

# Art in America

## ASIA PACIFIC TRIENNIAL

April, 2016

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BRISBANE— the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art

At a time when the international art market is rife with excess and the major biennials serve, increasingly, as a covert validation process for the world's most powerful galleries, serious viewers sometimes look to more peripheral global roundups for old-fashioned curatorial integrity. Such was the case with the first Cartagena Biennial, directed by independent curator Berta Sichel, and the second Kochi-Muziris Biennale, organized by Indian artist Jitish Kallat, both in 2014. Now the same can be said about the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial (APT8) in Brisbane.

This survey of works by some 80 artists from 30 countries was assembled without recourse to a star artistic director or advisory team imported from the Euro-American circuit. Instead, the selections were made by curators from the event's two venues, the Queensland Art Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art. Deeply knowledgeable about the vast Asia-Pacific region, these specialists proved refreshingly free of the outsider's impulse to exoticize or condescend to its art. Their show, devoid of the semi-mystical "last safari" air of the Centre Pompidou's landmark "Magiciens de la Terre" (1989), goes modestly and efficiently about the business of presenting the artists: who they are, what they do, why it matters. Wall labels and catalogue entries include ethnic identifiers matter-of-factly, allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions about myopia and exclusivity in the Western art system.

Curious about contemporary Mongolian paintings? Examples like Baatarzorig Batjargal's *Nomads* (2014)—mixing ancient and modern figures, animals and demons, mundane and mythological actions—occupy an aesthetic middle ground in APT8 between the Aboriginal memorial poles by Gunybi Ganambar (of the Ngaymil

people) or the dense line paintings by Yukultji Napangati (of the Pintupi people) and the cool, cerebral formalism of *Sol LeWitt Upside Down* (2015), a venetian-blind installation by Korea's *Haegue Yang*, a global art-scene regular.

This traditional-contemporary, mainstream-outlier dialectic pervades the entire triennial, nowhere more tellingly than in an installation by Australian artist Brook Andrew, who has painted the walls in three galleries of the QAG with a chevron pattern traditionally emblazoned on bark or human skin by the Wiradjuri people, of whom he is a descendent. This emblem of indigenous culture becomes the imperfectly repressed background for 19th-century salon paintings by and about white colonizers—a selection the artist drew from the QAG's permanent collection in collaboration with the museum's curators.

In a section of the triennial devoted exclusively to Indian vernacular art, one finds figurative Kalighat watercolors of the sort routinely appropriated—and denatured—by Francesco Clemente; narrative paintings from the Gond people incorporating airplanes, modern soldiers and helicopters; drawings on paper by the Warli people, using stick figures and traditional patterns to tell ancient tales or address current social concerns; and colorful multi-cell scrolls from Bengal and Rajasthan, crammed with imagery and text, functioning like visual newspapers or graphic novels. Art, we are reminded, has always been a communicative endeavor as much as an expressive form, and it often loses vitality when it retreats into conceptual games.

At the other end of the technological spectrum, Ming Wong, countering his native Singapore's uptight reputation, presents a

video fantasy involving flamboyant, fluidly gendered characters in a bucolic landscape. A video by Myanmar artist Po Po, meanwhile, documents the response of ordinary people to VIP markers he placed on bus-stop benches in his home country, long under strict military rule, and the relatively less restricted Bangladesh.

Focusing on harsh realities in Papua New Guinea's Bougainville Island, artist Taloi Havini (Hakō people) and photographer Stuart Miller display poignant portraits, usually set in landscapes, of "Blood Generation" individuals forcibly deprived of land and cultural heritage due to intrusive Australian mining interests. The duo's close-up shot of a black fighter waiting on the ropes, his gaze steady, suggests pride and determination even in the face of likely defeat.

During the triennial's opening in November, Cambodian-born Anida Yoeu Ali, raised in Chicago, appeared in costume to supplement the humorous photos and videos on view recording her "Buddhist Bug" project—in which she moves through the streets and open markets of her homeland in a giant saffron-colored garment-contraption that makes her look like a monkish version of Lewis Carroll's hookah-smoking caterpillar. Significantly grimmer was a 12-hour performance in which Indonesia's Melati Suryodarmo, trained in both Butoh dance and (under Marina Abramović) durational performance, slowly ground chunks of charcoal into powder by hand. Transformation, both external and internal, seems to be an inescapable theme for artists from long-closed or long-colonized areas now facing a lightning transition to the 21st century.

As always in such exhibitions, some bizarre culture clashes occur. A video of statuesque New Zealand-born artist Angela Tiatia lying on the floor in a black leotard and spike heels, eyes riveted on the viewer as she repeatedly "walks" up a wall with long tattooed legs, plays just steps away from a video by Köken Ergun showing an annual ritual in which Turkish Shiite men weep over the death in battle of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn ibn Ali in 680 A.D. The juxtaposition evokes numerous religious, transcultural, feminist and geopolitical issues. But such incongruity reflects, of course, the complex, difficult and enthralling nature of globalism itself.

—Richard Vine