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# Emi Eu: Everything in Life is Art

Text by Angela Low; Photography by Eumund Tan



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*What Makes Art, Art is a series that delves into some of art's biggest questions and picks the minds of various individuals from the art industry to uncover diverse perspectives that stimulate, inspire, confront and even clash.*

Under the pouring rain, I watch the clock intently as my cab zips towards Robertson Quay. As the seconds slip away from me at record speed, the car makes a wrong turn and throws me into an internal fit of hysteria. Pushing through the glass doors finally at a tardy five minutes past the appointment time, I ready myself for a look of grim disapproval from my interviewee in her signature all-black ensemble.

If you've never met Emi Eu, the director of Singapore Tyler Print Institute (<https://www.stpi.com.sg/>) (STPI) before, you'd think she looks like some uppity fine arts connoisseur with an austere pixie cut that says she suffers no fools and doesn't waste time on frivolity. As it turns out, however, the unexpectedly approachable boss lady is more of an everywoman than anything.

Despite fronting a contemporary art gallery and workshop that specialises in print and paper, she doesn't pigeonhole herself into any single form of art. Emi embraces all, even performative, literary and sonic art. "Life is art. Even finance is a form of art," says the South Korean-born doyenne and erstwhile piano player, whose taste runs the entire gamut from Mozart to Michael Jackson. "Art should not be separated from everything else."

As we converse, I begin to see what she means when she says everything in life can be seen as an art. During our hour-long interview, Emi enunciates each word with a gentle elegance, leaving an echo at the end of each sentence that hangs in the air before evaporating like soft mist. It's like having a conversation with a romantic realist painting—precise, yet graceful without calling too much attention to itself. At the photo shoot, on the flip side, she transforms into a playful piece of pop art, jauntily pulling faces at her colleague in between takes.

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“This is the 500th year anniversary of the death of Leonardo Da Vinci, who was *the* proponent of the universal man, and the universal man is someone who embraces everything. He never separated one thing from another,” shares the former SMU professor. “I hope that art will help us to embrace and understand everything.” There’d be no distinction between what’s highbrow and lowbrow, what’s art and what’s not.

### **High Net Worth: What was the first art piece that you remember falling head over heels for?**

*Emi Eu:* My mom is a textile scholar and an embroidery artist, so we had quite a lot of artworks around in the house. The very first artwork that I was obsessed with was by Édouard Manet. I think it was the portrait of a girl at the Folies-Bergère. I was absolutely in love with it. I even tried to copy it on canvas. It was just really captivating.

### **Do you think that art has changed you as a person?**

Art definitely contributes to who I am. It’s a part of me. I’m not sure if it has changed me. I don’t know if it’s an instrument that’s able to influence you to change, but it’s definitely an element that can contribute to your evolving personality or character.

### **Has it contributed to your evolution as a person?**

I think so. I also love classical music.

### **You used to play classical piano.**

Yes, but I don’t have time for it anymore. Many people practise playing the piano, but I do have a special liking towards it. It’s now become a very defining part of my life. I think life is art. Even finance is a form of art. Economists are very observant. They look at numbers, but the numbers are produced by the activities of people. I’ve come across a lot of mathematicians who play amazing piano because classical piano music has a lot to do with the tempo, and tempo is based on all different types of speeds—2/4, 4/4. It’s very mathematical.

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It's just the way we use our brains. I mean, there's only one brain. It's not sectioned as if one part's for finance, and another part's for music. [laughs] We're using the same brain, the same nerve. We're one person. I'm really bad at finance though. I can't do arithmetic well, but I do see finance as an art of numbers.

**That's an interesting way to look at things.**

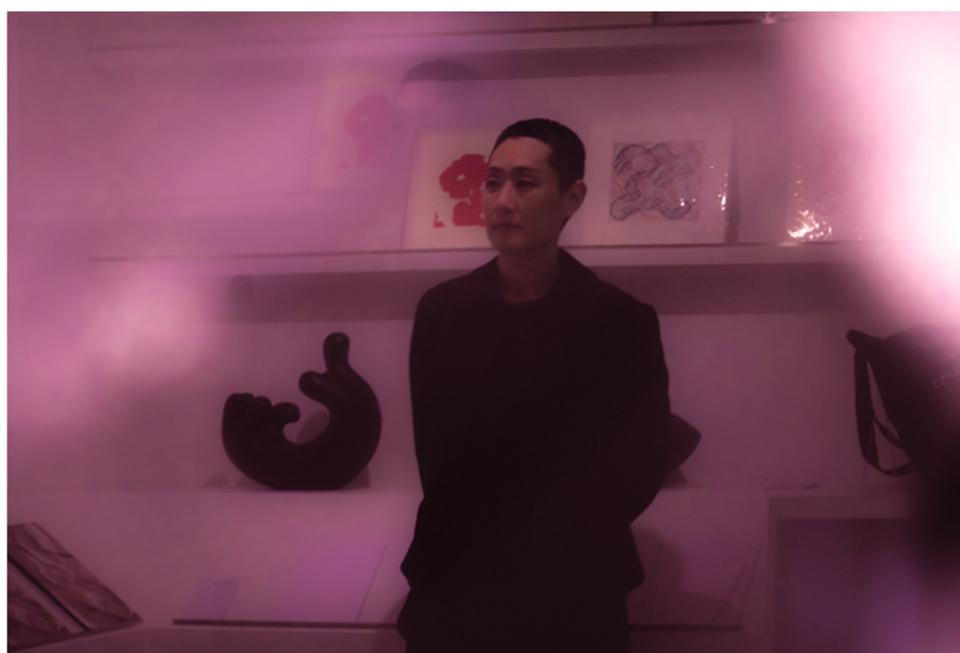
Yeah. Scientists are artists too.

