

## **CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000**

**Singapore Art Festival, Singapore, MITA**

### INTRODUCTION

For me art is very personal and being brought up in the Philippines, living in Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore and traveling extensively in all of the Southeast Asian countries I feel that I have a unique artistic perspective on contemporary trends in Southeast Asian art. My views on the subject are probably very different from Ian's or the other members of the panel. It is dangerous for anyone to give an overview of such a diverse cultural region. At any rate, I would like to make my ten observations on contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

### 1. MY FIRST OBSERVATION IS ABOUT THE INCREASING NUMBER OF SEA REGIONAL FESTIVALS, COMPETITIONS AND ART FAIRS

Back in 1985 I was invited to participate in the Fukuoka Asian Art Exhibit and at that time there were very few art festivals held in Asia. Only recently have art festivals been held in SEA. There have been numerous other competitions and ASEAN exhibitions like the annual Philip Morris Art Awards, Queensland Triennale in Australia, the Non-Alligned exhibition in Jakarta. Then there are a number of art festivals in the provinces like the Baguio arts festival, Bandung and Yogyakarta festivals.

While Fukuoka and those other festivals still play a significant role, in recent years the focus on SEA art has shifted here to Singapore. Let us start right here, the Singapore Art Festival.

2. MY SECOND OBSERVATION, FOLLOWING ON THE FIRST, IS THAT SINGAPORE HAS BECOME A CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL AUCTIONS.

I think it is appropriate that the first SEA Art Festival is held here in Singapore, as this is one place that can attract SEA regional artists, Chinese and Western artists and collectors from Asia, North America and Europe. Five years ago, this was not the case. Now you see Sothebys and Christies have annual auctions of SEA art here in Singapore and it is happening right now as I speak. Unfortunately, their main emphasis is on very old or dead artists and many foreign artists that painted in Asia. There is not enough of a focus on contemporary artists, but it is a good step in the right direction.

3. MY THIRD OBSERVATION IS THAT THERE HAS BEEN A TREMENDOUS GROWTH IN THE NUMBER OF GALLERIES, CURATORS AND ART DEALERS IN EACH OF THE SEA COUNTRIES ESPECIALLY IN SINGAPORE, INDONESIA, VIETNAM AND THE PHILIPPINES. Gallery owners and dealers have played a very active and aggressive role in promoting their artists. Vietnam is a good example, as there are Vietnamese galleries in Hong Kong, Paris, London, Sydney, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York.

During the last five years, there has been an increasing number of artworks in public places. The galleries and dealers are mainly responsible for putting these artworks in public space as well as in hotels and office buildings.

This has increased the public's awareness of art. A good example of this is the Singapore Art Expo, DBS buildings and many other public places here in Singapore.

4. MY FOURTH OBSERVATION IS THAT OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS, THE ART MUSEUMS IN MOST OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES HAVE PLAYED A

MAJOR ROLE IN PROMOTING LOCAL ARTISTS. The Singapore Art Museum has been a pacesetter in buying artists works from around the region. Taman Ismael Marzuki and the National Gallery in Jakarta, Metropolitan Museum in Manila, Metropolitan Museum in Bangkok have also played very important roles in exposing local artistic talent to their countrymen. As a result these museums have become important venues for Southeast Asian artists.

Other government support groups like the national council on the arts, foundations and art centers play important tasks of giving financial support to the artists. These efforts, however, still fall short of what is being done in the West. I would like to see a similar NEA in the U.S., Guggenheim fellowships and other art patronages in the region.

#### 5. MY FIFTH OBSERVATION IS ABOUT THE INCREASING AMOUNT OF INFORMATION BEING MADE AVAILABLE ABOUT SEA ART.

Initially, most of the books and articles about SEA were written either as dissertations by local Ph.Ds, by foreigners who came to SEA to do their dissertation on Asian art, or published coffee table books on SEA art.

In recent years this has changed with the advent of magazines like Asian Art News and Art In Asia Pacific and more recently the development of art critics who write weekly reviews of recent shows in local newspapers. This has also changed due to museum curators who have pushed to publish larger and more detailed catalogues about museum exhibitions.

More importantly, many artists have taken the initiatives to provide more information about themselves and their works through brochures and books. With the advent of internet many artists now have their own websites to provide information to the world

about their art. All of these are positive trends that will only accelerate the future knowledge and appreciation of SEA Art.

#### 6. MY SIXTH OBSERVATION IS THAT THE PROFILE OF COLLECTORS OF SEA ART HAS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY.

In the past much of SEA art was bought by expats looking for a low cost cultural reminder of their stay in a South east Asian country. They tended to prefer barebreasted women and traditional rural scenes. More importantly, SEA art was supported by a small number of local patrons who tended to be nationalistic.

