

NATIONAL IDENTITY 4.0

Singaporeanness as Art Object

DAVID CHAN

David Chan paints in a realistic style, yet hints of the surrealistic connotation come into play in his subjects such as animals, humans/human hybrids against his vivid or monolithic background. At first glance, the audacious works seem comical or bewildering. However, upon closer observation, the initial impression gives way to the artist's reality and his take on social issues such as popular culture and genetic engineering, and human behaviour in our current times. In that, it is always not easy to unpack the story behind each of David's works. It is like taking a lateral journey with David, the improbable storyteller himself.

One has to dip deep into David's realm of reality and imagination to understand his visual language and its iconographical interpretations of the story to be able to fathom the realistic rendition of his work. In David's early works, such as his "A Divine Comedy" and "Modern Beliefs" series, his works would be more fun, witty, and to some extent, whimsical. He used his in-depth knowledge of ethics of genetics to explore the anecdotes of human and societal relations, often humorous and comical, but with satire, serious undertone. David's visuals took a darker tone in his series of works in "Hybrid Society", exploring the hybridisation and oxymoron of humanity and society. David sought to rationalise the truth in the society of hybrids; the dichotomy of truths and lies, good and evil, strong and weak in humanity and societal relations, giving penetrating insights, often satirised and dramatic.

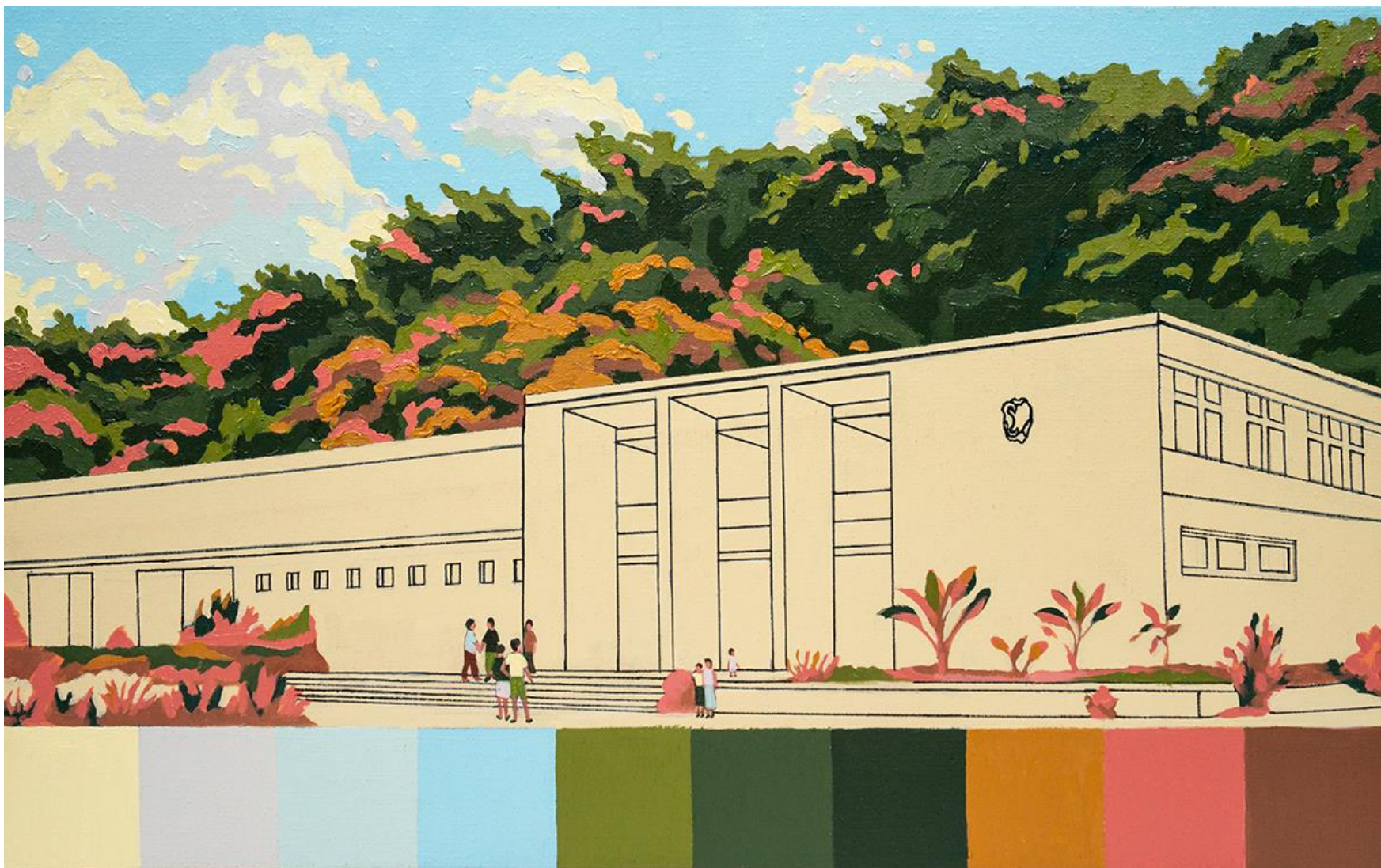
David's body of work is not just comprised of two-dimensional works; he is very skilled and commendable in the school of sculpture. His obsession with perfection and detail showed vividly in his majestic pair of deeply imaginative and visually impactful sculptures, "Chimerative and Centauree". David's hybrid take of these mythological creatures embodied the theme and ideology with literary and biblical complexities altogether, showing how ancient masculinist and femininity theories can be discourses and re-interpreted in today's contemporary urban environment.



