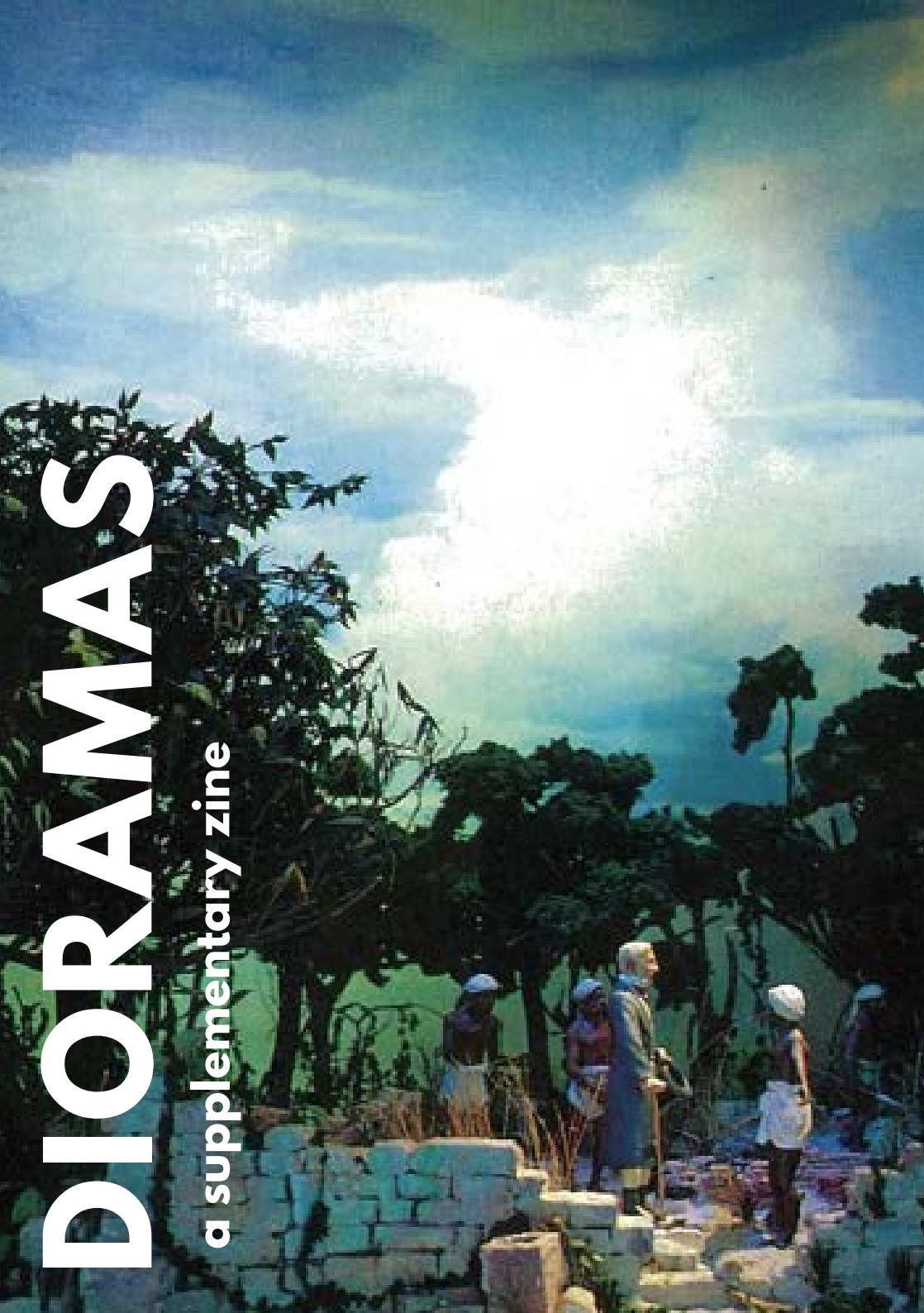


DIORAMAS

a supplementary zine



CONTENTS

3 PREFACE

4 DIORAMAS

10 ENCOUNTERING THE EXHIBITION #1

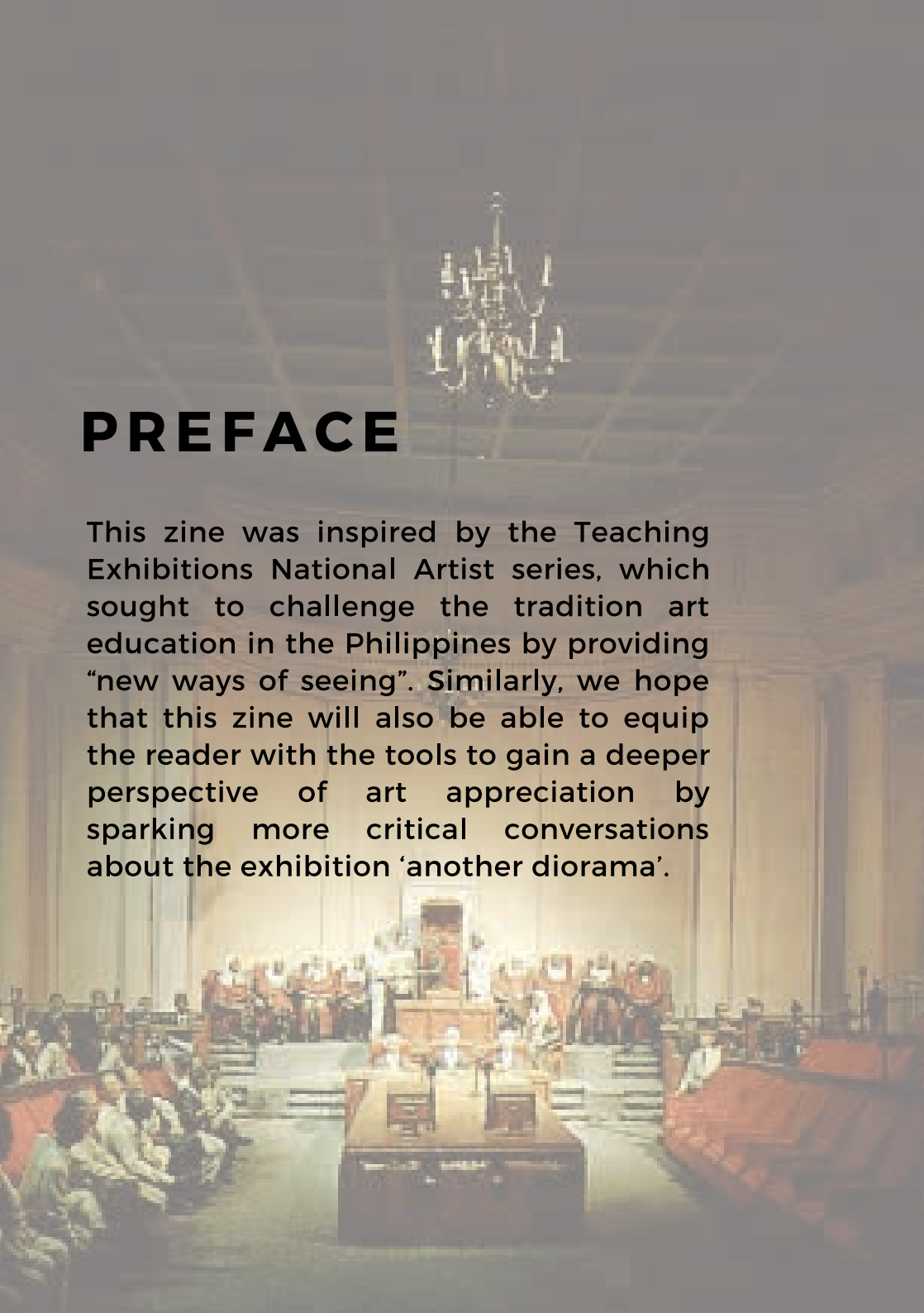
11 SHUI TIT SING

12 ENCOUNTERING THE EXHIBITION #2

13 REFLECTING FURTHER

15 BUILDING VOCABULARY

16 REFERENCES

The background image is a photograph of a museum gallery. At the top, a large, ornate chandelier hangs from the ceiling. Below it, a large diorama or stage set is visible, featuring a central figure and various props. The scene is dimly lit, with the chandelier providing the main source of light. The overall tone is historical and artistic.

PREFACE

This zine was inspired by the Teaching Exhibitions National Artist series, which sought to challenge the tradition art education in the Philippines by providing “new ways of seeing”. Similarly, we hope that this zine will also be able to equip the reader with the tools to gain a deeper perspective of art appreciation by sparking more critical conversations about the exhibition ‘another diorama’.

dioramas

Since the early 19th century, various dioramic forms have fallen in and out of fashion according to time period or mandate. Dioramas can be seen as sites of memory, culture and tension, and may vary depending on scale, cultural function and overall aesthetic.

IN ENTERTAINMENT

