

Linger in the world of S. Raoul

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Arts Correspondent

The scene is set up such that maybe, just maybe, S. Raoul would be back any moment, to wade through the detritus on his desk.

Suitcases full of notes and coffee-table books. Notebooks filled with scribbles, drawings and etchings. Boxes of flotsam and jetsam sit next to artworks on shelves, in a gallery at Lasalle College of the Arts.

So who is S. Raoul? Did he exist? And if he did, who – or what – killed him?

Allegedly a scientist, theorist and archaeologist, S. Raoul is the “star” in a new exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts titled *The Retrospectacle Of S. Raoul*, which opens tomorrow.

He is the invention of India-born, Singapore-based artist Shubigi Rao, whose first solo show here is as a conduit for her fictional creation. On the college’s webpage, she is billed as his “biographer and confidante”.

In fact, the exhibition is a showcase of her sheer artistic range: from installation works to video works; writings to hand-crafted books and a plethora of images. All are intended, says Rao, 38, a part-time lecturer at the arts college, “to make the viewer linger”.

And linger one must, in the world of S. Raoul – his scientific experiments, archaeological finds and the work which led to the visionary being felled by a tragic mishap – because it is so compelling.

The artist, who is married and has a 16-month-old son, leaves the viewer to imagine what happened

to S. Raoul. To her, this exhibition of his pseudo-scientific theories from the last decade is about addressing several issues through art-making.

“This looks really gross but it is quite clean,” she says as she opens a box containing what she calls “rubbish found on East Coast beach”. It includes plastic scoops, parts of toys, pieces of styrofoam, mottled with age, all carefully preserved on a bed of cotton. “By studying leftovers, I am trying to critique how knowledge is generated. It questions the practice of collecting, the act of preservation and who decides what is important enough to be stored, studied and presented.”

It is an idea which finds greater depth in *The River Of Ink* (2008), a work that powerfully addresses the futility of preservation in the face of cultural genocide.

By soaking 100 hand-drawn and hand-lettered books in the same fountain pen ink used to create the drawing and lettering, the books undergo dissolution. Some appear “pulped”, while others see the text dissolve in ink. The words and drawings that survive point more towards the painful, irreversible destruction than anything.

“The most destructive act we can do is to destroy books,” she says. “The Nazis destroyed books, the Library of Baghdad was obliterated, it has happened in Sarajevo.”

Apart from books, the show also includes scientific experiment to prove “art deranges the brain”.

The Tuning Fork Of The Mind, commissioned for the 2008 Singapore Biennale where it was a popular exhibit, reappears here. It is a machine that measures

brainwaves traumatised by overexposure to art. Electrodes are places on the viewer’s temples and the waves generated are translated into sound by the machine.

Rao says her fascination with science has to do ironically with flunking the subject in school and trying to understand the fuss about it.

A literature graduate from India’s Delhi University, the Mumbai-born artist moved here in 2001 and obtained a first-class Master’s in Fine Art from the Lasalle College of the Arts in 2008.

She has received several awards, including the 2005 Winston Oh Travel Award, an annual grant given to promising young local artists to travel abroad and broaden their artistic experience. She has also exhibited in China, Indonesia, Holland and India.

Her work stemmed from “reading the most inappropriate books when I was a child”, she says. “I was glad I grew up in a time without distractions, without television, so I was absorbed in books about natural history, science, literature. Anything but school texts.”

On why it took her more than 10 years to mount her first solo show here, she says: “To me, a solo has to be a serious, long-term commitment. I did not feel the need for a solo as I have platforms here in several group shows which allowed me to stay focused on S. Raoul.”

In his foreword to the book published with the show, *History’s Malcontents – The Life And Times Of S. Raoul*, ICA director Charles Merewether writes: “In many respects, S. Raoul stands for us all and for the spirit to push beyond the limit of the every day, to engage with others so as to change the way we might imagine the future together.”

Channelling her works through this persona, he adds, Rao evokes many writers, image-makers and stories.

As for the tongue-in-cheek term “Retrospectale”, in a sea of retrospectives happening in the art scene, Rao says with a laugh: “Art loves legalese and I thought we could have a bit of fun with it.”



Artist Shubigi Rao with *The Tuning Fork Of The Mind* (left) and *Stabbing At Immortality: Building A Better Jellyfish* (foreground). PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

View it

THE RETROSPECTACLE OF S. RAOUL BY SHUBIGI RAO

Where: Earl Lu Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Lasalle College of the Arts, 1 McNally Street
When: Tomorrow till April 11, daily from 10am to 6pm. Closed on Mondays and public holidays. Artist talk on Wednesday, 6 to 7pm
Admission: Free
Info: Call 6496-5075