

Artists explore the concept of ‘urbanness’

An exhibition looks at the socio-cultural impact of urbanisation in Singapore, the UAE and India through various themes – of loss, heritage and belonging

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Al Zanooba Journey by Abdullah Al Saadi, various media, 2015

Twelve leading Singaporean artists are exhibiting their work for the first time in this region in an exhibition titled “Urban:ness: encountering the city”. The non-commercial show, which is part of Singapore’s 50th anniversary celebrations, looks at the socio-cultural impact of urbanisation in the city-state.

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Curator Mukta Ahluwalia Bedi has also invited well-known Emirati and Indian artists to be part of the show with the aim of facilitating a cross-cultural dialogue, and presenting a wider Asian perspective on the way people respond to the challenges of urban living.

The show is complemented by a programme of talks, workshops, poetry readings, curator-led tours and interactive events designed to explore the Asian urban experience. This includes a presentation of an edible food art installation by Singapore's celebrity dessert chef Janice Wong on the opening night. The show has been organised with support from the National Arts Council, Singapore, The SG50 Celebration Fund, Singapore Tourism Board, Dubai and Singapore International Foundation.

It is being presented under DUCTAC's theme for the season — "East/East-East", which seeks to initiate an experimental East-arts narrative that looks at the East from a shared Eastern perspective rather than the viewpoint of Western institutions or Western educated curators.

"When I moved from Singapore to Dubai two years ago, I saw many similarities between the two cities. Both are dense, vertical, rapidly growing cities with multinational, migrant populations. As successful Asian models of modernity, the two cities have replaced Western models as a source of inspiration for urban development in Asia.

"I have been interested in the theme of artists responding to the challenges of urban living for a long time because with no rural pastures to escape to, a lot of artists in Singapore are consciously working with urban spaces. The idea behind this show was to celebrate Singapore through the arts, while also initiating a cross-cultural dialogue between artists, urban planners and residents of the two cities about the common urban experience.

"I have selected artworks that go beyond the recognisable representation of iconic buildings and city views, to have a deeper engagement with the socio-cultural dynamics of city life; and I chose the title 'urban:ness' because the artworks focus on the psychological and social spaces where private and public experiences intertwine to offer alternative narratives.

"Taking the Singapore story as a point of departure, I want to explore how Emirati and Indian artists respond to rapid urbanisation and have an Asian conversation about encountering the city," Bedi says.

As residents of rapidly growing Asian cities, the artists have explored various facets of urban life, mapping the physical, psychological, emotional and socio-cultural impact of

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the environment on daily life. Their artworks represent personal responses to their specific cities, but the themes they have addressed will resonate with all city-dwellers.

John Clang and Teoy Huey Ling have explored notions of home and belonging in ever-changing cities with migrant populations. In his series “Being Together”, US-based Clang has tried to recreate the lost tradition of families posing for family portraits at special occasions.

Using Skype to project digital images of the Singapore-based members of various families alongside their kin living in the US, he has created photographs that evoke the poignancy of separation and digital reunions, which have become part of the urban condition.

Unlike Clang’s deliberate constructions, ceramist Ling worked intuitively with clay, felt and paper to create various objects for her “Recollection” series. Through these tiny, fragile objects she contemplates the idea of home and the difficulty of preserving memories of home in a city where old spaces and structures are constantly replaced with new ones.

Artist and educator Lucy Davis traces the evolution of her city through an everyday objects such as an old teakwood bed that she found in a “karaun guni” shop in Singapore. Her project “Migrant Ecologies” features the original bed-head, sections of a teak log and its prints on paper, a collage of a banyan tree made from prints of the bed and some old photographs of a teak factory.

“The artist began researching the past after DNA analysis of the teak from the bed traced its origins to Indonesia. Her project traces the migration of teak trees from India to Indonesia and on to the once flourishing teak trade in Singapore, while also referring to Singapore’s natural ecology of tropical trees such as the banyan.

