

Art review: The Retrospectacle of S Raoul | 3.5/5



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By Bruce Quek -
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That, at least, is the story suggested by the exhibition, *The Retrospectacle Of S Raoul*.

But it's not long before you might realise that Rao is more Raoul's author than chronicler — Raoul is as real as a mentor as Spinal Tap was a real rock band.

Now on at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, the exhibition assembles some of Rao's works from the past 10 years based around the figure of S Raoul. Special mention should be given to the exhibition's accompanying publication, *History's Malcontents: The Life And Times Of S Raoul*, as a guide to both the befuddling character of S Raoul, and those of Rao's works not seen in the show itself.

As a rich cabinet of curiosities, the exhibition showcases the broad interests of Rao (through the persona of Raoul). These include archaeological studies of contemporary Singapore, as seen in *The Study Of Leftovers*, *Pseudoscience In Suitcase*, and *Earth=Unearth*.

In these works, Rao studies Singapore — and not through our grand works and tourist magnets, but through what we leave behind. It might be better thought of as an examination of the decision-making involved in collecting, preserving, and studying artefacts. How do we know what we know? Are we looking in the right places?

The Tuning Fork Of The Mind, which was originally commissioned for the 2008 Singapore Biennale, presents the artist's interests in contemporary art. Specifically, it is concerned with contemporary art's supposedly damaging effects, inviting you — through a series of engagingly fiddly steps — to get your brain scanned, and be shown how much you've put your poor brain through — what with all that contemporary art you've been feeding it.

Within the story woven for the show, Rao's *River Of Ink* might act as a point of contact between the twin identities of Shubigi Rao and S Raoul. It's the supposed object of S Raoul's untimely death, and at the same time, a collection of hand-drawn, hand-lettered books obliterated by a soak in fountain pen ink, a stark reflection of the violence that can be (and has been) done to knowledge.

In a refreshing turnabout, *The Retrospectacle Of S Raoul* manages to avoid — and take a jab at — the funerary stiffness of the conventional retrospective, in which an artist's past works are carefully laid out for us to offer our respects, and accept the condensed, edited history of the artist.

It is both Rao's artistic retrospective and an opportunity to honour the "dearly departed" Raoul at the same time, offering us many chances to slip from one frame of mind to the other, but never quite taking either entirely seriously.

The Retrospectacle Of S Raoul runs until April 11, 10am to 6pm, Earl Lu Gallery, Lasalle College Of The Arts. Closed on Mondays and public holidays. Free admission.