



# GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

*Pioneering culture-building networks*

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1, 2021

# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur  
VOLUME 7: ISSUE 1: 2021

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Cover Image: Ernesto Pujazon  
Totem to "Wiracocha", Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2007–2008

ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal

an Openly Published Journal affiliated with

The UNESCO Observatory at

The University of Melbourne

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert

Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory

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Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education



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**ABOUT THE  
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

## Editorial

### Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of  
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

#### BIOGRAPHY



**Shalini Ganendra's** impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

## FOREWORD

### **Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur**

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

# An interview with William Lim

## AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

## BIOGRAPHY

**William Lim** is an award-winning architect and artist, while also being an ardent collector of Hong Kong art. Dr Lim was described by Hong Kong Tatler in 2017 as “arguably the world’s foremost collector of Hong Kong contemporary art.”



Five years after returning from his years at the renowned Cornell University, Dr Lim founded CL3 Architects in 1992. It was not until 2006 when the multi-hyphenate bought his first art piece, an ink painting by Wilson Shieh, and he hasn’t looked back since.

His current 200-plus multimedia collection, which focuses on young and mid-career local artists such as Nadim Abbas, Tozer Pak, and Lee Kit, as well as personal favourites Lam Tung-pang and Chi Hoi, is displayed in his 5,300-square-foot studio in Wong Chuk Hang.

In 2014, he authored a book entitled *The No Colours: Living Collection in Hong Kong*, which documents his comprehensive collection of works by more than 50 contemporary local artists and provides an insight into the contemporary art scene of Hong Kong.

In 2017, the award-winning architectural icon opened its doors - H Queen’s designed by Dr Lim. It was Hong Kong’s first vertical art gallery building, a 24-storey development housing non-traditional exhibition spaces.

He was invited as a keynote speaker for the Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2018 Luminary Programme, presenting in the session “Collecting, Creating & Curating” at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia.

*This is my first participation in GWKL and what a pleasant surprise to learn about the emerging contemporary art scene in Malaysia, not too unlike HK 10 years ago when I started looking at the art development there. I encourage the young artists, galleries, collectors and museums to support this very exciting new force of creativity.*

- William Lim

**We interviewed William Lim about the trajectory of Hong Kong’s art scene thus far, the importance of cultivating and supporting local creation and appreciation of art, and his encounter with the Malaysian cultural milieu, around two years after his attendance at GWKL 2018.**

Q: You mentioned that Kuala Lumpur reminds you of Hong Kong ten years ago – could you elaborate on this?

William Lim: When I first came to notice the HK contemporary art scene, it was about 12 years ago. I stumbled upon a very strange exhibition that seemed very avant-garde to me. It was unlike what I have seen in the very commercial art market in greater China that was already booming. In HK at that time, contemporary art had no patron, no market. The artists were producing very academic art for a very small group of art audience who were mostly professionally related to the industry, like fellow artists, curators, publishers, art teachers. There was so little interest in what they do that artists had to get together and rent a space to stage their own exhibition- hence Para Site was formed a few years before that.

10 years ago, there were maybe two galleries in HK that would show local artists’ works in a permanent base, selling mostly to Western people who were either collectors or just wanted a piece of HK art as a souvenir. No auction house would show HK Contemporary art, and there was no major art fair here. Like all Asian cities, art was not considered to be an important part of life. Artists led a very humble life and had to take on other jobs to support their passion for art. Art seemed to be something that belonged to the Western world. The only reason Greater China’s art scene developed was that CNN reported on the emerging art scene there.

I visit KL quite regularly, and the contemporary art scene is quite unnoticeable here. That is why I thought it reminded me of HK’s art scene 10 years ago.

Q: What or who were the facilitators in developing the Hong Kong art scene? Was there a jump start that first engaged local collectors and then global collectors? Could you give a quick synopsis of Hong Kong as a cultural case study?

