

# Singapore's 'Open House'

## SB2011 aims to inspire, confound and challenge visitors

By Shelly Dee

*Biennale.* Definition: bi-en-na-le, noun. a biennial show; esp., an art show held every two years. Origin: Italy.

Well, *almost* every two years in the case of Singapore! The last biennale held here was in 2008 – a three-year gap rather than two – as an attempt to avoid conflict with the 2010 Youth Olympic Games and the Grand Prix season.

The third Singapore Biennale, SB2011, will be held 13 March – 15 May. It differs from other art shows, exhibitions and fairs that have graced our island's exhibition venues in recent months in that it focuses on art works created to a *theme* and commissioned for specific venues. Very few works will be on canvas and none of the artworks is for sale. The artistic process is as much the focus as the final product, which is meant to inspire as well as confound and challenge convention.

First a little history...

The inaugural biennale, SB2006, was the largest cultural event ever staged in Singapore. With a budget of S\$10 million, the exhibition included 195 artworks by 95 artists and artists' collectives representing 38 countries. According to Fumio

*Compound, a new work by Cambodian Sopheap Pich, will be installed under the NMS Rotunda*



Nanjo, recruited from Tokyo's Mori Art Museum to direct the 72-day event, the goal was to bring Singapore "closer to what is going on in international art, to see art from all over the world in this city." Organised by the National Arts Council, the city-wide programme attracted more than 883,000 visitors from Singapore and around the world. Artworks reflecting the theme of 'Belief' were installed in religious sites and historical buildings. Much of the site-specific work blurred distinctions between holy places and art exhibition spaces while also exploring relationships among and between different ethnic groups as well as the concept of how belief transcends individual views.

'Wonder' was the theme of SB2008, also curated by Nanjo. "The previous exhibition was a theme of belief... But now we have to re-question – is that belief really true, worth believing?" said Nanjo. The artworks by 66 artists from 36 countries were exhibited primarily in the downtown areas in venues that differed from those used for the first biennale. This artwork was intended to arouse curiosity, to surprise and challenge, to encourage the over 500,000 viewers to see deeper than the visual surface.

For SB2011, the National Arts Council has asked the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) to serve as organiser. Matthew Ngui, a Singaporean who has participated in previous biennales as an artist and as a curator, has been appointed Artistic Director. Trained as a sculptor, Ngui's personal artistic work focuses on installation, video, performance and site-specific art.

The theme of the third biennale is 'Open House'. Ngui says it's not so much a theme as an attitude. He wants the focus to be "on the city as site and as home, where art engages audiences and re-presents realities through unique creative processes. These give fresh insights into the spaces we inhabit."

The theme suggests not just the visiting that takes place during holiday seasons, but also the permeable barrier that exists between public and private or between individuals and groups or nations. "The goal is to relate artistic processes to what people do every day, such as working, shopping, commuting or eating," said Ngui. He adds that works will be presented in ways that relate to the private spaces of the home, to the 'transactional' spaces of the city where commerce and exchange take place and to the ports, which are the springboard for international trade. Of the 63 participating artists, nearly half are Asian and more than half have been commissioned to create works specifically configured for SB2011's unique exhibition sites.

Artworks are grouped thematically at four primary venues. Those at SAM and SAM at 8Q find inspiration in Singapore's familiar Housing Development Board (HDB) apartment blocks. Each space invites visitors to enter another person's world, "opening the door onto private obsessions, secret knowledge, personal histories and intimate experiences," said Ngui.

The National Museum of Singapore's (NMS) light-filled atria and dark, cavernous galleries become an urban landscape of shopping malls and night markets with works that explore transactions and exchanges in the urban environment, from the ecological impact of development to the pleasure and pain of window shopping.

Ngui is particularly excited about using Old Kallang Airport as one of the venues. Opened in 1937 as Singapore's first non-military airport, it also served as the headquarters of the People's Association. The artworks installed there explore movement across thresholds or borders and between cultures or countries.



*Secret Affair, a work-in-progress by Malaysian artist Ise, installed at SAM at 8Q*

Also on view at the Old Kallang Airport is a student project, *Self Portrait, Our Landscape*. More than 3,000 participants from 47 primary and secondary schools in Singapore drew self-portraits – but without drawing their own faces, thus shifting perspective so that they are defined by their setting or by the objects they use rather than by how they appear. Using basic animation techniques, each student then morphed his/her ‘environmental’ portrait into the next student’s portrait, in effect creating a landscape of collective identities.

At Marina Bay two major commissions offer visually spectacular public encounters while at the same time intensifying individual experience. Tatzu Nishi’s work shifts our perceptions of public and private space as he offers new perspectives on familiar yet often inaccessible public icons. With *The Merlion Hotel*, the Japanese sculptor builds a luxurious and fully operational hotel room surrounding Singapore’s venerated symbol, changing how viewers perceive public and private spaces and the icon itself. During the day, viewers can enter the room; at night those with the foresight to book ahead can actually stay overnight in the room.

Also at Marina Bay is Rafael Lozana-Hemmer’s installation of 30 robotic searchlights whose beams form a canopy above the bay, their movement controlled by viewers’ speech patterns via smart phone technology. The work of this artist (a Mexican who lives in Montreal) rides the intersection of performance art and architecture.

The list of other artists participating in SB2011 is as diverse as the pieces at Marina Bay are spectacular. UK-born Charles Sandison, for example, uses digital video animation to project words and text onto buildings. The videos of American Charlie White meditate on the consumer culture of his hometown of Los Angeles, where the mall can be ‘a massive crystal palace of total happiness’ as well as the hell of endless choice. Housed at NMS, his videos provide a contemporary look at the culture of consumption.

The six refrigerators created by Malaysian artist Ise (Roslisham Ismail) at SAM at 8Q reflect how six Singapore families of different backgrounds eat, cook and buy food – highly specific yet universal activities that comment on the way humans develop communities and relationships.

Said SAM director Tan Boon Hui, “The capacity of contemporary art to help us see the world in a different way is one of the most important reasons why contemporary art platforms like the Singapore Biennale are important.” The theme of ‘Open House’ recognises that contemporary art often develops from artists’ needs to reach across boundaries. Focused on the process of making art rather than the final art product, Singapore’s third biennale explores the relationships that take place in daily exchanges between individuals, groups, cities and nations. In an international and multi-cultural city that houses one of the world’s largest ports, the goal of ‘Open House’ is to bring together artworks of multiple perspectives and creative approaches to explore how people cross boundaries to connect with each other.

For information on SB2011 go to [www.singaporebiennale.org](http://www.singaporebiennale.org)

---

**Shelly Dee** collects Asian art and serves on the Board of the National Museum of Singapore.

---

*Features Editor Susan Hunter provided some material for this article.*

*Photos courtesy of SB2011*

---

Open Air: Relational Architecture 18 by Rafael Lozana-Hemmer consists of 30 interactive searchlights installed over Marina Bay

