Premier’s Contemporary Asian Art Scholarship

Contemporary Asian Art – Symbolism Globalised?

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*Contemporary art is a global ‘language’, which assumes as its starting point  
a complete rejection of prescribed ideological or aesthetic orthodoxies*

—Lorenzo Rudolf [[1]](#footnote-1)

If the World Changed, the theme of the 2013 Singapore Biennale (SAM), invited artists and curators to reconsider the ‘world we live in, and the worlds we want to live in’. Selected artists from the biennale were used to illustrate this theme and are documented in four case studies.

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.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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.

The four case studies are designed to facilitate students’ better understanding of contemporary Southeast Asian art and to promote:

* + an informed point of view, so that they are able to understand the different meanings that are valued in the artwork of contemporary Southeast Asian artists
  + an appreciation of the role and contribution of contemporary Southeast Asian artists to their society and culture, and globally
  + their knowledge about the meaning of the work so that (students and teachers) are able to locate them in critical narratives and perhaps be able to place the works within an historical context
  + the significance of the artists, the artwork and the audience responses.

*We live in an era of art history when the term ‘contemporary Asian art’ means only one thing:  
works by Post-Tiananmen-Square Chinese artists that fetch millions of dollars on the auction block.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

—Nora Taylor

Recent textbooks, contemporary art books, the promotion of Mainland Chinese artists by galleries and Youtube encourage this viewpoint about contemporary Asian artists.

Southeast Asian artists: Who are they? Where do they live? What do they practice? Where is the Southeast Asian region?

In contrast to contemporary Chinese art, art from this region is sometimes viewed as commercial, decorative and a ‘nice’ tourist souvenir – not real art. Students often see the region as an exotic and ancient one, full of temples, monkeys, woodcarvings, batik, bronze Buddhas and elephants.

I proposed to select four to five artworks and to construct case studies for Stage 6 students from SAM’s gathering of 80 artists and 27 curators from Southeast Asia. The case studies attempt to illustrate the complex, diverse histories of politics, social changes, cultural structures and global influences on the artists practice.

The focus of the NSW Visual Arts Syllabus for Stage 6 is on the construction of a number of case studies. These case studies allow teachers the chance to expand their students’ knowledge of the wider art world and investigate various expressive forms.

My aim in writing these case studies was to convey the experience of ‘being in the moment’ and to present a personal view of the artworks. Therefore, the case studies are written in an attempt to create the atmosphere of responding to the artwork in the gallery, as if the reader is in situ.

This was an important focus for me because as teachers we often resort to technology or hard copies of imagery that we wish to present to students but have not experienced physically. Inquisitive students often want to know countless details about the artwork, more than a classroom teacher is able to research, so I wrote with these students in mind.

Background information attached to the individual artist helps to place the artwork into a context, even though this may not be the intention of the artist.

Brief information worksheets about the artist’s country, political, social and cultural history are written to support the students’ understanding of their practice. Including these issues – some incidental – will help students to understand a little of the regions closest to us. These worksheets have information about global happenings, changes in local responses to issues of land, water, borders, resources, memory and identity (where applicable)

While in Singapore I attended the Biennale Symposium. This two-day wrap up of the biennale was the opportunity to listen to a number of artists, curators and critics vigorously discuss the exhibition held in the Glass Hall, SAM.

In his presentation ‘Art in the Global Future’, Fumio Nanjo, keynote speaker at the symposium, spoke about his experience as Artistic Director of the 2006 and 2008 Singapore Biennales and his involvement with other international biennales and triennials.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During his discourse Nanjo emphasised the importance of communication between cultures, expressing that visual arts is a vital, interactive vehicle that can be employed to tell stories attached to the histories of both the West and the East. He reiterated the significance of using artist practice as an educative process used to inform a wider audience about the imagery found in Southeast Asian artworks.

Russell Storer discussed the importance of the Asia Pacific Triennial to the interrelationship between Australia and its regional neighbours. He discussed the importance of exhibiting artworks and how this has promoted the art of Asia, the Pacific and Australia to a new and interested audience.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Curators and artists associated with the biennale used the forum to discuss their approach to working with emerging artists and problems associated with their own role as first-time curator–artists. This discussion also alluded to the difficulties of remotely connecting with the curatorial staff of SAM.

