

Suzann Victor

By Sue Sismondo

Suzann Victor, the only female artist to represent Singapore at the Venice Biennale (in 2001) was Artist-in-Residence at STPI in July 2014. Victor has built an international reputation with installations for biennales and commissions in Singapore and Australia, where she has been based since 1996. The artist produces conceptually sophisticated and visually striking installations that often incorporate kinetic elements and repetitive motion. Her multimedia works are site-specific and her work covers many genres: "I am directed by the site-specificity of the work or the process the work entails," she explains, "so [I am] not restricted in the use of materials." Although her work can be interpreted on many levels, the artist stresses that the theory never comes first: "It's always about the site and the context; it's how to work with the (commissioning) institution to come up with engaging forms. It's the embodiment of how we connect with people."

Her permanent installations in Singapore can be seen at NMS: *Contours of a Rich Manoeuvre*, the swinging chandeliers on the linkway between the old colonial building and the modern addition, and in the lobby of the Meritus Mandarin, the seven-foot-long *Panoramic Matrix*, which uses 90,000 crystal glass beads on 3,000 strands of monofilament in a reinterpretation of the Chinese scroll. NMS was also the site for *Rainbow Circle*, the artist's magical double rainbow water installation for the 2013 Singapore Biennale. Her frequent use of transparent materials, especially glass and water, is all about capturing light. The dynamic *Skin to Skin* (2005), located on the windy site of World Square, Sydney, uses light-responsive stainless steel plates and also wind-directed LED lights.

Victor turned to art in her late 20s, earning a Diploma in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts and producing award-winning abstract paintings. She was a founder and artistic director of 5th Passage (1992 to 1994), which sought to provide a community-based platform for art students and emerging artists in Singapore. Following press-fuelled outrage over an art event co-sponsored by 5th Passage when



Suzann Victor in the STPI workshop using acid to etch a large copper plate, image courtesy of STPI

Josef Ng snipped his pubic hair as part of his performance piece and the subsequent 10-year proscription on state funding for performance art in Singapore, Victor conceived of an alternate way to address the naked form, morality and sexuality with the installation piece *His Mother is a Theatre* (1994) in which human hair was used to spell out parts of the female human body.

Invitations to participate in several international exhibitions followed: the Japan Foundation Tokyo, the second Asia Pacific Triennial (Australia 1996), and the sixth Havana Biennale (Cuba 1997) where she constructed a quilt made of glass squares containing drops of blood from her host's family (*Third World Extra Virgin Dreams*).

With no real way to pursue her art in Singapore, Victor accepted a scholarship offer from the University of Western Sydney in 1996 where over the years she has earned a Bachelors, Masters and PhD in Visual Arts, all on scholarships. She identifies herself as a Singapore artist, whose intellectual development was 'schooled' in Australia, and celebrates the diversity of her experience. "It provides the ability to choose and be discerning about the values one embraces to form one's identity," she says. "The notion of identity is less about purity and more about complexity and diversity. We learn so much from the 'other.'"

She strives to make her work as open as possible: "I'm not interested in having things defined to death. The audience should *never* be underestimated. I try to create many layers of interpretation to allow the viewer to own the work and to encourage their own investment in how they interpret the work."

The STPI residency allowed Victor to work on prototypes that she hopes to further develop in the future. An exhibition of her work at STPI is scheduled for early 2015.



Skin to Skin, 2005, World Square, Sydney, Australia. Light-responsive stainless steel plates, wind-directed LED lights, antenna. Image courtesy of the artist, © Suzann Victor

Sue Sismondo is a docent at STPI where 23 women artists have been invited for residencies in the institute's 12-year history.
