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10 of the most famous Asian contemporary artists of all time

By Manas Sen Gupta 05 Mar 2021

Asia has probably produced some of the biggest talents when it comes to contemporary art.

Cai Guo-Qiang, Pacita Abad, Tiffany Chung and Ai Weiwei are some of the famous names who have used this art form — which emerged in the late 20th century — to bring focus to the issues of our times ranging from personal matters such as isolation to socio-political causes such as migration.

From everyday things like pins, chairs, tables and even fireworks, to videos and paintings, these artists use common objects as a form of expression. In fact, Ai's recent 2020 documentary *Coronation* made headlines for bringing to light the harrowing realities of the coronavirus situation in Wuhan.

debates on pressing issues. In the process, they have also won prestigious honours and awards, along with showcasing their work in various art galleries and museums.

Here's a look at 10 of the most famous Asian contemporary artists of all time that you should know about.

Ai Weiwei, China



Weiwei is known for his strong political views on China. (Image: skyarte/ [Facebook](#))

One of China's most famous contemporary artists, Ai Weiwei is not only known for his art but also his strong political opinions. He has openly criticised the Chinese government and has faced consequences many times. He was briefly placed under house arrest in 2010 for voicing his anger against government corruption that led to the deaths of thousands of schoolchildren in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. In 2011, he was held in custody for three months before being released under government surveillance and travel restrictions. In 2015, he moved to Berlin after receiving his passport from the authorities, and then to England in 2019 where he currently resides.

Some of Ai's famous works include *Sunflower Seeds* (second picture) and *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*. The former is an installation created using millions of individually handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds, weighing approximately ten tonnes and spread like a bed in a

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century fountain-clock.

Also interested in architecture, Ai started his own firm FAKE design in 2003. He has also collaborated with other architectural firms on projects like the Beijing National Stadium, famously known as 'Bird's Nest,' and London's Serpentine Gallery Pavillion.

Yayoi Kusama, Japan



Kusama is known for using polka dots as a motif. (Image: Diario24Horas/ [Facebook](#))

Considered by many as one of the most influential Asian contemporary artists to have emerged from Japan, 91-year-old [Yayoi Kusama](#) is renowned for using polka dots as a motif. Her artwork highlights themes such as anti-war, patriarchy and anti-capitalism. She was one of the most sought-after artists in the contemporary art scene in the West during her stay in the US in the 1960s.

Following a decline in health, she moved back to Japan in 1973 and stayed out of the public eye. In 1993, she made her comeback at the 45th Venice Biennale with the acclaimed *Infinity Mirror Rooms* exhibition — an installation using mirrors to create an impression of

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Manhattan Suicide Addict (1978) and her autobiography *Infinity Net* (2003).

Takashi Murakami, Japan



Murakami is famous for his Superflat post-modern art movement. (Image: [1/2e](#))

In the contemporary art scene, Murakami is famous for his Superflat post-modern art movement — a style that aligns historical Japanese art forms with contemporary pop culture. His art has largely been influenced by Japan’s otaku culture, a display of obsessive interest in anime and manga. This was the inspiration for sculptures such as *Miss ko2* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* which was auctioned for US\$15.2 million in 2008.

In the mid-1990s, he created Mr. DOB — a character that is today a pop culture phenomenon. Named after the Japanese slang “dobojite”

Mouse, Doraemon and Sonic the Hedgehog.

Some of his works, such as the *Polyrhythm* and the atomic bomb themed *Sea Breeze*, reflect on his experiences of post-war US-Japan relations. He has collaborated with many luxury fashion brands and artists including Louis Vuitton, Pharrell Williams and Kanye West. He also wrote and directed the 2013 sci-fi film *Jellyfish Eyes*.

Christine Ay Tjoe, Indonesia



Ay Tjoe is one of the most celebrated artists of her country. (Image: [asiasociety](#))

Born in West Java's Badung, Ay Tjoe is one of the most celebrated contemporary artists in her country. Early in her career, she explored a printmaking technique of the intaglio family known as drypoint before shifting to textiles. From intricately layered paintings on paper

Her works have been showcased in Grand Palais in Paris, White Cube in London and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanagawa among other art galleries and museums. Ay Tjoe is also one of the highest-grossing female Indonesian artists at global auction houses. In early 2018, her painting *3->2 #05* (second picture) sold at Christie's for US\$318,500.

Haegue Yang, South Korea



She is the first female Asian artist to win the prestigious Wolfgang Hahn Prize (1 Facebook)

The first female Asian artist to win the prestigious Wolfgang Hahn Prize and the honouree of the Republic of Korea Culture and Arts Award (Presidential Citation) in the visual arts category, Yang's work spans from classical sculpture to minimalism. She uses everyday objects to convey important socio-political messages, raise questions on identity, and discuss the subject of isolation. She is sensitive to and critically investigates the post-modern condition, contemporary civilisations and themes such as limits.

