Alvar Aalto Inspires

Held in conjunction with Singapore Design Festival and copresented by NUS Museum, Embassy of Finland and Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto opened on 15 October graced by guest-of-honour, Mr Mah Bow Tan, Minister for National Development. The exhibition featured a selection of the late Finnish architect’s one family houses from 1923 to the early 1970s. Most of these were built in beautiful settings, in the middle of a forest or overlooking a lake bathed in natural light, where Aalto integrated his architecture with the natural landscape. As for his furniture designs, functionality played a big part as each piece was aesthetically created to last.

‘His houses remind us about the significant role thoughtful architecture can play in enhancing the quality of everyday life.’

Mah Bow Tan
Minister for National Development
Alvar Aalto and Architecture Students
Magdalen Chua

NUS Museum partnered the Department of Architecture to encourage student participation, learning, and research alongside Alvar Aalto. Based on the models in Alvar Aalto, first year students in AR1121: Spatialisation and Visualisation of Architecture were asked to do comparative studies on Alvar Aalto’s peers, such as Tadao Ando and Le Corbusier, as a means of practising plan drawings. Students juxtaposed drawings based on Alvar Aalto and the chosen comparative architect, and contributed an essay reflecting on the comparisons between the two. A scale model was also submitted. From the submissions, potential participants in the exhibition were shortlisted, and a panel comprising representatives from NUS Museum and the Department of Architecture selected the drawings and models to be included in the exhibition.
Talks were held alongside the exhibition to bring about the exchange of ideas between students and experts in the field of architecture and design. ‘Play with Aalto’ was held on 28 November at Style: Nordic at Ann Siang Road, with Mirkku Kullberg, Managing Director of Artek, and Jonas Ericsson from Style: Nordic discussing their contemporary interpretations of Aalto’s designs and how Aalto’s philosophy is practised by design companies today. A panel session and exhibition tour on ‘Alvar Aalto & Architecture’ was organized on 29 November to explore Aalto’s motivations and architectural philosophy, and the relevance of his architectural ideas today. Chaired by Associate Professor Wong Yun Chii, Head of NUS Department of Architecture, the panel featured Markku Lahti, Director of Alvar Aalto Foundation; Mirkku Kullberg, Managing Director of Artek; and Assoc Prof Milton Tan, Director of DesignSingapore.

As a sociology student with the barest knowledge of art and its various forms and its development, I always wondered what it was like for these art connoisseurs, art history majors and so on when they walked around the very same exhibitions or galleries I have walked through – what do they see that I do not see? Do they immediately classify the art pieces according to its association with particular art movements or do they attempt to identify the influences other artists in history had on this particular artist’s work?

But in that process of classifying and identifying surely they inevitably lose the ability to wonder. This is essentially to regard something or somebody with marvel and delight and in order to do so in every sense of the word, there is a need to discard any kind of prior knowledge in the first few seconds or moments you see a particular sculpture or art piece.

For Art was definitely created to be admired and I truly believe, in all my inexperienced naïveté, that a good piece of art or an interesting exhibition is one that stirs in us just the right amount of awe and curiosity so that we abandon all pretentiousness and knowledge and merely admire like children with the faculty of wonder.

Alvar Aalto was one such exhibition. I blame it completely on the artist himself. His works resonate with his own childlike fascination and curiosity to try new and different things, to constantly experiment with the unthinkable during those times, to break the boundaries of architecture. An example of this is the courtyard wall for a summer house he used for experimental purposes. He explored a variety of brick patterns and combinations to understand the properties of materials. What perfect ingenuity borne out of an attempt to try something new and this is epitomized in all his works. To the eyes of the 21st century citizen, his designs might seem common like that of the 3-legged stool, but imagine how they must have looked to people of his time who were accustomed to either leather cushioned armchairs or straight back chairs. It is a mark of his success that his architectural creations – for this man viewed all his work even chairs and tables as part of his architecture – are a big hit in the consumer market. In a way it goes to show that the aesthetic appeal of his work transcends the gap between those who know and those who do not when it comes to matters of Art.
Connections is a fascinating exhibition by NUS High School students, putting together very ordinary everyday occurrences and mundane materials that the individual comes into contact with but never really taking another glance to see their uniqueness, and placing them in context with our lives. From the chair we sit on everyday, vegetables we eat at every meal, and to our faithful companion of pet dogs, this exhibition allows one to contemplate and perhaps reassess our daily behaviours and routines. It allows one to take time off to “connect” with our surroundings instead of our preoccupations with work and deadlines.

