



Stories from Yesteryear

Walk into the Art
Listen to the Conversations
Let the Stories unfold

Yip Yew Chong's
Solo Art Exhibition

17 - 22 Feb 2021
The Substation
+
26 Feb - 31 Mar 2021
Sofitel Singapore
City Centre

Stories from Yesteryear

“Stories from Yesteryear” is a series of 23 canvas paintings, 4 digital paintings and 3 paper sketches depicting scenes of Singapore’s bygone era. Painted between 2017-2021, it is my dream to visually document my impressions of the Singapore I grew up in on canvases.

My impression of Singapore began in my childhood days with the chaotic but charming Chinatown. In my youth, I was further exposed to Singapore’s other diverse cultures and landscapes, that I fondly immersed myself in. As I painted these impressions, I felt like I was reliving those times and spaces — walking through busy streets, riding through timeless rivers, flying over ancient hills, and overhearing hearty conversations.

The experience was like watching an old movie with many subplots. The movie tells the story of the Singapore seen through my mind, the many stories I encountered while interacting with fellow Singaporeans, and the story of my life.

Thank you for coming to *Stories from Yesteryear*. I hope the stories will inspire you to tell your own stories too!

Yip Yew Chong 2021



1. Stories from Yesteryear

Acrylic on Canvas
152cm x 122cm
2021

Just two weeks before the exhibition, I decided to add one final artwork to the series. I felt that the series needs an anchor artwork of the same name as the series title. Thus, I painted a scene of a storyteller in Boat Quay. He is surrounded by his audience, made up of mostly coolies who work as laborers carrying goods to and from the bumboats to the warehouses. The oil lamp lights up the storyteller’s face. His stories, in turn, light up the faces and minds of his audience. Their minds wander far back to where they came from. They also wander, far ahead to where they wish their new home to be — Singapore.

2. Trengganu Street Market

Acrylic on Canvas
152cm x 122cm
2020

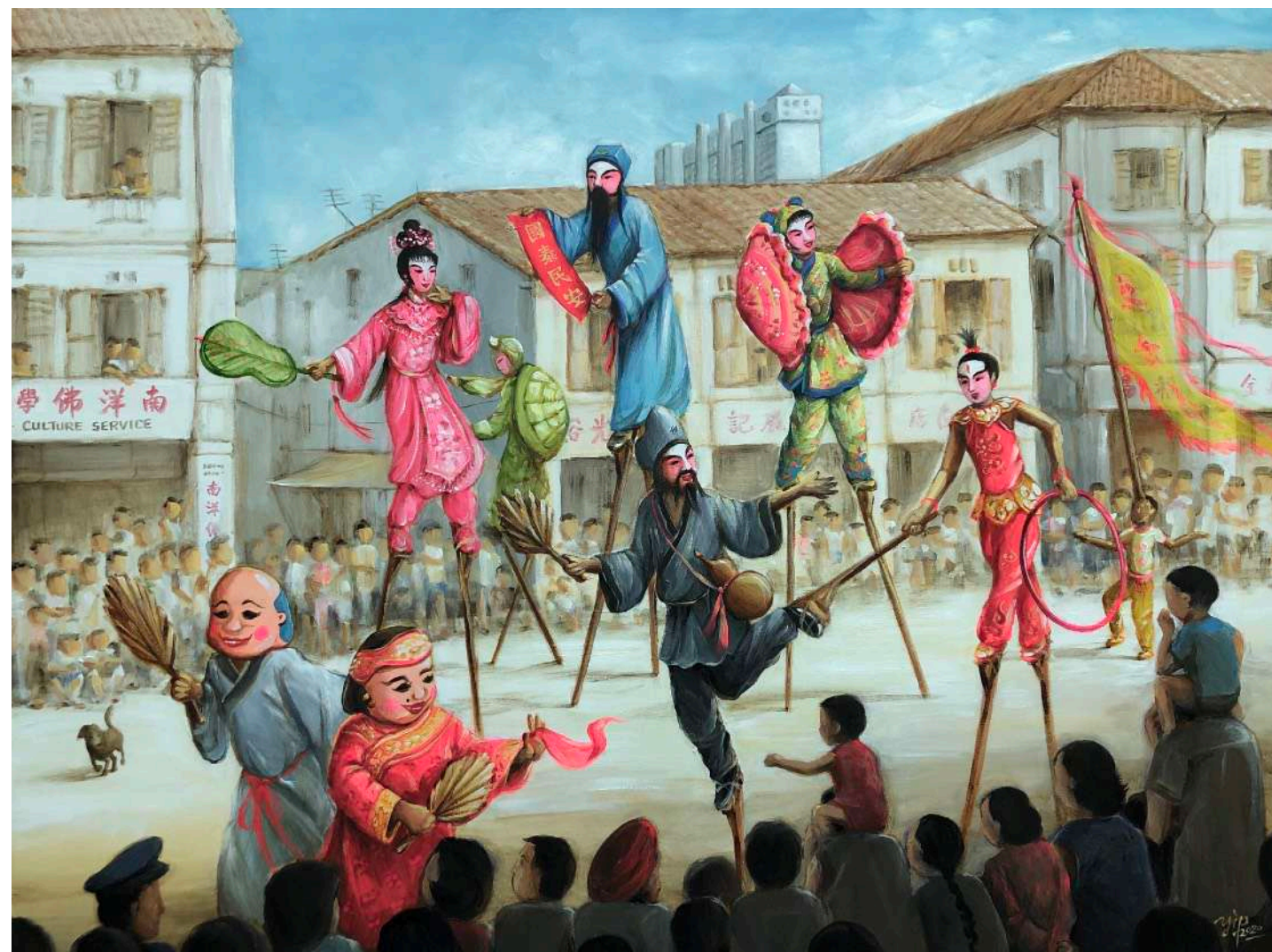
I have fond memories of growing up in Chinatown in the 1970s. I liked to roam the streets, soaking in the chaotic sights, smells and sounds. Trengganu Street was the busiest street as it cut through Sago Street, Smith Street, Temple Street and Pagoda Street. It hosted a morning wet market, an afternoon food market, and a night market for sundries, food and snacks. At the corner of Smith Street, there was a stall that I feared walking past most. It butchered and sold exotic wildlife like snakes, iguanas, turtles, anteaters, and more. Thinking back, these memories were so vivid; it feels like they just happened yesterday. This painting allows me to wander those streets again!



