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life

NEW NAME, NEW ERA

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Building a home around Chen Wen Hsi's murals



Two abstract murals (left and below) painted by pioneer Singapore artist Chen Wen Hsi on a brick wall near the front porch of his 5 Kingsmead Road house have been transposed into the home of the property's new owner Audrey Koh (left). The works sit on the overhauled bungalow's (left below) first floor, visible from the street through floor-to-ceiling glass. PHOTOS: GAVIN FOO, FABIAN ONG

It was very natural for me to want to preserve it. There are a lot of people who know nothing about this, which is a waste as a Singaporean. Being such a young country, we actually already have something of substance.



MS AUDREY KOH, who says she preserved Chen's works out of a sense of social responsibility and also a hope that Singapore can eventually have "national touchpoints" to rival those like the Colosseum in Rome

In a personal undertaking, the psychotherapist who bought the Nanyang artist's old house has reinvented the space to preserve his works



Clement Yong
Correspondent



In the last 40 years, the bungalow sitting at 5 Kingsmead Road in Bukit Timah has had to undergo major reconstruction twice.

Its first reinvention was after the original owner, pioneer Nanyang artist Chen Wen Hsi, died in 1991. Fellow Singapore artist Tay Joo Mee bought the house in 1998.

The second, and latest, overhaul came just before Covid-19, when psychotherapist Audrey Koh, searching for an abode near her daughter's primary school, found the place. She is the first non-artist to inherit the site, but she, too, has been drawn into its artistic history.

From the sloping street in the quiet precinct today, an over 4m-long abstract mural is visible

through floor-to-ceiling glass.

Hoisted into the house in 2023, the artwork is the foundation stone of the newly erected house – now comprising a basement, two floors and an attic – which is 50 to 75 per cent larger than its predecessor.

The playful Cubist work, titled Studio I, was painted by Chen onto a brick wall near the front porch of his house between 1961 and 1964. On the obverse side is a later, smaller work, Studio II.

Both now sit in relative comfort in the air-conditioned first floor of Ms Koh's home, surrounded by understated concrete-finish walls making no secret that everything about the house is playing second fiddle.

The murals' transposition, from the outside in and elevated a few metres above ground to accommodate the basement, was a complex operation involving nearly 60 conservators, architects, gallerists and a documentary crew over six years.

Ms Koh, 52, points to the rebars and concrete which she has opted to keep as part of the mural display, artefacts of the mammoth enterprise that has been the source of much nerves, brain-racking and the occasional nightmare.

The previous house owner had agreed to the sale only on condition that Ms Koh preserved the murals – to which she, having no inkling of who Chen was then, agreed to without much thought.

Though she did a semester of art appreciation at the now-closed Lon Morris College in Texas, the United States, it was only after a quick Google search that she was shocked into realising the scale of her responsibilities.

"I said to myself, 'Okay, this is a serious matter.' Because of the house, I'm thrown into this role to get to know and appreciate a whole new world. It's nice, in a way. We rise to the occasion," she says during a recent tour of the house, which will eventually be opened for guided tours.

The entire project was paid for out of her own pocket. She declines to reveal how much she put into the undertaking, saying only that

"what we did was priceless".

Ms Koh was motivated by social responsibility and a grander hope of Singapore eventually having "national touchpoints" to rival those like the Colosseum in Rome.

"It was very natural for me to want to preserve it. There are a lot of people who know nothing about this, which is a waste as a Singaporean," she says.

"Being such a young country, we actually already have something of substance. We are in the third or fourth generation right now, and all that came from this very solid base."

The murals weigh eight tonnes, and in the new orientation, sit right above a pillarless garage. This

