

Han Sai Por

“Post modernism accepts the facts that art does not follow any rigid man-made rules. If the artist says, “*this is art.*” then it is art, provided only that the artist can demonstrate a valuable idea or concept. Art needs man to judge and decide whether it is indeed art.”ⁱ – Han Sai Por

The cultural medallion holder Miss Han Sai Por made this statement in 1993 for her “sculptural installation” *Four Dimension*. That was her first solo exhibition after practicing as a sculptor for more than 10 years.

According to Susie Koay, Singapore “saw for the first time, alternative approaches to traditional, conventional sculptures in the 1970s in the show Contemporary Singapore Sculpture exhibition.”ⁱⁱ By the late 80s and early 90s, the rejection of the modernist ideology represented by the “second generation artists” became trendy and younger artists were eagerly exploring new art forms such as performance and installation art.

Sai Por’s statement above reflects to some degree the confusion felt between artists and public viewers in general, who encountered in the new art forms the uncanny “dematerialization” of the art object, and with it the seeming disappearance of conventional aesthetic values that people were accustomed to. Sai Por’s “sculptural installation” therefore came as a surprise for many, as she was well known for her abstract, organic stone sculptures. But her later involvements will show us that this is not merely due to willingness and need to experiment as an artist.

Sai Por’s lineage to modernist ideology is visible in her earlier works such as *The Growth* (1985) and *Spirit of Nature* (1988). As T.K. Sabapathy has articulated in his 1991 writing, she is concerned with the uneasy relation between men and nature in the modern era, and have expressed her desire for people to realize that “[we] are part of nature and not apart from nature”ⁱⁱⁱ. The abstract forms she created are hopeful symbols endowed with an inherent life force:

“I would like to think my sculpture has a force or inner life inside struggling to get out.”^{iv}

“stone is one of my favourite materials. In the erosion of rock by wind and water are found original, vital qualities which express the significance of life.”^v

In *The Growth* is a group of five sensitively carved out forms that flow in naturalistic movements to evoke a sense of organic vitality. On the other hand, *Spirit of Nature*, which is simplistic and carefully polished, gives a tranquil monumentality that exudes essentialist beauty.

However different the works in *Four Dimensions* were to these earlier creations, I see it as Sai Por’s further elaboration (or clarification?) on her understanding of nature and human as one – even “mathematical logic” that is often allied with “science and technology” which she seemingly discerned may not be wholly separated.

In *Four Dimensions*, we saw ten geometrical structures executed with mathematical precisions spread across the gallery space. These structures, some of which are

opened-up planes such as the *Inverted Pyramids* or the *Pyramids of Cubes*, were brought into relation with one another by their carefully arranged angles and the employment of shadow and light. They are even demonstrated with “explanatory” drawings to reveal the fundamental procedure constitutive of their final forms. Formalistic elements and materials are straightforwardly laid bare, which is unlike any of her earlier sensuous forms that evoke naturalistic feelings. Here the strategy is to engage the viewers to realize the logic and the procedural result of what they saw through what is displayed, and to finally arrived at the “fourth dimension”:

“My works are based on the concept of mathematical logic. The idea is to show how each step is based on the previous one so that the geometrical forms progress in logical sequence...

...The fourth dimension is abstract. It cannot be seen or touched. It contains the feelings and talents of Mankind. We wish to possess this space and to open it up for all people to share.”^{vi}

The fundamental concern here is closely related to her keen interest in the place of mankind in the world, not far from the idealistic sentiments to reconcile human and nature that is expressed in her earlier works. In her 2002 statements, Sai Por tried to established a connection between her previous attempts:

“The organic form I have created is simply essential of nature through my experience and imagination. None of them has a historical background, but my imagination never goes beyond the train of logical thinking. I am always aware of logical factors. The “Four Dimensions” series of 1993 is based on mathematical logic; “20 Tonnes – Physical Consequence” (2002), is an explanation of nature’s physical reaction when it is impacted by force, gravity and energy.”^{vii}

20 Tonnes – Physical Consequences further reinforces her faith in the transcendental power of natural forms.

In this installation (or “sculptural installation”? as “carving” – the oldest method in sculpture – is essential here.), Sai Por placed in the atrium space of MITA building a group of six monolithic granite rocks that were hewn out of a single block. Viewers are demanded to participate in the work and be confronted by its physicality in its entirety. What is significant this time is the power and energy emitted or released during the process of carving. Sai Por attempted to encapsulate and monumentalize this primordial and almost mystical power. In her own words:

“When I am working on stone, the immediate context is physical, the force of hammering, chiseling and drilling hard stone creates heat and energy. The reaction of the particles causes sparks and waves of sound. The appearance of the stone is the result, the consequent physical reaction. Understanding the character of nature through the physical context has become part of my sculpture.”^{viii}

In Sabapathy’s opinion, Sai Por’s devotion to the essence of her material is “highly romantic”, deeply rooted in the ideologies that shaped modern art (and modern sculptural practice).^{ix} This remark may not have intended to be judgmental, not to “disqualify Sai Por from serious critical reckoning” as he explained. However, it may be worth to note that, ideology as a system of belief, works “unconsciously”. In visual

arts, the values and ideals of the West has been assimilated, manifested, and is the basis from which many contemporary critical judgment arises. In the subconscious of artists and the public in general, the values extolled by “modernism” may still be most comforting.

Artists are expressive creators, what they produce is bound to reveal their subconscious thoughts. Sai Por’s indifference to theoretical categorization is clear in her devotion to sculpting and her insistence to present her sculptures in an unrestricted manner. Her latest creation of *The Brain Forest* at the Defense Science Organization Headquarters once more defy straightforward-definition; the “brains” installed at a somewhat rigid format almost appear like identical, replicated products, but are in fact individual forms painstakingly carved out from a single boulder – however, the unusual and gripping straightforwardness is unlike her regular sensuous pieces.

While art has deliberately placed itself beyond any formalist limits since conceptualism and postmodernism, Sai Por has shown that she is most concern about the subject and idea she wanted to deliver. It is from here we are lured to feel for her sincere creations.

Tan Yen Peng Sep 05'

i “Four Dimensions”, in *Four Dimensions: Sculptural Installation by Han Sai Por*, Shenn’s Gallery, Singapore, 1993, pp 11.

ii “Singapore – Multicultural Crossroads” in *Visual Arts in Asean: Continuity and Change*, Kuala Lumpur: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2001, pp 185.

iii *Sculpture in Singapore*, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore, 1991, pp 12.

iv “Four Dimemnsions”, pp 6.

v Ibid, pp 7.

vi Ibid, pp 11.

vii Han Sai Por Sculpture, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore, 2002, pp 4.

viii *20 Tonnes – Physical Consequences* – Han Sai Por, Art-2 Gallery, Singapore, 2002.

ix Ibid.