

Bridging History and Visual Art: Translating Scholarly Work Into Visual Storytelling

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Abstract

A critical challenge in historical scholarship involves limited public engagement associated with traditional academic texts. Visual art offers a compelling alternative methodology for translating complex heritage narratives through a visual lexicon that fosters public accessibility and connection to the past. This paper details an interdisciplinary art education exhibition that re-contextualises historical scholarship through practice-based visual art. The project employs a Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology, involving the qualitative, documentary-based translation of Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819–2002*. Nine interpretive acrylic paintings utilise semiotics of place, employing symbolic colour palettes and structural forms derived from architectural heritage to articulate the river's diachronic and synchronic narratives. A key feature is the introduction of narrative personae, "Ah Huat" (past) and "Wei Wei" (present), establishing a visual dialogue across eras. Each artwork is supported by a synopsis and scholarly quotations, grounding the artistic interpretation in historical rigour. Sited from August 16 to September 29, 2025, at The Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery, the exhibition utilised its location to enhance experiential context, supported by a bumboat workshop and artist talk. Functioning as a pedagogical resource and a contribution to PaR, this study demonstrates the viability of interdisciplinary collaboration for revitalising academic content and establishing new modalities for historical discourse.

Keywords: interdisciplinary art education, historical visual storytelling, practice-based research, Singapore river history, academic knowledge translation

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Introduction

The core challenge in historical scholarship lies in the limited public engagement with traditional academic texts. As social media platforms—offering fragmented, immediate gratification—become primary sources of information, sustained engagement with long-form historical contexts has declined (Twenge et al., 2018). While academic reading demands careful reflection, the nature of digital content encourages skimming, which can impair deep, sustained reading (Carr, 2010).

These trends are highly relevant in Singapore. Research indicates that while teenagers read frequently, many do not often engage with newspapers (35%) or books (32%). Instead, 51% read via social media, with 76% using these platforms to discover new content (Lee, 2019). These shifts highlight the potential of visual art as a medium for public engagement. Digital platforms emphasise visual primacy and rapid decoding over sustained analysis (Ozturk & Ozturk, 2022). Visual art, capable of eliciting emotion and sustaining interest, aligns with these modern consumption habits (Villanueva et al., 2024). Given that preserving history is crucial for understanding societal roots, revitalising historical content is particularly vital in Singapore.

To address these challenges, this study adopts an interdisciplinary Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology to translate complex scholarship into visual form. It focuses on Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs's (2003) seminal work, *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. The study analyses how the artist-practitioner employed visual narratives to distil and interpret the scholarly text, culminating in the exhibition *Timeless Flows: The Evolution and Legacy of the Singapore River*. Functioning as both a pedagogical resource and a contribution to PaR, the project demonstrates the viability of visual art in creating new modalities for historical discourse.

The following section reviews theoretical and empirical literature on visual communication, public engagement with history, and visual cognition. This establishes a scholarly foundation for translating historical narratives into an evocative aesthetic medium.

Literature Review

The rise of social media and digital platforms has shifted conventional modes of reading manuscripts, literature, and books, making them increasingly remote in daily life. Comprehending the characteristics of these platforms is essential for understanding the digital behaviours that draw audiences to visual content. Russmann and Svensson (2017) observed that social media engages users through visually rich content that simulates real-life situations, motivating deeper exploration and interaction through comments and shares. Social media integrates multiple modalities—images, videos, hashtags, emoticons, and text—allowing users to consume and manipulate visual material before dissemination. They noted that visual imagery enhances comprehension by enabling faster processing and multiple interpretations.

Visual imagery is effective even in institutional contexts. Klein et al. (2020) found that approximately 70% of adults use social media, prompting health organisations to adopt visual media to convey key messages. Ma and Fan (2022) highlighted that visual imagery is fundamental to human communication. They reported that Instagram alone has over one billion users, with more than 500 million photographs uploaded daily.

Visual content inherently captures attention. Seo (2020) noted its eye-catching qualities, while Deubel and Schneider's (1996) eye-tracking studies confirmed that images draw attention more effectively than text. Visual stimuli engage brain areas responsible for comprehension and memory retention, influencing attitudes, decisions, and recall. Consequently, audiences are more likely to respond to visual imagery before reading the accompanying text.

This dominance of visual communication informs the use of visual narratives in exhibitions. Visual storytelling—composing images to convey meaning, emotion, and narrative—can translate complex textual history into forms that resonate with contemporary audiences. The exhibition *Timeless Flows* seeks to represent the lives of lightermen—labourers who navigate twakows along the Singapore River—capturing both the historical livelihood and the socio-economic significance.

Visual narratives engage viewers emotionally and cognitively, allowing interaction and memory recall. Hidayat (2018) emphasised that narrative structures in museums enable visitors to interpret and retell experiences, enhancing engagement. Similarly, Calvi et al. (2023) demonstrated that storytelling-based exhibition designs revitalise audience engagement and learning.

In line with these findings, the exhibition integrated a bumboat craft workshop and artist talk, featuring two visual characters, *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*, representing the historical and contemporary Singapore River. These strategies exemplify visual storytelling's power to transform research into experiential, participatory encounters, fostering connection, understanding, and memory. Building on these insights, the following section outlines how these principles informed the Practice-as-Research design of *Timeless Flows*.

Practice-as-Research Methodology

This study adopts Practice-as-Research (PaR), in which creative practice functions as a form of inquiry. The practice component involves nine acrylic paintings serving as visual narratives, based on Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. The paintings feature two characters—*Ah Huat*, representing the historical river, and *Wei Wei*, representing the contemporary river—conveying the river's transformation over time.

