



Project Mandala
Mun Kiti

T. K. Sabapathy

**"project mandala"
tang mun kit**

curated and text by T. K. Sabapathy

sculpture

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Sabapathy, T.K.

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Foreword

Sculpture Square's annual *One Singapore Artist* exhibition series this year is featuring its fourth local artist since its inauguration in 2001. *One Singapore Artist* is part of Sculpture Square's continuous efforts to provide a platform for Singaporean artists, in recognition of their artistic endeavours and achievements. We are pleased to invite Tang Mun Kit to be part of this series. Mun Kit is an artist whose dedication and unfaltering vision to his art making is akin to soul searching. It is no less a process of self-discovery for him, as it is for us as we participate in this artistic journey.

"project mandala" marks a significant point in Tang Mun Kit's artistic exploration since he became a full-time artist in 1985. For this solo exhibition at Sculpture Square Mun Kit is inspired by the mandala, using it as a "dot", a starting point in his exploration unlike his previous exhibitions which he attributes to experimentation and improvisation using found objects, the mandala starts his journey in a finite point. Visually, the mandala as a finite point becomes a challenge for the artist who strives to break away from its limitation. In some ways, the liberation of the mandala dot as a focal point can be said also to symbolize Mun Kit's lifelong unwavering search to "seek the truth, to find the means, to express and reveal the expressions through visual arts".

Tay Swee Lin
General Manager/
Artistic Director,
Sculpture Square

The making of "project mandala": an introduction

T.K.Sabapathy

My involvement in this exposition and the circumstances in which I write this commentary entail walking on accustomed and relatively unaccustomed terrain. Let me explain a little.

Writings that I offer for publications that accompany exhibitions of works by practicing artists usually spring from a particular, somewhat settled, register. This has to do with appraising productions that are selected for display as an exposition or are being readied for presentation as an exhibition. The appraisals are largely driven by art historical interests, foremost amongst these are provision of contexts in which works are looked at or read. Related interests such as delineating grounds along which significance is prospected and claimed are equally important.

When interests such as these – i.e. art works, explication and teasing out significance – are set beside new ways of writing on art, they may well come over as old fashioned, even moribund. Yet and despite the proliferation of methods and ideologies in new art writing that are often advanced as staking fields that are contested, the foundational premises for writing on art have not changed, have not been re-configured all that much. For that matter, whichever way one gauges these fields, art works or productions, contexts and assigning significance are dominant engagements in art writing. Of course, the parameters and destinations for writing are diverse; the diversity consolidates and is advanced along competing trajectories. Let us move to another matter.

There are occasions when my commentary is spurred by thoughts on curating. Here too let me explain. Entire schools on curating have emerged. This is because exhibiting works of art is now regarded as an enterprise that is complicated, debatable and problematic, for the reason that expositions are not neutral, are not value-free. Discussions on curating have to do with examining the scope, criteria and methods of representing art and artists as displays. Accordingly, in as much as art works that are displayed are available for critical explication and analysis so are forms or strategies that are employed for displaying them.

In furthering these issues, questions such as the following spring to mind persistently. How is an exhibition constituted? Who is nominated or authorised to convene an exhibition? How/why are works selected and what are the preferred methods for their display? Questions are also prompted when regarding exhibition venues, especially when venues are interrogated as spaces, locations and sites. Cast in this light, they are charged with explicit and implicit significance. How are they determined and how do they in turn determine the content and design of expositions? How do they shape, circumscribe the public-ness and the reception of art works? When this question is reversed we ask it as follows: how do art works and artists intervene as agencies to alter, even invert exhibitions as sites, locations and spaces of authority and power? And so on.

By and large my engagements in art writing have leaned towards the first cluster of issues; although matters related to curating are not advanced with comparable consistence and attention, they are implicitly present

and germane to ways I think and write on art. I commenced involvement with Tang Mun Kit's current project with these premises in mind. And as in the past, research in its initial phases entailed frequent meetings with the artist, continuous conversations regarding the advancement of his practice, present interests and their consolidation into a project leading to an exposition. I record these conversations, transcribe and publish them – as the conversation with Mun Kit is, in this instance – in order to publicise and archive the artist's voice. All of this is familiar and their traces appear in this publication.

I remarked at the beginning of this commentary that in dealing with Mun Kit's "*project mandala*", the designation of his current exposition, the terrain covered is both accustomed and unaccustomed. I have pointed to the familiar.

What generates the unfamiliar, the unanticipated – albeit relatively? Why do I feel that the terrain is somewhat unaccustomed? Answers to these questions spring from encountering *project mandala* in conditions of unreadiness, incompleteness as an exposition at the time of writing this commentary and proceeding, nevertheless, to write it by acceding to these circumstances as constituting foundational grounds. I register this not in exasperation, not in despair. I enter it as signaling a shift towards attending to different domains with interest. I also mark it as requiring involvement with concerns of artists that are usually neglected and remain unmentioned in my writing. All this entails listening and writing with different accents. Hence, the focus in this commentary is on conditions and procedures of work, in other words with preliminaries of the project. I cast it as a report that is not exhaustive. Neither is its tenor exclusive to Mun Kit.

For a host of reasons the duration for producing work that is pertinent for *project mandala* and readying it for an exposition was insufficient. Mun Kit usually sets aside twelve months and more, during which a project is conceptually sketched out, space and materials for executing it are prepared. In dwelling on these matters – and he returned to them repeatedly, doggedly – he pointed to the congestion in his studio, to his need to store materials in containers and stack them, to secure adequate space and ready it so that he could commence production. Initially I heard these as dull, irritating noises coming from a distance and ignored them as mere winging. Mun Kit was, however, insistent; my impatience gave way to curiosity and subsequently altered to attentiveness.

Mun Kit is a collector; he is a collector of things, objects and detritus. There is a biographical resonance to his foraging as it was a way of securing furniture and utensils from discards, for his living. Materials gathered for making art are stored in containers that are then stacked on shelves in his studio, rising from the floor to the ceiling. In the conversation published here he says "Found objects are always the starting point since 1985, when I collected objects. Found objects have been the first stimulus for the concept, the idea, the thought process. On reflection, its like an exposition of one's life (p.33)." Collectively they consolidated as a material and creative archive. As an archive they point to a system whereby material is deposited and ordered so that it can be retrieved; as a trait this is formative in Mun Kit's practice and I will say a little more on it shortly.

