

A Peek at the President's Young Talents 2013

By Wai Lin Coultas

Inaugurated by the Istana and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 2001, the *President's Young Talents* is Singapore's premier commissioning exhibition. It features ambitious artworks by the country's most promising artists under the age of 35. They are selected by an independent committee of local art professionals based on the strength and promise of their emerging contemporary art and "for possessing the potential for credibility and recognition in the international arts scene".



Boo Junfeng, *Mirror*

Each selected artist is mentored from concept development to exhibition realisation by two members of this committee who challenge them "to push the boundaries of their practice to produce innovative, engaging works". The results are then judged and two artists are selected for "added commissioning experience and international exposure" at the upcoming Singapore Biennale. This year's winners are Liao Jiekai's *Brothers' Quarters* and Boo Junfeng's *Mirror*.

Liao Jiekai's artwork investigates the 'afterlife' of conservation buildings – especially the question of which buildings and therefore which memories, are deemed worthy of preserving. It highlights the fact that SAM is housed in a former Catholic boys' school run by the brothers of the French La Salle mission. The museum occupies the site of rooms that were once the monks' residential quarters, but weren't deemed architecturally, historically and culturally worthy of preservation when the school was gazetted for conservation. They were pulled down. The replacement wing has distinct differences from the architectural features of the conserved building's front and sides.

Boo Junfeng's film *Mirror*, consists of two screens. One shows a present-day, Singapore Armed Forces soldier during military training in Bukit Brown Cemetery, while the other depicts a Malayan Communist Party recruit in the same area during World War II, resisting Japanese rule. With this juxtaposition, his short film is saying that our country's present and future can't be removed from our past. We must embrace that past by enshrining what we toiled to build. Boo is adding his alternative voice to protest against the Singapore government's decision to exhume over 3,000 graves in Bukit Brown to construct a highway.

The other artworks on exhibition are:

Grace Tan's *Refuge*, which looks like clouds, clusters of blooming flowers or dense foliage. These were the source of inspiration for an artwork created from polypropylene loop pins; commonly used to fix price tags to garments.

Ryf Zaini's *Unveil the Curtain to the Window with No Ledge*, consists of red cables and plugs attached to lamps that are poised like striking cobras.

They evoke the danger inherent in using a technological tool which, when attached to many lights, can make a moment of enlightenment blinding.

Robert Zgao's *The Quieting and the Alarming* questions the National Parks Board's (NParks) decision to selectively cull the destructive wild boars that inhabit Singapore's nature reserves in order to preserve the native flora and ensure park users' safety. It calls for a multi-voiced dialogue with NParks.



Grace Tan, *Refuge*



Ryf Zaini, *Unveil the Curtain to the Window with No Ledge*

Zaki Razak's *Revising Art: The Ten Year Series* is a tent pitched outside SAM. He proposes an art school that questions established practices and the paradigms of an art education. His tent facilitates an informal, participatory and inter-disciplinary approach to learning and art education.

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All photos courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum