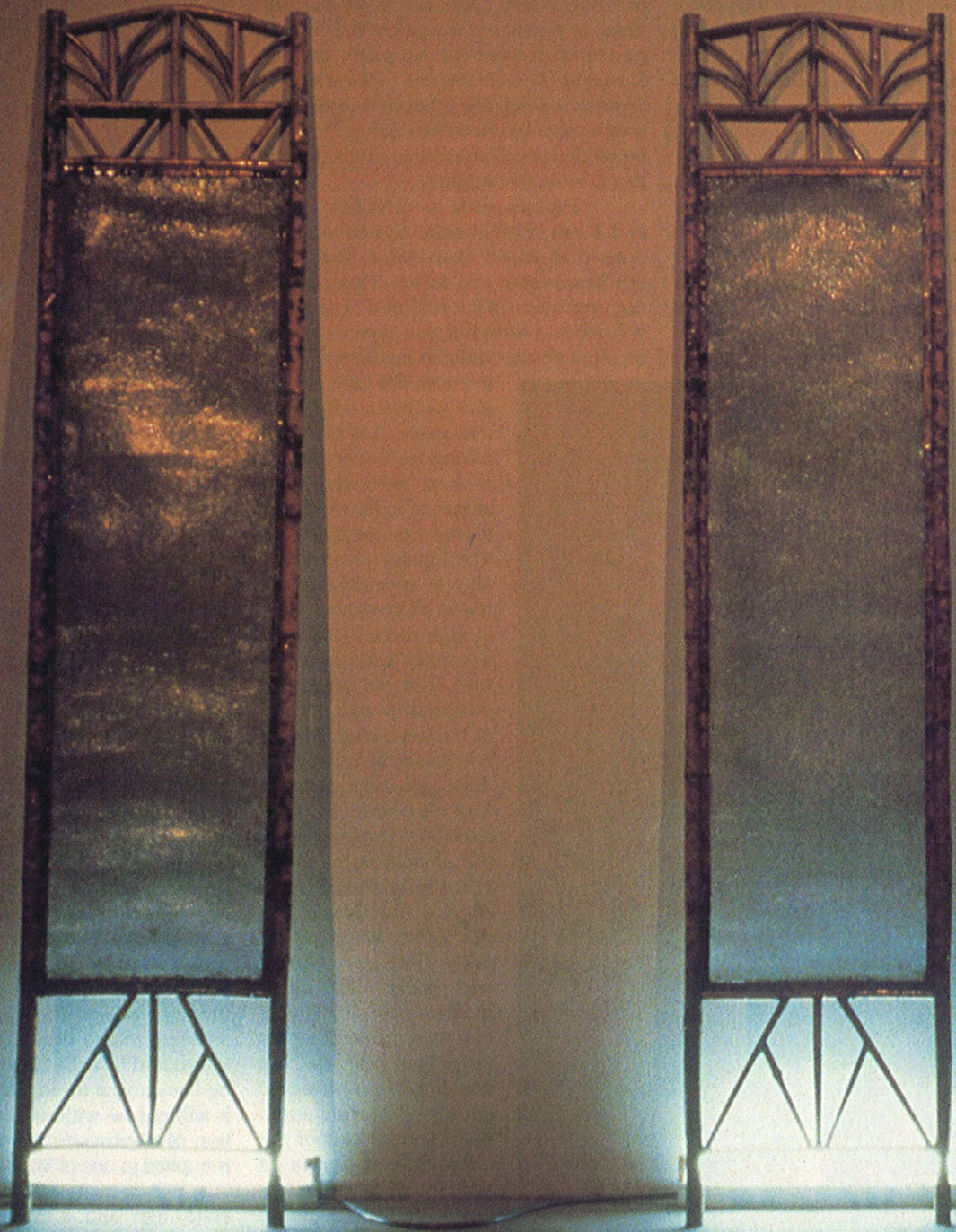
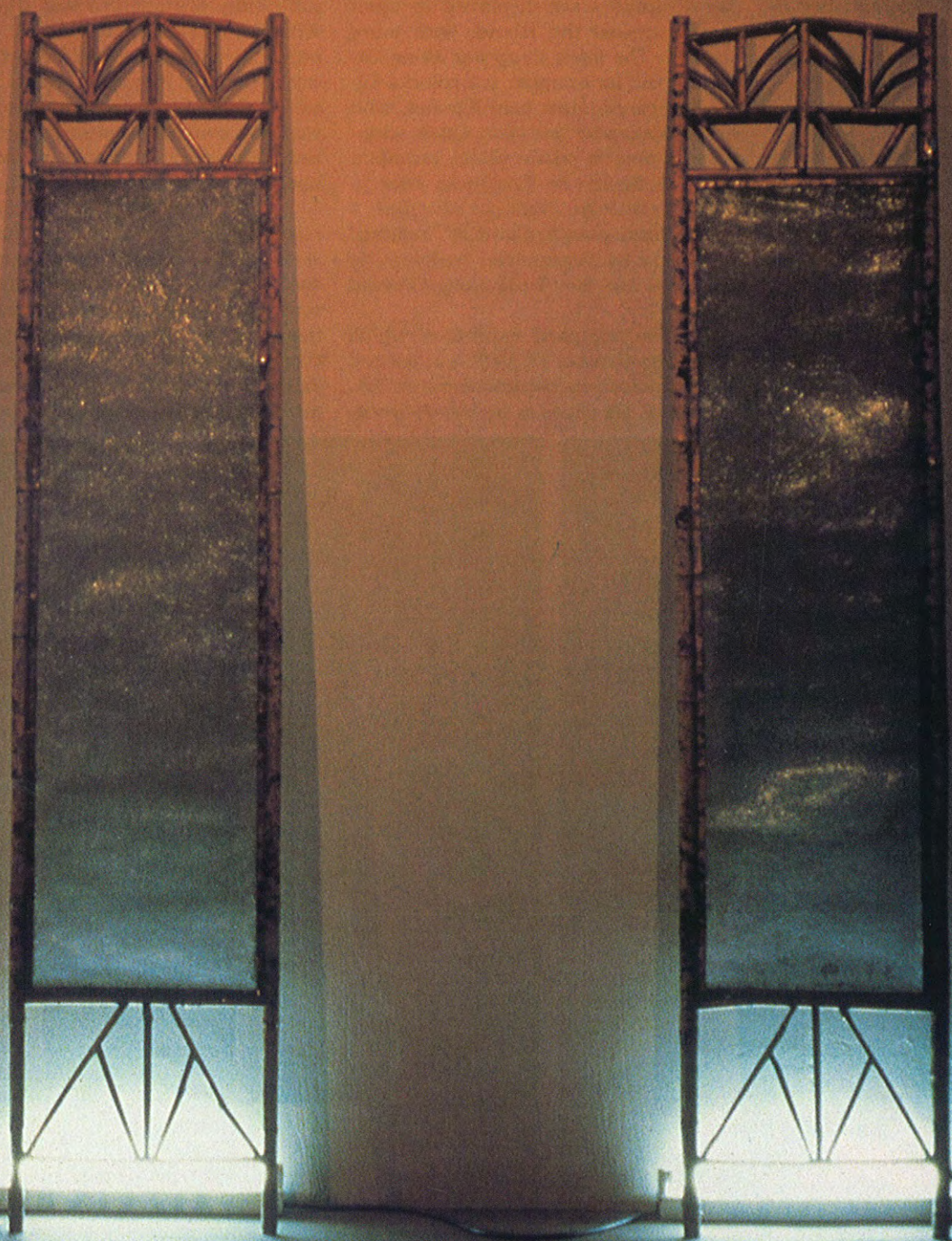


