

Amanda Heng, the Braided Spirit of Singaporean Contemporary Art

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Taking a sip of tea in the courtyard of the Singapore Art Museum, there was no doubt in my mind: “When I get old,” I thought, “I want to be just as cool as Amanda Heng.”

The lady with double-braided hair sitting across from me is an inspiring yet down-to-earth artist; indeed she has greatly contributed to the evolution of Singaporean contemporary art. She was one of the early members of the seminal art collective “The Artist Village,” and has long experimented with performance art and installation. Interested in art since childhood, she didn’t fully commit to making art until she left her tax office job to travel the world. Amanda Heng decided to become an artist during a trip to Europe. There, she discovered a completely different notion of contemporary art. The seriousness with which Europeans looked at art was light years away from how Singapore viewed art. In Singapore in the 1980s, art was all about economics. It was all about numbers!



Amanda Heng, Another Woman, detail, 1996, Collection of National Heritage of Singapore

Today Singapore is still about numbers, but has taken in Richard Florida’s lessons about creative industries as a factor for economic growth. A city port since its colonial days under the British and a multi-racial society, Singapore is now rebranding itself into an arts hub. This small tropical island-nation, tucked in between Malaysia and Indonesia, has experienced tremendous growth in its 50 years of existence. Economic and technological progress was achieved thanks to pragmatic governance and hard work on the part of its citizens. Amanda Heng has witnessed rapid transformation in both the art scene and society at large. And her work is a meaningful comment on this swift to modernization – as well as a compassionate observation on those who were left behind.

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Amanda Heng, Singirl Series, www.singirl.net

You started out as an artist in the '90s: That was the dawn of the Singaporean contemporary art scene as well as a momentous time for Asia. Was this fuel for your art?

The '90s in Asia were important because many things happened. Suddenly we found ourselves questioning our heritage and traditions in the face of the new nation. My interest in expressing this in art started because I felt threatened by the government policies aimed at constructing a new identity for Singapore. The hardest was the change of language policy which made English the official language. This was huge. Singapore has four main ethnic groups with different tongues – not to mention there being many different dialects of Chinese. Chinese, Malay and Indian schools were closed or switched to teaching in English. On top of that, the government banned dialects on radio and news reporting. Consequentially the older generation lost any form of entertainment and all their means of communication. In families, the elderly could no longer talk to the young, which meant orally-transmitted traditional values couldn't be passed on. And those values changed while the country was still looking for a new identity after colonial times. How can a society operate without values?



Amanda Heng, Singirl Lorong Buangkok, 2011, Installation View at SAM8Q

You tackled this issue in “Another Woman,” a photographic series in which you tried to create a channel of communication with your mother beyond the spoken word.

Yes, in my work I started to look at all the consequences of these changes in relation to my mother. She wasn't educated – she couldn't speak Mandarin, only dialect – so she was cut off by the new language policy. I went back to her

and really tried to understand what she was experiencing. Working on that series, I cried a lot, feeling my mother's pain. And it was not just her, but that whole generation. Elderly Singaporeans were feeling fear and insecurity. Where do I go? Who am I? What is this environment? I can't go back to China, so how am I going to carry on? They came from different countries to Singapore to escape hunger. They experienced war, and now they are facing all these changes. They fought so much, they gave us everything, and we treated them this way. No one spoke about it because we didn't have a common language to use.



Amanda Heng, Let's Walk, performance in Fukuoka, 1999

A sense of belonging is very much tied to language and culture. How do you negotiate this space between traditions and modernity in your work?

