Imagined Workshop

21 March 2002
Fukuoka, Japan

Fukuoka has been a pioneer in exhibiting contemporary Asian art. The Second Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, held in the city’s Asian Art Museum in March this year, encapsulates a mission to overcome Japan’s traditional isolationism from Asia (and contested history, when it did engage with Asia) in a radically and culturally inclusive art programme that is helping to redefine ideas about Asian art in the twenty-first century.

By Caroline Turner

Fukuoka, situated on the island of Kyushu and one of the closest Japanese port cities to China and Korea, was historically the target of Kublai Khan’s unsuccessful invasion fleets in the thirteenth century. A cosmopolitan, prosperous city today, Fukuoka is still a major port and a hub between mainland China and Japan. It is the only city in Japan and one of the few in the world with a museum devoted solely to contemporary Asian art.

The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum that officially opened in 1999 is a symbol of the new role museums are playing in the world. The museum is situated on the seventh and eighth floors of the spectacular Hakata Riverian complex of upmarket restaurants and designer label shops. It was built to house the largest collection of contemporary Asian art in the world, developed over twenty years by its parent, the Fukuoka Museum, which collaborates with contemporary Asian art survey shows in 1979/80. These were the renamed Fukuoka Triennale in 1999. The project was started because the new museum was constructed to run the contemporary art shows and to house this collection. The Fukuoka Asian Art shows, of which the Triennale is a continuation, were the first such exhibitions in the world and are still exceptional in terms of the number of Asian countries included. This concentration on Asian art itself was unusual in Japan, especially in 1979, as until recent times many Japanese did not consider their country to be part of Asia.

Japanese modern art was dominated by Tokyo and, from the 1950s, a deluge of American art. Fukuoka’s museum, influenced by and with American and European art, which reinforced Japan’s status as a first-world power. While many Japanese museums now display contemporary Asian art, emphasis still lies with international art, especially from Europe and North America. This is true even of the important new contemporary Asian art exhibitions that have emerged in the last decade, such as the Gwangan Biennale in Korea and now the Shanghai Bienale in China and the Yokohama Triennale in Japan, all of them presenting Asian art within an international context. The Fukuoka Museum and its Asian Art Museum, by contrast, have always looked to the Asian region to open up the debate on what contemporary Asian art is within a local context.

Fukuoka’s inclusion of little-known artists from poorer countries suggests affinities with the outstanding Havana Biennale, which has shown three generations of collaborative art from Asia. The Foundation, which is a sponsor of the Triennale, is now undertaking many more exchanges with programmes in Asia. The Fukuoka Museum is playing a pivotal role in exhibitions documenting contemporary Asian art from an ASEAN platform. The museum’s vision of the process of cross-cultural dialogue, have also sought to provide an alternative to the international Biennale model and to the dominance of Western perspectives in international art.

From the late seventies onwards, Fukuoka has also extended invitations to artists and curators from all over Asia who have come to Fukuoka through the Art Exchange programme to engage with local citizenry, especially young people and school children. For over twenty years, this programme has provided many opportunities for artists from Asia and has positively affected the development of art practice in poorer countries where artists have few opportunities to exhibit internationally. Fukuoka has also emphasized research into modern Asian art and initiated several groundbreaking research projects, especially on Southeast Asian art.

The Fukuoka exhibition was unique and radical. The radical nature of the project has not received adequate recognition in Japan where the exhibition is sometimes criticized as being less about art than about artists and communities, and at times including work that could be described as folk art. Yet this inclusive approach has been a strength, as has the intensity of engagement within each country to seek out new artists. While the Fukuoka shows have not included minorities within Japan, such as the Ainu indigenous people of Hokkaido or the many Koreans living in Japan, they have introduced the contentious issue of multiculturalism and opened up a new dialogue with Asian neighbours. The Fukuoka exhibitions, for all these reasons, can be viewed as an alternative to the mainstream where often the same artists are included again and again in international exhibitions.

The First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 1999 inaugurated the new Museum and concentrated on high-tech art. This second exhibition of 2002 occurred in times of greater economic stringency and focused instead on what the curators called ‘traditional Asian methods’ that is the making of objects by hand, indigenous and natural materials, communal and collaborative works and craftwork. Twenty-one countries were represented by thirty-seven artists and groups. Some were senior artists such as Panya Vijitchahanasarn from Thailand, a master of Buddhist temple mural paintings, but many were very young artists who had never exhibited outside their home countries. Some artists were from countries where artists are almost never seen in international exhibitions, such as Myanmar, Laos, Nepal, Cambodia, and Mongolia.