Sculpture For All

By Sian E. Jay



*Singapore's development as a regional visual arts center received a significant boost with the opening of Sculpture Square in October 1999. Its two-month-long inaugural exhibition, **Provocative Things**, brought together 16 of Singapore's most innovative sculptors.*



Amidst the popularity of contemporary Asian painting during the past decade, sculpture has had to take a backseat. Gradually, however, contemporary Asian sculptors have begun to receive the attention they deserve. Numerous exhibitions around the Asia-Pacific region in recent years have highlighted the varied output and achievements of the region's sculptors both in traditional sculptural forms and in more experimental work, including installation and performance art with a significant three-dimensional component. New sculpture parks and gardens are also being developed throughout the region to bring sculpture to wider public attention.

The latest addition in the drive to promote sculpture on a regional basis is Singapore's SP\$1.54 million Sculpture Square located on the corner of Middle Road and Waterloo Street. The Square consists of a newly restored 129 year-old chapel, the historic site of Singapore's first Baba Church, and an adjacent old boarding house in an open concept site. This site is part of Singapore's National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme and is lo-

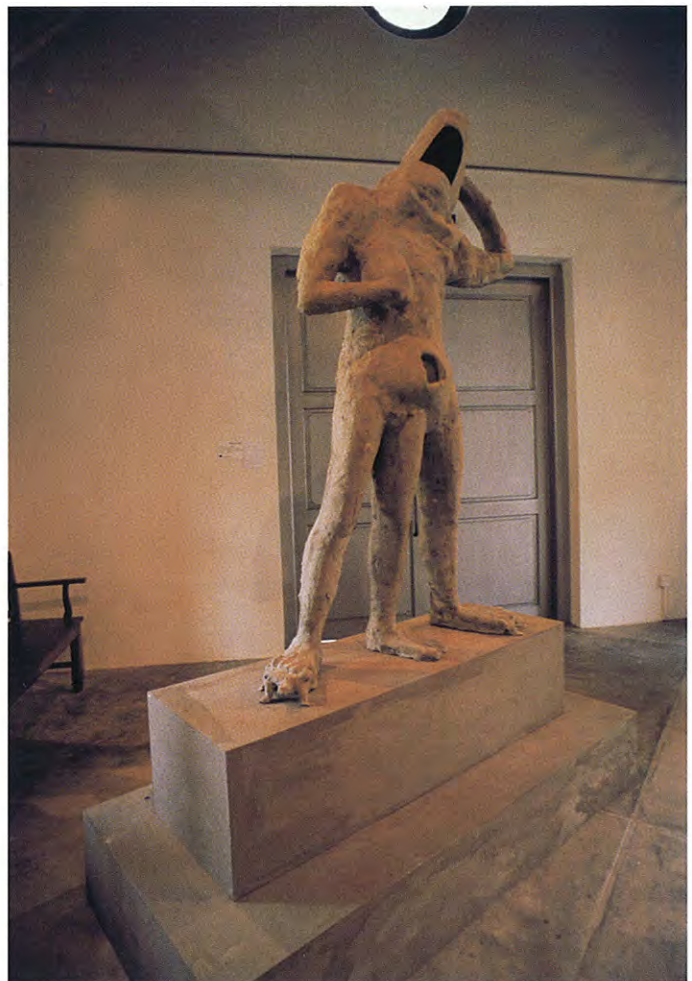
cated within the Civic District's Waterloo Arts Belt. As the first such space in Singapore dedicated to three-dimensional art, it joins the Singapore Art Museum and the National University Art Gallery where the public can now see curated sculptural exhibitions.

Interest in sculpture—and in public sculpture in particular—in Singapore has grown dramatically in recent years. Where a decade or so ago there were few sculptures to be seen in public places, today sculptures are displayed in open spaces around the Island, with more planned. The latest to appear along Orchard Road, for example, is a colorful figure by Spanish artist Juan Ripolles, who visited Singapore last year. Other sculptures of note in public places include a group of figures by Taiwanese artist Ju Ming outside the National Museum, a Henry Moore outside the OCBC building, and works by Singaporean sculptors Ng Eng Teng and Sun Yu-Li along Orchard Road.

