

Myth, Music And Mayhem

An Underground Yet Public
Exhibition of Mohammad Yazid

BY NGIOM



BETWEEN THE 21ST AUGUST AND 4TH OCTOBER 2009 IN SINGAPORE, A CHAIN OF ART EXHIBITS LINKED AN UNDERGROUND TUNNEL TO THE ESPLANADE CAR PARK, TO THE CONCOURSE OF THE ESPLANADE AND THEN TO THE MAIN GALLERIES OF THE BUILDING. TOGETHER WITH VARIOUS THEATRICAL EVENTS TAKING PLACE IN THE BUILDING AT THE TIME, THIS CORNER OF SINGAPORE REINFORCED THE REPUBLIC'S INTENTION TO MAKE ITSELF INTO ONE OF THE ART CENTRES OF ASIA. THIS WAS ONLY ONE OF SEVERAL ORGANISED EVENTS THAT WENT ON DURING THE TIME THAT MADE ART (AND DESIGN) AN EVERYDAY AND UBIQUITOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE CITY-STATE. ARTISTS WERE INVITED FROM OTHER PARTS OF ASIA, AND AMONG THEM WAS A MALAYSIAN ARTIST WHO OCCUPIED THE UNDERGROUND TUNNEL WALLS WITH THE VISUAL DEPICTION OF A MYTHICAL, FANTASY EVENT. THE PAINTINGS WERE LIKE ENLARGED PAGES OF A COMIC BOOK, AS VIBRANT AND AS POWERFUL AS THE MOST MEMORABLE ONES.



The exhibits were somewhat different to Roy Lichtenstein's 1960s tongue-in-cheek giant reconstructions of comic strips, which were then devoured by millions of Americans. Whilst the Lichtenstein's pieces were single pieces of artistic commentary of a visual consumerist culture, Mohammad Yazid's work was instead a story, where all the pieces together form a complete narrative of a mythical past: It was story telling instead of a commentary, and less iconic.

The paintings narrated a story of a fictional world called Temasek, where lived mythical creatures "dressed in today's modern fashion". It went on to narrate that, "One day Temasek is attacked by Chaos. But just as Temasek teeters on the brink of destruction, the youth of Temasek come together to fight back with the power of music". Yazid's intention was to "highlight the power of music to unite (the) youth".

What appears and appeals to the observer is the eclectic Asianess about the illustrations, which were a combination of various Asian mythologies as well as those from contemporary manga comics. The masks were themselves a combination of Malay Hindu mythology as well those of Chinese mythical characters. The heroic historic characters were Malay, Indian and Chinese legendary heroes, united in a mythical war against mayhem. The musicians were like contemporary Singaporean youths elevated to superhero status in a deliberately cliché sort of way. And what of the incredibly vibrant illustration of sound that came from the musical instruments? – It was a graphic depiction of raw, powerful energy, if ever energy could be illustrated.

There was nothing that was calm and genteel about the illustrations, where polite conversation could have resulted from the works. They were instead manifestations of unfettered youthful energy, with the hallmarks of passion, and even of anger. The works had certainly not failed to get noticed along the tunnel walkway. Importantly, it accorded the artist an avenue to express an art, which had a contemporary attitude about it. The great thing was that the art was displayed in a very public place without the necessity of security and any sort of contrived protection. It was public art in the most accessible kind. There was a sort of visual conversation between the artist's work and the public and mutual respect was accorded, and there was a trust that the works would not be defaced.





It is also twenty-first century entertainment from the world of illustration, which shares the mythical stories that now come with contemporary fantasy movies, from both the Hollywood studios as well as northern Asian movie studios. It is a new world that includes modern computer graphics and animations. It is simulacra and simulation at the extreme in a world without borders, and where the mind transcends the limits of material boundaries. There is hence a place for very public art in a civil society, and that seems where art ought to belong.

There is a craving for this sort of artistic expression and a need for spontaneity about it. Who ever said that art needs to have permanence? There is no art without commentary, and at its extremities, art is about rebelliousness, which is exemplified by graffiti art that is irrepressible in cosmopolitan conditions, which is yet another story. ●