The archive constitutes the material base of his practice. As an archive it also generates prospects for conceptual parameters and prompts formal constructs and approaches towards fabrication. Hence, collecting,

packing, storing are not just practical functions; they generate systems and processes for creative thinking. Two expositions deal with these prospects as themes. One of them emerged from a residency at **the Substation** in 1997 and is titled, pointedly, *Hibernated Works: Objects, Sculptures, Assets aka: Materials vs Materialism*. The second was presented at Telok Kurau Studios Gallery in 2002 and is designated as *Stacks, Trunks, Racks and Rolls*.

Earlier I reported that Mun Kit customarily requires a schedule that spans twelve months and more for the realisation of a project. In describing his practice I drew attention to the foundational importance of materials that are collected, stored systematically and consolidated as an archive. Taking cues from the exhibitions mentioned, we are led to regard the archive as embodying projects that are in varying states of hibernation or gestation. We would be, however, mistaken to deduce that a project is realised merely by uncovering or emptying the archive, much like a magician conjures the genii from a vessel with a sleight of hand gesture. Mun Kit's working methods put considerable distance between his creative practice from the inexplicable feats of a conjurer.

In the conversation that is published here, he provides detailed disclosures on schedules, procedures, stages entailed in developing a project, thinking on and manipulating materials and objects, continuities and interruptions, imagery and symbolism, expositions and reception of his works and on several other matters. Rather than paraphrase the conversation, I draw the attention of readers to it thereby gaining some familiarity with ways by which Mun Kit presents his thoughts on art and on his creative practice.

In a one-page hand written submission, Mun Kit sets down his observations on developing *project mandala*. It acts as much as a brief for himself as a spur for furthering my commentary. He registers his observations in short phrases, each consisting of not more than two words. At times the phrases are juxtaposed with one another, pointing to connectedness in procedures at different phases; at other times a phrase stands alone and significantly, gathering attention to a particular issue or method. He begins his observations ruefully by remarking that due to constraints of time (a repeated lament), the project is not developed along a "step-by-step process", commencing with studies and the formation of prototypes and then proceeding to resolved or completed two-dimensional, three-dimensional productions as well as installations. The "step-by-step process" is a hallmark of Mun Kit's practice; it underlines his creative methodology. Accordingly, a project is advanced systematically, incrementally and sequentially. Decisions are made and problems solved deliberately as well as through improvisations. Even as Mun Kit posits these drives as integrating with one another, there are outcomes in which they assume tensional, even paradoxical relationships.

The "step-by-step process" also points to destinations for his creative practice, namely: the work as a completed entity, whereby the project is marked by a closure. Even so, the components that constitute it are not necessarily aligned congruently towards such conclusive ends; they can pull away and secure separate spheres of interest and absorption, thereby rendering the reading of the project as complex, permeable and as at odds with the brief set out by Mun Kit.

Let me direct some of these observations towards *project mandala*. While the "step-by-step process" has been kept in view, it has not been followed faithfully or strictly. The sequential flow of work has been interrupted,

causing ruptures in the order of production. For instance, the three-dimensional works emerged in the intervening moments separating phases in the development of the two-dimensional compositions. Drawings, sketches and studies customarily precede the execution of the three-dimensional, two-dimensional works and the installation; in his hand written observations, Mun Kit designates them as "stepping stones" to large scale improvisations. They have not been produced in this instance and when they are, they can only be done retrospectively. In doing so their tenor and function are altered, thereby assuming different interests. Beginnings are now excavated from memory; they are filtered through the sediments of consequences and outcomes but no less engaging for all this!

When this commentary is read while viewing "*project mandala*" as it is displayed, it may be construed as tangentially related to it or even not related at all. Such a verdict is fuelled by customary expectations that texts accompanying exhibitions, directly set out to explain the work on display by pointing to it, saying what it is and why it is the way it is, explicate what it means and underline why it is worth our while to look at it. On the surface this appears as a plausible mandate for writing on art; what is more, when prevailing writing is scrutinised it does, in all probability, deal with these items as sectors or sites of interest. Even then, reading art writing and reading/seeing art works are not identical operations; neither is the relationship between the two symmetrical, in the face or equivalent. In these regards, my commentaries tend towards seeking discreet, somewhat varying relatedness with art and art works.

For this instance I have written "*project mandala*" digressively, for reasons already mentioned; that is to say, not so much by looking at and reading it as such, but by going around and behind it, so much so I may have lost sight of it. Still, excursions into Mun Kit's studio and seeing its contents, reporting on his work procedures, hearing his anxieties, discussing his creative methodology and appraising what he says of his practice have been absorbing. They have widened the grounds for encounters with "*project mandala*".

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"project mandala"

MANDALA (Sanskrit for "circle") in Hindu and Buddhist Tantricism, is a holy precinct prepared in honour of a Buddha or other divinities and sometimes used for performance of a sacred rite. It is also a representation of the cosmos, a consecrated area in which the forces of the universe are collected. These forces are represented by images or signs of divinities, by ritual instruments or by other symbolic means.

The MANDALA is used to assist concentration and meditation, a map for understanding the universe and the inner landscape of the human soul, and is regarded as a manifestation of the wisdom that is engaged in realizing that all things are empty of an enduring essence. MANDALAS are seen as sacred places which remind a viewer of the immanence of sanctity in the universe and its potential in oneself. By "reading" or meditating upon the components of the MANDALA in sequence, moving inward towards the center, the viewer moves simultaneously towards one's own center and towards the center of reality, the Hindu Brahma or Buddhist nirvana. In the context of the Buddhist path, the purpose of a MANDALA is to put an end to human suffering, to attain enlightenment and a correct view of reality. It is a means to discover divinity by the realization that it resides within one's own self.

The MANDALA can be purely geometric or figurative, consisting of a periphery and a center, which stands for beginning and end of all being. The center is visualized as the essence and the circumference as grasping; thus in its complete picture, a MANDALA means "grasping the essence".

MANDALAS can be drawn, painted, sculpted, embroidered or danced. Traditionally, sand ground from precious stones was used. Today, white stones are ground and dyed with opaque water colours. The basic colours are white, black, blue, red, yellow and green. Each of the basic colours (blue, red, yellow and green) has three shades - dark, medium and light - making a total of fourteen colours.

As an example of its widespread application in the 20th Century, the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung contended that MANDALA images appear spontaneously in dreams of patients suffering from certain kinds of conflict and schizophrenia. For persons experiencing disorientation and fragmentation, dream MANDALAS are manifestations of the need for wholeness and integration of the self; they represent; a natural attempt at self-healing by the psyche.

