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Singapore & The Arts: A Report (Part II)

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Day 4: The day was spent exploring some of the ethnic areas of Singapore: Little India, Arab Street, and China town. Lots of shops with things from all these different cultures: silks, batiks, herbs, spices, rattan, bamboo, and various other objects. I saw something very stylish and said, "Fancy Schmancy" and Siti replied, "we say Stylo, Mylo". People had tables set up on the street and they were selling things similar to what we might see at a country or street fair: a gadget for chopping vegetables, a miracle remedy for bruises, fortune tellers, and cleaning products. Street musicians and jugglers were also out in the malls on this Saturday afternoon. Shopping in Singapore could be a full-time activity. Beautiful items, things I don't usually see (even in New York City) at prices that were hard to resist. I had a chance to visit a number of different temples—Chinese, Hindu, and Buddhist.



Chinatown
(Singapore Tourism Board Photo)

Lunch was at the **Imperial Herbal Restaurant**. Each of the foods I ate had healing properties that were explained carefully by **Doris Ho**, restaurant manager, who interpreted for Herbalist and Chinese physician **Li Lian Xing** as he checked my pulse and looked at my tongue before telling me that my body was overheated (not a surprise as I was one degree north of the equator!) and exhausted (who wouldn't be on the schedule I was keeping?) and that my circulation wasn't so good. Actually I am inclined to much of Chinese medicine and appreciated Siti's adding the curative components when describing the foods we ate. We had walnut and red date soup (walnuts are good for the kidneys and brain) Gou Ci Cai Box-Thorn Vegetables with Wolf-Berries improves vision and is a tonic to the liver and kidney and a variety of other delicious and restorative foods. American ginseng (I was told it is better for people of today) is used as a restorative for the immune system and was suggested for me to take.

We spent time in the afternoon exploring more of the shopping areas, many of them with galleries and frame shops most very much like the ones I see here although one shop looked like it had been in the same spot for over a hundred years. It had an opening onto a busy street in China Town (I wondered how they close up at night since it seemed as if there was no front wall or doors) and one man was cutting glass while several other men were measuring pieces of wood. It looked like they made frames rather than just putting them

together from prefabricated pieces. We also visited art supply stores. When I entered one of the stores, I could have been in **Pearls** or **A.I. Friedmans**, the supplies and layout of the store was so familiar. I was looking for Chinese brushes and was finally directed to a Chinese Art Supply store where in fact I was able to buy brushes, rice paper, and paints. What a contrast. Like the contrasts I saw all over Singapore—a focus on ethnic cultures and a focus on commodities and newness. Dinner was Indonesian. Rice steamed in banana leaf, prawns with a chili paste sauce, red snapper with a black sauce, and watercress with fermented soybean.

In the evening I had the pleasure of hearing pianists **Dennis Lee** and **Toh Chee Hung** and the **Singapore Symphony Orchestra** at **Victoria Theatre**, built in 1862 as **Singapore's Town Hall**. The pianists are based in London and tour all over the world. They played Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra in E-flat major to an audience that was enchanted. Also on the program was Dvorak's Scherzo Capriccioso, Op. 66 and Franck's Symphony in D minor. I got to the concert early enough to hear the pre-concert talk by Dennis Lee. What a wonderful teacher he must be. He talked about the great challenge it is to play the Mozart piece—to be together both vertically (in sync) and horizontally (next to) in order for the music to blend and remain in time. He likened it to choral readings—one picks up a sentence where the other has left off, two voices join to enrich the sound and the meaning. He felt that each note written by Mozart as well as Bach is critical—nothing can be left out or added. He is so excited by his subject and appreciative of playing with the orchestra I was even more tuned in for the concert. **Lan Shui** is the conductor of this world-class Orchestra that began in 1979 with 41 members. I learned more about the orchestra when I met with their General Manager (see Day 6). It was a wonderful concert and the house was nearly full in this elegant old concert hall. I was surprised to see so many children, some as young as 6, at the Saturday night concert.