At the symposium I also reunited with two old friends, filmmaker Liao Jiekai [[6]](#footnote-6) and Low Eng Teong,[[7]](#footnote-7) now working for the Ministry of Education. Eng Teong invited me to meet his team from the Curriculum Division to discuss my project the following week, an invitation I was happy to accept.

Cheo Chai-Hiang [[8]](#footnote-8) introduced me to Grace Tan, one of the few female solo artists exhibiting in the biennale. I was aware of Tan’s practice prior to the biennale and was keen to discuss her technique and use of industrial materials for her installations. I arranged to meet up and discuss her practice and her biennale submission titled ‘moments’.

At the symposium, Cecily Briggs, Australian artist, curator writer and educator, resident of Singapore and now living in Melaka introduced Louis Ho [[9]](#footnote-9) and Simon Soon,[[10]](#footnote-10) two established curators and writers who had published articles about the biennale. I caught up with these two in Singapore and later in Sydney during the Sydney Biennale.

During Chinese New Year I stayed with Cheo and Briggs in Melaka. We discussed the inclusion of Cheo’s artmaking in a case study and I interviewed him throughout my stay.

In Melaka I visited the studio of Malaysian artist Tan Shin Toing, whose practice is carving miniature icons in ancient woods and stones, and Amy Tan, painter and educator.

In Singapore, Cheo’s and Brigg’s introduction to a number of critics, artists and writers was invaluable.

Case Studies

Nasirun’s and Toni Kanwa’s artworks are used to explain the diversity of practise in Indonesia, the relationship of the artist and their world.

Their work could be used to address the following focus question:

* + Are symbols drawn from the region’s diversity of political structures, range of economic development, mixture of languages, cultures and religions?

The New South Wales Syllabus for Visual Arts has a number of notions attached to decoding artworks. The Cultural Frame highlights the fact that no artist works in a social vacuum and that all artworks reflect some aspects of the culture (the beliefs, ideas and social structures) in which they were produced.

Nasirun

Nasirun’s installation ‘Between Worlds’ is an example of the syncretism between Javanese culture and Islam. The Javanese practice of Islam is very different from that in other parts of the world and many Javanese Muslims integrate their faith of Islam with local Javanese spiritual beliefs and practices. As Nasirun is a man of intense Muslim faith this may seem incongruous because he often uses images from Javanese mythology in his artworks. The inclusion of *wayang kulit* puppets enclosed in glass tubes and jars references past cultural influences – indigenous myths and Indian and Persian epics as well as past political restrictions for Indonesian society, especially artists.

While researching Nasirun’s world it became apparent that the island of Java has been influenced by a number of elements: religion (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, various forms of Christianity, as well as an ancient tradition of ancestor worship), colonization by the Dutch and British, occupation by the Japanese, and trade with countries fighting for the archipelago’s spices, gas and oil.

In the gallery audiences are drawn to ‘Between Worlds’ by a soft warm glow radiating from the stupa*-*like formation and the surrounding quietness of the room.

In the case study references are made to Borobudur, a Buddhist stupa in central Java. Students should be able to connect Nasirun’s installation with this temple. The relationship between ‘Between Worlds’ and this important Buddhist stupa reflects the following focus question:

* + Are some symbols globally relevant, or do we have to live in a culture to understand the meanings attached to the images?

In the documentation accompanying the work, Nasirun has said that his inspiration came from his observation of the influence of television and its hold on its viewers. He has connected the watching of television and the myths created within to those of the Shadow Theatre, traditionally used for entertainment and to recall stories from Hindu and Indonesian mythology.

Toni Kanwa

At the symposium Ade Darmawan expressed the following: ‘Through the collaborative and inter-disciplinary approach that happens through (such) explorative processes, the initial position of the artist as the center of ideas and consciousness, fluidly and organically shifted to become one of collaborator and mediator.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

Kanwa’s practice is an example of a collaborative process – not with a contemporary collective but with the indigenous people of his land. He is inspired by their traditional way of life and the belief systems that still prevail. In his practice he unearths the spirituality found in organic forms, guided and influenced by his experiences living with various non-urban communities in Indonesia.

