

## Art when it alteration finds

**Change, the possibility for societal or individual transformation, is the theme and Singapore the venue for an outpouring of contemporary works from across SEA**

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From now until February next year, Singapore has a lot more to offer than Orchard Road, the water-spouting Merlion and crunchy Garret popcorn. The fourth edition of the Singapore Biennale, arguably the biggest art festival in all of Southeast Asia, is now in top gear, and the Bras Basah and Bugis Street areas have been transformed into an artistic hub where visitors, local and foreign, can soak up art in all its possible incarnations.



Monuments For A Present Future by Kiri Dalena.

Echoing this year's theme, "If The World Changed", the featured works delve into every sense of the word "change" \_ the cultural, societal and political transformations that this region has experienced and continues to undergo. Eighty-two artists and 27 co-curators \_ mostly from Southeast Asia but with a handful from Japan and Europe \_ are contributing to the Biennale with their own interpretations of historic and contemporary issues ranging from environmental destruction to the failings of a national education system.

"The selection of Southeast Asian works in this Biennale shows how artists and curators seek to illuminate the different ways change is occurring in their societies," says Michelle Ho, a curator from the Singapore Art Museum. "Some show the different worlds, both micro

and macro, that inhabit the diverse region of Southeast Asia, as well as contested social realities and marginalised contexts that are not often visible in dominant narratives."

Highlights include deceptively simple paintings from a Singaporean artist with the nom de plume Speak Cryptic, whose work vividly conjures up the sense of an identity clash; a mixed-media installation by Filipino Kiri Dalena that seeks to convey the catastrophic state of politics in her country; and photographs from a site-specific installation by Lao artist Bounpaul Phothyzan, who is driven by environmental concerns.



Speak Cryptic's Fenomena .

Two other installations submitted for the Biennale, by Nguyen Thi Hoai Tho from Vietnam and Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang, make a strong case for the important role art can play in the development of a country or a community, not only acting as a medium to "document" or "reflect", but also as an effective tool to "resist" or "drive" those changes.

"Contemporary art is, in a sense, about contemporary life," says Joyce Toh, senior curator at the Singapore Art Museum. "A lot of the artworks are, in a way, trying to be the agent of that change as well. Different kinds of agencies ... sometimes it's to make the change, to meditate, to reflect, to express. And sometimes it's actually to make the change in the very process of making the work. That, for me, is really the power of contemporary art."

Thai artists have made quite a notable contribution to the exhibition as a whole. Embedded in miniscule resin beads, Nipan Oranniwesna's photographs invite one to contemplate the reconstruction of facts surrounding concepts like historical memory and the politics of identity. Prateep Suthathongthai's collage of photographs plays with the ideas of perceived reality and deception, while the sex-doll heroine in Boonsri Tangtrongsin's animated line drawing will surely put a smile on viewers' faces while at the same time questioning society's stereotypical attitudes.

A hand-written reproduction of an anthropological text by Dusdee Huntrakul raises questions about authorship, art-making and the presentation of academic findings as

subject matter for contemporary art. Also on display at the Biennale are installations by Nopchai Ungkavatanapong and Krit Ngamsom plus a collaborative project by Anon Pairot, Kamin Lertchaiprasert, Patama Roonrakwit, Samart Suwannarat and Zcongklod Bangyikhan (expect to read more about these artists' contributions in a future article in Life).

Given the scope of the Biennale, it is clear that Singapore wants to cement its status as the leading promoter of art in the region. Although quite a few works by Singaporean artists are included, Speak Cryptic's simple images in Chinese ink for a series called Fenomena are one of the most compelling contributions from the host country; these works resonate not only with the theme of the Biennale, but also with the issue of cultural identity, currently a hot topic for discussion in many parts of this region.

Fenomena consists of 12 pieces of cloth painted with figures dressed in traditional Malay garb which are absurdly juxtaposed with icons from Western popular culture. The familiar faces of Elvis Presley, Wonder Woman, Lady Gaga and Dr Spock from Star Trek stand out against this backdrop of clothing which identifies the ethnicity of the wearer in very clear terms. Speak Cryptic is clearly making a point about the identity crisis that affects not only Singaporeans but citizens of many other countries around the world. The decision to suspend these 12 painted tapestries above the ground floor of the National Library building, displaying them like so many flags, also creates an ironic twist since a flag normally conveys the sense of a shared identity or common allegiance.



The Loofah Trellis by Nguyen Thi Hoai Tho from Vietnam.