The inaugural exhibition which opened on October 22, 1999, was curated by Singaporean art historian and critic T.K. Sabapathy. He chose as his title *Provoca-*

tive Things: A 3-Dimensional Experience in Singapore. The title for the show was derived from a comment made by artist Teo Eng Seng in 1991 following a sculpture exhibition that Sabapathy curated at the National Museum Art Gallery. At that exhibition there was an attempt to include "three-dimensional productions based on conceptual and performative values," that had either been rejected or ignored at an earlier exhibition in 1976. As a result such art practices had subsequently been insufficiently documented and discussed. What Teo Eng Seng had said was, "a lot of provocative things were in fact not understood then and they were simply pushed aside." One of the pieces "pushed aside" was Teo's own performance project, which had been rejected outright by the selection jury.

At the 1991 exhibition, the organizers had tried to rectify the earlier omissions, and to answer certain questions about the development of sculptural practices. "Was sculpture developing along a trajectory whereby it could no longer be called sculpture in the conventional sense?" Sabapathy said. He elaborates on this in the catalogue for *Provocative Things* by



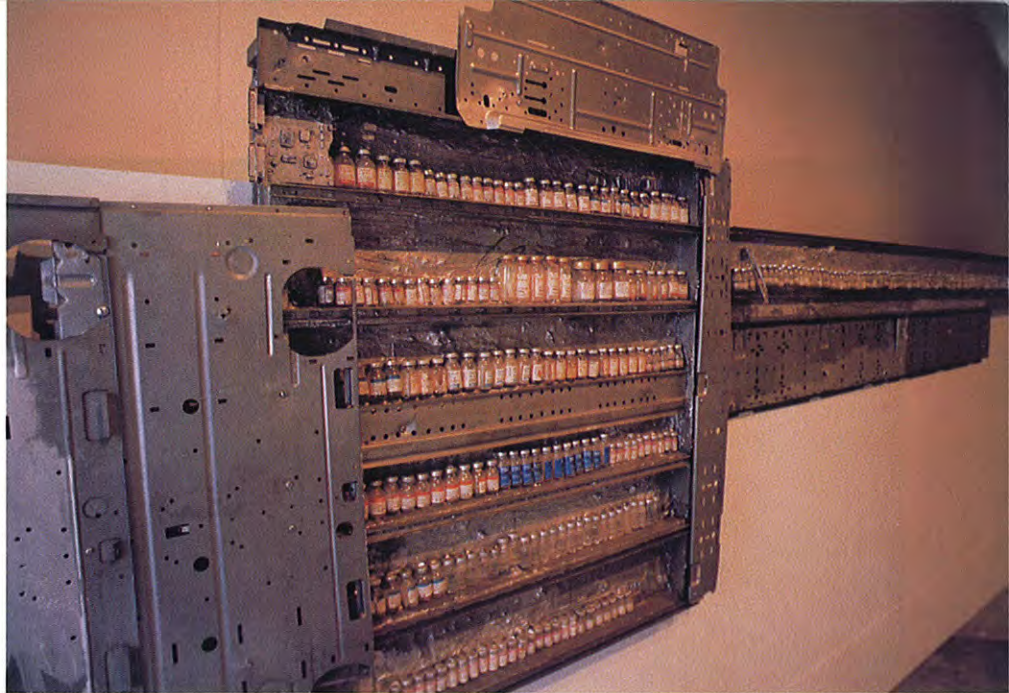
Above left: Victor Tan, *Between*, 1999, stainless steel wire and wood, 314 x 192 cm. **Above right:** Chandrasekran S., *Dead Worker I-MANI*, 1999, polyester resin coated with cement, 215 x 97 cm. **Previous pages:** Teo Eng Seng, *Astral Projection*, 1999, bamboo and reinforced fiberglass, dimensions variable.

explaining that it was concluded that sculptural practice in Singapore was indeed developing along two trajectories.