When Kanwa carves, he prays, and enters a trance like state before he begins. He believes that all materials have a spirit. In his practice Kanwa acknowledges the belief that all matter has energy that should be respected. Similar to an acupuncturist following the channels on the body to find the point of a problem, Kanwa follows the energy of the material he uses for carving and allows this energy to guide the form. His carving is intuitive as his sight is failing.

Kanwa carved about five figures per day for his biennale installation ‘Cosmology of Life’.

In selecting Kanwa’s practice for a case study I thought of the student who may not have access to elaborate materials. My aim was to create an awareness and appreciation of Kanwa’s material practice and to raise an awareness of the link between his embracing of Indonesian indigenous culture and his role as a contemporary artist.

Some images in the case study are by the courtesy of the artist; I have email contact with his wife, who has gracefully given permission for the use of the images.

Grace Tan [[12]](#footnote-12)

Born in Malaysia and living in Singapore, Grace Tan is one of the few female artists exhibiting in the biennale who is not part of a collective.

I had been interested in Tan’s practice while still in Sydney; however, the internet images were misleading and I was pleased to have the chance to see her work in situ. Her installation ‘moments’ is used to illustrate this focus question:

* + How do artists represent global challenges in their imagery?

Tan’s practice often involves non-traditional materials. In ‘moments’, flexible tubing of various shades of grey; knotted and intertwined to create cloud- and mountain-like forms that were suspended on unseen steel poles, reinforcing the floating impression.

In ‘moments’, Tan’s intention was to construct a space for respite, to create some time for reflection and a chance to slow down the pace of everyday life for a ‘moment’. She sees the lack of time and respect given to the natural environment and the impact of a global economy on nature as global concerns.

Tan described the importance of an audience’s interaction with her installations. Her motivation of selecting the corner site for the installation of ‘moments’ supported this intention: the darkness and the small LED lights within the forms created a meditative atmosphere, supporting Tan’s intention to draw the viewer’s focus to the inner self.[[13]](#footnote-13) The reflections from the other two installations added to the overall ambiance.

As the eye becomes more attuned to the dark lighting and the intense reflections from the other artworks, the viewer can observe more closely how the small lights that appear to be embedded into the interior of the knots and twists highlight hidden crevices. The forms are reminiscent of traditional knotted buttons and images of floating Chinese mountains. In Southeast Asia images of mountains are often used for meditation and contemplation.

Svay Sareth

Svay Sareth’s monumental installation in the National Museum of Singapore is used in the case studies to answer the following focus question:

* + How do we decode South East Asian Contemporary Art symbolism to make the ideas relevant to Australian students?

The Cambodian artist’s toy-like figurative sculpture is created from stuffed camouflage fabric stitched with bright orange. Through the surface treatment, students would be able to identify the reference as military, but with no flag or insignia the reference could be seen as a global one.

However, on closer inspection figures begin to emerge from each other and the camouflage material begins to separate into patterns revealing a large central figure towering over the groups on either side.

Cambodian students and those who know about the history of Cambodia could deduct from this work an allusion to the history and mythology of Cambodia, but Australian students would tend to see this as a global struggle related to war.

A politically active artist, Svay Sareth uses sculpture, performance art and installation art to communicate his personal history as well as the difficult past of Cambodia. Students may not connect this work to Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia, but most would have heard about this world heritage site.

In the case study I have related Sareth’s ‘Toy (Churning of the Sea of Milk)’ to Angkor Wat and the Hindu myth about the collaboration between gods and demons working together to ‘churn’ the sea for a precious elixir.

I attended ‘The Young Contemporaries 2013 Exhibition (BMS ’13 Bakat Muda Sezaman) at the National Visual Arts Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. Artists from the Sabah and Sarawak states were featured for the first time.

In his discussion paper ‘Four Currencies in Contemporary Practice’,[[14]](#footnote-14) Simon Soon comments about ‘… the rise of international biennales and triennales across the Asia-Pacific, which have afforded wider exposure to regional developments in contemporary art, coupled with the increasing prevalence of Internet access across the middle-class demographic, have added new dimensions to how these relationships play out.’

Unlike the 2013 Singapore Biennale, with the focus on one theme with twenty key words the curator arranged the work around five themes :[[15]](#footnote-15)

* 1. The socio-cultural impact of urbanisation, electronic and information technology, and free market capitalism
  2. the slippery semiotic of space, sign, code and language
  3. marginal identity, representation and post-colonial awareness
  4. the mystery of body, mind and soul yearning for peace
  5. nature and the built environment.

