



The Package Tour by Shubigi Rao and Malvina Tan

A return to Space

Singapore artists give unusual spaces a makeover in the second season of okto's Watch This Space



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FOR visual artist Shubigi Rao, the Changi Airport viewing gallery at Terminal 1 is "a funny place".

"People go there to watch planes — which are actually very far. It's in a boring part (of the airport) where the whole energy of the airport is actually missing. You see people napping, and I suspect it's where people let their kids run around without any danger of destroying merchandise," she quipped.

In short, it was a place that was ripe for an artistic make-over. Which was exactly what Rao and fellow artist Malvina Tan did for the second season of *Watch This Space*, the local reality TV show that sees Singapore artists creating artworks in unusual public spaces within a tight deadline.

The result was *The Packaged Tour*, a whimsical installation that looks at different notions of flight, and comprises boxes of dioramas, souvenir objects dug up from flea markets and thrift shops, some hidden security cameras, mirrors, televisions and a mattress.

What went on during the making of Rao and Tan's artwork will be revealed in one of the episodes of the series, which premieres this Wednesday night on MediaCorp's okto channel.

The success of the initial series prompted its producers to think even bigger. Last year's five-episode series, which saw a sculpture comprising 20 umbrellas erected outside Tiong Bahru Plaza and an interactive tent installation over at East Coast Park, among others, has now expanded.

This season, *Watch This Space* will feature 10 episodes with 10 pairs of artists that include a mix of established and emerging young players, including Vertical Submarine's Justin Loke, performance artist Jeremy Hiah, art photographer Zhao Renhui and graphic illustrator Kristal Melson.

"We wanted the idea of bringing art out from the gallery and into places where people might not expect to see art. And in a way, you'll be surprised or shocked by it," explained executive producer and director Jordan Katherine See, who added that the final artworks will be up throughout the duration of *Watch This Space*, so that viewers who get the itch to, can actually go out and see the works for themselves can do so.

While its premise echoes similar ideas, like the *Open House* art walkabout series, most recently held in Tiong Bahru, or the American reality TV contest *Work Of Art*, there hasn't been anything quite like this



Dream Dimensions by Marla Bendini and Michael Lee

show on local TV — and it has elicited some unusual reactions from audiences.

"People really did want to come up to the works and touch (the works). In a gallery, you're told not to touch, but in this case, you're encouraged to interact with it. We had cases last year where the interaction part was a little bit too much," See recounted with a laugh.

Interaction takes an interesting twist in at least one of the works. For their episode, performance artist Marla Bendini and fellow artist Michael Lee present a performance installation at the Sentosa Boardwalk. Titled *Dream Dimensions*, it comprises duct tape drawings of a floor plan of a cruise ship for visitors to take an imaginary tour. But for one day, at least, the two artists also did a performance, taking on different roles to enact a "cruise party".

"We provided chalk and people actually added their own drawings. One

of them drew a baby pool on the 'deck' of the ship," recalled Bendini. "We didn't just want to create an installation for the TV show but we really treated it as an extension of our practice — which happens to be in a TV show. I consider being on TV as a performance as well."

Of course, for certain artists, having a camera looking over the shoulders as you get creative juices flowing can be a bit disconcerting. "Television is a whole different animal, quite terrifying actually," Rao deadpanned.

But not, we're pretty sure, as frustrating as having a member of the public "tweak" a work. "We had a minor bit of vandalism the other day. Somebody dumped candy bar wrappers into the work," said Rao.

Maybe they could have added a "do not litter" sign as part of their design.

Watch This Space (Season 2) premieres this Wednesday, 10pm, on okto Channel.

ARTS

The art of teaching art

WHEN the American painter, sculptor and installation artist Paul Thek taught art classes at Cooper Union in the late 1970s, he wrote and then gave to his students a long, provocative and now famous list of questions and marching orders he titled, *Teaching Notes*.

Thek's sometimes intimate questions included "On what do you sleep?" and "Have you ever been seriously ill?"

Among his tantalising assignments for students were "Add a station to the cross", and "Design an abstract monument to Uncle Tom".

Teaching Notes closed with this statement, which professors (and critics) everywhere should take note of: "Remember, I'm going to mark you, it's my great pleasure to reward real effort, it's my great pleasure to punish stupidity, laziness and insincerity."

Thek's list has been passed around by serious art teachers for decades. It is now reprinted in a mischievous and nourishing new book called *Draw It With Your Eyes Closed: The Art Of The Art Assignment*, compiled by the editors of the art magazine *Paper Monument*.

The editors, in this slim book, asked dozens of artists and teachers, some well-known and some not, to speak about the best art assignments they've given or received or even heard of. And these 89 entries are accessible to anyone, many even to children. Like the conversation in the final hour of a boozy art opening, these small anecdotal essays mix gossip, profundity, bogosity and lecherousness in equal parts. The book is buzzy and wild, like real talk.

Some of the assignments printed here read like haiku. "Take an 18 x 24 inch piece of paper and make a drawing using nothing but your car"; "Defenestrate objects. Photo them in mid-air"; "Go into your studio. Using all the clothes you are wearing, make a work of art. Leave the studio naked."

Others sound like party games, albeit the kind that will have the neighbours ringing the police at midnight. There are stories here of pianos being demolished and then reassembled; of art made from nearly every bodily emission;

about an entire class unwittingly eating pot muffins at 8am on a Tuesday because a student has brought them along.

Some of these small essays are autobiographical, others confessional. More than a few are dyspeptic. There's a lot of (legitimate) pushback to the notion that art can be taught, or that assignments do anything except promote subservience and callow grade grubbing. A contributor named Justin Lieberman speaks for many when he says he often tells his students: "I am not your father! Do what you want!"

The editors note that "many of the anti-assignments collected in this book use the slippery logic of 'I command you to disobey me' and other infamous tricks of the oracle."

Most of the contributors, however, responded in the spirit of the undertaking. Their essays are a pleasure, in that they show us serious thinkers returning to bedrock principles. They remind us that every artist was an apprentice once.

One surprise is that a book like this one doesn't already exist. When the editors began work on it, they were surprised to find, in art literature, "how little attention was paid to the nuts and bolts of art teaching". They point out that art assignments have largely been an oral tradition, "adapted, shared, and reworked". This book thus comprises a mini-canon.

A fair amount of flatulent academic writing clouds the air in *Draw It With Your Eyes Closed* ("all art should kind of assault the domestic interior"; "begin by revising your previous notions of space"); but it is an upbeat and idiosyncratic book that also happens to speak some uncomfortable truths about the art world.

One of them is this: "It's quite difficult to get a foothold if somebody older than you doesn't take an active interest." Perhaps more pertinently, there is this advice to any teacher who lords it over his or her students: "Don't forget how easy it is for them to find images of your own work on the Internet."

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