The current popular understanding of what dioramas are has deviated significantly from its original intents and purpose. The term 'diorama' was first introduced in the 19th century by Louis Daguerre and Charles Bouton, who had conceptualized dioramas as spectacular imagined realities - moving-image shows that offered viewers "all means of illusion". This method of display was characterized by images of a landscape painted on both sides of a semitransparent piece of linen. The direction and color of the lights would then be manipulated from the front and back to give the illusion of changing seasons or the time of day. Each 'show' was a theatrical experience that lasted 10 to 15 minutes.



Left: daylight version of an alpine village. Right: night version of the same image.
(Both images from Dead Media Archive)



Scan the QR code to see
one of Daguerre and
Bouton's dioramas in
action!

Scale Model Dioramas

Also known as scale models, these dioramas are associated with hobbyists who either collect or create scaled down versions of a specific topic of interest. These can include famous monuments, buildings, military vehicles, plane models and so on. With these dioramas, the focus is not so much on the diorama-making process but the "pursuit of the subject matter". As such, this method of display places primary focus on the central subject matter and can usually be seen from all angles, as it is presented on a displaybase.



Scale model of Angkor Wat
(Image from Rakuten)



Scale model of a military tank
(Image from FineScale website)

IN ENTERTAINMENT (cont.)

Haw Par Villa

In the context of Singapore, perhaps one of the most iconic places to see dioramas would be Haw Par Villa. Known for its depiction of Chinese folklore and mythology (including the 10 Courts of Hell), the dioramas in this park were designed in a gruesome manner to "provide moral guidance to the public".



Dioramic depiction of Judgement Day
(Image from 8days website)



Chicken-headed sculptures
(Image from danamic website)



Scan the QR code to see
how the Ayala Museum
dioramas come to life!

Virtual Reality

Recently, many museums and tourist sites have turned to technology to modernise their dioramic displays. 3-D models created by Augmented Reality were usually accompanied by an appropriate soundscape in order to "extend the learning impact of real dioramas". These technological additions allowed visitors to feel even more "emotionally and aesthetically engaged" to the exhibitions.

Did you know?

In order to impart Chinese moral lessons and values, businessman, philanthropist and creator of Haw Par Villa, Aw Boon Haw commissioned "over 1000 statues and 150 tableaux centered around Chinese folklore, legends and history".

This universe of "syncretic lessons on Chinese history, culture, folklore, religion, codes of morality and proper behavior" was co-opted by the Singapore Tourism Board in the 1980s, where it advertised Haw Par Villa as "the world's only eclectic Chinese mythological park of its kind".