The research component encompasses analysing and reflecting on Dobbs's (2003) text to develop these characters, documenting how they were conceptualised and created as tools of visual storytelling. This process aims to evoke memory, foster appreciation, and encourage reflection, particularly through the accompanying bumboat craft workshop and artist talk. By integrating creative making with reflective analysis, PaR generates knowledge from the interplay between artistic practice and scholarly inquiry, demonstrating how visual storytelling can bridge historical research and audience engagement. Although "Practice" precedes "Research" in PaR, the research component takes precedence. The researcher must digest, analyse, and reflect upon Dobbs's (2003) text before translating it into visual practice. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) incorporated PaR in 1996, recognising that creative practice could hold equal value to conventional research outcomes (Elkin & Law, 1997).

For the nine acrylic paintings in *Timeless Flows*, the author's practice was guided by rigorous research. Documentary analysis, a qualitative method, was employed to study historical texts,

images, and other resources (Ahmed, 2010; Bohnsack, 2008; Iowa State University Library, n.d.). This ensured that the artworks were products of informed, reflective inquiry. The visual storytelling approach invites audiences to engage emotionally and cognitively, echoing the RAE's assertion that research can give rise to new discourse.

As Candy and Edmonds (2018) state, "PaR [Practice as Research] involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where ... a practice ... is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry." Here, the author's role as a visual artist embodies the practice component, while research—including analysis, reflection, and investigation—underpins the creative outputs. Through this process, Dobbs's (2003) historical account is translated into visual storytelling, inviting interpretation and engagement.

Gray and Malins (2004) note, "Practitioners learn by doing, we 'know' by doing, by experiencing. The research journey obliges us to make tacit knowledge explicit through reflective practice so that others may see our progress through the landscape." Throughout the project, the author engaged in continuous reflection to determine how best to translate Dobbs's (2003) text into visual narratives. The process also considered how visual images, informed by studies of social media platforms, could simulate experiences and elicit comparable responses from exhibition audiences.

The next section presents the research findings that guided the development of the visual storytelling. Drawing on insights from documentary analysis, reflective practice, and critical engagement with Dobbs's (2003) text, the author translated historical knowledge into visual narratives. This section examines how these findings informed the conceptualisation of *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei* and shaped the nine acrylic paintings, demonstrating how research and creative practice intersect to communicate historical narratives visually.

Research Findings

Visual narrative, or visual storytelling, was adopted as a medium to communicate the past and present of the Singapore River, based on Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. This approach was chosen because it engages audiences through visual imagery that evokes memory, reflection, and appreciation of the river's historical transformation. Through visual storytelling, viewers can juxtapose the river's past and present states, thereby deepening both their emotional and cognitive connection to its history. This idea was largely inspired by Dobbs's (2003) concern about whether younger generations could still relate to the river's historical significance. In his conclusion, he observed that the new millennium had redefined the river's socio-economic role. Once a bustling artery of trade, it has since been transformed into a leisure and tourism precinct—its old warehouses and godowns restored as cafés and boutiques while retaining their original architectural structures to preserve authenticity. However, Dobbs (2003) questioned whether these renovated and brightly painted buildings could still evoke an authentic sense of the river's historical identity. His concern reflects the shifting role of the Singapore River: from its former function as an entrepôt and economic lifeline powered by the labour of lightermen, to its present role as a site of tourism and recreation following the relocation of shipping activities to the Pasir Panjang Wharves. This shift signified not only an economic transition but also a symbolic one—from industrial vitality to cultural consumption.

Dobbs (2003) warned of the potential tension between new economic goals and heritage conservation, suggesting that it remains uncertain whether the Singapore River should be

remembered primarily as a historical, cultural, or tourist site. His concluding remark—“It remains to be seen, however, whether or not younger Singaporeans will find along the river a connection between the past and present”—deeply resonated with the present study. This reflection became the core motivation for visually interpreting Dobbs’s (2003) concerns, enabling audiences to perceive the continuity and transformation of the river across time through visual storytelling. To embody this concept, two characters—*Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*—were created for the exhibition *Timeless Flows: The Evolution and Legacy of the Singapore River*. *Ah Huat* represents the past, while *Wei Wei* embodies the present. Characters were chosen because, as Donovan (2018) noted, human cognition naturally responds to stories centred on the thoughts and feelings of characters.

Krieken et al. (2017) mentioned that storytelling has long been recognised as a primary mode through which people exchange information. They concluded that when characters are introduced into narratives, readers’ physical and psychological engagement intensifies, resulting in clearer neurocognitive responses. Although their study focused on linguistic narratives, the essential argument—that storytelling through characters is powerful and effective—applies equally to visual storytelling.

In visual art, the use of characters enhances narrative potency because visual imagery is often more immediately accessible to viewers than written text. Thus, the inclusion of characters such as *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei* renders the exhibition both relatable and compelling to audiences. According to StudySmarter (n.d.), visual storytelling, or narrative in art, conveys meaning through characters, settings, and events without reliance on written text. This mode of communication, used since ancient civilisations, has long served to share cultural myths, religious stories, and personal experiences—demonstrating its enduring capacity to help audiences comprehend stories visually. Moreover, by engaging in narrative art, audiences cultivate interpretive skills and a deeper appreciation of the meanings embedded within visual compositions.

The use of characters in this project also aligns with Dobbs’s (2003) historical focus on the lightermen—the workers who navigated the shallow waters of the old Singapore River in bumboats (*twakow*) to transfer goods between large vessels and the shore. His documentation of the lightermen’s labour provided the historical foundation for developing these visual characters, translating textual history into lived human experience within the visual narrative.

Documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) was used to extract relevant quotations and descriptions from Dobbs’s *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. This method highlighted key themes such as the lightermen’s activities, the landscape of the old Singapore River, and its transformation into the present-day river. These themes were then visually interpreted through the characters *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*. Each quotation provided historical grounding for the paintings while allowing space for new aesthetic and emotional interpretations.

On the back cover of his book, Dobbs (2003) stated that it “traces the history of the Singapore River and the people who made it their home and workplace.” Despite the pollution of the old river, it remained a vital lifeline for communities such as the coolies and tally clerks. The term *coolies* refers to the lightermen who worked along the river. The exhibition venue—the Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery—was deliberately chosen for its location along the Singapore River. This setting invited audiences to reconnect with the river’s history through personal memory and spatial experience.

