

“The Artist Needs the Audience to be Immersed”

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I met Dr Susie Lingham, on my assignment to the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) of which she is the Director, while covering the opening of the Signature Art Prize 2014 at SAM, organised by the Asia Pacific Breweries (APB) Foundation. With a Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil) in Literature, Religion and Philosophy from the University of Sussex (UK), she is a visual artist, writer, art theorist and educator. She had previously served as an Assistant Professor with the Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (Singapore), and has taught at universities and art colleges in Singapore, Australia and the UK. After the pre-opening brief of the Signature Art Prize exhibition, she spoke to me over lunch on the changing practices of art in Singapore and Asia in general.

How is the contemporary art scene of Asia Pacific doing, as a region?

Being very unapologetic about it, the South Asian art scene (which is the mandate of SAM), is not all homogeneous. If you think about the legacies they share – the different colonial heritage and all, and when you bring in ancient cultures like India and China – it's not a very convenient grouping. But in terms of Asia-Pacific, which the Signature Art Prize (SAP) covers, I think there's a sort of resonance that started with the Asia Pacific Triennial in Australia in the early 90s, it began with a crisis; with Australia asking who they are and where they belong – the kind of questing for identity is where it came from.

With Europe it's more cohesive because of the shared borders, and the communication; you mix cultures and lines get blurred. But Asia-Pacific, just geographically, is enormous. So with the SAP which is in its third edition, it has grown – in terms of participants and nominators, and also in terms of



Untitled by Mit Jai Inn.



Dr Lingham

quality. So this prize allows us, the Singapore Art Museum, to follow who are practicing art at that caliber in the region, from Pakistan to Samoa. When you try to encompass something as big as this, spanning across cultures, languages and geograph-

ical regions, there's a need for sensitivity, and this prize does that. But I think what's more important is that wherever these artists are, they are making art, and they practice with a contemporary consciousness.

Speaking of that, what is the hallmark of 'contemporary' art?

Across cultures, it's very different. The common string that binds them is the presence here and now, responding to each other and the society, not just working in a studio and painting. If you see the finalists this time, their work is very interdisciplinary. There's no discrete object. So one expression finds form in one space in different ways; so you see a sculpture in bronze ("Golden Teardrop" by Arin Rungjung), but it needs its compatriot parts -- video, where there's personal history, embedded in bigger history. The artist needs the audience to be immersed, in their process, and that's the hallmark. And there's no mystery. The artist doesn't want you to come and wonder "What is it?" or "How did he do that?" but just to engage with the art. You'll also notice, for Asia Pacific, they work with different norms; they express the research part of it differently. If you see Ranbir Kaleka's work ("House of Opaque Water"), he's shot real video footage, but the treatment is pure poetry. It's not just enough for the artist for the audience to experience it, but to be immersed and involved. And they don't want to alienate you; they don't want you to feel silly or stupid, but to feel a part of it.

How do you think the advent of contemporary arts is affecting more conventional artists?

Everywhere, there are different schools of artistic thoughts, and to take Singapore as an instance, we have two main colleges: The Lasalle College and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and they are completely different. The Nanyang Academy is old-school, somewhat with the Paris school of thought; it started in 1938, and it's still going – in faculties like Western Painting and Chinese Ink Painting, or ceramics. Lasalle, meanwhile, was founded around '84, by a sculptor who was an Irish priest. He came and put a different context to art. But even his thoughts are being iterated in different ways. But people often say contemporary artists have no discipline: they don't have to know how to draw, or paint. But there will always inevitably be classical purists who will look at everything else and see a lack of skills. But in general, I think classical and contemporary forms are overlapping. We have a permanent collection (titled "Medium at Large") to address this issue of evolving medium of art. People say, "Oh, they don't paint anymore!" but they do, maybe not in the conventional form. So, there we have rolls of paintings that are sitting on the floor, behaving like a sculpture (by Thai artist Mit Jai Inn). And then there are drawings – portraits no less, not done on paper, but ground on sandpaper panels with a live bullet shell (the "Headshot" series by Alvin Zafra from Philippines). And the portrait is of a person who died by the bullet. So that's a drawing. So, there's the overlap, and there is the skill-set.