In the exhibition catalogue, chief curator of the Museum, Masahiro Ushirosho, noted what he saw as a shift in Asian art in the late 1990s away from art reflecting problems in society to art about communication and collaboration. Hence the 2002 Triennale’s theme ‘Katru Musu Te’ translated as ‘narrating hands, connecting hands’ or ‘Imagined Workshop’. Ushirosho wrote that it ‘sets an age flooded with digital images, when terrorist acts and wars are broadcast live via satellite around the world, we need to take another hard look at the appeal and potential possessed by art’. He observed that the world is still permeated with hatred, violence, and misunderstanding, and that we must work to heal those rifts through an ongoing effort to understand each other’s world, culture, and values; even if it is no longer possible to naively and simplistically believe that art is able to do so. It is not clear whether Ushirosho was right, however, when he wrote that the artists were less concerned with social issues. Given that the exhibition opened a few months after 11 September, it is hardly surprising that these events were reflected in the art and that an extant subtler the less political theme of collaboration.

There were artists whose work in the exhibitions superbly reflected collaboration and craftsmanship. Nindiyoto Adipurnomo’s reinstallation featured traditional Javanese hairpieces handcrafted in collaboration with craftmen in Java; Alak Roy from Bangladesh handcrafted in collaboration with craftmen in her imagery, was a veiled woman, as Salima Hashmi notes in the catalogue, ‘the recent region, in the event, and her travels to the West, have had a profound effect on Aisha Khalid. The artist operates against the artificiality of “modernisation”, the distancing from nature, and its rampant commercialization (as well as the increasing pollution).’

Aisha Khalid from Pakistan questioned aspects of modernization at the Triennale, with ancient miniatures, classical paintings from Persia and the Mughal courts, together with folk art patterns, inspiring her exquisite small works. Dominant in her imagery is a veiled woman, as Salima Hashmi notes in the catalogue, ‘the recent region, in the event, and her travels to the West, have had a profound effect on Aisha Khalid. The artist operates against the artificiality of “modernisation”, the distancing from nature, and its rampant commercialization (as well as the increasing pollution).’

A talented young artist and teacher from Vientiane, Laos, Kham Tant Saphoutsonevthy, opened a few months after 11 September, a tank-cum-jungle gym toy, grew outside their home countries. Some works. Dominant in her imagery is a veiled woman, as Salima Hashmi notes in the catalogue, ‘the recent region, in the event, and her travels to the West, have had a profound effect on Aisha Khalid. The artist operates against the artificiality of “modernisation”, the distancing from nature, and its rampant commercialization (as well as the increasing pollution).’ Aising the contrast between the simple toys he himself made as a child and the manufactured ‘cute’ technological robots mostly imported from the United States, which serve as toys for his four-year-old son. His video Flowing refers to the artist’s own childhood memories of change in Vietnam over forty years, and encompassing personal childhood memories in which the fax machine is a box in which the artist is bom. The new economic policies, the artist noted, came different challenges – such as increasing pollution. Aisha Khalid from Pakistan questioned aspects of modernization at the Triennale, with ancient miniatures, classical paintings from Persia and the Mughal courts, together with folk art patterns, inspiring her exquisite small works. Dominant in her imagery is a veiled woman, as Salima Hashmi notes in the catalogue, ‘the recent region, in the event, and her travels to the West, have had a profound effect on Aisha Khalid. The artist operates against the artificiality of “modernisation”, the distancing from nature, and its rampant commercialization (as well as the increasing pollution).’

Aising the contrast between the simple toys he himself made as a child and the manufactured ‘cute’ technological robots mostly imported from the United States, which serve as toys for his four-year-old son. His video Flowing refers to the artist’s own childhood memories of change in Vietnam over forty years, and encompassing personal childhood memories in which the fax machine is a box in which the artist is bom. The new economic policies, the artist noted, came different challenges – such as increasing pollution. Aisha Khalid from Pakistan questioned aspects of modernization at the Triennale, with ancient miniatures, classical paintings from Persia and the Mughal courts, together with folk art patterns, inspiring her exquisite small works. Dominant in her imagery is a veiled woman, as Salima Hashmi notes in the catalogue, ‘the recent region, in the event, and her travels to the West, have had a profound effect on Aisha Khalid. The artist operates against the artificiality of “modernisation”, the distancing from nature, and its rampant commercialization (as well as the increasing pollution).’