

*Cinco continentes y una ciudad*



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## Fragmented stories

It may appear ludicrous to propose a survey of contemporary painting from the Asia/Pacific regions with the works of only six artists, yet what the disparate inventions of the artists in this exhibition convey, reflects both the concerns, the contradictions, and the interrelated dynamics contained in their cultures. Also it would be erroneous to present these works as products of a dialogue set apart from an international art arena. On the contrary, many of these artists, while they can be distinguished by concerns and methods unique to their origins, naturally draw from all the influences available to them and are participants and contributors to the evolution of art —both locally and internationally. Indeed, many of them currently live and work in countries other than their birth-place, or frequently travel to regions whose cultures are shaped on very different models from their own. Suffice to say, that in general, today's community of cultural practitioners tend to be diasporic in nature and engaged in a complex dialogue that both integrates and transcends codifications of language.

It would also be simplistic to view their works only in comparison to “Western Art”, for though such a connection obviously exists, the confluence is surely multi-directional. The common assumption in the West is that the contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific, is only a replication of the forms and language of Modernism, and has no origin in, or relevance to the cultures of these continents. This is of course a banal notion, but not an easy one to refute, for the issue is indeed a complex one. Western culture in general, however, owes much to the import of cultural artifacts and ideas from Africa, the Orient, Asia and the Pacific, over the centuries. Facilitated by trade routes and colonialism, this heritage and assimilation had a particularly concentrated effect on the development of Modernism, as is evident in the works of Gauguin, Picasso, Frank Lloyd Wright and other artists and architects of the period.

What we understand today by “globalism” is really an accelerated version of a process of contact, exchange, and imposition of cultures that has been ongoing since the Middle Ages. The difference, of course, is that we can now transmit information to the other side of the globe instantly, and ourselves within just a few hours, in contrast to journeys that in days of yore often took lifetimes to complete (e.g. the Crusades) but, nevertheless irrevocably changed cultures and the world-view of their peoples.

The impact of modern transport is that inter-cultural exchange is reduced to a commonplace conversation. If a “global culture” were truly to exist, might it be a collage of signifiers rendered meaningless by their fusion, in which the characteristics that distinguished their origin have been blurred or lost? It is easy to perceive our current condition, constantly bombarded as we are by an accelerated flow of excessive information, which we can no longer consciously assimilate, as precisely this —a homogenizing pool whose constituents lack distinguishing integrity.

But perhaps a “global culture”, if it ever exists at all, is formed in the eddy pools where our cultures overlap and meaning is translated to another tense. Here a kind of transitory Esperanto may be formed, a language so broad and inclusive that we can all identify in it certain commonalities, and find agreement in their interpretation. And both within and outside of these confluences, we may perceive ingredients that belong to worlds other than ours —simultaneously familiar and foreign, in which we can understand the diversity of our shared humanity as well as of our separate uniqueness. Indeed, if we admit that there is any such thing as an international art movement, or a “global culture” then they are surely like organisms that constantly and unpredictably evolve; a lattice of shifting nodal localities that act upon each other through the exchange of influences facilitated both by machine (data transfer) and people (travelers, curators, artists, businessmen etc.). The problem here is the transportation of ideas from one space to another and the dynamics that then ensue between those areas.

A curator transports a set of ideas and values from one location to another, and in so doing triggers a magnitude of possibilities at either location. The flow is never simply in one direction. Both the exporter and importer are subject to contamination by the material they handle. However, culture can be said to have a relevance to “place”, and without an anchor in its original context its authority diminishes. Thus the “globalization” of culture could be seen as a process of devaluation, a system of meanings displaced in a foreign context. My contention, however, is that this is always transitory, and that it is the artist, curator, or “media operator”, even a priest or shaman, whose role it has always been to attach a new ownership and significance to the import and “attach” it to its new context. Again, time is of the essence here —whereas previously this “ownership” of foreign imports was a barely perceived process over generations, it is now almost instantaneous. The remarkable feature of our hypermedia culture is how fast it assimilates and discards. The combination of both the Internet and television, though they are qualitatively different, has provided us with a common locality—a mingled non-locality.

