

Art in Southeast Asia : *Glimpses into the future*

The artists of Southeast Asia are creating remarkable works of art as they face the new social and cultural realities of the nineties and search for their own modes of expression. These forms of expression are unique in Southeast Asia and differ significantly from American, European, or Japanese contemporary art. In these countries, the position of the artists and art itself seems to be different from that in the West or Japan. Many of the artists produce work rooted in the life of the community, and their artistic investigation often have what might be called a moralistic tendency. Naturally, this is reflected in the formal aspects of their work.

A number of exhibitions introducing the art of Asia have been held in Japan in recent years. Art in Southeast Asia is designed to provide a comprehensive presentation of the contemporary art of this area, including painting and installations with strongly local characteristics rather than the more sophisticated forms of expression seen in the contemporary art of the West and Japan.

This exhibition focuses on the fundamental role of art and artists demonstrated by the current art of five Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The exhibition will include 80 works, some of them made especially for this exhibition, by 17 individuals or groups representing these countries, grouped under three headings.

Crossroads of Culture

Southeast Asia is the site of great cultural diversity. Traditional indigenous cultures exist side by side with remnants of Western colonial cultures and cultural influences from India and China brought in by immigrants. More recently deep inroads have been made by the urban consumer culture of the United States as well as a subculture of Japanese cartoons and popular music, accelerating the process of diversification. Out of the crisscrossing of these varied cultural paths a new hybrid culture is taking form.

Artists are seeking their own cultural identity in this environment, referring to the cultures of the specific ethnic groups to which they belong or actively incorporating the new hybrid culture as they create works of art suited to the present age. The artists introduced here are doing experimental work with a contemporary viewpoint, making use of a broad range of cultural motifs including the

mythical heritage of their peoples, religious feelings, implements used in everyday life, and kitsch and folk culture. Not content to be involved in a simple-minded traditionalism implying a return to, or reinterpretation of, traditional artistic techniques, they are creating new forms of art based on the

cultural conditions found in the places where they live.

Artists: Brenda Fajardo (the Philippines), Chandrasekaran (Singapore), Liew Kung Yu



The Horn Bill and the Missionary (1996) by Agus Suwage (Indonesia)

(Malaysia), Montien Boonma (Thailand), Navin Production Co. Ltd. (Thailand).

The Shifting Region of the 'I'

Individual identity in Southeast Asia is threatened by rapid modernisation and the huge influx of foreign culture. Older social orders and value systems are breaking down, and individuals previously supported by a stable community and family network find themselves cast into a state of uncertainty and confusion. Artists have embarked



Uncle Pan, from the project 'Pha Khao Mar on Tour' (1997) by the Navin Production Co., Ltd. (Thailand)

on a search for personal identity, attempting to bring some stability to a self which is cracked, warped and split.

Individual identity is inevitably involved with ethnic identity. For an artist of Chinese extraction, a minority in the multi-ethnic nation of Malaysia, there is a close link between the origin and history of his family and his present self.

Changes in feudal systems of values have had led to changes in the position of women in society. For women artists, exploring the issue of identity necessarily entails an inquiry into the meaning of being a woman. Southeast Asian women are examining this issue seriously but without becoming strident.

Artists: Agus Suwage (Indonesia), Chatchai Puipia (Thailand), Eng Hwee Chu (Malaysia), Imelda Cajipe Endaya (the Philippines), Pinaree Sanpitak (Thailand), Wong Hoy Cheong (Malaysia)

Social Statement

The rush to modernise in Southeast Asia has brought phenomenal economic growth, but with an inevitable shadow side. A building boom has left the larger cities bristling with high-rise architecture but struggling with growing problems, including traffic congestion, air-pollution, and rampant slums. Industrial development and tourism have resulted in degradation and pollution of the natural environment and damaged life in small farming and fishing villages. There are also problems in implementing democracy, protecting human rights, and preventing gender discrimination, and raising the social position of women.

These problems are certainly not exclusive to Southeast Asia. They are faced in every part of the world today. But that does not change the fact that they are part of the reality from which Southeast Asian artists cannot escape. These artists react by observing the reality around them attentively, making assertive statements, and actively involving themselves in the life of society. Because of this stance, their work contains important messages for the people who view it.

Artists: Nunelucio Alvarado (the Philippines), Arahmaiani (Indonesia), Dadang Christanto (Indonesia), Moelyono (Indonesia), Sanggawa (the Philippines), Semsar Siahaan (Indonesia). ■

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