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ART REVIEW: MEDIUM AT LARGE

The medium is the message

SAM’s latest collection show is playful and fresh

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SINGAPORE — With the National Gal­lery Singapore set to open next year, it’s the perfect time for Singapore Art Museum (SAM) to fully embrace its position as a space completely devoted to the story of contemporary art.

Its latest show is yet another im­portant step in that direction. Culled primarily from SAM’s permanent col­lection, with a few loans and a com­mission thrown in, Medium At Large is a rather narrative, inward-looking show where you can imagine the 31 pieces on display asking themselves and the viewer: What am I?

It’s also one of SAM’s most play­ful shows in a while and examines this often-taken-for-granted descriptor in art, the “medium.” In category- and la­bel-obsessed Singapore, we like things clear-cut and defined. But that’s not quite so easy when faced with a work like, say, Annie Cabigting’s “On The Shelf, On The Shelf (After Michael Craig Martin).” It’s an exact painting of an installation by British con­ceptual artist Craig Martin. The original work, On The Shelf, comprises a tilted row of milk bottles placed on a shelf. In a Mobius loop, Cabigting’s own paint­ing is, itself, placed on a shelf. A paint­ing? A conceptual work? A sculpture? That’s where the fun begins.

Obviously, a lot of interesting ma­terials pop up here: Human hair in Mella Jaarsma’s outrageous, huge, wearable sculpture Shaggy; honey sticks in Yu Shuang’s interactive Project: Honey Sticks (6,425); Osang Gwon’s photo collage-meets-sculpture BluRay B; Mella Jaarsma’s very hairy Shaggy.

PHOTOS: SAM

And bringing all of these differ­ent permutations in Titarubi’s Venice Biennale installation Shadow Of Sur­render, comprising charcoal draw­ings of trees, wooden benches and thick books.

“Two “paintings” highlight their very materiality. Jane Lee’s Status is a monumental work where the paint spills out and onto the floor, leaving a void where the painting should be. Gerardo Tan’s thisisthatisthis is two works made of dust scraped from old paintings and presented as works of high art: A small glass bowl and a framed “painting” of the recovered grime.

However, it’s ironic that, even as the show aims to question the point of categories, one can’t completely get away from them here. Many of the works are clumped together based on their respective genres, whether it’s a painting or a drawing. However, it does make for clearer comparisons on how different works wriggle away from its “root” genre in their own par­ticular idiom.

Ian Woo’s Lot drawings, for in­stance, are partly rendered in a pain­tery way, using a brush to employ graphite mixed in water. Next to it is Alvin Zafra’s portraits done us­ing a bullet to draw on sandpaper. Be­hind it, Sai Hua Kuan reduces the very idea of drawing to its basest element, the line, without actually drawing anything. Instead, his Space Drawing is a video of a rope whiplashing and snapping all around an abandoned building — the line becoming an ac­tion of an artist instead of being some­thing imprinted on a surface.

There’s a wonderful sense of flow as you move one artwork to another and forms overlap: You can go from a huge sculpture made from a collage of photographs (Osang Gwon) to a series of photographs of a painting (Chua Chye Teck). Medium At Large also redefines “medium” as the artist or creator of the artwork. In Alan Oei’s The End Of History, with its series of defaced paintings and archival material, you have an entire construct of an artist and his life — via the fictional Nan­yang artist Huang Wei.

And bringing all of these differ­ent ideas together — the medium as material, genre and creator — is Ho Tzu Nyen’s Venice Biennale work, The Cloud Of Unknowing. A wily, chame­leon-like work, it was previously pre­sented in various ways not only in Venice, but at Gillman Barracks and Tokyo. It’s an immersive piece hinge­ing on a video set up at the museum’s chapel space that employs smoke ma­chines (and at some point will prob­ably include a performance element). The videos themselves, comprising tableaux, were derived from, and re­fers to, old paintings and texts.

Is the exhibition fetschising this whole idea of the medium? Yes, it is — but it’s about time. Many of the works on display will be familiar to regular museum-goers, but combined, you get a fresh perspective. Appreciating art isn’t just about what they mean, but also about what they are — things and ideas created from other things and ideas. Ultimately, it makes our experi­ence and reading of contemporary art, and appreciation of what a museum is and does, all the richer. 

RANT AND RAVE

Chong Tze Chien doesn’t like latecomers

When an artist has something to say about something

SINGAPORE — If you’ve been kicking yourself for missing the first staging of Rant & Rave back in 2012, you can catch the restaging next week. Pre­sented by The Finger Players under The Esplanade’s Studios series, it’s a hilarious history lesson on Sin­ga­pore theatre and the important issues that have arisen over the years. Play­wright and director Chong Tze Chien dug into a huge range of archival text from newspapers. The performance is brought to life by Janice Koh and Karen Tan and you can expect some hilarious impersonations. But before that, we thought it’d be fun to hear the guy behind the show do a bit of rant­ing and raving himself. Here’s what Chong had to say.

RANTS

1. Trying to explain my profession to taxi drivers

“Because whenever you tell them you are a playwright, they won’t invariably ask, which MediaCorp Channel 5/8 drama­serial went and if I know Zoe Tay/Farr Wong/11 Nanxing.”

2. Latecomers to shows

“No matter how much you explain to late­comers that they can’t enter the theatre until an appropriate time in the play, they will insist that they can creep to their seats undetected like stealthy fighters in Afghanistan.”

3. Illo Illo’s Golden Horse triumph

“As much as I adore the film and take pride in a homegrown film made good internationally, I am dumfounded whenever relatives ask me if I would ever get a Golden Horse award for my work. Hello, I work in a completely dif­ferent discipline and industry, thank you very much.”

RAYS

1. Singapore International Festival Of Arts 2014

Three words: The Wooster Group. This legendary experimental theatre collect­ive, which counts Willem Dafoe as a founding member, is finally making its Singapore debut! Yum yum!

2. Post-show $55 basars at the Esplanade Waterfront bars

“Sharing a bucket of cheap good beer with friends after a show at the Esplanade, all you need to round up the evening.”


“For working tirelessly at championing local authors and books. If ever we need­ed a justification to carry on a Cultural Med­i­ation on a bookstore owner, BooksAc­tually would make a hell of a case.”

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