Yang's work has been featured at renowned events and places such as Munich's Haus der Kunst and Venice Biennale. *Handles* (second picture), her recent exhibit at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, comprises geometrical sculptures covered with bells,

also a Professor of Fine Arts at her alma mater the Städelschule in Frankfurt and has previously taught at Sweden's Malmö Academy of Art.

Pacita Abad, Philippines-US



She was the first woman to receive Philippines's 10 Outstanding Young Men Award (2012 Estate/AWARE)

Abad, who in 1984 became the first woman to receive Philippines's 10 Outstanding Young Men award, influenced the world of art through her portrayal of marginalised women of colour. Her political activism forced her into exile to the US in 1970, where she began her career as an artist. Her travel experiences shaped her artistic style, and she graduated from drawing tropical landscapes to producing abstract art.

She is known for mastering a technique called trapunto, inspired by an Italian quilting method of stuffing different materials in the canvases

created using this method. It shows a migrant peering from behind a prison window and is embellished with mirrors reflecting the viewer's face.

Abad created over 5,000 artworks, had more than 60 solo and over 70 group exhibitions at various museums and galleries till her death in 2004. Her work is displayed in various art collections in over 70 countries.

Tiffany Chung, Vietnam-US

1 / 2

Known as one of Vietnam's most renowned contemporary artists, Chung depicts human migration, conflict, displacement, urbanisation and human transformation through her art. She draws inspiration from her own life as a Vietnamese refugee in the US following the Vietnam War.

A graduate and master of Fine Arts, Chung uses her knowledge of archaeology and cartography to create paintings in the form of meticulously drawn maps chronicling geological events and recent humanitarian crises. Her 2019 solo exhibition at the Smithsonian

refugees spread around the world — is just one of the examples. Her art has been exhibited at Venice Biennale, Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich, and Museum of Modern Art in New York as well as renowned museums in many other countries. She currently lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, where she co-founded the independent non-profit gallery Sãn-Art.

Han Sai Por, Singapore



Han is the the Honorary President of Singapore's Sculpture Society. (Image: [/2si](#))

A full-time sculptor since 1996, Han is the founding president of Singapore's Sculpture Society and remains the Honorary President. One of the most critically acclaimed modern sculptors in Asia, she is also the only dedicated stone sculptor in Singapore and has hewn outstanding pieces of art usually from granite and marble. One of her works *20 Tonnes – Physical Consequences* (second picture) is notable because the monolithic blocks have been carved from a single block of granite. She has also produced masterpieces using sandstone and trunks of tembusu trees.

Han's first solo exhibition *Four Dimensions* was held at Singapore's National Museum Art Gallery in 1993. She has since featured in international institutions, public spaces and private collections in countries such as Malaysia, India, Japan, the UK and the US. She has been awarded numerous honours, including the Cultural Medallion

Nam June Paik, South Korea



Originally a musician, it was Paik's first exhibition, *Exposition of Music — Electronic Television*, in 1963 at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal which launched his career as one of the most prominent Asian contemporary artists of all time. At this show, Paik presented 13 television sets laid on one side with their reception altered so that each set had a different display.

After moving to the US in 1964, he created a remote-controlled robot called *Robot K-456* — that played snippets of John F. Kennedy speeches — in collaboration with engineer Shuya Abe. Over the next two decades, Paik went on to garner appreciation for his television and video-based art.

His art found space in Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and Venice Biennale among other renowned art exhibitions. In 2007, a year after his death, Paik honoured with the highest class in the Order of Cultural Merit by the South Korean government.

Cai Guo-Qiang, China

Cai was born in 1957 in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province. He studied stage design at the Shanghai Drama Institute from 1981 to 1985 and then left for Japan to learn gunpowder techniques for nine years. In 1995, he moved to New York City where he has lived ever since. He was the first Chinese artist to have a solo show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. In the 2008 exhibition, one of the installations was *Inopportune: Stage One*, where Cai suspended nine cars from the ceiling and created an exploding effect with timed light displays.

footprints, one for each Olympiad —was viewed by almost a billion people. Awarded the Japan Art Association’s Praemium Imperiale in 2012, he left the viewers astounded with a 12-minute event titled *One Night Stand* at the annual Nuit Blanche celebration in Paris. The dazzling pyrotechnic display at midnight was an ode to love and took place on Seine river between Musée du Louvre and Musée d’Orsay. It concluded with silver fireworks spelling out the words “Sorry Gotta Go”.

He went viral when a June 2015 video of a 1,650-foot chain of fireworks suspended by a helium balloon forming the shape of a ladder leaked on the internet. This was *Sky Ladder* (second picture), a work of art that Cai had tried to present earlier but didn’t get permission from the authorities. He went on to carry this out in secret at the Huiyu Island Harbour in Quanzhou. His life and artworks are the subject of the 2016 Netflix documentary *Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang* which is rated an impressive 100 percent on Rotten Tomatoes.

(Main and featured image: fundacaoserralves/ Facebook)

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