We are being reinvented in this space, or an aspect of us at least, that is not rooted in the place of our ancestors. How does the artist, transformed by this unavoidable interactive exchange, translate and act upon the process? The artist is by necessity engaged in a constant process of recovery and reinvention and as such could be considered as possessing a nebulous identity that only achieves coalescence in the creative act. Recovery necessitates a mining of the past, the present, and an analysis (or intuition) of the full range of the psychological and cultural heritage so that a semblance might be found that poignantly illuminates a point of existence. Manifestation of this, its communication from the personal (or mystical) plane to the multiple conveyance of public space, effects reinvention, not just of the individual—but of the society, its culture, and inevitably other

societies and cultures it directly or indirectly impinges on. The creative act is revolutionary, explosive—even dangerous. A poem may have dramatic political consequences for a nation. Art can sedate, but it can also irreversibly change our perception and thinking about ourselves and our destiny. Art represents both humanities need for reflection, and the evolving fractal edge of its intellect. In this sense it is not merely structural, but rather a morphing of many structures undergoing a process of finding new form.

So artists both reflect the nature of their society and impact upon it, thus contributing to an evolution of ideas. Artists have always been the filters through which ideas and forms, whether obtained from trade routes, colonialism, telecommunication, or other channels, are transformed and reissued with a new localized relevance. Gauguin, Picasso, and other founders of Modernism, borrowed liberally but inventively from Asian, Pacific, and African art. Their interest and investigation of these cultures was without doubt as symptomatic of European colonial practices as it was a testimony to the transformative codes embedded in the cultural artifacts that were imported from Asia, Africa and the Pacific. But their choice to incorporate these forms in their own art was from a need to find a revolutionary expression to the effects on the psyche of the dramatic technological, industrial and political changes occurring in that period. The colonizer invades, but is in turn invaded and infected by the very culture that it seeks to dominate. In this sense the cultures of Asia, Africa, and Pacific have had a determining influence on the development of Modernism and contemporary “Western” culture. The prevalent notion that the contemporary art of these regions is only imitative of Western Modernism, and has no relevance to their indigenous concerns, holds little credibility today. If an Asian, African, or Pacific artist chooses to use a form that is apparently “Western” it is because it is as much theirs as any “other”—though it becomes subverted to their purpose and politically charged by it. The fundamental difference between assimilation of Western ideas by Africa, Asia, and the Pacific—and the absorption of culture by the West from these continents—is that the former is complicated by the politics of oppression and resistance, whereas the latter is confused with purposeful miscomprehension which frames the “Others” culture in terms of the exotic or barbaric. This process, whereby the cultures of Asia, Africa and the Pacific are formed into a curious conglomerate—an “imaginative geography”, as elegantly defined by Edward Said in “Orientalism” (1979)—is a convenient conceit of stereotypes and preconceptions that has its foundation in the colonialist and imperialist activities of the West.

The impact of Western culture on Asia and the Pacific is not recent, but centuries old. Especially in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, many aspects of Western Culture, for example, a new use of perspective and human portraiture, were incorporated into painting in China, Korea and Japan. This assimilation coincided with political changes, and in itself produced a new



order of thinking, further contributing to cultural and social revolution. This introduction is especially interesting in Korea, which filtered Western culture indirectly through China and later, through Japan. The earliest Western paintings, books, and other artifacts were introduced to Korea mainly by official envoys returning from their posts in China. By the mid-eighteenth century there was an intellectual shift away from the conventions of Confucianism to a pragmatism that was open to new ideas, and social change. This created a climate conducive to assimilating the foreign knowledge that came via the trade routes from China. No doubt, the Western depiction of the body as well as the technical execution of these works, produced a mixture of sentiments ranging from abhorrence through fascination.