In recent years the SEA collector profile has changed tremendously with increasing wealth of SEA upper middle class professionals greater appreciation of art in general and the promotion of regional artists. Although there is still a nationalistic bias, many of these new collectors now are actively purchasing paintings from beyond their country. Many of these people have been educated abroad and achieved the level of financial success in their fields and become avid collectors and supporters of local arts. These collectors will grow in the future and a good example is the number of people who showed up at the opening here in MITA a few nights ago.

#### 7. MY SEVENTH OBSERVATION IS ABOUT THE ARTISTS IN SEA ASIA.

They are driven by different cultural backgrounds like the Chinese influence you see in Singapore like Cai Heng, Teng Chin Chin, Wayang influences like Tumadri Patri's, Nyoman Gunarsa; Socio-Political like Dede Supria, Sam Sheehan, Joko Pekik, Entang Wiharso, Vasan Sitthiket and Chatchai Puipia, Santiago Bose, Sanggawa and Salingpusa groups .

The search for female artistic identity in the society has been a subject for many female artists in the region like Lucia Hartini, Kartika Affandi, Agnes Arellano, Frencesa Enriquez, Imelda Cajipe, Inda Utoyo and Astari Rasjid.

The Vietnamese artists have long been influenced by the European style of painting and have fused this with local characters to create some wonderful paintings.

In my case for example, like many artists in SEA, I have been inspired by my cultural and political roots when I worked on series of people and landscape paintings from Batanes, social-political paintings of my Cambodian refugees and my immigration series which deals with asian immigrants in America and how they cope with mixed marriages, overseas workers like the Filipina maids in Hongkong and Singapore, wayang influences on my art and the many abstracts works I did when I visited all these countries.

8. MY EIGHTH OBSERVATION IS THAT SEA ARTISTS ARE NOT ONLY TURNING TO THEIR CULTURAL ROOTS FOR INSPIRATION BUT ARE ALSO INCREASINGLY USING LOCAL AND INDIGINEOUS MATERIALS LIKE BATIK, IKATS, SHELLS, CHINESE GOLD PAPER, HOMESPUN, BARK AND EVEN GEOMETRIC MOTIFS OR THEMES FOR THEIR ARTWORK.

9. MY NINTH OBSERVATION IS ABOUT THE PROTECTION OF SEA ART IN BOTH PHYSICAL AND INTELLECTUAL SENSE.

In physical sense, many of the museums, unlike Western museums, do not have the capability or finance including insurance to take care of documentation, preservation and conservation of valuable pieces including insurance. I have been in the back rooms of many museums where paintings carefully done by noted artists are piled up on top of each other, paperworks are getting mildewed. flooding in the storage rooms

and a general impression that many of these valuable works that are not being properly cared for.

In an intellectual property sense, another growing problem is that much of SEA art is being copied or modified by unscrupulous forgers. A typical example of this is when on two separate occasions, two five star hotels in Indonesia stole my artwork, copied them 300 times so that each room will have a copy and not bothering to look for me and ask my permission.

10. THE LAST OBSERVATION I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE IS THAT SEA ART IS NOW MAKING ITS MARK IN THE WESTERN WORLD (AUSTRALIA, EUROPE AND THE USA).

To many in the Western world, any art that is not from North America or Europe must be folk art and there is a lack of appreciation. I remember when a New York curator came to my studio and we started discussing Asian contemporary art and how she should start making exhibitions for them. She did not know what I was talking about..She wanted to know if these artists were doing folk art. I managed to tell her that it is very important for her to look for these artists otherwise she will be losing her job in the future.

Now, this ignorance of contemporary SEA art is beginning to change for a number of reasons.

Many of the SEA artists living in international capitals like New York, San Francisco, London, Paris, Berlin have begun to make their mark on the local art scene. In the mid 80s I was living in Paris and came across Nena Saguil. Many Filipinos never heard of her and yet she was collected by museums in Europe. Another example was Alfonso Ossorio who lived in East Hampton in New York. Ossorio painted during the period of Jackson Pollock, deKooning and Rauschenberg. I

remember going to his place in the Hamptons and it was like a huge Ossorio museum. Although he was Filipino, he never had a major exhibition in Asia, though he desperately wanted one, yet he is collected by almost all major art museums in America.

In recent years, a number younger SEA artists have followed the path to Western countries including like Manuel Ocampo, David Medalla, Paul Pfeiffer, Gaston Damag, Long Nguyen, Hang Liu, Entang Wiharso to name a few.

In conclusion, I am very upbeat about the future of SEA art and who knows the Singapore Art Festival could one day develop into a major event and become the Sao Paulo Biennale or the Venice Bienale of ASIA. I and my colleagues would love to see this happen!!!