

Art comes home

Chan Hampe Galleries celebrates its fifth anniversary with a group show and a brand new space in Geylang. **Gwen Pew** takes a sneak peek



Eugene Soh's 'Creation of Ah Dam'

In just five years, Chan Hampe Galleries has built a name for itself as a popular, exciting and successful art space. It regularly sells out at art fairs and the young local artists it represents are among the most sought-after both in Singapore and overseas. Now, with its reputation consolidated, the people behind the gallery want to do something different.

'Money is important, of course, but nowadays everywhere you go, people are always flogging you something,' says the gallery's co-owner and director Benjamin Hampe. 'I mean, what happened to just looking at art, y'know? There's a real dearth of not-for-profit art spaces in Singapore, and we'd like to fill that gap.'

The opportunity to do so came up when Angie Chan and her husband Nick Davies – both co-owners, too – bought a home on Lorong 24A in Geylang. It's no ordinary space: the beautifully renovated shophouse is part of development consultancy firm Pocket Project's Shophouse Series.

The project paired seven local architects with eight shophouses from the '20s. They were tasked with marrying the structures' old world-charm with contemporary sensitivities. So Chan and Davies live upstairs, in a home filled with brightly coloured furniture and pieces of art adorning almost every surface, and they've

'donated' the ground floor to build a 'gallery', named Shophouse 5 after its unit number.

Stepping through the blue-grey front door, the first thing we notice is how quiet and enclosed the space is. Shophouse 5 is decidedly cosier than Chan Hampe Galleries, and Hampe tells us that's precisely the idea: 'We want this to be a space for quiet contemplation, an intimate place for people to

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get to know the art and the artists. We're not looking for foot traffic here. It's for those who are in the know. People should go and look for art, otherwise it's not worth it!

In order to further differentiate itself from Chan Hampe, Shophouse 5 is a place that Hampe hopes can host more controversy. 'We're not looking to offend people; this is not a platform to push any sort of political agenda. But we want the works to explore truths and discuss issues that should be talked about,' he explains. He pauses, then adds with a grin: 'Though, I've always told my

artists that if they can get my gallery shut down, I'd be very proud!'

'NOT ANOTHER SG50 SHOW'

In celebration of Chan Hampe's fifth anniversary and the opening of Shophouse 5, the two venues are holding a joint exhibition, *Common Ground*. The idea started when Hampe gave gallery director Samantha Segar a curatorial challenge: to put together a show that explores what binds – and divides – Singaporeans. It features 21 works by 16 artists that Chan Hampe has worked with in the past, but Hampe didn't want this to be 'another SG50 show', as he puts it. 'A nation's story is made up of so many different stories. Some stories are of pain, or loss, or disagreements both politically and socially, but they're all still real.'

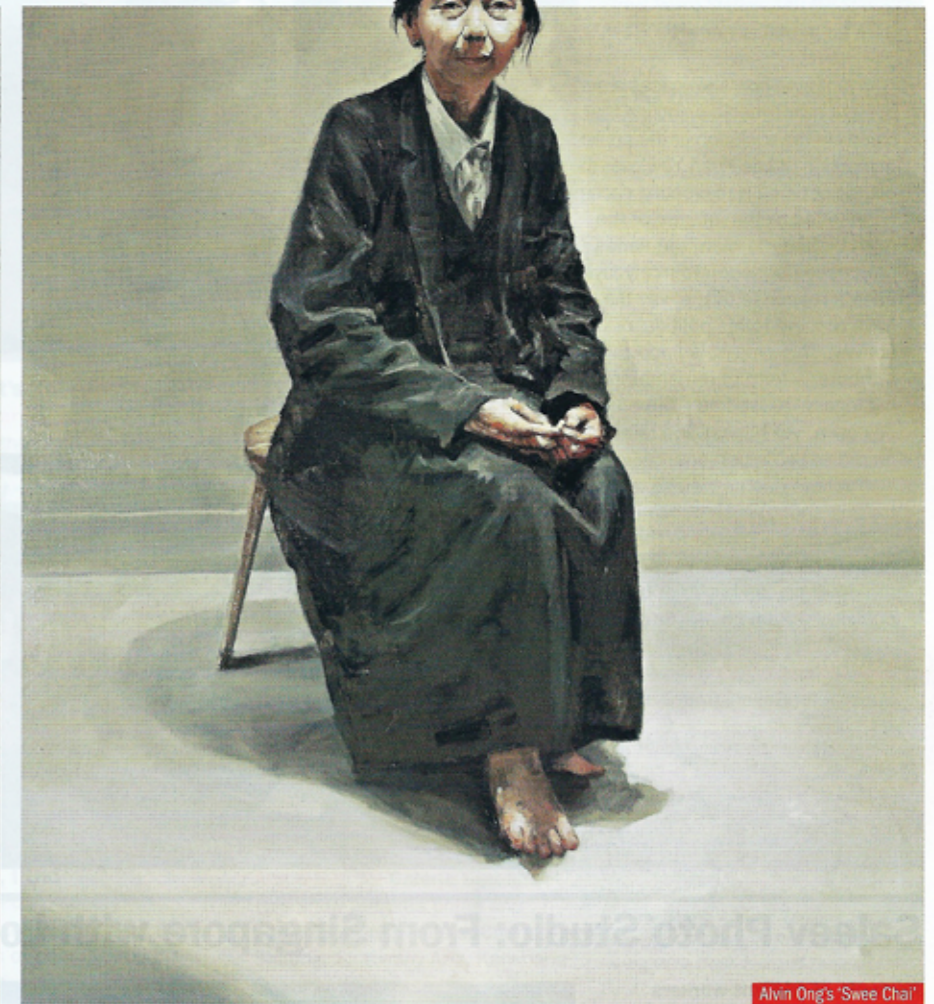
Highlights include Eugene Soh's 'Creation of Ah Dam' – a play on Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' – that Hampe describes as having 'an immediate sense of humour and irreverence, but also has a lot of small,

interesting socio-political elements'. Another is Alvin Ong's oil painting, 'Swee Chai', which depicts Ang Swee Chai, a surgeon living in exile in London. 'She's an activist, although not a bitter one,' Hampe says. 'But still, this isn't a work that will be collected by the National Gallery!'

The works on display, many of which are commissioned especially for this exhibition, are loosely divided by theme: the ones at Chan Hampe are mostly about the nation and identity, while those at Shophouse 5 are more concerned with universal topics such as nature. The works at Shophouse 5 can only be viewed on a by-appointment basis, although there will be an open house on August 15 and 16.

Although *Common Ground* is curated in-house, Hampe prefers to be hands-off with the projects at Shophouse 5. 'There's so much you can do with this space,' he says. 'I don't want to have another commercial gallery.'

Common Ground is at Chan Hampe Galleries and Shophouse 5 from Aug 15-Sep 13.



Alvin Ong's 'Swee Chai'



Kumari Nahappan's 'Moves on Spice'