

# Dancers rehearse in back alleys in National Museum's new digital gallery

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SINGAPORE - In a back alley behind a row of shophouses, an Indian dancer performs bharatanatyam by the light of a streetlamp.

Another dancer rehearses silat moves in the street with the aid of plastic pails and a stick. On the rooftop above him, a third arches her back and spins a red parasol.

Their performances are projected on screens in Art Of The Rehearsal, a digital installation in the National Museum of Singapore's new space Gallery10.

The museum's tenth gallery, which had its soft opening on Dec 10 last year, is an experimental digital space equipped with advanced projection technology.

Museum director Angelita Teo, 44, at a media briefing on Tuesday (Jan 31), called it a "laboratory space where we can work with creative individuals, artists or otherwise".

Located in the space previously occupied by the dining hall of Chinese restaurant Chef Chan's, it is the first of the museum's galleries to allow food and drink and is open to the public for free.

Art Of The Rehearsal is Gallery10's first permanent showcase. The commissioned work by multidisciplinary artist Sarah Choo Jing and Shanghai-based commercial cinematographer Jeffrey Ang uses digital media to showcase traditional dance forms.

It is a three-channel video installation of nine dancers from various cultures practising their steps in a setting that is a collage of the back lanes of Kampong Glam, Little India and Chinatown.

Choo, 26, says of the mishmash of locales: "It's everywhere and nowhere. These are the back alleys people don't visit, but where the hustle and bustle of night life happens."

She and Ang, 45, wandered around these back streets at midnight to capture images, around 20 of which are used in the composite backdrop.

They filmed dancers from Apsaras Arts, Era Dance Theatre and Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Dance Theatre practising their moves on green-screen, then superimposed them onto the backdrop.

They also captured the backstage rituals these dancers go through to prepare for a performance, from the elaborate process of donning make-up, to the prayers which Indian dancers do over their bells before they put them on.

While the dancers come from different cultures, Choo and Ang were struck by what they had in common: the sheer amount of effort that went into their rehearsals, and the vulnerability they revealed in these moments of preparation.

"It never occurred to me that it would be that scary," says Choo. "We always think of performers as being so confident on stage, but they too are human beings."

Dancer Banupriya Ponnarasu, 26, who appears in the installation dancing under a ladder, hopes it will endear traditional dance forms to younger generations. "Traditional dance is like a chameleon," she says. "Its colour changes, but its body is the same."

"In Singapore, there are many fusion projects which try to put together the art forms of three different cultures, which change the individual art forms without retaining their essence. This does not change any of the art forms, but brings out the individual essence of each in a whole new visual, and I think that's commendable."

The installation, which cost between \$200,000 to \$250,000, was funded by the National Arts Council.

In the pipeline for Gallery10 is a food-related installation, slated to be out later this year. Ms Teo declines to reveal concrete details, but hints that it could make use of projections, scents and edible art to create a new kind of dining experience.

"Museums today are all about immersive experiences," she says. "Digital technology is here to stay, and we need to be open to featuring new ideas and concepts."