There was the initial shock of the foreign import, incomprehension of its “value-set”, and the difficulty of aligning it with traditional standards. This still applies, of course, to contemporary experience. Most astounding for artists and scholars was the realism and naturalism of Western painting and this inevitably led to an incorporation of Western techniques of perspective and portraiture in their own works. It still remained necessary to distinguish the two schools of painting—Western style painting (“Suh'yang hwa”), and Oriental painting (“dong'yang hwa”), as separate movements. The significance and translation of these imports becomes further complicated with changing political events. When the Japanese Meiji Restoration, itself the result of a wholesale adoption of social, political and industrial models from the West (necessitated by having to fend off aggressive overtures by Western governments), culminated in the eventual annexation of Korea in 1910, Western ideas in Korea became synonymous with the culture of the imperialist overlord. So these ideas, already to an extent assimilated and given new “ownership”, suddenly acquire a new foreignness, and are identified as an imperial imposition. Colonization involves a supplanting of the subjects identity with that of the colonizer. In the case of the Japanese occupation of Korea, 1910-1945, this came both in the form of Japanese culture and language, as well as the newly adopted Western culture.

An academic form of Western painting was encouraged by the Japanese, and this conservatism, by now institutionalized, continued to be supported by the Americans after the Korean War. In effect, this rigid translation of Western values in art was used as a tool to quell resistance and guarantee cooperation and collaboration. Indeed, the Japanese administration aimed to achieve total control of the cultural, social, political, and economic aspects of the Korean people. They created an infrastructure that monitored Korean life at all levels. Occupation of this nature undoubtedly leaves a permanent mark on the psyche of a nation. On the one hand there is resistance to the oppressor in which national identity is formed and consolidated. On the other there is assimilation and collaboration which compromises personal identity and national integrity. Cultural resistance

in Korea often took the form of subverting, and appropriating those aspects of culture used by the occupier to oppress. At various times, through the 1930's to the 1950's, and again in the 1980's there have been movements of political realism in art that rejected the establishment art scene and created their own critical theories defining the social and political role of art. These movements had the contradiction of a figurative realism with a leaning to revival of folk art. Frantz Fanon noted that there are three stages of the intellectual in the encounter with the colonizer. The first stage is unqualified assimilation; in the second there is recovery of identity, remembrance; in the third the intellectual motivates the people to resistance and rejection of the oppressor.

A further example of the function of this mechanism is the Korean "Min Jung" movement (Peoples' Art). In a society deprived of its democratic rights of expression, artists in the 1980's realized that their practice lacked credibility unless it addressed itself to political enlightenment and consciousness raising. In response to this, artists evolved a form of critical political realism. In a period of total press censorship this form of realism served both as a focus and expression of dissidence. The critical basis of Min Jung was to see realism as the only style appropriate to forming a national identity in which political power was placed in the hands of the "people". It saw political Realism as the antithesis of, and antidote to Modernism which it regarded as a neo-colonial, and cultural imperialist import that was irrelevant to the concerns and needs of the Korean people. What is not immediately apparent here is the extraordinary interweave made by filtering, appropriating, and identifying the elements that originate in the cultures of the oppressor and the oppressed respectively. Western style figuration has gone through a counter metamorphosis in Korea. Its initial introduction coincides with new thinking, but it then becomes alternatively a lever of oppression and resistance, stagnation and innovation. As in any society, revolutionary ideas soon become institutionalized. The criticism made by the Min Jung movement of the "Informel" group and other Korean Modernist movements from the 1950's through to the 1970's, although valid in its context, tends to ignore the relevance of the concepts of Modernism to Korean art and, indeed, their origin in Eastern philosophy and aesthetics. The "Monochrome" painters of the 1970's were the Korean counterpart of the Minimalists. There was a fundamental difference, however, in their intent. The monochromatic and minimal use of colour in traditional Korean art has both spiritual and cosmic, as well as spatial values. So there was a very natural affinity to this movement in Korea, but what was understood by it was perhaps far more profound than the mere reduction of painting to a pure object.

