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Open House at the Singapore Biennale



Sopheap Pich

Sopheap Pich, *Compound* (work in progress), 2011, bamboo, rattan, plywood, metal wire, 400cm x 250cm x 250cm (dimensions approximate)



Ise (Roslisham Ismail)

Ise (Roslisham Ismail), *Secret Affair*, (work in progress), 2010-11, food installation

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Singapore is making yet another splash in the contemporary arts scene this year, this time with Singapore Biennale 2011 Open House, its third biennale, which starts this weekend and ends May 15.

In what some may describe as typical Singapore fashion, the opening weekend is loaded with free events—artist talks, performances, discussions, family activities and a soiree—all designed to wow the public and create a buzz similar to that of ArtStage Singapore, the art fair held at the flashy Marina Bay Sands in January.

For 10 Singapore dollars (US\$7.89) a ticket, visitors can view 150 works by 63 artists from 30 countries, mostly from Asia. Guides are on hand for tours in English, Mandarin and Japanese, and audio tours can be downloaded onto iPhones. Seeing it all will take you around the city-state as you travel to four different

venues, each with a tailored theme: Old Kallang Airport (themes: travel, ports, light and movement); the National Museum of Singapore (the city, markets, malls); Singapore Art Museum at 8Q (personal space, thinking, home); and the Merlion Hotel at Marina Bay (private person/public space).

Biennale curators Trevor Smith and Russell Storer, together with Matthew Ngui, the first Singaporean to serve as artistic director, aimed to create what they called an “open window” on the contemporary artistic process. Armed with a S\$6 million budget—a hefty chunk came from Singapore government coffers—the organizers hope to draw as many as 650,000 visitors, putting the city-state a few steps closer to becoming a recognized global arts hub.

Many artists are creating works on site, including Japan’s Tatzu Nishi, who fashioned a hotel suite around the iconic Merlion. Visitors can file through the room at the Merlion Hotel by day; a privileged few can sleep there by night. (The suite was fully booked about an hour after the reservation line opened.) Overnight guests pay S\$150; day visits are free.

The overall theme of “Open House” is also linked to the island’s multicultural heritage, and works at the Singapore Art Museum will examine how different cultures coexist in the city-state. “Our festivities—Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Hari Raya Puasa—that’s when we invite people in for a chat to talk about the past and the future,” says Mr. Ngui. “It’s about home, where you live, and taking stock of things.”

For instance, Malaysian artist Roslisham Ismail, also known as ISE, is creating a food installation called “Secret Affair” that opens the refrigerator doors of six diverse families in Singapore to compare how they buy, cook and eat food.

Further afield, at the Old Kallang Airport, which is open to the public for the first time in 50 years, Spanish architect Marcos Corrales cleared the terminal and recreated it to house installations about travel, ports and light. “We wanted to use a space in transition,” said Mr. Ngui, pointing out that older locals will enjoy returning to this old familiar place that still awaits a future mandate. Don’t miss a giant animation that uses ‘environment self portraits’ done by 3,000 local school kids.

Other artists get “into spaces not seen before,” says Mr. Ngui. Among the Biennale’s many video installations, for instance, Singaporean Charles Lim unveils his tour of the city-state’s hidden drains. He’s one of nine local artists featured in the Biennale.

Last stop: The National Museum of Singapore, which features art focused on themes of city malls, advertising and commerce. In the foyer is “Compound,” an interpretation by Cambodia’s Sopheap Pich of urban sprawl and its toll on the environment, with structures made of bamboo, rattan, plywood and wire. Inside the museum, look for the work of Swiss artist Beat Streuli, renowned for his street portraits from around the world. Here, he created a video that melds images of Singapore and New York City.

Mr. Ngui says the Biennale should encourage contemporary artists in Singapore, giving them the experience of being in an international show. “Our first two Biennales were quite successful, and international people have taken note,” he muses. “But our Biennale is still young. It still has to prove itself.”

For more information, see <http://www.singaporebiennale.org>.

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