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Kesilapan Penulisan Tentang Seni Rupa Malaysia • Biennale Of Sydney 2006 • A Non-Objective Review Of Kamal Sabran's Heaven

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A MALAYSIAN ARTISTS' PRO

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It is now official: sentAp! will be participating in the Dokumenta 12 magazine project, to be held in Kassel, Germany in 2007. In view of the project's requirements, we will invite several art critics in upcoming issues to debate on three specific themes: "Is modernity our antiquity?", "Bare life (subjectification)" and "Education: The local institution". Their writings shall be published, ahead of the exhibition, in digital format in an online version of the Dokumenta Magazine, as well as in printed publication.

Nevertheless, we still maintain the usual concoction of articles, essays and reviews pertaining to local and regional art scenes. Jolly Koh, an advocate of 'beautiful decorative paintings', refutes some allegedly erroneous views on the history of modern art in Malaysia, particularly its Abstract Expressionism. Citing certain facts and evidences, he emphasises on the need for a re-reading of local art writings specifically those 'canonical' criticisms authored by Redza Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy.

The 2006 Biennale of Sydney (BoS) was held from 8th June to 27th August. Sarena Abdullah compiles some notes and observations on Southeast Asian artists participating in the 15th BoS; where Malaysian art was solely represented by Hayati Mokhtar and Dain Said's film work. The state of visual arts in Vietnam is neglected to some extent by the general art community in spite of its vibrancy. In "Late-night notes from buzz-town, Saigon," Sue

Hadju probes into the roles of artist-run initiatives in defining and projecting Vietnamese art scene.

In the local context, there were numerous art exhibitions organised within the 4-month period since sentAp!'s last issue. Besides brief overviews in the "Malaysian Art Shows" section, we include several articles on selected local exhibitions. Hasnul J Saidon gives his non-objective review of Kamal Sabran's Sonic Cosmic, a multi-media event of music, digital sound, poetry recital and visual projection, marking the completion of his 1-year residency at the National Space Agency. This is the first of a series of art residency programmes sponsored by the institution to converge the arts and sciences.

Wong Hoy Cheong unveiled his latest works at Valentine Willie Fine Art in October. Stupefied by its photographic images illustrating gory aspects of Malaysian 'popular' crimes and their 'iconic' criminals, I interpret Bound For Glory. On July 19, 2006, before the closing of his Integrity show at the National Art Gallery, Jeri Azhari passed away. In memory of perhaps the (last) stalwart of Malaysian Pop Art, we include Safrizal's obituary and sentAp!'s brief coverage on Salute: Jeri Azhari (1955-2006), a tribute presentation of painting, drawing, print, sculpture, video art and mixed-media works by more than 60 artists paying their final homage to the late artist.

Biennale of Sydney 2006

Sarena Abdullah

THE 2006 BIENNALE OF SYDNEY (BoS) featured about 85 artists from 44 countries of diverse cultures: Bosnia, Malaysia, Palestine, Japan, India, Canada, Lebanon, Singapore, Britain, Egypt, Latvia, China, Serbia & Montenegro, Bahrain, Russia, The Netherlands, Brazil, the United States, New Zealand and Kazakhstan. Held from 8 June until 27 August 2006, it took place at 16 venues spanning from Circular Quay to Marrickville, Blacktown and Campbelltown. Inspired by the Venice Biennale and established in 1973, the BoS celebrated its 15th anniversary this year. Besides paintings, installations, performances, video and photographic works, the BoS also organized events such as artist talks, symposia and various public programs.

Based on the theme of *Zones of Contact*, Charles Merewether, the Curator and Artistic Director, describes the 2006 BoS: "It deals with the issues of our time – the ideas and concerns that shape our lives and our sense of the future. It is about those zones in which people live and move, criss-crossing between, and within, those places and spaces. It is about cities, settlements, the merging and separation of public areas and private territories in which people encounter and make contact with one another."⁽¹⁾ He further states that the conceptualization of *Zones of Contact* relied on a range of academic discourses prevalent since 1970s: periphery, dependency theory, and the center/periphery of the 70s; repre-

sentation and 'writing cultures', the limits of modernity, modernism as cultural paradigm, hybridity and identity, transnationalism, and transculturation of the 80s; globalization cosmopolitanism, locality, theoretic models of the cross-cultural, translation and the dialectics of cultural imbrications and entanglement of the 90s.⁽²⁾

In response to the curatorial theme, most of the Southeast Asian artists manage to address the salient issues of cultural dislocation and displacement, the influence and connections of different cultures upon each other, the effects of migration and mobility, and the impressions of living in a cosmopolitan and globalizing world. Some artists were born and live in Southeast Asia; some were Australian born but live and work in other parts of the world; several of them were born somewhere else and have since migrated to Southeast Asian region. I realized that the exhibition was never about an artist representing a particular culture or country; instead it offers "...a reflexive relation of the lived experience of the now across cultures [and] explore[s] what it means to be in and of the world shaped by the uneasy contradictions between cultures, the unstable transient zone of inclusion and exclusion of peoples."⁽³⁾

