

Speak To Me, Walk With Me

Amanda Heng Retrospective at the Singapore Art Museum

By Loredana Paracciani

In 2010, The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) began an annual programme to showcase established Singaporean artists in a solo exhibition. Last year the initiative featured *Tags and Treats: Works by Vincent Leow*. This year, cultural medallion awardee Amanda Heng was chosen.

One of the most prolific and established female artists in Singapore, Amanda Heng has been recognised well beyond national boundaries. Her work has been featured in major art exhibitions such as the 3rd Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia (1999), the 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Japan (1999) and the 7th Havana Biennial in Cuba (2000), among others.

The upcoming exhibition *Speak To Me, Walk With Me: Works by Amanda Heng*, curated by SAM Assistant Curator Michelle Ho, is the first survey of the artist's works since the late 80s.

Formerly a tax officer, Amanda Heng's interest in visual art was sparked by her questioning of social dynamics. Despite the cross-disciplinary nature of her work, which ranges from performance to photography, installation to mixed media, Heng's concerns have been consistent throughout her career: gender, identity and the involvement of the community. The starting point for many of her works is communication, specifically the engagement of a general audience in an examination of bodily communication.



Another Woman, 1996 – 1997 Photo print, Variable, SAM Collection

In the series *Another Woman*, which comprises performances, photographs and mixed-media installations, the artist's mother symbolically represents the subjugated female figure within a traditional Chinese patriarchal household. Heng's mother, who emigrated from China to Singapore, never became fluent in English, so the only language her daughter had to communicate with her was her own imperfect Teochew. Their unshared feelings and emotions inspired Heng to develop *Another Woman* as an ongoing project, starting in 1996. Her mother's body and her own become the tools of a communication in which no sound is needed to bridge intellectual and physical divides.

The body as a vehicle of communication is explored in a number of other works showcased in the exhibition.



Yours Truly, My Body, 1998, Performance Documentation from Bielefeld, Austria

Yours Truly, My Body is an impressive performance piece first performed in 1998 in Tokyo and afterwards in several other venues (although never in Singapore). In the video and photographic documentation of the performances, the audience witnesses the butchering of a dead pig to dramatise the extreme sacrifices women make to ensure their 'perennial' beauty. Pig's blood was scattered on the floor during the performances and used to cover the pig's limbs and Heng's naked body.



Singirl, 2000, Performance documentation from Post Mortem exhibition, Dresden

In *Singirl*, Heng again explored the concept of female beauty intertwined with identity. The series was first performed in Dresden in 2000 and consists of live performances, prints and a website launched in 2009. Singaporeans may be familiar with this series as it was both a performance and a gallery exhibition in recent years. Departing from the perfect beauty of the iconic air-hostess of Singapore Airlines, the artist questions the extent of suffering women undergo in order to be accepted in society. In this series, Heng levels a deeper critique against widely imposed social codes and the female role in a society in which women are seen as a commodity.

Centering on the physicality of the body and its space, both around and between human beings, Amanda Heng's work never ceases to engage an audience searching for a deeper reflection on our bodily practices.

Loredana Paracciani has recently obtained her Masters in Asian Art Histories. She lives and works in Singapore.

Photos courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum