

Art Caged/Uncaged (2011)

The idea for this exhibition stemmed - quite selfishly - from an experience of my own. As a child, I often used to see a group of men that gathered at a small padang in Ipoh, and I used to gaze intently as they sat around listening to their birds, which were in cages mounted at the very top of poles scattered around the field.

Regretfully, I enjoyed the scenery from across the street. A little too frightened and aware of my age and gender, I felt like an outsider and never plucked up the courage to enter the padang to enquire about the goings-on. But still, the image of tall poles with delicate bird cages balanced atop them, and singing birds inside, dug a deep imprint in my mind. I love the spectacle of it all, the imagery it created, and the romanticism of the whole affair - that people could be so engrossed in the sounds emitted by a tiny animal and how a small group of individuals could create their own little world, a little microcosm within society.

Recreating that atmosphere was the first thing I sought to do with *Art Caged/Uncaged*, and the idea developed into something altogether different when I began to draw parallels with the art world. I noted how both entailed small groups of enthusiasts, and observed how there seemed to be an impenetrable force field around both communities; you were either in the group or not.

Little exchange exists between these two groups, and I imaged that if I didn't know very much about art, I would be reluctant to walk into a gallery today - a throwback to the days when I watched a bird singing competition from the safety of a row of shop lots. However, with contemporary art growing and there being a silent rally for art being more public and accessible here in Malaysia, I wondered if it would be possible to create an exhibition that straddled both sides - populist and intellectual - at the same time.

A return to the experience

It could be achieved with a little tweaking, I felt. I write about art, and in that process, often rely on the methodology of analyzing the art object as one would a text: decoding it, deciphering it, and interpreting each line or element like a word in a sentence. Like a puzzle, there is a deep, silent sense of fulfillment when one piece locks onto another, but in this private and consuming task, what is sometimes compromised is the very nature of the experience. In writing for the mass media, I've also become incredibly aware of my audience; I am not just writing for the readers in the know.

People ultimately respond to art - and all things really - on very intrinsic levels: I love it because it's colourful, I hate it because I find it ugly, I prefer paintings to sculptures, I don't like the taste of it, or that sound annoys me. Secondary analysis - where artworks are read as texts or as a system of signs (as loosely described above) - is usually reserved for those with some basic knowledge of the subject matter; someone could easily state they loved Cindy Sherman's photographs, but only someone with a reserve knowledge on postmodernism or some critical theory could bring forth cogent arguments from one of the artist's images.

And so, this exhibition comes from a desire to reframe the art object and to liberate it - even if only temporarily - from its semiotic guise and to bring it back into the realms of the experience and the sheer spectacle of what an exhibition is. And, much of this has been a response to Wei-Ling Contemporary's setting within a shopping mall. This highly public context entails generous foot traffic and attracts an audience that largely consists of Joe Public. Would they be able to read a Cindy Sherman or a Latiff Mohidin? How do they respond to art altogether?

These questions remain very relevant in our local art context, where the small community of art practitioners and lovers maintain a solidarity that is at once admirable and a little intimidating to the outsider. And, whilst this is in no way a remark that experience alone is

enough in an art exhibition, surely it can be reframed so there is a non-threatening entryway for the viewer?

The competition in *Art Caged/Uncaged*, where audiences get to vote for their favourite artwork does this. Not only does it draw a parallel to the format of the bird singing competition, but it also engages the viewer on a participatory level and helps us uncover what the usually-silent viewer has to say about their favourite artwork: Why did they like it? And, what do people respond to best? It is a small survey, but by privileging the viewer, this hopefully bridges the gap between artist / artworks and their audience.

What is an exhibition if not a spectacle?

In the gallery, we have attempted to recreate a little bird singing competition at a padang by hanging artworks at eye-level and relatively close to each other. There is no particular vantage point for any artwork or artist (bar Yap Sau Bin's sound piece, *Of Garden and Artifice*, which by its intrinsic nature requires you to carry around a device with you as you view the physical objects in the gallery) and this display permits a level playing field, where the artist's identity as author is leveled in a group setting; the artworks come together to form one complete installation and all play a crucial part in the exhibition. Arguably, none could exist as strongly if decontextualized and viewed independently.

And so, the hanging objects and sound works evoke a real bird singing competition in a field. The artists play the role of bird owners and they have brought their birds to battle, so to speak.

With this adopted role in mind, the artists have presented nurtured traces of their craft. Umibaizurah Mahir showcases her skill in blending industrial and fine art techniques in her ceramic birdcage titled *Paradise*; Shia Yih Yiing amalgamates two eponymous elements from

her oeuvre; emerging artist, Tiong Chai Heing, explores materiality and comments on contemporaneous society in *Predicament*; Kojek's birdcage contains a ghostly remnant of a bird that has taken its own life to set its soul free; Hasnul Jamal Saidon has brought two cultural items from Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah's collection of gifts and cultural items from its museum origins into the context of a private art gallery; Meme's *Attachment* narrates the story of an actual encounter between the caged figure in the artwork and a real bird; and Wong Chee Meng has created a little baroque palace for a soon-to-be-hatched bird, which for now is a little golden egg resting inside a white cradle.

Jeganathan Ramachandran lends his wooden birds, insects, and animals to the exhibition, where they function as observers and mingle with audiences; Lim Kok Yoong's sound installation (inspired by the mockingbird) draws audiences in with its high-frequency synthetic bird calls; and Yap Sau Bin's work, recordings of himself set against nature in green areas of Kuala Lumpur, is offered on a portable device, so audiences can engage in a more physical spectatorship - one that is heightened by the artist's performance (July 13), where audience members are invited to be part of the work.

Let me tell you a story

In Malaysia, telling stories is a commonly used device in art. Narrative plays a strong component in contemporary Malaysian art and what all the artworks in *Art Caged/Uncaged* combine to do is weave a tale about artists, artworks, and what an exhibition is by showcasing contemporary art vis-à-vis one of our region's cultural activities in a playful installation. It will proffer a sense of nostalgia for some viewers, as well as an element of discovery, and we hope it is a story that engages audiences in such a way that they may never feel afraid of leaving the comforts of familiarity to venture into a padang or gallery.

Complimenting *Art Caged/Uncaged* is the story of a real bird owner, Boy (found in this catalogue), where he tells us what really happens at bird singing competitions and what this activity entails.

May you enjoy and learn a little bit more about both.

Rachel Jenagaratnam, 2011.