Being a free thinker, I attempt (with due respect to its religious and spiritual aspect), to utilize the concept and form of MANDALA as a stimulus to create drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations. The process of this intention is a test on the possibilities, sculptures and installations. The process of this intention is a test on the possibilities and limitations of the usage of found objects in particular and on my improvisational approach to visual art making in general. As there are various forms of MANDALAS with distinct concepts and different purposes, I intend to experiment and expand on the format of the traditional MANDALA, whilst retaining the purpose as such, that is to become a vehicle for inspiration, for engagement, for realization.

June - August 2004.

Some information about the artwork development process. Out of necessity, preliminary study drawings were unfinished (eg. isd #1 to #6) and paintings were done while simultaneously developing sculptural studies, followed by an installation test-run at Telok Kurau Studios Gallery, before the actual Chapel Gallery installation at Sculpture Square.

The artworks are chronologically titled (ie project mandala #1, #2, #3, #4, and #5 on) but for a visual comprehension of the conceptual development, they are arranged as in the catalogue (ie. pm #1, #2, #7, #5, #6, #8, #10, #3, #4, #9 and #11). Reiterating the intent, the mandala as a dot at the centre (series pm #1 & #2), moving away from the focal point and beyond the composition boundary (series pm #7). The mandala encompassing the whole composition (pm #5) and going into the circular (series pm #6); the mandala in the act of "disappearing" into the four primary colours (series pm #8) and finally the mandala as being "everywhere" in the composition (pm #10). From reality to illusion to the void.

The installation study paintings (series pm #9), the sculptural works (series pm #3 & #4) and the Telok Kurau studios Gallery test-run culminate in an improvised on-site variable installation (pm #11). From thinking about the void and illusion, back to reality.

2 Nov 2004
Tang Mun Kit
Singapore

BIODATA

- 1955 Born in Singapore
1979 Awarded B Sc (Hons) Mech Eng, University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK
1980 - 1981 Marine and Industrial Project Engineering Work
1985 onwards Self-Study, Works Development, Exhibitions and Projects

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 **'IDEALS AND IDEAS'** – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1991 **'IMPROVISATIONEN'** – Hohmann Galerie Walsrode, Germany
1992 **'IMPROVISATIONEN'** – World Trade Centre Bremen, Germany
1993 **'On BirD and MaN'** – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1995 **'researchdocumentationpeace'** – Pitspace Gallery, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia
1996 **'IMPROVISASI dan juga...'** – Creative Centre, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
1997 **'Hibernated Works: Objects, Sculptures, Assets aka. Materials vs Materialism'** – The Substation Gallery, Singapore
1999 **'BLUEPRINTS, PLANS, ARCHETYPES, PROTOTYPES'** – Telok Kurau Studios Gallery, Singapore
2000 **'Works on Process/Works in Progress Featuring Choice, Decision, Action, Eventuality'** – Telok Kurau Studios Gallery, Singapore
2001 **'Stacks, Trunks, Racks and Rolls'** – Telok Kurau Studios Gallery, Singapore
2002 **'Thus Spake Parrots and Puppets'** – Telok Kurau Studios Gallery, Singapore
2003 **'pests and pesticides and politicians'** – Telok Kurau Studios Gallery, Singapore

PROJECTS

- 1987 **'Heavy Load'** Installation Yin and Yang Festival 1987 – National University of Singapore, Singapore
1988 **'More than 4...'** Installations and Actions – Singapore Festival of Arts, old SJI building/Botanical Gardens/City Centre, Singapore
1989 **'The Artist Studio'** Installation – Nanyang Technological Institute, Singapore
1989 **'Fighting Birds'** – Australia and regional artists exchange (ARX 1989) – Installations and Actions, Art Gallery of Western Australia/Perth ICA, Australia
1989 **Artist-in-residence** – Western Australia College of Advanced Education, Perth, Australia
1990 **'The Artist Studio (revised)'** Installation – Singapore Festival of Arts 1990 Fringe Exhibition, Singapore
1993 **'Facing the Infinite Space'** – Invitational visit/Gallery Forum/Group Exhibition - Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Centre Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
1995 **'Artist-in-residence'** – Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Melbourne, Australia
1997 **'Artist-in-residence'** – The Substation, Singapore
1999 **'Shaping a Global City'** – Artist featured in Singapore Trade Development Board Corporate video produced by Petal Productions Pte Ltd, Singapore
1999 **'Encased Objects and Sculptures'** Installation – Nokia Singapore Art 1999 (curated section), Singapore Art Museum
2000 **'Tracking Time'** – Installation Performance... Collaboration with Doppio-Parallelo (Australia), Singapore Arts Festival 2000, Clifford Pier, Singapore
2001 **'Artifacts from old SJI (Found and Missing)'** installation – Nokia Singapore Art 2001, Singapore Art Museum

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 'National Museum Heritage Week Art Fair', Singapore
1987 'National Museum Centenary Art Exhibition', Singapore
1988 '6th Shell Discovery Art Exhibition', Singapore
1988 'Man, Objects, Images 1988' – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1989 '1st ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Paintings, Photography and Children's Art' (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei and Philippines)
1989 'Open Studio Show' – The Artists Village, Singapore
1989 'Man, Objects, Images 1989' – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1990 'Contemporary Art in Singapore: Where East Meets West' Touring Exhibition (Singapore, Holland, West Germany and Scotland)
1990 'Qu Art Support II' – International Art Exhibition, Hong Kong
1990 'Modern Art Travels East-West' – Touring Exhibition (Holland, Singapore)
1990 'Urban Artists: 25 Years of Singapore Art' – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1990 'Singapore Artists Speak' – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1990 'Man, Objects, Images 1990' – National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1991 'Many in One: 25 Years of Art from Singapore' - Touring Exhibition (Singapore, USA)
1991 'National Sculpture Exhibition 1991' - National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
1993 'Eyes on Eyes' ASEAN Touring Exhibition (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei and Philippines)
1993 'Sixth Asian Art Biennial', Dhaka, Bangladesh
1994 'Window on Singapore Art' Touring Exhibition to Hong Kong and China (Beijing, Jinan, Suzhou, Shanghai, Quanzhou, Xiamen, Guangdong)
1995 'Contemporary Art of Non-aligned Countries', National Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia
1996 'Modernity and Beyond' Inaugural Exhibition, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
1996 'Grand Shell Discovery 10th Anniversary' Exhibition, Riverhouse, Singapore
1997 'Art Power', Caldwell House, CHIJMES, Singapore
2001 'Asean ART 2001 Singapore', Earl Lu Gallery, LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
2003 'Singapore - ASEAN Art Awards 2003', ARTrium, MITA Building, Singapore