To illustrate the theme related to electronic and information technology, and free market capitalism, Karya Low Chee Peng’s *‘The Lost Childhood’* installation of semi-realistic babies presents a bleak view of a lost childhood.

Five white marble babies play traditional games, like marbles, on a sandy floor. Another seated isolated from the group at a traditional school wooden desk, focuses on an Apple laptop, illustrating the impact of electronic media and its effect on a child. Headless, a huge steel cage in the shape of a head is placed on the sixth baby’s shoulder, a black brain held within.

This installation of Peng’s babies is not as playful as Vu Hong Ninh’s ‘Little Soap Boy’ (2009) in the Singapore Biennale. Exhibited in museum’s courtyard and in all the washrooms, the audience was invited to use the ‘boy’ to wash their hands throughout the biennale.

The theme of ‘babies’ is one that seems to flow through Southeast Asia and China, and is often used as a device by artists to comment on issues or as propaganda by the residing political party. Posters of fat happy babies traditionally appear at the lunar celebration of Chinese New Year. They are pasted on doors, gates, windows of homes and shops to bring happiness and good luck.

The Contemporary Muslim Calligraphy exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum of Malaysia reflected the various practices, in which calligraphy can be presented. The artists’ paintings and drawings played with surfaces, evoking abstracted landscapes and mystical vistas, and exploring the movement of line, with some leaping off the support ground.

I found this exhibition to be visually exciting and thought provoking.

CONCLUSION

The Biennale gathered many emerging artists, artist-curators and curators from Southeast Asia: a risk-taking venture by all accounts and the grant gave me the amazing opportunity to be involved in this unique experience. As a teacher my connection, with the wider art world is often restricted by time and the lack of flexibility in the day-by-day running of a department.

The generous support of all the sponsors allowed me the time to research, reflect and develop case studies that will help to support students and teachers. It also allowed me the opportunity to be in the presence of the artwork that I initially viewed over a monitor. The physicality of the work in-situ transformed my initial response to this exhibition and reinforced my opinion that tangible contact with artworks enriches one’s experience and understanding of the work.

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1. Lorenzo Rudolf, Founder, Fair Director, ‘Celebrating the Thrilling Art Scene Of Southeast Asia’, *We Are Asia,* Art Stage Singapore, 16-19th January, 2014*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Singapore Art Museum. Artists Folio http://www.singaporebiennale.org/artist\_bio\_listing.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nora Taylor, *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology – 2012.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fumio Nanjo is the Director of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, and author of *A life with Art* (2012) and *Asian Contemporary Art Report: China, India, Middle East and Japan* (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Russell Storer is the Curatorial Manager, Asian and Pacific Art /Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jiekai’s single-channel video *Bukit Orang Salah*, 2013, is a film about a quarantine centre for immigrants and pilgrims returning from Mecca that questions Singapore’s history, heritage and identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Low Eng Teong, Deputy Director, Arts Education Branch, Ministry of Education, Singapore. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cheo Chai-Hiang is one of Singapore’s pioneering contemporary artists. His instruction pieces from the early 1970s are generally regarded as the first conceptual art works in the country, and his practice since then has consistently sought to question the forms and processes of art-making. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Louis Ho is an art historian, critic, curator and co-editor of an upcoming journal of Southeast Asian art history, *Remote.* He has contributed articles and reviews to various publications, including books, journals and magazines, and also teaches art history at a number of local institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Executive Director of Jakarta Biennale 2013,Artist, Curator, Director of *ruangrupa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tandescribes herself as a multi-disciplinary practitioner, experimenting with mundane materials, for instance, the plastic loops used for her installation in ‘In the Stillness’for the Setouchi Triennale. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The space was shared with Ken and Julia Yonetani’s-‘Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations’ (UV lights uranium glass ) and as well as Nguyen Trinh Thai’s (Vietnam), ‘Unsubtitled’ (video projections on wooden cut-outs). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Reactions –New Critical Strategies. Narratives in Malaysian Art.2013* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. BMS ’13 Bakat Muda Sezaman catalogue contents and page 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)