As Merewether highlights:

There is a general global movement that is reflected in *Zones of*



Hayati Mokhtar and Dain Said "Near Intervisible Line"

forcing the villagers away whilst erasing all visible markers. At present the sandy terrain does not hold onto its past; there is no trace of its past environs except for the records charted by modern survey and people's memory. By means of a four-channel panoramic projection, the artists narrate the state of the space and the personal histories associated with it. They explain:

We realized that we stood before an expanse that was not characterized by emptiness – rather, a rich zone, criss-crossed with invisible lines. Delineations which created not only foreground and background, contours and lots, but that endangered a series of oppositional and yet inter-related forms of experience – between actuality and potentiality, past and future – abstractions that reflected the shifting and permeable tensions that function at the foundations of the concept of landscape itself.

Being a film work, it demands time, concentration and patience. However, its hushed stillness somewhat a discomfort to me. Equally disturbing is the wandering in and out of the frame of the figures, portraits of past inhabitants who still linger to share haunting songs and old memories. The film does not only sharpens the senses but encourages us to find a relationship with the land we behold.

It must be noted that the familiar strategy adopted by many international curators in constructing biennales around such theme as Zones of Contact is being severely criticized. Thematic deliberation as such would result in the acceptance of works that only could fit in the show's narrow framework. Well, not all works could effectively express the experience of dislocation and displacement. And also not many artists encounter the experience of migration or cultural conflict; even some with those experiences might not want to express them at all. While claiming that Zones of Contact is the conceptual structure within which he proceeds with his

research and selection (and the naming of the Biennale), Merewether seems in the end to defy his initial framework; this despite his argument that it is important to provide the audience with some form of introduction to the exhibition.(6)

[For more information visit www.bos2006.com]

Endnotes:

1. Charles Merewether, "Introduction," in *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney Handbook* (Woolloomooloo, NSW: Biennale of Sydney, 2006), 04.
2. "Interview: Charles Merewether," *Broadsheet*, June-August 2006, 74-75.
3. Charles Merewether, "Taking Place: Acts of Survival for a Time to Come," in *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney* (Woolloomooloo, NSW: Biennale of Sydney Ltd., 2006), 45.
4. Charles Merewether, "A World of Art Arrives in Australia, 2006," *Zones of Contact Media Release*, 1.
5. Born Singapore, 1975. Lives and works in Singapore.
6. "Interview: Charles Merewether," 72.

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REVIEW

BOUND FOR GLORY (Chronicles of Crimes): WONG HOY CHEONG'S GORY REALISM

Valentine Willie Fine Art (9-30 September 2006)

Nur Hanim Khairuddin

THOUGHT-PROVOKING, 'charming,' 'cliché,' 'superficial,' 'mediocre,' 'ghost house?' were some of the mixed responses from the audience to Wong Hoy Cheong's latest solo exhibition at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Bangsar. Deliberately reconstructed for the show, the gallery's interior walls were entirely painted in black and its glass façade covered with black shroud. All lights were put out except pockets of lights illuminating the works on display. Upon entering the main door, tunes of several national anthems accompanied our ascent to the exhibition floor. We marched to background rhythms of patriotic grandeur, in specially-designed lighting effects, out of a 'dungeon' into the creepy silence of gory spectacles. We met them upstairs: ten black-and-white enlarged digital photos, whose chronicles of our society's fascination with crimes, bonded by the blood of our mediated passion for fallen heroes and fallen villains, were bound for glory.

Six nasty deaths invoked from our dusty past: three cult-killers and three victims of criminal violence. Mona Fandey the Malay woman 'bomoh', Kalimuthu the Indian gangster, Botak Chin the Chinese Robin Hood, Noritta, Canny Ong, Xu Jian Huang; all have long buried their sorrow, agony, anger and motives deep inside their graves. The dead tell no tales; but their murky legends inscribe new psycho-thrillers in our national

history. Ten 'black images' reflecting the social reality of the occultist erotic, bloody Malaysia. Ten re-enactments of the life and death of notoriety: of the alienated working-class and hybrid middle-class among us hunting for survival, wealth, and greed. In the quest for glory, they brea social, political and moral taboos; they shred the fabric of spiritua bearings to pieces.

No doubt, this series of photographs occupy a middle distance within cr of our affection with pop-mythical cult of gothic persona. Regardless o their brutal outlook and fatal attraction, we foster love-hate relationship with them and indulge in their tales of gore and glory. Composed with i film-noir expressionist touch and enhanced by cinematic stylisation al Bollywood and Hong Kong action movies, the works present analogies o our aestheticisation of violence, sadism, and death. We glorify the crimi nals' sins, deify the victims' innocence, and mythify their secrets; and al at once we fetishise all aspects of their darkness. The works thus inform us of duality: evil realism amid beautiful sensationalism.

Despite the photos' simple poses and direct expressions, we watched witl horror the axing, the shooting, the drowning, the rape, the crime o passion, the burial, the ritual, the wicked moments of death; we in fact