“By interweaving personal photographs of one of the last teak traders, Davis tells the story of Singapore’s evolution from a manufacturing hub to a service economy. Through this everyday object, Davis not only traces the history of urban transformation and the migration of nature, but also talks about the need to preserve the greenery in a city and alludes to the eventual migration of tree-derived materials such as paper and charcoal into her art,” Bedi says.

Hong Sek Chern combines memories of the past with imagined future possibilities in her paintings of futuristic urban landscapes done with ink on rice paper scrolls. The artist has manipulated the conventions of Chinese ink paintings and she has used modern

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innovations such as Google maps to create a painting of Dubai, a city she has not yet visited.

Engineer-turned-artist Henry Lee also blends fact and fiction to create futuristic cityscapes incorporating references to visionary leaders that have led cities to success. In a unique technique, the artist first covers his canvasses with pages from paperback books, on which he then makes detailed charcoal drawings. "The pages refer to the global dynamics of the information age, where knowledge is power," Bedi says.

The importance of knowledge is also the central theme in Shubigi Rao's work "River of Ink, No Cover No Colour". But through her pile of 100 handmade books on different subjects she emphasises the importance of traditional forms of knowledge. By drowning her books in the same ink that was used to create them, the artist questions the place of ancient wisdom and its transmission to the next generation in today's fast-paced, information-oriented world.

"This layered work refers to the erasing of old structures and memories as cities grow. It reminds Singaporeans of the old National Library, whose loss was strongly felt despite the opening of a bigger and better library. It reflects a change in people's perception of their cultural-historical roots and the need to preserve them, while also speaking about personal narratives that are linked with public spaces," Bedi says.

Jason Wee dwells both on the interweaving of public and private spaces and the isolation of city life in his "Requiem" series, by creating an "architecture of grief" featuring "mourning robes", a styrofoam orchid wreath, tombstones and other related objects.

Through this work he mourns the absence of the support of an extended family and community in the city during times of grief and the loss of traditional mourning rituals that helped in healing. The work references the demolition of an old cemetery in Singapore to make way for urban development and alludes to the feelings of Singaporeans on the passing away of the father figure of the city state.

"Locus", a video by artist and writer Regina De Rozario and designer Seah Sze Yunn of Perception 3, features photographs of transient spaces in Singapore ranging from a car park and bus stop to a now-demolished national stadium, along with nostalgic text and mournful sound effects. The work, which contemplates the act of photographing as a means of remembering and forgetting, resonates with the experience of residents in any growing city, and most certainly one that is changing as fast as Dubai.

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Other artists have explored the vernacular culture of their multicultural city. Photographer Lavender Chang asked diners at the city's ubiquitous hawker centres to tell her about their favourite dishes. She then deconstructed the dishes chosen by people of different ethnicities and photographed the various ingredients. The images in her series "A Dissection of..." are presented along with texts of her conversations about why the dishes are so loved.

Through this "research" of Singaporean cuisine, the artist, who is of Taiwanese origin, attempts to understand the sense of belonging that food culture creates and expresses her desire to be accepted as a Singaporean.

Artists' collective Vertical Submarine also takes a light-hearted look at the city's cultural peculiarities in "Hokkein Rhymes" featuring seemingly nonsensical rhymes in the colloquial Hokkein language placed alongside images of old Singaporean advertisements of household goods.

Street artist Zaki Razak's words "Amusing Ourselves to Death" painted on the walls of the gallery, comment on the way people in a city are so lost in the information and entertainment available on the screens of their smart devices that they become alienated from the world around them. Filmmaker Ghazi Alqudrcy expresses his feeling of being lost in his home city and being away from nature in his short films.

The three Emirati artists in the show deal with the same themes as their Singaporean counterparts, but in their own unique ways. Abdullah Al Saadi escapes from the city to seek solace and inspiration in the desert. The artist embarked on a journey through the desert wearing handmade traditional leather slippers (zanooba) and carrying some bare essentials in a wheelbarrow.