The one most captivating display, or rather five frames that caught my eye, would have to be the photograph series where each frame consists of 64 photographs captured through a lomograph camera. Not only does each photo reveal the colours and text that surround us, it also reflects how we can look at one object with very different perspectives. In this case, each photograph gives us 4 positions of the same object. There may not always be a specific tale behind each chosen object, but it clearly highlights some of those that the common eye may have neglected. Some include, the “exit” signs, “toilet” signs, books on a shelf, and even pictures of friends. We may see them ever so often but never to take a moment to ponder, ask questions, or take a further interest.

Connections is a simple and relaxing exhibition to walk through where we take our minds away from the harsh conditions of reality. It is easy to understand, and yet intriguing with their individual messages and skilled attention to detail.

Yunizar’s Coretan

Coretan showcased 19 paintings by contemporary Indonesian artist Yunizar, jointly organized by NUS Museum and Gajah Gallery. This series started in the 1990s and may be difficult to understand. As the exhibition collateral reads, Coretan refers to ‘scrawls, scribbles, marks, worthless or trivial composition’ and one wonders what it all means. However, Yunizar paints with spontaneity and does not attribute meaning to the scribbles. Yet, his paintings have a certain sensory effect if you step back and allow it to speak to you.

About Yunizar

Born in 1971 in Talawi, West Sumatra, Yunizar studied at the National Arts High School in Padang. Inspired by the works of Indonesian masters, he left for Yogya to study art. In Yogya, his interest shifted and he was influenced by other artists from West Sumatra who were also studying there. They formed the Jendela group in 1993. The group rejects the presentation of sociopolitical concerns in favour of a formalist aesthetic beauty that defies any attempt at interpretation.
Baba House

A Resource for Teaching and Research

The media and members of the Peranakan community were invited to a sneak preview of the Baba House at 157, Neil Road on 24 November when the first stage of restoration was unveiled.

Managed by NUS Museum, NUS Centre For the Arts, the Baba House is a gift to NUS from Ms Agnes Tan, the daughter of the late Straits Chinese community leader, Tun Dato Sir Tan Chen Lock. The heritage house, which is more than 150 years old, will be a resource for teaching and research for various disciplines at NUS such as the Department of Architecture, School of Design and Environment, and Southeast Asian Studies Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

According to Peter Lee, Honorary Curator for the Baba House who oversees the interiors of the various rooms, the presentation will turn the clock back to 1928 which represents the last period of the house in its prime. Archaeologist Lim Chen Sian from Southeast Asian Studies Programme who unearthed over 2000 items says that the archaeological study of the Neil Road house is probably the more comprehensive study of a building in conservation ever taken in Singapore. ‘We were able to reveal the significance behind its associated material culture, architectural ornamentations, and building construction methods, providing clues for us to interpret the past and perhaps a glimpse into the mindset of those who once dwelt in the house,” he said

A new annexe will house The Peranakan Association and will also be home to a caretaker and tour guide, Mr G.T. Lye, one of the last female impersonators in Peranakan wayang (opera). When ready in mid 2008, the Baba House will be open to the public by appointment. There will be workshops on Straits Chinese cuisine as well art and craft. Special programmes include symposiums and discussion panels on various aspects of Straits Chinese culture featuring key personalities and scholars.

Review of the Invisible City

Fiona Heng reviews Tan Pin Pin’s film, Invisible City which was screened in conjunction with the opening of NUS Museum’s WE exhibition.