Visitor testing out the VR app using her
smartphone in the Ayala Museum
(Image from Geeky Pinas)

IN NATURAL HISTORY

Dioramas found in natural history museums are commonly called 'habitat dioramas'. This method of display was traditionally characterised by taxidermied animals in mid-action, surrounded by plants and other props in the foreground against a painted background. Mainly created for educational purposes, these life-like animals are meticulously created and arranged within an "authentic" natural habitat, creating a 'trompe l'oeil' effect which evokes the illusion of looking at a real scene.



*One of Akeley's most famous dioramas
(Image from SiouxWIRE website)*

American Museum of Natural History

The style of display used for habitat dioramas can be attributed to explorer and "father of modern taxidermy", Carl Akeley. In order to transport museum-goers into these animals' natural habitats, he developed a sculptural process now called the "Akeley Method" in order to capture a realistic portrait of nature. It required taking precise measurements, making plaster impressions and using bones from a specimen's skeleton to create lifelike clay sculptures. Akeley combined immersive design with scientific research, creating illusory spatial breadth and depth in his dioramas, many of which remain in the American Museum of Natural History to this day.

Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LKCNHM)

However, the popularity of this form of dioramic display has decreased dramatically after 20th century modernism denounced it for being "static and archaic" (and for perpetuating racist, sexist and colonial stereotypes). As a result, more modern exhibitions of taxidermied animals (like the ones in LKCNHM) have chosen a less immersive mode of display. Here, the natural environment of the specimens is not part of the primary requirement and its accuracy is based entirely on the action of the specimen itself.



*Display of bird specimens in LKCNHM
(Image from Pupuren website)*

AS PUBLIC HISTORY

Dioramas have steadily found their way into national history museums, specifically in post-independence Southeast Asian national history museums. Many of these young nation states sought to construct an "objective" retelling of events leading up to their formation - one that evoked pride and commitment to the state. This method of display is characterized by a depiction of historical events through (usually) miniature scenes that are presented as a set. This form of dioramas mirrors Akeley's emphasis on details and the desire to represent a scene with accuracy to give the viewers a sense of "being there as it happens". Thus, the process of creating public history dioramas typically involves extensive historical research on events, architecture, clothing, technologies and topography.

The Ayala Museum

The diorama exhibition has been the highlight of the Ayala Museum for the past 45 years. A team consisting of an author, historian and the first director of the museum deliberated on which milestones in Philippine history to portray. Then, based on extensive research, the visual composition of each diorama was formed with the help of five selected Filipino artists. This project eventually culminated in the creation of 60 dioramas of Filipino history from prehistoric times to the First EDSA People Power Revolution in 1986.



Diorama 22: Galleon Trade Scene, ca. 1750
in the Ayala Museum
(Image from Google Arts & Culture)



Diorama 8: Construction of Government
House in the National Museum of Singapore
(Image from Dioramas - A Visual History of
Singapore)

National Museum of Singapore

The National Museum of Singapore used to house 20 dioramas. From the ancient settlement on Fort Canning Hill in 1823 to the first parliament meeting in 1965, the visual representation of our national history captured in these dioramas constructs a coherent world in which Singapore and its people have successfully advanced from third world to first.

All the existing documentation on these 20 dioramas boast that these scenes of Singapore's development have been captured "in totality". Books and the newspaper clippings from 1984 never failed to emphasize the work that was put in to ensure "that every detail [was] historically correct". Six researchers supposedly spent two years fact-checking every detail, "down to the color of the thread used to tie the pigtails, worn by the Chinese".

The 60 dioramas in the Ayala Museum were hand-carved by artisans from Paete, Laguna, a town in the Philippines known for its highly skilled woodcarvers, hence dubbed "the Carving Capital of the Philippines".

Inspired by the concept and craftsmanship of these dioramas, The National Museum of Singapore commissioned those same Filipino woodcarvers to create the 20 dioramas for Singapore!