4. Chingay 游行

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

In 1973, Singapore held its first Chingay procession. One of its purpose was to return the festive mood to the Lunar New Year following the ban on firecrackers in 1972. The parade followed an 8km-long route that passed through South Bridge Road, just outside my home in Sago Lane. My family was amidst the large crowd that lined both sides of the road. Amongst the big-headed dolls, giant flags, lion and dragon dances, I was particularly mesmerised by the stilt walkers who towered above everyone else.



3. New Year's Eve 年晚

Acrylic on Canvas
91cm x 91cm
2019

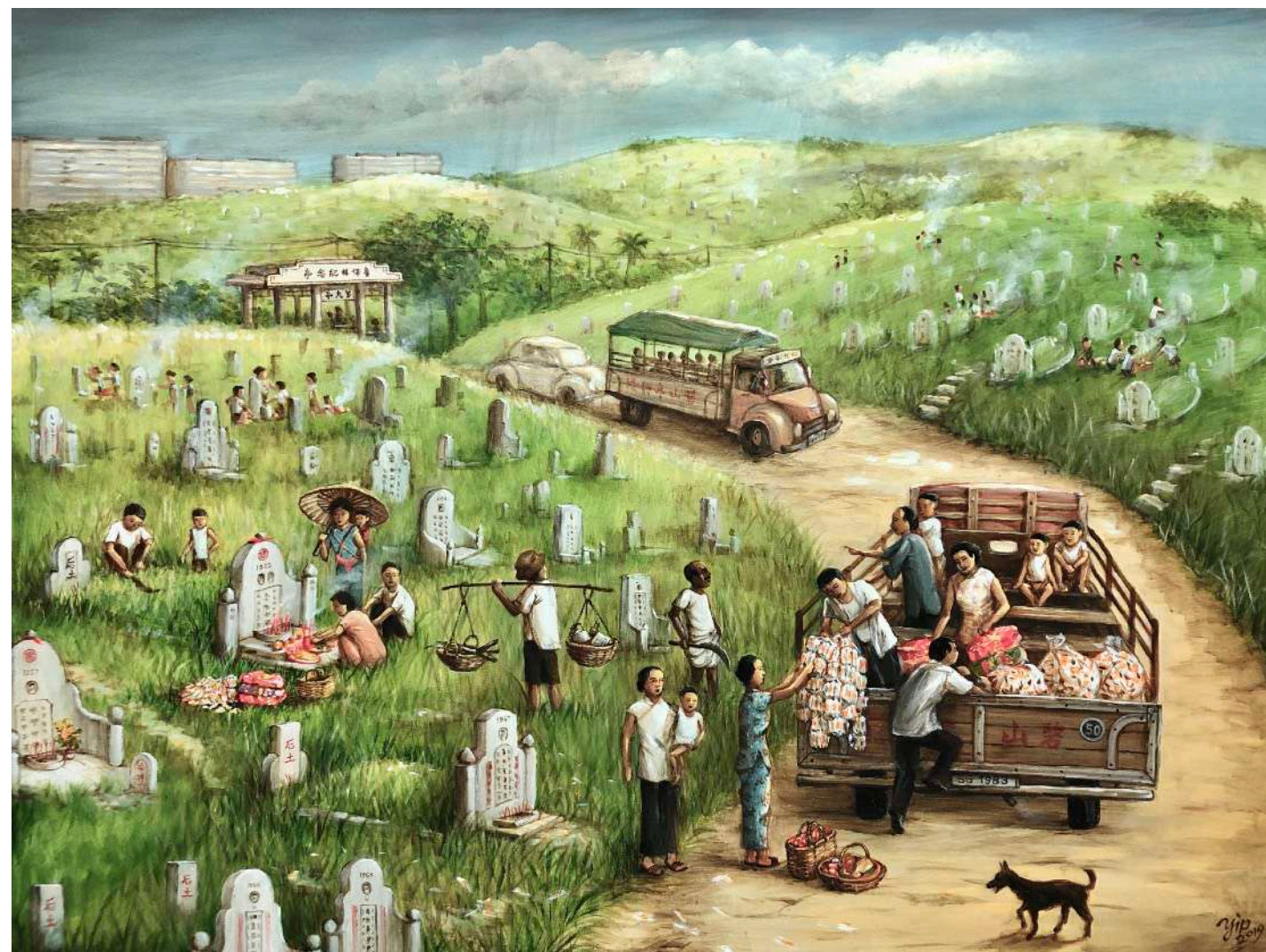
Set in 1978 Chinatown, this was an endearing scene close to my heart. Growing up in a Chinatown shophouse, New Year's Eve was always full of simple delights and joyous anticipation — it was a joy to do spring cleaning, decorate the house, gather for reunion dinner, and wish for everything a child could dream of for the New Year. While enjoying the reunion dinner with my large family, I observed my family's co-tenant, an elderly lady, who would sit alone with two bowls of rice on the table. She was longing for her graduate son to come home to have a reunion dinner together. But that never happened.



5. Tomb Sweeping 行清

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

As a child, going to Pek San Teng cemetery to sweep our ancestors' tombs felt like a picnic. A month before, we would excitedly fold and sew bags of gold and silver nuggets to "send" to our ancestors. When the day arrived, my extended family would rent a lorry and drive to the cemetery hills. I particularly enjoyed helping my dad cut the grass and clean the tombs. 1981 was probably the last time we did this because from 1982, the tombs were exhumed to make the land available for public housing. Today, Bishan Town sits on that land.



