

## 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.

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**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.**