**Did
you
know
?**

AS CONTEMPORARY ART

In contrast to the aforementioned types of dioramas, contemporary dioramas are much more varied in terms of overall aesthetic. Therefore, contemporary dioramas do not have a specific form or mode of display, nor does it aim to portray a specific type of subject. What it *does* offer us, however, are questions - questions that may not be easily resolved, but nonetheless prompt us to rethink our current understanding of dioramas and, more importantly, their place in our modern world.

For example, some artists like Richard Barnes bring attention to the absurdity of dioramas as a form of display by puncturing the sanitised and packaged illusion of reality (refer to 'Man with Buffalo'). On the other hand, Tom Nicholuson questioned the historical justice of the dioramas in Indonesia's Monumen Nasional. By also using dioramas as a medium, and by interviewing refugees instead of relying on official narratives, Nicholuson challenged "legitimate" perspectives, giving privilege to voices that have not been captured in the production of national History.

Another intervention that contemporary dioramas offer is to highlight the issues presented by dioramas as an art form. Its current multifaceted nature affords it versatility but also problematizes its placement into a clear category of art. By extending the possibilities of what a diorama represents, artists highlight these slippages from art-making and offer new propositions about the spaces dioramas could inhabit - be it history museums, fine art institutions, cultural sites or even perhaps, more popular, public spaces.



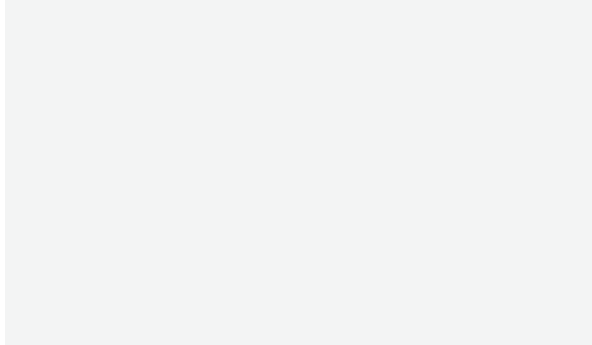
Richard Barnes, *Man with Buffalo*,
20 x 24 in, archival inkjet print, 2007.
(Image from Artsy website)



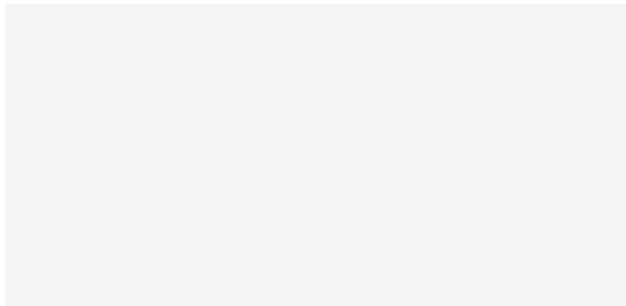
Tom Nicholuson, *I was born in Indonesia*
120 resin cast diorama figurines, 2017.
(Image from Tom Nicholson website)

ENCOUNTERING THE EXHIBITION

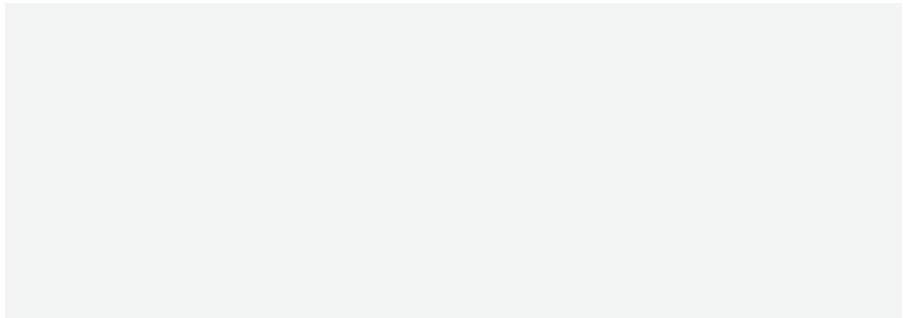
"Dioramas were historically designed to evoke feelings." Pick 2 scenes from the exhibition and identify the feelings they incited in you.