6. Geylang Serai Bazaar Raya

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

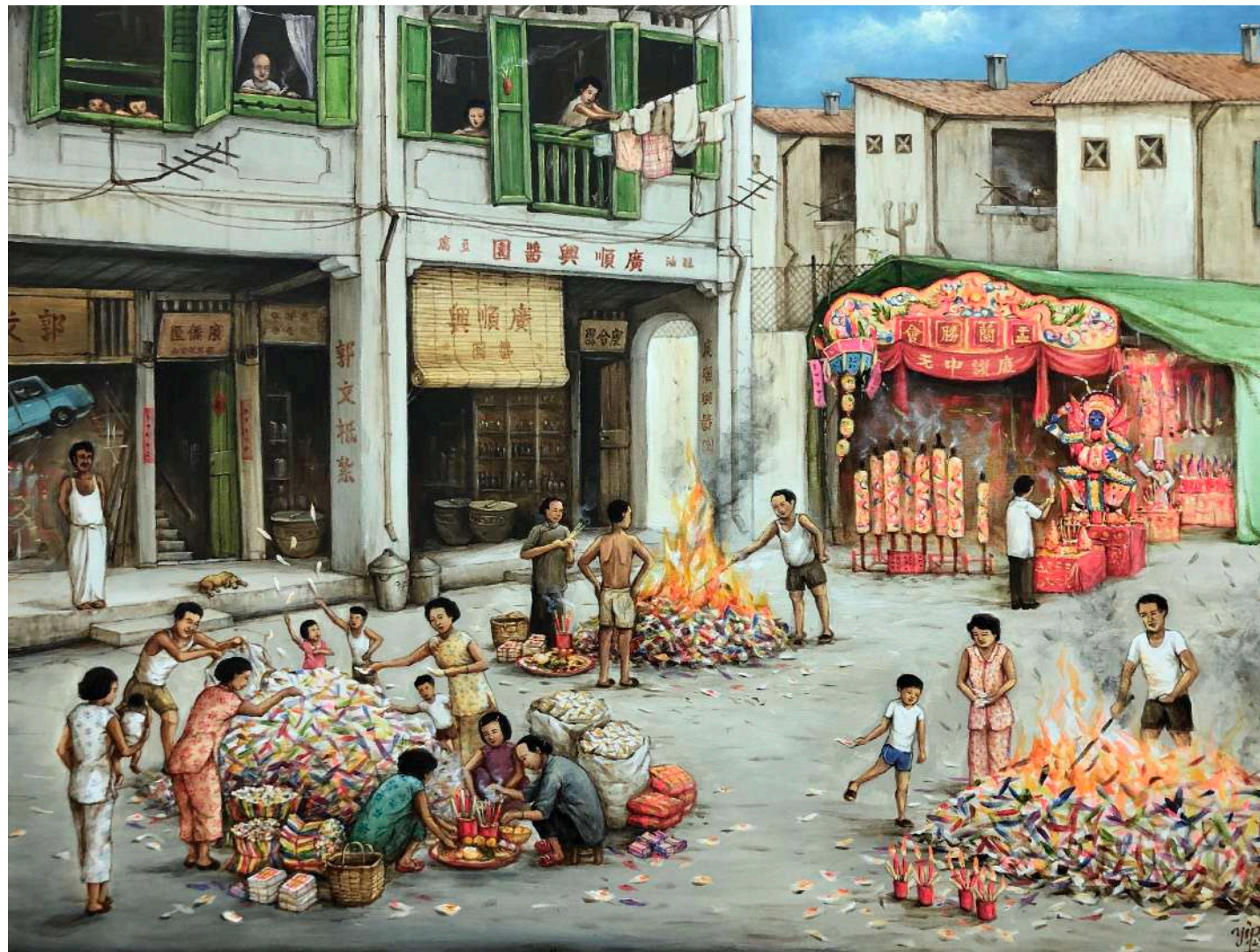
From late 1960s to 2003, this was the scene of the bustling Geylang Serai Ramadan Bazaar. This painting depicts the market in 1970. At that time, Geylang-Changi Road was still bidirectional and the postal code was '14'. As a youth, I would make my yearly "pilgrimage" to this market during Ramadan. I loved open air markets and I loved its ethnic feel. I remember waiting at the Haig Road Hawker Centre at dusk to watch people have breakfast after the prayer calls. After dinner, I would cross the road and squeeze through the packed market. I would queue to cross the overhead bridge to get a view of the light-up from the bridge, before taking my one-hour bus ride home.



8. Hungry Ghost Festival 烧衣

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2019

Sago Lane was well known as the 'Street of the Dead', for its funeral parlours, coffin makers, paper effigy maker and everything related to the dead. As I grew up and lived there till age 14 (1983), I wasn't afraid of seeing corpses and rituals for the dead. One festival I especially enjoyed was the Hungry Ghost Festival. A month before, we would fold colourful papers into bundles of hell notes. On the fourteenth evening of the seventh lunar month, we would burn all the bundles on the street as offerings to the ghosts. When many families did that at the same time, it was a sight to behold — the whole street would be filled with smoke, ashes and an unworldly festive mood!



7. Preparing for the Haj

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

Since young, I've been fascinated by Bussorah Street for its "tunnel view" of the grand Sultan Mosque. Thus, I have painted many scenes of Bussorah Street, including a fantasy scene of the street covered in snow, painted in 1987! This most recent painting, set in 1972, is a very special one. It is most intricate and took the most amount of historical research. It depicts Haj pilgrims, families and Khaji shopkeepers busy preparing for the Haj. Singapore was once a stopover for pilgrims in the region who took the sea route to Mecca, and Kg Glam was where preparations for the journey took place. When I posted a photo of this painting on social media, it was very well received by the Malay/Muslim community. Many shared their memories of sending their grannies off at Kg Glam for the Haj.



9. Mid-Autumn Night 中秋夜

Acrylic on Canvas
101cm x 76cm
2017

The fifteenth night of the eighth lunar month was always the most enchanting night in Chinatown. Set in 1979, this painting expresses my memories of the charming scene. While my siblings, neighbours and I played with candle-lit lanterns on the streets and in back alleys, our mothers would be at the windows, praying to the moon. The men would gather at the five-foot way, enjoying mooncakes, pomelos, yams and tea and chit-chatting through the night.



10. Pulau Kusu

Acrylic on Canvas
101cm x 76cm
2017

During the ninth lunar month, my family would join throngs of people for the annual pilgrimage to Kusu Island in the south of Singapore. As a child, the boat ride felt very long and it made me seasick. But on reaching the island, the excitement of picnicking, swimming and climbing up the hill made the trip feel like a holiday to paradise! The island was actually made up of two rock outcrops. On one sat a Chinese temple and on another, a Malay shrine atop a knoll. The two were linked together by a sandbar crossable at low tide. Legend tells of how a Chinese man and Malay man were saved by a turtle from a shipwreck, after which the turtle turned into a rock. In 1975, the government reclaimed land around the outcrops and joined them to create one island.



11. Timithi தீமிதி

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

When my family was resettled into a HDB flat in Chinatown, we were lucky to be allocated the 25th floor. Not only did we have a panoramic view of the city, the sea and nearby Indonesian islands, we also enjoyed a bird's eye view of all the festivals in Chinatown. This painting shows the annual fire walking festival, Timithi, held at the Sri Mariamman Temple which is ironically located in the heart of Chinatown. But in this depiction, I have turned the clock further back to 1909! It shows the original Gopuram — a simpler three-tier tower with a thatched roof leading to the temple altar. That thatched roof caught fire in 1910 and the Gopuram was replaced in the 1930s with a more intricate five-tier tower. To this day, the splendid Timithi festival is still held annually at the temple.