Both Byron Kim and Cho Duck-Hyun are "Post-Modern" Korean artists whose work has an unavoidable historical reference to the abstract and figurative movements in Korea. The irony of Byron Kim's large, serene monochromatic paintings is that they are a disquieting subversion of Abstract and Minimalist painting to a figurative content. *Synechdoche* (1993), for example, (named

for the figure of speech in which the part suggests the whole, or vice versa) consists of 204 small canvases that are portraits of the skin pigmentation of subjects of various ethnic origins, who had posed for the artist. In another work *Mom III*, wide softly brushed colour fields are used to depict the skin of the artist's mother. Thus the apparent abstraction in Kim's work is encoded with specific socio-political and organic meanings that imply a complex and emotional range of signification. The purity of the surface is betrayed, or enriched by its content, dependant on your perspective. His work also pays a certain homage to the paintings of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, whose works of the 1950's may also be influenced by a Zen Buddhism filtered through an American interpretation seeking, perhaps, a politically safe form of expression in the face of a McCarthy inquisition on their earlier political activism. However, Byron Kim's works are politically charged by their recognition of their cultural and colonial context. They address the entwining of Modernism and Orientalism and extend to the recovery of memory of a culture not quite forsaken by the Korean-American diaspora of which he is a product.

Cho Duck Hyun's figurative works are installations made from large paintings of historical or old family album photographs painstakingly reproduced with conte pencil and sepia inks that saturate the fibre of the canvas. Lacking both the conviction of the Min Jung political art movement, or the romanticism of earlier Korean figurative art, Hyun's work is an existential mining of collective memory. He uses the photograph as a stylistically reductive gateway to a past that is being hurriedly buried by an erasive rewriting of history. *Exhumation for Burial* (1996), is an installation of about fifty small wooden crates, each containing an image of an infant, arranged in rows in a field where the topsoil has been freshly exposed. In fact, the child's face is that of his newborn son. The artist, whose father died when he was a child, was told by his mother that his newborn son looked like his deceased father, so the implication of the work is of death and renewal—a reincarnation of the past in the present. Like a photograph, Cho Duck Hyun's works insist on the immediacy of the event, and its permeation to the present. This is obvious in his series *A Memory of the 20th Century* which depicts scenes of political demonstrations and riots that followed the aftermath of the Korean War seen through a shuttered frame. The architecture of the frame has a particular emphasis in all of his works, and we are required to consider it as much as the image it contains—as it signifies the threshold over which the image is pulled out of a cultural amnesia into the presence of the observer.

Misinterpretation, translation, linguistics, formal aesthetics, are inexhaustible themes in the hands of the contemporary Chinese calligrapher, Xu Bing. *A Case Study of Transference*, 1994 was an installation held in a temporary gallery space in Beijing in which a sow and a pig trampled open books that littered the floor of a large pen. The pigs, selected carefully for their virility and season, engaged in continuous coitus oblivious to the onlookers in the gallery. The skin of the male and

the sow were covered, in no meaningful sequence, with Western and Chinese characters respectively. Amid the energetic squeals of pig life and the shocked laughter of the Beijing audience, knowledge underwent a simultaneous process of transference and degeneration in which its conveyor, language, was reduced to illegibility and pseudo meaning. The form acts as a catalyst on the content and what is left is only the aesthetic. The nature of abstraction in Chinese calligraphy illustrates by contrast the differences in the Western and Eastern philosophies of the aesthetic. Western tradition defines the aesthetic in painting through the balanced structural relationships of composition, form, colour and texture and their expression.

The tradition of Chinese calligraphy, which is also the basis of the traditions of brush painting in Korea and Japan, equates the creative act, not necessarily the evidence, with the object—which is to achieve emptiness, through which one may attain enlightenment. Considered inseparable from poetic expression, calligraphy has been esteemed a high artform since the Han Dynasty (206 BC) and one which embodies the principles of Chan Buddhism. The action of laying ink to paper is absolute and the point of its absorption in the fabric is one of no retreat. The stroke must be completed without hesitation. The form that is left is purely aesthetic, a potency of emptiness. Probably, the most well known of Xu Bing's works is *A Book from the Sky* (1987 - 1991). To make this, the artist spent over one year manually carving blocks of 4,000 Chinese characters, manipulated in such a way to look authentic but conveying no actual meaning. This installation commands a presence wherever it has been shown and features three scrolls of characters attached as one sheet that unfurls from the ceiling like a divine instructional canopy. On the ground below are ten rivers of open books revealing their aesthetic testament of non-meaning.

