

Art captures singapore

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The city-state's recently launched biennale will give locals and visitors plenty to contemplate in a show that focuses on Southeast Asia, Zhang Zixuan reports.

Singapore is turning into an art carnival until next February with the return of Singapore Biennale 2013 - the country's top platform for international dialogue in contemporary art.

Titled *If the World Changed*, the fourth-edition biennale asks artists, curators and the public to reconsider the world we live in, and the world we want to live in. This year's biennale pays special attention to the Southeast Asian region, which has been a corridor of the world's major civilizations with rich cultures and geographies in history, and is experiencing high-speed transformation today.

The biennale features works by 82 artists and artist collectives, among which around one-third are from Singapore, and the rest are from the other 12 countries around the region such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. The focus goes beyond major metropolitan centers to present a greater diversity of artistic practices.

Organized by the Singapore Art Museum and supported by the nation's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, the National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board, the ongoing show features artists and works nominated and selected by 27 curators from around the world.

"It's quite a challenge to let so many curators work together, but being collaborative is also what is so different about this biennale," says Susie Lingham, director of the SAM.

She points out that the biennale does not have country pavilions, a decision designed to let the works from different regions speak to one another.

Tan Boon Hui, project director of the Singapore Biennale, says that the team of curators was "locked up" for three one-week sessions to force everyone to come up with some creative ideas. "Instead of fitting everything nicely together, we faced the differences and discussed them," he says.

The biennale occupies a number of Singapore's most active art spaces, including the organizing museum and its annex building SAM at 8Q, National Museum of Singapore, Peranakan Museum, Fort Canning Park, National Library Building, Singapore Management University and Waterloo Centre as well as Our Museum@Taman Jurong.

The selected works include all kinds of media, each addressing the theme *If the World Changed* via an issue such as spirituality, nature, ancestries and futures, or the self and the other.

At SAM, the installation work *Payatas* by Philippine artist Oscar Villamiel occupies a whole dark space. Audiences are warned about allergies and uncomfortable feelings before entering. The work, however, attracts a lot of attention and wows the audience.

The dark room is arranged like a garden. Thousands of doll heads excavated from the Manila landfill of Payatas are poled on bamboo rods. Within a zinc shed the walls are fully covered by doll bodies.

Payatas, the city's mountainous garbage dump, is also home to an estimated 200,000 people. Many of the inhabitants, including children, scavenge for anything that can be recycled, repaired and sold.

"The installation is a visceral assault on the viewer. It evokes a slum, but the unmistakable sense of discomfort is prompted less by dirt than by the legion of dolls," comments co-curator Claro Ramirez, who is also from the Philippines. "But Villamiel unearths unexpected beauty among its horrors. It's a strong testimony of human spirit and very touching."

Near SAM's entrance is Malaysian artist Ahmad Abu Bakar's installation Telok Blangah. The work features a kolek - traditional fisherman's boat from Melaka - filled with 1,000 glass bottles inscribed with aspirational messages from male prison inmates in Singapore. The Malaysia-born and Singapore-raised artist says he seeks to address questions of land, identity and faith.

And in SAM at 8Q, Singaporean artist Royston Tan uses seats salvaged from Singapore's oldest theater - Capitol Theater - in a collaboration with Kuik Swee Boon and T.H.E.Dance Company to make a video installation.

From its opening in 1930, to its heyday as Singapore's premier theater, to its final curtain call in December 1998, Capitol Theater has been a collective memory to several generations of Singaporeans. It is currently undergoing restoration to become part of a new shopping and entertainment complex that will open in 2014.

Now, artist Tan chooses to focus on Capitol Theater again after approaching this subject in his documentary work *The Blind Trilogy* in 2004. But Tan insists he is not simply indulging in nostalgia, but also drawing on a fear of losing his own history.

"If I can no longer remember or recognize the places I grew up in, then can I still consider this my home?" he asks in reply.

Such tribute paying to a collective memory is also reflected in Indonesian artist Anggun Priambodo's *Toko Keperluan*.

The installation recreates an open-door, old-fashioned provisions shop. Such small shops were once easily found on street corners in Southeast Asia, but in many cities they are being replaced by mini - mart chains or franchises.

"The name '*Toko Keperluan*' means 'a shop for your needs', which is ironic since many items in the shop are anything but necessities," explains Priambodo. "As shopping becomes a way to enjoy life or to re-live nostalgia, the items we purchase become a means by which we define and project our 'selves'."

In front of the National Museum of Singapore, three cylindrical bamboo structures built by Indonesian artist Eko Prawoto remind the audience of ancient tribe sheds, which are quite



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alien compared with modern buildings. The slow passage of time, represented by clouds as seen through the open skylights, as well as the smell and texture of bamboo recall a time when humans lived more intimately with these sensations and raw materials.

Along with the ongoing exhibition, this year's biennale also features workshops and lectures. "There isn't one voice: It is a polyphonic chorus that can, and sometimes does, verge on cacophony," says SAM's Lingham. The hope, she says, is to deepen our understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, aesthetic and ideological complexities of Southeast Asia.