12. Tanjong Malang

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

This painting defies time, straddling 1844 and 2020. It depicts a once-important bustling capetown called Tanjong Malang, in the south coast of Singapore. The town comprised a Malay fishing village, a Hakka temple village, a hilltop Mausoleum of a revered Muslim Saint (Habib Noh), a Mosque below it, and a Parsi cemetery. It was an exemplary multiracial settlement, alongside Telok Ayer to its north. As Singapore developed, the hills were levelled, the bay filled, and the beaches made concrete. Soon, it became Singapore's Central Business District. Today, glittering towers and flyovers surround and conceal the only remnants of this historic town — the Mausoleum, the Mosque and the Hakka temple. Have you seen them?



13. Deepavali Eve at Serangoon Road

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

In Covid-stricken 2020, I created this painting two weeks before Deepavali with hopes of stirring up some festivity for our Hindu friends. It depicts the hustle and bustle at Serangoon Road on the eve of Deepavali in 1984. To make the scene more relatable, I included familiar shop names like Jothi Flowers, Haniiffa Textiles, Komalas and Govindasamy Pillai store — all written in Tamil too. A speech therapist wrote to me sharing her story of how she used the painting to successfully spark positive response from an Indian patient who had been very withdrawn. The patient was initially apprehensive, but she looked at the familiar scenes, she ran her finger on the mobile screen and started to describe what she spotted. The painting had made her cry, and the story made me cry too!

14. Winter Solstice 冬至

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2017

When it snows in the Northern Hemisphere and the day is the shortest, Singapore gets really wet and cold. We celebrate the Winter Solstice with colourful glutinous dumplings that keep us warm, with the pandan leaves and ginger giving the soup a tropical touch. This painting depicts my siblings and my mother making and eating dumplings in an imaginary kampong house in 1973. We didn't live in a kampong but many Singaporeans did at that time. When the monsoon season came, the kampongs would be flooded. That made the best playtime for kids who would waddle or even swim in the water!



16. Peranakan Wedding

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

When I thought of painting a scene that is symbolic to the Peranakan community, I thought that an olden day wedding scene would be apt, because it would be colourful and intricate, qualities which Peranakan culture is known for. More so, it would be meaningful because that was how Peranakans came about — through intermarriage of the Chinese traders with local women in Singapore's early days. Thus, we see an interesting blend of Chinese and Nusantara culture in their dressing, food, language, customs and architecture. As for the house, I chose the present-day 'NUS Baba House' at Neil Road, an iconic Peranakan museum painted in striking blue, because I pass by the museum almost everyday as a resident of the area. Just five doors away is the house that our first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew lived in as a child. He is probably the most famous Peranakan in Singapore!



15. Christmas Lightup

Acrylic on Canvas 122cm x 61cm 2019



I always loved the “winter” season in Singapore, for its festive holiday mood and cool weather due to day-long rain around Christmas time. When I was in secondary school, I attended Aikido classes in the evenings. On my way home, I would intentionally take a bus that passed through Orchard Road so as to view the light-up, even though the route was longer. The very first light-up took place in 1984. Seeing so many fairy lights for the first time filled me with awe, even more so when it rained. Sitting by the bus window, I left it ajar, allowing the wind and rain to caress my face, and the lights to flicker past. Such sweet memories.

17. Christmas at Parish Hall

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

It was 1961 in the wee hours of Christmas Day. After Mass at St Joseph's Church, the congregation crossed over to the adjacent Parochial House's Parish Hall for breakfast. The Church and the Parochial House were built by the Portuguese Mission in 1912, and hence in those early years, mainly served the Eurasian community. I've always wanted to paint a scene featuring the Eurasian people and the beautiful gothic-style Church, and thus took the opportunity when Christmas approached. But being unfamiliar with Eurasian culture, I visited the Eurasian Heritage Gallery and also consulted some Eurasian friends. I learnt a lot! I hope this painting appropriately features their beautiful culture. Look at how they dressed, listen to their Kristang conversations, and imagine tasting the tea, Pang Susi and Sugee cakes!





18. Dhoby Ghaut

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

Dhoby Ghaut, which lies smack in the heart of the city, is a lively place today. But not many people know why the place is so named. This whimsical painting peels off layers of time to showcase what Dhoby Ghaut, Orchard Road and Bras Basah Road were like in their early days. It is whimsical because it is an impossible scene – the landmarks depicted did not exist together at any one time, as some were demolished before the others were built.

The view is seen from a prison (Gaol) where present-day SMU stands. It overlooks a sprawling field dotted with white linen drying under the sun. The washermen from India (called Dobi) are seen washing laundry in the stream (Sungei Bras Basah). The stream still exists today, albeit hidden underground as the Stamford Canal, used to drain storm water from the Orchard valley. Scan through the painting and see how many past and present icons you can identify. Watch out for the train track that ran through Orchard Road!