AWARDS

- 1989 Special Award to Promising Artist - MCI Art Competition, Singapore
1989 Certificate of Distinction Award - 8th Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore
1990 Certificate of Distinction Award - 9th Painting of the Year competition, Singapore
1990 First Prize - IBM Art Award, Singapore
1991 Certificate of Distinction Award - 10th Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore
1993 Certificate of Commendation - 12th Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore
1996 Certificate of Commendation - 15th Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore
1997 Certificate of Commendation - 16th Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore

COLLECTIONS

- Singapore Art Museum (formerly National Museum Art Gallery), Singapore
- Deutsche Bank AG, Singapore
- World Trade Centre Bremen, Germany
- Other Corporate and Private Collections



project mandala #1-1



project mandala #1-2



project mandala #1-3



project mandala #1-4



project mandala #2-1



project mandala #2-2



project mandala #2-3



project mandala #2-4



project mandala #7-2



project mandala #7-3



project mandala #7-1



project mandala #7-4



project mandala #5



project mandala #6-1



project mandala #6-2



project mandala #6-3



project mandala #6-4



project mandala #8-1



project mandala #8-2





project mandala #8-3



project mandala #8-4





project mandala #10



project mandala #3-1



project mandala #3-2



project mandala #3-3



project mandala #3-4



project mandala #4-1



project mandala #4-2



project mandala #4-3

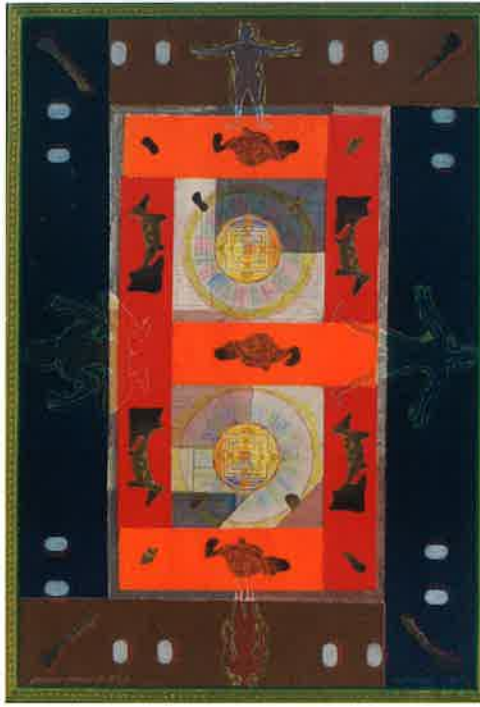


project mandala #4-4





project mandala #9-1



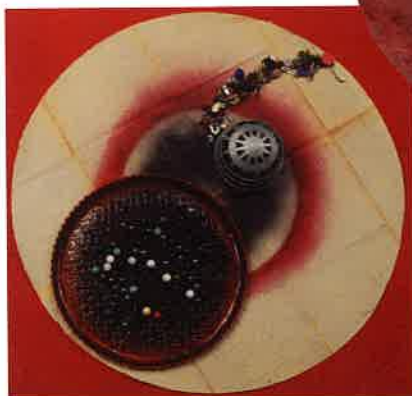
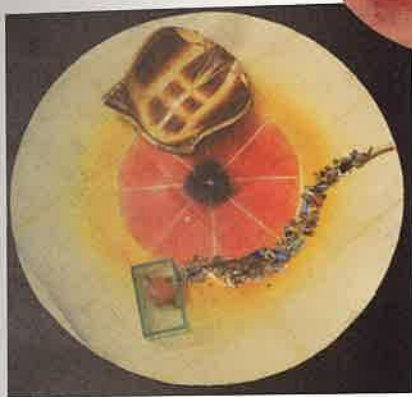
project mandala #9-2

