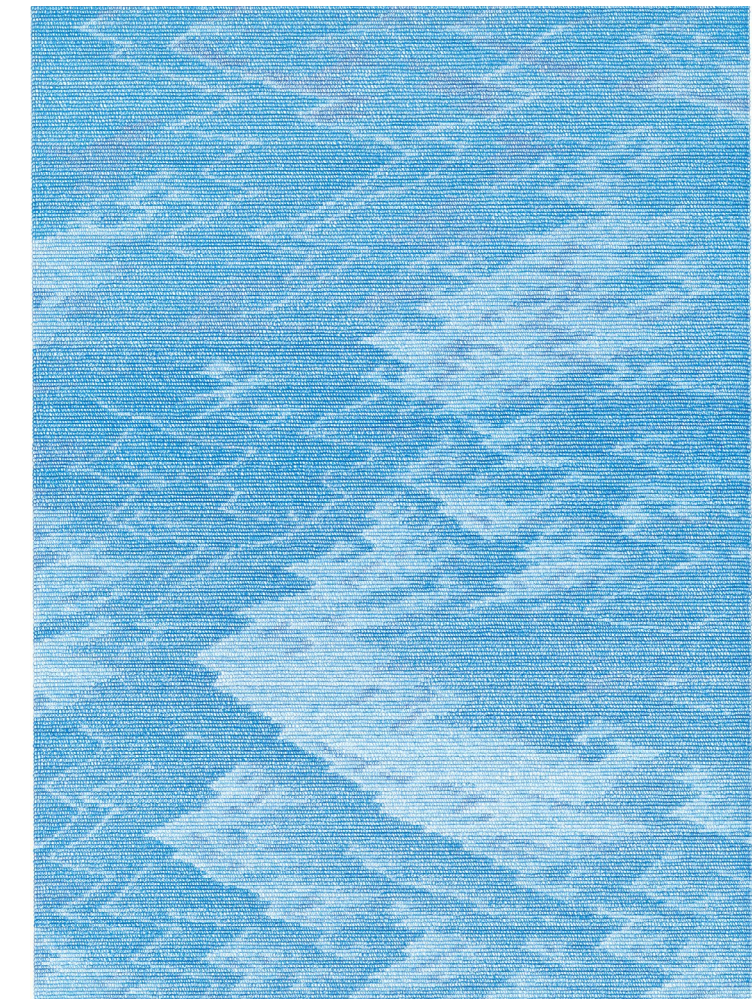
BUY WHAT YOU LIKE

Unlike institutional collectors, private collectors are not tied to specific collecting policies. Some nevertheless choose to set a framework or discipline to their approach – perhaps a specific medium, period, genre, or grouping of artists. This might speak to their particular interests, and also has the advantage of creating and documenting organised bodies of work which might eventually fit in, say, to a university art collection as a donation or acquisition.

Other collectors like to claim they just 'buy what they like'. Honing 'what you like' of course takes time, experience, and self-understanding, and at a certain scale, even very eclectic collections fall into certain patterns and can be read and studied in different ways.

Collectors who enjoy a sense of discovery and continuity may focus on artists recently graduated or holding their first exhibition, following and acquiring their work over the course of their career. Others may seek out 'the best of the best', works that attest to the achievement of artists who have already established a strong reputation.

Following the path of other collectors may seem a safe introduction, but our advice would be to start with what you like that you can easily afford, and chart your way forward from there. ■



Amer Ismail, *Untitled* (29 August 2019), ink on paper, 56cm x 76 cm, private collection