The first involved objects that are most commonly regarded as sculptural in that “volume, mass, and tactile qualities are the pre-eminent properties and qualities.” The second deals with that which Sabapathy describes as “arrangements, events, gestures, constructions, and concepts, in which the materials used are often indistinguishable from those employed in fabricating things for use in the everyday world.”

It was with these considerations in mind that Sabapathy set out to put *Provocative Things* together. The artists were selected, he explained, “based on their consistent reflection of their sculptural or three-dimensional practices in order to widen and re-define their parameters.” He selected 16 artists ranging in experience and practice from Ng Eng Teng, who has been working for over 40 years, to Victor Tan, who began his artistic career only four years ago. “The artists were chosen,” Sabapathy went on to elaborate, “because I like their work and have been closely associated with their development through research and writing. There is a personal involvement, but they have not been chosen merely on a whim. Their work does actually fit into the overall scheme of things.”

Provocative Things does encompass a range of visual ideas expressed in the three dimensional, which challenge the viewer to think about the status and practice of three-dimensional art in Singapore. Three of the pieces, those by Ng Eng Teng, Chandrasekaran S, and Victor Tan, are very clearly figurative sculptures. However, in spite of their upright nature and occupa-



Chng Nai Wee, *Biotics*, 1995-1997, mixed media, 120 x 400 x 20 cm.

tion of a settled piece of ground, as Sabapathy suggested, “they sit uncomfortably within these dimensions.” He has a point, for they undermine our more usual visual expectation of conventional figurative sculpture in their planes and contours, and even in the way they appear to occupy the space.

Ng Eng Teng’s *Torso to Torso (Male and Female)* continues a series begun some years ago during a life-drawing class, when he began to notice that different parts of the human body took on different forms when viewed with a slight touch of humor. There is indeed something humorous about the cement fondu figures with their rather colorful daubs. They were the first objects to confront visitors entering Sculpture Square to view *Provocative Things*, and it takes a few moments for the eye to take in what the artist is doing.

The figures were among the more monumental on display, and at over two

meters high one might have expected them to appear more imposing. Although the forms are recognizable as faces, they are modeled in such a way as to make one pause and take a second look, for they are also witty plays on the form of the human body. As Ng suggests, they are “lightheartedly naughty, sensual, sexy, yet un-erotic.” They may well make some viewers seem uneasy as is clearly intended, but ultimately they appear uninteresting, and say more about the artist’s attitude towards, and discomfort with, the body than that of the onlookers’.

Chandrasekaran’s cement-coated polyester resin figure, on the other hand, has a far stronger presence. This is partly due to the way the work is mounted on a plinth to make it considerably higher than its initial 215 centimeters. The eye is pulled up to gaze at it. By so doing the work imposes itself on the viewer. *Deadworker I-MANI* would not be described as a particularly appealing sculpture. It has an unfinished look to it, but its form, stance, and the way it holds the space it occupies almost forces viewers to come closer and examine it for themselves in order to unravel its meaning.

It isn’t easy to uncover the meaning underlying this work. The head suggests the visor of a welder, cut away to reveal a space where the face should be, perhaps suggesting the faceless nature of the *Deadworker*. But the head is tipped to one side, resting on its left hand, in a pose reminiscent of Krishna—and here the artist draws on his Hindu roots to express himself. The body has an ambiguity to it, an androgyny, implied through the single breast, and the presence of a space suggesting a vagina, and a third leg, which suggests a phallus. Here, too, the artist appears to have drawn upon Hindu themes relating to the body and to the ambiguity of sexuality. Chandrasekaran’s



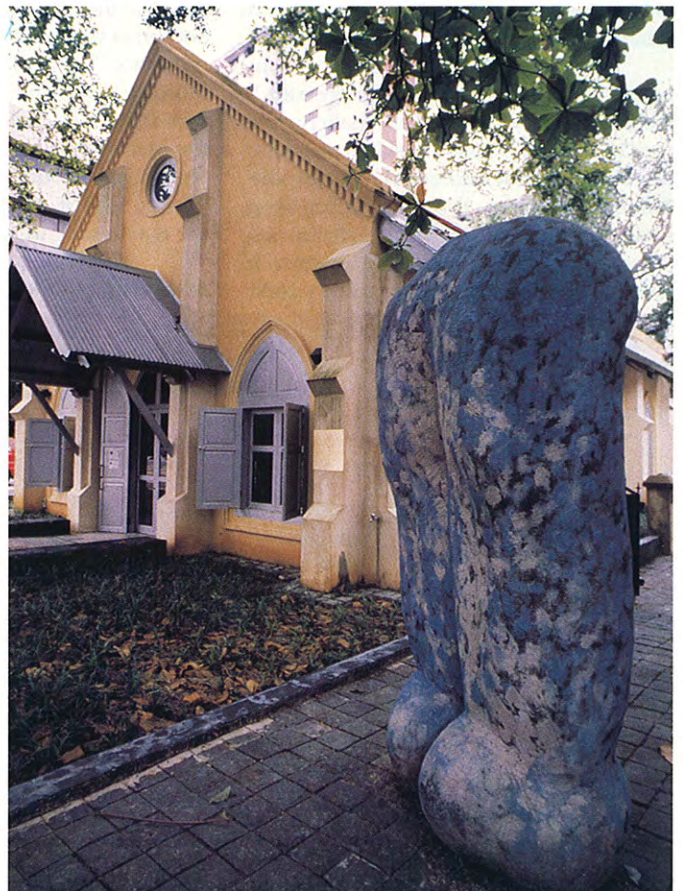
Chng Seok Tin, *Kuantan Boat Song*, 1999, coconut husks cast in bronze, dimensions variable.



Cheo Chai Hiang, Wu Zhong Sheng Tao (36 Strategies series), 1999, mixed media, dimensions variable,



Jason Lim, *Are You Afraid Of Ceramics?*, 1999, mixed media, dimensions variable.



Ng Eng Teng, *Torso To Face (Male and Female)*, 1999, cement foundu with color, 1: 230 x 125 x 88; 2: 215 x 120 x 80 cm.

work is puzzling and perplexing, even irritating in the way it forces the viewer to peel away the layers of ideas to get to a meaning, while in contrast, Ng's pieces appear obvious and overstated.

Between, the third figurative piece by Victor Tan, consists of a stainless steel wire figure in a wooden frame. Of the three, it has the strongest aesthetic appeal both in the use of the material to create the delicate figure, and in the graceful execution of the figure. Tan's use of space, too, is particularly interesting. By framing the piece like a painting, he suggests the use of two-dimensional space, but the figure leans forward and daintily steps out of the frame to create a three-dimensional effect. The work hovers precariously above the ground, and the movement of air causes the whole structure to sway gently. As the figure steps out of the frame, it is captured momentarily in a state of transition, caught halfway in and halfway out, a delightful play with space and the figure's place within it.

There are two wall pieces in the exhibition that refer us to the art of relief sculpture. But whereas one, Chng Seok Tin's *Kuantan Boat Song*, has a simple visual appeal that allows the components to be defined as relief, hugging the wall, Chng Nai Wee's *Biotics* suggests a piece of functional apparatus and sits uncomfortably, testing our notion of a relief.

The elements that make up Chng Seok Tin's *Kuantan Boat Song* are derived from pieces of coconut husk picked up from the beach and cast in bronze. Their curved shape, reminding one so poetically of simple boats, become metaphors for the maritime nature of the region. The pieces of husk that have curled away from their base become the passengers on a journey to wherever the imagination chooses. This is a beautiful visual statement, simply, but strongly stated. The almost futuristic imagery, suggested by Chng Nai Wee's *Biotics*, on the other hand, is both startling and stark. He leads us to question the use of biochemicals to build and enhance the human body and its performance, using the means of enhancement rather than the finished product to make his point. The vials of biochemicals in the aluminum cyropreserver suggest a future nightmare, a conveyor belt of perfected people.



Mohammad Din Mohammad, *Singa Kuda (Alternative Vehicle)*, 1996-1999, mixed media, 160 x 90 x 30 cm

Another piece, more emphatically installation than sculptural, is Cheo Chai-Hiang's *Wu Zhong Sheng Tao* (36 Strategies series) which consists of a set of ladders leaning against the wall. At the top of each ladder, fastened to the wall, is a black box in which the artist has chalked a few words. In themselves the words make little sense, and perhaps refer to Cheo's long-time play with the punning and alternative meanings of words. The installation is a continuation of Cheo's ear-

lier work reflecting his nomadic life. This has expressed itself in Cheo's tendency to "make do and mend," not only in the production of his work—hence the ladders are made from an assortment of found materials—but in the adoption of Chinese colloquialisms and idioms—references to which appear in his work. Although the piece serves to provoke questions from the onlookers, it is actually the process of production—a collaboration between Cheo and his students—that was of central importance to the work.

If Cheo's installation makes use of the found object, so, too, does Mohammad's *Singa Kuda (Alternative Vehicle)*. However, it is in the transformation of those objects, and the ability of that transformation to evoke ideas in the onlookers' minds that gives it potency. Mohammad's work is also, on another level, a reflection and expression of the syncretic nature of his cultural background. The process of placing and replacing the constituent elements during its production are central concerns, as they are in Cheo's work, but more so than the ladders, Mohammad's recreated creature has the ability to continue being reconstituted and recreated in the onlooker's mind after it is "finished."