Years ago in Junior College, a teacher once asked the class, ‘If a tree fell in the forest, and no one was there to witness it, did it in fact happen ?’ Till this day, I find this question absolutely mindboggling, and concluded that some questions will never have any answers to them. One of the many questions surrounding the exhibition WE, is in fact, do we exist, a part or apart of a memory/history to our community and nation? This is especially evident in one of the exhibits that succinctly describes the need or rather the desire to document our places in history.
Building Family Bonds through Art
Family Workshop – Art, Family & Heritage

After her successful forays into the peculiarities of how individual Singaporeans build up their identity to the bigger nation, Singapore with Moving House (2001) and Singapore Gaga (2005), Invisible City (2007) had a deep impact on me. Not because I am a History student, but because of how each individual in the theatre was reflected through those characters caught on film, each trying to capture their lives and to make sense of it all. This was apparent with the lack of acknowledgements for the interviewees like in most documentaries, but rather, leaving everything in the closing credits. Most importantly, Tan sends a very strong message, at least to me, that yes(!), everybody wants to be remembered, by somebody. One moral of the story is not only can the victors write history, but anyone can and should try whether they end up succeeding or not.

Interestingly, it was the Chinese title of the documentary that first caught my eye, 备忘录 (read: bei wang lu), which Tan, translates to as ‘an aid for memory (in case one forgets).’

However, I felt like it was suggesting that this documentary on documenting, was teasing itself, as if to say that this record was prepared to be forgotten (just like most things). Yet, from a more contemporary film, I remember the line ‘ideas are bulletproof’. So perhaps, Tan has successfully reinforced this question of identity within us, and within our community as part of Singapore. The most poignant of all the interviews, I loved the old black and white photos of buildings from the 1950s, now long gone, taken by Marjorie Doggett. Perhaps this struck a heavier chord, with the recent conservation programmes that have been reported. Nevertheless, it still boils down to the same questions of whether recording everything despite an artifact not having a story, is indeed worth recording? However, if a collection of artifacts is found, then pieces of a larger picture will be painted which translates into a more interesting story, waiting to be told.
How do you actually make a sculpture? The NUS Museum organized a family art workshop on the 23 November as part of Explore Singapore! festival addressing the creative process that goes into making such an aesthetically pleasing product. The main objective of this workshop was to highlight the life and works of the late Singapore sculptor, painter and artist Ng Eng Teng, in particular his sculptural artworks relating to the family. Also, the workshop aimed to introduce basic sculpturing techniques to families and provide a bonding session between parent and child.

The 3-hour workshop proved to be a hit with the 13 parent-child paired participants. Starting the session, Foo Su Ling, curator of Ng Eng Teng Collection, introduced the participants to some of Ng Eng Teng’s famous sculptures pertaining to the family such as *Mother and Child, Madonna and Child, Over Father’s Head IV* and *Parents and Child I* which emphasized the close relationship and bonding between parents and child.

The enthusiastic parents and children could not wait to try their hands at being little sculptors. Jeremy Hiah, the workshop instructor, introduced them to the materials and basic techniques of sculpture making and showed them how to create a simple model of a man. They were taught to create a personal mover for a board game like monopoly or snakes and ladders. Their creation was to be something that would be meaningful to them and their families and they were asked to look at the Ng Eng Teng Collection for inspiration and ideas.

The participants worked hard at drawing out their ideas making models of their movers. Whilst waiting for their models to dry, some parents and children started making their board games. Many family groups, particularly the children tended to do small clay models of themselves, their pets and other objects that were of special significance to them. The session ended with the groups painting their works with acrylic paint.

All in all, the family art workshop was a tremendous success in that the participants went away with an appreciation and hands on experience of sculpting. Their awareness of local sculptors and their works was heightened. Many participants made inquiries about when the Ng Eng Teng Collection would be up so that they could bring their families to visit and learn more about the local art scene. Others asked where they could buy the art materials as they were interested in pursuing sculpting and modeling as a hobby.
STUDENT VOLUNTEER

TAN HWEE LING

Undergrad Tan Hwee Ling (Year 3 Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Social work) coordinated a visit to NUS Museum for 100 students from City Harvest Community Services last November.