**To you, everything is art.**

Yes, in some form or another. Anything that uses brain power to create. Of course, in science, it's more theory-based. They need to prove it. Art can be very abstract. It cannot be proven, but the basis in general, for me, is really about how you use your brain to create something. It's like problem-solving.

**Do you consider this interview an art form then?**

Yes, it's part of our daily lives. It's just how we want to conduct an interview. When you say it's kind of an art form, it's a generalisation. We have to be specific about it. What I'd like to say is that art should not be separated from everything else. The whole history of civilisation is visually recorded. People used to make vessels, instruments and kitchenware. All these things were created by people for a purpose.



(<http://www.hnworth.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Emi-EU-Art-1.jpg>)

**What is it about art that fascinates you most?**

The artist. They think about things that normal people like me don't think about. They produce art with their thoughts in such clever, elegant, beautiful, articulate

ways. I appreciate that.

**What goes through your mind when you see a new contemporary painting?**

I don't understand a lot of them because the vocabulary is not as prevalent. I think I go by instinct. If there's something there, I'll learn more about the artist. If not, I'll dismiss it. But I must say it's also about personal taste. Over the years, you also start to decipher the art. You're no longer just looking at it. That's what it's like for Asian art, especially Chinese calligraphy scrolls. That's why Chinese calligraphy is the highest form of art. It starts with writing, but when they write with ink, with the brush on paper and silk, you can decipher the person behind the painting, and understand what the artist was thinking.

I visit a lot of museums that have old art, old masters from both the East and West continents because we don't have them here. It's a learning process. I just keep looking and trying to understand. I still do this all the time because you can never stop learning about art. You can also expand into different things like pottery, aboriginal art, Indian-American art, Aztec art, anything that people have made with their hands.

**Do you think there are any distinct differences between Asian art and European art?**

Generally, yes. The process of creation is very different. The artists from our region that I've seen—and I don't mean the younger ones—create with their hands a lot more than the artists from the West. Contemporary art is really a western thing. They had an earlier head start than the artists from our region. A lot of Asian artists use materials that came from the West, but we don't see a lot of western artists making art with ink and paper, or doing a lot of craft work.

**Does the misconception of printmaking as a “lesser” art form still exist?**

Yes, oh my God. A curator from a very famous museum in New York told me that when someone calls to buy a poster, they still transfer the call to the drawings and prints department. I was like, “What? Are you kidding me? In New York?” [*laughs*] We still

face a lot of challenges. There was a whole industrial revolution in the 19th century that led to mass printing. That notion of printing kind of got mixed up with fine art printing.

### **How do you try to dispel such misconceptions?**

We're always organising educational programmes. That's our biggest mission.

**It's never easy in the art industry. It's also worrying to hear about how Art Stage was cancelled abruptly this year due to poor sales. The year before, it had the lowest number of participating galleries since its inception in 2011. The Affordable Art Fair has also recently scaled down. What's the condition of the local art scene currently? Do you think the Art Stage incident is reflective of a diminishing market?**

Here's the thing. Art fairs are a western notion, and it's a relatively recent phenomenon. Research showed that 10 years ago, there were about 20 art fairs. Now, there are more than 200. We have 52 weeks in a year, and an art fair normally goes from Wednesday to Sunday. If there are 200 art fairs, that means there are four art fairs a week at any time in the world. That's crazy. I think that art fair organisers have to be clear on its objective. It's also a business. You have to work hard to ensure the business continues. Now that there are so many more art fairs, it's become really competitive.

When it started, Art Stage was the only one here. Art Basel Hong Kong was not there yet. It was really good timing. There was a huge growth in the local market. But if you don't pay attention to how the market is changing, it gets hard. Ultimately, you need sellers and buyers, and a constant supply on both sides. For Art Stage, the quality of the show was going down because the galleries that were participating were starting not to come back. Art Stage was supposed to be the premiere contemporary art fair in Southeast Asia, featuring big galleries from all over the world.

