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General

Imagined Workshop

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Fukuoka has been a pioneer in exhibiting contemporary Asian art. The Second Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, held in the city's Asian Art Museum in March this year, encapsulates a mission to overcome Japan's traditional isolationism from Asia (and contested history when it did engage with Asia) in a radical and culturally inclusive art programme that is helping to redefine ideas about Asian art in the twenty-first century.

By Caroline Turner

Fukuoka, situated on the island of Kyushu and one of the closest Japanese port cities to China and Korea, was historically the target of Kublai Khan's unsuccessful invasion fleets in the thirteenth century. A cosmopolitan, prosperous city today, Fukuoka is still a major entry point from the mainland to Japan. It is the only city in Japan and one of the few in the world with a museum devoted solely to contemporary Asian art.

The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum that officially opened in 1999 is a symbol of the city's historical and continuing links with Asia. The museum is situated on the seventh and eighth floors of the spectacular Hakata Riverain complex of upmarket restaurants and designer label shops. It was built to house the largest collection of contemporary Asian art in the world, developed over twenty-two years by its parent, the Fukuoka Museum, which began a series of contemporary Asian art survey shows in 1979/80. These were renamed the Fukuoka Triennale in 1999. The project was so successful that the new museum was constructed to run the contemporary art shows and to house this collection. The Fukuoka Asian art shows, of which the Triennale is a continuation, were the first such exhibitions in the world and are still exceptional in terms of the number of Asian countries included. This concentration on Asian art was itself unusual in Japan, especially in 1979, as until recent times many Japanese did not consider their country to be part of Asia.

Japanese modern art was dominated by Tokyo and, from the 1950s, made a deliberate link with internationalism and with European and American art, which reinforced Japan's status as a first-world power. While many Japanese museums now display contemporary Asian art, emphasis still lies with international art, especially from Europe and North America. This is true even of the important new contemporary Asian art exhibitions that have emerged in the last decade, such as the Gwangju Biennale in Korea and now the Shanghai Biennale in China and the Yokohama Triennale in Japan, all of them presenting Asian art within an international context. The Fukuoka Museum and its Asian Art Museum, by contrast, have always looked to the Asian region to open up the debate on what contemporary Asian art is within a local context. Fukuoka's inclusion of the work of unknown artists from poorer countries suggests affinities with the outstanding Havana Biennale, which has shown third-world art, including artwork from Asia. The Japan Foundation, which is a sponsor of the Triennale, is now undertaking many exchange programmes with Asia, and the Singapore Art Museum is playing an important role in exhibitions documenting contemporary Asian art from an ASEAN platform. These exhibitions, while emphasizing a process of cross-cultural dialogue, have also sought to provide an alternative to the international Biennale model and to



Kham Tanh
Saliangkham,
Miss Lao Contest,
acrylic on canvas,
2001

the dominance of Western perspectives in international art.

From the late seventies onwards, Fukuoka has also extended invitations to artists and curators from all over Asia who have come to Fukuoka through the Art Exchange programme to engage with local citizenry, especially young people and school children. For over twenty years, this programme has provided many opportunities for artists from Asia and has positively affected the development of art practice in poorer countries where artists have few opportunities to exhibit internationally. Fukuoka has also emphasized research into modern Asian art and initiated several groundbreaking research projects, especially on Southeast Asian art. The Fukuoka experiment was thus unique and radical. The radical nature of the project has not received adequate recognition in Japan where the exhibition is sometimes criticized as being less about art than about artists and communities, and at times including work that could be described as folk art. Yet this inclusive approach has been a strength, as has the intensive research within each country to seek out new artists. While the Fukuoka shows have not included minorities within Japan, such as the Ainu indigenous people of Hokkaido or the many Koreans living in Japan, they have introduced the contentious issue of multiculturalism and opened up a new dialogue with Asian neighbours. The Fukuoka exhibitions, for all these reasons, can be viewed as an alternative to the mainstream where often the same artists are included again and again in international exhibitions.

The First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 1999 inaugurated the new Museum and concentrated on high-tech art. This second exhibition of 2002 occurred in times of greater economic stringency and focused instead on what the curators called 'traditional Asian methods' that is the making of objects by hand, indigenous and natural materials, communal and collaborative works and craftwork. Twenty-one coun-

tries were represented by thirty-seven artists/groups. Some were senior artists such as Panya Vijnthanasarn from Thailand, a master of Buddhist temple mural paintings, but many were very young artists who had never exhibited outside their home countries. Some artists were from countries whose artists are almost never seen in international exhibitions, such as Myanmar, Laos, Nepal, Cambodia, and Mongolia.