What is your involvement with City Harvest Community Services?
I did my social work placement from May to July this year at City Harvest Community Services. Prior to this, I have been a volunteer with the children’s services since I was 17. I am still very much involved, committing my time to weekly visitations to a group of street kids in Ang Mo Kio, and on weekends, helping out in the programmes for children.

What gave you the idea of organising a visit to NUS Museum for the children?
The kids we reach out to are mostly from lower income families and some from broken homes. Most of them do not perform as well as their peers in school. The idea of bringing them to the museum was to create a cultural awareness and an appreciation for art in them. And since the museum was at NUS, we also wanted to instill in them a vision for higher education.

How did you and the children find the visit?
The children enjoyed the visit. We had some very interesting and colourful art pieces done by the younger children. The older children also put in effort in searching for the worksheet answers in the Highlights of Southeast Asian Collection. One girl said that the guided tour was useful as she would have not understood as much if she were to walk on her own. I even had two boys telling me that they would like to study architecture when they grow up after gaining inspiration from the Alvar Aalto exhibition. This visit also created awareness in our volunteers. One volunteer who is aspiring to study in NUS next year was pleasantly surprised that NUS devoted space for art and culture. Personally, I’m quite satisfied by the responses that were garnered. It has indeed been an enriching trip.

REENA DEVI

Reena is a third year student from Stansfield College majoring in Sociology. She supported Outreach programmes during her one month stint with NUS Museum.

‘Working in a museum and getting to observe the mechanisms that go behind running it was definitely interesting for me – the various exhibitions, taking down the art pieces to make way for installation of new ones, the guided tours, training the docents for guided tours etc. It was all fairly new and thus, eye opening for me.’

Check out our internship opportunities at:
www.nus.edu.sg/museum/internship.html
Distinguished Visitors

1 Nov
Mr and Mrs Toshio Egawa (facing camera), with Ahmad Mashadi and Lim Qinyi. The Egawas visited NUS Museum as part of their itinerary under the MFA Distinguished Visitors Programme.

13 Nov
Lee Kuan Yew Distinguished Visitor Professor Emeritus Richard Somerville and Mrs Somerville with Lim Nam Leng, interpreting Ho Ho Ying’s abstract painting. Prof Somerville from Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, was in NUS to deliver a packed public lecture on global warming.

The Puppet by NUS Chinese Drama

18 Oct
The NUS Chinese Drama established good rapport with the audience who identified with the issues explored in the play which was based on an original script. This was a new performing experience for the group which is managed by NUS Centre For the Arts and led by dramatist Peter Sau.

NUS High School Arts Festival

16 Nov
Chris Mooney-Singh, poet performer and founder of Poetry Slam in Singapore, making poetry interesting for NUS High School students. This was a programme under the school’s annual Arts Festival.
16 Nov

The NUS Motoring Club held its Volunteer Appreciation Dinner for over 70 guests. It was held to recognize the contributions of volunteers who had dedicated their time and effort in making the highly successful Caltex National Karting Challenge 2007 possible.

Guided Tours
28 Sep

Members of Friends of the Museums touring the Lee Kong Chian Collection. The organization comprises volunteers who are interested in museum activities and provides training for guiding in Singapore museums.

Guided Tours - 2 Oct

Students from the Indian Institute of e-Business Management, Mumbai-Bangalore.

Gulliver’s Travels?

‘During a visit to Singapore, my daughter and I spent a very relaxing afternoon at the NUS Museum. We particularly enjoyed the WE exhibition. Thank you for providing such a wonderful resource for visitors to Singapore.’ Cleo Fleming from Kyoto, Japan shares a photo of her 8 month old daughter Nina Stachurski taken with Michael Lee’s photo cutouts. (WE exhibition was held from 28 Jul to 4 Nov 07)
Launch of 3 Exciting Exhibitions on 31 January 2008
Opening Programme begins at 5pm in NUS Museum. All Are Welcome.

Fragments, Histories, Contexts: NUS Museum South Asian Collection
Till 6 Apr

This exhibition revisits the Indian sculptures, paintings and textiles donated by the Indian Government to the University of Malaya Art Museum in 1959. These ‘artifacts’ not only help uncover the issues and debates surrounding South Asian artistic expressions but also explore contemporary concerns of museological practice in postcolonial societies. As such, this exhibition seeks to relocate these artifacts firstly within the culturally rich and sociohistorically interlinked regions of South and Southeast Asian and secondly in the Museum’s very own postindependence history.

