

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Southeast Asia Stakes Its Claim in the Art World

By JASON FARAGO SEPT. 27, 2017

Until recently — the 1990s, let’s say — an American critic keeping tabs on new art would concentrate on New York’s museums and galleries; cast an occasional, often dismissive eye on Western Europe; and perhaps try to visit Los Angeles now and again. No longer. By the ’90s the idea of a single avant-garde was dead and buried, and in its place arose a pluralist art ecosystem that spans the planet. It makes larger intellectual demands than ever, and requires us to accept that we’ll never see everything or understand it completely. In the new global art world, even we New Yorkers are provincials.

Perhaps nowhere benefited as much from this shift to a pluralist art world as Asia, where the 1990s saw an explosion of biennials and triennials. The Gwangju Biennale, Asia’s most important such exhibition, began in 1995 in South Korea, and was soon followed by large-scale shows in Shanghai, Taipei, Fukuoka, Yokohama, Singapore, Jakarta, and a half dozen other Asian megacities — all of which introduced Asian audiences to foreign art and pushed their own region’s figures to the international forefront. In these exhibitions, as well as in the new museums and art schools that arose around them, traditional styles of painting, drawing, pottery or calligraphy fell by the wayside, and installation, video and performance served as lingua franca.

The art in “After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History,” at the Asia Society on Park Avenue, is the fruit of this global shift. The work here

comes from Indonesia, Myanmar (or Burma) and Vietnam, though with just seven artists and one collective, it's small enough to avoid the curse of the "regional show" and doesn't force any unity on a diverse lineup. Not every work here is a masterpiece, but all of them plumb the roiling past and fractured present of places that, with a combined population of nearly 400 million, we have no excuse to be clueless about.

The most internationally prominent artist here is Dinh Q. Le, who immigrated to the United States as a child and returned to Vietnam in 1993. His enlightening project "Light and Belief" (2012) unites 70 ink drawings and watercolors, which the artist collected from elder figures at work during the Vietnam War, with a long, lightly animated video in which Mr. Le interviews these older artists about the social role of art before the biennial age.

"Uncle Ho highly regarded the arts," says one of these older painters, referring to the party leader Ho Chi Minh. "The artist must also be a warrior," another recalls. Mr. Le's video forces a reconsideration of the proficient but academic works on paper he has collected: a woman in a conical straw hat, say, or a soldier disguised amid dappled trees. "Light and Belief" also, rather brilliantly, reintroduces ignored chapters of Vietnamese art — which looks regressive to us now, but was resolutely "modern" in the art schools established by the French colonial regime — to global institutions that have little understanding of them.

The war locally termed the "Resistance War Against America" also informs the regretful art of the Vietnamese collective known as the Propeller Group. In a two-channel video, "The Guerrillas of Cu Chi" (2012), we see a 1963 propaganda film set at the Cu Chi tunnels, the underground passageways outside Ho Chi Minh City used by the Vietcong. (The soldiers there, an enthusiastic narrator declaims, "were never afraid of hardships and always found ways to kill Americans.") Across the gallery is a second, slow-motion video, shot at the tunnels today; the grounds above have been converted into a shooting range for tourists, and gleeful Americans spend \$1 to fire AK-47s while their friends capture the fun on their phones.

"The Dream," another work by the Propeller Group, consists of a half-complete Honda Dream motorcycle, of the kind used to skip through Hanoi's wild traffic. But its wheels, engine, seat, and even pedals are missing; the body stands denuded, an uncanny object more sculpture than vehicle. The parts were

snatched, we see in an accompanying video, by thieves in just a single night. As in China, nominally communist Vietnam has embraced brakes-off turbocapitalism, and the old dream of society has been picked clean.

The Burmese artists here have an even more direct engagement with local political circumstances. Htein Lin, a dissident from Yangon, turned to art not while visiting some international exhibition — Myanmar is among the poorest countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and was essentially closed to foreign influence until the 2010s — but rather during a six-year spell in prison. His ghostly installation, “A Show of Hands,” features hundreds of white plaster casts of raised right hands, each one an index of a political prisoner like himself. What makes the work more than an easy ode to people power is the associated video, in which we watch Mr. Htein Lin cast the hands of monks, journalists, poets, and youth activists, each of whom recounts their past run-ins with the military dictatorship with surprising lightness.

F.X. Harsono, perhaps the most prominent artist in contemporary Indonesia, is represented here by both earlier sculptural installations that took direct aim at the Suharto regime, as well as a more recent video. “The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers,” from 1994, consists of more than a hundred carefully arrayed wooden masks, but they’ve been chopped in half; their mouths are cut off and piled in the center. From the title on, it’s about as direct a protest against free speech as you can make without just hoisting a placard.

“Writing in the Rain,” a performance filmed in 2011, shows Mr. Harsono writing his name in Chinese characters on a pane of glass, only for his calligraphy to be wiped away by streams of water; as the downpour continues he keeps it up, and the ink spills to the floor. (The artist is ethnically Chinese, a minority in Indonesia.) To a western critic like me, the gesture reads as an obvious reboot of Marcel Broodthaers’s noted 1969 film “La Pluie,” in which he hopelessly attempts to write poetry in a rainstorm, but where that Belgian provocateur proposed an art unfixed from clear meaning, Mr. Harsono’s political gesture could not be clearer, or more locally focused.

It isn’t wrong to criticize art as blunt as this, in which symbols function not as elements in a complex, imaginative system, but in strict one-to-one correspondence with political or social ills. Yet what works in New York may not work in Jakarta, and while we now have to evaluate art at a global scale, we also

have to study the particular circumstances in which “global” contemporary art took root in local cases. In these three countries, an outward-facing practice of “contemporary art” marched in step with local reform movements, engaged with free speech, economic fairness and multiparty democracy. If some artists in this show seem to be speaking a bit too literally, that may be because influencing local audiences was a more urgent calling than winning the approbation of far-off western institutions.

And part of reckoning with a global art world is expanding one’s tolerance for things we don’t understand. It means more looking, more reading, and more sympathy too — sympathy for art that may not resemble what we most like, and of which our mastery can only be fragmentary. If, as the Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei has asserted, contemporary art is a kind of freedom, then our need to appreciate this art has only increased now that Indonesia and Myanmar, as well as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are taking an antidemocratic turn. That may be a more important vocation than hunting in vain for a single avant-garde in a world as large as ours.

After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History
Through Jan. 21 at Asia Society; asiasociety.org

A version of this review appears in print on September 29, 2017, on Page C13 of the New York edition with the headline: Stepping Out From History.

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