



# SLOG

VISUAL ART

## Inside Seattle Art Fair: 'Thinking Currents' Will Feature More Than 25 Artists from Across the Pacific Rim

by [Jen Graves](#) • Jul 28, 2015 at 12:22 pm

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**VIETNAMESE FISHERMEN ON CYCLOS UNDERWATER** This is a still from the 13-minute 2001 video by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, an artist based in Ho Chi Minh City. Two of the artist's works will be part of Seattle Art Fair in the exhibition *Thinking Currents*, organized by Leeza Ahmady. COURTESY OF MIZUMA ART GALLERY

Seattle Art Fair will be a **bright, white warren of booths**, but **7,500 square feet** of it—and that's no small area—will be **another world entirely**: a video exhibition called *Thinking Currents*, presenting works of art by artists across the Pacific Rim.

Leeza Ahmady, the New York-based, Afghan-born independent curator who organized *Thinking Currents*, talked with me by phone about her philosophy, history, and the process of pulling together this big exhibition of more than **25 works by more than 25 artists in just four rapid months**.

"Questioning one's own intellectual and cultural programming is difficult; trying to achieve this on a collective scale is a colossal task," Ahmady told Art21 in an **interview in two parts** in 2012.

I was curious to hear more from her. What follows is an edited version of our conversation, which took place on two separate days in the last two weeks.



**GOING INSIDE SINGAPORE'S NEWLY UNVEILED JURONG ROCK CAVERNS** The artist **Charles Lim** created *Sea State 6: Phase 1* for the Singapore Pavilion of this year's Venice Biennale, and now it will be part of *Thinking Currents* at Seattle Art Fair. The piece goes inside a massive hydrocarbon storage facility built by a state-owned corporation, which "will soon be filled with oil and never seen like this again."

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### **How did you get involved with Seattle Art Fair?**

One of the galleries in the fair, **Ryan Lee**, who is a colleague in New York, I work very closely with one of the artists he is now representing, **Mariam Ghani** from Afghanistan. When there was talk about how to maybe incorporate this side of the world, which is very close to the US—the Pacific side of Asia—I was recommended by Ryan, and then I had several conversations with the Fair, and I was surprised and impressed that they were inviting me to do something very different.

Generally there's the commercial aspect of a fair, so normally I'm never invited to do something other than a lecture or a talk. If it's an exhibition, it's more commercial-oriented in terms of being something that's accessible for collectors, but they invited me to think about something that would be really not that at all. When I mentioned video and sound, they said that's exactly what they had in mind.

It's a very prominent medium that most artists around the world have been really experimenting with and working with for decades, and there was momentum in the 2000s where you saw video everywhere, but suddenly it's kind of disappeared and painting has showed up everywhere again. Video is seen more in institutional or biennial settings rather than in commercial settings. So this has been wonderful.

### **How many artists are in *Thinking Currents*?**

There are 25 artists, but more than 25 because two of them are a collective—5 artists in one collective and 2 artists in another. There are **25 or 30 works** that we've selected. Most of the works are heavily researched and include current issues from the environment to history, politics, and the economy. They're multilayered and very specific, in terms of local concerns or issues being explored, yet there's always some connection to the larger global arena, larger regional connectivity.

### **How is a fair exhibition different for you?**

In an art fair, so many different kinds of people will go through the space. Some will know there's this exhibition of video and film, and some might not even know there's this medium called video—that it's not just TV art. I like that. There's space for creating awareness for the public that might not always have access to this other world. Like we might not have access to the medical industry, for instance, it has its own language, its own clichés, and its own understandings. I'm interested in traversing all these different audiences.

### **Will the pieces in *Thinking Currents* be for sale?**

Some of them are not for sale because they're not available anymore, so they were just selected for their significance within the art realm. Some are available because they haven't been sold. This is not an exhibition for sale, there's no one standing around to, like, make sales on behalf of the artists or the galleries who supported this. But in a very discreet way, some of the works are available for collection, particularly hopefully institutional collection or more public collections, because that's honestly what I do this for. Again, we are trying to make all these works... become available in other ways in the future to the public. I feel like that's also part of curatorial work. Any inquiries, we will be forwarding directly to the artist because this is a nonprofit.

### **You mean Asian Contemporary Art Week is a nonprofit, right?**

Yes. I've been doing **Asian Contemporary Art Week** for 10 years here in New York. It was established to break this notion of what Asia is, from a very East-Asia-centric vision of Japan, China, and Korea, to really encompass the entire continent and its population, production, and the artistic activity that's been taking place for decades and decades.

This exhibition is part of the larger context of the dissemination of knowledge about what's taking part in various parts of Asia, and how American museums, particularly a lot of US university museums, so powerfully are beginning to really engage with all the other parts of the world. This exhibition is a way for us to connect to the West Coast. [ACAW in New York this year is October 28-November 8.]



**'DEATH SEMINAR B'** In this work, the Chiang Mai-based artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook conducts a Q&A session with bodies from the morgue. The 18-minute video from 2005 will be part of *Thinking Currents* at Seattle Art Fair. COURTESY OF TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART

### **How long have you been working on *Thinking Currents*?**

I've been in conversations with the fair since the end of January. I would say this is the shortest amount of time I've had in recent years to organize this scale of an exhibition. It's been quite intense.