Due to the gallery's limited size, two long and two short exhibition panels —approximately nine artworks were curated to fit cohesively within the space. The following quotations, extracted from Dobbs's (2003) seminal work, were selected and served as historical anchors for the artworks:

1. Dobbs (2003) states, "For many years after the establishment of the British Settlement in Singapore in 1819, to speak of Singapore was to speak of the river... Colourfully painted vessels called lighters, ranging in size from a few tonnes to more than 150 tonnes, crammed the confined waters of the river. They carried valuable trade goods from ships in the outer harbour to quays along the river, at times forming a virtual impenetrable blanket over its waters" (p. 3).
2. Dobbs (2003) states, "...Chinese who worked on lighters along the Singapore River—arduous toil was a daily reality. Forced to leave their villages and homelands because of grinding poverty and political turmoil, they arrived in Singapore to take any sort of job" (p. 63).
3. Dobbs (2003) states, "The principal task of lightermen was the transport of cargo between ships in the harbour and warehouses along the river. They were responsible for both the safety of their craft and the cargo it carried" (p. 64).
4. Dobbs (2003) states, "Lightermen got to know which itinerant hawkers and eating houses served the best food or drink and frequented these places between working hours... Perambulating hawkers serving a variety of noodle or rice dishes were found all along the river at any time of the day or night, catering for the manual workers in one of the busiest parts of the city" (p. 92).
5. Dobbs (2003) states, "Times quickly changed, and by the end of the decade, the PSA was handling most of the cargo moving through Singapore... There was little the lighterage industry could do to offset the impact of these dramatic changes in the ocean shipping industry" (p. 109).
6. Dobbs (2003) states, "The clean-up of the Singapore River and planned development along its banks has continued unabated since the removal of lighters and support industries in 1983... Renovated shophouses and godowns that once supported entrepôt-trading activities are once again coming to life. Now refurbished, they house cafés, bars, and restaurants" (p. 116).
7. Dobbs (2003) states, "The government has successfully achieved its goal of transforming the old, filthy Singapore River into a clean and pleasant environment. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether or not younger Singaporeans will find along the river a connection between the past and present" (p. 116).

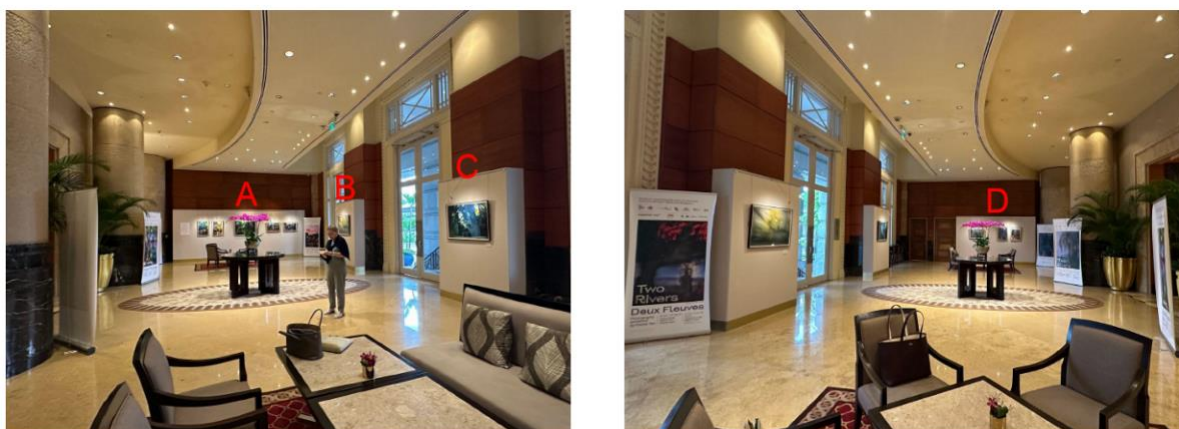
Together, these excerpts encapsulate the Singapore River's evolution from a centre of maritime trade to a revitalised cultural and leisure district. Through the visual characters *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*, these historical narratives were reimaged into contemporary visual form, allowing audiences to experience the coexistence of continuity and change. The paintings not only highlight the transformation of the river's physical and social landscape but also evoke emotional connections between the lived experiences of the lightermen and the present-day visitors of the riverfront. In doing so, the exhibition extends Dobbs's (2003) scholarship beyond textual history, offering a visual dialogue that bridges the past and present, and encouraging audiences to reflect on their own sense of place, memory, and heritage along the Singapore River.

Discussion/Analysis

The paintings were exhibited at The Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery, which comprises four white display panels, as illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 1). The curatorial design was deliberately structured to cultivate visual coherence and facilitate a progressive narrative flow, enabling viewers to experience the temporal and socio-spatial evolution of the Singapore River. Each panel was arranged to balance visual weight and rhythm, guiding the audience's gaze seamlessly across the works while preserving the integrity of the overarching narrative.

Figure 1

The Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery




As indicated in the diagram, the panels were labelled A, B, C, and D. Panel A displayed four paintings, each measuring 96 cm × 66 cm; Panel B featured two smaller works measuring 50 cm × 66 cm; Panel C presented a single painting of 96 cm × 66 cm; and Panel D exhibited two larger works, each measuring 107 cm × 81 cm. This calibrated configuration was conceived to sustain visual equilibrium and structural rhythm, allowing the viewer to transition between works naturally. Each of these works was executed in acrylic on canvas, ensuring a vibrant and durable finish across the entire series.

Each pair of paintings juxtaposed representations of the past and present, articulating the transformation of the Singapore River's physical, social, and economic landscape over time. Accompanying each painting was an A4-sized interpretive panel (Figure. 2, 3, 4, 5) comprising a thematic synopsis and an excerpt from Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. These textual elements functioned as historical anchors, situating each work within its scholarly context and intensifying the dialogue between visual representation and historiographic interpretation. The overall layout of the paintings is shown in Figure. 6, 7, 8, 9.

