

## Singapore Biennale 2013: Surveying Asia's artistic landscape

By Hannah Jo Uy  
November 18, 2013



The massive mural of participating Filipino artist, Leslie de Chaves at the Singapore Art Museum

Now on its fourth year, the Singapore Biennale is paving the way for Southeast Asian artistic harmony and proving that unlike minds and wild imaginations can work together towards a single goal. Unlike other Biennales, the Singapore Biennale boasts of a whopping 27 member curatorial team working hand in hand to put together an artistic visual feast that spreads throughout the entire city featuring works from 82 artists hailing from different parts of Asia.

Organized by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the theme for this year: "If the world changed," highlights the changes that have happened and are happening in the world today, as well as the response of the artists in the context of their own respective Asian regions.

"There's so much about it that is an experiment and we are doing something risky," says Susie Lingham, Director of SAM. "We are taking a chance. When you work on a scale like that, there will be ups and downs but I think that's the nature of art, you are able to encounter all kinds of things, from emotions to intellect, that whole range, and allows you to ask all those questions."



Indonesian Architect/Artist Eko Prawoto's "Wormholes" in front of the National Museum of Singapore

The impressive roster of curators include, Angkrit Ajchariyasophon from Thailand, Aminuddin T.H. Siregar and Mia Maria from Indonesia, Aye Ko from Myanmar, Faizal Sidik

and Yee I-lan from Malaysia, Ark Fongsmut from Thailand, Erin Gleeson for Cambodia, Misouda Heuangsoukhoun from Laos, Nguyen Nhu Huy and Tran Luong from Vietnam. Singaporean curators include David Chew, Fairuzlman Ismail, Tamares Goh, Michelle Ho, Khairuddin Hori, Seng Yu Jin, Tan Boon Hui, Tan Siuli, Tay Swee Lin, Charmaine Toh, Joyce Toh and Naomi Wang. Filipino representative curators are Charlie Co from Bacolod City, Kawayan De Guia from Baguio City, Abraham Garcia Jr. from Mindanao and Claro Ramirez from Manila.

“That’s also why it’s not your conventional famous names,” adds Lingham. “You see a lot of younger artists. I think what is especially different is a big number of our co-curators are artists themselves. Artists are sensitive to many other things. Who they work with, who they respect, this is who they’re bringing in. It’s personal, its real, it’s also urgent, there is a sense of urgency, the need to articulate things that are hidden, kept away for so long and haven’t found a voice.”



Art collective Siete Pesos from Cagayan de Oro, exhibited at the National Museum of Singapore, on display until February.

Curator Erin Gleeson, who has been actively trying to ignite the contemporary art scene in Cambodia certainly believes in giving artists from Phnom Penh more of a voice. “The Specific history of Cambodia is very anomalous, the idea that the 90% of intellectuals were murdered only 30 years ago. I think that is something that is unique. The artists really care about the next generation, and they are looking straight in the face of their reality. Because of Cambodia’s history, there is this spectrum of experience that is so different between the last two or three generations. The older artists are not that old, but they survived wars that the younger generation did not. And so I was interested to get the perspective from that generation because their practice and work are different from the generation after. The Diaspora also had another perspective, so that was interesting. For me I would say that was the very intent and I also wanted artists with different practices because I know Cambodia is not always included in Southeast Asian platforms. There have been many group exhibitions in which Cambodia has been overlooked and so knowing this is the

chance, it's kind of an introduction on artwork on Cambodia today, I thought it would be good to introduce a spectrum of practices."

Singaporean curator Fairuzlman Ismail also looks to the Biennale to promote artistic education among their artists. "For Singapore, we don't really have regions. The country is so small, the scene is also rather small, but we do support and try to identify upcoming artists, and we work together with them and showcase them in the biennale. Personally it is up and coming; the art scene is a bit more active. The good thing is our local artists are venturing out to understand, of course, like sharing ideas and making connections; at this point the scene is rather healthy."



