

Singapore's nature reinterpreted through storytelling by artist Inessa Kalabekova

The Fullerton Hotel presents the solo show of Kazakhstan-born, Singaporean artist Inessa Kalabekova, who looks at nature through the eyes of mythology and poetry.

Fullerton Gallery presents Inessa Kalabekova's solo exhibition in Singapore, called "Nature of Art," from March 1 to March 30, 2023. Here the artist explores the sights and secret corners of Singapore's parks and gardens, through the medium of painting and collage. Each painting is in a dialogue with the poems of Alice Kalabekova, Inessa's young daughter, a burgeoning writer in her own's right. A book, specially published for the exhibition, will comprise both the artworks and the poems, as well as sketches and photographs.

The eighteen paintings on show have been originally exhibited in the form of prints. They were shown within the original context that inspired them, namely Singapore's Botanic Garden, in July last year. This is the first time the original artworks - plus some newest, previously unseen paintings - will be presented to a Singaporean public in a gallery setting.

In the show Inessa looks at the peculiar Singaporean natural context with child-like eyes, operating a magic spell of sorts. Bamboo, banana trees, butterflies, leaves, birds, flowers, and water lilies are not just decorative elements, or a backdrop to a peaceful walk. For her, they are animated entities, and each bush or branch can be the hiding place of a mythological creature.

Legends are indeed at the very center of Inessa's imaginary dimension. Her representations draw from both Eastern and Western traditions, ultimately converging into personal mythologies. An example is the figure of the dragon; while this is usually represented as an evil creature in Western culture, it is a rather positive one in Chinese myths. In her oeuvre Inessa creates her own interpretation of the dragon, which encompasses both positive and negative elements. Of course, viewers themselves can give their interpretation of the dragon, according to their own background.

The artist says that making art is a way for her to record and express her emotional journey between her internal self and the nature of life. When Inessa tackles a new canvas, she doesn't just make a decorative piece, but rather creates a whole, complete world to share with others.

The inspiration from the paintings came to the artist as much from a direct appreciation of nature and ancient legends, as from the delicate and poignant poem written by her daughter. Involving Alice in the creative process came naturally to Inessa; her entire family is a participant in her world of art and imagination. Mother and daughter spend a lot of time together, and love to create stories about their adventures in nature. They let each their individual gaze on their surroundings influence each other, and together they are able to transform the most mundane aspects into moments of beauty and wonder. It's really a process of co-creation, where the pure stare of the young girl meets the trained – but just as sincere and spontaneous – eye of the professional artist. It's not a coincidence that in Inessa's work, childhood memories are often recurring, and the past imagination merges with the present.

In the context of Singapore, this process and compassionate gaze takes up even more meaning. We know that what we call nature (forest, the shores, vegetation) has been artificially modified in Singapore since the '70s, when the government started presenting Singapore as a "Garden City", later to be rebranded as "City in a Garden". The whole City in the Garden project has been about recreating a natural environment with a strong artificial element akin to urban planning. So what we

have today in Singapore is that nature - in order to simply exist - needs to be either decorative or efficient.

In this context, Inessa's work creates a special enchantment; she is able to find the beauty in the efficient, transmuting something grown and modified to be practical and transactional, into a place of beauty, possibility, and storytelling.

The artist was born in the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan, part of the former USSR. She studied not only visual art, but also music, dance, and architecture academically. This varied and diverse education provided her with a synesthetic understanding, developing her capacity to translate music into visuals and movement, as all these forms of expressions are animated, in her view, by the same energy source.

At the time the educational model in Kazakhstan was the Russian one, with a big stress on technique, versus concept. The artist had the chance to focus on the conceptual aspect of her practice at a later time, when she enrolled in the prestigious art college Central Saint Martins in London. This opened up the artist to a variety of expressive possibilities. She complemented her artistic studies in Oxford, where she learned about the nitty-gritty of building herself as an artist within the art system.