The gallery's minimalist architecture, defined by white walls and controlled lighting, further reinforced the exhibition's narrative intention. The unobtrusive environment heightened perceptual clarity, directing attention toward the dialogue between image and text and fostering a contemplative rhythm that guided viewers through the visual chronicle of the river's transformation.

Figure 2
A4-Size Explanatory Panel


TIMELESS FLOWS



Title: The River's Lifeline
Size: 96cm X 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2024
Synopsis:
 The painting portrays tightly packed rows of lighters along the old Singapore River, traditionally known as twakow and tongkang. The term twakow originates from the Hokkien dialect, while tongkang is derived from Malay. Both refer to the wooden cargo boats that were once a vital part of trade and transport along the river.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
 The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
 Page 3:
 "For many years after the establishment of the British Settlement in Singapore in 1819, to speak of Singapore was to speak of the river. It was the physical center of town and the great bulk of goods traded in the settlement were handled on its banks. Even as new port facilities at Keppel Harbour came into commission in the later years of the nineteenth century, the amount of trade goods that passed through the Singapore River continued to grow until at least the late 1950s. The waters of the river were at the heart of the island's trading activities. Colorfully painted vessels called lighters, ranging in size from a few tonnes to more than 150 tonnes, crisscrossed the confined waters of the river. They carried valuable trade goods from ships in the outer harbour to quays along the river, at times forming a virtual impenetrable blanket over its waters."


TIMELESS FLOWS



Title: Lighters Reborn: From Trade to Tourism
Size: 96cm X 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2024
Synopsis:
 Once used as cargo vessels along the old Singapore River, the lighters have since been transformed into tourist bumboats navigating the modern-day river. A key visual distinction lies in their safety tires—today's bumboats feature iconic orange tires with white markings, in contrast to the black rubber tires of the original lighters.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
 The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
 Page 123:
 "This sentiment was summed up in a letter to The Straits Times in 1983 entitled "soulless" where the writer, referring to the removal of lighters from the river, suggested that all that would be left for Singaporeans and visitors to look at were hotels, high-rise offices and shopping centres."


TIMELESS FLOWS



Title: Lighters Reborn: The Lighterman's Journey
Size: 96cm x 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025
Synopsis:
 Meet Ah Huan, a seasoned lighterman who left his village in China in search of a better life, fleeing poverty and political upheaval. He found his place along the old Singapore River—a vital artery of the island's early trade and transformation. In this painting, Ah Huan is seen guiding his cargo-laden lighter back toward the riverbank, having just transferred goods from a large ocean vessel anchored offshore. His vessel glides quietly past rows of tenements, warehouses, their lower floors abode with trade, while families dwell above, living side by side with the heartbeat of the river. Ah Huan is more than a labourer—he is a thread in the fabric of Singapore's maritime heritage, part of the living memory of a river that once bore the weight of a growing nation. Through his quiet journey, we glimpse a bygone era shaped by resilience, hard work, and life upon the water.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
 The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
 Page 45:
 "... Chinese who worked on lighters along the Singapore River and many toil was a daily reality. Forced to leave their villages and homelands because of grinding poverty and political turmoil, they arrived in Singapore to take any sort of job."
 Page 46:
 "The principal task of lightermen was the transport of cargo between ships in the harbour and warehouses along the river. They were responsible for both the safety of their craft and the cargo it carried."

TIMELESS FLOWS



Title: Lighters Reborn: A River's New Voyage
Size: 96cm X 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025
Synopsis:
 Meet Wei Wei, a young man aboard a touristic bumboat, gazing at the vibrant rows of restaurants lining the riverbank—once old shophouses and warehouses from the historic days of the Singapore River. Once a bustling hub of trade, the river has now been transformed into a scenic attraction, blending heritage with modern leisure.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
 The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
 "The row of shophouses, which were once occupied as warehouses, had been repurposed into restaurants and bars. Today, Boat Quay is one of the major nightlife spots in Singapore, frequented by the professionals that work in the Central Business District area, and tourists."
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Figure 3
A4-Size Explanatory Panel

TIMELESS FLOWS




Title: A Pause by the River
Size: 50cm X 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025

Synopsis:
Ah Huat sits by the river, eating a simple meal he bought from a nearby hawker. Shielded from the sun by his hat, he focuses intently on his food—each bite a source of strength for the demanding task ahead: hauling heavy cargo from the large ships to the waiting lighter.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
Page 92:
"Lightermen got to know which itinerant hawkers and eating houses served the best food or drink and frequented these places between working hours. They did not have to go very far to get a good meal. Perambulating hawkers serving a variety of noodle or rice dishes were found all along the river at any time of the day or night, catering for the manual workers in one of the busiest parts of the city."

TIMELESS FLOWS




Title: A Pause by the River
Size: 50cm X 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025

Synopsis:
In contrast to Ah Huat, who sits on a wooden stool eating a modest meal during his break from hauling cargo, Wei Wei relaxes comfortably with a hamburger in hand, surrounded by colourful rows of shophouses now transformed into trendy cafes and restaurants. These vibrant scenes have replaced the old warehouses and shophouses of the past. Wei Wei, a tourist, admires the modern landscape of the Singapore River, while Ah Huat once laboured along its bustling banks as a lighterman. Though both are captured in moments of eating, they represent vastly different roles and eras along the ever-evolving river.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
Page 116:
"The clean up of the Singapore River and planned development along its banks has continued unabated since the removal of lighters and support industries in 1983. Renovated shophouses and godowns that once supported entrepôt-trading activities are once again coming to life. Now refurbished, they house the cafes, bars, restaurants..."

