

**singapore
biennale
2025**

**pure
intention**



ARTIST FOLIO

(For Educators)

Cui Jie

SECONDARY:

Visual Arts

Social Studies

THE ARTIST

- Cui Jie is an artist living and working in China. Her paintings weave together real and imagined elements to examine diverse perspectives across geopolitical landscapes.
 - Through meticulously rendered sculptural and architectural forms, her work traces the monumental changes of the modern world. She is best known for her evocative cityscapes and interiors.
 - While appearing delicate and calm, these paintings are emotionally charged studies of urban environments, informed by her personal history and references ranging from Bauhaus principles and Chinese propaganda art to Soviet aesthetics and Japanese Metabolism.
 - Her recent exhibitions include *Une nouvelle génération d'artistes Chine*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2024); *New Model Village*, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea (2022); and the 12th Taipei Biennial (2020).
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THE ARTWORK



Installation view of Cui Jie's *Thermal Landscapes* (2025), as part of Singapore Biennale 2025: *pure intention*. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Thermal Landscapes

2025

Acrylic and coloured pencil on canvas

Singapore Biennale 2025 Commission

THE ARTWORK

- The painting *Thermal Landscapes* takes inspiration from watchtowers built in Singapore. Unlike structures for surveillance or reconnaissance, these towers were symbols of modernity, offering vantage points to showcase the city's rapid urbanisation.
- Trained as a painter, the artist layers her pictorial surfaces with different painting mediums to convey a sense of temporality of urban planning, stacking histories within the canvas. Her practice often involves creating imagined hybrids of real architectural structures.
- The work explores the nuanced link between architectural forms and utopian aspiration. Buildings once hailed as landmarks of progress, e.g. as being the tallest or most distinctive in design, merge with forms reminiscent of mid-20th century kitsch ceramic figurines.
- This juxtaposition of monumental icons and sentimental, mass-produced objects invites reflection on the legacy of development, modernist architecture and the idea of "home."
- A recurring black-and-white pattern serves as a key visual motif.
- Visually, this pattern evokes multiple associations: the skeletal framework of a living creature, the structural core of a building or the underlying composition of the paintings themselves.
- This pattern's transition between urban grids and organic curves reflects the tension between human design and nature.
- By alluding to waterways and Wi-Fi signals, the work connects industrialisation and globalisation to the travel and communication systems that define our modern world.

THE ARTWORK

- Viewed as a whole, the hybrid architecture-sculpture symbols appear adrift in a vast ocean, connected by a network of “undersea cables” and power grids.
- This is a metaphor for the flow and cross-pollination of ideas and resources and how ideologies (like “progress” or “modernity”) circulate and permeate across cities and continents, transforming our landscape.
- Notice that plants figure in the painting as well, connected to the island buildings via the “undersea cables”. Cui Jie selected plants introduced into the region from the ballast soil of the 19th to 20th century merchant ships, and some of them can be traced back to earlier colonial times or even the Zheng He period.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The seven structures depicted in this painting were of actual buildings in different Southeast Asian cities. They were either the tallest buildings or had the most distinctive design. A few buildings from Singapore were featured, including the Hilton Singapore Orchard.
- Try to identify the following buildings in this painting:
 - Hilton Singapore Orchard, it was previously,
 - The Mandarin Singapore (1971)
 - Meritus Mandarin (2002)
 - Mandarin Orchard Singapore (2010)
 - Pan Pacific Hotel, Singapore
 - Millennium Residence, Bangkok
 - Millennium Hilton, Bangkok
 - Menara Takaful Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur
 - Wisma 46, Jakarta

DID YOU KNOW?

- Artists do not create in a vacuum; they are often inspired by the visual languages of different times, places, and ideas. Cui Jie builds her paintings by combining influences from various art and design movements. The ideologies listed below have influenced her work. Try to identify which style you can find in this painting.

- Bauhaus Principles: The foundational philosophy of the influential German school (1919–1933) championed the unity of art, craft and technology. It serves as the blueprint for rational, functional design, emphasising simplicity, utility, and a pursuit of beauty for the modern world.
- Chinese Propaganda Art: A powerful visual language developed in 20th century China, characterised by bold graphics, heroic figures and vibrant symbolism. This style harnessed art as a tool to communicate political ideals and mobilise public sentiment, creating a distinct aesthetic of persuasion.
- Soviet Aesthetics: This encompasses aesthetics that developed during the period of the Soviet Union's existence (1922–1991). This includes artistic movements, architectural styles and cultural trends that contribute to a distinct, shared Soviet cultural identity.
- Japanese Metabolism: A radical architectural movement of the 1960s that reimagined cities as organic, living entities. Proposing flexible, modular structures capable of growth and adaptation, Metabolism envisioned an architecture that evolves like a dynamic ecosystem.