Sculpting Life: Ng Eng Teng Collection
11 Jan - 31 Dec 2008

Ng Eng Teng (1934 – 2001) was a painter and potter by training but is most recognised for his sculptural pieces featuring humanist themes. A beneficiary of the artist’s generous donations, NUS Museum has over 1,000 of Ng’s works including sketches, paintings, maquettes, sculptures, figurnes and pottery.

An archival display-cum-exhibition, the presentation will be divided into three sections – The Formative Years, Body/Form/Perspectives and Materials/Processes/Public Works - exploring a range of biographical, stylistic and thematic interests. The presentation surveys the breadth and depth of Ng’s oeuvre and encourages further research and dialogue on the artist, his productions and facets of the era in which he lived and worked.

Reconfiguration: Chinese Contemporary Art
Till 6 Apr

Outlining the broad development of Chinese art from the 1980s to the present, Reconfiguration highlights aspects of contemporary art practice, read in relation to the accelerated growth of China as an emerging power. It features works by Cao Fei, Cheng Guan Feng, Hai Bo, Xu Bing, Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun. The exhibition draws from the Museum’s Lee Kong Chian collection and beyond.

NUS Arts Festival 2008
Site, Situation, Spectator
From 29 Feb 2008 at various sites, Kent Ridge Campus

A collaboration between Department of Architecture, University Scholars Programme and NUS Museum, Site, Situation, Spectator presents projects by Architecture students within the programme. These projects are developed to explore relationships between public, space and practice, encouraging research into and engagements with contexts, contingencies of places and their uses, and developing forms of aesthetic interventions. Projects - presented as studies, documentations or site-specific installations - will deploy strategies that purposefully mediate the problematics of location, meanings and individual experience.

GYPSY FLAME
Accordion Recital by Zhang Wanjing
Fri, 1 Feb 2008
6.30 – 7pm
NUS Museum
Free Admission
All are Welcome
NUS Arts Festival 2008
Open Art Show

The Body – A Photography Exhibition
15 February to 30 March 2008, NUS Museum

CALL FOR ENTRIES
Open to NUS staff, students and alumni

In conjunction with NUS Arts Festival (NAF) 2008, NUS Museum invites NUS students, NUS High School students, staff and alumni to participate in a photography exhibition themed "The Body."

Participants are invited to submit a range of photography related works that reflect the complexity around the question of a ‘body’ as a physical or symbolic form as well as to offer insights in various fields ranging from the humanities to the sciences.

Eligibility
The exhibition will be open to all amateur and professional photographers who are students, staff and alumni of National University of Singapore and NUS High School.

Deadline for Submission
18 January 2008

Visit www.nus.edu.sg/museum for terms & conditions of participation and to download the entry form. For enquiries, call 6516 2403 or e-mail claire@nus.edu.sg.

NUS Arts Festival 2008 Open Art Show

Pre-Submission Artist Talk
by Russel Wong

The talk was organized as an introduction for NUS students to the NAF2008 Open Art photography exhibition. Russel related his experiences working with celebrities and how he started out with his first cover of British Olympic champion Sebastian Coe for US magazine Track and Field News. He gave practical tips on how best to engage the subject by creating the right environment, researching the subject and giving effective instructions. He also advised the students to prepare a mental checklist before the shoot. A video clip of fashion photographer Francis Ng’s works was also shown before the talk.

‘The talk really changed my perception about lighting, shadows, and their importance in photography. I had a great time listening to his stories and experiences!’
Chan Zhi Yao, Darkroom Executive
The Photographic Society of NUS

‘The talk was quite inspiring. I liked how Mr Russel shared his experiences, how he discovered his passion to be a photographer... It’s interesting to see through his photos how his personal style is like. Hope to have more talks in the future from such experienced photographers!’
Wong Chui Fen, Sheares Hall PhotoComm