Continuing from the *National Identity 4.0 – Conversations*, David's *Singapore-ness as Art-Object* is a complex, evolving construct shaped by the nation's unique intersection of multiculturalism, pragmatism, and a deeply rooted desire for social cohesion. It reflects a nation still negotiating its identity, balancing between modern global influences and traditional Asian values. Unlike the West's historical arc through movements and "isms," Singapore's artistic sensibility is more attuned to heritage, symbolism, and the aesthetics of harmony, order, and functionality.

Public appeal in Singapore tends to gravitate toward works that are accessible, community-centred, and visually grounded in familiar motifs, HDB blocks, kopitiams, multicultural icons, and language hybrids like Singlish. While the authorities may favour narratives of progress, unity, and sanitised history, the public often embraces art that reflects lived realities, from nostalgia to quiet resistance. Yet there exists a shared space, art that both uplifts and questions, such as tributes to pioneers like the Samsui women, as seen in Sean Dunston's works. These pieces resonate because they honour resilience without overt politicisation.

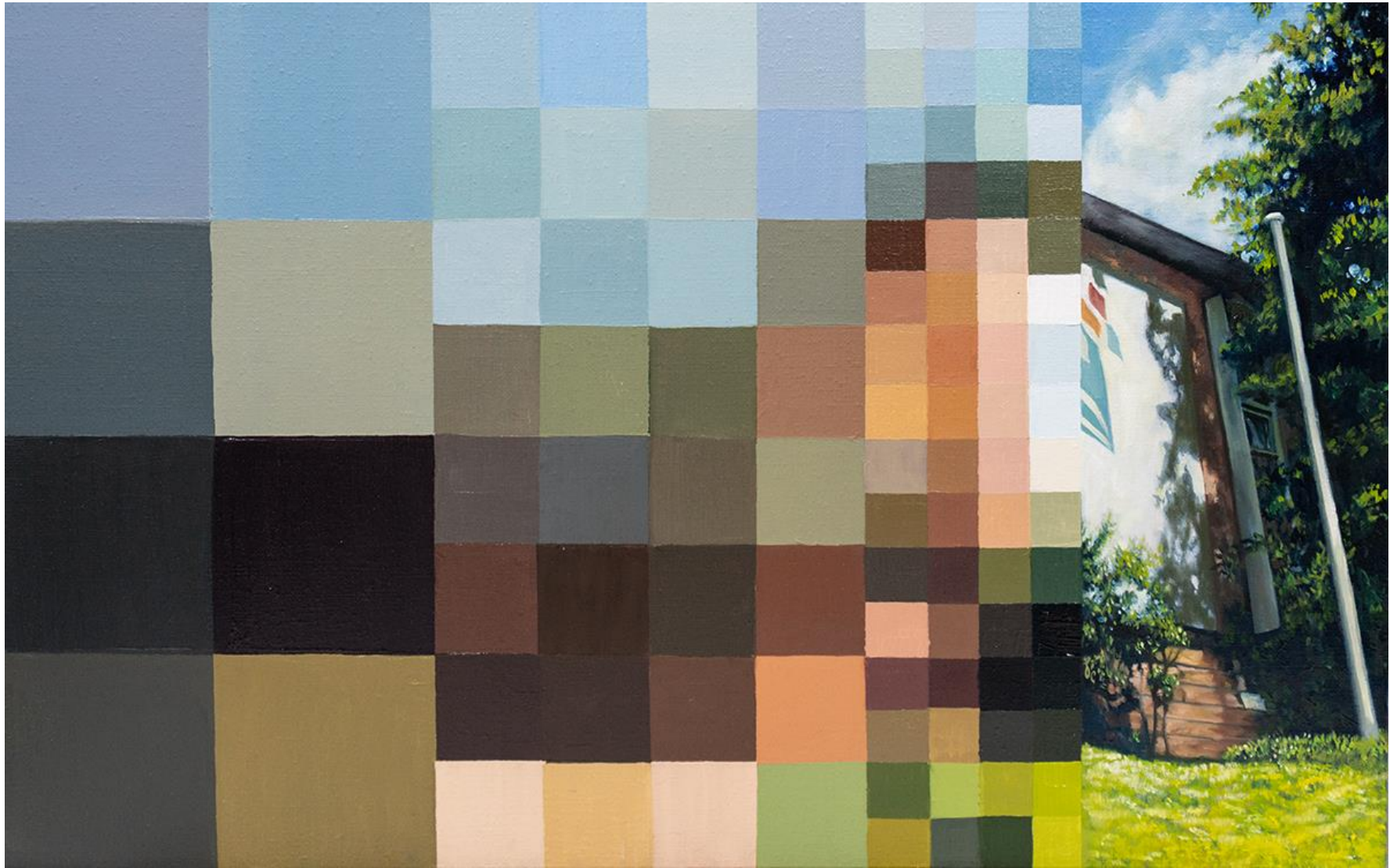
The challenge for Singaporean artists lies in walking the tightrope between provocation and preservation. Works that aim to educate must do so with empathy and craft engaging without alienating, questioning without antagonising. As Singapore marks SG60, the search