

CULTURE

# Singaporean artist Dawn Ng on how she captures time in her powerfully-conceptual art

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Luminary artist Dawn Ng has developed an avant-garde body of work spawning from the concept of time. On the cusp of a period of renewal, the creative shares just why her favourite element continues to capture her attention



Dawn Ng has a new obsession. “How many breaths on average do each of us have in a lifetime? What are the components of a single breath? Is breath, like a fingerprint, unique to each person?” Ng cuts herself off in an impassioned frenzy. “You know how everyone was so afraid of one another’s breath during the pandemic? Breath gives life, but breath then could take life away.”

The Singaporean artist’s curiosity about the subject comes as no surprise given her long-term creative focus on time, memory and the ephemeral. What could be more fleeting than breath? Still, true to Ng’s gently subversive approach to the topics she coaxes art out of, her central question

lies in the tactile potential of breath—how would you hold breath in a physical form?

Leave it to Ng to find out. In 2022, Ng presented her first solo show in London at the historic St Cyprian's Church in Marylebone. Titled *Into Air*, the exhibition was a mixed-medium display of the creation and disintegration of ice. More specifically, in an endeavour to tangibly capture the passage of time, Ng had painstakingly crafted nearly 150 large sculptural blocks of frozen pigment—documenting the process in the form of photographs, films and residue paintings.



Artist Dawn Ng pictured in her lofty studio. Photo: Sayher Heffernan

“The technicality of the blocks increased over time as my understanding of how different pigments interact with one another grew. If I were to boil cadmium red and pour it into a purple or blue dye, the heat would cause fractures in the ice and allow the red pigment to seep in, leading to something interesting—like blossoms of violet.”

“In the first block that I made, I had used probably a combination of 11 different pigments. By the time I got to 140-something, I was at about 33,” Ng laughs. That translates to 33 individual days of work for one block—each day spent freezing one pigmented layer of ice on top of another. With time as her muse, Ng has always been happy to disappear into her studio.

Having studied in New York and worked in cities like London and Paris, Ng returned to Singapore in 2012 and has since been building both her seminal body of work as well as a family. Her six-year-old daughter Ava is often a driving force behind the artistic voyages she embarks on. *Perfect Stranger*, an exhibition distilling daily exchanges with a stranger from a different part of the world over a year, was born out of a desire to leave a time capsule behind for Ava.

“I never meant for it to become a piece that I would show. What I really intended, right when I became pregnant, was to be able to give my daughter a book when she was in her 30s, capturing for her a soft tapestry of thoughts, memories and time. So often, our parents remain mysteries to us and I wanted to document some part of it for her. Eventually, the project turned into something bigger.”

Time, while often the subject of Ng’s projects, is also the ever-elusive commodity that enriches and grounds her work. Having more of it to devote to her craft is something the artist craves deeply. “I am an introvert at heart,” she ruminates. “My happiest place is being in the studio with a small team. It’s self-contained bliss.”

It is timely, then, that 2023 will be somewhat of a creative respite for Ng. After January, she’ll no longer present new shows for the rest of the year, and instead dive into studio work and research.

“I relish the structure and vigour that comes with showing up to the studio every day. Having the undisturbed quietness and centredness to go deep into a subject—to plunge into research and go down rabbit holes. It’s almost like having blinkers on, but dedicating time to exploring new ideas is fundamentally very nourishing.”



Ng's work centres on the ideas of time, memory and the ephemeral. Photo: Sayher Heffernan

Before she dips out of the limelight and into the studio, a new milestone awaits. Commissioned by UBS, an immersive, site-specific installation Ng had been working on was revealed at ART SG, the largest contemporary art fair in Southeast Asia. Having become a part of the UBS Art Collection—one of the most prominent corporate art collections in the world—Ng reflects: “It’s been a great honour. I respect both the integrity and intentionality behind the Collection.”

For this project, Ng lent her love of the ephemeral to a colossal 11m theatre tunnel leading to a mirror-reflected time-lapse film, documenting the 18-hour collapse of a monumental block of frozen pigment.

She describes the end result: “It’s hypnotic and meditative - seeking to pull the viewer out of a barrage of sensory stimuli into the presence of oneself and the now.” If that statement doesn’t sum up the fundamental ethos behind Ng’s practice, what possibly could?