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Artists Who Defined Contemporary Southeast Asian Art

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Heri Dono, Flying Angels, 1996. Image courtesy of The Nation

In trying to define any tangent of **contemporary Southeast Asian art** and its historicities, one will, at any given point, find themselves at several roadblocks. One of which comes in the form of the lack of archives. Another, in that Southeast Asian countries, are so distinct from one another in their own cultures that piecing together a consolidate Southeast Asian history might just be a feat we may never find a solution to. There are obvious signs of cultural origins that come attached with works of a contemporary nature. However, these come with localized subject matters, and we start finding it hard pressed to find out what connects Vietnamese paintings with, say, Indonesian ones. Not only do their artistic practices differ distinctly from each other, so do the artist's upbringings, techniques, cultures, and so on, all attributing towards their uniqueness and identity in their works.

Contemporary Southeast Asian art is still at its adolescence. It does not withhold the boisterous histories that Europe and the West has. Its influences are also oftentimes divorced from that of external capacities and follows a different pace of cultural advances and narratives that exist at home. Whilst contemporary Southeast Asian art is still being shaped, there have been some individuals that have asserted themselves at the forefront of pushing this era of art, defining it over the course of their career and in their stride.

The Artling brings you these artists who we feel have defined contemporary Southeast Asian art:

Dadang Christanto



They Give Evidence 1996-1997 (left)

Heads from the North, 2004 (right)

Born into an Indonesian family of Chinese descent in 1957, Christanto studied painting in Yogyakarta and was the first artist in Indonesia to undertake installation in his practice. This led to him then being one of the first Indonesian artists to enter the international art world.

Christanto surrounds his practice with themes of human suffering and communal grief. They are derived by his motivations of honoring victims of political violence and crimes against humanity. In encountering his works, a sense of sincerity and rawness of emotion indubitably resonates in viewers. This is stemmed from Christanto's own father disappearing when he was a boy, abducted by army sanctioned hitmen, never to return. The human head is a recurring motif in his works, across paintings and sculptures, exposing sufferings of victims that have been endured in silence. His works, however, seeks to plead for compassion regardless of religion or political beliefs.

Christanto was the first Indonesian artist to represent his home country at the [Venice Biennale in 2003](#). He has exhibited at the Sydney Biennale, Sao Paulo Biennale, Gwangju Biennale, and the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane.

Navin Rawanchaikul



Asking for Nothingness 1995 - 1997, National Gallery Singapore

Born in Chiang Mai, Rawanchaikul is a Thai artist with ancestral roots from Hindi-Punjabi communities of Pakistan. Rawanchaikul's body of work is vast, often questioning systems of artistic creation and presentation, with works surrounding notions of team spirit and collaboration. He is known for works that involve "direct public interventions, social commentary, and an innovative style of integrating community of individual experiences into eccentric fictional tales".

He initiated a production company in 1994 called [Navin Production Co. Ltd.](#), of which many of his works are produced under, also functioning as an artists' collective. His community-driven projects aim to integrate art into everyday contexts, as strongly noted in 'Navin Gallery Bangkok'. In this work, Rawanchaikul converted an ordinary taxi into a mobile gallery that featured rotating exhibitions, executed internationally in cities such as Sydney, London, and New York.

Rawanchaikul has also represented Thailand at the 54th Venice Biennale and has had solo exhibitions at MoMA P.S. 1, Palais de Tokyo and the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art.

Arahmaiani



Do not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind, 1997-2014-2018

Handle Without Care, 1997

As a result of her powerful commentaries on socio-political and cultural issues, Arahmaiani grew to become one of Indonesia's most seminal contemporary artists. She is established as a pioneer of performance art in Southeast Asia, whilst having a practice that spans multiple medias. A major survey of her work will be on show at Museum Macan in Jakarta, where over 70 of her works from the 1980s till today will be featured.

Over the past 8 years, her practice has comprised of themes of "spirituality (particularly informed by Tibetan Buddhism), cultural syncretism, humanity's interconnectedness with nature, and the place of the feminine in religious traditions and in spiritual life in general.". Her first exhibition in the United States showcased the first-ever survey of over 30 years of performance work, along with key installations from the 90s, drawing connections between individuals communities and nations.

Since the 80s, Arahmaiani has exhibited in over a hundred solo and group exhibitions internationally. She has performed at the Venice Biennale and exhibited in the Biennale of the Moving Image, Gwangju Biennale, Sao Paulo Biennale and the Asia-Pacific Biennial.

Imelda Cajipe-Endaya



Pasyong Bayan, 1983

Cajipe-Endaya's practice, spanning printmaking, painting, installation and mixed media, is steeped in Filipino history. By implementing socio-political themes in her works, she blows the roof off of changes and conflicts in her home country, exposing a perspective that is not only passionate but of a well-informed native.

It is because her art emerged from a fervid climate of the 1970s that attributes towards the conceptual identity of her works. Also a writer, Cajipe Endaya experienced a "cultural barrage" from external influences from the West, and sought to accumulate and consolidate notions of Filipino identity. Researching into traditional practices of folk art and Filipino printmaking, what becomes evident are how such techniques and themes are all drawn upon in the overarching model of her practice.

One of the main themes in Cajipe-Endaya's work is migrant labor, specifically in Filipino culture. Combined with the aforementioned motivations of seeking Filipino identity, she explores notions of loneliness and separation. Her activism started in the 1960s when she was a student, and began taking roles in the organization and advocating for women's rights. The 70s and 80s saw the emergence of a feminist consciousness, where Cajipe-Endaya was seen as an important figure.

Cajipe-Endaya shaped contemporary Southeast Asian art through the narrative of her works, both visual, literary, and through the initiation of several organizations. It allowed for explorations through sisterhood and solidarity attained with interactions that exist through upheavals and success.

