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A Stitch in Time

The newly formed Critical Craft Collective by artist-educators Adeline Kueh and Hazel Lim seeks to elevate craft into a fine art *By Durva Simone Bose*

Traditional textile crafts such as crocheting, knitting and embroidery have made a resurgence in the past two years. For artist Hazel Lim, making something with her hands was essential during the pandemic. “Crafting is cathartic,” she says, “Many of us use it as a coping mechanism to combat the isolation and the need to be productive.”

Lim, who is also the programme leader for the Bachelor of Fine Arts at Lasalle College of Arts, kept busy with various textile crafts as well as baking, sharing the same interests as fellow artist Adeline Kueh, a senior lecturer with Lasalle’s Master of Fine Arts programme. This was the spark that ignited the formation of the

Critical Craft Collective, created to give craft its own platform to flourish.

“We see craft as a fundamental building block for heritage across the region, including in Singapore—just look at the batik motifs on the Singapore Airlines uniforms—and it needs to be brought back to the foreground,” says Kueh, adding that “it’s not enough to just make crafts, whether using paper, textile or flour; [we need to also] reflect on why we make them.” The collective’s induction, she further shares, is part of the ongoing global movement to slow down—from our consumption of fast fashion to fast food—and reflect on our practices.

As part of that reflection, the collective draws attention to the labour and history behind the numerous crafts practised here. Its inaugural exhibition, *The Story of Calico*, for example, shed light on the humble origins of the unbleached, semi-processed cotton fabric used in garment manufacturing and reflected on its waning relevance due to technological innovations. Mounted during the Singapore Art Week this January, it presented a variety of crafts made from calico, alongside a rare sight at art exhibitions: a process table. Resting on it was everything from sewing tools to fabric cut-outs and works that failed to make the cut, giving visitors a glimpse of the intricacies behind crafting. “It’s not enough to celebrate the finished artwork; the process and labour behind it should also be acknowledged,” says Kueh on the inclusion of the elements.

The process table highlighted how labour intensive craft is, with a subtext that the labour of crafting is informal and often invisible. Lim also points out that “women are expected to carry out embroidery and textile mending as part of their domestic duties”, lending the



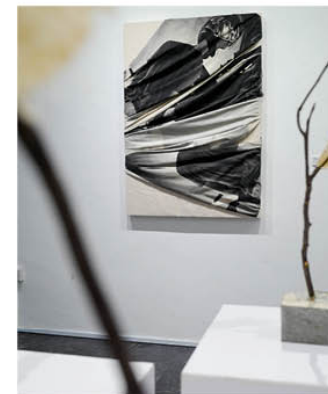
impression that crafts made by women are not art.

The pair thus felt that there is a need for an officiating body to elevate craft from the informal to the artisanal—a desire amplified by their own experiences as female artists. “Within [the art industry], certain perspectives and voices—often male—are championed over others, which intimidates those lacking the ‘legitimacy’ as an artist to step into the art ecosystem,” says Lim.

“The only way to encourage a thriving craft community in Singapore is to build it from the ground up,” adds Kueh, who shares that the pair are optimistic about the collective’s formation being the beginning of something great.

The collective’s goals, as part of a three-year plan, are simple: to spotlight the history of the local craft scene, to empower the craftspeople, and to induct a space for discourse and research. “We want to mobilise crafters from all walks of life to find a platform for their work and themselves within a craft council in Singapore,” shares Kueh. Lim adds that they also hope to create “multiple entry points for all to discover and pursue craft”.

As educators, Lim and Kueh already view art and craft through a critical lens, and they hope to bestow this discerning eye upon their students. This led to a collaboration with former students and young artists such as Homa Shojaie, Zulkhairi Zulkiflee and Alysha Rahmat Shah for *The Story*



Clockwise, from far left: Artist-educators Adeline Kueh (pictured left) and Hazel Lim, the founders of Critical Craft Collective; an abstract screen-printed calico by artist Zulkhairi Zulkiflee of the original *Malay Boy* painting by pioneer artist Cheong Soo Pieng; *Tradewinds*, a perpetual work in progress by Kueh, with cartography, origami, textiles and other crafts to depict her personal history. Opposite page: Lim’s *Notations* features stacked layers of odd-shaped calico fabric arranged to create shadow play



of *Calico*. “It’s this need to identify with traditions, or dispel cultural tropes, that binds young artists to age-old manual crafting techniques such as embroidery and silk screen printing,” shares Kueh.

Craft may symbolise rituals and community, but it is the art of crafting that is a medium for storytelling—a recurring theme in the duo’s individual artistic practice. Kueh’s genre of storytelling is about striking a balance between the highly critical and the conceptual. In her latest work *Tradewinds*, shown at *The Story of Calico*, she marries elements such as textile scraps and fabric buttons from her past exhibitions to recite the history of textile and craft trade routes.

The same goes for Lim, who favours taking things out of their

existing settings to redefine them in a new context, as evidenced in her work *Notations*, also shown at the same exhibition. Inspired by musical notes and fabric offcuts from her late mother’s sewing days, she uses stencils to cut out fabrics before sewing them together. The stencils have been a recurring element since she started pursuing art, almost like an intangible heirloom that follows her throughout her journey.

Both Lim and Kueh agree that it is a new dawn for craft. Just like how calico’s usage has changed with the digitisation of samples in the garment-making industry, the narrative of craft will change with generations to come. As Lim expounds, “craft is a lens we use to examine how our history weaves into our identities”.