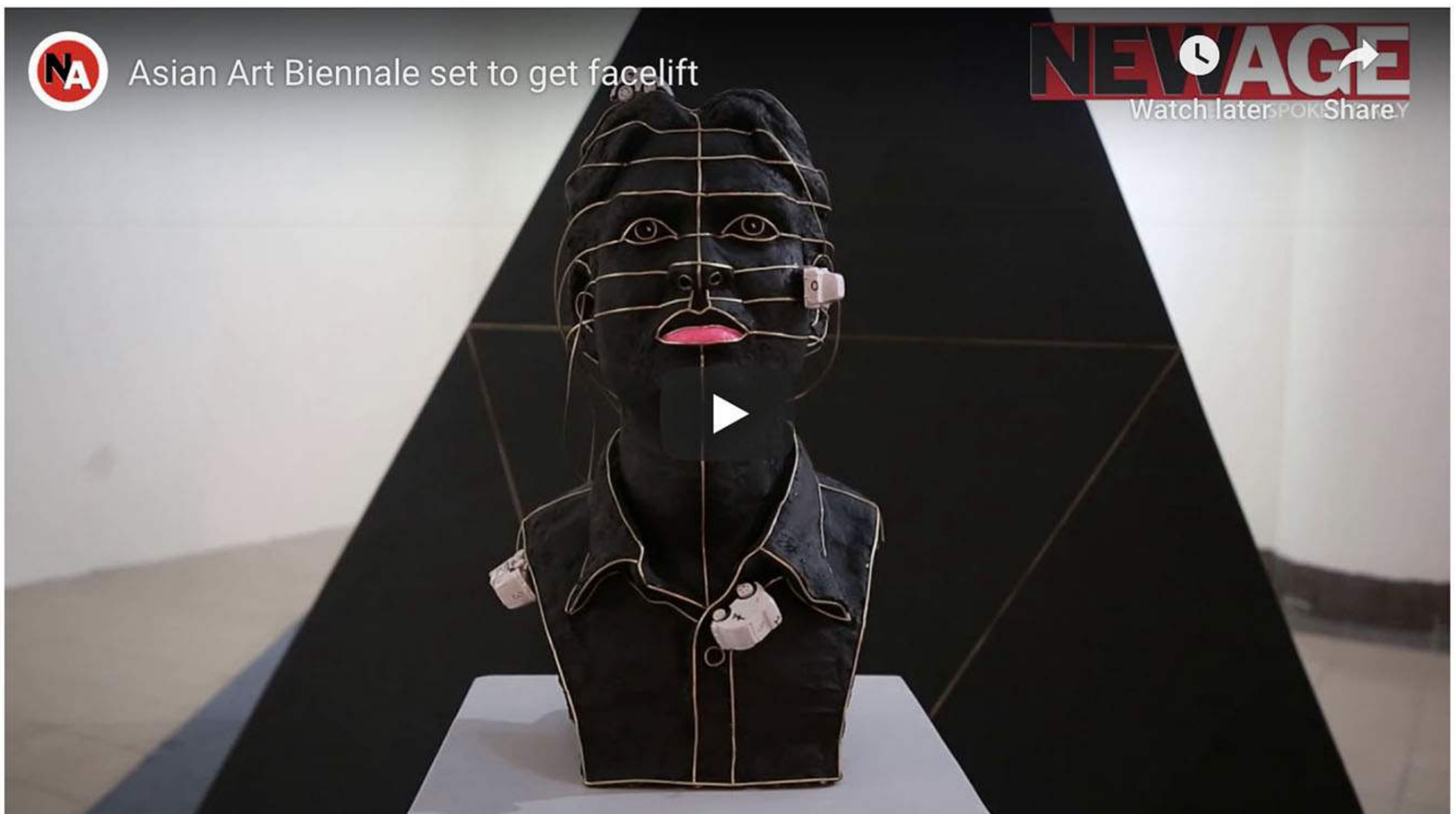


Asian Art Biennale set to get facelift

Ershad Kamol | Published: 21:41, Aug 30,2018 | Updated: 20:02, Sep 03,2018



Two visitors look at an artwork at on display at the National Art Gallery.— Abdullah Apu



Asian Art Biennale, the oldest in the region and hosting artists from across the globe, now makes it a point to restore its image of a grand platform, much of which has been lost to political turmoil and other challenges in the past three decades.

Set up in January 1981 with the participation of just 14 Asian countries, the biennale in the course of time grew into a unique umbrella of artists from across the world, earning for it an international name.