Figure 4
A4-Size Explanatory Panel

TIMELESS FLOWS



Title: Sunset
Size: 96cm X 66cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025

Synopsis:
With the government's sweeping cleanup of the old Singapore River and the rise of PSA as the hub for cargo operations, the lighterage industry faded into history. The remaining lighters were relocated to Paik Panjang Wharf, marking the end of an era. Ah Huat, once a proud lighterman, now faces the quiet uncertainty of change. He removes his hat in a gesture of respect and resignation—a silent farewell to the world he once knew. Behind him, a wall of vibrant containers and towering cranes looms like a barrier to the past, symbolizing both progress and the daunting unknown that lies ahead.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
Page 108-110:
"Times quickly changed, and by the end of the decade the PSA was handling most of the cargo moving through Singapore. Throughout the 1970s there had been unprecedented development of the port authority's facilities. The port of Singapore was fast becoming one of the busiest and most modern harbours in the world. Technological change in cargo handling, especially container shipping, played a major role in this rapid development and transformation... There was little the lighterage industry could do to offset the impact of these dramatic changes in the ocean shipping industry."

Figure 5
A4-Size Explanatory Panel

TIMELESS FLOWS



Title: The Heartbeat of Old Singapore
Size: 107cm X 81cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025

Synopsis:
Ah Huat chats with his friend, a rickshaw coolie, their voices mingling with the hum of the bustling riverfront. A Samsui woman strides with quiet determination toward a shophouse under renovation, while nearby, an amah gently holds the hand of her wealthy towkay's child, guiding her home. This fleeting moment weaves together the lives of the unsung heroes who quietly sustained the heartbeat of old Singapore's economy.

Ref:
<https://www.nhs.gov.uk/news/article-detail/ContentId=22c8b6c2-770e-453e-a34d-9c2b0e0284c3>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-20170830>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lighterman_in_Singapore
<https://hhfhsia.nhs.uk/our-services/316586-31662-2017/Heritage-of-labour/>

TIMELESS FLOWS



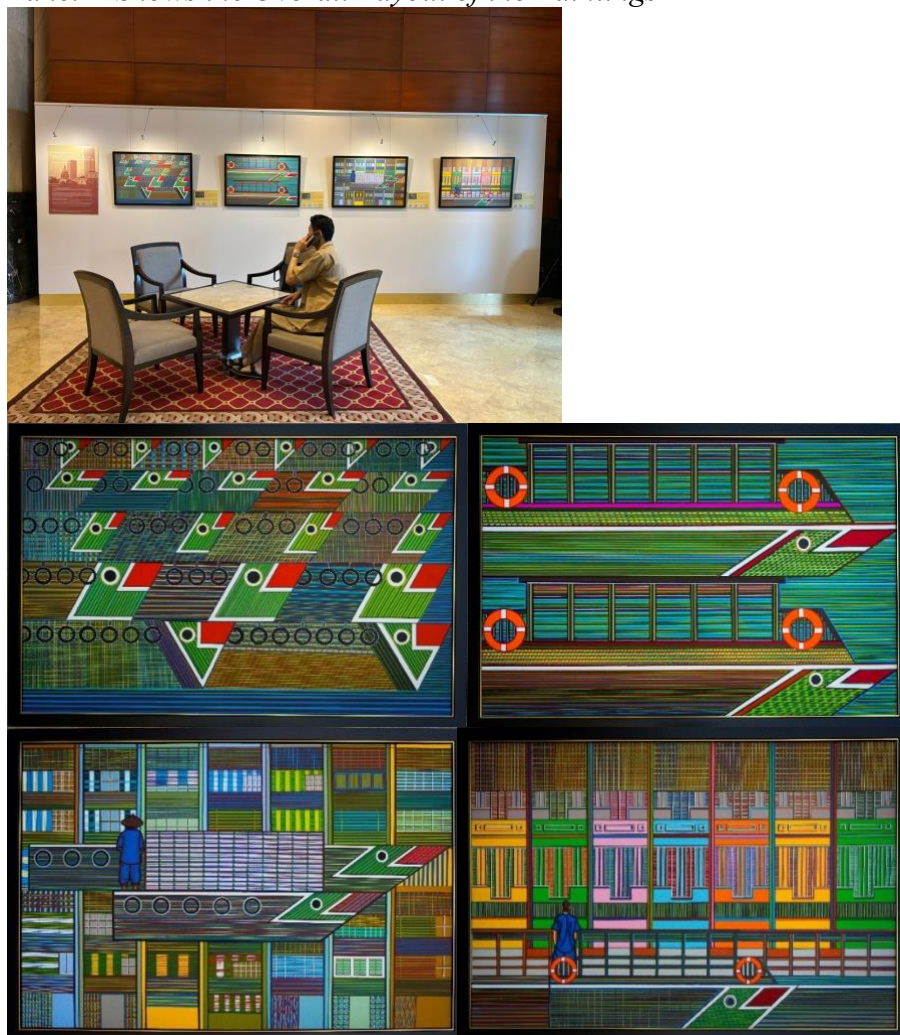
Title: New Millennium
Size: 81cmX107cm
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Year: 2025

Synopsis:
The historic riverscape of old Singapore gracefully yields to the dawn of a new era—the rise of a knowledge economy. Wei Wei and his wife, embodying this hopeful future, walk steadily toward the promise of progress. By their side, the domestic helper carries their daughter, a quiet testament to the vital role of foreign workers in nurturing this new millennium. Towering modern buildings of banking and commerce stand as a backdrop, symbolizing the pillars that sustain Singapore's transformation into a vibrant, knowledge-driven society.

Quotation from the book by Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs.
The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819-2002
Page 116:
"The various urban development and renovation projects along the river reflect the Singapore government's vision of the city-state, as a "tropical city of excellence", a "gracious" global city based on a knowledge economy."