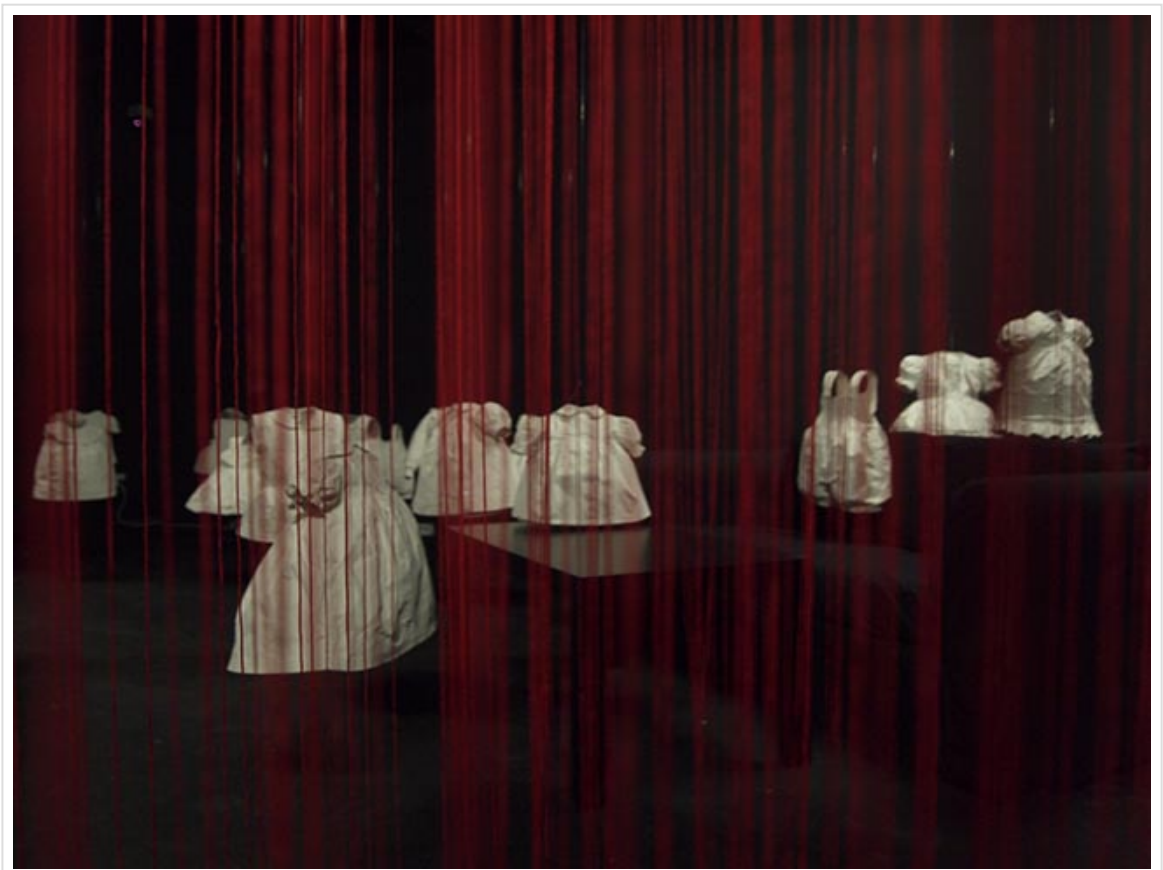
I'm interested in my heritage, culture and tradition, but I'm also quite critical of it. I try to understand whether history is still relevant to contemporary living in Singapore. I also recognize that we are a new country with many different ethnic groups and religions. We are developing very fast, and we are an exception in a prevalently Muslim area of the world. So there is a pervasive sense of insecurity and anxiety caused by our struggles to survive. There are, of course, realities one needs to address. But for me, to find our position is actually to understand the source of our insecurities without getting rid of them altogether. Every civilization has its own values and richness, and we can use them for ourselves. But you must be willing to recognize those values. And even though Singapore prides itself in being a multicultural society, living here, I can say, is not as seamless as it looks. Here policy changes happen overnight. You need time for individuals to process them on an emotional and psychological level.



Amanda Heng, Singirl Revisits 1, Long Fu Coffee Shop (Telok Kurau Road/Joo Chiat Place), 2011

How does art fit into your life? Does it fulfill a particular purpose or need for you, and has this changed over time?

After working with my mother, I realized that art can't be separated from life. Art has to be part of life, and both feed into each other, which means I have to go through art as a process for my own personal growth as well. Art changed my character and the way I look at things. I don't think art should be put on a pedestal. Wherever you encounter art, you have to take the chance to train your spirit, eyes and mind.



Amanda Heng, Missing, baby girls' dresses, fishing lines, hooks, black cloths, 1994

In fact, you are all about bringing art to the people, as opposed to a more elitist conception. Is art in Singapore today elitist?

Obviously, yes. They are consciously trying to develop elitism. Just look at the art gallery cluster Gillman Barracks, with their monthly events. It's all about food and a lot of noise. You come to see art as mere entertainment, just a higher-class, more elitist form of entertainment. Instead of producing what the galleries or the government want, artists should challenge this system. Of course, they must find critical ways to ask questions, not just contradict point blank. It's about bringing the current situation into your work. Can you make the public see the contradictions, while protecting the space to express yourself as an artist? It's definitely hard to do that in an art system which channels education to turn artists into stars. This way of setting about things fails to show the laborious process of development and experimentation which lies underneath any artistic development and is closely connected to the artist's life.



Amanda Heng, 20 Years Later, 2015

So, compared to your generation, does the new wave of Singaporean artists find it more difficult challenging the status quo?

Yes, and I also think the other contradictory thing is that the Western art

philosophy or ecosystem is about experimenting and breaking through norms, whereas in Asia the general culture is more about harmony. That goes against the spirit of asking questions and pushing things to the limit. Young artists have to be conscious about this tension and see how they can negotiate traditions. I feel that this challenging spirit is at the core of art-making. An artist’s role is to look at society critically. How do you argue for your ground? How do you negotiate your space? These things are more important than art-making itself. If you have this kind of spirit, anything can happen.



Amanda Heng, Another Woman No.7, 1996-97, Collection of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

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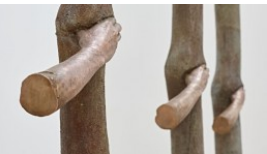


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