

Panorama at SAM

An Outward Look into Asian Art

By Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

On 19 April the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) opened two shows simultaneously: *Lee Wen: Lucid Dreams in the Reverie of the Real* – a much-awaited retrospective on established Singaporean artist Lee Wen – and *Panorama: Contemporary Art from Recent Asia*. The latter is an exemplary effort by SAM to focus an attentive eye on the production of contemporary Asian artists: 24 artists from eight Asian countries are featured.

Works by established and emerging art practitioners were selected for this exhibition in order to highlight the latest additions to SAM's collection. We can see that by choosing to focus on the artistic practice of upcoming as well as established artists, the museum is aiming to connect the practices of both senior and younger generation artists, thus starting a much-needed discourse on the language and interests of today's art practice regardless of the artists' ages, all simultaneously busy making art.

Titled *Panorama: Contemporary Art from Recent Asia*, the show covers a variety of artistic qualities and mediums. From video to sculpture, to photography and installations, *Panorama* brings to the fore a feast for the visitor's eye, while on a more conceptual level, it challenges the audience to unravel the cultural, social and political messages carried by each of the artworks. Although not an easy curatorial task considering the diversity of the artistic practices presented, SAM Assistant Curator David Chew manages to find a fine balance between the strong and lesser works, while highlighting their cultural and ethnic differences and similarities. While somewhat cramped in the relatively small galleries of the first, second and third floors of SAM's historical building, the exhibits as a whole are informative and successful, especially if taken as a document of recent art history; a history that in most Southeast Asian countries remains unwritten or is nascent.

Welcoming visitors on the first floor is the fluorescent installation by Thai artist Sakarin Krue-On (b. 1965). Famous for his site-specific installation *Terraced Rice Field Art Project* and *Nang Fa (Angel)* at Kassel Documenta in 2007, Krue-On's established and acclaimed practice ranges from installation to video. Informed by Buddhist teachings regarding the vanity of life and the mundane, Krue-On's installation, *Cloud Nine*, (in Thai *Lom Lom, Lang Lang* meaning *Empty Hope*) (2004), tackles the Thai interpretation of western wealth by adopting collectible porcelain figurines that, in his visual language, are transformed into fantastical animals. White porcelain street dogs equipped with red-feathered wings ransack an apparently opulent banquet, ready to step up onto society's ladder, thus alluding to social inequality in Thai culture. *Cloud Nine* is featured on the cover of this issue of *PASSAGE*.

The candy-pink setting of the first room contrasts with the cold blue environment of the adjacent room where, as part of the same installation, visitors are presented with a crude but factual video of puppies ferociously sucking at their mother's sagging nipples. Between harshness and opulence, the struggle for life eventually prevails over misery.

Equally engaging, on the second floor, is the composite claymation-installation *Crowd of Bystanders* (2003–2005) by Chinese artist Zhou Xiaohu (b. 1960). Zhou started using clay to create video animation in 2002. In his monochrome animated videos he combines the aesthetic value of sculpture – represented by the small clay figurines – with the cinematographic techniques of montage and editing, achieving a perfect marriage between engaging iconography and conceptual acumen.

Crowd of Bystanders re-enacts current Chinese political events drawn from news broadcasts, bouncing the viewer back and forth between two-dimensional TV screens and three-dimensional sculptural works. On a more conceptual



Zhou Xiaohu, *Crowd of Bystanders*, clay statues, video animation, 800 x 800 cm, 2003–2005



Sherman Ong, *Hanoi Haiku*, prints on archival semi-gloss paper, 75 x 75 cm each (set of 6), 2005



Justin Lee, *Eat Fast Food Fast*, video still, edition 1/3, 2011

level, the free manipulation of clay animation, by way of Zhou's rearrangement of time, allows the audience to observe the relationship between the mass media and hidden socio-political manipulation.

Singaporean photographer and filmmaker Sherman Ong (b. 1971) also deals with the process of editing and assembling in his photographic essay *Hanoi Haiku* (2005) located on the third floor. Several images shot in contemporary Hanoi are assembled in *haiku* style. Often in the format of short literati poems, *haiku* are characterised by sharp punctuation marks or cutting words that emphasise and juxtapose the various parts of the poem. *Hanoi Haiku*, like a *haiku*, is an assemblage of several images, each one juxtaposing the other, thus highlighting the transient qualities of a culture, Vietnam's, rapidly disappearing under the pressure of globalisation. Notwithstanding this, by aligning the shots in a sequence, Ong's work seems to focus on the continuity of history, exploring a narrative made of space, time and memory.



Albert Yonathan, *Cosmic Labyrinth*, performance installation with glazed middle fired ceramic, slip cast, dimension variable, 2011

Space and time are the coordinates for the intense and meditative sculptural installation *Cosmic Labyrinth* (2011) by Indonesian artist Albert Yonathan (b. 1983), also located on the third floor. A hundred monochromatic ceramic stupas are aligned in a geometrical shape, transporting the audience — and the artist — into the conceptual terrain of the metaphysical, embraced in most religions by the stupa iconography. Each of the stupa-like statuettes hand-moulded from clay is unique, thus suggesting individuality within collectiveness. *Cosmic Labyrinth*, as well as most of the ceramic installations by Yonathan, is the result of his meditative performance when the artist explores human nature through the art-making process.

At the opposite end both in spatial and conceptual terms — and literally from the metaphysical to the physical — is the work by Singaporean artist Justin Lee (b. 1963). The last, or first, work that visitors see, according to their chosen access to the exhibition, *Eat Fast Food Fast* (2011) is an

intriguing if somewhat repulsive video projection. As the title of the work suggests, *Eat Fast Food Fast*, originally shown as a performance, is an ironic yet realistic comment about beating time in a high-speed culture, which is portrayed in the video as blending the contents of a McDonald's combo meal into one liquid potion.

Beyond video and mixed-media installations there is a variety of paintings and drawings as seen, among others, in established Singapore-based Serbian artist (and mentor to many young Singaporean artists), Milenko Prvacki's (b. 1951) powerful oil on canvas *Nr. 1* (2009) and Singaporean Ian Woo's (b. 1967) beautiful graphite on paper *Lot Sees Salt* (2009).

The first in a series of SAM shows that focus on recent artworks from Asia, *Panorama* attempts to provide a background to the themes and aesthetics developing in the regional art scene.

The variety of works presented in *Panorama* succeeds in making contemporary art, often conceptually complex to the bystander, accessible, fun and engaging despite combining commendable artworks with some lesser works, which may lack the former's historical and conceptual depth. Though not an easy balance to strike, one hopes to see more of such outward-looking shows, opening up a 'panorama' of the art created in the region today, thus shortening the distance between neighbouring countries.



Milenko Prvacki, *Nr. 1*, Oil on Canvas, 97 x 122 cm, 2009

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All photos courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum