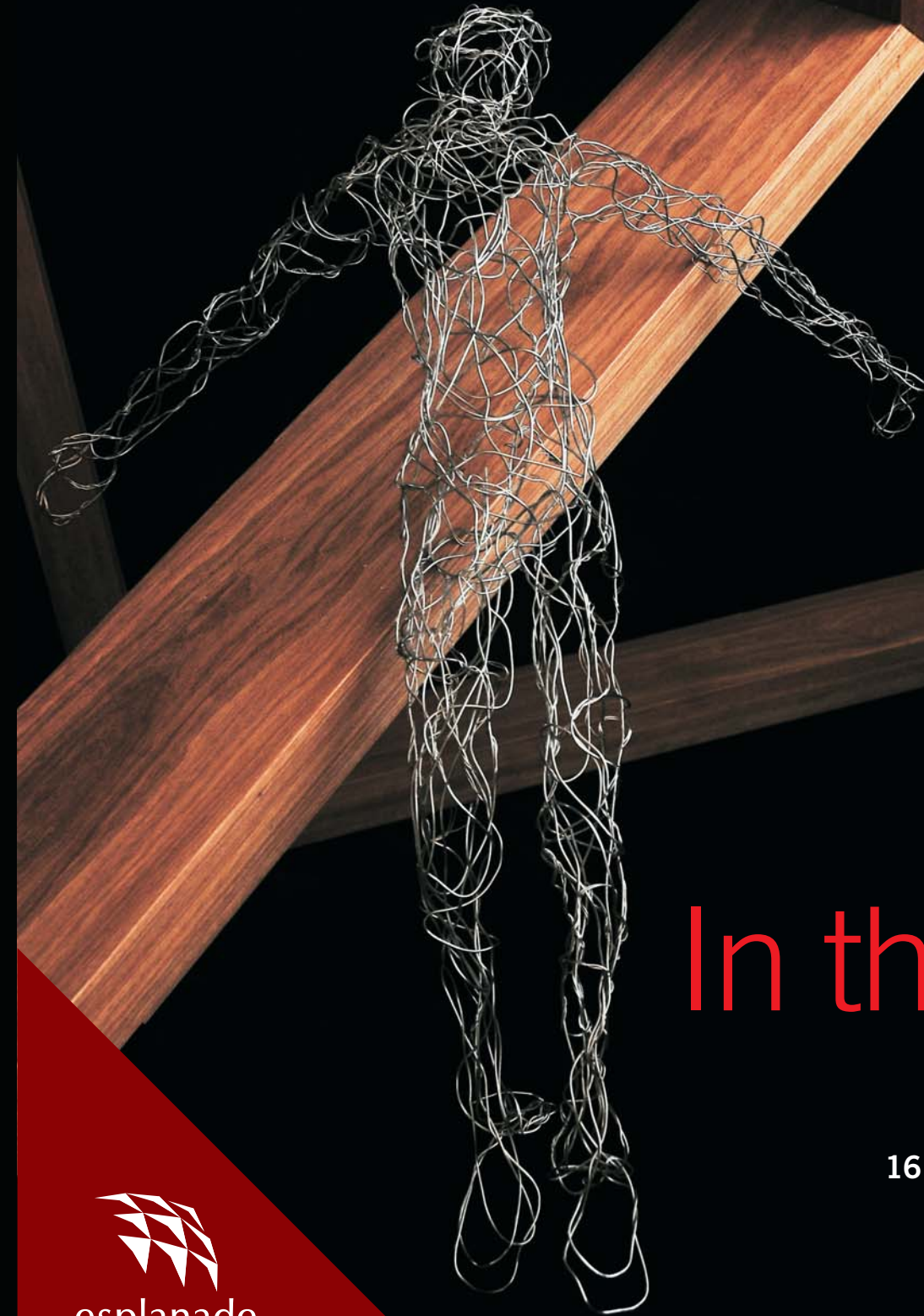




Esplanade Presents
Visual Arts



In the Air

by Victor Tan
Singapore

16 Jul – 16 Oct 2011
Sat-Sun
Concourse



Another *Esplanade Presents* Programme



In conversation with Victor Tan

by Susie Wong



Victor Tan is synonymous with the human form in sculpture. Acclaimed for his work in steel wire, Tan returns to the Concourse with *In the Air*.

What is in the air? “The mind is not something we can capture, but we can understand its state through the body”, says Tan.