For Mohammad, the symbolism of each component is clear, it is linked to his cultural background so that the horse head represents an aggressive approach towards life, the coconuts, consumerism, and the old piece of wood on which the completed structure stands, the earth. These are the meanings he



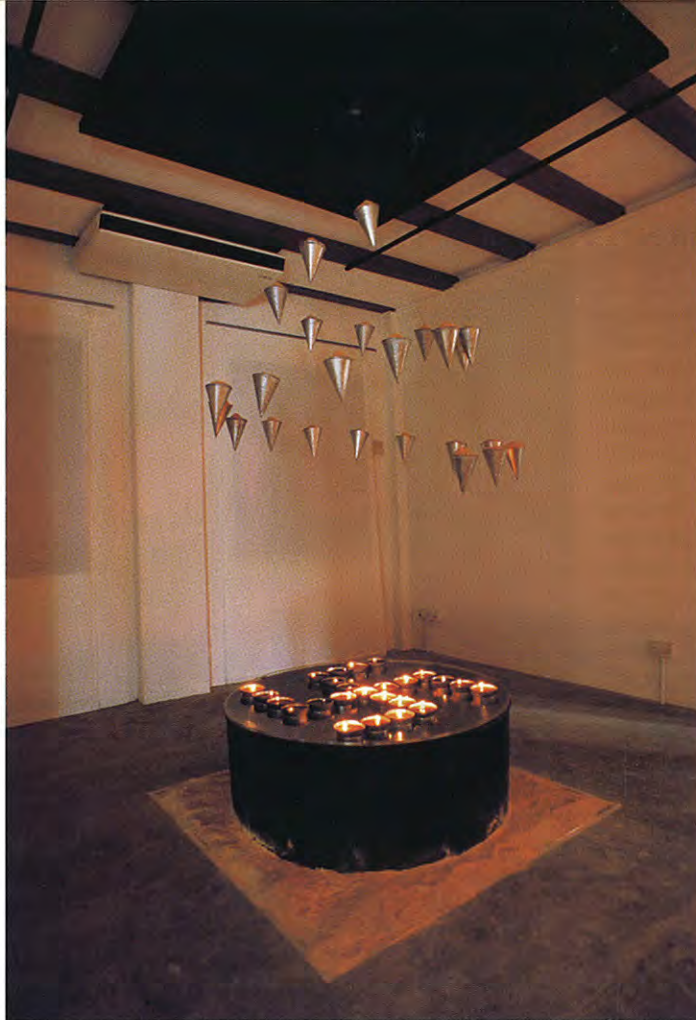
Baet Yeok Kuan, *Untitled*, steel and cast concrete, 1999, 200 x 180 x 70 cm.

assigns to the objects, which have all had a previous "existence," but they can just as easily be assigned different meanings by different people. Some meanings may be shared, cutting across cultures, such as the idea of the mechanical world encapsulated in the old computer frame that forms the "skeleton" of the figure. As each person combines and recombines the parts to create their own "alternative vehicle," the space occupied by the work is boundless once the participant undertakes their own "shamanic" journey.

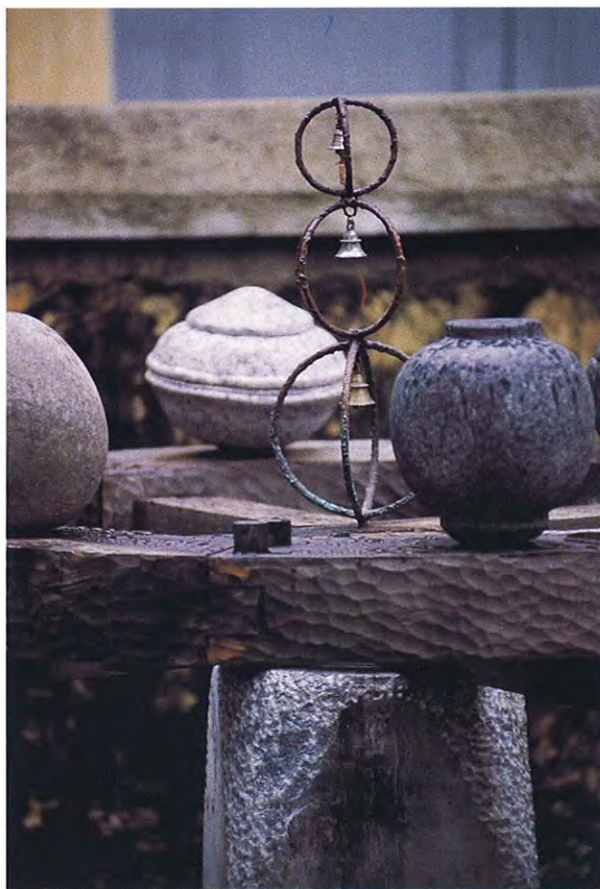
Lim Poh Teck also makes use of the found object in his work, and in *Your Choice*, he uses them—like Mohammad—to express not so much ideas about his own culture, but the way that mass culture and the culture of consumerism has forced its way into all spheres of life. At first glance, the two giant cans with propellers on top, sitting in the middle of the hall, seem a little incongruous, and at first elicit a smile, and a question as to what they are doing there. But as one begins to think about them, they become very familiar; Lim has reproduced the sardine cans that are a typical item on any grocery list, and which formed a common part of Lim's daily diet as he grew up.