Kidlat Tahimik, celebrating the premier of his 33-year-old film in traditional Cordillera G-string

From October 26, 2013 to February 16, 2014 the city of Singapore has been transformed into an exhibition space with the Biennale extending its reaches to other venues and parks to accommodate their colorful and intriguing roll of artistic pieces.

The main venue, SAM, unsurprisingly holds the most number of artists as every crevice of the three level colonial structure is filled with one art form or another to titillate every sense, whether that of sight, sound, smell or touch staying true to the underlying effort to make art, truly an experience. Installations, paintings, sculptures, videos, sound recordings abound to make SAM one big Pandora's box of Asia's artistic expression.

Entering SAM, one is greeted by Malaysian artist Ahmad Abu Bakar's Telok Blangah which features a kolek Melaka, which is a traditional fisherman's boat from Melaka that is filled with a thousand glass bottles inscribed with messages from male prison inmates in Singapore. On the second floor, Indonesian artist Toni Kanwa shares with us materialized spiritual reflections with, *Cosmology of life*, a stunning installation of hundreds of miniature wood sculptures no more than three inches high, set on a massive square white foundation lit from behind, and the figures gathering to form a circle for a space. With the square representing the masculine, the inner circle representative of the feminine, the talisman-like sculptures were carved as an expression of the artist's world view on nature, spirituality, and the cosmos; it also follows a special ritual from his previous research of sacred practices in Indonesia. The third level of SAM hosts team Lab's *Peace Can Be Realized*

Even Without Order, a stunning interactive digital installation that is set up within a dark room in which the animated diorama cut out figures interact with each other as well as the viewer. Within the dark room, the panels seem endless within the boundary of mirrors, and the accompanying music makes the art piece an experience to be lost in.



Pieces of Baguio art collective Ax(is) Art Project exhibited at the Singapore Art Museum

The National Museum also hosts many intriguing art pieces, from its usual home collection. At the entrance is the bamboo installation of Indonesian artist Eko Prawoto Wormhole. A total of three tepee-like structures are connected, resembling a range of mountains similar to the artist's inspiration from home where it is regarded as an axis between the earth and the heavens. The opening on top also forms a figure from the shadows on the floor that works as a sundial. Inside the museum is Sydney-based Singaporean artist Suzann Victor's magnificent Rainbow Circle: Capturing a Natural Phenomenon, a mixed media installation of sunlight, water droplets and modified solar tracker. With the aid of project engineer, David Marsh, recreating a rainbow was truly a fascinating feat. "Meteorology, the weather as a phenomenon, is not a very common subject in artistic practice," says Suzann Victor, "so it's quite interesting and quite attractive for me to look at this as a subject matter. There was the attractiveness of being able to say your materials are sunlight, water and a heliostat, the latest green technology that redirects sunlight to town halls town centers. For example, recently in Norway a Norwegian artist redirected light in the town square to completely alter space and how we experience it."

The Peranakan Museum gave way from its usual collections to certain special pieces from the Biennale, among them Singaporean artist Hazel Lim's A Botanical and Wildlife Survey-Singapore which features porcelain plates with drawings, student journals and videos. "I like how all these things we can find in everyday life," shares Hazel Lim, "things we overlook and things that can be quite trivial in the kitchen is a suitable surface to rethink how we can insert something." Leading students to gardens and parks all over Singapore, Hazel Lim orchestrated a six month nature tour that led to 150 students' creations that serve as a reminder of natural beauty and appreciation in the midst of urban development.

Other Biennale venues include SAM at 8Q, Fort Canning Park, National Library Building, Singapore Management University, Our Museum @ Taman Jurong, Tank Road and Waterloo Center.

The Singapore Biennale is a truly interesting showcase of the issues of many Southeast Asian artists in terms of identity, traditions, environment, politics, and globalization. It



**Publication: Manila Bulletin**

**Date: 18 November 2013**

**Headline: Singapore Biennale 2013: Surveying Asia's artistic landscape**

compares, and contrasts. It highlights similarities in our situations, and appreciates the differences. It is a witness to the cultural, historical, spiritual diversity of Asia.