WL: In a place with 8 million people, there are not enough local collectors to develop an art scene. Local interest will never put a place on the art map. When I was involved with Para Site, there was a big debate on why we would bring in international artists to exhibit, which would take away the opportunity to show local HK artists.

But I believe that you need to put the local artists on the same platform with internationally established artists in order for local artists to learn and excel. So, we did a show with Joseph Kosuth and Tsang Kin Wah, both dealing with texts. We initially received heavy criticism for Para Site's decision to bring in an international director. But this is precisely what established Para Site into a world-class art NGO within 10 years. The major breakthrough was the start of an international art fair. Art HK was founded by Magnus Renfrew around 2008.

Figure 1: H Queen's; the high-rise art gallery in Hong Kong, designed by William Lim.



It was showing contemporary art from Asia and the West. It got so successful that after five years, Art Basel bought it. In the next five years, Art Basel grew it into a major international art event, bringing artists, collectors, curators, museum patrons and acquisition teams to HK. The success of Art Basel HK sparked other art fairs to be set up as well. Auction houses coincided their auctions with the art fairs, hence bringing more collectors to HK. International galleries began wanting to establish a base in HK. I designed a building here 6 years ago, probably the first high-rise art gallery building in the world, and the spaces were quickly snatched up by the top international galleries before it even opened.

Alongside this, the HK government started the development of the Hong Kong Arts District- the West Kowloon Cultural District. One of its highlights is the Museum of Contemporary Art, Design and Moving Image – M+. Lars Nittve, who had just completed the development of Tate Modern, was hired as the director. Lars announced a strategy for M+'s collection which will be HK-centric and expanding outwards. This gave a boost to the academic standing of HK art not only locally, but it also started to attract international attention to discovering HK contemporary art. Important establishments like Tate Modern, the New Museum, Mori Museum, etc., started showing HK artists' work. Other institutions, like the Guggenheim and Tate, started to collect HK artists' work. The art scene here grew quickly to become the most important art centre in Asia and the third-largest art market in the world (we may have surpassed London to be the second right after New York).

Q: Are there many local Hong Kong collectors of Hong Kong contemporary art? What is the collector profile?

WL: There is a growing number locally. I would think serious collectors do not amount to more than 30. The number is definitely growing. It used to be the case that I would go to a gallery exhibition and all the works were waiting for buyers. Now, you would often find that the works are sold even before the opening. I would say most collectors are either expats or HK people who had lived overseas for a while.

Figure 2: Dr William Liu at his GWKL 2018 Luminary session "Collecting, Creating and Curating", moderated by Dr Deepanjana Klein-Christie's International Head for South Asian Modern & Contemporary Art. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: What is the importance of quality cultural marquees, like GWKL, for developing international awareness and growing local appreciation for art in an emerging region?

WL: I believe that art is an eco-system: it needs artists, galleries, museums, art events, and collectors as its most basic structure. I don't think local appreciation alone is enough without international exposure. If it were only HK collectors looking at the

local art scene, it will remain very provincial. So, I think you will need at least two major yearly events: one would be like GWKL, which would attract international and local collectors to KL; and the other would be to showcase KL artists in an international exhibition, like the Venice Art Biennale.

Q: What are your views on the GWKL Luminary Programme? How did you feel about your engagement with the audience?

Figure 3: Dr William Liu with local Malaysian students who attended his GWKL session at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



WL: I thought it was very well-organised. I was surprised about the number of people who turned up on a Sunday afternoon. I enjoyed most particularly talking to the students, as they were full of hope and curiosity for the KL art scene. I was very happy to share how I became a collector and how having an interest in contemporary art has informed my career as well. I hope this gave a positive message to the students attending the talk.

Q: Government involvement – is it necessary? What has the role of the Hong Kong government been in relation to art initiatives?

WL: I think government support is very important for an art scene to develop internationally. The HK Arts Development Council (HKADC) has been established for many years. It supports many local art initiatives. Many art NGO's and artists are supported through their funding. The HK government also supports the local museums in their operations and their collections. Recently, the HK government allocated more funding for art acquisition from local artists. One very important international event that the HKADC supports is the Venice Art Biennale. This is very important to make HK artists visible internationally. Through Venice, HK artists got international exposure and went on to be invited for exhibitions in international art spaces and museums.

