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FEATURES

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BEYOND THE GLASS CASE

IN AN ART OR DESIGN EXHIBITION, THE NAMES OF THE ARTISTS OR DESIGNERS USUALLY TAKE CENTRESTAGE. EVEN IN EXHIBITIONS THAT HOUSE A COLLECTION OF DESIGNERS, CREDIT IS ALWAYS GIVEN WHERE IT IS DUE. THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE GLITZ AND GLAMOUR OF THE EXHIBITIONS – THE WORK BEHIND SMOOTH TRANSITIONS FROM ONE EXHIBITION TO ANOTHER, AND THE EASE WITH WHICH EXHIBITS ARE VIEWED, SO MUCH SO THAT THEY ARE SOMETIMES TAKEN FOR GRANTED.

TEXT BY JOANNE GOH. IMAGES COURTESY OF DESIGNSINGAPORE COUNCIL, NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD AND BLACK DESIGN PTE LTD
ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLEY CHENG

It is ironic that good exhibition designs sometimes work so well that the audience is unaware of the efforts taken to orchestrate a seamless and enjoyable experience. Unless a more established name is linked to the exhibition, in the case of the recent All the Best exhibition by Zaha Hadid, featuring the Deutsche Bank Collection, it is not common for exhibition designers to be recognised.

Exhibition designs are almost as important as the works they exhibit. They aid in providing a smooth channelling of spaces to present the works in the best possible manner and without this, the viewer's experience may not be as rich as desired. Helmut Kinzler of Hadid Studios, who was involved in All the Best, reflects this point. He states that the "foremost intention is to propel the visitor's attention towards the art". Likewise, Sebastian Chun, head of design services at Asian Civilisations Museum, stresses that it is "not enough for exhibition designs to be solely aesthetic without integrating the designs with the exhibition content and exhibits. Good exhibition design should create

an environment according to the exhibition theme and concept, and integrate design elements with the exhibition content and exhibits. Moreover, it should challenge viewers' imaginations throughout their viewing journey so that they can hopefully walk away with a memorable experience of the exhibition as a whole."

Designing an exhibition is no mean feat. They serve to convey key ideas and showcase objects with clarity and accessibility, while engaging and exciting the senses. With the increasing accessibility of exhibitions – many museums and exhibitions now offer free admission under certain conditions, judging from the likes of the Singapore Art Museum and the recent Singapore Biennale 2006 – the audience now consists of a more diverse crowd than before, which requires exhibition designers to be able to reach out on many more levels.

Parallel to the works being presented, exhibition design allows, as well as requires, creativity on the part of the designers. Orchestrating different circulation routes, planning for proper lighting and setting up the opti-

mal exhibition environment are all part and parcel of an exhibition designer's job. Dr Milton Tan, director of DesignSingapore Council, elaborates that the uniqueness of exhibition design lies in its ability to "represent the integration of different aspects of design, for example, lighting, sound, layout, product displays and circulation. It requires the involvement of the audience on physical and mental levels, including the realms of knowledge, perception and emotions."

With the free forms serving a dual purpose of offering wall space for the art and structure for the layout of the exhibition, All the Best has paved the way for exhibiting art in more creative and dynamic ways. This perhaps sets the atmosphere for the increasing number of world-class exhibits, which require more sophisticated means of presentation in order to keep exhibition experiences fresh and interesting.

Having to juggle with a wide variety of tasks is thus not uncommon when it comes to exhibition design, and this involves everything from access services to minor details like appropriate font sizes and fonts for labels.

Describing the inspirations and challenges behind All the Best, Kinzler stresses the desire to "establish a dynamic, free-flowing space that embodies spatial entities that within themselves contain and proffer the artwork to the visitors. This spatial idea was then developed in a very close dialogue with the curators. We have tried to merge the interaction of the visitors with the temporary, modulated space of the exhibition, and to allow for a critical and innovative interrelation of the presented works of art. The resulting open sequence of spaces and shapes form multiple routes and vistas for the visitors, becoming a catalyst for the locale and the art."



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Singapore Art Museum