

# From Sacred Space to Sculpture Sanctuary

By Valerie Aw

Remembering the many transitions of the 'Orange Church' on *xiao po*

Life as the youngest daughter of a famous artist has many privileges, not least of which are much-cherished childhood memories. I remember how enthusiastically my father explored the bustling alleyways of old Chinatown and the muddy lanes of Singapore's *kampongs* (villages) to observe how ordinary folk lived and worked. With his trusty paintbrush he transformed the images in his mind into vivid and colourful forms on canvases.

I can remember playing along the riverbanks or carefully avoiding the watery potholes in Trengganu Street while my father captured images of the street hawkers haggling prices with housewives. There was, however, one image in my young mind that I could not reconcile: a church with a Gothic exterior, European-style arched windows and – instead of priests and nuns – men in oil-stained shirts repairing cars. This confusing image remained buried in my memories until a year ago when I set foot in Sculpture Square in Middle Road.

That church at *xiao po* (literally 'little hill') in Middle Road went through several incarnations before becoming an art space in 1999. Built in 1870, it was used by Christians for daily worship and recreational activities. Later, during the 1890s, *Baba* (Peranakan) Methodists occupied the church. When that congregation outgrew the space in 1927, the building stood empty until it was converted into a Chinese restaurant during the Japanese Occupation. After the war, the site was again converted, this time into a motor garage and parking area. When the garage moved out, the site stood idle for almost a decade. Thankfully, through the vision of sculptor Sun Yu-Li, the church and the adjoining site were converted one last time into the art-housing site now known as Sculpture Square. Thus this handsome architectural, historical and social monument now embodies both national histories and nostalgic memories. It has witnessed the shift from a place of sanctity to a sanctuary for the arts.

Twelve years after it launched with an ambitious exhibition entitled *Provocative Things, a Three-Dimensional Experience in Singapore*, Sculpture Square has become synonymous with the development of three-dimensional contemporary art in Singapore. With three full-time and one part-time staff member, the venue organises four core programmes every year to promote both emerging and established 3D artists.

The Artist-in-Residence programme provides art-making infrastructure and exhibition opportunities for emerging artists who lack facilities or space. The ever-popular Children's Sculpture Carnival has allowed thousands of children to try their hands at making their own art pieces.

Established artists are served through ONESingapore Artist, an annual programme established in 2001 to spotlight major Singaporean sculptors. Through 9 January, internationally renowned sculptor and muralist Delia Prvacki (who hails from Romania, but has lived in Singapore since 1992) is featured in a site-specific installation, *Mine*. The exhibition title refers to the mines of her Transylvanian homeland while also referencing her first solo exhibition at Sculpture Square in 1999.

Besides supporting working artists, Sculpture Square serves as an incubator for emerging curators through a recently initiated programme that funds exhibition proposals by aspiring curators.

Today, Sculpture Square is a landmark at the junction of Middle Road and Waterloo Street. Mention the 'orange-coloured church' and taxi drivers will know exactly where to let you off. No longer a church, a Chinese restaurant or a car garage, 155 Middle Road has earned its place in Singapore's arts history.

Twice fortunate, I am privileged to remain part of my father's continuing journey to capture Singapore's fast-disappearing urban landscape as well as a part of Sculpture Square's new era as a leading three-dimensional arts centre.

*Editor's Note: Sculpture Square will host a solo exhibition by Joanna Tang from 1-18 February and the first Emerging Curator Show from 1-24 March.*

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*Photo courtesy of Sculpture Square*

