







ART

Definitions of Home at the Singapore Biennale

By SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP
Published: March 21, 2011

SINGAPORE — The Japanese artist Tatzu Nishi invites the public to interact with public objects in novel ways. Over the years, he has constructed a temporary one-room apartment around a bronze angel weather vane atop a 14th-century cathedral in Basel, and enclosed a 4.5-meter-high statue of Queen Victoria in Liverpool to make it the centerpiece of a temporary hotel room.

-  RECOMMEND
-  TWITTER
-  E-MAIL
-  PRINT
-  REPRINTS
-  SHARE

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop

In a commissioned piece, Compound, the Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich used bamboo and rattan to create a fictional city surrounded by bombs, alluding to his country's still recent violent history.

For the Singapore Biennale 2011, running until May 15, Mr. Nishi has transformed the 8-meter, or 26-foot, white cement Merlion, a tourist landmark, into the centerpiece of a luxurious hotel suite. The suite, built around the usually water-spouting half-lion, half-fish beast, comes complete with a bathroom, balcony overlooking the Marina Bay and a dedicated butler from the nearby Fullerton Hotel. During the day the room is open to the biennale public, while at night, a few lucky guests can sleep under the statue's leonine head, which bursts through the floor in a décor wallpapered with a Toile de Jouy pattern that mixes motifs of Sir Stamford Raffles (who founded Singapore), the Merlion and a Chinese temple.

Mr. Nishi, who started this practice to bring his art closer to the public and is also working on a living room project in New York, said he liked to “make the public private” by creating an “inside” around a space that is perceived as “outside.” The 32 nights made available to the public for 150 Singapore dollars, or \$120, a night sold out in an hour.

“I hope people will have a different perception of the Merlion by experiencing it up close,” he said.

The third Singapore Biennale should have been staged last year but was postponed so that it would not coincide with the Youth Olympics, which were held in Singapore. The biennale, which features 63 artists from 30 countries and 161 artworks, aspires to be international, but it still has a strong Asian flavor — 57 percent of the artists are from the Asia-Pacific region.

And while the previous biennale's theme, “Wonder,” favored aesthetically pleasing and more accessible works, this year's biennale is taking a slightly more difficult conceptual tack.

The biennale is built around the idea “Open House,” and the concept has been stretched to the fullest. “Open House is not strictly a theme, but more of an attitude and way of thinking,” said the biennale's artistic director, Matthew Ngui, an artist who believes the biennale should be a platform for experimentation. “It is not so much about identifying works that talk about space, but rather identifying artistic processes and practices, and the way they work in specific spaces and interact with them. That is why more than half of the artworks are newly commissioned or works that are premiered here for the first time.”

Blog

ArtsBeat

The latest on the arts, coverage of live events, critical reviews, multimedia extravaganzas and much more. [Join the discussion.](#)



[More Arts News](#)

He added that Singapore Biennale 2011 aimed to move away from big-picture themes that he felt tended to present artworks “about” something and instead throw the focus on the artistic practice and daily life influences.

One of the commissioned works is a new installation by the Thai artist Arin Rungjang, “Unequal Exchange / No Exchange Can Be Unequal.” The artist has created a large living room that will continue to change using a system of exchange in which he invited Thai workers in Singapore to “re-furnish” the space by swapping a piece of furniture from their home with one of his initial pieces from [Ikea](#). The process is to be documented over 64 days with daily photographs added to the wall. Mr. Rungjang said he was interested in exploring social and economic mobility through this work.

In another commissioned piece, *Compound*, the Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich used bamboo and rattan to create a fictional city surrounded by bombs, alluding to his country’s still recent violent history. “On the outside you can see progress in Cambodia, but when you consider what that progress brings, it’s also a lot of destruction,” Mr. Pich said.

“Secret Affair” is a food-related installation by the Malaysian artist Roslisham Ismail, aka ISE, who asked six Singaporean families to each fill up a refrigerator with 200 Singapore dollars worth of items. A video of the experiment hangs like a magnet on the top door of the each fridge.

“While each family had the same budget, the content of each fridge is different, reflecting for example, economic status and how big the family is. I really wanted to see and show how other people live,” the artist said.

“Open House” is presented across five different spaces including the city-state’s first civil airport terminal. The airport was closed in the 1960s and had been used until 2009 by the People’s Association, a community group set up by the government to foster racial harmony.

“The experience in each venue is radically different and decidedly so because we wanted to amp the contrast to get a real full emotional range,” said the biennale’s co-curator, Russell Storer.

One of the most visually appealing works is an installation by the Vietnamese artist Tiffany Chung, who as a small child experienced firsthand the 1978 flooding of the Mekong River. She rethinks urban planning with a utopian miniature floating city, inspired by vernacular architecture from across Asia. Her project proposes flat sustainable living using local materials, eschewing futuristic high-rise designs that are alien to local habitats. The large installation hangs from the ceiling to appear as though it were floating on water and is complemented by the artist’s jewel-decorated cartographic works of Vietnam.

Other works include “The Barn,” by the Scandinavian artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Draget, who have transplanted a traditional German barn complete with bales of hay, a stuffed goat and farm tools into Singapore’s tropical environment.

The Turner Prize-nominated artist Phil Collins presents “The Meaning of Style,” a video on skinheads in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, and the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s “Frequency and Volume” has visitors’ shadows tuning into radio frequencies in a noisy but visually stimulating environment.