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S'pore art: Top picks for 2014



TheatreWorks' Retrospective. Photo: Memphis West Pictures.

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BY

MAYO MARTIN, BRUCE QUEK (/AUTHORS/MAYO-MARTIN-BRUCE-QUEK)

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SINGAPORE — It's that time of the year again. Year-end picks from yours truly and regular TODAY contributor Bruce Quek.

We've whittled down our respective lists, with Bruce concentrating on the visual arts and The RAT scurrying across disciplines. On my part, I've focused on the homegrown, even as I acknowledge that a bunch of international productions and exhibitions could've easily been jostled given the rest a run for their money.

Top of my head, the Singapore International Festival Of Arts was simply amazing, with Mystery

Magnet, The Chorus; Oedipus, Peter Pan, Give Me Your Blood And I Will Give You Freedom. There was Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake at da:ns Festival. Exhibitions-wise, you had the APB Foundation Signature Art Prize at SAM, Zanele Muholi's gritty Faces And Phases at SIFA's The OPEN showcase, and the Chinese contemporary photography show Flux Realities by the Singapore International Photography Festival and ArtScience Museum, all of which were pretty good shows.

In any case, read on. They're in no particular order.

MAYO MARTIN'S TOP PICKS

1. RETROSPECTIVE by TheatreWorks. "French choreographer Xavier Le Roy's dance performance-cum-installation, in collaboration with 13 local dance and physical theatre practitioners, was a playful game, an endurance marathon, a leisurely experience, a full-on confessional and perhaps a bit of ego-tripping, too. A fine testament to the idea that art ultimately lives on and finds direct connections through people who actively engage with it."

2. ORGANISED CHAOS by THE Dance Company. "From harmonies to harmonicas, the constant babbling, counting, panting — sometimes manipulated and enlarged as reverberation, loop and echo — the voice becomes an extension of the body's performance and sound acquires a very palpable physicality... Here was neurosis manifested."

3. NO STAR ARTS GRANT by Eng Kai Er. "If you ask me, No Star Arts Grant is such a rich project (no pun intended). It brings up issues regarding private philanthropy, even though she has categorically stated she wasn't motivated by that but by "anger and sadness". For dancers, the body is central and here you could also read Eng's as (dramatically speaking) caught between two forces, whether it's Science and Art, Bondage (no pun

intended again) and Freedom, et cetera.”

4. ROOTS by The Finger Players. “I can clearly see why it had people raving (when it was first staged in 2012) — writer-actor-director Oliver Chong’s monologue is a masterful piece of storytelling. It says something about the artist’s skill when one is completely immersed in a story that seems commonplace plot-wise, to the point you hardly noticed the time.”

5. I DIDN’T KNOW MANI WAS A CONCEPTUALIST by Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingde. One of the best experimental voices in Singapore poetry, Kon’s science fiction-meets-existentialist prose poetry collection is densely — almost brutally — packed with allusions and anyone who stays for the ride is rewarded with an immensely satisfying (and often funny) read.

6. SOUND: LATITUDES AND ATTITUDES by Institute Of Contemporary Arts Singapore / Joleen Loh and Bani Haykal (curators). Finally, a survey of Singapore’s sound art scene! As the exhibition revealed, not only is the range of practitioners wide — from theatre people to performance artists to experimental musicians — the kind of works and the approaches are also just as vast.

7. 1ST MIGRANT WORKERS POETRY COMPETITION by Shivaji Das / The Literary Centre / Banglar Kantha. A unique and much-welcome initiative that adds to the multiplicity of literary voices in Singapore, with 80 poetry submissions coming in from migrant workers — many of whom are already published authors.

8. “WHEN YOU GET CLOSER TO THE HEART, YOU MAY FIND CRACKS ...” by Lucy Davis / Migrant Ecologies Project. “It’s a show swirling with art, science and history, while subtly touching on economics, geopolitics and even the fantastical. There’s a lot happening here and if, like Davis, you stick around long enough, you may discover in all this wood, grains of truth.”

