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Singapore Biennial 2011

Various venues

Drawing inspiration from the local custom of opening your home to guests during festive occasions, the title of the third Singapore Biennale, 'Open House', was offered as an invitation rather than a theme. Sidestepping critiques which test the welding of each work to the curatorial framework, artistic director Matthew Ngui and curators Russell Storer and Trevor Smith extend the notion of an 'open house' to evoke the elastic thresholds between public and private, and the now familiar tenets of site, interaction and exchange. A particular strength of this large but quite low-key exhibition is its multilayered approach to Singapore as a global trading port and its self-conscious image as a hospitable place to call home – even as its most powerful moments are the least diplomatic and most unhomely.

Unsurprisingly, the figure of the house reappears often in works ranging from a fictitious architect's intricate cardboard fantasies (Michael Lee's Office Orchitect, 2011) to Tiffany Chung's miniature floating Vietnamese city (stored in a jar: monsoon, drowning fish, color of water, and the floating world, 2010–11). Less literal is the Singaporean chapter of Charles LaBelle's extraordinary Buildings Entered project (1997–ongoing), a record of more than 12,000 buildings he has physically entered since 1997, first photographed and then drawn onto pages of various philosophy books.

More than 40 percent of the 63 artists are Asian, and, impressively, nearly half the works are special commissions or shown here for the first time. Tatzu Nishi's The Merlion Hotel (2011) at Marina Bay was the most hyped, with the Japanese artist deploying his signature trick of framing an iconic public landmark as an 'instant sculpture'. Locals and tourists ordinarily gather to have their photo taken beside the giant statue of an imaginary creature with the head of a lion and the body of a fish, invented by the Singapore Tourism Board. By reframing the statue inside a temporary luxury hotel suite and turning off the water usually ejaculating from its

mouth, Nishi makes it viewable up close. Paying overnight guests will presumably make good use of the double bed beneath the rather phallic monument, as a sign that recommends drawing the curtains reminds us.

Displacement and repressed sexuality also drive Elmgreen & Dragset's Deutsche Scheune (German Barn, 2011), a full-scale mock-Tudor construction situated inside a giant hanger of the Old Kallang Airport. Inside this displaced Bavarian fantasy – complete with hay, a wooden cart and even a mountain goat – four young local men dressed only in lederhosen lounge around on the hay, reading books on farming techniques. The work's homoerotic undercurrent is itself somewhat radical in Singapore, where homosexuality remains illegal, but it is the architecture dislocated into the tropics and the uselessness of the labour that makes it such a brilliantly confounding and perverse fairytale.

A combination of social planning and economic progress has made Singaporeans disarmingly optimistic. Even the opening of a long-closed civil airport as a key Biennale venue feels like ritualistic memory cleansing and celebratory nation building. Works installed in this British-built 1937 Art Deco building reference the city's status as a trading and travel hub – the very things that enable global culture and indeed the Biennale itself. In Arin Rungjang's Unequal Exchange/No Exchange Can Be Unequal (2011), a room full of IKEA furniture will be slowly swapped, piece by piece over the course of the Biennale, for domestic furniture owned by Thai migrant workers. Meanwhile, Phil Collins' video The Meaning of Style (2011) lyrically documents the local adoption of skinhead subculture in Malaysia, picturing young men whose dandyism and seeming passivity is underlined by their coexistence with a flight of butterflies. Translated identity is also at stake in Nedko Solakov's The Flying Method of an Artist with a Fear of Flying (or how to make a signature site-specific work from a long distance) (2011). Instead of visiting Singapore, Solakov flew a local artist to Bulgaria, with the final work consisting of a video documenting a tutorial in which he trains him in his style, as well as the resulting tiny notes and drawings on the walls of the control tower stairwell.

The future is always quickly encroaching in Singapore, which is perhaps why most of the nine local artists in the Biennale seem preoccupied with the island's modern history. Koh Nguang How's Artists in the News (2011), from his incredibly obsessive Singapore Art Archive Project, is one of many to use the local newspaper, The Straits Times – in his case in a 30-year collection of 80 boxes of the periodical. John Low's art-historical investigation into the Singapore River takes the form of an installation

that includes a library and an array of paintings, drawings and documents of its changing meaning. Also exploring realities otherwise hidden, Charles Lim's three-screen All Lines Flow Out (2011) follows an anonymous group into the underground network of local canals. Coincidentally, Tan Pin Pin's short film The Impossibility of Knowing (2010), featuring long shots of sites of personal trauma, and voice-over narratives, includes a girl being washed away down a canal. Such correspondences accumulate organically in the Biennale, even as works are given their own discrete spaces. The overall effect is polished and thoughtful, if a bit polite.

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