

# PLURAL

## CRUMBLE, CRUMBLE, TOIL AND TROUBLE



PAULINE & USHA DECEMBER 4, 2017 EXHIBITIONSSINGAPORE SHOWS

*The House is Crumbling*, the latest installation by renowned Thai artist [Pinaree Sanpitak](#), specially commissioned for the National Gallery Singapore's [Light to Night Festival 2018](#), is a visual and sensorial treat. The installation will be open to the public from today, 4 December 2017, at the Koh Seow Chuan Gallery and, when the Light to Night Festival officially opens on 19 January next year, Berlin-based violinist [Ayumi Paul](#) will engage with the artwork, the site and with Singapore audiences, as a physical, emotional and musical presence within Pinaree's installation.

As visitors enter Pinaree's ever-changing and shape-shifting "house" of cushions, they will also encounter Ayumi, who will be there for 6 hours each day, over 10 days, playing on her lovely 18th-century violin, handcrafted by Florentine master violinmaker [Giovanni Battista Gabrielli](#).

Both artists were in Singapore a couple of weeks ago, when *The House is Crumbling* was being installed, and we were privileged to be invited behind the scenes to witness the installation process and to have a chat with Pinaree and Ayumi. We thought you might like to hear from the artists themselves, in their own words, so we made a short video clip as an introduction – check it out!

As Pinaree explains in the video, *The House is Crumbling* a room filled with towers of brightly-coloured Isan *khit* pillows for anyone and everyone to pull apart and re-assemble as any whimsical object that they may wish to create.



*The Koh Seow Chuan Gallery, covered in pillows*



*A closer look*

String tendrils hang off the pillows, and fans of the hit Netflix drama Stranger Things, will no doubt find the structures evocative of the spooky Upside Down (i.e. a parallel dimension, where decaying versions of physical structures remain, but which is replete with monsters and demons).

Pinaree explains that the installation is interactive, and that one is expected to “use the (pillows) as a simple model to build things.” Having herself been occupied with constructing her new studio and working with architects for the past 2 years, Pinaree’s certainly had building and construction on the brain.



*Spidery strings, to be knotted together to form new pillow-structures – think Lego pieces, in fabric form*

It’s the first time this installation is being shown, and the artist is excited to see what shapes and structures emerge out of play and participation in the room. When we commented that Singaporeans are traditionally not known to be the most creative people around, we were gently chastised to “not underestimate the audience.”

Indeed, the room might resemble a cloth pillow version of a kid-friendly ball pit, but a closer look reveals further interesting details.

There is, first of all, a nod to the Isan region of Thailand, from where the pillows were produced. Pinaree's certainly not the first artist to reference Thai textiles, with Anon Pairot recently displaying his Weapon for Citizen (2016) at Art Stage Singapore earlier this year. In Pairot's work, for example, the use of the textiles "restore hope" as they have "kept their local material identity, not in order to play to tourists' favour for the exotic, but to preserve links with locally made souvenirs."



*Interacting with Pairot's stuffed toy guns, at Gallery Seescape in Chiangmai last year.*

Perhaps in a similar vein, Pinaree offers us, in Singapore, a whimsical entry-point to her *own* home country, such entry-point being quite different from the ubiquitous Singaporean package-tour trip to Bangkok.

Next, while the colourful pillows may be moved around, and assembled and disassembled, the black-coloured pillows in the work may not be moved at all. This creates a second fixed frame within the pre-existing physical borders of the room – here, creativity is allowed to flower, but within strictly layered confines. It's a thoughtful allegory for Singapore's own struggles with promoting creativity in a system which sometimes feels as though it has been built on the observance rigid hierarchies. (There's a great commentary here by Gary Miles for *Today Newspaper*).

Academic commentators have noted that the titles of Pinaree's works are often cleverly crafted to provide for further insights into the meanings of her pieces. When asked why such a fun and interactive installation might have as dark a title as *The House is Crumbling*, the artist wryly told us that she doesn't think we are living in happy times.

With the recent US elections, the escalation of the refugee crisis and the shockwaves of the UK's Brexit decision amongst others, there is little doubt that we live in an uncertain world. Could the black pillowed-borders of the *House is Crumbling* represent a sinister vein of poison, slowly winding its way around the room until it finally envelops the entire space?

Enter Ayumi Paul and her violin:



*Violinist, artist and performer Ayumi Paul. Image credit: Ayumi Paul*

No stranger to performing outside the traditional concert hall, in unconventional performance spaces, Paul is a classically-trained violinist with an experimental and genre-transcending practice. She creates site-specific works, often in collaboration with artists as well as other musicians, creating soundscapes that may be a blend of violin, voice and various other instruments, as well as sounds from nature or sounds made with objects that are in the space. In such musical installations, she does not perform set pieces of music according to a fixed programme but instead improvises with the sound material, freely adjusting each performance to the space and to the audience at a particular moment.



We were curious to know how Ayumi prepares for a performance like this – how much does she compose and prepare ahead of time and how much will she improvise as the installation itself changes and morphs and as she encounters the various people who enter the space every day? Much like Pinaree’s installation, which utilises cushions as “building blocks”, Paul composes musical “modules” ahead of time, which allow for flexibility and an unlimited number of possibilities in the actual performance itself. Just as Pinaree’s house will morph and shape-shift from moment to moment and day to day according to what visitors do with the cushions, Paul’s modular musical performance will engage and respond to the audience, the installation and the space, spontaneously and freely in the moment.

*“When you come from the concert hall or opera house, the white cube feels a lot like freedom.” -Ari Benjamin Meyers*



Paul, who has enjoyed a long friendship and artistic relationship with composer and conductor [Ari Benjamin Meyers](#), shares his appreciation of the freedom that performing in an art gallery affords the musician, allowing her to subvert the deep-seated conventions associated with traditional musical concerts. Paul explained, for example, that in performances such as the one she will create for *The House is Crumbling*, the visitors can come and go as they please. She will not be performing on a stage, at a distance from the audience – they can sit face to face with her, walk around her or even lie down beside her. They might stay for a minute, or several hours, leave and return on another day. They may speak, laugh, sing, listen to her playing, or ignore her completely.



*Pinaree Sanpitak and Ayumi Paul*

Paul emphasises that, in her performances, she is “human first, artist later” and that the challenge of dealing with the unknown inspires and excites her. It is her hope that in engaging with and responding to the audience from moment to moment and day to day, she will discover something about herself and the audience, too, may learn something about themselves.