Q: What is the role of private patronage insofar as developing a cultural market?

WL: Private patronage is very important for a place to develop its art scene. One very successful place to look at would be Indonesia. They have great collectors who support the local art scene by putting together great art collections, some with their own private museums. The other important source of private patronage would be from private corporates, like banks or fashion brands that support art. HK is fortunate to have a few of these corporates that support the art scene here.

Q: How important is the idea of cultural identity to artwork from emerging regions and why?

Figure 4: The development of art and design practice in Malaysia, through the perspectives and experiences of local Malaysian creatives themselves, was explored at the GWKL 2018 Luminary Feature session "Multi View, Malaysian Vision". Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



WL: To me, cultural Identity is key to creating art. I think contemporary art should definitely reflect the culture of a place. I think if you look at regional art - India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand - all have developed their contemporary art scene with a strong focus on their own culture. It will be quite noticeable from good artists that their culture or social backgrounds are reflected in their works. I think international audience and collectors will also find the works with cultural identity more meaningful.

Q: Having engaged this time with Malaysia, albeit briefly, what factors could accelerate the growth of the Malaysian art scene to an international scale?

WL: I would say the continuation of GWKL will definitely be an important first step. I would say to expand the content of GWKL to include an art fair where you can see more of work by local artists, which can then bring in regional art collectors.

Q: You surveyed the National Art Gallery - were there exhibitions, works and/or styles that caught your eye?

WL: I was pleasantly surprised to see the contemporary art collection at the National Art Gallery, which I had no idea existed before. I was also impressed with the families and people that were there to spend the Sunday afternoon. Clearly, there is interest in art in Malaysia. In particular, I was amazed at Anne Samat's work of the figures. They have great cultural reference and yet, so relevant to the current art scene and what is being done by female artists in other parts of the world. I very much wish to be able to see more of her works. Other artists like Zulkifli Yusoff, Mohd Farizal Puadi, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Hasnul Jamal Saidon are superb and are of good international standard whilst carrying a strong cultural identity. The other solo exhibition, Second Life by Chang Yoong Chia, is also amazing. I have never seen his work before, but I think both his work and the way that exhibition was curated was very impressive.

Q: As a collector, where do you see Malaysia in five years, and what will it take to get this country there insofar as art appreciation?

WL: I think art appreciation needs to start from education. Young people should be encouraged to enjoy art and not be intimidated by it. I think the young students that came to my talk are very enthusiastic, and their teacher was very encouraging and caring, so I think that is a great start.

I think the pace of art development relies on who is backing and pushing it, so it is hard to say how an art scene will develop without knowing what the driving force is. I think Singapore has been trying for years, and now they have a great National Art Museum, which I think will help greatly to propel its art scene.

Thus, for KL, one of few things that need to happen for it to develop its art scene: grow GWKL into an international event; groom its artists by supporting them to show internationally, and give incentives and support for the establishment of more galleries and art NGO's. If one or more of these things will happen in the next two-three years, then I think Malaysia will have a totally different art scene in five years' time.

Figure 5: Dr William Liu's GWKL 2018 session at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia: "Collecting, Creating and Curating". Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: As an architect, when you view the fast-changing cityscape of Kuala Lumpur, what do you see in terms of architecture and design?

WL: I think KL is developing quickly into an international city. There are many re-developments taking place, replacing old neighbourhoods with new super high-rises. This is happening all the way from the city centre to the airport. Fortunately, the city is still very green, which makes it a very nice city to live in. I hope it will remain that way. KL is a diverse cultural place with four main ethnic groups with strong cultural heritage. I hope this diversity and cultural heritage will be well preserved amidst the fast development. I think as cities throughout Asia start to develop, it is unfortunate that some moved so fast that they have lost their identity. I hope this will not happen to KL. I hope with proper planning that culture and development can coexist.