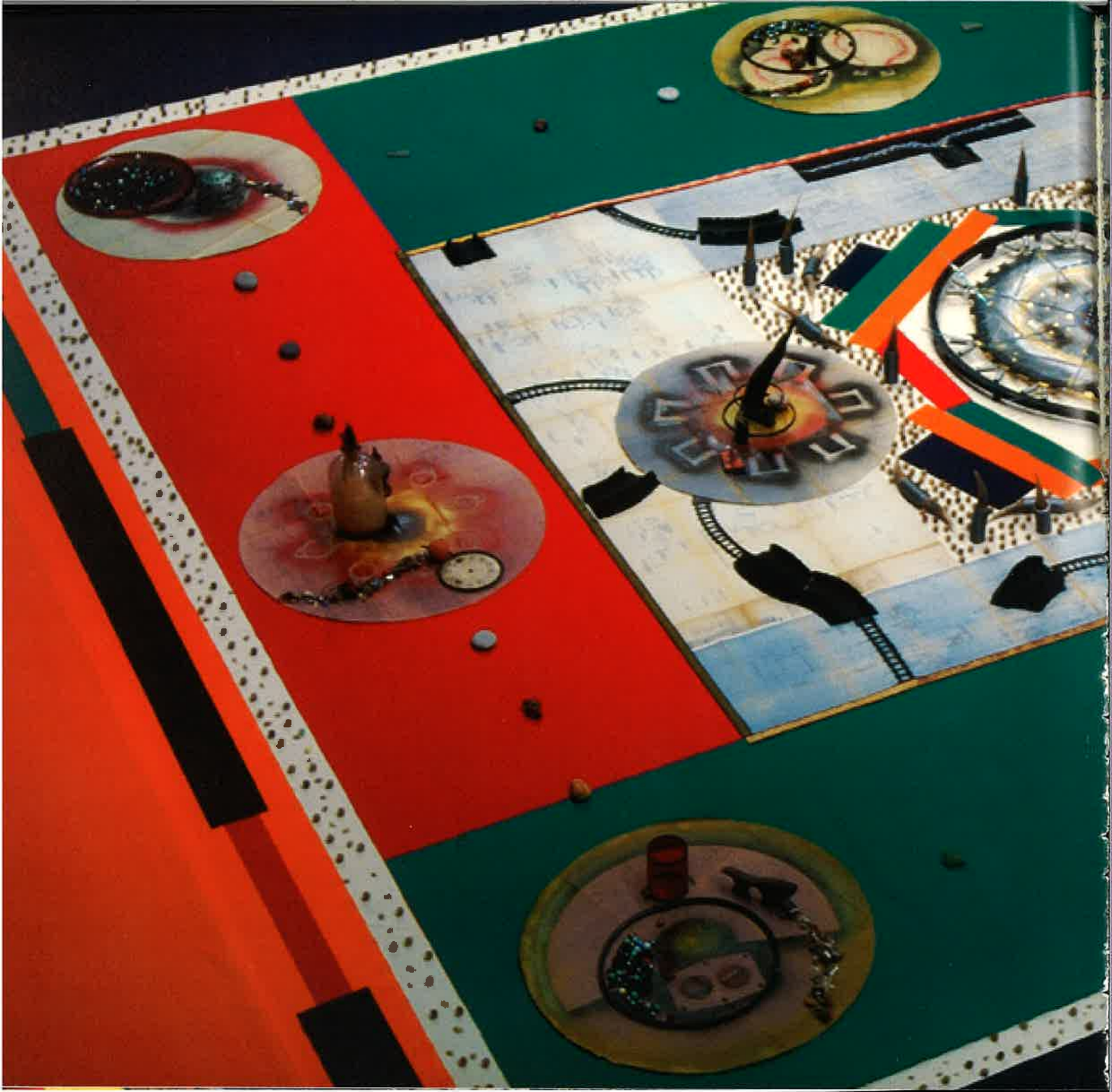


project mandala #9-3



project mandala #11







A Conversation Tang Mun Kit and T.K. Sabapathy

Session 1: Thursday Sept. 23rd 2004, 4pm, Telok Kurau Studios, Rm 106.
Session 2: Thursday Sept. 30th 2004, 4pm, Telok Kurau Studios, Rm 106.
Session 3: Friday Oct. 1st 2004, 4.05pm, Telok Kurau Studios, Rm 106.

Tks: *Can we begin with the three-dimensional works which are the most recent? Even from a cursory look, they signal a leap into very exciting, great possibilities. You are also very excited about them.*

Mk: Yes, it informs the rest of the working process as well.

Can we talk a little about that. Could you say something about the materials that have gone into their making?

Just a few days back when I was cleaning up the space, that is always the best time to do some preliminary work for three-dimensional works (pm #3-1 to pm #3-3). Its just a matter of using up what I have at hand ... from the drawings, studies, sketches that I have done so far, and the work in progress, all laid out at home, which is one-third done, paper works; it is an evolvment you know, using the same starting point, the mandala as a dot and the schematic expansion from the dot itself. It's a matter of putting the materials at hand to form the mandala - diagram more or less, just using the colours again, same four primary colours. As for the object it's a second addition on to the ground that is prepared. It's actually tentative.

As you can see from this studio that I still need to re-organise the space in order to finish up the two-dimensional works and progress to the three-dimensional, which are sculptures and installations; and then there is a test run of the actual installations. I have yet to go through the boxes of objects which I am going to use; so this is just a first, tentative usage of objects. It may change as it goes along. If you look at these three metal objects here, which fit in this work, they are found objects. Whereas, when you come to the fourth pieces here, it consists of stainless steel wires which are fabricated. This gives me a further idea of doing some sculptural panel pieces for the mandala itself. This is all very tentative and evolving, as seen in the drawings. The study drawings which I have done half way (incomplete study drawings isd #1 to #6) I have yet to go back to them because I'm just preparing the first stage of drawings and paintings, before going on to the wet stage. This is the dry stage - the collage stage - which is the first. *experiences?*



project mandala #3-1



project mandala #3-2



project mandala #3-1

The wet stage? Wet, dry stages; do they point to conditions of work and experiences?

Well, yes, it's according to the situation that I'm in. The studio space is not ready for all at one go, whereby I can do one piece at a time, where I can do the first dry stage and the second wet stage all at one go. The situation doesn't allow me, so I'm doing it in this manner at the moment, because it's a rush for time as well. We only have about three to four weeks before we finalise the exhibits for photography, for the catalogue and the framers. All that have to come after what I've done; so you know, I don't have that six or seven weeks, it's actually three to four weeks.

Let us return to the three-dimensional works. Fabricated elements are in there even when the objects are found. In the utilisation of these found objects, it seems to me there are degrees of surprise, departing from the orthodoxy of the schema. In your two-dimensional works, there is great interest in pressing everything towards a coherence and harmony. In the three-dimensional works, the objects themselves assert a certain presence, asking for a different kind of attention. This is how I read it ...

Well, these found objects are parts of certain equipment or ...

Apparatus ...

Apparatus and so on. Actually I must explain this usage of the found objects. start with the mandala's centre, the dot, expand outwards in the design of the two-dimensional works. Then proceed to the three-dimensional works. These found objects, well I must say that the tendency is to break away. This is what I fear all the time when you start off with something that is fixed, which is given, which is set forth, like a stipulation; you tend to want to break away from that. It's more like a reaction against the limitation; so this tendency is always there. So when I started off with the first four drawings, or paintings, it's very laborious because it was more like design work. So how should I put it; the decisions



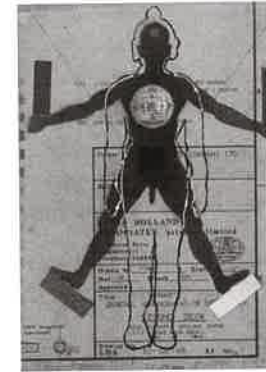
isd #1



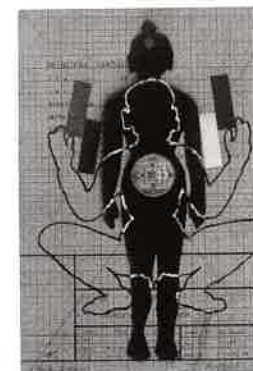
isd #2



isd #3



isd #4



isd #5



isd #6

overtake the spontaneity, you know, to decide where to place certain shapes, in what manner to form this geometrical design. What I can see is that towards the end of the whole process, the tendency is not to use the mandala.

First the mandala marks a dot, has a centre; next to move it away from the centre. Next, have the whole composition encompass the mandala itself so there is no one point for the mandala, but the whole composition is the mandala itself. Finally to break away from using the dot, the mandala itself. So I have yet to come to that stage, the final stage where I can break free from this restriction of using the mandala as the dot and as the starting point. It's always in my mind how can I break free. If you look at the finished first four paintings (pm #1-1 to pm #1-4) and these tentative sculptures, all of them have the mandala as the dot. How am I not going to use it? Because once I don't use it, as it is possible in these tentative works (pm #7-1 to pm #7-4 details), if you take away the mandala dot, its like a Kandinsky abstract.