In the exhibition catalogue, chief curator of the Museum, Masahiro Ushiroshoji, noted what he saw as a shift in Asian art in the late 1990s away from art reflecting problems in society to art about communication and collaboration. Hence the 2002 Triennale's theme 'Kataru Musubu Te', translated as 'narrating hands, connecting hands' or 'Imagined Workshop'. Ushiroshoji wrote that '[i]n an age flooded with digital images, when terrorist acts and wars are broadcast live via satellite around the world, we need to take another hard look at the appeal and potential possessed by art'. He observed that the world is still permeated with hatred, violence, and misunderstanding, and that 'we must work to heal those rifts through an ongoing effort to understand each other's culture, worldview, and values (even though it is no longer possible to naively and simplistically believe that art is able to do so)'. It is not clear whether Ushiroshoji was right, however, when he wrote that the artists were less concerned with social issues. Given that the exhibition opened a few months after 11 September, it is hardly surprising that these events were reflected in the art and to an extent subverted the less political theme of collaboration.

There were artists whose work in the exhibition superbly reflected collaboration and craftsmanship. Nindityo Adipurnomo's refined installation featured traditional Javanese hairpieces handcrafted in collaboration with craftsmen in Java; Alak Roy from Bangladesh exhibited impressive abstract ceramic sculptures; John Frank Sabado used

indigenous tribal materials and symbols from the Cordillera in his paintings, a fascinating reflection on ancient forms of shamanism and spirituality in the Philippines; Pinaree Sanpitak's silk woven textiles were made by ethnic groups in Thailand with threads pulled by the artist to create forms like breasts or stupas.

Political issues, however, were very obvious in the art. Japanese Yanagi Yukinori used banknotes representing an imaginary united Asian currency that were folded into origami cranes by his audience, who had their own faces photographed and transferred by computer to the banknotes. The idea of 'united Asia' connects with his previous works on the Second World War (a theme that is unusual in Japanese art) by evoking the 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere'. This also references the way money transforms relationships between nations, and the domination of rich countries over poor countries. Cranes evoke memories of the folded paper cranes that form a symbol for Hiroshima and the effects of the American nuclear attack. Indian artist Satish Sharma's work was, in part, a postmodern take on 11 September, inviting viewers to have themselves photographed dressed in Indian costumes such as turbans, while posing against images of the Taj Mahal or the face of Osama bin Laden. Japanese Ushijima Hitoshi's *Noetic Research Project*, a tank-cum-jungle gym toy, grew out of his sculptures replicating playground equipment, but was inspired by the war in Afghanistan.

Sutee Kunavichayanont's *History Class*, invited visitors to do rubbings from carvings in the lids of old-fashioned wooden desks. These carvings depicted episodes from Thai history such as the 1976 police shooting of students at Thammasat University and the students' pleas to stop further bloodshed. Another compelling work against violence was Vietnamese Tran Luong's installation *Generationnext*, which depicted the contrast between the simple toys

he himself made as a child and the manufactured 'cute' technological robotic and violent mutants, mostly imported from the United States, which serve as toys for his four-year-old son. His video *Flowing* refers to the artist's Buddhist beliefs depicting images of change in Vietnam over forty years, and encompassing personal childhood memories in which the family left Hanoi to avoid American bombing. With the new economic policies, the artist noted, came different challenges – such as increasing pollution and commercialization.

Aisha Khalid from Pakistan questioned aspects of modernization at the Triennale, with ancient miniatures, classical paintings from Persia and the Mughal courts, together with folk art patterns, inspiring her exquisite small works. Dominant in her imagery is a veiled woman. As Salima Hashmi notes in the catalogue, 'the recent events in the region, and her travels to the West, have had a profound effect on Aisha Khalid's work. She chafes against the artificiality of "modernization", the distancing from nature, and its rampant commercialization [as well as] the inability of the dominant culture to see beyond its own perspective'.

A talented young artist and teacher from Vientiane, Laos, Kham Tanh Saliangkham (b. 1973) participated in the Fukuoka residential programme at Kyushu University for three months in 2001. It is clear how important this opportunity – the realization of a long-held dream – was to his new understanding of contemporary art. The artist's paintings document customs from his home country, such as a charming wedding scene with villagers. His work also included social commentary as in *Miss Lao Contest* (2001), a painting in which the contestants in traditional costume are depicted against sponsors' logos, such as Shell, Honda, and Suzuki. If the Fukuoka Triennale has a subtext that Japan is part of Asia, or at least must engage with other Asian countries in a spirit of harmony and cooperation, another subtext of the exhibition is undoubtedly the belief that contemporary Asian art discourse should be about building new frameworks for art in the region. This is not about building a 'wall' around the region of Asia, as Paris-based Chinese art critic Hou Hanru observed in arguing against such a concept, or a rejection of international art. Rather, it is a rejection of the domination by Western art ideas (and Western curators) of the international art world. Masahiro Ushiroshoji urges a different model for art today. He wrote in 1999 in the document of the Art Exchange Programme that 'the significance of an Asian art museum lies in the attitude of re-questioning the European centralized value system that dominates the space and system for art'. This is also the potent message of the Fukuoka Triennale. ◀

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