The body is the most intimate landscape one has; and for Tan, with his partial sightedness, an intriguing process of tactility and sense, as he works his figurative sculptures often by measuring it against his own body.

This installation conveys a projected sense of relaxation, when the “mind becomes more conscious” and as Tan says – “where thoughts become possible”. In this surreal dimension, figures mingle amongst suspended doors and windows that offer entry and exit points. The human bodies in varying sizes, are suspended or on the ground. Balanced gingerly as they are on pivot points; they twirl or sway to movement of air and people.

Susie: You were referring to the wooden frames of windows and doors, about capturing the moment. When one looks out of the window...

Victor: It is that moment of entering. Normally when you enter, you pay a lot of attention, the moment of entering a space.. Just like when you look out of a window; most of the time you pay a lot of attention to that ‘looking out’. That sense of sharpened awareness or consciousness of the place you’re going into. The consciousness of “what’s next?”

S: So what is the beauty of that moment?

V: When you’re awakened to that moment, that sort of awareness and tension, I feel that the senses sharpen and then you feel joy. For example, when you look out the window you see the beauty of that scene, which you never noticed before. Or even at night when you stare out the window in awe, and you look up at the moon, it’s so beautiful and sometimes you don’t notice. Our friends, how often do we really sit down and talk to them? Moments that you’re so conscious and aware of their presence.

S: You have mentioned writers or philosophers like Viktor Frankl. What did you learn from his writings?

V: Well from his book *Search for Meaning*, I learnt that everyone has a choice and you have your own responsibility to choose what you want. Nobody can take it away from you. No matter how bad the environment is or how bad people treat you, we all have a choice. I think that’s very important.

S: Can you relate this then, to Frankl’s experiences?

V: When he was in the Nazi camp¹ he could easily go into a state of depression and suffering when he was tortured by the soldiers in the labour camp. But he chose to not be affected. He chose to

find meaning in the suffering. I think that helped him survive. Though he may be suffering, there’s a certainty that he got when he realised his meaning, and he went on helping others, and that turned out to be joyous. It’s a different level of joy I feel. In the city we have joy like going partying. But for him there’s a spiritual joy that comes from the heart. It brings peace to yourself and to the people around you.



S: Nevertheless your work in this case, this sense of floating, these human figures floating..., they are mostly lying inert, but they are twirling and moving slowly. How does that relate to, being present, having full consciousness and meaning?

V: If you notice each sculpture is actually balancing on one point. The movement can be fast or slow. It depends on the wind that is blowing. Though the wind might be strong, it still balances on one point. If the wind is slow, it moves gently. Sometimes, when you’re in the early stage of that realisation, the fear comes in, the fear of falling. But the more you do it, the more you’ll be able to sit on the balance, to align [yourself in] the balance.

S: Is your work about wanting to represent oneself?

V: When you want to draw, there’s a portrait, and there’s a reflection of oneself, of looking back. I think we’re still questioning, we’re still finding out, still going through the process. It’s my personal journey through art, it helped me in my search for self. The figures develop a relationship that helped me come to a conscious awareness of myself as a person.

S: There’s a lot of expression in the pose of your figures, the technique and the material. Can you elaborate on the choice of wire?

V: When I was studying in LASALLE, I explored different mediums. I majored in ceramics but for drawing classes, as I have partial vision, I talked to the Dean about not attending classes, but he said I had to. So they allowed me to explore different mediums. Wire came in during that time.

S: The human figure is a very intimate and symbolic subject for you. What about the bird figures? Are they symbolic?

V: I read *Bluebirds of Happiness* by Maurice Maeterlinck². We don’t hear much of that story in Singapore. It was really beautiful. It was about a brother and sister from a poor family. They have rich well-to-do neighbours. The girl became very sick. One day, a fairy godmother came to the house and told them to look for the bluebirds of happiness to help the girl to recover from the sickness. They went to the past and present to search. One day when the children woke up from their dreams, they found the bluebirds in their house. It had been right there all the time. It can be a search for happiness, a search for freedom.

Susie Wong is an art writer, curator and artist in Singapore. She has written for numerous publications on art since the late 1980s.

Art direction and photos by Priscilla Teoh-Stoute of ijnDesijnDimensions

In the Air – An Esplanade Commission

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl had been a Holocaust prisoner of Nazi concentration camp during World War Two, in 1942.
² *The Blue Bird*, a play by Maurice Maeterlinck, 1908.