What are the interesting anecdotes that you learnt from the captions accompanying the dioramas of the National Museum of Singapore?



What images of Singapore do you recognize in Shui Tit Sing's sculptures?



Did you know?

A common feeling that dioramas, especially public, state-commissioned ones, try to evoke is that of nationalism. The choice of scenes to depict and how they are depicted can definitely serve as propaganda and elicit feelings of hope and aspiration for one's country. This is especially so for dioramas that are created after major wars or civil unrest.

SHUI TIT SING

Originally from Guangzhou, China, Shui Tit Sing was a photographer, sculptor and painter. After he graduated from the National Fine Arts College (Hangzhou) in 1940, he moved to Singapore where he was an art and Chinese language teacher.

Shui was well-known for his contributions to a number of art societies in Singapore. He was a regular exhibitor at major group exhibitions between 1946 to the early 1990s. Although he was a teacher, Shui continued to hone his painting skills, with many of his works showcasing an artistic style that combined Western and traditional Chinese painting influences. Paint continued to be his medium of choice until 1968, when he decided to dedicate the remainder of his artistic life to sculpting teakwood. It is believed that this shift in artistic medium was the outcome of Shui's travels with the 10-Men Art Group to Cambodia in 1963.



Shui at Angkor Wat in 1963
(image from the Phnom Penh Post)

Regardless of form, many of Shui's works aimed to capture the various everyday activities of different communities across Southeast Asia. Shui contrasts a romanticized vision of village life with concerns about the nature of modern life as he experienced them in Singapore.

The project 'another diorama' is based on the teakwood sculptures carved by Shui.

Did you know?

Between 1961 and 1970, as part of the 10-Men Art Group, Shui toured Southeast Asia to places like Borneo, Sumatra, Cambodia and Thailand with the aim of documenting, researching and drawing from regional traditions and cultures. The success of this informal art group and its consequent cross-cultural interactions eventually led to the formation of the Southeast Asian Art Association in 1970.

ENCOUNTERING THE EXHIBITION

Use the table below to compare and contrast the National Museum of Singapore's dioramas with Shui Tit Sing's sculptures.

	STS Sculptures	NMS Dioramas
What scenes are portrayed?		
What was the main material used?		
What was the time period presented in these works?		
Who initiated these works?		
Who carved these sculptures?		
With reference to form, are they lifelike?		
Are they socially representative?		

Which category of dioramas do you think is most applicable to Shui Tit Sing's sculptures and why?

REFLECTING FURTHER: WORLD BUILDING

What worlds exist within dioramas? Can 'a world' only be portrayed in habitat and public history dioramas – or can coherence also exist within a single teakwood sculpture?

In the broadest sense, world-building refers to the process of constructing a reality through the use of space, composition and background. While the term is perhaps more commonly used in relation to writing science fiction or fantasy, visual artists have identified that their art-making process can also be seen as an act of world-building. From this perspective, we can see how art forms like painting, photography and even architecture are guided within certain principles of spatiality and 3-dimensional elements to create a coherent 'world'.

It can also be argued that world-building projects can advance a more political agenda. When couched in a specific historic period, pieces of infrastructure can relate to a larger political landscape. Let's take the era of the 1956 Non-Aligned Movement and Bandung Conference as an example - after the Cold War, newly independent countries felt the need to publicly declare and guard their independence. In Southeast Asia, this manifested specifically in the construction of monuments - large-scale infrastructural projects that marked the break away from the imperial powers. Stadiums, in particular, were emblematic of this declaration. The Phnom Penh Olympic Stadium (1964) and the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium (1962) were sites where these non-aligned countries physically banded together in solidarity against colonialism.



Gelora Bung Karno Stadium
(image from jakonline.asia)



Phnom Penh Olympic Stadium
(image from The Phnom Penh Post)

In that case, perhaps it is more important to ask what work goes into the creation of these worlds – what was the process of this world-building? What was it for? What purpose did it serve in that specific time period? The decisions that have to be made in the production process inevitably shape what ends up becoming monumentalised.