Heri Dono



Kuda Binal (Wild Horse), 2002 (left)

Flying Angels, 1996 (right)

A Yogyakarta based artist, Dono was the first Indonesian to break into the international art scene in the early 1990s, achieving iconic status both at home and abroad. The principal themes of his practice are derived from wayang, a popular form of Javanese folk theatre that is influenced by ancient mythology, where two-dimensional shadow puppets perform alongside music. Dono's oeuvre takes off from wayang, bringing elaborate sculptural installations into the world of machines, robots, and television. They are bound with powerful statements of socio-political issues, globalization, and culture.

Since his first exhibition in the 1980s, Dono has exhibited extensively around the world, having been involved in some 270 exhibitions, including numerous international biennales including the Venice Biennale, Guangzhou Triennial, Sharjah Biennale, and Havana Biennale. His key international exhibitions include 'Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011' at the Singapore Art Museum; Traditions / Tensions, Asia Society, New York; Cities on the Move, Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek which traveled to the Hayward Gallery in London.

Pacita Abad



A Million Things To Say, MCAD Manila

Abad was an internationally renowned painter from Basco, Batanes, a small island in the Philippines. Her artistic career that spanned 30 years started when she left to study law in the United States, later switching to painting and dedicating her life to it.

One could say she defined contemporary Southeast Asian art by painting the world. Abad worked on 6 different continents, traveling to over 50 countries, creating over 4,500 artworks. These have been exhibited in more than 200 museums and galleries around the world, of 75 were solo shows.

Abad developed upon trapunto, a quilting technique. This involved her stitching and stuffing her painted canvases to give them a three-dimensional effect. She further developed this by incorporating cloth, mirrors, beads, shells, buttons and other objects onto the surface of such paintings. She has influenced numerous art scholars throughout her lifetime and is one of few in her generation to receive multiple international awards for painting.

Nyoman Masriadi



Serta Merta, 2013 (left)
SHANGRILA, 2015 (right)

A contemporary Indonesian painter who depicts Indonesian history through his narratives, Masriadi's works come with a certain spirit of rebellion. Perhaps stemming from his upbringing which consisted of three decades of authoritarian rule under the Suharto regime, this artistic rebellion has since worked contributed towards Masriadi's career as witnessed through soaring auction records. The lack of freedom of speech in Indonesia has led to unique narratives that include witty social commentaries on contemporary life and global pop culture.

He has aided in the definition of contemporary Southeast Asian art through his signature motifs of black-skinned figures which have widely influenced other Indonesian painters. These figures have brought Masriadi international recognition, with Bloomberg even citing how billionaires have been lured by them in an art fair in London. In 2008, a triptych of his sold at [Sotheby's in Hong Kong for US\\$1.1 million](#), back then a record for a living Southeast Asian artist at the auction.

Han Sai Por



Seeds, 1995.

Han Sai Por is one of Asia's leading sculptors. Having participated in international exhibitions around the world, her works can additionally be found in international institutions, public spaces, and collections all around the world. Han's works are a commentary on changing landscapes, both physically and metaphorically. She is best known for her stone sculptures that mimic organic forms, highlighting uneasy relationships between man and nature in the modern era.

Han's contributions to art have spanned decades. She was conferred the Cultural Medallion for at in 1995 and was a winner of the sculpture and painting section at the 11th Indian Triennale. Han has exhibited internationally from China to Denmark, and her works can be found in public commissions in Singapore, Japan, and the United States. She continues to define Southeast Asian sculpture through her involvement with Singapore's Sculpture Society, having been their founding president from 2001 till today.

Lee Wen



Splash #1, #2, #3, 2003

A Singaporean performance artist, Lee Wen's practice explores themes of social identity. Although he studied in Singapore for most of his life, it was until he left to the City of London Polytechnic that he discovered his true calling as a performance artist.

He is best known for his 'Yellow Man' performances, where he painted himself with bright yellow poster paint, expressing exaggerated imagery of ethnic identity as a Singaporean citizen. He explored this further 'Journey of a Yellow Man', where he expanded the series to include works the involved mixed media, installation, and painting. This gained international recognition at a fast rate when he began performing and showcasing International at locations such as the Gwangju Biennale and the Asia Pacific Triennial in Australia.

Like Han Sai Por, Lee Wen was awarded the Cultural Medallion for his immense contributions to the development of local contemporary art. He has defined **contemporary Southeast Asian art** through the spearheading of international performances, through his continued interests in the cultural constructs of identity, and interests in trends of contemporary art practice.

Rirkrit Tiravanija



untitled 2002 (He Promised) (left)

Soup/No Soup, 2012 (right)

Tiravanija's practice and artistic production are aligned with the ethics of social engagement. His works often require activation by viewers, inviting them to inhabit and occupy the space that the artwork is comprised of. This element of participation attributes towards genres of the conceptual, performance and installation.

In his most well-known series, Tiravanija actively rejects art and its objects and instead cooks and serves food to exhibition-goers. One of which in the series took place in an emptied out art gallery. This facilitation of interaction, whilst simple and playful, aims to "demonstrate the necessary foundation for community-based political actions". Tiravanija continues to define contemporary Southeast Asian art through such modes of collaboration, allowing viewers perspectives of the every-day through a re-staging of it. In a way, he goes as far as to re-define the framework of Southeast Asian art itself through themes of this blending and recombining of cultural contexts.

He has received numerous grants and awards and has exhibited internationally. Solo exhibitions include *The fire is gone but we have the light: Rirkrit Tiravanija & Korakrit Arunanondchai*, Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, United States (2016); *Tomorrow is the Question*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, (2016); *U.F.O. (Universal Fantastic Occupation)*, Museo Jumex, Mexico City (2015) and *Print/Out*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012).

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