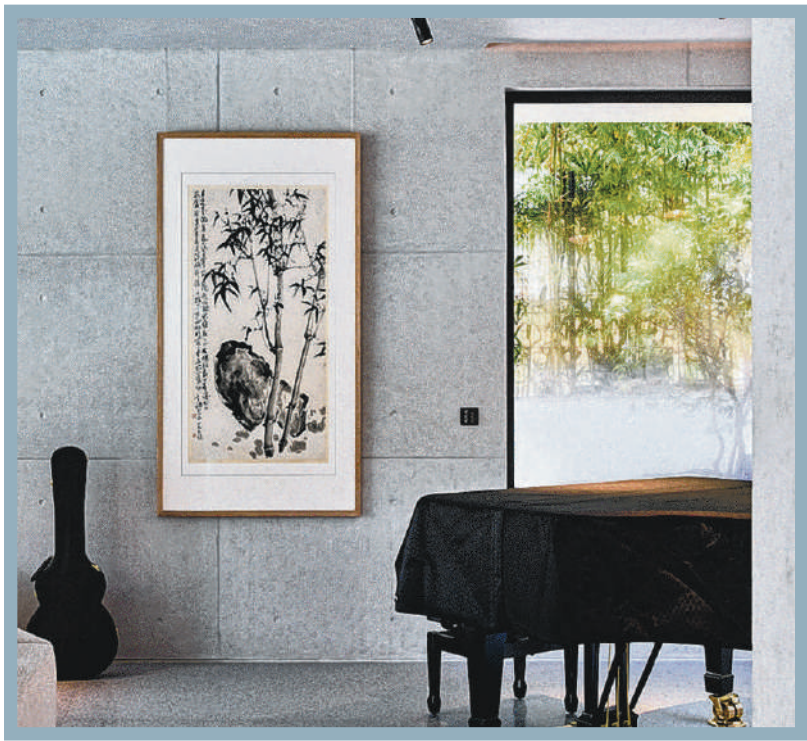
demanding a unique feat of engineering from Mr Alan Tay and Ms Sarah Ng of Formwerkz Architects.

Mr Tay says the controlled demolition required to extract the wall and the subsequent temporary reinforcement of a slope so tractors could hoist the mural into the building was a first in Singapore.

"It was a landmark case, a landmark experience. They had to strengthen the base and sides, cut off the existing roof, then move it. The last thing you want is for the bricks and plaster to fall off and be damaged after all the planning," he adds.

CONTINUED on C2

First floor doubles as exhibition gallery; guided tours in the works



FROM C1

The columnless carpark directly below is held up by long-span beams, which, due to their length, naturally bend a little with weight. But with the murals in mind, it was back to the drawing board. The brick parcel now sits on a galvanised steel frame and is clamped in place from both the top and the bottom.

A decision to put in movement joints feels particularly prescient after the earthquakes that struck Johor on Aug 24. “They act as a dampener for movement due to nearby construction or building, or a seismic wave from Indonesia and Malaysia,” says Mr Tay.

Ms Koh’s brief was for the mural to be visible from the street level so anyone could peek at the slice of Singapore history.

Mr Tay adds: “Usually on conservation projects, your engagement is very specific with rules set. But for this, as an architect, it was liberating and very strange. We were really trusted with the decision of what’s good for this particular context.”

As Ms Koh waited for the house to be completed, she continued researching – and buying – Singapore works, mostly those from the pioneer generation.

The first floor, which houses the murals, now doubles as an exhibition gallery, with a central garden courtyard that Mr Tay designed as a tribute to Chen’s famous “miniature zoo” in his garden.

While there are no ducks, chickens, peacocks or squirrels to be found here, Ms Koh and her family

have revelled in discovering new, magical ways for this central feature to interact with the surrounding art. From an angle near the entrance, a reflection of a gibbon from a Chen painting appears to scramble up a trunk in the courtyard.

Ms Koh says the branches of the eucalyptus alba tree planted there also recall the Cubist herons that Chen is known to paint. “They change colour when it rains. There would be a gradation of colours, light and dark.”

One day, a visitor saw in an abstract work by Chen the Chinese character “fu”, or blessings. Ms Koh was sharing the story with her husband, the director of a local skincare and wellness company, when they turned their heads at a serendipitous moment to see the character inverted in the glass panel surrounding the courtyard – a prosperous homonym for “fu dao”, the arrival of blessings.

Her collection now includes works by all five major Nanyang artists – Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang and Georgette Chen – as well as more classical pioneer ink painters like Fan Chang Tien, the king of bamboo.

This representation was deliberate as Ms Koh, even as she sings praises of Chen Wen Hsi’s innovation, retains a firm belief in the virtue of tradition.

Referring to the four male Nanyang artists in Mandarin as the “four heavenly kings”, she says: “Of the four, two broke out more obviously to merge the West with the East. This was Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng. Fan



remained steadfast, which, to me, is good too, because we need someone like that,” she says.

Like the most avid collectors, she is decisive about picking up pieces when they strike a personal chord. “Singapore at the time was so welcoming that it could welcome and encompass anyone. It reminds me to appreciate them all and the values behind creation.”

This open-heartedness has guided Ms Koh as a novice collector to take the daring step of commissioning three works from contemporary artists for her new art sanctuary. These include A Tree by Lim Soo Ngee, a sculpture fashioned from the rambutan tree in Chen’s garden.

