

THE CULTURE

Unexpected shifts in perspective

Mutability and periphery come to the fore in a Singapore Biennale focused firmly on the region's artists. Peter Hill writes

Singapore Biennale 2013: If the World Changed Multiple sites in the Bras Basah Bugis Precinct, Singapore Until 16 February 2014

If the world changed, what would it look like? That is the question behind the fourth Singapore Biennale. Its message waves on blue flags from buildings and lamp standards all across this equatorial island state. It is addressed by 82 artists and art collectives spread across 10 official venues. Collectively they represent 13 countries, arcing through Southeast Asia, from South Korea through Burma, to Vietnam and Australia. Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are particularly well represented.

It is a show that fizzles with ideas, speculations and the quirky use of materials. Installation, video projections, relational aesthetics and a range of “superfictions” join with large-scale paintings and wood carvings in intelligent juxtapositions. Yet the biennale is not without controversy, in its structure rather than its content. For the first time it comes under the umbrella of the Singapore Art Museum. The first two biennales were directed by Fumio Nanjo, regarded by many as Japan’s leading curator of contemporary art projects. His biennales were global in their choices. The third edition was directed by Matthew Ngui and was again international rather than regional.

When I spoke with English art historian and novelist Tony Godfrey (author of the classic 1998 book *Conceptual Art*), who now lives in Singapore, he told me: “In 2006 Lee Boon Yang, then minister for the arts, opened the first Singapore Biennale by saying it would ‘enable our artists to meet and engage artists from all over the world for a productive discourse. Such exchanges should be mutually inspiring, and ones from which may spring new ideas for a better tomorrow.’ He was proud to say that the exhibition included 95

artists from 38 countries – some like Yayoi Kusama, Xu Bing or Barbara Kruger were famous, others were not.”

Many people I spoke to in Singapore felt that this time, internationalism had been sacrificed on the altar of regionalism. More controversial was the decision to appoint 27 curators from across the region, many of whom are practising artists themselves. Their brief included focusing on the non-capital cities in each country. So in the Philippines artists from Baguio City have been favoured over those from Manila; in Indonesia, Java over Jakarta; in Vietnam, Hue over Hanoi.

I had no problem with any of this. The result was that I came away informed about scores of artists I’d never heard of before, and impressed by the ambition and freshness of their visions. If biennales, as ubiquitous now as art fairs, should have any rules, a primary one should be that they are as different as possible from the ones that preceded them. This one certainly is that.

One of several standout works was by the Japanese/Australian husband-and-wife duo, Ken and Julia Yonetani. Inspired by the Fukushima nuclear disaster, it is called *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nuclear Nations* (2012-13). It consists of 31 chandeliers, each glowing a sickly green inside the large, blackened gallery that houses them. The work references the world’s 31 nuclear nations, and the size of each chandelier corresponds to the number of nuclear plants operating in that country. (It should not go unnoticed that Southeast Asia is a nuclear-free region.) London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, hinted at through the work’s title and the antique chandeliers, was chosen as a symbol of what happens when human ambition meets with technological development.

When kitsch furniture design and trauma become unlikely bedfellows, perhaps the logical outcome is a form of gallows humour. Vietnamese artist Tran Tuan presents a body of work called *Forefinger* (2013), where several chair-like stools take the shape of bent forefingers. Various made from crocodile skin, animal bone and cowhide, they would not look out of place in a Las Vegas casino. The darker side to this story is that they refer to the “trigger



Arc of ideas clockwise from the main image: *Forefinger*, *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nuclear Nations*, and installation by Hazel Lim

finger” needed by all soldiers. Anti-war activists in the past (and we hear too little of this side of the Vietnam War) would cut off their index fingers to avoid military service. Tran, born in 1981, is commenting on the unresolved post-war trauma of his parents’ generation.

Sai Hua Kuan, who lives and works in the UK and Singapore, has built a two-channel immersive video installation that takes the equator as its theme. One is never far away from thoughts of the equator on this island nation, and one of the cutting-edge galleries in Singapore’s Gillman Barracks complex is



called Equator Art Projects. The artist has chosen the equatorial point directly opposite Singapore, at Yasuni National Park in Ecuador, and the videos document sunrise and sunset at both locations. It is a simple idea that holds within it complex environmental and cultural issues, as viewers engage with this daily cycle of our turning planet.

Singaporean artist Hazel Lim also deals with ecological issues in her collaboration with 150 students from five of the country’s secondary schools. Working in several of the state’s national parks, they produced drawings of

flora and fauna, later transferred to porcelain plates and grouped into an impressive wall installation reflecting cultural memory and identity. This work can be seen in the Peranakan Museum (other of the 2013 Biennale’s venues include the Singapore Art Museum and the National Museum of Singapore). I am grateful to the biennale for introducing me to the concept of Peranakan. This refers to the local women who married traders from a range of overseas nations, notably the Chinese, and to the hybrid, mostly matriarchal, cultures that arose as a result.

Also showing here is one of the most exciting artists anywhere on the planet, Robert Zhao Renhui. He has created a “superfiction” called The Institute of Critical Zoologists and its ongoing project, *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World* (2013). On the surface, through photography and installations, it critiques how humankind is altering the planet, but at deeper levels it deals with the falsification of images and how we read them.

In the neighbouring gallery, Shirley Soh exhibits *Seeing (from) the Other* (2013), a collaboration with inmates from the Changi Women’s Prison. She encouraged them to produce images and messages about “change” on *kuvarica* – traditional Serbian linen wall hangings – addressing aspects of their rehabilitation and, perhaps not surprisingly, the resulting works are often filled with a childlike hope and optimism.

If there is a message to be delivered about the visual arts through the fourth Singapore Biennale, it is that contemporary art is not about the “delivery system”. It is about the ideas and emotions contained within those systems – painting, video, sculpture, printmaking, role playing and fictional narrative. And it is about edges as well as centres, in terms of where

Art is not about ‘delivery systems’. It is about the ideas and emotions contained within those. And it is about edges as well as centres, in terms of where artists can live and how they can work

artists can live and how they can work. As Eugene Tan, director of the National Art Gallery (whose PhD is from the University of Manchester), told me, “Singapore has a carefully thought-out plan for the visual arts, begun over a decade ago with the *Renaissance City Report* (2000), that plotted not just the creation of the Singapore Biennale, but its annual art fair, its presence at the Venice Biennale, and the cluster of high-profile international commercial galleries at Gillman Barracks.”

Perhaps most significant of those developments is the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Art at the heart of the barracks complex. It has just hired as its founding director one of the world’s leading curators, Ute Meta Bauer, who has served as dean of fine art at the Royal College of Art in London, a co-curator of Documenta 11 in Kassel and director of the visual arts programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She will be running a huge gallery, with a separate building for visual art research projects and a third building for artist and theorist residencies. Singapore is no longer a place you pass through on the way to somewhere else.

Peter Hill, artist, writer and independent curator, is an associate professor of fine art at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is currently completing a book called *60 Contemporary Artists*.