for identity goes beyond clichés like the Merlion or Singlish. While a distinct identity is still crystallizing, the arts have a powerful role to play by amplifying diverse voices, preserving the ordinary, and challenging the status quo with care, they can shape what Singapore-ness truly means fluid, hybrid, and deeply human.



Blanked. 2025. Oil on Linen. 40 x 60 cm



Faded. 2025. Oil on Linen. 40 x 60 cm



Fragmented. 2025. Oil on Linen. 40 x 60 cm



Washed. 2025. Oil on Linen. 40 x 60 cm



Child's Play. 2025. Oil on Linen. 80 x 110 cm



A Plentiful Harvest

2025

Oil on Linen

160 x 120 cm

Merlion - One People, One Nation

2024

Oil on Linen

160 x 120 cm

One people, one nation, is a look at Singapore's position as a cosmopolitan country. The migratory birds in the painting represent the many who have landed in Singapore to work, play and build their home.

At the bottom of the painting, there is the Merlion, one of the most successful emblem of Singapore Tourism Board since the late 1960s. It represents our country and how we have branded ourselves as an island paradise surrounded by water. The cat in the midst of the birds, a running theme in the whole National identity 4.0 series, signifies the new generation (those born after 2000s). Like many of the new 4.0 generation, the cat is trying to fit in by wearing a bird hat.

The work is a critique on the dilemmas of the new generation placed into a situation that is always at flux, trying hard to fit in while maintaining their identity.