Already deteriorating, it was felled and air-dried for two years, before Lim selected the parts that were stable enough to be used. He cut them up with a handsaw, then stacked and charred them for an even tone.

The other commissioned works are a set of ceramic scholar rocks by Oh Chai Hoo sculpted from the soil of Chen’s former home garden, and Chua Chon Hee’s ceramic vessels that translate Chen’s Cubist structures and colours into the cuts and glazes on assorted pots

and dipping bowls.

Having now had five months to settle into the space, Ms Koh’s contribution to the art ecosystem continues. Initially hesitant, she has agreed to throw her doors open at some point for guided tours.

Gallery partner artcommune gallery has also supplied the content for an official website, Skingsmead.sg, that will go live on Oct 3. This will contain information about the murals and Ms Koh’s collection, as well as serving as a platform for announcing 5 Kingsmead Road’s public initiatives.

More immediately, there is the premiere of a documentary film, titled Home To He(art) – Ms Koh hired a crew to shoot the six-year project – at the National Gallery Singapore, as part of its Painting With Light: Festival Of International Films, on Sept 7.

A plaque at the front of the house announces its status as the only private residence in Singapore marked as a historic site under both the categories of culture and community and art by the National Heritage Board. This, however, confers no legal obligation on the owners to preserve the site.

Mr Ho Weng Hin, chairman of built heritage conservation group

Docomomo, says official metrics for the preservation of buildings remain too conventional. The too-narrow interpretation of what is historically or socially important has already led to the loss of important houses such as sculptor Ng Eng Teng’s residence and studio at 106 Joo Chiat Place in 2012.

“The kampung house was made of timber and, in theory, could have been dismantled into pieces and relocated, but no one will pay for this unless the state steps in and says that the house encapsulates his lifework and art,” says Mr Ho.

Other homes are currently at risk, including those made by pioneer architects like Alfred Wong for their families, which defined what it meant to live in the tropics.

The current measurements are out of step with those of other developed nations, such as Japan, which has turned ceramic artist Kawai Kanjiro’s house, studio and kiln in Kyoto into a museum.

Mr Ho adds: “With such a long line of Cultural Medallion recipients and as we celebrate Singapore’s 60th, it’s time to look at different conservation metrics. It’s rare to have an owner like Audrey who understands the value of art and invests in it.”



Among the works in Ms Audrey Koh’s collection are (from far left) Fan Chang Tien’s ink bamboo painting, which echoes the bamboos that Ms Koh has planted outside; Lim Soo Ngee’s A Tree, which comes from parts of Chen Wen Hsi’s rambutan tree that was air-dried for two years; and Oh Chai Hoo’s An Eternal Dialogue Series (2025). PHOTOS: ARTCOMMUNE GALLERY, GAVIN FOO, STUDIO W

Even Ms Koh struggled with the balance between public access and the privacy of her residence. She has two young daughters.

The general idea is to allow Level 1 to potentially be open, with private spaces the family can hide in on the other floors.

“We are given the opportunity to have a piece of history, and with that, comes responsibility,” Ms Koh reasons.

This burden – and opportunity – might have fallen on someone else’s shoulders. Ms Koh, who enjoys it when the stars align in auspicious ways, was initially scouting the plot of land opposite 5 Kingsmead Road.

Instead, she was led to meet passionate individuals including the Formwerkz architects, Mr Ho, and Dr Diana Tay from art conservation studio Barc Labs.

Six years after diving headlong into the endeavour that has demanded so much of her time and resources, Ms Koh reflects: “If you ask me if I would do it again, there’s no question that I would. I’m just happy we found the right group of people who share the same vision and heart for Singapore art.”

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Renamed Arts House Group prioritising fund-raising for programmes and venues

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Arts Editor

The Arts House Limited (AHL) will be renamed the Arts House Group (AHG).

The change is part of an overall strategy to boost the entity’s profile and cement its identity as both venue manager and arts programmer, says executive director Sharon Tan.

“The front-facing name is important. It has to stand for what we do and who we are. It is not frivolous. Part of it is also to differentiate us from The Arts House at the Old Parliament because the confusion really kills us,” Ms Tan adds.

AHG is often conflated with the venue The Arts House at the Old Parliament, which it runs.

The group manages five other venues: Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall; Drama Centre; Goodman Arts Centre; Aliwal Arts Centre; and Stamford Arts Centre.

It is also responsible for organising two national flagship festivals: the Singapore International Festival of Arts (Sifa) and Singapore Writers Festival (SWF).