Yes, it loses specificity, its concreteness.

When you produce a work of art, you want it to make sense, to propose a meaning, or make a statement. So the mandala as a dot, is a starting point; it gives a sense of meaning to each and every composition because it is being used as one of the visual components as in these works in progress, using colour canvasses. They are only one-third finished in the sense that there is more to do. I'm going start using more collage materials before I go on to the wet stage. The mandala would somehow, I foresee, be displaced from the centre of the composition. I must redefine its location.

(So the mandala as such, because of what it is, because of its symbolic content, resists being de-centred. Where ever it is, it will always claim the power of a centre for itself.)

Yes, because I think it's natural when you look at a work of art that your first impression springs from the most attractive point. That's where you start from and then you look around. So I think the mandala as a dot would always be the focal point for the viewer; focal point for the viewer, to look at it first and then what's around it.

And yet you say, although you haven't quite worked how it might turn out, that the final stage would be to do away with the mandala completely.

Yes, well I haven't figured out how not to use the mandala image. Yes, yes ...maybe featuring some elements of the mandala itself in the whole composition .. I don't know, I can't say how it is going to turn out.



pm #7-1 detail



pm #7-2 detail



pm #7-3 detail



pm #7-4 detail

Can we talk a bit about your choice of the mandala. Why choose the mandala which will never surrender its centredness? Is it to accentuate the challenge that you see in your creative process?

Well, I must say that this exhibition was meant to be a summation of my past five solo exhibitions that I have presented at Telok Kurau studios and to document them. But due to circumstances, lack of sufficient funding to do the documentation, the idea of doing a brand new theme, a theme-based exhibition, popped up during my discussions with Tay Swee Lin, some time in May 2004. The mandala was a concept I had in mind for next year. If not in Sculpture Square, I would present it as a solo exhibition in Telok Kurau studios. But I had yet to start working on it.

So since May, I have been conceptualizing and formulating the artist's statement, without realising that it is going to be so time consuming. It's unlike my other projects which are open ended; there are no restrictions whatsoever. Because the way I work is, how should I say, is through improvisation and experimentation. I didn't realise that the mandala would become a restriction in itself. It's actually a reflection of human nature that when you are given a situation you tend to make the best use of it and later on, you improve on it or develop from it. But the tendency is always to break away from that. The limitation is unforeseen. Since I started on it, I have to work through it because in the end I may not be able to break away from not using the mandala as one of the visual components. Somehow it has to be in there.

We will return to this a little later. There are characteristics in this exposition that link it with your earlier theme-based projects over the past five exhibitions?

Yes, of course, because, like I say, experimentation and improvisation are my work attitudes; found objects have been the stimulus. That is how I started my visual arts practice in 1985. Found objects and improvisation, these two are the main aspects of how I approach my work. That's how I know how to do my work. If you put me in the academic situation, having to deal with traditional materials, maybe I'll be lost because I am not formally trained.

You have built your practice on these premises, on these grounds. I think it is useful to know this. But the five exhibitions have specific content and concepts, which set them apart from one another and from earlier exhibitions. We can refer to them collectively because they bear certain family resemblances. I want to home in on the interests in these five shows. Each of them has, as I recall, a specific iconography, a specific content. These are attentively worked out and given quite careful consideration, in your artist's statement. From your point of view, how do they collectively hold together, besides the attributes of found objects and improvisation?

Found objects are always the starting point since 1985, when I collected objects. Found objects have been the first stimulus for the concept, the idea, the thought process. For example in 1999, the exhibition *Blueprints, Plans, Archetypes, Prototypes*, was based on found blueprints that stimulated thought process and hence the formulation of its concept. And even in the year 2000, the works in the process exhibition are also based on found objects. Going even further back, to 1997 and the Substation's Artist in Residency Exhibition; that was also based purely on found objects. Between 1991 to 1997, was a period of hibernation of all these found materials because I didn't have the work space to make use of them. So that gave rise to the

concept of *Hibernated Objects*. To round up, found objects have always been the starting point. And of course, on reflection, it's like an exposition of one's life experience. Why found objects? Because of the circumstances I was in. At that time in 1985 when I was retrenched and embarked on art ...

On this madness ..

Yeah, you can call it that. Found objects were the by-product of looking for found furniture to make use of; I was really poor. So it's from one's life experiences that bring forth this idea of using found objects and developing a method of working through improvisation, without formal training. So these are attempts to overcome the situation and one's experiences. When I decided on becoming a visual artist, I asked what is my purpose as a visual artist? In short it is to "seek, find and reveal". To seek the truth, to find the means, to express and reveal the expressions through visual arts. So when I say found objects and thoughts, it's actually a matching of the two. Because some found objects stimulate you to hook onto ideas that you had many years back. The combination stimulates you to think of the old ideas, of the matching of the two components and starting the process.

I want to stay a bit longer with these seven years, including the Substation residency, which I'm glad you recalled. Because I thought the residency marked a distinct phase in your practice. The Substation exhibition and the subsequent shows that you held at Telok Kurau studios all had conceptual, material and expositional rigour and determination. Each was framed as a project in the technical sense of the term. A project is devised around a brief that you adopt for yourself. The brief may not be formally and procedurally stipulated, but still it's a brief because it sets up parameters for your thinking and execution. Found objects and thought processes expand, vivify the brief. In the earlier exhibitions you had a diverse range of things, objects, pictures and paintings. But from 1997, each exposition is thematically grounded and driven. The themes have social, political and cultural currency. Symptoms of these can be seen in the diverse range of works you have produced before. But since 1997, they are garnered around and internalised as projects. This is how I see your practice in the last seven years.

Yes. That is very true. Before 1997, going back to 1985 to 1991, there is a free flow of ideas in the two-and-three dimensional works. From 1985 to 1991, I had space at Hooper Road. I was free to develop two-and-three dimensional works. Since 1991 onwards, I was restricted to just two-dimensional works; so, if I were to reflect from 1993 onwards, it was the theme based exhibitions. The first was Ideas and Ideals, which is already theme based. I must say that from my first very exhibition in 1991, I sort of controlled the production for solo exhibitions based on themes. Going back to 1997 and the Substation, it was the availability of space, I was given the space, residency space, to work with three-dimensional objects. But from 1991, my exhibitions are theme-based.

We have talked about the development and the advancement of your practice over the last 7 years, where it has distinctly been driven thematically, where each theme then is devised as a project. The process and method that you have developed are mindful of the work as a project. For the present we have an interesting exposition, titled project mandala.

