

# Down Chinatown's memory lane

Some 30 artists revisit the history of the area through their works, with the community there as their target audience. **BY CHEAH UI-HOON**

**Y**OUNG Singapore artists are going to reconnect with Chinatown and "transform" Kreta Ayer Square for one week in the first Pop-up Noise: Soul Searching event.

An initiative of Noise Singapore – which is a platform for artists aged 35 and below to show their works – this year's edition will see 31 artists exploring history and memory through experimental, site-specific works. Nineteen of them are new works.

"The artists have interacted with residents, uncovered interesting historical facts and observed intently the sights, smells and sounds of old Chinatown," says Aruna Johnson, deputy director, arts and youth, of the National Arts Council, which is sponsoring the event. "Their creative responses revive the experiences of the past generations in a space that has witnessed Singapore's rapid progress and transformation."

The creative team – Jalyn Han, Joseph Nair and Xu Jingyi – held an open call for artists. "They only had to submit a statement of intent and introduce themselves. We were not looking for pre-existing work or proposals but a willingness to go on a journey," explains Mr Nair.

Ms Han notes that the team did look for artists with an artistic interest or personal history in Chinatown or with engaging with communities. "The next criteria is that the artists are still finding their way or questioning their approach," she adds.

Artists had to agree to listen to an oral history session by antique authority Kok Seng Whatt who has a wealth of personal anecdotes of Singapore, and also attend workshops by project director Ms Han at Kreta Ayer Square which is the space between Chinatown Complex and the Buddha's Tooth Relic Temple. Workshops included listening, observing and talking to people, and gathering impressions and discussing them.



Artist Megan Miao at work on her piece *Collect*. Her ink paintings will be hung such that they flow through the five-foot-way-inspired set at Pop-Up Noise: Soul Searching.  
PHOTO: DON WONG

Mr Nair notes that the depth of the exploratory process was more important, so all the creative team did was to work with the artists to sharpen their presentations.

"It was surprising that at least a quarter of the work was interactive, and used gameplay to tell stories or to create artwork with participants and residents, even to encourage a conversation between these groups," says Mr Nair.

For Ms Han, she was surprised by the courage of artists to tackle the darker aspects of the project. "For instance, they didn't shy away from Sago Lane that was once called the street of death or hesitate to track down the surviving *majie* (unmarried nannies) who lived in the area."

Through theatre, dance, music, interactive, installation, 2D visual art and open art jams, Pop-Up Noise's site-specific works drew inspiration from the community and has as its primary audience, the members of that community as well.

Artist Jacklyn Kuah interviewed the early migrants of Singapore for her radio play in dialect. The act of sitting around and passing time, something that many of the seniors in the area do, is reflected in visual artist Hera's and sound/visual artist Wu Junhan's work.

At the side of the square where the uncles play chess, sometimes through the night, Ng Wenjie's chess board will render the act of parti-



Pop-Up Noise: Soul Searching is an invitation for the mainly elderly residents of Chinatown to sit with members of the public and enjoy art made by commissioned youth artists who were inspired by them.  
PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR

cipants playing the game as art-making.

Alvin Chai will explore the act of traditional letter-writing and correspondence. Performer Hafiz will take small groups of participants on a storytelling hunt at night. On some evenings, there will be improvised open artist jams led by musicians/sound artists SA Trio.

"I think the scale of this experimental site-specific work with this many young artists, who have been guided through history and memory by an artefact collector, is novel to Singapore," says Mr Nair.

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# Pop-Up Noise: Soul Searching will run on Oct 21-30, 10am-10pm, at Kreta Ayer Square. For more information, please go to <https://soulsearchingpopup.wordpress.com/schedule>



From left: Performer Steven Ang, dancers Suhana Jumadi and Norhaizad Adam, and physical theatre performer Lim Jun Jie rehearsing *Sago Lane* ahead of its premiere on Oct 21. Adam choreographed the piece based on the death houses that once lined Sago Lane. PHOTO: MD HARIZ BAKRI