Figure 6

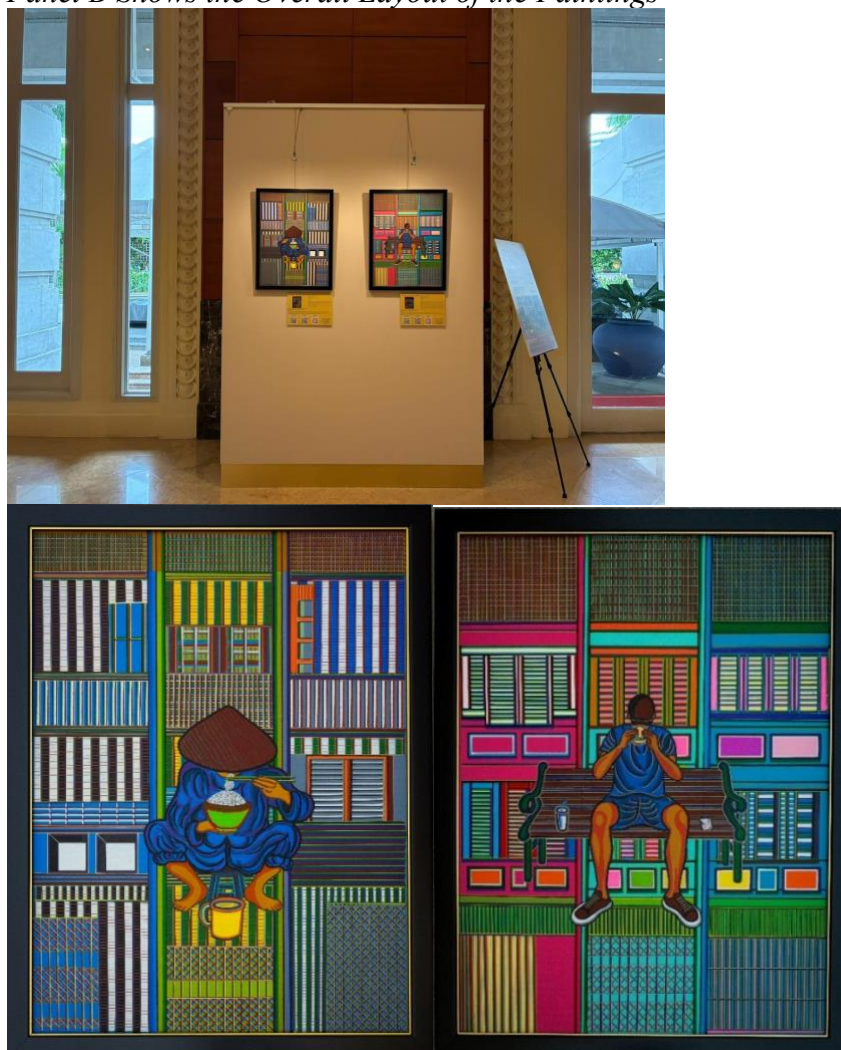
Panel A Shows the Overall Layout of the Paintings



On the top left, the painting titled “The River’s Lifeline” captures a perspective of the past; conversely, the piece on the top right, titled “Lighters Reborn: From Trade to Tourism”, reflects the present day. The painting on the bottom left, “The Lighterman’s Journey,” captures the past as Ah Huat guides his goods-filled boat toward the river’s warehouses. In contrast, the piece on the bottom right, “A River’s New Voyage,” shows Wei Wei in the present day, enjoying a scenic tour on a bumboat that has evolved from a vessel of trade into one of tourism.

Panel A initiates the visual narrative through four paintings. The first pair juxtaposes the congested, bumboat-filled river of the past against its transformed state as a modern tourist hub. The second pair features “Ah Huat” navigating goods toward historical warehouses and shophouses, illustrating the logistical constraints of the old riverfront. Its companion piece shifts to the present, depicting “Wei Wei” aboard a tourist bumboat admiring the renovated landscape of cafes and commercial premises that now occupy former godowns, highlighting the river’s evolving socio-spatial dynamics.

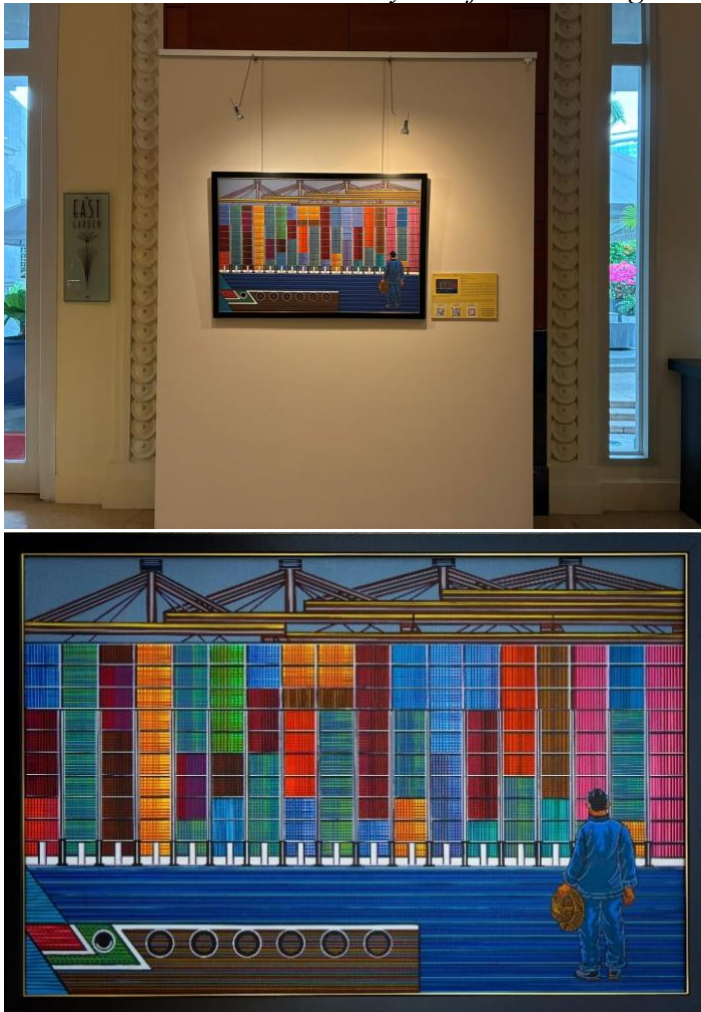
Figure 7
Panel B Shows the Overall Layout of the Paintings