His poignant work, "Al Zanooba Journey", features a video of this introspective journey of reconnecting with his roots. The artist will also do readings from the journal in which he recorded his thoughts every evening in the tranquillity of his tent.

Mohammad Kazem expresses his feeling of being disoriented and lost in his rapidly changing city in works from his "Directions" series by using GPS coordinates of every step he takes to orient himself through abstract numbers rather than tangible landmarks or memories.

Mohammad Ahmad Ibrahim's installation "Land Shift and Fresh Salt" features coral found along the shores of the UAE, bound to freshwater stones from the Caspian Sea by copper wire. The work speaks about the loss of natural habitats due to urban expansion,

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migration, blending of different cultures and the global capitalism that an urban centre represents.

In contrast with the planned development of Singapore and Dubai, Gigi Scaria's video "Panic City" tells the story of urban explosion in India, where infrastructure is unable to keep pace with urban growth, adding to the anxieties and challenges of city life. Similarly, a bull locking horns with a crane in Sayam Bharath's painting "Pray for tomorrow" speaks about the clash between nature and expanding cities.

"As Singapore transformed from a colonial port to a developed city-state, it has outgrown its identity as an immigrant city and become a homeland to people of various ethnic origins. This show illustrates that despite their different cultural heritages, contemporary Singaporean artists look internally at Singapore for inspiration, narrative, language and cultural identity.

"Their artworks address issues relevant to the city, reflecting the Singaporean way of life and a Singaporean idea of 'urban:ness'; but these works can also be understood in wider frameworks of urban studies.

"Just as Singapore cuisine is well-known for its distinct flavours, contemporary Singapore art is also coming into its own on the global arena with its distinct identity. We are happy to celebrate Singapore's golden jubilee by introducing to this region Singaporean artists who are at the forefront of cutting edge art practices in a show that aims to be a catalyst for cross-cultural dialogues with Emirati and Indian artists who work consciously with the theme of 'urban:ness' within their own cultures," Bedi says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

"Urban:ness: encountering the city" will run at the Gallery of Light, DUCTAC, Mall of the Emirates, until November 10.

Celebrating the many facets of a woman through dance

Dubai-based Indian classical dance institute Gurukul will present "Navinayika", a solo kathak production that celebrates the many facets of a woman through dance. The concept of "Navinayika" was developed by Pali Chandra, founder and artistic director of Gurukul, and star of the show, under the patronage of legendary kathak exponent and guru Pandit Birju Maharaj.

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Chandra is an award-winning dancer, choreographer and educationist and has performed around the world. After moving from London to Dubai about a decade ago, she established Gurukul to share her knowledge and skills with students of all ages. She will be accompanied on stage by seven leading musicians from India.

“This narrative kathak presentation is an adaptation of ‘Ashtanayika’, a very significant treatise of performing arts based on the ancient Indian texts, Natyashastras, which portrays eight expressions of a woman through different kathak techniques. To this depiction of the journey of a woman and various facets of enduring love, ‘Navinayika’ adds a ninth expression revealing the woman beyond,” says Chandra.

“We have used intricate technique-based choreographies, and delicate expressive compositions of kathak to create a production rooted in tradition yet contemporary in nature. The music score is set to the mood and tone of the ‘nayika’s’ state of mind and includes bhajan, thumri, tarana, ghazal, sufi and contemporary sounds,” she adds.

The event will be held at DUCTAC, Centrepoint Theatre, Mall of the Emirates on October 29, from 7.30pm onwards. Tickets, priced at Dh250, 150 and 100 are available at the DUCTAC box office and Gurukul studios. For more information write to admin@gurukuldubai.com or navinayika@gurukuldubai.com

<http://gulfnews.com/culture/arts/artists-explore-the-concept-of-urbanness-1.1604445>