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

PRE-VISIT:

- This artwork is inspired by watchtowers whose purpose has changed over time. List as many buildings as you can think of which have been repurposed. Why do you think their functions have changed?
- The title of this painting is *Thermal Landscapes*. What do you think “thermal” might refer to here? (e.g., heat, energy, mapping, change) Why do you think so?

DURING YOUR VISIT:

- The following questions can be used to spark student-led discussions and unlock layered meanings within the artwork:
 - What are the first three things you notice when you look at this painting?
 - How would you describe the artist’s use of colour, line and texture? What kind of feeling or mood do these choices create?
 - The painting mixes grand structures (towers) with domestic-scale, ordinary objects (figurines). What might this contrast suggest about how objects and our surrounding landscape capture memories?
 - The scene appears to float on a vast ocean. If the ocean symbolises time or global forces, what could the “undersea cables” connecting the structures represent?

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

- The artist believes the rapid transformation of a city shapes the people who live there. In what ways has your own city or environment influenced how you see, think and act?
 - In your view, what does the artist's specific choice of these elements say or reflect on the nature of development and change itself?
 - The size and composition of *Thermal Landscapes* adopt the format of murals. Why do you think this format was chosen? How does it reinforce the context and meanings underpinning the work?
- Thinking routines: Claim, Support, Question
 - 1. Make a claim
 - Based on your observation, what is one main idea or message you think this artwork is communicating? State your interpretation as a claim.
 - 2. Identify Support
 - What specific things do you see in the artwork that support your claim? Point to the visual evidence.
 - 3. Raise a question
 - What other questions can your interpretation lead to? What are you still wondering about?

POST VISIT:

- After the visit, connect the experience to bigger ideas and personal understanding.
 - What is one detail or feeling that stayed with you after looking at this artwork? Did anything surprise you about its actual scale or texture?
 - The artist blends different times, functions and architectural forms. Can you think of a place in your own community that holds similar layers of history and change?
 - If you were to create a companion artwork (a photo, poem, sound piece, or another painting) in response to *Thermal Landscapes*, what would it focus on and why?
 - Imagine you are an urban planner. What is one key insight or caution from this painting that you would apply to a future city project?
 - What new questions about cities, memory or art did this painting raise for you?
 - Underpinning *Thermal Landscapes* is the idea that urban forms are shaped by powerful forces or 'big ideas.' Which of these ideas (such as progress, sustainability or community) do you see most strongly at work in your own city or environment, and why?
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FIND OUT MORE:

ARTIST

- “Cui Jie: Thermal Landscapes,” in *Pilar Corrias*, Accessed 11 December 2025, <https://www.pilarcorrias.com/usr/library/documents/main/exhibitions/370/thermal-landscapes-by-gina-buenfeld-murley.pdf>.
- Hervé Lancelin, “Cui Jie: Critique of Chinese Modernity,” in *ArtCritic*, 6 September 2025, <https://www.artcritic.com/en/cui-jie-critique-of-chinese-modernity/>.
- Shen Qilan, “How I Became an Artist: Cui Jie,” in *Art Basel*, 8 January 2025, <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/how-i-became-an-artist-cui-jie?lang=en>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- RADII. “Cityscapes in Flux – The Art of Cui Jie.” YouTube video, 1:53. August 3, 2024. <https://youtu.be/M30n1jDzMW0?si=0idP-8KwnVHbwFk6>.
- Tanoto Art Foundation. “Singapore Biennale 2025 Artists Spotlight: Cui Jie & Ayesha Singh | TAF Conversation Series.” Youtube video, 59:47. November 12, 2025. https://youtu.be/8JBKPUZZtl4?si=hl4_P9wmasm8W0Bb.
- West Bund Art & Design. “Cui Jie | Studio Visit.” YouTube video, 2:24. June 18, 2024. https://youtu.be/ZyFK3UZC-24?si=SPP_I8z_XjRUFtev.

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