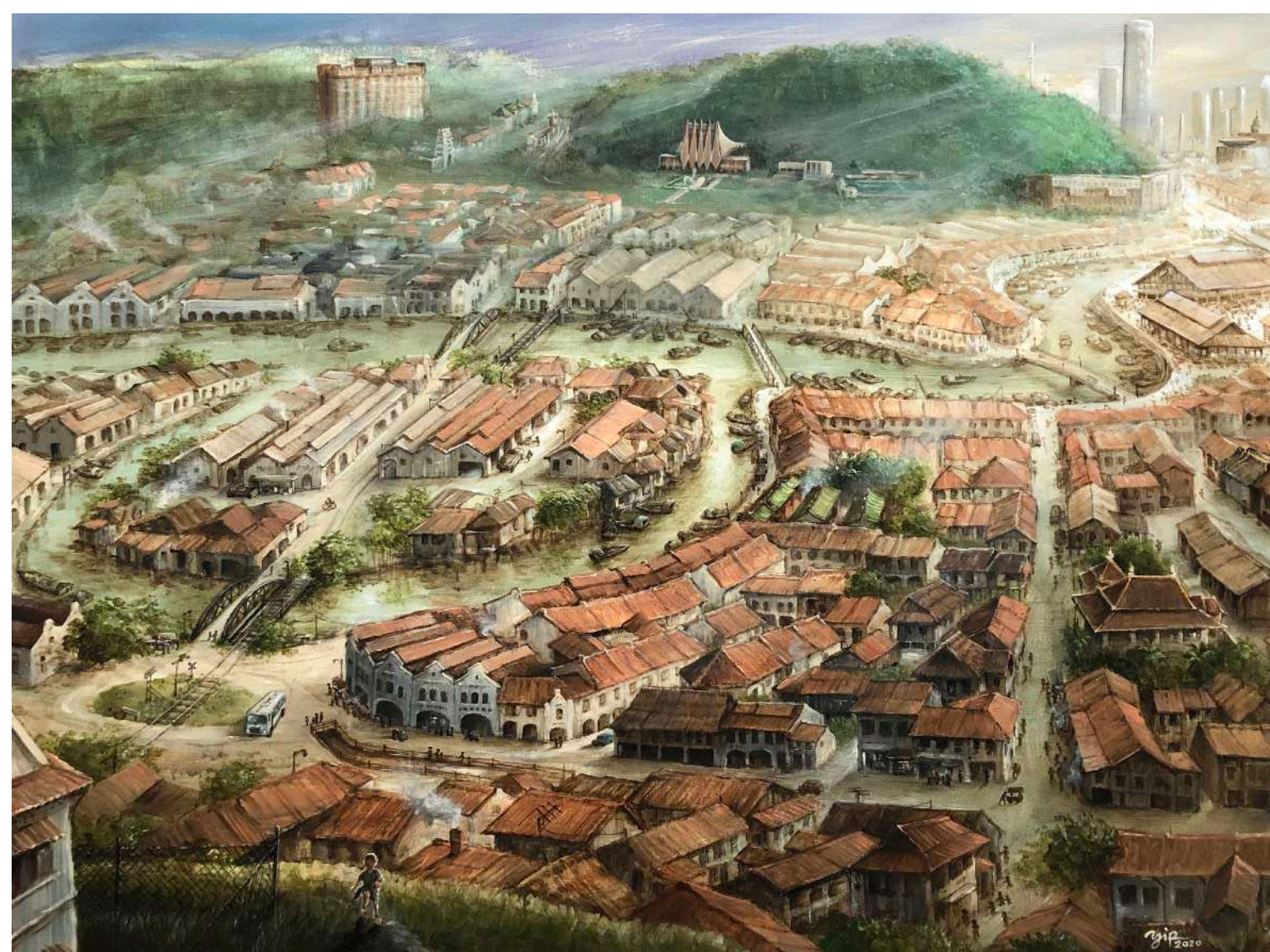


19. Kallang

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

The flight is about to land in a few minutes, and a breathtaking view unfurls below. Flying over a familiar huge blue cylinder, I can see the street life below – buses, trishaws and people moving about. I can see a huge stadium and the tiny airport building on the left! The rivers are winding and converge into a large bay. A village in between, of attap houses and boats with tall masts, takes me back to the nineteenth century.

As the plane glides over the long bridge, I can see a stone lion below a column at one end. On the sprawling bay teems boats, ships and flying-boats. Further beyond, another huge bridge seems to be under construction, and some strange seashell-like buildings glitter afar. A timeless view I wish could last forever, but alas, we'll be landing at Kallang Airport...



20. Pulau Saigon

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 91cm
2020

Once upon a time, there was an island in the middle of the Singapore River, called Pulau Saigon. It was an important island at the crossroad of transportation and ethnic settlements. A historical railway track ran through this river island from around 1906 till 1932. The island was gradually merged to the south bank of the Singapore River from around 1972 to 1991.

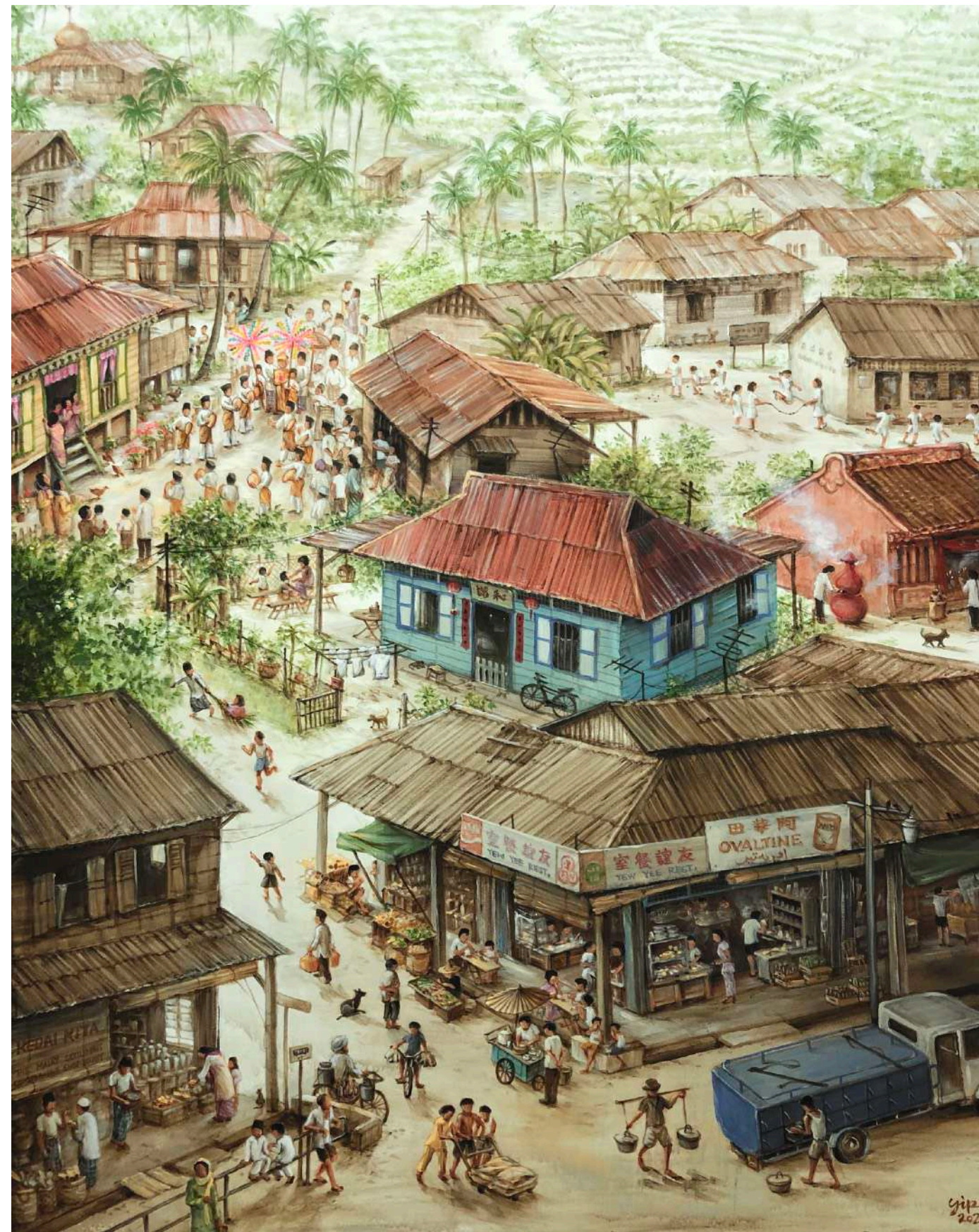
In 1984, I walked across the island daily for a whole month as I worked in a warehouse wrapping hampers during my school holidays, but I didn't know it was an island then! Today, the Central Expressway tunnels underneath the expunged island. This painting also showcases several past and present landmarks around the Singapore River. Try spotting them! Hint: This view is seen from Pearl's Hill.



