

## All In Good Time

**Shubigi Rao** is an artist and writer whose eclectic interests embrace subjects as different as science and literature, archaeology and art theory, and so much more. Individually and collectively these inform her art, which speaks to personal and global concerns.

*You came to Singapore in 2002. What has Singapore given to you as an artist?*

It has undeniably changed what I make and how I approach my work. The first piece I did here in 2003-2004, *The Study of Leftovers*, was a faux-archaeological endeavor of Singapore as an extinct civilization based on a study of its litter. This was a response to Singapore's First World patterns of mass consumption and unsound disposable culture. It's strange to be regarded as a foreign artist—I've always felt like an alien in India, the land of my birth—and yet it is impossible to not react or be sensitive to one's environment. Clinging to identification labels is a peculiar form of insecurity. Since eschewing a singular affiliation or identity, I feel liberated from lazy readings or easy context application. I think I'm more of a cultural nomad.

*Your art practice reflects a distinct intellectual curiosity. Do you feel that you bring a unique perspective to art-making in Singapore?*

I'm not wholly sure if that's necessarily a good thing. Since each major work demands complete immersion in a field of knowledge outside my expertise, an intense period of study and isolation, I find it hard to get enough distance from my work to be able to situate it with fair accuracy in Singapore. Also, I have this unreasonable tendency to work in ten-year-long periods, which means that if the artwork can be a very different animal by the end. It also means that I rarely have solo shows during this time.

*For you is there no distinction between making art and writing?*

I'm still unable to separate writing from art-making, and I think the reasons lie in my formative years where I was brought up by my parents' library of old and rare books. Being exposed to the minds of people, alive and long dead, across time and geography, nation and ideology meant that I see commonalities and connections before I see difference, which

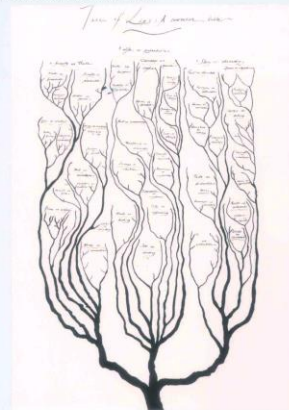
again is why words like 'local' and 'foreign' are laughable to me.

*Is installation art the most genuine and organic expression of your artistic pursuits?*

Installations have worked well for me because of their sprawling nature, which is closer in ethos to my process of thinking, reading, and making. You're very perceptive to use 'organic' here, because my installations are unrehearsed, and are often assembled on site.



Shubigi Rao, installation view of *The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul*, 2013. Images: Courtesy of the Artist.



Shubigi Rao, *Tree of Lies: A conversion table*, 2013, mixed media on Tiepolo paper, 100 x 70 cm.

*Over the past decade, how has the Singapore art scene changed? How has it impacted on you as an artist?*

I suppose the generational shift that marks the careers and work of Singaporean artists born in the 1970s is what you are referring to here, and I would agree that it is a remarkable evolution. I am energized and excited by the work of artists, writers, and filmmakers now, whose work reflects an exquisite sensitivity, sophistication, and adeptness. This is why I feel more at home here (as an artist especially), where boundaries are fluid and art-making is plugged into the world at large. It still embodies an intellectual spirit. The movement of information and ideas has always interested me, and my art has been sharpened through my experiences here. Most of my work is a response to local situations, though it is invariably coded and rarely obvious as such.

*What are the challenges of being an artist in Singapore and do you think artists here are short term?*

The challenges keep shifting, but certain constants remain—the lack of naturally occurring artist-space enclaves for instance, and of enough cheap studio space (especially for graduating art students) mean that production and interaction are affected.

I certainly don't think artists here are short-term. You can see the longevity of idea and form, and the deeply considered thoughtful superstructures within which artists here think and work. And that's not taking into account the adroitness and confidence with which artists here have traveled, studied, worked, and shown overseas. This elasticity is a form of adaptation that I think makes for artwork with substantial staying power.

*Is it difficult to get financing for your projects? If it is, why do you think it is difficult?*

We all have different methods of funding our projects. For the first decade, my

work was funded by my work as a part-time lecturer at LASALLE College of the Arts and polytechnics, as well as writing and editing. As my projects have grown in scope and scale, the National Arts Council has been very supportive but I still like to rely on my own sources of income. I suppose this is because I can't take money very seriously, and so, when I find I've run out, I use low-tech solutions. I also can't bring myself to believe that anyone owes me a living, and so it took me a full decade before I applied to the NAC for funds. Again, this isn't feasible for everyone, of course.

*Do you feel that recent changes to Singapore's art infrastructure, gallery closures and art fairs, for example, have altered people's overall perceptions of the art world?*

Fairs and arenas change, rise and fall, and I don't think that radically changes how and why artists make and think about art. Infrastructure is, to me, the tail-end of the whole business. So far it hasn't affected how I work. Of course this is also because of the non-commercial, unsellable aspect of what I do, and so I've tended to operate outside this structure. When I need institutional support, I've looked beyond the art world. I'm currently working with universities and libraries globally, taking my work outside the more insular and temperamental infrastructure you mention.

*Your last solo exhibition was in 2013. What are you working on now and how do you see your practice evolving?*

The solo [exhibition] in 2013 that marked the end of the *S. Raoul* project also marked a shift towards a more urgent and perhaps less whimsical method and approach. Three months after that show, I began to work on another decade-long endeavor, *Pulp: A short biography of the banished book*, about the history of book destruction, censorship, and other forms of repression, and looks at the book as resistance and as civilizing influence. This involves visiting public and private collections, libraries and archives globally that have served as flashpoints in history, collecting fragments, ephemera, anecdotes, buried secrets, and piecing together (through film, books and artworks) a composite chronology of the trajectory of our species. The project was born out of my anger with the destructive history of our species and the cultural destruction we continue to perpetuate. Δ

[Christina Arum Sok]