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A show of Giacometti's works and a solo exhibition of Matisse will be held in May, reports **PARVATHI NAYAR**

In the movie industry, the "blockbuster" is a lavishly produced vehicle with big stars that's expected to have wide appeal and financial success. Over the past 15 years or so, the term has been borrowed by the visual arts world to describe major art shows.

It's a sign of our culturally vibrant times, perhaps, that early next month, we will see at least two such art shows opening here that could satisfy the blockbuster criteria in a local context: *Seeing, Feeling, Being: Alberto Giacometti*, at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) that will showcase over 100 works of the iconic surrealist sculptor, including sculptures, lithographs and drawings; and the first-ever solo exhibition of French modern master Henri Matisse in Singapore at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), worth around S\$5 million, and comprising 52 prints, three drawings and one painting.

Lee Chor Lin, director of the National Museum of Singapore, cautions the term "blockbuster" may not be applicable to art shows in Singapore, unlike those "in the big European cities and Japan, where art/culture is an important part of life - and you do see shows that cost tens of millions of dollars to stage, long queues even in harsh winter to get in, and hype generated that's comparable to Hollywood movies."

For sure, the scales are different. "Blockbuster" was appropriated by Western arts commentators for shows such as Tutankhamun that had overwhelming numbers swarming to see them. Still, the term is useful in the Singaporean context to describe our larger shows - especially from a marketing viewpoint, to create excitement.

As Emi Eu, head of Special Projects, STPI, explains, "What we mean by the term is the type of exhibition we present for the larger public, because during the year, our shows are more for specific audiences. By 'blockbusters' we mean specially curated exhibitions, which aim to provide opportunities for Singapore audiences to view rarely seen works by art world masters."

Sienne Megan Tan, SAM's deputy director, adds that some exhibitions, "for reasons of the audience's familiarity with the artists) or subject matter, such as Xu Beihong, or

Chen Wen Hsi", are promoted as "blockbusters". And as Kenson Kwok, director, Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), further points out: "Blockbuster shows are generally those with mass appeal that attract large numbers of visitors. However, it is not always easy to predict the response. There are exhibitions we think may only appeal to a more specialised audience - like ACM's exhibition of Japanese masks in 2006 - which end up surprising us by attracting a larger number of visitors than expected."

Call them "major exhibitions" or "blockbusters", these shows are major undertakings that use up large amounts of resources. Ms Tan says that blockbusters can cost between S\$800,000 and S\$2 million, while STPI shares that installing one can cost in the range of S\$150,000 to S\$250,000.

So what's the payoff? The blockbuster raises the profile of the institution, practically guarantees media coverage - and gets more eyeballs. Anecdotally speaking, because most blockbusters are activated by events centred on them, they get more repeat visitors, and get in different population segments, who appreciate the chance to experience rare works without having to travel to see them. The \$1.2 million Louvre show at the National Museum, for instance, was seen by around 87,000 people over 100 days. STPI records show 13,000 visitors for Picasso. Ms Tan says that for blockbusters, SAM expects "a surge in visitorship by between 20 and 30 per cent" above usual visitorship.

Partly because they are so expensive, the average duration of such shows is three to four months, adds Ms Tan, useful to generate word of mouth publicity and a treat in Singapore where exhibitions rarely last more than two weeks. "Bigger shows are also a means of attracting more partners to work with us -



Past and future: 'Hidden Faces' from ACM's exhibition of Japanese masks (left), Alberto Giacometti's 'Diego' (above) and Henri Matisse's 'Arabesque' (below). *Seeing, Feeling, Being: Alberto Giacometti* will showcase over 100 works of the iconic surrealist sculptor, and Matisse's first-ever solo exhibition will comprise art works worth around S\$5m

whether we are talking about corporate sponsors or even the media," says Dr Kwok. In terms of the corporate sector, the blockbuster also offers opportunities to see works of corporate connoisseurship.

Private or commercial galleries have also entered the blockbuster arena; in selling works by acknowledged masters, they see new business opportunities and possibilities to engage with different levels of "collectorship". The Opera Gallery has an annual, selling masters show, which last year was termed Masterpieces: The Ultimate Collection and valued at US\$60 million. The gallery also staged Dalí in Singapore in 2006 - the logistical cost was over S\$1.5 million.

Fost Gallery's Stephanie Fong says there are parallels between the blockbuster concept and exhibitions brought in by Timothy Yarger Fine Art (TYFA) that are hosted by Fost Gallery, such as the David Hockney prints last month. Ms Fong plans to have one such blockbuster show annually, alternating with emerging artists. The shows cost

US\$25,000-US\$1 million to organise with, for instance, "Timothy Yarger, flying down from California each time we mount such an exhibition; he stays for more than a week, giving public and private lectures."

In the West, blockbusters also generate criticism because of the costs, to alleviate which the shows need to tour - not always the best for fragile artworks. But locally, the blockbuster is largely seen as a win-win situation all round. So what other blockbusters can we expect in 2008? Stephane Le Pelletier, director Asia Pacific of the Opera Gallery, for one, assures they "will be staging another outdoor monumental sculptural exhibition along Orchard Road with the support STB and PSA during the F1 period. The details are not finalised yet, but rest assured that it will be something worth waiting for."

Seeing, Feeling, Being: Alberto Giacometti, SAM, May 1-June 15. Henri Matisse, The Master: Works from 1917-1952, May 9-Aug 16, at STPI, 41 Robertson Quay

