

Beauty & Difficulty

biennales, art fairs, painting and contemporary art



When asked how her work relates to the theme of this year's Singapore Biennale, Shubigi Rao replied: "It isn't really my job to teach anyone how to feel 'wonder'; that would be presumptuous and arrogant." As for the work itself, *The Tuning Fork of the Mind*, the artist described a component of it as devised to "measure brain damage caused by art." One presumes she was joking, but perhaps she was half serious as well.

I remember sitting next to Shubigi at the opening press launch of 'Wonder', and we were both dismayed by the populist messages that dominated the occasion—to the exclusion of other aspects of the exhibition. A month later, the arts minister would, at the launch of the NAC's Arts for All programme, push the same ideas.

Yes, art can be for anyone, but one shouldn't confuse that position with the assumption that the art you find at exhibitions like biennales is meant for everyone. Contemporary art eludes definition: if anything, what characterises it is pluralism. But there are approaches common to a lot of it. For instance, the questioning of convention. To be sure, some provocations have themselves become conventional, but that doesn't mean artists have stopped asking questions.

But usually, biennale art takes a little more effort to engage with than, say, a popular television sitcom. This does not mean that art should be inaccessible, only that there are degrees of access. Since not everyone cares to make the effort for art, it's not for everyone, and that should be fine. We shouldn't be dumbing down art so that it becomes 'effortless'. That would be both condescending to audiences and self-defeating for artists. We forget that we've been trained for years, since we started watching television as kids, to consume popular culture. So why is it too much to ask that we learn a few things in order to appreciate art?

Commentators in the daily newspapers have taken this Biennale to task for being

puzzling and unattractive. A Sunday Times editorial prejudged the show before it opened, questioning whether works like the Aquilizans' "forest" of 4,000 slippers, Flight, should be considered art. Ong Sor Fern, in her column for the Straits Times, argued that contemporary art seems to have deliberately eschewed beauty, and is the poorer for doing so. However, in both cases, the writers have made some highly problematic assumptions. In the twentieth century, thanks in large part to Duchamp and Warhol, the art world has finally got over the question, "Is it art?" Yes it is. Paintings of soup cans, factory-made urinals strategically placed in museums, or rubber thongs on top of bamboo poles. The question that remains now is: "But is it any good?"

That can be a very difficult question to answer. The Sunday Times assumes that one can decide this without actually experiencing the work at all. If anything, what art demands is experience. One has to look, and look again.

And looking is not an easy thing. Ong Sor Fern believes that beholding a masterpiece by the 17th century painter Velasquez would be like a direct appreciation of its beauty. But would she be able to discriminate between a great Velasquez and a lesser one?—that is, of course, if she didn't have recourse to an education in art history.

It's often assumed that looking at a painting is easier than looking at an installation. I went to ARTS Singapore, and if I were someone quick to judge, I'd employ the words puzzling and unattractive. But the point I want to make is this: the experience reminded me how difficult it is to look at a painting. There were works I found simply unappealing; others looked technically accomplished but conceptually bankrupt. These were just quick impressions, inadequate to the task of an honest judgement. One has to look, and look again. Even for paintings. And, surely, for biennales.

Written by Lee Weng Choy