Day 5

After breakfast at the hotel, Siti and I headed over to the **Clarke Quay** to the weekly Sunday flea market. Here I wandered around, saw a guitarist singing Elvis tunes, an artist doing caricatures in charcoal, and lots of the usual junk of a flea market. There were lots of toys—especially warriors, militia dolls and paraphernalia. More to my liking were hand-crafted shoes, sculptures, jewelry, batik masks, puppets, and talking with a few artists. I was particularly pleased to meet with **Michelle Soh**, a potter working with indigenous clay and porcelain, The work was delicate, old feeling and yet contemporary. I couldn't resist several pieces.

Lunch was at a food court in the basement of one of the big shopping centers. Everybody's food was represented: Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Malaysian, Indonesian, Fusion (a combination of different cultures), Indian, Thai, and many others. What choices!

From here we went to **Christie's Fall 200 Jewelry Auction**. Both Christie's and Sotheby's hold their Asian art and jewelry auctions at the same time in Singapore. It looked like any of Christie's auctions: buyers, spotters, phone bidders, and auctioneer with prices listed in the monies of the region.



Michelle Soh, potter, with CS at Clarke Quay Weekly Flea Market

ArtSingapore held Art Talks during 2 of the 5 days that the Fair was on. Five different panels were offered: "Collecting Southeast Asian Art," "Chinese Contemporary Art" (in Mandarin), "Conservation of Precious Works," "Modern and Contemporary Indian Art" and, the one I attended, "Trends in Southeast Asian Art." Artists **Pacita Abad**, Philippines; **Zai Kuning** (Singapore) and **Wong Hoy Cheong** (Malaysia) were on the panel which was led by **Ian Findlay-Brown**, publisher of **Asian Art News** (learn more about them at www.asianartnews.com and www.worldsculpturenews.com). Some of the ideas that were expressed: Global Art has no "isms," it is contemporary world art (art from 1945 up to the present); artists are inspired by their own environment, psychological, social and political concerns; artists have learned to be part of the market and will work towards selling, others are opting out of the "circus" as one artist expressed it to be true to their own vision; corporate and government patronage has affected the artist in that they become a product—again, some can live with it, others cannot; art is a commodity and should be acknowledged as such; in Asia the lack of professionalism in the artists turns off dealers and buyers who are more and more concerned with documentation; the West should come to Asia and learn from Asia; Western education is geared to specialize in one art form or another whereas in Asia, artists are diverse in their art expression. The plight of the artist seems to be the same everywhere. At the end, each artist was acknowledging that they must earn a living another way in order to do the art they want. The room was filled with collectors of Asian Art, dealers, and people just interested in the topic discussed. I wanted an answer to What is Asian Art? and there is no answer and with the world so accessible there is only "contemporary art"—for example we can't make assumptions that all Chinese artists paint with watercolors. There is specific art to indigenous peoples like the Dream Paintings of the Aborigines. During the reception after the panel a man approached me and said "Hello Cornelia. I'm **Enrique Castanon**, I have an *ART TIMES* T-shirt and I'm a subscriber. How are you and what brings you here?" Well I was certainly surprised (another small world occurrence) and immediately remembered Enrique and meeting him by chance in a gallery in Soho while I was delivering papers several years ago. Enrique lived in Washington, DC and had advertised with us as well as being a subscriber. He's now in Singapore, hard at work to get gallery representation. I wonder where I'll meet him next?

Dinner was at one of the many seafood restaurants along **East Coast Seafood Center**: a Tiger beer (one of Singapore's products), buttered prawns, steamed sea bass, baby kai lan, chili crab (from Sri Lanka) with a sweet & sour sauce. We began the meal with pistachio nuts to nibble. What a feast! It was wonderful to be by the South China Sea, to dip my feet into the water and pick up a few shells. In the far distance I could see the skyline of the city.

