

Living Pictures: The largest-ever show of south-east Asian photography opens this week

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Covering images from the 19th century to today, National Gallery Singapore's extensive show illustrates how the region has shaped the global history of the medium

With more than 300 images by nearly 100 photographers, the largest-ever survey of south-east Asian photography is on show at the National Gallery Singapore. It attempts to place photography from and about the region in the compendiums of local art history, and in the history of photography at large.

“Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia considers the power of photography in affecting the way we see and approach the world, and its mobilisation in systems of knowledge and representation since it arrived in the region in the mid-19th century,” says curator Charmaine Toh. “This exhibition offers an additional strand in the tapestry that is the global history of photography.”



May in Manila/Hot Summer (After Balthus, Self-Portrait), 2019 © Wawi Navarroza. Courtesy of Michelangelo and Lourdes Samson Collection.

Moving into the fourth section of the show, *New Subjectivity* explores the disappearing distinction between photography and fine art, and the emergence of photographic discourse. Representing reality as truth is no longer photography's endeavour, instead, it facilitates different meanings and understandings of it, and even reflects on the artificiality of the medium.

Finally, *Contemporary Imaginations* immerses the visitor in the explosion of images in the present day. Referring to Walter Benjamin's question about whether art was photography, this section recognises the omnipresence of photography as 'a way of seeing, thinking, and interacting' with the world. Here we see the vibrant and multilayered tableaux of Filipina artist Wawi Navarroza [above], who combines self-portraiture with the assembly of disparate objects to reflect on self and place. Representation is a recurring theme in the section, which unavoidably engages with political matters. In Dinh Q Lê's *Crossing the Farther Shore*, for example, we see found photographs of anonymous South Vietnamese families taken before the country's reunification in 1975.

Spanning over a century, the exhibition offers a generous introduction to the history of photography in south-east Asia. From functioning a tool of imperialism, to depicting the harsh realities of war, and as a burgeoning medium of fine art. Most importantly, the exhibition delivers an important reminder of the role that photography has played in reclaiming the region's own cosmologies.

Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia is on show at the [National Gallery Singapore](#) from 02 December until 20 August 2023.