

HEADLINE: Art fest a big hit with Singaporeans

SUBHEADLINE: A diverse range of media is employed but the quality of the works on display is mixed

BYLINE: Story and pictures by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

There's a game which seems to enjoy an enduring popularity in Singapore. Not one of those up-to-the-minute, high-tech computer gadgets. No. This is a much less esoteric game which has its roots in antiquity. It's played by children all over the world and, in English-speaking nations, is called Simon Says.

The Singaporean version of this game could be compared to a national sport. Certainly the residents of this city state have been playing it enthusiastically since gaining independence. ``Simon'' is Lee Kuan Yew (or, perhaps, his successor as prime minister, Goh Chok Tong) and few of Singapore's citizens ever seem to tire of carrying out his bidding. And judging from the general infatuation on the island at the moment with anything vaguely ``arty'', the most recent edict handed down by ``Simon'' was: ``Get involved in art!''

Perhaps it was indeed this very game that a Singaporean presidential committee was playing back in the mid-1980s when it decided to enlist some four million citizens and residents and embark on a long artistic odyssey. Certainly the city's disparate population seems to have gone all out to produce works of art. The number of exhibitions held there has doubled over the past decade, according to a recent National Arts Council survey.

Singapore, officials tell us, is anxious to make up for decades of neglect; it wants to make a name for itself on the international art scene and has almost finished building a mega theatre and concert hall complex (see accompanying story) in order to pull itself up by its proverbial bootstraps (albeit with a little help from some foreign consultants).

Whether or not this Simon-Says hypothesis of ours holds any water, the analogy does at least have the advantage of explaining the present widespread passion and admiration for artistic endeavours in Singapore. This

climate of unbridled enthusiasm for all things creative may possibly excuse some of the awkwardness and superficiality which has been displayed along the way.

To this colourful artistic cacophony, a large-scale visual arts festival called Nokia Singapore Art adds some more cheerful hotchpotch. This nascent event (the first festival was held in 1999 to explore the theme, ``City/Communities'') was inaugurated in December by Prime Minister Goh and is due to wind up exactly a month from now, on February 3.

Jointly organised by the National Arts Council and the Singapore Art Museum and sponsored by Nokia Pte Ltd, the festival aims, so organisers say, to inculcate an appreciation and awareness of the visual arts in Singaporeans. It presents itself both as a national showcase of the best of visual arts in the country and a celebration of diversity.

Some 133 artists, 90 percent of whom are citizens, are currently presenting 141 new works, both traditional and contemporary, in a range of media including oil and ink paintings, sculpture, prints and installations. These are being displayed at several venues: The Singapore Art Museum (where can be seen the three Nokia Arts Award-winning works), the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, ARTrium, the Singapore Calligraphy Centre and Sculpture Square.

As part of the Art in the City project being run in tandem with the festival, installations have been erected in public areas like Suntec City, the promenade along the river and Chijmes restaurant. Smaller ``affiliate'' exhibitions are being held at various art and cultural institutes and outdoor venues.

The festival is nothing if not an ode to diversity. Certainly, a bewildering range of media have been employed. But whether all of these are substantial, high-calibre works is much less certain.

An installation by Saraswati Gramich (Stroll, Lean, Slide 2001) comprises hundreds of luminous strips hanging from the rim of a fountain at Suntec City.

Diminishing and Where Are the Babas and Nonyas? is an oil projection on canvas at Sculpture Square. Its creator, Robert Teo, is making a statement

on the way indigenous Peranakan culture has been eroded by the intrusion of technology.

Play Yard by Wang Qing at the National Museum is a jigsaw featuring the head of Chairman Mao (apparently it's supposed to make us reflect on the influence China's Cultural Revolution has had on young people).

And the all-encompassing theme chosen for this year's festival _ ``Histories/Identities/Technologies/Spaces (H.I.T.S.): Singapore Art Today'' _ hasn't done anything to narrow the spectrum. Participating artists were invited to explore the question of how art in Singapore is characterised by a range of interests and concerns, conditioned by histories, convention and the evolving contemporary landscape.

The cyberart component of the festival was among its highlights. As the organisers put it, ``technology affords newer ways for formal articulations and presentations in art pieces, while artistic responses are conditioned and enabled by the physical and technological environments.''

Seven interactive works of art are on display at the Singapore Art Museum. They are the result of collaborations between artists and a number of technological experts and organisations, in particular the Cyberarts Research Initiative Department of the National University of Singapore.

The latter body commissioned Charles Lim, Woom Tien Wei and Melvin Phua to create a piece called Alpha 3.0: GPS Piece-Web Walkabout. The artists used the Global Positioning System (GPS), interfaced with wireless technologies and the Web, to create real-time visualisations of movement in urban spaces. The work involved the trio making an eight-hour journey on foot from the Singapore Art Museum across the border to Johor Bahru in Malaysia. The walk was tracked with a GPS and the data channelled into a software programme. The stated purpose of the exercise was to examine ways in which technology distorts our conventional notions of geographical space, distance and bodily engagements.

Other cyberart works include a dark room with digitally manipulated samples of the island's acoustic environment and a Web site (virtualchora.com) where visitors can puzzle out the dichotomy of freedom versus responsibility and

manipulate two virtual people, healing or harming them _ as they please.

All in all, the festival serves up some interesting, challenging and unique pieces which are well worth seeing. It makes the statement that in Singapore no holds are barred _ in the realm of visual arts, anyway.

Nevertheless, the festival raises once again that dusty old question concerning how one defines art itself; taking a piece out of a gallery and bringing it to the direct attention of the public is not in itself enough to make the piece worthy of the description ``profound'' or ``professional''. And isn't the effort of demystifying art made at the risk of stripping a particular work of its most valuable attribute?

Perhaps one is also entitled to wonder whether a piece has failed as a work of art if the public, supposed target of its message, is unable to decipher the essence of that message. A case in point was the on-site collaborative work installed by artists and art teachers Tang Da Wu, Lee Foo Koon, Ho Soon Yeen and Betsy Toh in a corridor at an old local-authority apartment block in Kiam Tian Place. It was removed by a cleaning lady. The artists redid the work but then it was vandalised.

``We're not working towards [creating] one physical product,'' said a member of the group, ``we're more interested in the relationship between society and us. Art has to respond to what society is undergoing, the art process has to be exposed. This interaction, the human factor, is very interesting to us.''

Certainly the enthusiasm with which festival has been greeted seems to show that a genuine awakening to the subtler realities of art is taking place in Singapore. The driver of a taxi hailed on one of the city's busy and cheerfully illuminated streets had this to say: ``Singaporeans are getting more and more interested in art. Because once they [are able to] `eat good, sleep good', they can interest themselves in other things. Anyway they're like small kids; if the government says something, they'll follow it through. They trust the government because so far it has always done what it has promised to do.''

The same man admitted, though, that he didn't have the time or desire to visit an art exhibition himself because he still wasn't eating or sleeping well enough. Hopefully his situation will improve this year.