Malaysian artist Adrian Ho's focus is also about change, but in the context of anxiety about the state of the environment, and he expresses himself through the more conventional medium of oils on canvas. Two paintings of his are displayed on opposite walls at the Singapore Art Museum: Fruits Of Life depicts a rich, dense rainforest, while Full Production portrays a vast landscape of oil-palm trees in the middle of which there is a factory belching dark smoke which rises to obscure a section of the blue sky. It is a poignant reminder of the large-scale deforestation that occurred in Malaysia between 1995 and 2000 to clear land for the planting of oil-palms. The artists presents two views of reality and is clearly asking viewers if this is the price they are willing to pay for vegetable oil.

While Ho's work serves up a dilemma, Lao artist Bounpaul Phothyzan really puts viewers on the spot with a site-specific installation of his called We Live. His home province of Bolikhamxay is deluged with floods practically every year and the resulting soil erosion is having a devastating effect on local residents. Bounpaul's photographs show how he made use of driftwood collected around his village to create representations on site of three enormous fish skeletons ranging in length from 10 to 15m. While the skeleton in the middle

is complete, the ones on either side of it are missing their head and tail bones and are apparently meant to embody the ruinous state of nature and the ecosystem in that part of Laos. Meanwhile, Nge Lay has made extensive use of wooden sculpture to transport an exact replica of a classroom from the village of Thuye'dan, Myanmar, to a corner of the Singapore Art Museum. Entitled *The Sick Classroom*, it comprises representations of a teacher, students and the simple items of furniture found in a rural schoolroom. For this plaintive call for reforms in Myanmar's schools, Nge Lay collaborated with a local craftsman and used as models actual pupils from the first grade, since this is the first point of contact between children and the formal education system.

The most haunting work at the Biennale by far was created by Filipino artist Kiri Dalena, a mixture of video and sculptures used for an installation called *Monuments For A Present Future*. It was inspired by the Maguindanao massacre of 2009 during which 58 civilians were shot to death. The video footage shows relatives of the murdered people being allowed onto the site of the atrocity after police investigators had completed their work. Scattered all over the floor of the exhibition space are sculptures \_ fashioned from wood, clay and stone \_ of human body parts and of figures lying curled up in fear, their arms shielding their heads. The fact that all the materials used for the sculptures came from the actual site of the massacre makes this image all the more powerful and helps us to better relate the work to the violence perpetrated in similarly horrific incidents all over the world.

Echoing curator Michelle Ho's comments about how a lot of contemporary Southeast Asian art to emerge over the past two decades "is precisely characterised by artists trying to address the need for change in their respective societies", pieces by Vietnamese artist Nguyen Thi Hoai Tho and Khvay Samnang from Cambodia are both good examples of the way art has been employed in more recent times.

To protest chauvinistic social attitudes and the derogatory manner in which women are treated, Nguyen's *The Loofah Trellis* incorporates the female physique, in the form of elongated breasts, into an image of loofah gourds growing on trellises. (In Vietnamese street slang, the word for this type of gourd is also used to refer to the breasts of lactating mothers or older women.) A sarcastic comment on the extent to which women are objectified by patriarchal societies, this piece reflects the artist's refusal to accept a traditional definition of female identity. Khvay Samnang's work is another good example of how an artistic creation can also be an act of protest. The work he submitted for the Biennale, *Untitled*, is a five-channel video and sound installation which shows the artist pouring sand over his own head while standing chest-deep in various lakes in the Phnom Penh area.

This simple gesture was his reaction to the news that the Cambodian government has given permission for several lakes, which used to be open to the general public, to be filled in with sand so that the land can then be sold to private developers.

Other noteworthy exhibits at the Biennale include:

*Road To Nirvana* by Myanmar artist Po Po, a conceptual piece which used strings covered with phosphorescent paint and hypnotically tinkling bells to create the impression of going on a spiritual journey via meditation;

Anahata by Malaysian artist Kumari Nahappan, a mound of seeds combined with a sound installation to present the sense of possibility (every seed may grow into a tree)

Cosmology Of Life, by Indonesian artist Toni Kanwa, a thousand miniature talisman-like sculptures which explore the themes of nature, spirituality and the cosmos.

The Biennale continues until Feb 16 with exhibits on display at the Singapore Art Museum, SAM@8Q, the National Museum of Singapore, the Peranakan Museum, Fort Canning Park, the National Library, Singapore Management University, the Waterloo Centre and Our Museum@Taman Jurong.

Discounted tickets are available for students, senior citizens, tourists and permanent residents of Singapore while admission to some venues is free. Visit the Biennale website [www.singaporebiennale.org](http://www.singaporebiennale.org) for full details.



Adrian Ho's Full Production .



Video installation by Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang.