



Koh Nguang How. *Artists in the News*. Installation with newspaper archive. 2011.
PHOTO CREDIT: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM. IMAGE COURTESY KOH NGUANG HOW.

Between Artists in the News and The Hotel Merlion

The Singapore Biennale 2011 is only partially successful in initiating an engagement with private and public worlds, notes **Bharti Lalwani**.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MATTHEW NGUI, ALONG WITH CURATORS TREVOR Smith (Australia) and Russell Storer (Canada/USA), selected 63 artists from 30 countries under the banner *Open House* for the Singapore Biennale 2011. In comparison to the previous two Biennales headed by the Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo, *Belief* (2006) and *Wonder* (2008), this Biennale had a theme which aimed at engaging with private and public spaces using artworks as interventions. While previous biennales had addressed local communities and their environs with works such as the painting on the rooftop of the Shri Krishna Temple by N.S. Harsha (2006), the outdoor Burmese pagoda installation made in sugar by Richard Streitmatter-Tran and Chaw Ei Thein (2008), or the temporary *Containart Pavilion* by Shigeru Ban (2008), this year's exhibits were crammed within three museum spaces – Singapore Art Museum (SAM), its annexe 8Q and The National Museum of Singapore along with the not-in-use Old Kallang Airport, Singapore's first civilian airport built in the 1930s, and the Marina Bay. The Biennale was on view from the 13th of March to the 15th of May.

Japanese artist Tatzu Nishi's project involved a luxurious temporary hotel room built around the iconic Merlion overlooking the Marina Bay. This room was open for viewing during daytime while guests could check in to stay overnight. Nishi came up with *The Merlion Hotel* around the Merlion ignoring other more challenging public monuments. The work failed to be anything more than a vehicle for an international publicity stunt on the opening night – instead of speaking about how this hotel mimicked the glamour of the Marina Bay Sands casino, Nishi spoke about how impressed he was with the construction of exclusive condominiums (built for the extremely wealthy) in Singapore and how he would love to buy one and become a resident.

Most of the works at Kallang's characteristic pre-war site felt uninspired or suffered in relation to the space. Martin Creed's light installation *Don't Worry* (2008) on the walls of a stuffy room was not very impressive. The Scandinavian artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset constructed a barn with bales of imported hay to emphasize



Candice Breitz. *Factum*. 17-channel video installation consisting of 7 two-channel and one three-channel installations, 17 hard drives. 2010. IMAGE COURTESY CANDICE BREITZ, THE POWER PLANT, TORONTO WITH PARTNERS IN ART, KAUFMANN REPETTO, MILAN AND WHITE CUBE, LONDON.

Singapore's urbanism and absence of rural culture. Four Asian boys posed as farmers dressed in nothing but lederhosen. Was it a subtle reference to homosexuality? The artists often tend to scatter their installations with such clues but in this case they refrained from making any overt statement.

Singaporean Charles Lim used pairs of bloated drain socks filled with debris along with a video to depict the drainage canals of Singapore in the work *All Lines Flow Out*; it contemplated the underbelly of the finely manicured city-state. Sheela Gowda succeeded in engaging with the space in *Behold* (2009) – a 4 kilometres long rope made out of tangled human hair held aloft steel car bumpers, lashing at the viewer with its sickly smell, generated by the sultry weather.

The video work by British artist Phil Collins looked at the skinhead subculture in Malaysia. Australian Tracey Moffatt explored racial hierarchies and stereotypes through montages culled and edited from Hollywood films in her video, which produced a highly sexualized but comic narrative. Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer encouraged public participation by setting up a stunning interactive installation *Frequency and Volume: Relational Architecture 9* (2009), which used the visitors' shadows to tune into different radio frequencies thereby transforming human bodies into antennae and providing a dynamic visual and sonic rendering through an intersection of video projection and sound.

