

## TRANSCRIPT

### INTERVIEW WITH TIFFANY SINGH AND IOLA LENZI

*Maqula Al-Hala Wa Qaws Quzah – On the Rainbow and Halo – The Revision of the Optics*  
(2014 - 2015)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

As part of Visual Arts

3 Oct 2014 – 4 Jan 2015, Esplanade Concourse

#### Notice:

This interview was published in the programme booklet for *Maqula Al-Hala Wa Qaws Quzah – On the Rainbow and Halo – The Revision of the Optics* from 2014 to 2015.

Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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*Maqula Al-Hala Wa Qaws Quzah – On the Rainbow and Halo – The Revision of the Optics* is an art exhibition by artist, Tiffany Singh (New Zealand).

It was exhibited at the Esplanade Concourse, from 3 Oct 2014 – 4 Jan 2015.

**Project The Revision of the Optics, a new multi-media installation by Tiffany Singh**

Tiffany Singh, a New Zealand artist of South Asian descent, has over recent years developed a practice as visually and sensorially engaging as it is spiritually meaningful. Through a cross-disciplinary approach and sensitive use of materials the artist works with time and architectural volume to create site-specific installations that audiences penetrate bodily and in mind. In her works, Singh orchestrates a cross-section of media to convey ritual in an abstracted, stylised mode rather than attempting to plunder references literally from the realm of Asian religious ceremony. Mindful of the mental and physical equilibrium we all seek to attain in our everyday, the artist's pieces create forces and fields that working together, seem to hold tensions and polarities in balance. Predominantly deploying natural fibers and materials in the construction of her oeuvre (organic components such as flowers, spices, leaves, rice, wood, paper, wax, feathers, honey, earth, and more have appeared in various installations), Singh also resorts to suggesting culturally-specific faith-based inflections with bells, symbolic colours, wind chimes, and ribbons among others.

Singh, commissioned by Singapore's Esplanade Theatres on the Bay to compose a new, site-specific installation in the art centre's Concourse entrance space in September 2014, answers Iola Lenzi's questions about her practice and its meaning in the Singapore context.

**Iola Lenzi (IL): Your work has a spiritual core drawn from Asian belief systems, can you please explain how you came to shape your practice along these lines.**

**Tiffany Singh (TS):** I am of Asian descent and have always been interested in exploring my philosophies through my visual arts practice. The work is very repetitious in its form and process and often becomes a meditation exercise that shifts my awareness. The creation process of art for me is an experience of connecting to the senses beyond the normal awareness of them, this input or feeling is then translated into an expression in normal dimensions: form, sound, colour, composition. It is the East that first put me into this state of being through the exposure to ritual and ceremony, and the heightened sense of being connected to something greater than self. It is Eastern philosophy and a desire to explore my Buddhist practice through my arts practice that creates this spiritual core.

**IL: Your pieces speak to a universal public even though they are sometimes constructed around Asian cultural symbols, sacred customs and vernacular expressions. Please explain how you conceptualise your pieces so that they reach out to all types of audiences.**

**TS:** The purpose of the work is to draw the audience towards consideration of more spiritual things, induce transformation and reverence. To do this you have to be inclusive. Here the psychological effects of the artwork are significant. If the audience goes home with a feeling of well-being, connectedness, and wholeness then much has been achieved. To attempt this I involve materials and ritual objects that have a history of mediating and clearing energies (bells, wind chimes, colour, spices, flowers etc) and an association to healing and spirituality before I have even worked with them.

By employing materials from the everyday with these energies, the sense of mystery is dissolved: they are familiar and so audiences can form an association with them. This allows people to respond from a sensory perspective rather than a purely intellectual one. The works are often arranged to reference ceremony and ritual to engage the audience in a specific state of consciousness, an introspective and less protected state. In this sense the works can be seen to be psychotherapeutic. We are all human and have sensory responses. It is this set of relations that I work with so as to ensure my art is inclusive and non-specific to a particular audience. The sense of ritual that is employed is crucial too as ritual is a collective way to deal with the otherworldly, a spiritual practice that aligns with religion, belief, culture and society.

**IL: Visually and sensorially your oeuvre appropriates references from the natural world and the realm of sounds. Iconographies linked to ritual are also integrated into your selected space to form an original work with its own, distinct properties. Though each space has its individual character as you develop your installation, do you find similarities of methodology in the orchestration of each new piece?**

**TS:** Yes. None of my works are entirely independent, each relating to another. They are all interconnected to examine the role of the sacred in contemporary society. My processes are also quite refined in terms of allowing a signature aesthetic to surface such as the device of

the field and repetition, or my particular use of a revised colour spectrum. I also give myself strict frameworks. For example the use of natural materials: I never use plastics or synthetics, so providing all the work a particular feel and sensual quality.

**IL: please explain how you build within each space and what you look for as you generate a dialogue between your creation and the site.**

**TS:** Site is critical. The way the audience engages with the site is very important as these sites have entry from all 360 degree viewpoints. The key for me is that the work looks effortless in a space, as if belonging there. In order for the work to look resolved, I integrate its energy with that of the site.