21. Jalan Singapura 2
- Selamat Malam

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 152cm
2020

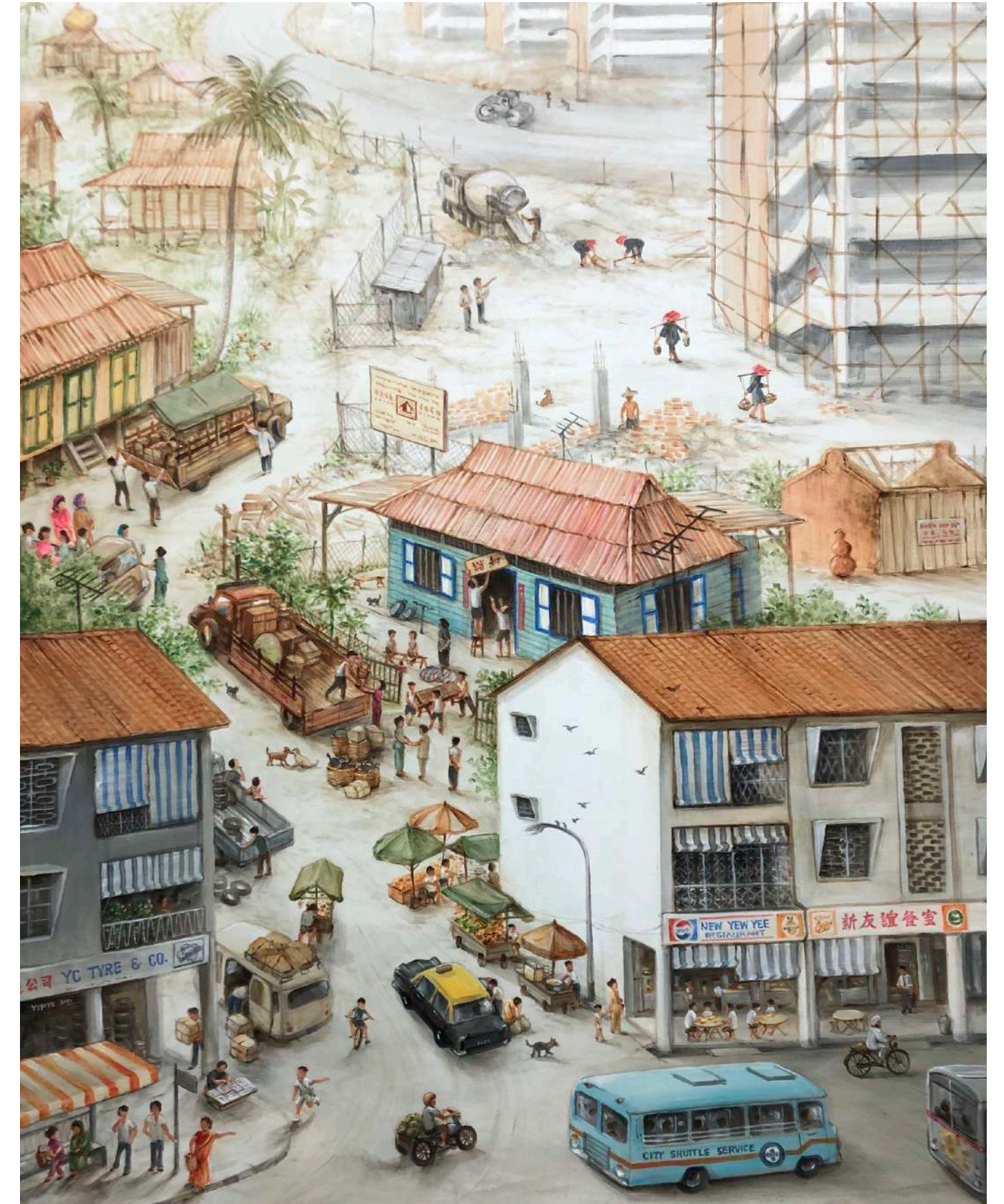
Night has come. It blankets the village in an aroma of black coffee darkness. But lights love the dark, for that is when they look most beautiful. They play with glows and shadows, and create halos and silhouettes. Stars and fireflies join the fun. Sounds love the dark too, for in it they are most heard. I hear the moon singing, the crickets laughing, and silence whispering. Selamat Malam.



22. Jalan Singapura 1
- Selamat Pagi

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 152cm
2020

Not so long ago, this imaginary place was actually a common sight all over Singapore. It depicts a snapshot of rural Singapore in the early 1970s, of a Malay village and a Chinese village coexisting side by side. While the villagers are busy with their morning activities, a night soil collection truck with its workers arrives to collect human waste from every house using buckets. In the village, a Malay wedding is in progress, while a Chinese school is having its recess time. Beyond the villages, farmlands roll into the horizon. The eclectic mix of people, culture and scenery evokes a time and place that pulsates only in memories today.



23. Jalan Singapura 4
- A New Beginning

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 152cm
2020

A sense of anticipation and renewal fills in the air. The row of wooden houses fronting the road have already been replaced with taller concrete apartments. The families of the last two kampong houses are seen moving out. The former farm areas further in are now construction sites for HDB flats. This was the Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s that went through rapid and drastic infrastructure changes. I am reminded of my family's resettlement in 1983 from our dilapidated house in old Chinatown, to the HDB flat perched on the 25th floor. I was just 14 years old, but was already excited and anxious about our new beginning.