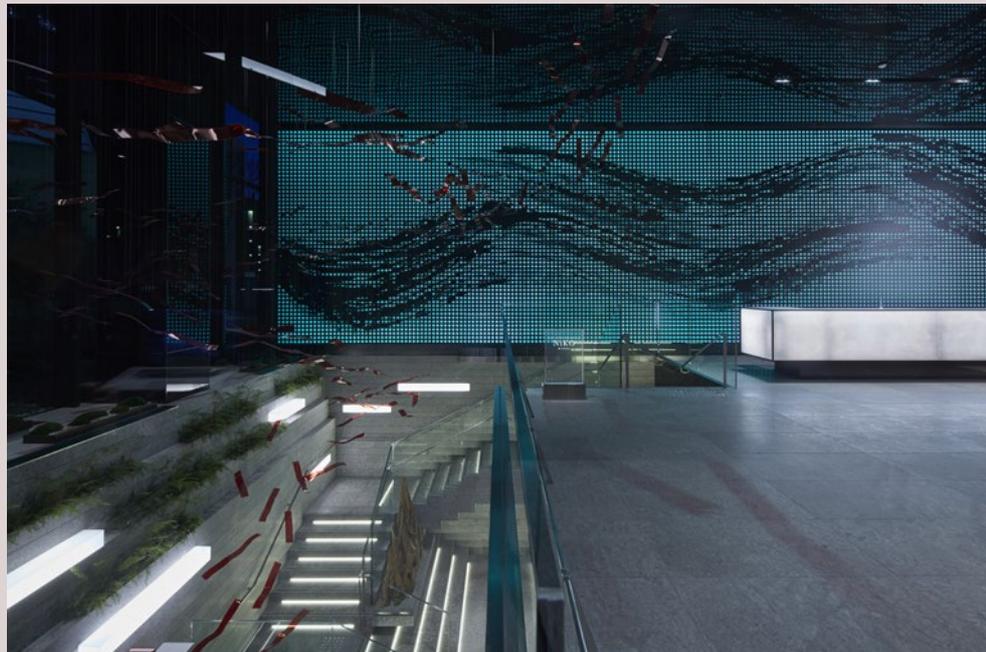
Q: How do we mitigate the preconception that art is elitist?

WL: To own art may be expensive and elitist, but to look at art and appreciate art is definitely not. I think many countries have a free admission policy to museums. I think there are many ways to enjoy art for free or pay relatively little. In HK, the notion of art being elitist is diminishing. During Art Basel HK, the public can buy a ticket and go see artworks worth several million dollars, and the fairs are swamped with visitors. People start to talk more about art, and respond to art by posting Instagram pictures, taking selfies, or even taking art lessons. H Queen's, which I designed, receives students and school groups all the time to the galleries. The newly opened Taikwun provides another venue for art exhibitions and events and has become a great place for people to go to view art, and it's packed with people all the time.

Q: What are the common characteristics of successful artists?

WL: I think great artists have to stay true to themselves, and they need to have something to say. A great artist will never think of what to make to appeal to the public. They will think of what to create to make a difference. That is why great artists may not be successful artists. Nowadays some of the most successful international artists run like businesses, and their works are produced in factories. It comes down to whether you want to be successful, or do you want to be great. Having said that, I do think that successful artists need good galleries to work with them, to groom them and to help them find collectors, and exhibit their works in important collections. No matter how great an artist is, without the right exposure they can never let their talent be seen.

Figure 6: The Millennium Mitsui Garden Hotel in Tokyo – one of the many works in William Lim's portfolio, as the head of his leading architect firm, CL3.



Q: Any other comments on your GWKL 2018 experience?

WL: I do wish GWKL will grow from strength to strength. I was under a very tight schedule this time. Next time, I hope that more artists can get involved. I would love to see more artworks, go to artists' studios, and see more galleries get involved.