Next, a night safari in the **Singapore Zoological Gardens**. We rode in a tram through a dense forest where over 100 different species of animals can be seen in their natural habitat. Said to be the only Night Safari in the world, this wildlife park is an advocate of wildlife conservation as well as a recreation destination for nearly a million visitors a year.

Day 6

After a traditional kaya toast breakfast (paste of sugar, coconut milk, pandan leaves, egg, and a bit of salt) we met with Mr. **Liew Chin Choy**, Managing Director of the



Victoria Concert Hall
Victoria Theater

Singapore Symphony Orchestra. I was able to get some specifics and to see the backstage area, rehearsal areas, and offices of the orchestra. I learned that there are 90 professional musicians and freelance musicians that play over 100 concerts a year in two seasons at their home, **Victoria Hall**, and at open-air concerts at the **Botanic Gardens** as well as smaller ensemble groups playing for office and shopping crowds at major shopping centers. The repertoire is primarily Western, yet one of their missions is to bridge the musical traditions of the East and the West. The average age of this orchestra is 35 and 78% are

Singaporeans, the rest a mix of Europeans, Americans and Asians. Ticket prices are between 10 and 40 Singapore dollars (\$7-\$30 US). They have an extensive music education program for the young, bringing programs into the schools and holding Young Peoples' Concerts. The Orchestra has numerous recordings out and while I was there, played for the American Ballet Theatre's performance (figured I would see them in NY!). This year the Orchestra (they tour every two years) will tour Germany, performing 9 concerts in 9 different cities between October 20-November 1, 2000. As with most every organization, they deal with the same issues of programming, artistic vs. management issues, funding, audience development, and the day-to-day concerns that arise especially when dealing with creative individuals. The orchestra members do not have a union but are paid a "living wage" and often coach or teach. The Orchestra is often contacted for musicians for various gigs. Perhaps one day they will come to the US; that would be a treat!

After a delicious lunch at **The Red Book**, a fusion restaurant with the theme of **Mao**, we explored more of ethnic Singapore ending up at the **Sri Mariamman Temple** (built in 1862) and witnessing how the Hindus mark the **Navarathiri Festival**. We were there in time for the prayers and offerings of flowers, fruits, incense, and other foods. Music was played as a procession of devotees approached the outer sanctums where priests received the offerings and who then brought them into the inner sanctum. A relatively light dinner was at another huge food market (we ate satay from a hawker—street vendor; all vendors are licensed by the government and have very strict sanitation rules).

Day 7

I spent my last day guide-less and driver-less. I was back on my own—life was becoming more real. It was not really tough as I did take a cab from the hotel to visit Judith in her wonderful colonial home (see notes from Day one) and then from there to the **World Trade Center** where I got a cable car to **Sentosa Island**. It was hard to decide what to do on this last day. Should I take the Rapid Transit and crisscross the island? Should I cross the causeway and go into Malaysia? Should I visit the exquisite botanical gardens and see the orchids? Two things I was sure of. I wasn't hungry and I didn't want to just wander.

It was such a gorgeous day that I decided to go to Sentosa Island, the "fun island" with many resorts and theme park attractions. I was interested in some quiet time to reflect, perhaps some people to have conversation with, and a little exploring of the World Trade Center—a complex that houses offices, exhibition halls, and shops as well as being Singapore's cruise center. I took the cable car over to the Island and that gave me a wonderful view of the Port area, the ships, and thousands of containers waiting to go to their next destination. Once on the island I took the monorail for an overview and then an open

trolley from one end to the other of the Southern edge where the beaches were. I found myself at the Southernmost point of the Asian Continent and was reminded of being in Key West Florida at the Southernmost point of the US. It was a good day to reflect on my time, to go for a swim in the South China Sea before returning to the hotel, to pack and say my farewells.

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CS at Sentosa Island
in the South China Sea