

SHOEBOX SCULPTURE
BIENNALE 2023

Sightseeing

the sky, the land, & the sea

Sculpture

6th Jan 2023

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30th September 2024

“Thinking About Things”

by

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Thinking about Things

I.

Walking into the gallery space felt somewhat like walking into an immersive art installation. Rolled out across the floor from my feet was a carpet of grass with picnic mats that beckoned me to take a seat. Choosing a spot, I settled down, helped myself to a small slice of red velvet cake perched on a dessert stand, and took in what towered across the lawn from me: a sprawling wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling presentation of cubbyholes that housed a diverse collection of tangible and material things. It resembled a cabinet of curiosities, some kind of contemporary *wonder-room*. With its grid-like structure, it even bore some semblance to pixels on a huge screen.

I had arrived at the 2023 Shoebox Sculpture Biennale – the first of its kind in Singapore, organised by the good people behind Sculpture 2052. This inaugural edition titled *Sightseeing Sculpture: The Sky, The Land, and the Sea* had been initiated to explore the intersection of traditional sculpture and contemporary craftsmanship within the evolving landscape of art practices in Singapore. The project unfolded in two key parts: the first, *The Sky, The Land, and The Sea*, was an exhibitionary component that showcased some 113 mini-sculptures by 89 artists, demonstrating their adeptness in navigating the challenges of space and scale imposed by the dimensions of an ordinary shoebox. The complementary *Sightseeing Sculpture* featured a mobile, sculptural, and larger-than-life periscope made by Artists Caravan, around which a series of guided “sightseeing tours” offered fresh and playful approaches in which to view and appreciate sculpture – an art form that has often found itself on the peripheries; little discussed (and perhaps consequently misunderstood) within broader contexts of art in Singapore.

II.

Philosophically speaking, many attempts to define a distinct aesthetics of sculpture have typically begun by setting it apart from other more familiar art forms. Or, in Rosalind Krauss’ words: locating sculpture in terms of what it was *not*. Sculpture is often emphasized to be *unlike* painting, installation, performance, or architecture in some particular way or another. However, throughout the twentieth century, the sheer diversity of objects that have claimed the label of “sculpture” (many of which challenge the conceptual boundaries of the art form) further complicates any attempts at a clear definition. For if sculpture was once characterized by its worship-based, commemorative, didactic or decorative purposes, and was generally recognised as a distinct art form featuring representational subject matter presented either in the round or in relief, the onset of modernism(s) would profoundly change the possibilities of sculpture’s forms and functions.

This raises several questions to which there are no easy answers: how may one consider or assess such diverse works under the single umbrella of sculpture? What makes an artwork more or less of a “sculpture” than another? How have contemporary approaches further added to sculptural aesthetics? And where else might this discipline go from here?

III.

Three-dimensionality / mass / space / representational / figurative / abstract / bust / statue / freestanding / relief / in the round / placed on the ground / on a pedestal / within a niche / within an alcove / perched atop a building / monumental / static / durable / changing / wood / marble / stone / metal / clay / bronze / plastic / glass / found objects / a combination of materials / additive / subtractive / hand carving / modelling / casting / chiseling / welding / assembling / constructing / combining / machine-made / foundry / kinetic / indoors / outdoors / in museums and galleries / public parks and squares / historical sites / memorial sites / courthouses / corporate spaces / educational institutions / civic buildings / places of worship / private residences

VI.

Reflecting upon three-dimensional practices, the Shoebox Biennale seems all encompassing – showcasing works that operate within an expanded set of possibilities that continue to be elaborated today.

The exhibition is participated by renowned local sculptors including Baet Yoke Kuan, Chong Fah Cheong, Chua Boon Kee and Lim Soo Ngee (among others), who showcase works that exhibit their mastery in the traditional principles and values of sculpture, evoking the material solidity inherent in their respective mediums. Works such as *Untitled 2022* (Baet) and *Reminiscence* (Chua) further recall their monumental works that adorn the Singapore landscape. Han Sai Por, a prominent figure in Singapore sculpture known for her finely carved stone and marble works, features another side of her practice with *The Black Forest* (2023) – a scaled-down version of her extensive wood-and-charcoal installation from the 2016 Singapore Biennale, accompanied by a mini endoscope that allows visitors to travel between the shrunken charcoal trees. Works such as those by Chiew Sien Kuan and the late Chng Seok Tin offer examples of sculptural assemblages that incorporate found objects, demonstrating the transformative potential of everyday items into art.

