

A Land of Fantasy and Dreams

The Art Garden at the Singapore Art Museum

By Maren Kraemer-Dreyer



Stellar Cave II, by Julien Salaud

When the Singapore Art Museum's (SAM) docents had a preview of this year's *Art Garden* everybody thought "Wow!" followed by, "I have to bring my kids! They will love it." Indeed, this year SAM's fourth edition of the *Art Garden* is even more enchanting and intriguing than its successful predecessors. SAM's curators, four artists from Singapore and two from France, have converted 8Q, the museum's annex building, into a magical place. The design of the galleries invites the young and young-at-heart to tap into their imaginations and takes them on a journey into the world of fairytales, dreams and fantasy.

As usual, the fun starts outdoors. Dawn Ng's popular creation, *Walter*, a huge and very cute white rabbit, has 'hopped' back to the front lawn of the main building, signifying that it's 'Children's Season' at SAM. In front of 8Q, an interesting installation of 134 interactive and imaginative micro-'LANDscapes in a box' awaits the visitor. Created by undergraduates from the Department of Architecture at the School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore, the boxed landscapes highlight different areas of Singapore and issues related to these places. Some students address the topics of nature and wildlife in highly urbanised Singapore, including the idea of creating a wildlife buffer zone in Hindhede Nature Park (next to Bukit Timah Nature Reserve), to keep its resident monkeys in their natural habitat. Others look at society's use of spaces and recreate

various areas according to their function. For example, Clarke Quay's buzz and the bars have been recreated using various pieces of glass gathered from broken alcohol bottles. Colourful lights have been added to illustrate the area's attractions and nightlife.

Inside, there is much more to see, explore and experience. A fairytale garden with an Asian twist has been installed on the ground floor and children are encouraged to explore it and rethink nursery rhymes and the Brothers Grimm



Detail from The Enchanted Garden City, by Sandra Lee

classics as they know them. Singaporean artist Sandra Lee has depicted seven fairytales and six nursery rhymes in her *Enchanted Garden City*. They cover all the walls and the floor so you feel as if you are wandering into a huge book of fairytales in which the storybook heroes have come alive. There is Rapunzel being rescued by an Indian prince riding an elephant, Little Red Riding Hood wearing a *sarong kebaya* and talking to the wolf, three pandas watch over a sleeping Goldilocks and much more. The larger-than-life illustrations are made from the artist's beautiful watercolour paintings. They have been scanned, printed onto large vinyl sheets, and then painstakingly pieced together so they cover the entire gallery.

Equally challenging to mount and also referring to a children's literature classic is the installation on the second floor. The artist is Vicente Delgado, a Spanish-born lecturer from the Faculty of Design at LASALLE College of the



The entrance to Vicente Delgado's Around the Day in Eighty Worlds

Arts, with an interest in evoking "symbolic communicative responses". He has titled his work *Around a Day in Eighty Worlds*, a word play on the Jules Verne classic. The artist is referring to the power of a child's imagination which can run wild and travel through 80 imaginary worlds in just one day. Themes such as the hot-air balloon and the grandfather clock from the Jules Verne novel are included in the work, alongside popular icons. The rabbits refer to the old-time chewy milk sweets called *White Rabbit*. The famous character Doraemon, the lovable Japanese robot cat, is included in the work and also provides the overall shape of the room - a cat's face. If you stand at a particular vantage point you can see a cat's face, formed by the graphics on the walls and objects located in the room.

More animal depictions await you in *Stellar Cave II*, an installation by the French artist Julien Salaud. His work was inspired by the discovery that the ancient Lascaux (in France) cave paintings of cattle correspond to the position of the stars at the time the images were created and are therefore prehistoric star charts. When they walk into the dark gallery, with only UV light illuminating the animal images (created by screws and strings strung across the walls), visitors feel as if they are in a cave, but they also see an enchanting night sky. Buffaloes, pigs and deer seem to wander across the sky with the some figures 'disappearing' into the wall. Although based on the artist's own photographs of animals in French forests, the figures seem to be ethereal beings looking down onto the viewer from a magical sky, leaving the visitor with the feeling of being in a beautiful dream.

Reflecting that dreams can be also be quite different, another French artist, Stephane Blanquet, has created the *Nightmare Room*, which can be experienced on the same

floor. Visitors enter a lovely bedroom and are invited to sit down on a cosy children's bed, which rotates into another room revealing scenes with a nightmarish quality. When you walk through the dimly lit space wearing 3D glasses all kinds of creepy characters and monsters pop out from the walls, adding thrills to your exploration of the gallery. However, as if waking from a nightmare, children emerge from the gallery feeling happy because as scary as the experience might have been, it was not real and has passed. Coming back to reality in the 'daytime room' they can join one of the activities offered with each of the show's exhibits.

There is more to see and do. Similar to the reactive wall in the 2012 exhibition, Steve Lawler (Mojoko) and Shang Liang offer an interactive, noise-activated experience in *The Incredibly Magical Expanding Room*. This new media installation offers an optical illusion of walls appearing



Inside Stephane Blanquet's Nightmare Room, photo courtesy of SAM

to grow wider as they respond to the pitch of your voice. Like the previous work, this installation is bound to be very popular with children and parents alike as it is designed to open minds, change perceptions and trigger the viewer's imagination.



Film still of Little Secret by Tan Siang Yu, photo courtesy of SAM

Finally, SAM's *Art Garden* has some wonderful films for the children. Featuring short films and animations by local students and young filmmakers, the Moving Image Gallery's screening is a great way to end the tour of this lovely exhibition. SAM's *Art Garden* continues to 1 September.

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Unless otherwise noted, photos by the author