Samsui - We Build a Nation with their Hands
2024
Oil on Linen
160 x 120 cm



Well Done, Son!
2024
Oil on Linen
110 x 80 cm





Yusof Ishak – Bapak
2024
Oil on Linen
110 x 80 cm

David's *National Identity 4.0 – Conversations* examines the shifting perspectives on nationhood among Singapore's younger generations. His interest in national identity traces back several years, reflecting on changing attitudes towards Singapore's history. Journalist Kwa Chong Guan's article in *The Straits Times* in 2015 highlighted the limited awareness of pivotal events like Operation Coldstore, with only 16.6% of surveyed citizens recognizing it. Kwa noted that younger Singaporeans are more familiar with recent, high-profile developments, revealing a generational disconnect with earlier events that shaped Singapore's identity.

This series specifically explores the attitudes of those born in the 2000s toward nation-building. Referencing the 2023 National Day Rally speech, where PM Lee Hsien Loong endorsed a new generation of leadership, David raises questions about Singapore's evolving path under fresh leaders. With the legacy of leaders like Lee Kuan Yew and Lee Hsien Loong transitioning, David's work probes into the "old stories" and generational nostalgia shaping Singapore's future. Through *National Identity 4.0*, he invites reflection on the direction Singapore might take as it adapts to new societal dynamics and leadership.

In his work, David uses realistic, layered compositions of humans, landscapes, animals, and related iconographies to offer critical reflections on social issues, blending humour and irony, inviting introspection on themes like popular culture, ethics, and contemporary behaviour. David's works reflect our years of nation-building and quest to build a uniquely Singaporean identity. It's a fun and curious look at the cross-pollination between our social, political, cultural, and historical legacies. David's work raises the question: What direction will Singapore take as it continues to evolve? He aims to explore observations, old stories, emerging nostalgia, and generational disconnects in the nation's journey.



Lee and Raffles – 5 Stars Arising, 2024, Oil on Linen, 160 x 200 cm

DAVID CHAN (1979)

A Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art, First Class Honours) graduate of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Singaporean David Chan is a full-time artist who held his first solo exhibition – Genetic Wonderland – in 2004 at age 25, to much critical and public acclaim. In that year, he was also winner of the 23rd UOB Painting of the Year – Representational Medium Category Award.

Showcasing his mastery of classical fine painting and sculpting techniques matched with a thoughtful palette of juxtaposing warm and cold colours, each art piece highlights David's uncanny talent for conveying depth through creating layers and textures. Working with oil on linen, David paints in a realistic style and often uses subjects such as animals, humans and hybrids. At first glance, the works seem comical and bewildering, but upon closer observation, the initial impression gives way to the artist's reality and his take on social issues such as popular culture and ethical dilemmas, as well as human behaviour in our current times.

Nevertheless, while David's works are cynical social commentary, they are hardly confrontational or aggressive in their messages and one gets a sense that his cynicism is peppered with plenty of irony and humour, much like life itself. In more recent exhibitions he has further expanded his artistic vocabulary by including sculptures. These life-liked 3-dimensional works further explore his concepts and ideas creating an even closer bridge between the viewer and the artwork.

David has had 10 solo exhibitions in Singapore and 5 overseas; the most recent one was "Tones and Values" in 2023. He has also exhibited in a number of countries including, China, America, Taiwan, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, and in 2011 he was able to exhibit his work at the 54th Venice Biennale at the Fondazione Claudio Buziol, the same work travelled to the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam in Netherlands the next year. David recently also participated in the Singapore 2016/2017 Biennale, with an gigantic installation in front of National Art Museum, titled The Great East Indiaman.

In addition to painting and sculpting, David also lectures at the National Institute of Education and Art Design & Media in National Technological University. David's artworks collections include Singapore Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, and many important private collections around the world.

ART SEASONS is a contemporary art gallery in Singapore and Beijing that represents Asia and Southeast Asian contemporary artists. ART SEASONS is today a leading art gallery in Singapore and has made its presence felt in Singapore, the region and beyond.