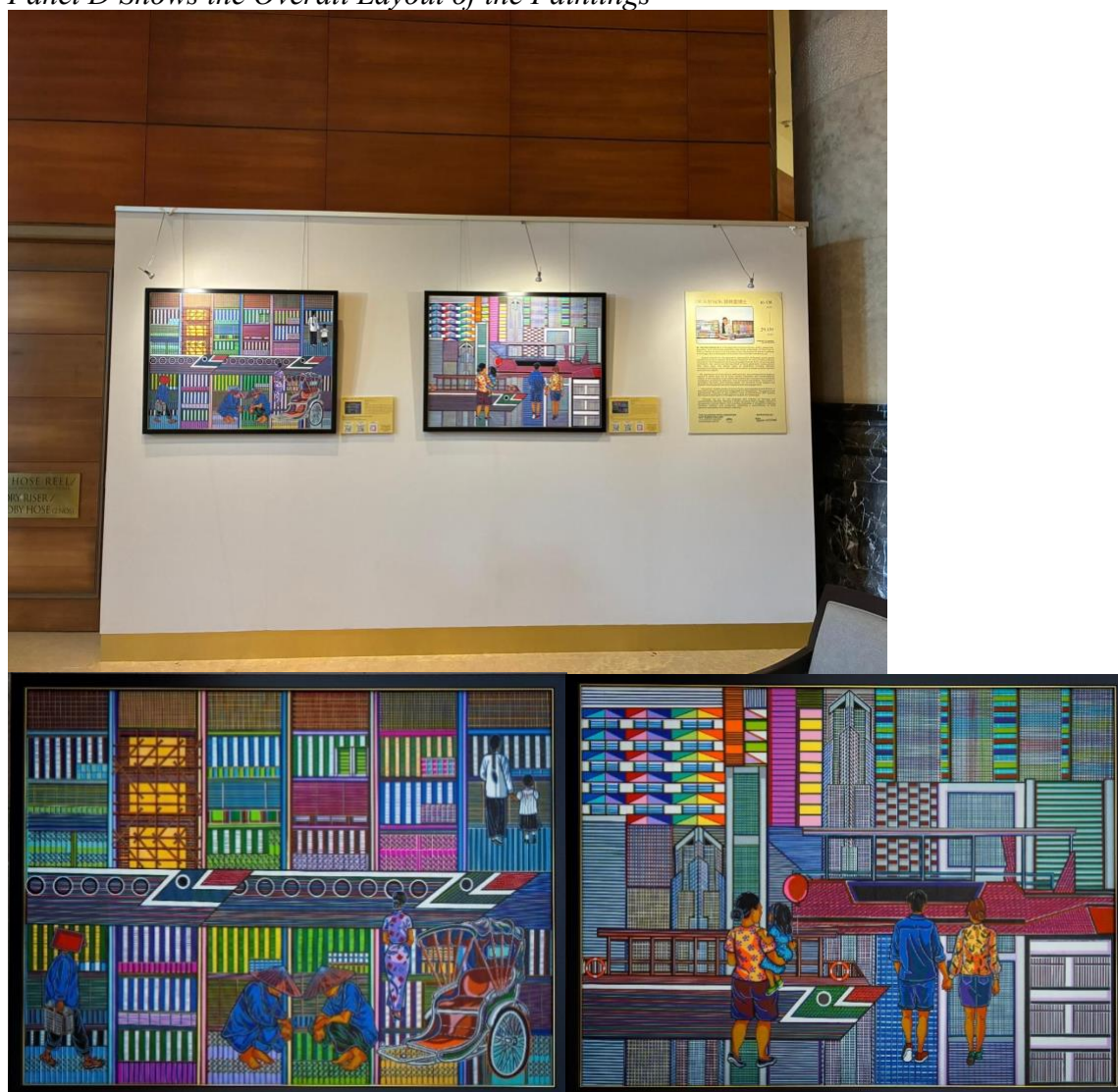
Panel B continues the narrative through two smaller paintings. Although both are titled “A Pause by the River,” the work on the left depicts Ah Huat seated on a low wooden stool, taking a modest meal of rice and black sauce. This scene reflects the economic hardships of lightermen who endured low wages and physically demanding labour. In contrast, the counterpart shows Wei Wei seated on a bench enjoying a burger, underscoring the leisure and comfort of the contemporary riverfront. This juxtaposition emphasises the shift from the labour-intensive lives of the past to the recreational, commercialised present.

Figure 8

Panel C Shows the Overall Layout of the Painting



Panel C featured a single painting, titled “Sunset,” that encapsulates the transition from the traditional lighterage industry to mechanised logistics at Pasir Panjang Wharves. Ah Huat is depicted lowering his straw hat, a symbolic gesture marking both the end of the day and the conclusion of his career as a lighterman. In the foreground, a large vessel loaded with colourful containers and mechanised equipment visually overshadows the smaller bumboat, highlighting the redundancy of traditional vessels and the efficiency of modern logistics.

Figure 9*Panel D Shows the Overall Layout of the Paintings*

The first work on the left, titled “The Heartbeat of Old Singapore,” depicts Ah Huat in conversation with a rickshaw coolie, situating the scene within the communal networks of the historical working class. The composition also features a Samsui woman in her iconic red headdress and a Majie (domestic servant) escorting a young girl home. Behind them, shophouses with ground-floor warehouses and upper-level residences reinforce the socio-economic stratification of the era. Its companion piece, “New Millennium,” reflects the contemporary riverfront, showing Wei Wei and his wife admiring a skyline dominated by commercial skyscrapers. The inclusion of a household helper carrying their daughter illustrates the continuity of domestic labour within the modern family structure. Together, these works frame a comprehensive temporal arc, juxtaposing the intimate labour practices of the past with the leisure and urbanisation of the present.