If those galleries aren't there, you're not going to see artworks of a high calibre. Art Stage also expanded to Jakarta, which is pretty close to Singapore. This means there's no reason for people in Indonesia to come to Singapore to see the same show. I think it was a

strategic misstep. To be fair, the galleries that pay a lot of money to come for the art fair have to make the money back, and I think Singapore may not be a market that can digest such high-level art fairs. The market here may not be big or diverse enough. But we will see because Art SG is coming up in November. I hope that it works.

**What kind of art appeals to you? Is it a specific style, subject matter, the emotion an artwork conjures, a question it sparks?**

I'm most impressed with the finished artwork when I learn that the concept, process and execution find the perfect balance. It's like food. One of my favourite local dishes is *bak chor mee*. When I find that beautiful balance between the spiciness, the sourness, and the way it's coated with the noodles and soup, it's perfect. So it's about the process, and the end result that comes out of it. A good artist, in my opinion, of a high calibre with a solid foundation will produce art that's really great to look at, to hear, to understand, to appreciate.

I go to Venice every two years for the Biennale. When I'm there, I'll go to the Gallerie dell'Accademia, and there are a couple of paintings that I'll always want to see. Every time I look at the same painting, I'll always find something different.

**Do you have an example?**

There's a great painting by Titian of John the Baptist. I remember this one particular year I was looking at it, I realised that the way he painted the bare skin, especially the hands, is so life-like that you can almost see the veins. I thought, "How did he do that?" I asked people from the industry, restorers and art historians about it, and they told me that he always has to apply a minimum of 30 layers of paint. Yet, it's so fine. It's like a veil. Can you imagine what he has to do? The depth of his understanding of the material, his desire to do something like that, and his eye to achieve that are amazing.

**What kind of art do you not enjoy?**

I don't enjoy art that does not communicate the point clearly. I also compare the artmaking process, because I've been with STPI for so long and we're really directly involved in the creative process, with writing an essay.

Artists don't just come in and start creating. They do a lot of work when they're not physically working. They're researching, reading and thinking. When they create a new body of work, it's like writing an essay. What is a good essay? You're writing an article about me, right? How many times do you think you'll need to rewrite this article?

Even if you write everything in one sitting, you'll re-read and trim out things that you don't think are necessary. You'll ask yourself, "What is it that I want to say?" I find that the kind of art that needs to be worked on more is the kind that has too many points, too many things that it wants to say, and is not edited well. There's no specific focus or theme. I'm not a good writer. My husband is a writer. But I prefer very cleanly constructed types of writing. It has to be really succinct.

### **Like minimalist art?**

Minimalism doesn't just refer to visual minimalism. It's also in the concept. I found out that the works of minimalist artists are actually the opposite of minimalism. It only appears to be minimal. They've weeded out a lot to get to the essence of something, but that essence means so much more. You know Ad Reinhardt and his black painting? They call it a black painting, but he said it's not black. So what is black? It is basically when light absorbs every colour. It's not black. It's everything.

**That's fascinating, but a lot of people may look at his all-black canvases and think they're pointless and strange. What do you think is the purpose and role of art in society?**

I hope that through embracing art, any form of art, it'll help people become better-rounded. This is the 500th year anniversary of the death of Leonardo Da Vinci, who was *the* proponent of the universal man, and the universal man is someone who embraces everything. He never separated one thing from another. That's why he was a scientist, doctor, philosopher, etc. Being an artist was the least interesting thing for him, but he needed the money. I hope that art will help us to embrace and understand everything.

**Yet, not everyone is interested in engaging with art.**

It's the education system.

**What do you think can be done about this?**

There has to be an understanding that there should be a better integration of the humanities in the local school system. I think they're doing as much as they can within their constraints. It can't happen overnight. And it's not just about art. It's also about understanding literature and philosophy. This also applies to the teachers because it's the teachers who impart knowledge to the students.

**There's also a gap in the local curriculum when it comes to art history.**

Yeah. I used to be an adjunct faculty member at SMU. They wanted me to teach the art history of the East and West. It was an introductory class, but I positioned it as a civilisation class. The history of art goes in tandem with the progress of civilisation. You can't separate that. The emphasis in that class was to think about the time in which an art piece was created, and what was happening in the world concurrently.

I started teaching in 2001, and stopped last year because my job became too demanding. It's too bad because I loved teaching. When I teach, I learn a lot. I never actually studied art history myself. I was a business major. I learnt by going to museums and doing research on my own.

**Do you believe that one cannot be an artist without knowing the history and culture behind art?**

Anybody can be an artist. That's what Marcel Duchamp said. But then Leonardo Da Vinci also said you become a good artist when you're able to accurately portray, embrace or express the soul of the sitter in the portrait. You have to be able to paint the person's personality and character.

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