

HL 7110: MA module (Semester 2: 2025-2026)

Tutor: Professor Shirley Chew

Contemporary Literature and Culture: Representations of Art and the Artist

SHHK, Level 3 Meeting Room 3, Tuesdays 2.30-5.30

‘It is a curious fact that the word “contemporary” has come to replace the words “modern” and “postmodern” as a descriptor of the consequential art of our time. It is equally curious that the meaning of this word is at once obvious and opaque. The situation ... obliges us to ask the question “What is contemporary art?” but to do so with caution, and with no expectation that we arrive at a definitive answer.’ (Terry Smith, art historian)

‘Who shall unriddle the puzzle of the artist nature? Who understands that mingling of discipline and licence in which it stands so deeply rooted?’ (Thomas Mann, novelist)

‘What mattered was that they [the works of art] should bear some lineament or character,
Some affluence, if only half perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.’ (Wallace Stevens, poet)

Aims:

- 1 This module introduces students to a selection of literary texts in English published in the last fifty odd years and which have as their governing themes the role of the artist and the place of art in the present time.
- 2 It calls for close analyses of the formal experimentations in the selected texts which, while in their several ways can be dubbed modernist and/or postmodernist works, open up grounds for exploring ‘contemporary’ as a viable concept in current literary studies.
- 3 It introduces students to a number of key strands in aesthetics and in literary theory; and calls for critical negotiations between conceptualisations of language, history, society, culture from different schools of criticism and the selected literary texts in question.
- 4 It pays attention to the selected texts as interdisciplinary sites in which different narrative and cultural forms interrelate and interact -- history, photography, visual arts, philosophy, horticulture, pottery, music – to arrive at new and significant attempts at ‘sense making’ (Frank Kermode).

Reading-list: Primary texts (according to publication date)

* You need to have a copy of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* for the second week of seminars.

** A programme of seminars will be available at the first and introductory meeting on Tuesday 12 January 2026. A reading-list of secondary texts will be available after 12 January.

- 1 Randolph Stow, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 1965)
- 2 Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower* (London: Flamingo, 1995)
- 3 Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost* (London: Picador Books, 2000)
- 4 Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage Books, 2001)
- 5 Tan Twan Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012)

- 6 Olive Senior, *Gardening in the Tropics* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995)
- 7 Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012)
- 8 Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014)
- 9 Teju Cole, *Every Day is for the Thief* (London: Faber, 2014)
- 10 Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2015)
- 11 Anuradha Roy, *The Earthspinner* (London: Mountain Leopard Press, 2021)

Teaching method

3-hour Seminars comprising Lectures, Weekly Student Presentations, Discussions.

Assessment:

One assessed essay of **5,500 (min) to 6,000 (max)** words comparing at least two texts on the module.