### **On your checklist, artists are listed according to the cities where they live rather than countries. Why is that?**

These days, we're living simultaneously in multiple cities. Even though we're working with these ideas of the Pacific Rim and Asia, you can really see that the artists are moving, they're living in so many different places and their works are taking them in so many different directions.

There's an artist from Belgium, **Alexis Destoop**. He just happens to be focused on Australia and Hong Kong, on looking at the landscapes and how imperialistic adventures have completely changed the land in certain places in the world.

**Charles Lim**, in Singapore, is exploring Singapore and the notion that the island is never really available to its people, the people living in it, they're disconnected from it.

Some of these explorations are very psychological. **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook**, an artist from Chiang Mai, she is sitting and having a conversation with five bodies that she basically borrowed from a mortuary. They're dead, but she's having this conversation with them about life and death and what do they think, and this whole Buddhist principle that there's value in having closeness between the living and the dead, and that there's something beyond, that we're always running away from death but we don't know it.

### **Tell me about your background.**

I grew up in Kabul in the '70s, and I left when I was really young—10—then made it to the US by the time I was 13, so I've been a New Yorker for a long time. Eventually, I did my Master's in art history, particularly focusing on Central Asia because of the 'Stans—Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan—these countries that were very much isolated from the rest of Asia because of their connection to the Soviet Union. A lot of my initial research was about connecting that missing part into the realm of Asia, but then essentially at some point I realized that the only way to have anything that specific stand out, you have to look at the whole.

So I've been moving around there from there to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and this project is also a dream for me because most people think of Asia when the Pacific Rim is mentioned, but there's also the United States, Canada, and half of South America as well here. It's really interesting to look at how all these realms of connectivity create both fractures in our perceptions of places and people but also can mean ways to see them in a big picture, more whole, and hopefully that changes policy.

Every day there's some news about Afghanistan or Iraq, but we are so limited to one or two images in people's minds, of war or terrorism, of drama. There's so much more to these places and their histories. In some ways we're all connected to our biography, we have to be inspired to do the things we're doing. So for me, it's like, if you lift up and look under one mattress, there's a lot of stuff, and then there's lots of other mattresses to look under.

### **Are there particular types of works you tend to be drawn to as a curator?**

Artists these days are environmentalists and scientists and philosophers, they're really thinking from all different places, of integrating so-called aesthetics with other disciplines. This realm of contemporaneity, of contemporary art practice, unfortunately still keeps getting missed in museums and galleries in the US because everything still has to get stamped before it is presented.

So Asian Contemporary Art Week has also been a way to sift out and bring out the immediate activities of people who are doing things right now at this moment, but who, in 10 years, who knows what they'll be doing? Many of them don't have the resources to stay connected and manage to continue producing, but what they are doing is important.

And if they were to get picked up by institutions in a world-class manner, most of them by the time they're 30 might not have to turn to commercial jobs in radio and TV stations but would continue their art practice. So we've got to do this. It's like the lifeline.

### **What do you mean when you talk about the "stamp" that museums are waiting for?**

Many institutions will wait and look at an artist for a long while. They're not in the place of taking positions. A lot of museums are becoming blockbusters, so they want to present something that already rings bells in everybody's ears and has gone through that validation process.

There are not that many institutions that will take the risk of presenting somebody unknown; there are very few of those left. So how that happens is in programs like ours, and biennials and other programming. We all have to take responsibility and watch out.

### **You talked about broadening the notion of what constitutes the Pacific Rim. I notice there aren't any artists from the Pacific Northwest in the show. Why is that? Did you consider including some?**

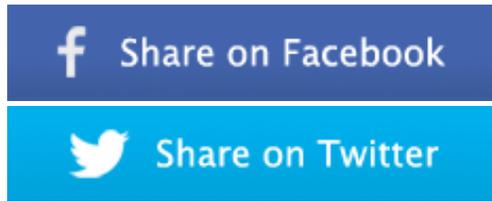
Yeah, I did. Of course. Actually, **Patrick Todd**, one of the sound artists, now lives in New York but he was born in Hawaii, and a lot of his inspiration for his sound work and painting comes from his childhood relationship to the water.

I did actually invite a number of artists from the West Coast to participate, but I think it really was about time—the factor of just having literally less than four months to organize. I generally need about a year to a year and a half for any large-scale exhibition like this. I have to make relationships, to establish trust and faith. This is an art fair, and an art fair is an incredible setting in one way in that it gives incredible exposure, but there also are many artists who thought about the reality of people's attention spans and their ability to engage with the kind of content that they are bringing.

So I think all of this brought in different realities for me, not having necessary connections with too many artists that are based on the West Coast at this time and not having enough time to cultivate those relationships.

I think I was invited mostly because of my connection to Asia, this notion of Asia. So I really decided to focus on what I know, who I know, and whose work I'll be able to contextualize... I had to say, let me work with what I know because what I know is unknown on this end of the world. And while there should be so much more connection between Asia and the Northwest, there isn't, so let this iteration be about making this connection, and hopefully I'll have more opportunities.

In the end, I couldn't include anyone from South America, either. At some point, I had to focus on this part—East Asia and Southeast Asia—and then we can slowly bring in the conversations. I hope that if Seattle Art Fair is successful, either they continue the conversation with another curator or me again, and it goes out even broader.



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