**IL: Quite different to other types of art that operate as autonomous and self-contained objects or images, audience involvement, reception, are clearly integral to your practice. Can you explain why this is so important to you.**

**TS:** I am searching to connect and so offer the works up to the audience, the latter shaping and engaging with these works. I believe that there is a certain energy associated with the works and that any work or concept has the ability to gain energy when it becomes an accumulative piece. This integrates the audience's space and its energy into the work of art.

Quite often materials are used and reused or commissioned from fair-trade artisans whose energy permeates the objects. For me the dialogue is more profound and honest when it incorporates other voices as well as my own. Ephemeral art is usually understood as reflecting a desire to dematerialize the art object in order to evade the demands of the market, or to democratize the elitism of the art world. In my practice, there is opportunity to be a part of process through a contemporary social practice art model which by nature supports both these concepts. Process prioritises outcome and thus there is often nothing tangible left to purchase. So it is the experience of the artwork which becomes the artwork itself in a lot of cases. Ultimately its about establishing a connection to this dimension, other dimensions, and to each other.

**IL: Please can you give some examples of the kinds of visual and semantic devices you deploy to draw your publics into your installations and how you set-up conversations between your artistic vision and members of the public.**

**TS:** Quite often the works are social practice. This means there is space for engagement and the 'finished' artworks are actually the beginning for the participation stages. The purpose of this is to achieve oneness. For example *Bells Of Mindfulness* (California 2013) asked the audience to de-install one of the 1000 suspended bells and hand-folded paper cranes from a tree and re-install the bell in a place that was sacred to them. Audiences were then asked to document this site through film or still image and upload it to a site that documents the journey of the bells. The enquiry in this case concerned the role of the sacred in contemporary society. Instigating audience involvement and thus adding multiple voices to the work was a way of showing how sacred space is different things to different people and is in fact everywhere. Another project, *Fly Me Up To Where You Are* (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch 2013/4) included an education kit asking children to identify their hopes and dreams through a process that results in them painting a prayer flag. All the flags were then stitched together to create a multidimensional and multifaceted voice providing a platform for the community to be seen and heard as a collective. An importance is placed on the role of creativity to process concerns, hopes, dreams and ideas. These concepts when addressed in a positive and considered way, allow for the community to be responsible and connected, not only to each other but also to the aspirations of our younger generations, by identifying what can be achieved through notions of co-authorship.

**IL: Also, can you provide some details of the responses you have had to your work in different locales.**

**TS:** It is always interesting to me to work between East and West. While the dialogical arts practice model is academically understood in the west, the subtle references to ritual are often overlooked. In the case of *Bells Of Mindfulness* a lot of the bells go 'missing' because they are so beautiful that people want to 'own' them which is counterproductive to the intention of the artwork, the latter's realisation depending on audience intercession. However in the East there is a deeper understanding of the references to ceremony and ritual because daily practice is still part of everyday life. So the readings of the materials and objects when placed in a context of ritual like *Sayapatri 100 Layers* (Nepal 2014) or *Knowledge Is More Important Than Knowledge* (India 2012) are intuitively deeper even though the understanding of relational aesthetics and ephemeral art is still developing in a lot of places in the East.

**IL: The Concourse space is the Esplanade's prime public access zone, the very**

**entrance lobby of the arts centre. It is open and accessible to publics from all walks of life, not just patrons of the theatre and concert hall. It presents cathedral-like volumes, stone cladding, natural light on one side, wide stairs. It is a very challenging space for an artist to play with. Please explain how you have negotiated the difficulties of the Concourse as well as how you have turned its more problematic aspects into rewarding ones.**

**TS:** It is a challenging site but also a very rewarding one due to the scale and interesting angles of the stairs and light. The works are designed in the round so that they are complete from all directions. The concourse work literally cascades down the stairs spilling out in all directions. It is a dynamic site and I have attempted to make work that reflects this dynamism with colour blocking, bold angles and hopefully the sensual movement of the ribbons and bells that will add a sound-based element to the works. Colour is a beautiful medium to work with. Also the movement of the ribbons and the bells moving through the tunnel cones to the concourse should make the work feel alive rather than static. With so many amazing events at the Esplanade, the energy of the work should match the energy of the theatre complex.

**IL: You are doubtless aware that Singapore society is multi-religious and multi-cultural. To what extent have you researched the Singapore locale in preparation for the building of your piece and how has the specific make-up of Singapore society influenced or impacted this new creation?**

**TS:** The part the most closely related to the Singapore audience is the Concourse work's floor component. This piece aims to reveal my particular colour spectrum through natural materials that are familiar to a local audience. Aesthetics definitely play a role: beauty is a divine quality but it is also in the eye of the beholder and thus a cultural thing. As much as possible the materials have an association to festival, offering or ceremony and quite often hold healing properties at their core.