All the paintings incorporated montages of shophouses and warehouses, with Ah Huat representing the past and Wei Wei the present. Colour palettes referencing old shophouses and bumboats were used to evoke collective memory and sensory recall. Symbolic elements, such as the fisheye and mouth of the bumboat, signified navigational guidance and protection for lightermen. Each work, paired with A4 explanatory notes and relevant quotations, enabled

audiences to navigate the paintings and interpret historical developments along the Singapore River.

Utilising visual storytelling through Ah Huat and Wei Wei drew audiences into both historical and contemporary dimensions of the river, evoking emotional and cognitive responses. This aligns with Dobbs's (2003) documentation of the river's evolution as a site of human endeavour and transformation. The characters activated empathy and recognition, supporting claims that narrative figures facilitate deeper engagement with complex histories (Bruner, 1990).

The visual compositions employed montages of architecture, bumboats, and characters to communicate meanings beyond text (Arnheim, 1974; Eisner, 2002). Colour and design were intended to trigger sensory recall and collective memory (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007). The sequencing of paired paintings reinforced temporal transformation, while explanatory notes integrated textual literacy, providing cognitive scaffolding for audiences (Fisher et al., 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Ritchhart, 2007). Audiences were encouraged to engage visually rather than solely through text. This participatory approach transformed viewers into active interpreters, aligning with Dewey's (1934) principle of art as experience and Sullivan's (2010) articulation of PaR as a dialogic knowledge process. By translating Dobbs's (2003) historiographical insights into visual and narrative formats, the exhibition bridged the gap between scholarship and public understanding (Leavy, 2015; McNiff, 2018).

The exhibition featured interactive elements, including a bumboat craft workshop and an artist talk (Figure 10). Participants folded origami bumboats while the author shared memories and engaged audiences in discussion. This fostered intergenerational connections and highlighted the pedagogical and reflective purpose of the exhibition.

Figure 10

Bumboat Craft Workshop/Artist Talk



Conclusion

This Practice-as-Research (PaR) project aimed to integrate scholarly inquiry into the author's creative practice as a visual artist. By examining Stephen Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*, the researcher used documentary analysis—a qualitative method for interpreting historical themes—to inform the development of nine visual artworks. These were exhibited at The Fullerton East Garden Gallery from 16 August to 29 September 2025. The central objective was to communicate the intertwined histories of the Singapore River through visual storytelling, using two narrative characters, Ah Huat and Wei Wei, as interpretive conduits of Dobbs's (2003) scholarship.

This exhibition strategy responded to a contemporary media environment where digital saturation often diminishes sustained engagement with long-form historical texts. Against this backdrop, painting served as a narrative device to reintroduce contemplative engagement, transforming textual accounts into visual experiences that invite emotional connection. The introduction of Ah Huat and Wei Wei was a deliberate strategy to anchor viewer attention through relatable figures, enhancing cognitive accessibility to complex themes. Situated within contrasting settings of old shophouses, godowns, and modern redevelopments, these paintings visualised the river's transformation from a site of labour and trade to one of leisure and tourism.

For the artist-researcher, this process underscored the PaR practitioner's responsibility to balance creative interpretation with historical authenticity. Rigorous qualitative analysis ensured the paintings preserved the integrity of Dobbs's (2003) scholarship while rearticulating it through an aesthetic medium. This approach reaffirmed the ethical dimension of practice-based interpretation, in which the artist avoids distorting the original meanings. Consequently, the nine paintings stand as "visual artefacts" that demonstrate how artistic practice operates as a legitimate mode of knowledge production.

Audience engagement during the exhibition was highly encouraging. Guests included Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs, alongside artists and friends. Many noted that the paintings' colours and compositions evoked nostalgia, while the inclusion of Ah Huat and Wei Wei made the historical narrative accessible. An A0-sized introductory poster and A4-sized explanatory notes guided viewers through the exhibition's focus, helping them understand that the artworks were inspired by scholarly text.

The paintings were displayed in a logical sequence depicting the landscape of the old and new Singapore River. For instance, lightermen labouring along the river were juxtaposed with modern tourists; a coolie eating by the riverside contrasted with a visitor on a park bench; and the decline of the lighterage industry was shown alongside urban renewal. Historical people such as Samsui women and rickshaw pullers were represented alongside contemporary commercialised riverfronts. This sequencing allowed viewers to experience a narrative progression, with many remarking that the visual imagery prompted them to read the accompanying texts for deeper historical understanding.

Associate Professor Dobbs, the guest of honour, noted that the paintings clearly reflected the historical contexts of his work, describing the exhibition as powerful and engaging. The impact was further extended through bumboat craft workshops and artist talks. Participants remarked that the storytelling captured the essence of the river's evolution and expanded their appreciation of how historical texts can be reinterpreted through painting.

Certain limitations must be acknowledged. Feedback was primarily gathered during the opening and workshops, as the artist could not be present throughout the entire duration. This may have introduced bias, as many respondents were acquaintances. However, several artworks were purchased by unknown visitors who provided unsolicited praise regarding the visual storytelling. Spatial constraints also limited the scale and quantity of works; smaller paintings would have reduced visual impact, while larger ones would have restricted the number of historical themes depicted.

Looking forward, the impact of digital disruption has motivated the artist to consider expanding into digital storytelling to engage broader audiences, particularly younger

generations. Ultimately, this project successfully bridged the gap between historical scholarship and public engagement. The creative and historical dimensions of this work affirm how Practice-as-Research can transform academic history into accessible, evocative, and enduring forms of visual knowledge.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author confirms that the intellectual content, original ideas, and scholarly analysis presented in this work are entirely their own. Generative AI was not used to create or influence the research. AI-based tools (Grammarly/Gemini Google) were utilised strictly for linguistic polishing, grammatical refinement, and word-count reduction of the author's original draft.

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