However, far from being an amusing reference to an aspect of childhood, they have become a potent reminder of how the outside world encroaches in ways unforeseen, and forces the powerless to accept "terms and conditions" over which they have no control. All packaging on consumer goods comes complete with information, regulations, and conditions with which we must comply. Sitting incongruously in their little bit of space, the two sardine cans expand conceptually to fill a vast space that concerns itself with human rights, power relations, and a host of other issues.

There were pieces displayed which had a simple aesthetic appeal in an abstracted way, playing with form that is simply placed in a space, and allows the



Kumari Nahappan, precisely...360, 1999, found objects, lead cones, sandalwood powder, and burning candles, 140 x 140 cm. (approximately).



Chong Fah Cheong, Ora Pro Nobis, 1987-1999, marble, wood, granite, copper, metal bells, 138 x 135 cm.

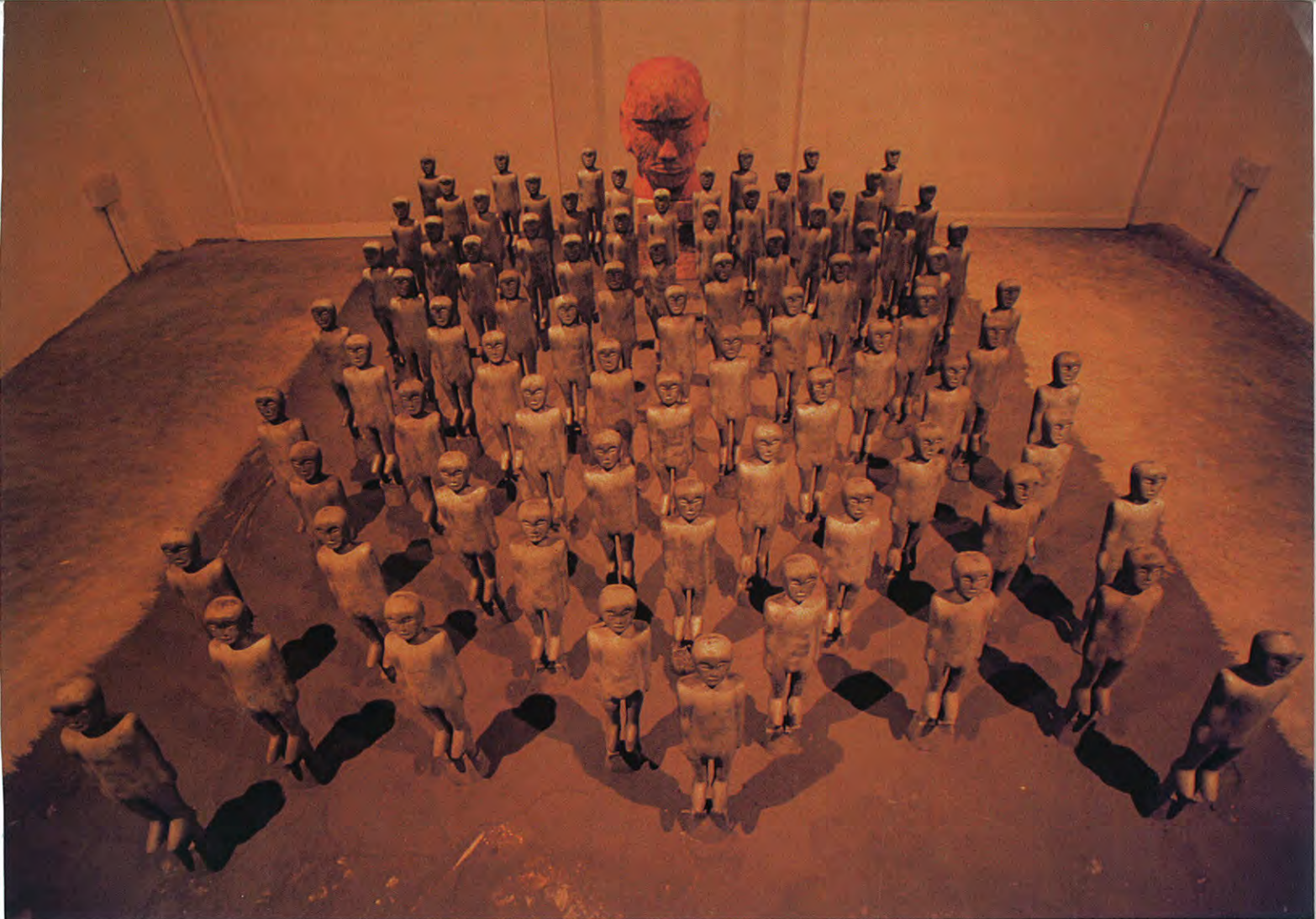
eye to enjoy an arrangement of pleasing forms, or to seek deeper meanings. The works of Ahmad Bakar and Baet Yoek Kuan fall into this category. Ahmad Bakar's series of arrangements—*Aliph*—are abstracted expressions of Arabic calligraphy, the first letter in the alphabet. The tradition of calligraphy allows unlimited artistic possibilities, expressed simply as an expression of the letter and all that it evokes in Islam, or it may take on new meanings. In Bakar's arrangement, if *aliph*, as the first letter, suggests a beginning, then his expression of that letter through the use of the skeletal arches of the work may also evoke reminders of endings, death, decay, and a return to a new beginning.

