

S'pore Biennale: Nasirun's Between Worlds

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Nasirun's Between Worlds at the Singapore Biennale 2013. Photo: Singapore Biennale 2013.

SINGAPORE — Not so long ago, I went for a walk with my parents in our neighbourhood and we happened to come across a traditional puppet show. I had expected it to be as well received as the getai from the previous night, but I was wrong.

There was no one there but one elderly man. Another elderly lady was making her way to the seats at a painfully slow pace. It was practically a ghost town — except that Hungry Ghost Month had long passed so the show wasn't put up for our friends from the nether world.

This experience coincided rather poignantly with my encounter with Indonesian artist Nasirun's work at the Singapore Biennale. Exhibited at the Singapore Art Museum, *Between Worlds* is an installation of wayang, or shadow puppets, placed in glass bottles and beakers. Imagine hundreds of these all arranged to form squares within squares, lit up from underneath with subtle coloured lights. Sounds impressive, doesn't it?

I couldn't help but wonder why these puppets were placed in glass bottles, reminding me of science, rather than pretty flower vases. Was the installation's clinical vibe telling me these puppets should be preserved and not forgotten? Did the artist wish to tell us that we needed to recognise the importance of tradition and culture to lead balanced lives, like how the laboratory process of titration reveals the exact amount of chemicals required for complete neutralisation to occur?

Between Nasirun's work and my neighbourhood encounter with the empty puppet show, one is moved to think about the loss of appreciation for traditional cultures. Do these things still have a place in a world of flat screens criss-crossed with Wi-Fi signals?

Or would it be better (or simply unavoidable) to just let go? Perhaps it would be best to put our cultural icons in conical flasks, too, so they could be preserved and placed in museums like this. But I'd like to think of that as our last resort. After all, perhaps, there's a traditional puppet show happening in your neighbourhood. They've probably got some seats left.

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The Singapore Biennale runs until Feb 16, 2014. For more details, visit <http://www.singaporebiennale.org> For more updates on the Young Art Writers Programme, visit #artlanders (<http://tdy.sg/artlanders>) or For Art's Sake (<http://tdy.sg/artssakeblog>)

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