Over the years Inessa has exhibited internationally and her artworks were collected by museums such as the Haegumgang Theme Museum in South Korea, as well as private collections in over eleven countries, including of Japan, Australia, Portugal, Austria, USA, and Dubai. Among her most recent awards, she won the International Art Competition "Waters" at Art Room Gallery in 2020 and was a finalist of the Prisma Art Prize International in Rome. Last year a Special Mention Award at Art Vue Foundation and Honorable Mention, Palm Art Award, Germany.

Being classically trained and with a big awareness of painterly tradition, it's only natural that Inessa would start a piece from the composition. A very important part, the foundation of the artist's inner world, are her sketchbooks, full of images as well as quotes and ideas. Some depictions are from real life – some of the initial inspiration for the "Nature of Art" series have been made *en plein air* - or they might be images and phrases or stories that just pop into her mind, and are deemed suitable to be translated into painting. From the initial sketch to the final piece, the idea might change completely. The following steps involve balancing colours within the composition. The collage is then built by overlapping layers of paper cuts on top of those colours.

The layering of different strata involves also going back to the sketchbooks, to retrace the original idea. It's really a back-and-forth, based on a strong intuition; the artist can feel which part is working and which one doesn't. In the collages, Inessa uses also some little tricks that she learned from classical painting. One is the interplay between warm and cold colours, which create vibrancy and movement, a sense of aliveness. Although they look very contemporary, in Inessa's paintings there is always a subtle dialogue with the masters of the past, especially Marc Chagall, Sargent, Rembrandt, Fechin, Carel Fabritius, William Morris. The latter is directly referenced in the use of his famous wallpaper patterns as part of the collage.

With a passion for collecting items and images, Inessa incorporates not only wallpapers, but also postcards, musical scores, and maps within the canvas. There are also a lot of easter eggs and references inside the collages. For example, the artist's passion for museums is found in the use of museum tickets, which are not immediately visible, but reveal themselves to the viewer slowly. The cues Inessa inserts in the canvas are meant to unfold, rather than be appreciated at a glance. This

corresponds to the artist's approach to the technique, which is laborious and involves many steps; similarly, also the appreciation of the canvases promotes a slower, more mindful approach, in contrast with the fast-consuming culture that is starting to permeate the art world, as well as societies at large.

As Lao Tzu famously said: "Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished." Going against the grain, the artist defines "The Nature of Art" as a "slow art exhibition, meant to be cosy." When preparing a show, she always considers the location, and this is perhaps due to her architectural background. Changing the exhibiting space from the Botanic Garden to an exhibiting space, naturally changes also the fruition of the paintings by visitors. The space of the East Garden Gallery, within Fullerton Gallery is small and intimate, it also carries with it the history of the heritage building, reminiscent of colonial Singapore, before being transformed into a world-class hotel. The history of places and objects is part of the storytelling element central to Inessa's artistic vision. It might now be an entire story told by one canvas, other times is just a hint, like a song that evokes a possible unfolding of a story, without being too descriptive.

One of the most interesting elements of "The Nature of Art" exhibition is to bring the magic powder of spirit and imagination, to a context that is goal-oriented and highly bureaucratic. The question the artist seems to ask is: what is that propels the world forward? Transactions, efficiency and economics, or rather love, curiosity and storytelling?

About the Fullerton Hotel

The Fullerton Hotel Singapore is one of Singapore's most renowned luxury hotels, located near the mouth of the Singapore River, in the Downtown Core of the Central Area. It was originally known as the Fullerton Building, and also as the General Post Office Building, and was named after Robert Fullerton, the first Governor of the Straits Settlements. Commissioned in 1924 as part of the British colony's centennial celebrations, the building was designed as an office building by Major P.H. Keys of Keys & Dowdeswell, a Shanghai firm of architects. In 2015, it became listed as a national monument of Singapore.

"The Nature of Art", Inessa Kalabekova
East Garden Gallery, Fullerton Hotel
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