REFLECTING FURTHER: COSMOLOGY

In comparison to world-building, which tends to manifest in more political forms of presentation, cosmologies allow for more subjectivity as they provide us with a more culturally sensitive depiction of reality.

The architecture of temple complexes seen across Asia are clear examples of cosmology at work. Most of the Indochinese region was heavily influenced by Vedic knowledge and Hindu belief. The result was the construction of complexes that were dedicated to Hindu deities like Vishnu, the Protector. Prambanan and Angkor Wat are examples of temple complexes that reflect a cosmology. Apart from the symbols, imagery and depiction of classic Hindu myths, the architecture and overall layout of these complexes spoke to the larger questions of our creation and place in the cosmos.



Shui with one of his wood artworks
(image from [That Spare Room](#))

More contemporary spaces like Haw Par Villa could also be considered a cosmology, since it is a site where morality and myth-making are actively and simultaneously being constructed. Once again, not only does the park contain explicit representations of Chinese mythology, but its circular structure also symbolizes harmony, which is an extremely integral concept in Confucianism cosmology.

Did you know?

Temples were both social and religious centers. Thus, the architecture and symbolism reflected the larger Indic belief system while also capturing the everyday lives of those that engaged with this belief system.

From the unique composition of Shui's teakwood carvings, we can see how he was heavily influenced by the bas reliefs found in the temples of Angkor. Similar to how the walls of Angkor Thom and Bayon depict scenes from everyday life of the Angkorian Khmer, Shui's sculptures can also be seen as facsimiles of modern Singaporean landscape and activities.

BUILDING VOCABULARY

artist

A person who practices any of the creative arts; art involves the expression of one's thoughts, emotions, desires and how one experiences the world

category

A class or division of people or things regarded as having particular shared characteristics

cosmology

The visual representation of a culture; this may take a visual form that reflects a specific social and cultural situation

diorama

A scene that captures a moment in time

illusion

Something that deceives by producing a false or misleading impression of reality

immersion

To be completely engrossed or absorbed, to develop a deep mental involvement in something

re-creation

The action or process of creating something again; a re-enactment or simulation of something.

memory

The act or fact of retaining and recalling experiences, impressions and facts

monument

A structure (usually three-dimensional) that was explicitly created to commemorate a person or event that is relevant to a social group's history and/or cultural heritage

national history

Narratives that regard the nation-state as the primary subject of history for the purposes of nation-building. This construction of the past is endorsed by the state

scale

A representation of the relationship between a measurement on a model and the corresponding measurement on the actual object

sculpture

The art of carving, modeling, welding, or producing figurative or abstract works of art in three dimensions

static

Lacking in movement, action, or change, especially in an undesirable or uninteresting way

truth

That which is true or in accordance with fact or reality; a fact or belief that is accepted as true