But its journey was not smooth but fraught with various challenges — it faced setbacks due to political upheavals, financial constraints and dependence on bureaucracy instead of professional curators. Yet the successive governments have been organising the event as it projected a positive image of the country to the world.

At the initial stage in the 1980s, the biennale got huge supports from other Asian countries as it was the only art show of its kind promoting the Asian art in the global art market.

Over the years, the biennale has grown in size, taking in its fold countries from all across the world but it failed to keep pace and lagged behind in its competition with other art biennales such as South Korea's Gwangju Biennale and UAE's Sharjah Biennale which came into being years after the inception of Asian Art Biennale.

Now, with a promise of making up for what has been lost, the 18th edition of Asian Art Biennale, is set for inauguration by president Abdul Hamid at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy on Saturday. It will feature 583 artworks by 465 artists from 68 countries from all continents.

A visitor watches an artwork displayed at Asian Art Biennale at the National Art Gallery in Dhaka
.-- Sony Ramany

Of them 414 artworks by 223 foreign and 107 local artists will compete for three grand prizes and six honourable mention awards while others will display works as guest artists. Each of the grand prize winners will receive Tk 500,000, a crest and a certificate while each of the honourable mention awards winners will get Tk 300,000, a crest and a certificate.

The highest number of applicants is from the host nation Bangladesh. Artists from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China, Iran, Turkey, Palestine, Germany, the UK, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, the USA, Argentina and others are participating at the biennale with their latest works in diverse mediums.

Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, established in 1974, initiated to host the Asian Art Biennale in January 1981 with a view to promoting artists and art works of the region to the global art market and creating interactions with the artists and art historians and critics of different Asian countries.

There was, of course, another reason behind organising the art biennale spending tax payers' money: magnify the image of the country against the backdrop of the image crisis of the newly independent country Bangladesh, which used to get coverage in the international media coverage as a land of disaster in the first decade after the country's independence through a liberation war in 1971.

The then director of the academy Syed Jahangir, who initiated to organise the biennale with support from friends holding big positions in different ministries, told New Age that he had got tremendous support from Japan Foundation, and several other renowned East Asian artists like Mochtar Apin from Indonesia and Redza Piyadasa from Malaysia.

'While touring Japan on the occasion of at a pre-exhibition meeting organised by the Fukuoka Art Museum in 1980, I met several renowned artists of the region. I invited them to a party and urged them to help us organise the biennale.

'Instantly, they responded positively and offered all possible supports to organise a landmark show of the Asian art,' Syed Jahangir told New Age.

'After returning to Dhaka, we discussed with the government officials and they also took it very seriously as an attempt to uplift the image of the newly independent country to the world. It is to be mentioned that not many art exhibitions used to be organised in those days in Dhaka and there were not much facilities for organising such events either.

'However, we decided to invite the Asian countries to participate in the biennale through diplomatic channel,' he added.

The initiative of holding the biennale in 1981 got very positive responses from the countries, which have rich heritage of fine arts and have many international standard artists.

Even the rival countries like India and Pakistan, North and South Korea, Japan and China along with other Asian countries like Kuwait, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and host nation Bangladesh joined together to popularise the fine arts and artists of this region, dominated by some rich western countries.

'Along with the best works of the local artists, the show displayed works of famous foreign artists like Maqbool Fida Husain and Somnath Hore from India, Mochtar Apin and Affandi from Indonesia, Redza Piyadasa from Malaysia and others who participated in the first edition,' recalled Jahangir, adding that all of the participants expressed satisfaction and also promised to continue their supports for the noble initiative.

In the successive two editions, held in 1983 and 1985, the number of participating artists and countries increased and its coverage extended to the Middle-east and Central Asia through the participation of artistically rich countries like Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the then USSR.

Local master painters like Safiuddin Ahmed and Aminul Islam and foreign master painters Mochtar Apin and Affandi from Indonesia and Redza Piyadasa from Malaysia, Indian master abstractions Ram Kumar, Japanese legend Shinichi Segi, famous Filipino artists Raymond Albano, Pacita Abad and Virginia Bonodan-Dandan from Philippines, renowned Pakistani sculptor Shahid Sajjad participated in the first few editions of the biennale and many of them even donated artworks to enrich collection of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

'Japan Foundation has always been supportive and extended best possible help. They even sent professional curators to organise the biennale with professional gestures,' Syed Jahangir said.

The art biennale became the most attractive art shows in the region in the first decade. Evaluating its impact on the local art arena, eminent artist Murtaja Baseer said, 'The Asian Art Biennale played a significant role in the development process of the artists in the 1980s as it offered the local artists to look into works of the contemporary modernists from Asian countries.

