The ground has shifted at the Singapore Art Museum.
By Mayo Martin -
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Well, a part of it at least — there’s a gaping square patch of nothing at the museum’s front lawn, and that plot of land has been transported wholesale inside.

The earth art installation Real Estate is by Twardzik Ching Chor Leng, an artist who, incidentally, had also transported water from the Singapore River to the museum a few years ago. It’s also part of the museum’s first post-Singapore Biennale exhibition titled Unearthed.

Comprising 28 works from Singapore artists, Unearthed tackles issues relating to the natural world and how we deal with these. Here are works that alternate between the macro and the micro, question the future or digs into the past, wade into water or wander on land. It’s environmental, it’s historical. Familiar works rub shoulders with new commissions, science meets art.

SIGNAL OF INTENT

When it comes to the direction of the Singapore Art Museum, only time will tell if there will be a significant metaphorical ground shift as well. In the meantime, its new director, Susie Lingham, describes the first official show under her tenure as the “perfect beginning” in a push...
to make SAM what she describes as a “creative museum”.

It wouldn’t be hard to look at Unearthed as a signal of intent, especially when Lingham underscores how it will not be about the “high-end market but about art and curatorial research”.

It’s no secret that SAM had previously introduced shows — many of which were good — that reflected a broader, general sentiment about Singapore’s place in the art scene. Exhibits done in overt collaborations with collectors and with art-giving bodies, for instance, supported the idea of Singapore (and its contemporary art museum) as a regional hub for a booming art market.

And while Lingham would clarify that, of course, such links or relationships are a given when it comes to any museum of contemporary art of such scale, one senses that priorities could be slightly different this time around.

SAM, for her, will be a “nexus, a place that allows for the meetings of minds and practices”.

“In the next few years, we’ll be looking at counterpointing things, comparative practices,” she said, whether it’s between scientists and artists, musicians and artists, or between two painters.

Unearthed, for example, showcases six new works that were done in collaboration with Nanyang Technological University’s Earth Observatory Of Singapore (EOS), the only earth science research centre with an art residency programme. Among these are Singaporean artists Sai Hua Kuan’s installation, which creates sound using wet soil dug from Seletar, and Robert Zhao Renhui’s photographs of landscapes of disaster-struck Padang and Banda Aceh.

NEW FACES

It’s not just these obvious acts of interdisciplinary collaborations that hint at something different.

Unearthed’s line-up of artists include some familiar — though no less interesting — works seen at previous gallery exhibitions and Biennales, from the likes of Ho Tzu Nyen, Charles Lim, Yeo Chee Kiong, Donna Ong and Zhao. But you’ve also got some left-of-centre surprises, like Ezzam Rahman’s fascinating mini-sculptures of animal skeletons made from his dead skin, Debbie Ding’s installations involving rocks, the Singapore River and memories, and Frayn Yong’s mini-cityscapes made from pencil lead — works that have been exhibited in smaller non-museum venues like the Substation previously.

More tellingly, you have pieces by some pretty established artists making their debuts at the museum.

Artist-scientist Isabelle Desjeux’s 1000 Rubber Seeds And One Mutant continues her investigations of “failure” with a showcase of rubber seed specimens and one abnormal one that failed to explode (and some that eventually will, over time, in the museum itself).

Woon Tien Wei and Jennifer Teo, the husband-and-wife artist-activist team behind Post-Museum, have been busy holding tours and raising awareness at Bukit Brown cemetery. And here they’ve created a kind of ecosystem experience called The Bukit Brown Index, which comprises a wall on which the names of the exhumed are written, another list of supernatural
sightings at the cemetery and portraits of “Brownies” (members of a heritage group) with their favourite Bukit Brown spots. In the middle of all these, on the floor, is a huge printout of the Land Acquisition Act.

And then you have two works from Lucy Davis relating to animals she found at the Raffles Museum Of Biodiversity Research. Both that have, literally, swallowed history. Nanyang Meadows is an installation that centres on a crocodile killed in Singapore in 1887. Or, to be precise, the eight bags of wheat found in its stomach — an unusual crop to find in this part of the world, leading to what Davis describes as a “metaphor of the pastoralisation of the tropics” by past colonial masters.

All The Way Down, meanwhile, revolves around a tortoise, that, upon its dissection, was discovered to have consumed old newspapers and documents from the early 20th century. Here it’s presented poetically as pieces of paper floating down over a hologram of the tortoise.

The artistic practices of all three have, more or less, taken place in more academic and experimental arenas. To find them inside SAM is an interesting development.

Admittedly, it would be folly to judge a museum’s new direction solely on one show. But considering what its next show will be, we’re getting curiouser and curiouser. Next month’s Medium At Large is partially set to tackle the issues of being, well, a museum.

“It will be about the difficulties of collecting contemporary art in the region,” said Lingham. “It will be a very educational show.”

A show about a museum that holds up a mirror to itself? This we have to see.

Unearthed runs until July 6 at the Singapore Art Museum and SAM at 8Q. For more information, visit http://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg [1]

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