9. MEDIUM AT LARGE by Singapore Art Museum. "You can imagine the 31 pieces on display asking themselves and the viewer: What am I? It's also one of SAM's most playful shows in a while and examines this often-taken-for-granted descriptor in art, the "medium". In category- and label-obsessed Singapore, we like things clear-cut and defined. A painting? A conceptual work? A sculpture? That's where the fun begins."

10. MONKEY GOES WEST by Wild Rice. "It's Broadway Beng Sebastian Tan's directorial debut for the theatre company and he puts his undeniable "beng" stamp on playwright Alfian Sa'at's layered interpretation of the Chinese classic novel. It's a tale of family, friendship and belonging. But what makes this even more engaging, beyond its immediate lessons and sheer entertainment value, are other things that Alfian highlights. Achieving enlightenment and having fun — it is the same thing in Monkey Goes West."

Honourable mentions: The Rise & Fall Of Little Voice by Pangdemonium Productions, Poor Thing by The Necessary Stage, Tell Me Something I Don't Know by Geraldine Kang, Ten Thousand Tigers by Ho Tzu Nyen, SingPoWriMo 2014 Facebook page by Joshua Ip and company, We Are Home And Everywhere by Zai Kuning, Countershadow (Tactics In Evasion) by ICAS, Logical Progressions by Ang Song Ming, In The Deadpan Bed Pan by Tan Wee Lit, and Play Things by Michael Chiang.

BRUCE QUEK'S TOP PICKS

1. COUNTERSHADOWS (TACTICS IN EVASION) by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore / Melanie Pocock (curator). How do you discuss the hidden — would such an examination negate its concealment or would it likewise become evasive? This group show brought together intellectually stimulating works by Jeremy Sharma, Heman Chong, Sai Hua Kuan and others in a setting which

challenged conventional notions of the display of artworks in a gallery.

2. NAMELESS FORMS by Latent Spaces / Chun Kai Qun (curator). Instead of passively bemoaning the ever-present crunch on available gallery space and platforms for presenting contemporary art, Latent Spaces took it upon themselves to transform a dilapidated room in Haw Par Villa into an art space, with their first exhibition taking that same transformation as its subject and material, providing a perspective on heritage and history not bogged down by misty-eyed nostalgia.

3. THE PRINTER / THE PAPER / THE LAYER / THE THING'S RIGHT(S) / THE LITTLE FAT FLESH by Inga Svala Thorsdottir and Wu Shanzhuan. If you think the Singapore Tyler Print Institute show's title is a mouthful, wait till you get to grips with the conceptual depths mined by the artist duo — encompassing such varied notions as mystic geometry, the civil rights of inanimate objects, map-making and ecology.

4. MACHINE FOR (LIVING) DYING IN by Michael Lee. If life could be reduced to a series of mechanical operations, would it be a life worth living, or simply a slow, steady state of awaiting death? The show at Yavuz Fine Art asked these and other questions, examining matters ranging from dying alone to the common experience of inhabiting HDB flats.

5. PARABOLA by Genevieve Chua. It's easy to forget just how much can be extrapolated from a single point of data — in the case of Parabola, which was shown at Tomio Koyama Gallery, the show begins with the humble human pelvis, and goes on to explore our evolution (with some presentiment of our eventual end) through formal extrapolations of the complex topology of the pelvis.

Honourable mentions: Medium At Large at the Singapore Art Museum, XXII by Joshua Yang (Sculpture Square), Time Travelers Chronicle

(Doubt): 2014 – 802,701 A.D by Rirkrit Tiravanija (STPI), Requiem by Jason Wee (Galerie Michael Janssen Singapore), Sound: Latitudes and Attitudes (ICAS), Of Indeterminate Time Or Occurrence by Heman Chong (FOST Gallery).

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