'Only in the second edition of the biennale in 1983, the local artists and art lovers got the chance to watch Japanese installation works. In fact, the art practice in the country before the Asian Art Biennale and after it differs a lot,' Baseer said.

But, in the second edition the biennale faced a major challenge for fund crisis from the government.

The problem, however, was overcome when United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation offered grants for organising the third edition in 1983.

For making the biennale as a more effective platform for the Asian artist, local and foreign artists and art critics came up with specific suggestions in the seminar organised as ancillary event of the fourth edition of the biennale held in 1989.

Artists from Japan, Pakistan, the then USSR and Bangladesh collectively proposed to establish an Asian Artists Association, launch a dedicated Asian art gallery, form a welfare fund for the artists, publish books or periodicals on arts of Asia, collect fund collectively for promoting Asian artists in Europe, form a separate curatorial team to make the biennale a well-focused and well-organised event of art. They gave such observations as Shilpakala would then organise the biennale at such venues as the academy's small gallery, Osmani Memorial Auditorium and Bangladesh National Museum. After establishment of the National Art Gallery, the biennale's venue problem was solved to some extent and from 2012 the biennale has been organised at the gallery.

But, other recommendations did not translate into reality in the past two decades and Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy still depends on the diplomatic channels to get artists and artworks for free at the biennale, instead of appointing professional curators to collect funds and art works fixing some themes as found in other biennales in the world.

The foreign delegates, artists and art commissioners like German curator and contemporary art teacher Dorothee Brill, chief executive of the UK-based New Art Exchange Skinder Hundal, head of curatorial and research department of National Art Museum of China Zhang Qing participating in the biennales in the successive editions repeatedly recommended that Shilapakala Academy appoint curators.

They also told the academy to improve quality of the displays, take effective measures for its branding at the international art market, commissioning some reputed artists to create artworks especially for a particular edition and work collectively with the other famous museums and organisations those arrange biennales for improving organisational capacity.

But, the academy did not incorporate those recommendations and offers extended by the delegates at the seminars organised at the biennale to establish it as a standard in the 21st century. The academy rather focused more on increasing the number of the participating countries and artists.

'It's not the only problem that the biennale is organised under the guidance of the government bureaucrats through the foreign missions, the senior artists who have been involved with it for many years are equally responsible for the fall in the appeal of the biennale in the global art arena. The seasoned artists also need to realise the current art trend to guide the bureaucrats accordingly,' Chittagong university's art professor and also renowned artist Dhali Al Moon observed while talking to New Age.

'As a result', he said, 'Asian Art Biennale could not get international recognition as the oldest art biennale in Asia in any international journals on art. It has no position in the global art calendar either.'

An Asian art specialist, Diana Campbell Betancourt, from Los Angeles, in her article titled 'Entry Points: Rediscovering the Asian Art Biennale with Syed Jahangir', published on the official website of the New York-based Museum of Modern Art last year, writes, 'One notable exception to the thesis that the success of the first five editions of the Asian Art Biennale was due to unofficial curatorial efforts by individual artists paired with the hands-on approach and vision of Jahangir is the Japan foundation's long-standing and official involvement.'

Even the Japan Foundation, which had always been supportive to the biennale since its beginning has stopped sending artist since the 17th edition held in 2016 even though contemporary Japanese artists like Kohei Nawa and Meiro Koizumi, who have now international projects in Europe, participated in Asian Art Biennale and won grand prizes for their innovative works in 2014 and 2012.

Though the foundation had not made any official statement for not sponsoring any artist at the Asian Art Biennale, everybody concerned knows the reasons: Asian Art Biennale's failure in keeping pace with the contemporary art scene and stereotypical approach of the academy.

In the absence of quality foreign artists in the 17th edition of the biennale held in 2016, Bangladeshi artists won eight out of nine prizes. It did not raise the image of the biennale to the global art market, the senior artists noted.

Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy's director general Liaquat Ali Lucky said they had a plan to improve the quality of the biennale to meet the requirements of the contemporary global art scene. 'For this edition we gave advertisements in the internationally reputed art magazines inviting participations. We also requested other biennales to help us to improve the standard,' Lucky said.

For improving the standard in the present edition, Lucky said that the academy included some innovative supplementary projects by inviting local and foreign performance artists, art camps for local artists and child artists.

'For improving the standard of the biennale, we will appoint region-based curators in the next edition,' Lucky informed.

He expressed his determination to recover the lost glory of the oldest art biennale in Asia and make it the most attractive art show in the coming edition.