

Revisit Sembawang through the eyes of Tang Da Wu

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Senior Culture Correspondent

Artist Tang Da Wu is sporting a large bandage over his right eye, but he waves away concern: "It's just a little scratch."

The contemporary art pioneer has been busy installing works for a new show at the Ngee Ann Kongsi Galleries at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa), the double-bill, Sembawang: The D. D. Land and Sembagraphie.

As he walks among his works, Tang says: "I like making things. I make art every day. If I'm not drawing, I'm making. I make and draw in order to study something."

Art is not the only thing that engages the 77-year-old. Given his age, he says: "I've already started preparing for, and celebrating my death. I welcome it happening."

In the meantime, he keeps busy with his artmaking. Dr Bridget Tracy Tan, 45, director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Art at Nafa, observes: "His mind is always working."

Tang proposed the new show to Dr Tan two years ago after he finished his last Nafa double-bill: Hak Tai's Bow, Brother's Pool and Our Children. A tapestry from that show is on display at Artesan Gallery at the Esplanade.

In this new show, the performance artist best known for co-founding the landmark Artists Village in 1988, an artists' collective which promoted experimental art, revisits Sembawang where it was located.

The neighbourhood may loom large in his imagination, but the soft-spoken artist demurs when asked whether he is sentimental about the changes in its landscape. "I'm not sentimental. But I spent a lot of time there in my childhood.



It's just things around me, so it's natural I respond to it, work on it."

The self-deprecating artist declares about his art practice: "I'm no good by myself. I need people to work with me."

Gesturing around at the works, he adds: "This show is many people's effort."

Certainly, Sembagraphie, the second part of the double-bill, involves more people: the performance piece will feature about 20 performers from his troupe Stitchen Haus da Opera interacting with a tapestry he has created.

He is most animated when talking about his work, at one point breaking into an impassioned read-

ing of William Ernest Henley's famed Invictus poem, which he is penning on a wooden slab as part of an installation.

The wood slab has been cut from an African mahogany tree salvaged from Pasir Ris Park. The rest of the tree forms part of another installation, part of his habit of maximising all his materials and recycling bits from other works. He says wryly: "I'm a karung guni man. I can't work in my studio any more. It's storage for art works. I work outside in the open."

He is positively voluble when he talks about the tapestry that is the centrepiece for Sembagraphie. It is a reworking of Pablo Picasso's famed Guernica painting which he

has seen several times over the years: "I enjoy studying that painting. It is the icon for world peace."

It took him about two years to produce his remixed version. "I changed it from a horizontal to a vertical format. I need a more concentrated picture and vertical is good, it looks like a big gate you can walk through and into. When it's horizontal, one's reference is the cinema image, where you sit and watch passively."

The tapestry also borrows the figure of the dead soldier from Eugene Delacroix's iconic Liberty Leading The People painting.

He admits with a glint of mischief that he likes copying the greats, but the practice of copying is rooted in

**BOOK IT / SEMBAWANG:
THE D. D. LAND AND
SEMBAGRAPHIE**

WHERE: Ngee Ann Kongsi Galleries at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 80 Bencoolen Street

WHEN: Sembawang: The D. D. Land is on until Sept 29; Sembagraphie runs from Oct 5 to Nov 3

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: <http://str.sg/J4wQ>

Sembawang: The D. D. Land and Sembagraphie, a double-bill show at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, is by artist Tang Da Wu (far left), seen here with Dr Bridget Tracy Tan (centre), director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Art, and artist Jennifer Ng. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

arts education. Tang was trained in Britain and thus well schooled in European art history.

He has a first class honours degree in sculpture from Birmingham Polytechnic's School of Fine Art as well as a master's degree in fine arts from Goldsmiths College at the University of London.

He is a dedicated arts educator himself and his latest double-bill will be accompanied by workshops and seminars for Nafa students.

He declares: "I always think I'm not an artist, but I have made these works. I have my many years of learning and I like to pass it on so I teach."

His advice to budding art students: "Don't make art. Make questions."