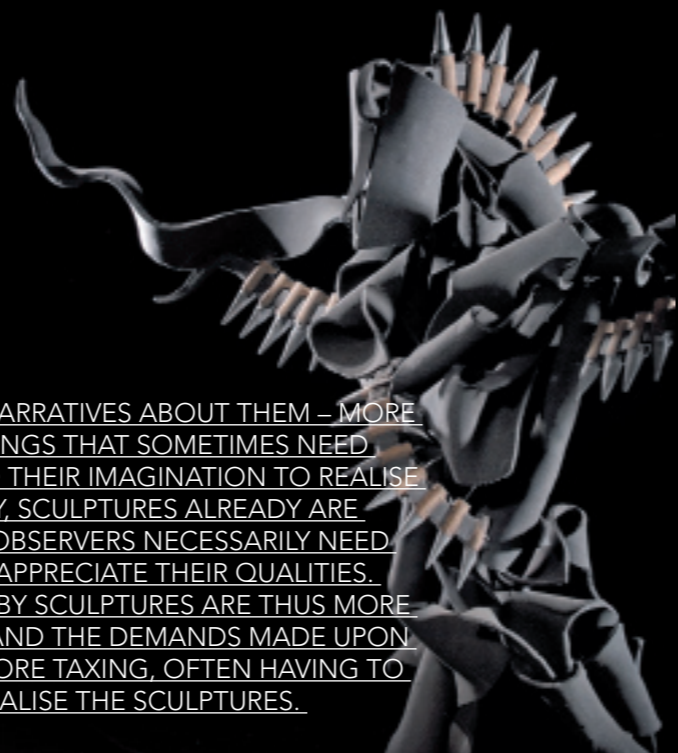


Raw Power & Urbane Wit

Metal Sculptures of Raja Shahrman and Astari Rasjid

BY NGIOM

SCULPTURES NECESSARILY CARRY NARRATIVES ABOUT THEM – MORE SO THAN PAINTINGS. UNLIKE PAINTINGS THAT SOMETIMES NEED THE OBSERVERS' TO DIG DEEP INTO THEIR IMAGINATION TO REALISE IMAGES OF THREE-DIMENSIONALITY, SCULPTURES ALREADY ARE THREE-DIMENSIONAL, WHERE THE OBSERVERS NECESSARILY NEED TO WALK AROUND THEM TO FULLY APPRECIATE THEIR QUALITIES. THE MESSAGES THAT ARE CARRIED BY SCULPTURES ARE THUS MORE DIRECT THAN THAT OF PAINTINGS AND THE DEMANDS MADE UPON THE SCULPTORS ARE PHYSICALLY MORE TAXING, OFTEN HAVING TO POSSESS PHYSICAL PROWESS TO REALISE THE SCULPTURES.



Traditionally, sculptures that are merely beautiful rely purely on lighting to bring out the aesthetic characteristics of the sculpture, and what is evoked in the traditional sense are the tactility and formal qualities. In this sense, the sculptures are complementary to the setting, usually the immediate landscape or the architectural space. For example, although the familiar Renaissance sculptures usually carry narratives about them, telling particular stories to particular audiences, they were necessarily 'beautiful' and are often sublime, and in sculptures of the human form, they tend to idealise the human body.

Contemporary sculptures however are not necessarily 'beautiful' but they could be political or, they could even be critical as is the case of the metal sculptures of two South-east Asian artists. The trend towards non-beauty came about with the modern movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, and for a long period of time they were mainly restricted to the occidental context. Unlike architecture, where the modern movement had enabled architectural forms to be reduced to pure function, sculpture could have nothing like it - so, they are reduced to commentaries instead.

In Europe these commentary artworks have become a fascination in their own right, accepted by art curators, but are baffling to the public, who often go away feeling short-changed and outraged. Recently, the philosopher, Roger Scruton claimed in a BBC programme that plain 'beautiful' art are now below the horizon of official patronage, and what is now promoted is a 'cult of ugliness' instead. He lamented that wealthy patrons like Charles Saatchi promotes artists like Damien Hirst who made his mark by producing sculptures out of pickled animal sinews and bones. minus the skin and exterior covers, and the art favoured by the Tate director, Nicholas Serota are those that portray the sordid parts of life, like Tracey Emin's notorious My Bed, which portray remnants of today's decadent living around a bed with even a hangman's noose over it.



Intently offensive, these extreme celebrations of non-beauty are yet rarely found in Asian art; however, among the Asian artistic subculture, there exist a strain that does not prioritise beauty. The Malaysian artist, Raja Shahrman's art prioritises power over beauty using pieces of metal as metaphors of human inner parts – of sinews and skeletal parts to allegorise human forms in their various struggles. In some of his sculptures, he fused bullet shells into the sculpture to comment that the sculptures were about wars and his protest of them. In the end, the art, although grotesquely contorted, is however still beautiful to look at, especially in the way each metal part is carefully measured, crafted and welded to form a holistic and dynamic composition.



Raja Shahrman's influence could be traced to 1970s science fiction art, particular that of the Swiss artist, Hans Rudolf Giger, who created the aliens in the cult film 'Alien', whose art also graced the covers of the OMNI magazine in the 1980s. The sculptures are undoubtedly masculine, throughout the process of making the art, which require countless hours in the foundry as well as in the final product. The figures do not aspire to be idealised humans at all; they are instead extra-human, closer to fantasy, science fiction humanoids, contorted in menace, aggression and pain.

Calling the exhibition, 'Rhythm of the 21st Century' the Petronas Art Gallery also introduced the sculptures as a contemporary expression of the Malay blacksmithing tradition with a cosmopolitan context, and that the sculptures 'allude to the nature of mankind'. The dynamic and animated embodiment of the sculptures echo the gruelling process of working with the oxy-acetylene flames and using a mandible to carefully fit pieces of twisted metal together. That the sculptor could be so prolific about the production of the immimicable pieces is itself remarkable.

Indonesian artist, Astari Rasjid metal sculptures are also commentaries, but on the consumerist culture. They are cynically attractive, each of which carries whole essays on the mental state of the material consumers. They are light, fun and undemanding and, somewhat easy to look at. There is also a cosmopolitan outlook about them, which could apply to any cosmopolitan centre anywhere in the world. They convey different messages to different observers. They could be taken as mirrors of the observers, each of whom is a consumerist, who has unwittingly committed acts of overindulgent consumerism. Or they could be taken as just witty products.

Even the colours chosen for the sculptures are somewhat frivolous and teasing. They are as light-hearted as the postmodernist culture that prevail around them – as frivolously pretty and as culturally intrusive – meaningless; yet meaningful within the prevailing context.

Rager Serenton BBC pergramme: "Why Beauty Maffere," 2009. ●