I hope that this familiarity will engender a connection with the work in relation to culture and association. Resonance is not limited to a tangible world but operates across multiple worlds: artist, audience, site, energy this is where the notion of correspondence starts. I hope the colour and natural material triggers connection in multi-religious and multi-cultural terms.

**IL: “*Revision of the Optics*”, which will be installed in the Concourse during Esplanade’s end-of-year quarter, involves bells, sound and colour spectrums. Can you explain how you came to develop this particular piece. Can you speak about the materials you chose for the work, why you selected them, and how it will work physically in the space.**

**TS:** I believe in using my practice as a bridge as much as possible, the work has a social consciousness which informs the conception and visual identity of the artworks from the outset.

All the artworks come from this place as I aim primarily to work consciously and ethically in a global market. I strive to make my artwork while supporting a local artisan industry. The conceptual premise of the artworks is also important of course. My work is underpinned by a notion of healing through the deployment of subtle energetics. I have been working with these same materials and concepts since 2008. For me materials are equally important in terms of aesthetics and ethics.

I work with a fair-trade organisation called Indika to support a family in the Rann Of Kutch. I have been working with this family for two years now and have realised shows in California, Australia and Singapore featuring their hand-made clay baked bells. We have also made a film to promote fair trade and support artisan communities. Most of my works are created out of a desire to support artisan industry, organic produce and local enterprise.

The colour spectrum references the Eastern philosophy of the chakras, whereas bells have a relationship to the sacred in almost all belief systems. In accord with Shinto and Wisdom Traditions, bells are used to summon nature spirits as well as disperse negative energy from a site. The stunning sound quality which helps to change the feeling or rather vibration of a space is in alignment with the chakras through sound. It is the history and association with the sacred that the bells and materials carry with them that is so alluring to me.

The materials are also very inclusive, referencing the sacred of many different belief systems, religions, and philosophies. Frequency and vibration are governed by the way the materials occupy the space, materials and site at one with each other. Air currents stream in

from the doors and multiple access points. I hope to bring awareness and attention to the ether by creating works that are activated by it. It is a beautiful thing to pay attention and notice something that is usually invisible.

**IL: How will the installation operate in response to evolving light conditions in the Concourse?**

**TS:** Different colours come out in different lights. The work should throw out different vibrations and aspects with this shift in light. The cones will be quite sensitive to light changes too as they will be directly lit from above during the day with natural light. This will give a slight glow to the ribbons. Hopefully the work will become like a giant sundial as the light changes throughout the day, different colours shining.

**IL: What do you expect audiences to experience with “*Revision of the Optics*”?**

**TS:** Having expectations from an audience is problematic and something I have worked hard to dissolve. It is also aligned to my philosophy to have no expectations of outcome that way one is far more open to process and the unexpected. However in terms of response, I would like viewers to digest the artwork as a correspondence between the tangible world and the realm of possibility and magic. One of the functions of art I believe is to transport the viewer into a state that is close to their inner core. This is partly transcendental, partly psychological, and can even be seen as a transport mechanism to achieve a different state of consciousness. The work is thus related to the notion of healing where the preparation, inception, perception and setup with adequate innate emotional, sensory, moral and aesthetic input exists.

**IL: In tandem with this ambitious Concourse tactile and sound installation, you are producing a second set of work for the Cones, which you call “*Iris*”. Can you please explain this work’s concept and visual construction.**

**TS:** This work is an introduction to *Revision of the Optics* and unpacks the work by expanding on the colour spectrum in more detail. The bells are also a size smaller so create a different tone that draws one in and connects to *Revision of the Optics* by producing a



different tone in the sound spectrum. The colours are again a render of the chakras. It is a delicate render of *Revision of the Optics* that is spilt into three works that create one work together. It is also about layers and repetition as repetition can bring the mind into an altered state, repetition also a psychologically effective technique associated with ritual.

**IL: Why do you think your enquiry into the role of the sacred in contemporary society is important?**

**TS:** Science and rationality have lead us away from each other and the possibility of the magical dimension, thus diminishing essential connection. The social part of ritual and the sacred has a lot to do with resonance and how we relate to each other. The sacred can be a means to connect with others through a dimension outside and greater than self and selves. It can be a way to imagine a better world we are all a part of and a means to dealing collectively with our problems.

It is not that the sacred has changed much, it is more that our image of it and our relationship with religion, magic, myth and art have changed since ritual and the sacred have become the subject to theological and philosophical discourse. The change has occurred as result of prioritizing the intellectual over the intuitive, triggering a slippage between knowing and learning.

By asking what we perceive these sacred spaces to be, we can use them to create a oneness for the individual and community. This way we can potentially address social ills, influence reality and the future, and engender healing. Through these works I hope to encourage a dialogue that is rooted in mechanisms and relations that are precognitive and a part of our own histories. It is a deep enquiry into the psyche of the modern world, my art exploring the potential for the sacred and ritual and providing paths for participants that cannot be expressed in cognitive terms. This is I believe necessary at a time in history where science and technology trump intuition and innate perception of information.

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based critic and curator with a dedicated interest in Southeast Asian art.