Nikki Luna
(Philippines)
How to use this artist folio

This artist folio contains information about the featured artists in the Singapore Biennale 2013, their artworks as well as artistic processes, to let visitors have a better understanding and appreciation of the artworks displayed.

Questions and activities found at the back of the folio are meant for visitors to have a deeper engagement with the artworks. The questions can be used for discussions when looking at the featured artwork, while the suggested activities are for educators or parents to conduct with students or children for further exploration beyond the visit.

The suggested reading and viewing lists also provide more information about the artist’s practice, artwork themes and related ideas or issues, which helps educators and readers make connections and relate them to their daily life.

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If the World Changed...

The Southeast Asian region has historically been the corridor of the major civilisations, as well as a place of cultural interactions. Within this fluid region, many individuals and populations inhabit different societies, from agrarian communities, coastal settlements, to urban metropolises.

21st century Asia, and particularly Southeast Asia, is an increasingly active participant in current global movements. These global happenings and changes have brought up localised responses to issues of land, water, borders, resources, memory and identity, among others. However, the experiences of change have also been uneven and varied across the region. Against this backdrop of past and continuous change, a multiplicity of responses has emerged from Southeast Asia, including large-scale activism, invitations for open dialogue and personal philosophical meditations, all of which can be seen in the Singapore Biennale 2013 (SB 2013).

The theme of SB 2013, "If the World Changed", is an invitation to reconsider the world we live in, and the worlds we want to live in.
The artwork

Tiempos Muertos (Dead Season)
Nikki Luna
2013
Sugar and resin
Diamonds: 7.8 x 7.8 x 7.8 cm (each)
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the Artist
Singapore Biennale 2013 commission
About the artwork

For her Singapore Biennale 2013 contribution, Nikki Luna has created an installation displaying diamonds cast from unrefined sugar, exhibited neatly in encased display shelves in the gallery.

The sugar used in the installation is sourced from Tarlac, Bukidnon and Bacolod in the Philippines. In particular, Bacolod, the capital city in the province of Negros Occidental in the Philippines, is also known as the “Sugar City”, and this area is famed for its expansive sugar plantations. Stories had long described the city as an opportunity for “the sweet life”. However, such a living is only available to the hacienederos (plantation owners). Their success is made possible through the hard labour of the plantation workers who toil for as little as a dollar a day. In addition to the troubling salary, the work is only seasonal. June to September is known as tiempos muertos or the “dead season”, where little work can be found. Further reduction in sugar prices also means it may soon result in every season becoming one of little yield for the workers.

Sugar is an everyday product that is consumed on a daily basis. However, it can also be harmful to the body when taken in excess. This draws parallel to the extreme situations that many in the sugar industry face, where the arduous harvest and production of the sweet product can also lead to bitterness and pain. Luna’s installation thus creates awareness of the doomed and dangerous industry. Ironically, the industry produces a good that is a staple for nearly every culture; a common, everyday item that connotes positivity, love and joy.
Nikki Luna compares the production of sugar to that of diamonds. She writes, “Cane sugar must go through further processing to provide the free-flowing white table sugar required by the consumer. The same process diamonds go through to become ‘clean’ and ‘conflict free’ ready to be sold to ladies and men as a symbol of ‘love’...” Her work sheds light upon the inhumane conditions in which the sugar plantation workers of the Negros province live and work.

The artist uses her installation for SB 2013 as an opportunity to tell the story of those who are trapped within the agricultural system of the Philippines. Over half of the sugar produced in the Philippines comes from the Negros province. Therefore, a large population of workers is affected by sugar production system. Many of the sugar plantation workers of the area are second-generation labourers on the farms in which they work. Unable to own land and indebted to their employers, this circle of injustice has become an accepted part of agricultural society in the Philippines, as its roots began in the era of Spanish colonialism but still exist today.

Luna’s work invites viewers to rethink how their personal choices can affect those around them. The simple table sugar that is sprinkled into coffee or tea is actually a product of the very system that she abhors. The artist encourages self-reflection in a literal sense as Tiempos Muertos is installed on a set of mirrors.

Looking through the mirrors not only provides a view of one’s self, but also along with the installation objects and the surrounding environment. Therefore, individuals are able to consider their own connection to others and the environment that surrounds them.
Artist Nikki Luna hails from the Philippines where she studied painting at the University of the Philippines. She continued her studies in an art residency at Cooper Union in New York City. During this time, she began to explore topics of feminism in her art, a theme that still permeates through her work today.

Luna chooses to use non-traditional materials in her installations and sculptures. Such materials are often those that can be found in a domestic setting, such as diapers, eggs, milk and mirrors. Her use of such materials helps create a commentary from a feminist perspective. Not only do her works speak for women in general, but particularly geared towards the female experience within the Philippines.

Nikki Luna is founder of the non-profit organisation, StartART Project. This organisation provides art workshops and psychosocial services for residents of conflict zones in the Philippines. The project partners with human rights organisations to benefit children who are victims of poverty.

The artist lives and works in Manila, where she manages her organisation and develops her body of work. Luna has exhibited her work throughout the Philippines but also internationally in cities such as Milan, Beijing, New York and Singapore. Exhibitions include Art Stage Singapore 2011 and M! Milan International Art Fair in 2011, among others.
Discussion time

- Walk around the installation. What are the items you can see that make up this installation?

- What do you notice about the colour, size and placement of the objects here? Describe them in detail.