These studies of transference and translation are taken to the point of sheer ingenuity in Xu Bing's classroom installation *Learning Square Words*. In this classroom of equally spaced desks with calligraphy notebooks laid out on top, the tutor is actually an instructional video that advises the student on methods of calligraphy. It eventually becomes apparent to the student that the beautiful Chinese characters they are tracing are actually from the Alphabet. Hence the characters in the book can form words in any European language, some being immediately apparent, others held only for a moment before they slip from perception back to their form of Chinese ideograms. The artist has constructed a poetic Babel from the ironic transfusion of Western and Eastern cultures in which the forms can be distinguished, but their message only understood when their content has been condensed to non-meaning.

Born in Pakistan, which itself is a multiculture distinguished by Muslim, Hindu, Persian, Indian, European, and British Colonial influences, Shahzia Sikander draws liberally from the spectrum of her cultural heritage. Her painting is undoubtedly rooted in the traditions and imagery of

miniature painting from Pakistan and India, yet her application of material often has the loose painterliness that comes from Western tradition. She paints “miniatures”, but these occasionally transform into large murals that refuse the borders of a rectangle and, indeed, appear to want to escape the confines of the Western gallery walls they have invaded. Sikander has reinvented miniature painting though utilizing certain of its stylistic constraints. She incorporates mythologies and imagery from a spectrum of cultures including Muslim, Hindu, Persian, Indian, European, Mexican—even Celtic. These diverse sources are not at first apparent to the observer (immersed as they may be in their own Orientalist projections) and are only revealed with closer consideration.

The female figure is frequently the focus of her work, especially the feminine use of the veil—a theme that she continuously explores, particularly as it pertains to imagination and issues of feminine identity. As a Muslim and a feminist she is intrigued by the power of its religious and political ambiguity. Its function is to hide sexuality, to prevent distraction from prayer, yet it also signifies feminine sexuality. It is often considered by Westerners to symbolize oppression of women, yet the decision to wear it or discard it has been a means of resistance by Muslim women under colonial rule. Although Sikander's work comprises a liberal appropriation from the associated components of her own culture and others, her work is more explorative than arbitrary, and the overlay of the seemingly disparate iconography of her compositions is consolidated with a new potency. One that is expressive not only of her origin, but of her looped passage through Eastern and Western cultures.

The works of the collaborative artists Reamillo and Juliet—Alwin Reamillo and Juliet Lea are a satirical exploration and deconstruction of the political terrain of the Philippines. After enduring four hundred years of Hispanic rule, fifty years of American education and consumerism, and three years of Japanese control, Filipino culture has incorporated and absorbed everything that has invaded it and is notorious for its bizarre confusion of icons. This diverse and colourful iconography is much in evidence and fully exploited in the slyly witty political deconstructions created by Reamillo and Juliet, of paintings, photomontage, collages, maps and diagrams. In their work, *Kakainin ba nila ang maga saging?* (Will They Be Eating The Bananas?) from *P.I. for Sale* (1995), Mother Filipinas is laid out as a cadaver of Asia, her corpse opened and dissected by clamps, scissors and other surgical instruments intent on probing her interior and marking her terrain. The “map” is made on an oil-stained bedsheet that has the appearance of flayed skin. Its surface is not only cut and dismembered but is crawling with painted maggots, an indicator of the (political) corruption below. The surface of their paintings are a dense layering of images and icons as surreal as they are pop and usually with a direct social or political inference. *Bulang ang taong nakasalaming iyon* (Blind Is That Man With Glasses) 1996, also in the *P.I. for Sale* series shows a procession of priests juxtaposed

