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Zulkifile Mahmud — Packaging the Sound of the City

By **Carla Bianpoen** on 1:09 pm February 5, 2014.
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While some purists may debate whether sound is even an art form, 39-year-old Singaporean Zul has been using the medium to express ideas for a number of years. (JG Photos/Carla Bianpoen)

Delicate electronic components and wires laid out as sculptural works on a board, or reliefs appearing like mechanical schemes hanging on the wall, and an installation of vibrating androids buzzing away; such is the ambience of Zulkifile Mahmud's exhibition "Sonically Exposed" in the Singapore Private Museum, a 120-square-meter venue for the arts in the heart of Singapore's culture zone that collector, philanthropist and real estate developer Daniel Teo established in 2010.

For the novice in sound art, the works initially appear like complicated mechanical schemes demanding highly technical knowledge to understand. But one can't deny the sculptural aesthetics that render the works a touch of what is called art. This should not be a surprise as Zulkifile "Zul" Mahmud studied visual art majoring in sculpture.

Since 2006 he has been intensively exploring Sound as a major focus of his art creations.

Considered an artist at the forefront of a generation of sound-media art in Singapore's contemporary art development, Zul, who was born in 1975, has actively participated in exhibitions held in various cities of the globe. He first made a mark in 2007 as one of the four artists who represented Singapore in its national pavilion in the Venice Biennale, he created an installation of a 4 meter wide dome titled "Sonic Dome — An Empire of Thoughts." The work was suspended in the center of the room, where one could listen to a sonic composition built from ambient and manufactured sounds while lying on a

platform under the dome.

Although seven years have passed since then, and Zul has had many solo shows, for the general public here, sound art is still relatively new. In fact, sound art has been an issue of heated conversations internationally.

While sound as an element in art works has been generally accepted, sound as a form of art is still being questioned. Is sound as a form of art real art? The debate is still ongoing, even after compelling



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works like "The Murder of Crows" in the 2008 Sydney Biennale and "Alter Bahnhof" at Documenta 2012 by Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller enticed the art world — and even after the Turner Prize for the first time awarded a sound artwork by Scottish artist Susan Philipsz in 2010.

Nevertheless, sound artists continue to work with sound as their major, and so does Zulkifl Mahmod. Yet, this time he is more focusing on laying bare the inner workings of sound. "There is a misconception that sound art is very performative," he states. "There is a lot more than that."

Indeed, Zul who studied at the Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore and is a multidisciplinary and multimedia artist, is not only opening up the inner workings of sound, but he also conceptually relates it to existing issues in Singapore.

The body of works exhibited at the Private Museum takes inspiration from the impact of a growing population and the heightened pace of development projects, and how such tensions are mostly covered up to keep the image of Singapore as a haven for tourists.

"On the surface, Singapore looks really nice, as it is packaged to please and attract tourists," he said. But a closer look will reveal the tensions and growing intolerance as a result of a growing population, and of the rapid pace of construction work in the city which are shifting the physical and mental landscapes of its citizens.

Listening to the mesh of noise, sound and voices heard through a headphone, one may be abhorred, but that is precisely what it is meant to be, as it is in fact a critique and a metaphor for what is happening in the dense population of Singapore. At the same time it is like a warning, particularly expressed in the carefully laid wires on the board that must not touch one another as short circuits could spoil everything. The latter is meant as an analogy to the tensions in society that must not run too high.

It took the artist three years to prepare for this exhibition of 14 reliefs, installations and sculptures which are each made up of a variety of electric components linked together by bent metal wires. The artist has also inserted light sensors in the works which react when people come close.

Sonically Exposed

Through March 9
The Private Museum
51 Waterloo Street #02-06
Singapore
Tel. +65 67382872

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