- Look closely at the row of diamonds in this installation. Do you think they are real stones? How can you tell? What do you think they are made of?

- What are the differences and similarities between these diamonds you see here and the diamonds that you know?

- Look at the artwork caption to see what these diamonds are made of. Can you think of some possible reasons why the artist uses this material instead of other materials to create these diamonds? What other materials would you use, if given a choice?

- What are some words that come to your mind when you think of sugar? What do you usually use sugar for? What does sugar taste like? Do you think that sugar is a good material to use for this installation? Why do you say so?

- Read the artwork caption or SB short guide to find out more about the conditions under which the sugar workers live. How do you think their day might differ from your own?

- Life on the sugar plantations can be hard for workers in the Philippines who toil the fields that do not belong to them, since the plantation owners are the ones that reap most of the profits. What are your thoughts about this situation? What more do you think can be done in the interest of these workers?

- Notice the mirrors used in the installation. Walk closer to take a look. What do you see? Why do you think the artist chose to place the mirrors there in that manner? What do you think the artist is trying to tell you?

- Looking at the artist's choice of materials and placement of objects in this installation, how does this installation make you rethink about your relationship with the things around you?
Suggested activities

• What are some interesting things you can do with sugar, as a material? Try experimenting to find different ways of using it. Get your friends to come together and exercise your creativity to find the most unusual use for sugar. What have you discovered about sugar as a material?

• Nikki Luna uses the non-traditional material of sugar in her SB 2013 installation. Try using an everyday material in a sculpture you create. Perhaps it is salt, flour or even facial tissues and toilet paper rolls. What can this material say about your own environment? How is the experience of working with this material different from using clay or wire in a sculpture?

• Where does your food come from? Under what conditions was it produced? Research one food or consumer product to discover more about the industry that produces it. Create a video, painting or sculpture to communicate the results you found in your investigation.

• What can you do to prevent injustice that occurs as a result of human consumption? As a class, propose ideas that can make an impact on a chosen industry (e.g. palm sugar, rice, bananas or even the manufacturing of clothing). Vote on one resolution your classroom can commit to in order to make a difference in your selected industry.

• Observe the two paintings artist Adrian Ho, exhibited in the SB 2013. Ho’s work is a critique of the palm oil industry in Malaysia. Compare the two paintings with Luna’s installation, Tiempos Muertos. How do both artists use their work to create awareness of injustices caused by the choices of everyday consumers? Have a discussion with your friends to exchange your thoughts.
Glossary

**cast**
- a process of shaping a material with a mould

**toil**
- work extremely hard or incessantly

**doomed**
- likely to have an unfortunate and inescapable outcome; ill-fated

**indebted**
- owing gratitude or recognition to another

**injustice**
- unfair treatment; a situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored

**abhors**
- regard with disgust and hatred
Further reading

Nikki Luna’s Website
http://nikkiluna.com/

Fictional book for children that takes place on a sugar plantation
Sugar by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Book on the impact of sugar in the modern Philippine society
Sugar and the origins of modern Philippine society by John A. Larkin

Book describing the economics and political implications of the sugar trade in the Philippines
Barons, Brokers and Buyers: The Institutions and Cultures of Philippine Sugar by Michael S. Billig

Further viewing

Interview with Nikki Luna on her organisation, StartART Project
Nikki Luna and StartART at Mornings @ ANC
http://vimeo.com/14474985

News clip on child labour in the Philippines sugar plantation
Ending child labour in the Philippines
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WkDT9HArAg

Short video describing the benefits fair trade may offer labourers in developing regions
1. Trade Aid (Part 1) Alternative Trade in a Conventional World
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNodTqHw9Eo

2. Trade Aid (Part 2) Alternative Trade in a Conventional World
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rO1GBjSS9g
Annex: The Singapore Biennale

About the Singapore Biennale
The Singapore Biennale was established in 2006 as the country’s pre-eminent platform for international dialogue in contemporary art. It places Singapore’s artists within a global context, and fosters collaborations with the international arts community. The Biennale provides new opportunities for local visual artists, arts organisations and businesses, cultivating deeper public engagement with the arts and enhancing Singapore’s international profile as a vibrant city in which to live, work and play. The 2006 and 2008 editions of the Biennale were organised by the National Arts Council. As with the 2011 edition, Singapore Biennale 2013 is organised by the Singapore Art Museum of the National Heritage Board, and supported by the National Arts Council.

About the Singapore Art Museum
The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) advocates and presents contemporary art practices of Singapore, Southeast Asian and the Asian region. Since 2009, SAM has focused its programming and collections around contemporary Southeast Asian art and art practices, and has built up one of the most important collections of contemporary art from the region. Through strategic alliances with arts and cultural institutions and community organisations, SAM facilitates visual arts education, exchange, research and development within the region and internationally. SAM is also organiser of the Singapore Biennale 2013 and the past edition in 2011.

About the National Arts Council, Singapore
NAC was set up to spearhead the development of the arts in Singapore while advancing the country’s aspiration to be a distinctive global city for the arts. NAC’s mission is to nurture the arts and make Singapore’s rich and diverse culture an integral part of people’s lives. Anchored on the twin strategies of excellence and engagement in the arts, NAC aims to build a vibrant arts sector by creating a conducive environment where the arts is accessible to all, and artistic talents have the necessary resources and capabilities to excel and achieve long-term sustainability.