As far as I know this is the first time you have nominated a theme, the mandala that is, which has distinct cultural groundings, historical and cultural groundings. Your earlier works have emerged or surfaced from biographical, social circumstances, from your observance of what is going around you on a day to day basis. But here you have gone away from that. What is your interest in the mandala? Why the mandala and why did you look at it?

Well, as for the mandala image, I must say that it's from a mandala poster which I bought way back in 1991 from Amsterdam; it has hung in my house from 1991 till now. So that image has always been ...

Been around.

Been around, yes; since then I have been looking at it, at times been captivated by it; looking at it, more than just glancing. There was a Buddhist exhibition, sometime in May this year, and there was a huge sand mandala created during that exhibition. And it all comes back to me again, that this mini-poster that I had, you know, can be enlarged to such a scale. That's how the intention of using the image of the mandala as a theme crystallised.

From your statement, it is quite clear that you have done some research on it. You've looked up sources, familiarised yourself with the symbolic, ritualistic as well the cultural and artistic contexts in which the mandala functions. And it's quite obvious that it's layered, rich, complex. Are you anxious about these matters?

Well, initially as I have mentioned earlier in our discussion, I didn't realise the extent of the limitation because my thinking was to use the mandala image as a dot, as a starting point, and from there on extend that to the end of the process whereby I may not use the image. But now, during the working process, I realise that by taking away the mandala image as a dot, the work becomes devoid of a centre ...

Do you have to deliberately set aside the symbolic dimensions of the mandala in your use of it? The mandala embodies rich symbolic, cultural meanings. In using it, did you have to do things so that its historical, its embedded symbolic power did not exert itself and overwhelm everything else in your work, in your design?

Well, I'm not using it as a religious symbol per se. I'm using it as a dot as a starting point. For me the dot is a principle of art, the dot and line, shapes and forms and so on; so that is the usage from my point of view. I'm not expanding the so-called religious aspect of it. Its more an aesthetic use of it in visual art. It doesn't bother me what the specific mandala is about. Even the designation of the mandala that I employ is not exactly known to me.

How does the mandala feature, generally and specifically, in the development of this project?

Well, the start is the use of a mandala image as a dot, as a starting point; the dot corresponds to the definition of mandala in Sanskrit. First, using the mandala dot as the centre of the image, as a focal point, and from there on lines, shapes, forms, designs, colours, textures etc radiate outwards to make a picture. Next the mandala is used as a dot at any position other than at the centre of the picture, the tendency to free itself in order to explore possibilities of other images.

Press on!

Yes, well, next, to use the dot, manipulate it further and then to have the mandala dot as encompassing the whole picture using circular boundaries as opposed to regular rectangular formats. And finally the mandala dot is everywhere in the art works, meaning that I would forego using the actual image of the mandala.

When you say final, is it final in terms of marking an end of the process or an end of the project or is it just another phase?

No, you start off with a process in mind, from the beginning, to make use of something; from there on to react against it and do away with it. It's human nature to have a reaction to something that is fixed. So it's a process in itself to start off with something and to end without it.

Is this a departure from processes in earlier projects?

Yes. Unlike previous exhibitions, this has a very finite starting point. So maybe it's something ..

Something that separates it from the others.

Yeah, different from previous themes in this respect. I just want to see what comes out of it. It's like saying, for example, an analogy here, there is a God, that's the first option you can have or there is no God. And there could be a third option too. That God is dead which is from Nietzsche. So it comes with a whole spectrum of possibilities. Similarly with the image, and without the image, to see what turns out from the whole investigation.

So the spectrum that you talk about, starts with the image with the adoption of the image. The end of the spectrum is marked by doing away with this image. And then what is left? Or what does one hope to be able to leave, once the image fades away or disappears?

It strikes me too that having gone through the whole process, one tends to present art works that work, in the sense that we do not show failed pieces. So, if you really want to see the whole process, then you have to look at the failures too. But then again, failures are obliterated or destroyed. So in the end, what's the purpose of all this process? You're trying to make sense of every work that you present and not present meaningless works which you don't even know what they are about. Then in the end, you realise that it's all an illusion because visual arts is actually illusion in itself. So again it goes back to making a meaningful work process, having meaningful art works as the outcome.

We have discussed the formal and material bases and foundations of your practice. It has been illuminating, for me anyway. I would like to shift attention to another area, namely, meaning. By this I don't mean to ask you what does this or that work mean. You have said that for you, the work or the process or project has to be worthwhile. It has to be worthy. It is in this sense that I want to talk about meaning. How important is meaning, for you, in your work?

I must say again that when we do a piece of work, you want to put meaning to it. But for this process, since I started of with the mandala as a dot which would mean that I'm starting off with the first meaning...shall we put it that way? Henceforth in the attempt to work it out to a point where it becomes meaningless or where we reach a stage of meaninglessness in the whole context. At this stage, I am not fully aware of these concepts as yet. I think I should say that the other word for meaning is substance. What is behind the appearance of what we see? Appearance is what we see but to be able to be inspired by the substance that is within, would mean that the work is actually working in the sense that it inspires or it engages the viewer to think further. So that gives it a meaning in itself, the so-called worthiness of it.

One final matter, and it is a complex matter: It has to do with the reception of your works, your productions and projects. How have they been received by the public? Who has come to see your expositions and what have they said to you in conversation? I ask this because you have curated your own productions. How did you connect and gauge reactions of the public?

Well, maybe I should reflect on the beginning, when I started exhibiting in 1987. At my very first exhibition of art works in 1987, Ms Susie Koay, then curator at the National Museum of Art Gallery, was very encouraging; she visited and said that she was inspired by the works I put up at that time. That was the first instance. Over the years, whether group or solo exhibitions, there have always been responses; for example, in Germany there was warm response at the reception opening. Many Germans were curious about what I was doing at that time, there was press and there was even T.V. coverage. And back in Singapore since 1991, almost all of my solo exhibitions have been reported and featured in the press; so I say that general interest is there with regards to my works. As for public response during the individual exhibitions, there are times when viewers look at the works for a long, long time. You sense the so-called worthiness of the piece of work, the work that you are exhibiting, that it can captivate people to spend time on it. But lately I must say that the press coverage has not been so forthcoming. There is some coverage in the Chinese press and in some magazines but not in our main English press. Apparently they do not have art writers, critics.

Has there been any serious critical reviews of your work, aside from what appears in the press?

