

Taking Flight

The National Museum of Singapore hosts SUZANN VICTOR's new installation piece, *Wings of a Rich Manoeuvre*. The artist explains to ZARA ZHUANG the symbolism behind the visual extravaganza



THE NEW BEAST in town is a shapeshifter. Cycling through various forms — one moment it's a dragon; 15 minutes later, it's a flock of birds — its shimmering torso dances above the bridge linking the original and modern wings of the National Museum of Singapore. Officially launched in late November, *Wings of a Rich Manoeuvre* is the museum's latest large-scale installation, created by acclaimed Singapore-born, Sydney-based artist Suzann Victor — the same name behind *Contours of a Rich Manoeuvre*, a row of swinging red chandeliers that had once occupied the same location.

Calling it the most complex work of art in her career, Victor describes the new piece as a reminder of the passage of time. The installation's 14,080 Swarovski crystal elements are divided among eight motorised chandeliers, pendulums that swing up to 30 degrees in a controlled sequence. Displaying the piece in a museum setting is intended to be particularly poignant. "A museum freezes tiers of time, embodied in each artefact that it displays, carefully conserved to stop time from marching on," the 57-year-old explains. "This work shows the passing of time because it's out of time with objects in the museum."

A visualisation of the transit of moments into history, *Wings of a Rich Manoeuvre* also represents the confluence of science, engineering and art. A textbook example of simple harmonic motion, present in children's swings and rocking chairs, the oscillating crystal chandeliers demonstrate the hypnotic and tranquil motion of physics in everyday life. The installation took a team of about 12 almost two years to bring to life, using customised electromagnets, laser-cut metal parts and stainless-steel frames treated with electropolishing to give off a blurry reflection, dubbed "moonglow."

The motion of *Wings of a Rich Manoeuvre* bears art historical references too, Victor says. The patterns traced by the swinging crystals, as they reflect from the sun or the fitted LEDs, calls to mind the drawings of centaurs and Greek profiles that Pablo Picasso made through light painting for Gjon Mili's 1949 photo series. In addition to the complex mechanics in the installation, Victor added a public interaction feature: Museum visitors can change the colours of the LEDs lighting up the crystals and design their own wings. "I think it's refreshing to create artwork that is pleasurable, not just in terms of viewing, but in a viewer's experience and engagement with it," Victor says. "So I hope and trust the public will have a lot of fun with it."

It was a process of evolution from *Contours of a Rich Manoeuvre* that led to Victor's new work. The previous incarnation, created in 2006, featured eight traditional-looking chandeliers, but National Museum Director Angelita Teo later offered Victor the opportunity to reinterpret it and the artist decided on real crystals, larger chandeliers with an abstract, stylised look and a public interaction feature. Returning to the 122-year-old museum was also a natural move, given Victor's predilection for architecture and creating artwork with dynamic presence in a vast space. This was clearly the case for *Bloodline of Peace*, her 2015 installation at the Singapore Art Museum as part of the 5 Stars exhibition, which overwhelmed with its 24-m long blanket comprising 11,520 lens units, each containing a tiny drop of human blood. The piece was designed as a dialogue about life and survival, war and aggression.

Starting out as a Lasalle College of the Arts student sketching in pencil the works of the old masters, Victor went on to create her first installation in 1992, an ephemeral still life with eggplants that seemed to grow out of the wall at Parkway Parade shopping centre. With friends, including former Singapore Art Museum director Susie Lingham, she founded the arts initiative 5th Passage Artists, which co-organised the Artists' General Assembly event the following year. *Brother Cane*, the protest performance piece by Josef Ng (during which he enacted trimming his pubic hair), raised a furore over obscenity in art that put a stop to government funding for local performance art. But Victor takes a positive view of the experience. "I'm actually very grateful it happened," she says. "Because it triggered a question in me: How can art be more potent than

a [two-dimensional] painting?"

Since then, Victor, who holds a PhD in Visual Art from the Western Sydney University, has gone on to exhibit at the Singapore, Venice, Gwangju and Adelaide biennales, as well as at other venues and fairs. Through decades of engaging audiences, she has made discoveries about their experience of connecting with art. "People are innately free to think and feel. And when you reach as many as you can, it's one of the most meaningful achievements through this medium," she says. "Sometimes, there are preconceptions and prejudices, so when you can create something and the audience says: 'Oh, I used to think this was rubbish, I'm surprised and I'm actually engaged,' I think that's fantastic." **P**