world-building

State (or pre-state) oriented, more political form of representation

woodcarving

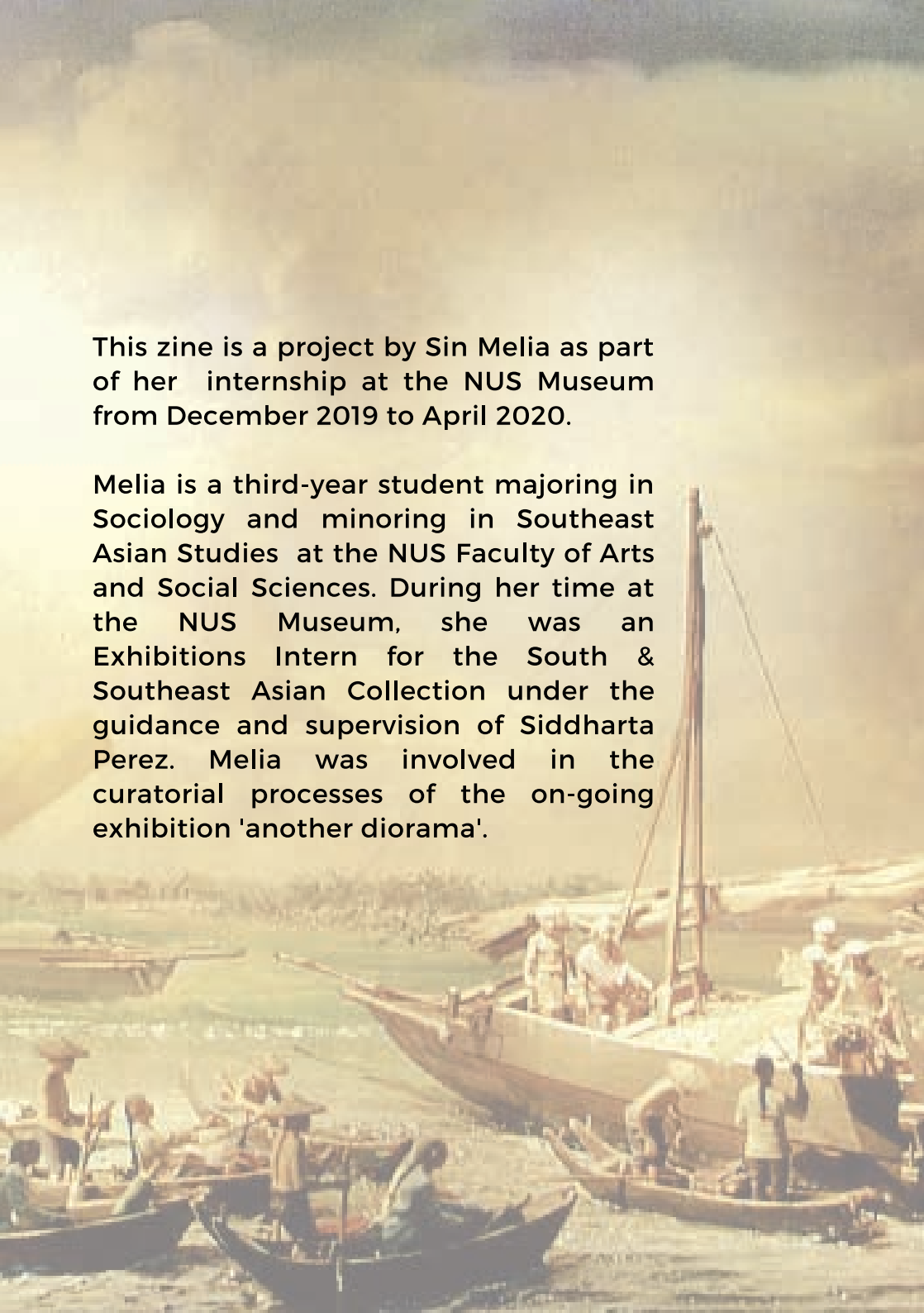
A form of woodwork by means of chisel and mallet, resulting in a wooden figure or in the sculptural ornamentation of a wooden object.

10 men art group

An informal group of artists from Malaya that organised field trips around Southeast Asia between 1963 and 1970, in search of a regional aesthetic

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A sepia-toned historical photograph of a river scene. In the foreground, several small wooden boats are visible, with people inside. Some people are wearing hats. In the middle ground, a larger wooden boat with a tall mast is prominent, with several people on board. The background shows a wide river and a distant shoreline with some buildings and trees. The overall tone is historical and documentary.

This zine is a project by Sin Melia as part of her internship at the NUS Museum from December 2019 to April 2020.

Melia is a third-year student majoring in Sociology and minoring in Southeast Asian Studies at the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. During her time at the NUS Museum, she was an Exhibitions Intern for the South & Southeast Asian Collection under the guidance and supervision of Siddharta Perez. Melia was involved in the curatorial processes of the on-going exhibition 'another diorama'.