24. Di Tanjong Katong

Print of Digital Painting 130cm x 30cm 2020

This painting was specially done for a music video to 'Di Tanjong Katong', an endearing song many of us sang during our childhood days. It was also an unusual collaboration with Gendang Akustika, a Malay musical ensemble, who invited me to join them in creating this little National Day gift. Like the song lyrics, my mind pines for the old Tanjong Katong beach, its idyllic kampong and kelongs. The clear blue sea merges with the azure blue sky and under it, villagers fish, relax and play carefreely. I hear the waves lap and coconut trees rustle. I hear the tune of 'Di Tanjong Katong' singing in my heart.



25. Grand Hotel de l'Europe

Print of Digital Painting 60cm x 40cm 2020

Many people are aware that the present-day National Gallery was once a Supreme Court and City Hall. However few people know that on the site once stood a beautiful hotel — The Grand Hotel de l'Europe. When I was asked to create a representational painting of the National Gallery as part of a NAC-Plural Art project, I chose to paint its predecessor building instead because I found the two buildings strikingly similar, except for the hotel's square crown as opposed to the gallery's green dome. To make sure the National Gallery is represented, I painted an artist sitting on the Padang painting a scene of the present-day building!



26. Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka

Print of Digital Painting 60cm x 41cm 2020

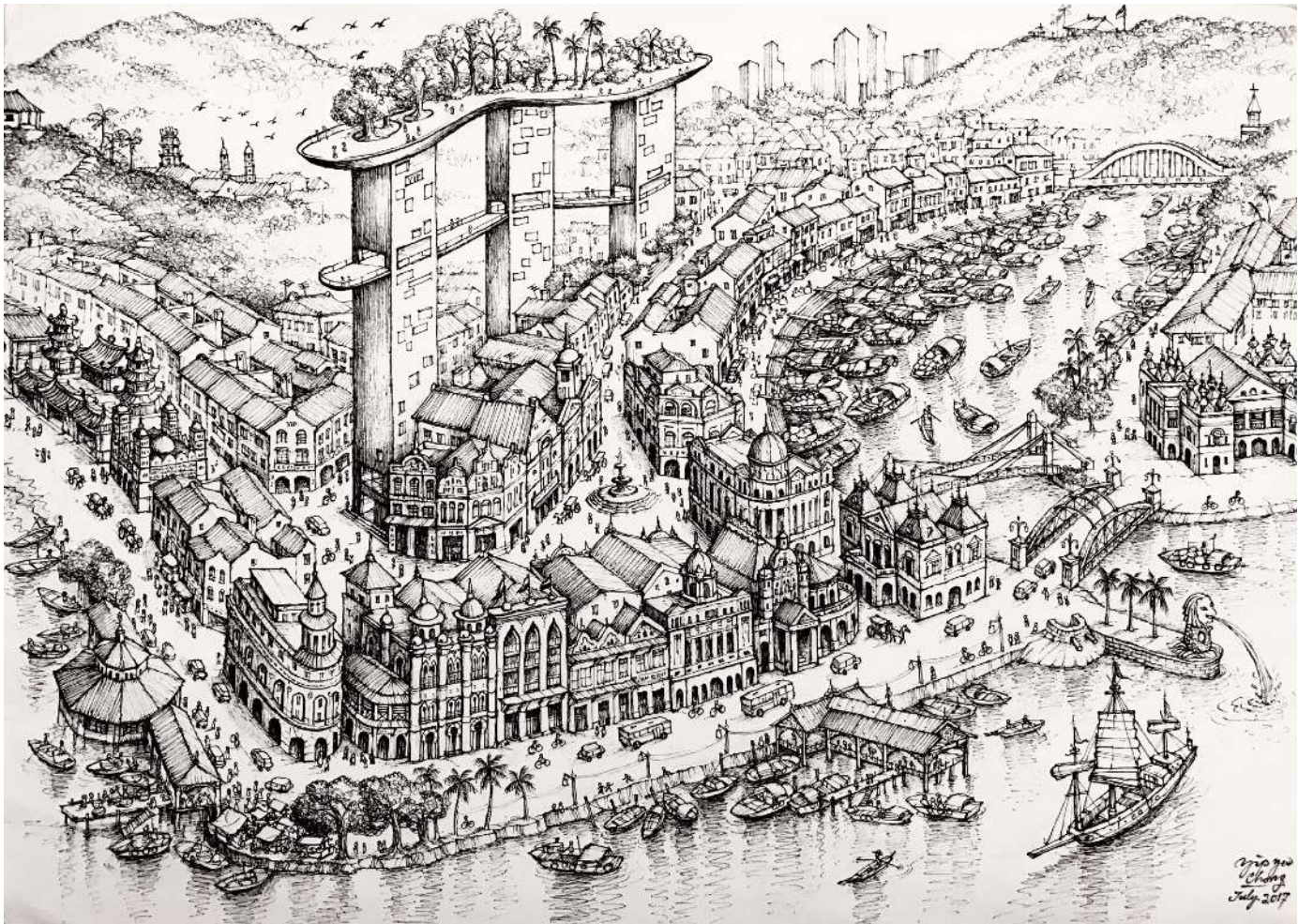
In 1820, one year after Raffles' landing, Arab merchant and philanthropist Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied built the very first Mosque in Singapore — the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka. The Mosque served the early Muslim settlers in a kampong south of the Singapore River which Raffles designated for Muslims, including Raffles' tutor, Munshi Abdullah, who once lived in the kampong. This digital oil painting is my reimagination of the Mosque in 1920. It was specially painted for a book that commemorates the Mosque's 200th anniversary.



27. Hari Raya Tea Party

Print of Digital Painting 60cm x 41cm 2020

My flat overlooked the former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, thus the Station and its railway tracks have a special place in my heart. The Station's backyard was once a lively place that housed many families of the Railway Company's staff. During Hari Raya Puasa, they would hold tea parties at the old Railway Club. This digital painting depicts one of those celebrations in 1970. People dressed in their best, chit-chatted and ate delicacies, while children played near the train turntable, which was used to turn train heads around manually. In 2011, the last train left the station and the backyard fell into disuse.



28. Singapore River 4

Print of Ink-on-Paper 60cm x 42cm 2017

Imagine how Singapore would look like...

If we had not demolished the many Victorian and Moorish buildings that once decorated Collyer Quay, Fullerton Square and Raffles Place,
If we had not flattened Mount Wallich, Scotts Hill and reclaimed Telok Ayer Bay,

If we had not cleared all the boats off Boat Quay.