Well, hardly. For the 1997 Substation Residency exhibition, there was an in-depth write up in the in-house magazine. There also is a transcript of an interview by Constance Sheares that allows me to go in depth. I can recollect one review by Tzu Nyen. It was a critique of *Stacks, Trunks, Racks and Rolls* in 2001. Whether I agree or not it was a real critical write-up which I appreciate very much. Even though I felt that if he had a discussion with me he could have cleared up some of his perceptions of what the show was about. *

I think criticism need not seek agreement with artists. But by and large, do you think there is enough writing on art and artists?

No, no .. absolutely not.

*Ho Tzu Nyen '*Stacks, Trunks, Racks and Rolls*' nicknamed '*No Bones Left*' Installation by Tang Mun Kit, in *vehicle, contemporary visual arts*, No.4, 2001, Plastique Kineetic Worms, Singapore, pp 54-58.

12	project mandala #3-4	carpet tile, linoleum tile, cork, plastic, artificial grass, brass, petri dish, color photocopy, found metal part, acrylic, glue, varnish, wood mounting.	46cm x 46cm x 21cm	Sep '04
13	project mandala #4-1	carpet tile, linoleum tile, plastic, artificial grass, foam, petri dish, color photocopy, wood stamp, plaster teeth mold, sandstone egg, acrylic, glue, varnish, wood mounting.	34cm x 34cm x 16cm	Sep '04
14	project mandala #4-2	carpet tile, linoleum tile, plastic, artificial grass, foam, petri dish, color photocopy, wood stamp, plaster teeth mold, sandstone egg, acrylic, glue, varnish, wood mounting.	34cm x 34cm x 16cm	Sep '04
15	project mandala #4-3	carpet tile, linoleum tile, plastic, artificial grass, foam, petri dish, color photocopy, wood stamp, plaster teeth mold, sandstone egg, acrylic, glue, varnish, wood mounting.	34cm x 34cm x 16cm	Sep '04
16	project mandala #4-4	carpet tile, linoleum tile, plastic, artificial grass, foam, petri dish, color photocopy, wood stamp, plaster teeth mold, sandstone egg, acrylic, glue, varnish, wood mounting.	34cm x 34cm x 16cm	Sep '04
17	project mandala #5	collage, stencil, transfers, color pencil, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on blueprint paper.	76cm diameter	Oct '04
18	project mandala #6-1	collage, color canvas, color photocopy, stencil, color pencil, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on blueprint paper.	76cm diameter	Oct '04
19	project mandala #6-2	collage, color photocopy, stencil, color canvas, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on woodproofed plywood.	76cm diameter	Oct '04
20	project mandala #6-3	collage, color photocopy, stencil, color canvas, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on woodproofed plywood.	76cm diameter	Oct '04
21	project mandala #6-4	collage, color photocopy, stencil, color canvas, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on woodproofed plywood.	76cm diameter	Oct '04
22	project mandala #7-1	collage, color canvas, color photocopy, stencil, color pencil, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on blueprint paper.	56cm x 56cm	Oct '04

23	project mandala #7-2	collage, color photocopy, stencil, color canvas, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on woodproofed plywood.	90cm x 55cm	Oct '04
24	project mandala #7-3	collage, color photocopy, stencil, color canvas, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on woodproofed plywood.	91.5cm x 56.5cm	Oct '04
25	project mandala #7-4	collage, color photocopy, stencil, color canvas, ink, acrylic, wood dye, spray paint on woodproofed plywood.	100.5cm x 80.3cm	Oct '04
26	project mandala #8-1	collage, acrylic, spray paint on canvas	122cm x 122cm	Oct '04
27	project mandala #8-2	collage, acrylic, spray paint on canvas	122cm x 122cm	Oct '04
28	project mandala #8-3	collage, acrylic, spray paint on canvas	122cm x 122cm	Oct '04
29	project mandala #8-4	collage, acrylic, spray paint on canvas	122cm x 122cm	Oct '04
30	project mandala #9-1	blueprint paper, embroidery border cloth, color canvas, collage, color photocopy, stencil, ink, color pencil, spray paint, acrylic on paper.	71cm x 101.5cm	Oct '04
31	project mandala #9-2	blueprint paper, embroidery border cloth, color canvas, collage, color photocopy, stencil, ink, color pencil, spray paint, acrylic on paper.	71cm x 101.5cm	Oct '04
32	project mandala #9-3	blueprint paper, embroidery border cloth, color canvas, collage, color photocopy, stencil, ink, color pencil, spray paint, acrylic on paper.	71cm x 101.5cm	Oct '04
33	project mandala #10	color photocopy, acrylic, spray paint on canvas.	370cm x 370cm	Oct '04
34	project mandala #11	color canvas, wooden platform, blueprints embroidery border cloth, found objects, plaster, metal, wood, plastic, glass, leather, sandstone, natural stones, found trampoline, seashells, spray paints, acrylic, lightings.	770cm x 740cm x 35cm	Oct - Nov '04

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ABOUT SCULPTURE SQUARE

Sculpture Square - a non-profit, independent arts organisation - is Singapore's first and only art space dedicated to the promotion, development and regional exchange of contemporary 3-dimensional art.

Since 1999, Sculpture Square has been a key player in the local visual arts scene, especially in recognising and nurturing young talent. Individual and collaborative exhibitions, regional artist exchanges, artist residencies, symposiums... such programmes afford opportunities for both new and established artists to grow in the field of 3-dimensional art.

As a regional hub for sculpture and contemporary 3-dimensional art, Sculpture Square's role extends beyond showcasing works by local and international artists - it wants to bring the world of 3-dimensional art to the community and to bridge the gap between the public and artists.

Lively community programmes run throughout the year at Sculpture Square - including talks, informal meet-the-artist-sessions, an annual children's Sculpture Carnival and Children's Sculpture Exhibition, and year-round sculpture workshops. It also provides comprehensive art consultancy services which are backed by curatorial expertise and a rapidly-growing resource centre.

Nestled within Singapore's Civic and Cultural district, at the corner of Waterloo Street and Middle Road, Sculpture Square is a refreshing sanctuary amidst the hustle and bustle of the city.

INTERESTING FACTS

1. Constructed in 1870, home to the very first Baba Methodist church and Methodist Girls' School in Singapore, Sculpture Square's Chapel gallery (174 sqm) is one of the few Gothic style buildings still standing in Singapore. It has a 9m high, pillar-free ceiling and its 19th-century facade has been painstakingly preserved.
2. The building next to the Chapel gallery, which now houses Sculpture Square's office, library and the Lower gallery (96 sqm), was once a boarding house.

For more information on Sculpture Square and its programmes, please contact:

sculpture

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