South Korean artist Kyungah Ham presented exquisite tapestries of embroidered hyper-real images of *Nagasaki and Hiroshima Mushroom Clouds* (2010), which carried lines like 'I'm Sorry' and 'I'm Hurt'. What made these works special was the story behind them – different skilled embroiderers in North Korea were commissioned to work on parts of a silk tapestry. These parts were then stitched together by the artist in South Korea. There seemed to be a message of solidarity that slipped in from the South to the North by ducking the communist guards. This delicate work should have been exhibited in the museums rather than left to suffer the natural elements at the Kallang airport.

Artworks at the National Museum were missable except for an installation by Gigi Scaria and a film by the Danish collective Superflex. Scaria presented surreal urban landscapes using a combination of sculpture and photography. Superflex presented the image of a capitalist-consumerist world vanishing under water. The film *Flooded McDonald's* (2009) showed a life-size replica of McDonald's slowly going under water. As the flood waters rose, the camera followed some French Fries floating towards the corporate mascot, Ronald McDonald, who then floated along with trays, paper cups and the company's trademark packaging. It was eerie and unsettling to see the film, especially after witnessing the media coverage of post-Tsunami Japan.

At the entrance of 8Q, Malaysian artist Shooshie Sulaiman welcomed the public into her 'home', where two spaces – a double-storey



Roslisham Ismail aka Ise. *Secret Affair*. Installation with 6 refrigerators, instruction manual and video. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Singapore Biennale 2011. 2011. PHOTO CREDIT: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM. IMAGE COURTESY ROSLISHAM ISMAIL AKA ISE.

Simon Fujiwara. *Welcome to the Hotel Munber*. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. 2010. FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION. PHOTO CREDIT: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM.

shophouse and her studio – had been recreated. The shophouse, beautifully evocative with its uneven whitewashed walls, belonged to the 93 years-old Ah Guat in Malaysia, with whom Sulaiman shares a deep friendship. One level up was *Secret Affair* (2011) – a work of the Malaysian artist Roslisham Ismail aka Ise. He researched the consumer habits of six diverse Singaporean families with a focus on their approach to food. The result was six separate fridges, beautifully aligned in an outward circle, enabling the viewer to open each door and take a peek into the contents and guess their owners' ethnicity or personalities.

South African artist Candice Breitz installed multi-channel video works in *Factum* – seven pairs of identical twins and one set of identical triplets were interviewed; the editing of the works helped present their distinct characteristics. Singaporean artist/ archivist Koh Nguang How presented *Artists in the News* (2011), an installation demonstrating how art and artists have been reported on and written about over the last thirty years in local newspapers. Nearly 3000 articles, collected since the '80s, demonstrated the struggle of Singaporean artists in establishing their practices while challenging state art institutions. Koh stationed himself within the installation during the biennale using it as a makeshift office to engage with visitors about Singapore's art history. In one of the earliest article *Art for learning more than appreciation* (1986), Koh talked of how one of Singapore's premier conceptual artists Tang Da Wu's earthworks were

rejected after the National Museum's director expressed concern over his works staining the newly opened museum's wooden flooring. Also drilling holes into the gallery's walls was disallowed!

For the installation *Welcome to the Hotel Munber* (2010) Simon Fujiwara recreated his family run hotel (with several fictional add-ons) in Southern Spain during General Franco's dictatorship in the '70s. With this basic narrative, he spun a story about repression and freedom and what it might have meant to be a closet homosexual under that regime. Ironically 'placed' in a city-state where homosexuality is against the law, the installation closed two weeks after the museum authorities altered it (pornographic magazines on display were taken off on the day of the opening without prior consent of the artist). With the integrity of his artwork compromised, Fujiwara insisted on closing the *Hotel* until he could reach an agreement with the museum authorities.

While this incident marred this year's Biennale, it sparked a wider debate on censorship in the city-state, which aggressively markets itself as the arts hub of Asia. The biennale seemed safe and therefore underwhelming. That said Southeast Asian artists, on the whole, provided more thoughtful works than their international counterparts. In an age when art events are mushrooming all over the world, the Singapore Biennale could benefit from having a strong regional flavour rather than putting together an assortment of international names!