Lau Pat Sat would be jutting out into the sea.

Raffles Place would look like a square in Europe.

Tan Kim Seng Fountain would be the icon of Fullerton Square.

Guns would guard the shores at the tip of Battery Road.

I imagine the grandeur of the old dames that preceded Fullerton Building
and the Victoria Concert Hall

I imagine the mighty Pinnacles@Duxton towering above everyone

I imagine the Merlion looking into the blue horizon

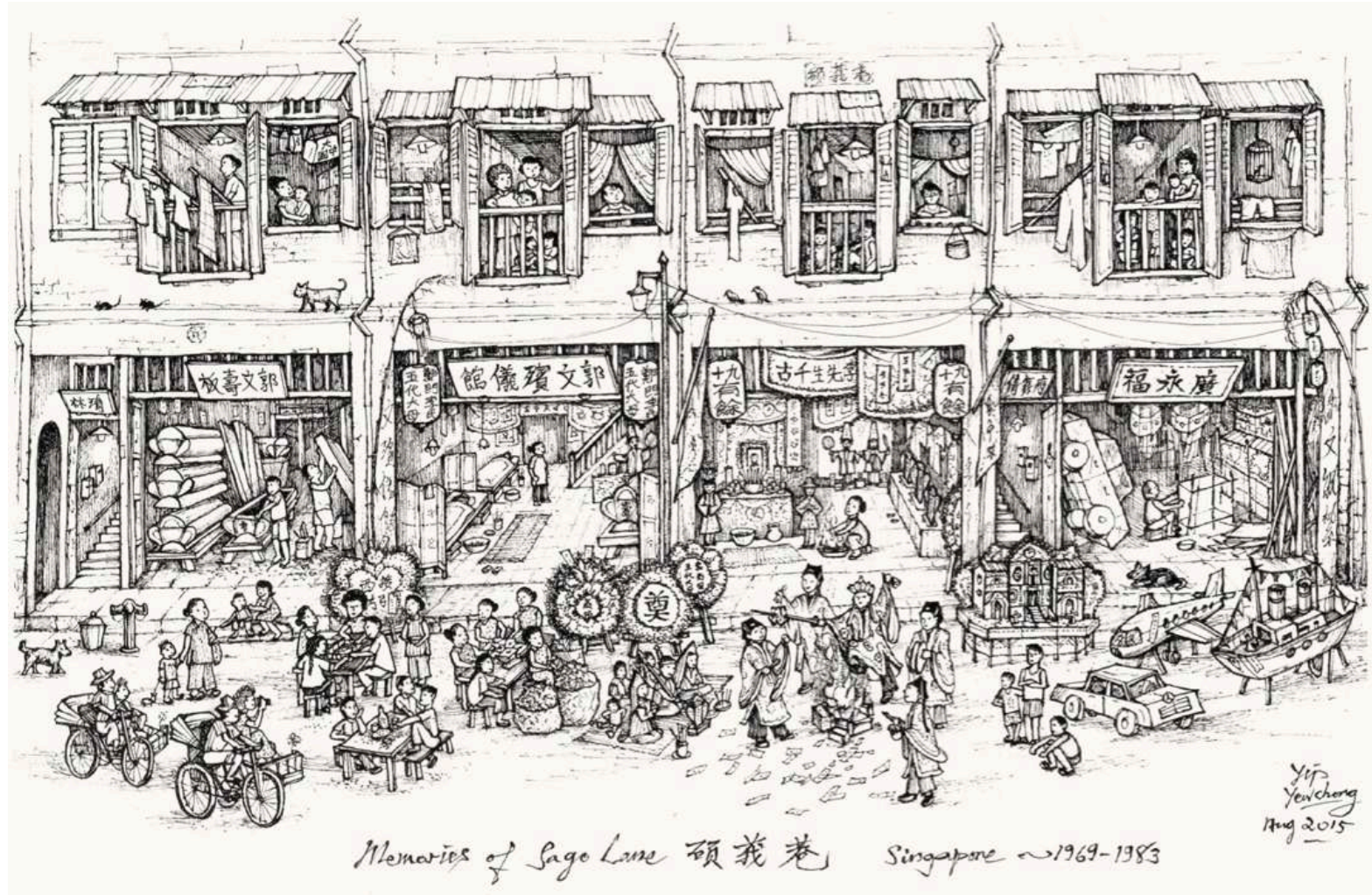
I imagine the enchanting city centre Singapore once had.



29. All Murals Greeting Card 喜气南洋

Print of Ink-on-Paper 60cm x 42cm 2016

In late 2015, I had made many new friends through painting several public murals. When the Chinese New Year season of 2016 arrived, I decided to draw a Greeting Card with all the murals contained in the card. I thought it would be a very special card for all my new friends! It turned out to be not just a simple greeting card, but an elaborate piece of artwork! Can you spot the murals?



30. Memories of Sago Lane (Street of the Dead)

Print of Ink-on-Paper 60cm x 39cm 2015

I grew up in the 70s in Chinatown Sago Lane, also known as the Street of the Dead. The street was lined with funeral parlours, coffin makers, paper effigy makers and mourning clothes shops. Though everything seemed to be dedicated to the dead, the street was very much alive both day and night. In the day, elaborate funeral processions jammed up the street. In the night, mystical wake rituals and colourful displays of paper effigies took over. Throngs of tourists on tricycles added to the chaos. The Street of the Dead was never dead!



Yip's first solo art exhibition opened on 12 Jan till 14 Mar 2021 at Art Porters Gallery, 64 Spottiswoode Park Road.

About the Artist

Yip Yew Chong, a Singaporean self-taught artist, has painted over 70 street murals since 2015 when he started dabbling in art while holding a full-time accounting job. In mid 2018, he left his accounting career to become an artist. He currently practises street murals, canvas paintings, sketches, digital art and installations. The themes of his artworks often reflect scenes of local life, especially of a bygone era. Thus, the artworks are also often used for education, mental healthcare, and heritage promotion purposes.

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Stories from Yesteryear Exhibition Venues

17 Feb to 22 Feb 2021 11am to 9pm daily

The Substation

45 Armenian Street
Singapore 179936

26 Feb to 31 Mar 2021 10am to 6pm daily

Sofitel Singapore City Centre (Level 5 Etincelle)

9 Wallich Street
Singapore 078885

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Yip's Murals around Substation



Yip's Murals around Sofitel Singapore City Centre



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