Baet Yoek Kuan's *Untitled*, which is part of a larger series, utilizes steel and cast concrete to express a personal response to the human condition, which includes feeling pain and discomfort in both body and mind. The carefully

balanced sculpture uses graceful, geometric forms that also encompass the organic. The frame encloses and constricts, and where it attempts to open up into space, Baet's work pulls back at the last moment, closing in on that space in a claustrophobic, troubling way.

A very different way of utilizing space comes through in the work of Sun Yu-Li, Kumari Nahappan and Teo Eng Seng, where boundless space and the space encompassed by the mind is evoked. Sun takes his work beyond the confines of the given space of the exhibition hall. With *Universal Language* he extends the notion of human knowledge, symbolized by a pyramid, upwards through the use of neon strips representing inspiration, so that ultimately it becomes an architectural manipulation of space that encompasses the whole building, which becomes a metaphor for the potential boundlessness of human knowledge.

Kumari Nahappan also plays successfully with notions of space in *precisely... 360*, which represents a continuation of her earlier work. She draws on her own cultural iconography to ex-



Vincent Leow, *Among Men Is Man*, 1989-1999, aluminum, wood, dimensions variable.

press the vastness of time, mediated through Indian philosophical concepts. She, too, uses found objects which she combines into a pleasing arrangement, a spiral of lead cones packed with sandalwood powder, suspended over a swastika of burning candles. The spiral reminds us of the Indian concept of time, spiraling down from a golden age to the present, the age of lead, which is also a poison. The swastika, too, can evoke various feelings, positive or negative, so that the more we look, the more oppositions can be found in Kumari's work. The symbols and ideas that she uses enable the viewer to create his or her own universe through personal interpretations of layered symbols and ideas, and in so doing create their own meanings.

Whereas Nahappan plays with space in a three-dimensional form that expands conceptually outwards, Teo Eng Seng uses a flat plane in *Astral Projection* to consider the idea of existence, and the state of non-existence. A series of back-lit bamboo and reinforced fiberglass screens represent the divide between the two states of being, invite the onlooker to choose which door to pass through and find out what lies beyond.

If these three works express the boundlessness of space, time, and exist-

ence, expressed conceptually through ever expansive space, then Chong Fah Cheong manages to condense the universe into a confined space through the simple action of turning a wheel. *Ora Pro Nobis*, meaning "pray for us," draws on the iconography of Asian religious objects—prayer wheels, beads and bells—and allows the audience to interact, bringing them into direct physical contact with the work and the ideas it encompasses. There is also an immediacy about the arrangements of Jason Lim's *Are you afraid of ceramics and stuff like that?* The assembly of objects, some familiar and some less so, lying on a surface, invites the audience to play, to reassemble and regroup the elements in endless combinations. Lim uses the arrangements to make us question the whole notion of what constitutes art, and what it is supposed to achieve.

Finally, Vincent Leow's intriguing installation *Among Men is Man* is a scaled-down work that actually represents power and ego. A group of 80 aluminum figures almost all identical, stand up in ranks like warriors from an ancient Chinese tomb, while a much larger wooden head overlooks them from behind. It suggests "big brother is watching you," or perhaps

that out of the masses a leader will always emerge, but its scale reduces these apparently vast considerations down to the minute and manageable. Leow's work—as Jason Lim's—also brings our focus back to the way that art is practiced in Singapore today, through the very craft nature of its manufacture. This is apparent in the marks of the chisel on the wooden head, and the sand casting technique used to make the aluminum figures. Those who have chosen to claim in articles and reviews of late that the art of the found object and installation ignores the element of craft should take a careful look and reconsider their detracting remarks. If *Provocative Things* demonstrates anything, it is that the crafting of the work as much as the crafting of ideas is paramount.

There was a broad range of ideas and practices encompassed by the work displayed. If it provoked anything today, it was interaction and dialogue with the viewer. One suspects that it would be very difficult today not to understand or to push the work aside, an indication of how far the Singaporean audience has come since 1991. Δ

Sian E. Jay is the Singapore-based contributing editor for *World Sculpture News* and *Asian Art News*.