There are also works that gesture towards the histories and happenings of sculptural practice in Singapore. *Uniting ReThinking ReThinking* by Teng Jee Hum is a notable example. The work comprises a pair of clay sculptures that make reference to *Torso to Face (Male)* and *Torso to Face (Female)* – a pair of monumental ciment fondu sculptures produced by pioneer sculptor Ng Eng Teng in 1999. This homage is purposeful: since their initial collective exhibit at the inaugural exhibition of the now-defunct Sculpture Square that same year, the pair had been separated and have since resided without the other in different collections. By some twist of fate, however, both were coincidentally out on display around the same time last year. The irony is not lost, too, that they were presented in two exhibitions that foregrounded different approaches to sculptural thinking in Singapore: *Torso to Face (Male)* in *Nothing is Forever: Rethinking Sculpture in Singapore* at the National Gallery Singapore, and *Torso to Face (Female)* in *reTHINGing the Site – Sculpture and its Environment* at the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. These miniature sculptures by Teng are an attempt to reunite them, albeit symbolically, inviting contemplation on the evolution of the discipline of sculpture over the past four decades.

The ever-expanding universe of sculptural materials is also exemplified in the Shoebox Biennale by artists who demonstrate that almost any material capable of being molded in three dimensions can be used in sculpting. In *it is not what you said, it is how you said it to me*, Ezzam Rahman employs a combination of depleted analgesic balm tubes, used anti-inflammatory plasters, and empty pill casings among other objects. Each of these items serve as a “residue” of his performance art practice, and being reminiscent of the body, further extends sculpture’s engagement with the viewer into the broader realms of daily life and the social.

Conceptual gestures often play a significant role in the artistic process as well, as seen in Nhawfal Juma’at’s work *The Forestalling of Something Bigger*. The work features three crushed paper balls bound up with tape, showcasing formal intricacies reminiscent of traditional sculptural practices that highlight the fluidity of fabric and the sculptor’s skill. However, the material choice introduces a paradox, as these pieces of paper that once held the artist’s sketches are now symbolically precluded from realisation by the act of crumpling. By transforming the potential symbolised by those pieces of paper into a tangible artwork through this gesture, he not only renders the original idea meaningless but also shifts emphasis away from merely the sculptural object to the conceptual impetus behind it.

The medium chosen for an artwork can often amplify its message, too. In *Ma(r)king Time* by Calvin Pang, a roll of thermal paper typically used for printed receipts is marked with lines as a means to mark time, communicating with its material in a way that the marble or stone of a traditional sculpture does not. As time passes, the imprints on the receipt paper gradually fade, emphasizing the theme of impermanence so central to Pang’s practice. While *Ma(r)king Time* captures his reflections on commercial transactions in the digital era and the fleeting nature of his own existence, I can’t help but think about how the work and its quiet presence also rejects the logic of the permanent monument and challenges conventional perceptions of sculpture – as something that’s static, fixed, unyielding to time.

VI.

However the category of sculpture might have evolved over time, one thing that most would agree on is its intrinsic connection to space. Contemporary insights into space, including those shaped by quantum concepts involving eleven to twelve dimensions, disrupt the conventional understanding of merely three or four dimensions. Within this expanded view, several works by Yeo Chee Kiong and Sun Yu-li offer rich grounds for deeper exploration.

Sun Yu-li articulates the fusion of art and technology in his artist statement for *Untitled*, a pair of yellow PLA plastic sculptures that, to differing degrees, allude to the double helix structure of DNA, symbolising life. Similarly, in works such as *Vertigo* and *The Anatomy of Soul and Spirit*, Yeo Chee Kiong embraces the same approach of digitally sculpting his subjects, later materialised by a 3D-printing machine – a comparatively novel form of additive sculpture. These instances witness a transformation in the *space* of craftsmanship: while the sculpture exists in the physical realm, the actual act of sculpting first unfolds within the digital. This shift invites further reconsideration of the traditional emphasis on the artist’s hand, exploring the intersection of digital sculpture and traditional craftsmanship and adding to the evolving discourse on sculptural methods.

VI.

Through the Shoebox Biennale, one can see glimpses of how sculpture has expanded beyond its traditional confines over time, evolving into an open-ended inquiry rather than a fixed category. The presentation offers a unique opportunity to experience a range of visual ideas expressed in the three-dimensional, showcasing the diversity of sculptors and sculptural practices in Singapore. Traditional methods endure, encompassing both representational and abstract forms. The use of found objects, assemblages and ceramics continue to be of interest to sculptors, too. In addition, the act of sculpting, traditionally associated with hands-on craftsmanship, is undergoing transformation through innovative techniques like 3D-printing and AI, redefining the essence of sculpture while opening up new possibilities in the creation of three-dimensional objects.

The “2052” in Sculpture 2052’s name reflects its founders’ ambitions and dedication towards sculptural practices of the future, and I’m already looking forward to the next Shoebox Biennales to come.

Teng Yen Hui
November 2023