with a sacrilegious overlay and backdrop of splayed vaginas with forceps, crucifixes, and peering bureaucrats in close proximity. Elsewhere in the Bosch-like landscape a kidney machine connects President Fidel Ramos with Ferdinand Marcos, and out of an erupting volcano, a man with a barong, smokes or inflates a large brain (the society?) —as if this is the only action that could make sense in this chaos. In common with many intellectuals and artist of their generation, the artists are critical of what they perceive to be a triad of fascistic power formed of an alliance of government, Church, and the military. Their art is a postmortem of a murdered society —a dissection and peeling of layers upon layers to reveal the ravages of colonialism and post-colonial corruption on the national cadaver.

Each of the preceding artists could be described as “Post-Modern” in that they deal with the translation and filtering of ideas from Western culture, the mechanisms of memory and recovery of identity within the processes of colonialism and imperialism, and the perception of their own cultural practice by the West. Imants Tillers, who has been referred to as one of the most important and representative of the Australian Post-Modernists, also has a similar engagement with memory and the mechanisms of post-colonial culture. But as a first generation Australian, the son of Latvian refugees, he has naturally cast his net over the self-referential totality of a European Modernism that has been filtered through reproduction and geographical remoteness. Since the late 1980's, the structural relationships that determine a cultural and national identity in a post-colonial society became central to the work of many Australian artists.

The theoretical debunking of the holy trinity of Modernism, Modernity, and Avant-Gardism, combined with a growing awareness of the intricate mechanisms of “Otherness” as it applies to race, gender, class, and location in colonial, post-colonial, and diasporic societies, had a particular relevance to Australian artists. Their very remoteness from the great metropolitan centers of world culture in Europe and North America, necessitated their engagement of the problematics of post-colonialism and cultural and geographic dislocation. In common with Post-Modernists abroad, the work of artists such as Tracey Moffat, Juan Davilla, and Imants Tillers, is characterized by hybridization and mimicry, but it also extends to a subversion of the European heritage that reveals the post-colonial dynamics of location, dislocation, and “Otherness”. Working systematically from reproductions, Tillers revitalizes his encounters with “second-hand” art by painting them on to small canvas boards, which put together, form large muralesque installations. In short, his working method is quotation: he copies other artists' work. His methods however result in a sophisticated and layered subversion of the “borrowed” material. His paintings and installations are cultural conglomerates that embody unrelated discourses brought into a field where they are laid against and over each other. There is no easy reading of Tillers' work —they are assimilation's of various and distant cultures dispatched to Australia on magazine covers and glossy reproductions to be reformed in his autono-

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mous arrays. They are the remnants of cultural notations disconnected from their origins and attributed new meaning within the juxtapositions in his work. It is the irreducibility of these works to any simple interpretation that makes them remarkable as Post-Modern art. There is no trivializing irony in these works. Rather they form a complex overlay of inferences that have no simple conclusion. His works are maps that can be rearranged to describe other geographies, according to his working method. To quote the artist, “The canvas boards are all numbered as I paint them in a continuous sequence from one to infinity —and any one of them can be recombined to form a new work. In this way an area of failed painting is never wasted but can become ground in another subsequent work—”. The reproduced fragmentations of Tillers' work emphasize Australian provincialism and its tendency towards mimicry and excessive consumption and regurgitation of imported and native culture. It is within this eclectic mix and reconstitution of dislocated imagery and fragmented authorship that he portrays both a personal and a national identity.

The works of the artists in this exhibition are as diverse in form as they are in concern. Yet each creates an intersection between the political, spiritual, and societal domains of their cultures that serves to direct our attention to the fundamental differences of non-Western and Western cultures, as well to their interconnectedness and the problematics therein of origin, influence, and authorship. It is hoped that the exhibition may alleviate the notion that the substance of contemporary art has been created solely by the West —when posterity will indeed reveal the fabric to be an interweave of ideas borrowed, stolen, assimilated, or transformed, from disparate and distant cultures brought into proximity through centuries of colonialism and trade.

*Yu Yeon Kim*