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# SIZE MATTERS



**I**F YOU'RE the type to be overwhelmed by art, try *The Big Picture Show* for size. Comprising more than 20 mostly mural-sized paintings from Asian artists, the exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) will, hopefully, leave you in awe.

The works are taken from the museum's permanent collection (housed at the Heritage Conservation Centre) as well as from private collections. It is the first time the SAM has put on a show using size as the theme.

In terms of immediate visual impact, it is an impressive exhibit. We can only commend the curators for surviving the logistical nightmare of transporting and setting up these paintings, which can span the length of a wall (Ferdinand Montemayor's 13m-long, 11-panelled cityscape *My Country, See What Has Happened Now To Nature*), or reach the ceiling (the late Pacita Abad's 5m-high mixed-media tapestry *Marcos And His Cronies*).

But at the end of the day, it's the performance that matters most.

From public art murals and abstract pieces to bucolic landscape scenes, the artists have different ways of approaching size. Some cram every space with details to delight the mind, others let sheer size itself overwhelm the viewer, such as Nobel Prize for Literature laureate and painter Gao Xingjian's monochromatic ink on paper work *Day And Night*. It's a haunting artwork in which a handful of shadowed figures move across a desolate landscape.

Gao's painting is a recent donation to the SAM. He will be holding a talk on Nov 24 at 2.30pm at the museum's auditorium.

In this writer's opinion, there's no middle ground when it comes to big works. And some of them fall flat because they look like they were merely blown up for the sake of being blown up. But when it works, size becomes a powerful tool.

Montemayor's red-and-orange-hued work



Day and Night by Gao Xingjian

## MAYO MARTIN

(mayo@mediacorp.com.sg)

sizes up two exhibitions that tackle greatness in different ways — one by the size of an artist's canvas, the other by an artist's legacy



Cock Fight by Affandi

In the case of Affandi, it's someone in a state of constant artistic flux. By no means a grand retrospective, the 20 paintings that comprise the exhibit — jointly presented by Credit Suisse to commemorate Affandi's birth centennial — simply gives a summary of the artist's stylistic progress.

Arranged chronologically from the 1930s to the 1980s, we see an exceptional artist's mind unfolding through time, in a manner of speaking. From the early realist portraits of his wife (*Seated Nude*), and daughter and artist Kartika (*My Child*), Affandi slowly and eventually embraced a wilder, more expressionistic style of painting characterised by thick swabs of paint squeezed from tubes applied directly onto the canvas to create richly-textured works.

There is a sense of chaos in Affandi's pieces. Some works, like *Mountains of Daring* or *Cock Fight*, overwhelm you with barely-distinguishable images that fill the frame. Others, like *Erotic* — a graphic painting of a couple making love — is almost devoid of background. They can be playful and whimsical — as in the almost-abstract *Tower of the Sun, Osaka '70* or a collection of Balinese masks in *Mask* — or ominous as in the darkened scenery in *Boats At The Kusamba Beach*. (If you want to see more of his works, there are six others displayed at the museum's permanent exhibition, *Art In Our Time*.)

Apart from the later trademark "tube painting" technique that Affandi uses to great effect (it gives an added tactile element to the works and makes them glisten), there is very little that binds together all these paintings, which range from portrait to city/landscape, and from erotica to erotica.

Except, of course, for Affandi himself, a genius of his time constantly in pursuit of genuine expression.

The Big Picture Show is on until March 23 next year. Affandi: A Painter of Genius runs until Nov 18. Both exhibitions are on at the Singapore Art Museum. The museum is open daily. Admission is \$8 for adults and \$4 for students and senior citizens.

It's quite something when a respected critic — best known for his influential book on art criticism *Ways Of Seeing* — describes a South-east Asian artist as such. More so given that it was at a time when the region's artists were practically unknown in the Western world.

Affandi was indeed a pioneer. By the 1950s, he was an international artist, participating — and winning — in the Sao Paulo and Venice biennales. Apart from that, what exactly does being a "genius" mean?