The Arts House, christened as such in 2004 after a \$15 million renovation, last went through a major revamp in 2014 when it merged with Arts Festival Limited.

Over the years, it has struggled to find an identity and niche in an increasingly crowded and sophisticated arts landscape.

The merger with the arts festival

came on the heels of a report by a 17-member committee convened by the National Arts Council (NAC) to review directions for the then-floundering festival.

It was meant to offer the festival more independence to programme and a base of operations in the heart of the city to engage audiences all year round.

The implementation of this vision has been patchy, interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the unexpected death in 2022 of executive director Tan Boon Hui only a year after he was appointed.

Funding is a central concern. According to the AHG’s annual report for the financial year 2023/24, its arts programming budget dipped from \$6.2 million from the previous financial year to \$4.26 million. This amount covers not just the tentpole festivals, but also all other venue programmes, such as the Aliwal Urban Arts Festival, SingLit-centred Verse and Goodman Open House.

Before the merger, the arts festival’s budget hovered around the \$8 million mark. The inaugural Sifa organised by AHL received \$6.4 million in government funding and about \$1.6 million in private sponsorship.

Ms Tan says the current arts programming budget “is direct programming costs and does not take into account manpower and other costs”.

The group’s programming costs have held steady at around \$4 mil-

lion for several years, but FY2022/23 saw a jump to \$6.2 million because of a busted budget.

AHG’s overall expenses totalled \$35.63 million for FY2023/24, with headcount (\$12.4 million) and building upkeep (\$8 million) taking the biggest bites of the pie.

The report also recorded marketing and publicity expenses totalling \$2.06 million – a dip from FY2022/23’s \$2.8 million, but nonetheless substantial when compared with the arts programming budget.

Ms Tan says publicity expenses included in-kind sponsorship from outdoor advertising company JCDecaux, which bumped up the numbers.

The 59-year-old adds that AHG is committed to increasing the budget for arts programming and cutting marketing expenses.

“It’s very clear in what we do – programmes and venues. Corporate function is always as a support to what we do as core business. So, that’s why we are directing budgets to both programmes and to upkeep our buildings – that’s actually expensive.”

The group’s rental income received an almost \$600,000 boost, from \$1.5 million in FY2022/23 to \$2.1 million in FY2023/24 from 13 commercial tenants in its venues.

But this is insufficient to fund all that AHG wants to do.

There is now a two-man fund-raising team. It has found a sponsor to support AHG’s new Next



Executive director Sharon Tan says the Arts House Group is committed to increasing the budget for arts programming and cutting marketing expenses. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

Stage programme, which commissions works in progress by artists and groups residing at its arts centres.

Another donor has stepped in to support the maintenance of the Victoria Clock Tower. Other initiatives include campaigns for donors to buy seats or naming rights at the venues.

After 1½ years at the helm, Ms Tan, whose arts administration career started at the Substation in the 1990s, says: “I realised that, putting all the pieces together, we have a chance to impact the artists or arts groups at different stages of their development.”

“So, an arts group starting out could be using our space at Goodman or Aliwal, where it does its conceptualisation and rehearsals. Then its first production could go to the Drama Centre. And as it matures, it gets commissioned for Sifa.”

Hence, initiatives such as the

Arts House Literary Fellowship programme, which dovetails with SWF, and the memorandum of understanding with the University of the Arts Singapore, which offers students intern opportunities in the arts industry.

Currently, AHG houses some 200 artists and groups in its three arts centres.

Ms Tan says: “The key for me for all the venues is that we keep it well, we increase utilisation, we make it affordable for the artists. More importantly, we manage it like a community, like a creative enclave.”

This is similar to Mr Tan’s vision of a programming through train for creatives housed at AHG and its potential to become a leading arts centre in the region.

But making Sifa world-class is going to take more than just funding. AHG is still subject to arts licensing, and the idea of exempting it has been floated since 2015.

Ms Tan says she is not pursuing an exemption because that would mean AHG would have to build in-house capability.

She is focused instead on the possibility of hiring associate artistic directors for Sifa, which will allow programmes to be commissioned further upstream.

One long-time complaint from Singapore artists is that festival works have too short an incubation period. Having a festival director come on board earlier will ease that hurdle and hopefully produce more thoughtful and rooted works for the festival.

AHG, despite being an arm’s length from NAC, is still accountable to its paymaster as a mostly publicly funded entity.

Ms Tan says: “Space is so important. It’s not just physical space, it’s metaphorical space. Space for creative expression is important. But it’s a negotiated space. That’s the reality.”