Transcending Histories & Disrupting the Present at APT7

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The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) marks two decades of the APT series. Much of Contemporary Asian Art history has been shaped by the dynamism, vibrancy and vital inclusions of successive APTs. As Chaitanya Sambrani aptly offers, prior to APT1 ('Tradition and Change', 1993), there was 'no contemporary Asian Art in Asia'. While contemporary artistic practices existed and were developing at individual centres, such as in Thailand and China, 'contemporary Asian Art was a creature born on the banks of the Brisbane River'.

In this year of celebration, there has been a strong sense of reflection and an emphasis by the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) on capturing the history of the APT through a number of significant commissions. Atul Dodiya's *SOMERSAULT IN SANDALWOOD SKY* (2012) records and recounts the trajectory of Contemporary Asian Art and the APT in a series of contemporary cabinets of curiosities, while Heman Chong incorporates material from the QAGOMA archive to create a complex, open-ended sound work.

Beyond these commissions that deal explicitly with the APT's history, many artists at APT7 explore the role and impact of the past, and the ubiquity of history, displacement and memory – highlighting continuing tensions at play. Underlying these works is a determination by artists trying to make sense of the present through embracing notions of historicity (broadly defined) and revisiting their own histories.

REVISITING COLONIALISM & ART HISTORY

It is perhaps fitting to begin with Greg Semu whose digital, dialectic works respond to the histories of the Pacific through the richness of art's own history. It is in present tense even though we are referencing past historical events. It gives it [the past] new life’, says Semu of his practice. Semu’s repertoire critiques and disrupts established colonial histories that have ignored, displaced, and subsumed the proper place of many proud and rich cultures. His art offers a discursive platform to create paradigm shifts, ‘providing a passage where one can change the personal perception and facilitate a healing’. Untitled (2007) from The Battle of the
Noble Savage series re-stages clashes between Maori and colonising Europeans to re-imagine the established portrayal of this violent past. The rearing horse that forms the focus of Semu’s work recalls a French history painting, Napoleon Bonaparte, Técuitl Conquered, crossing the Alps at Great St Bernard Pass, 20 May 1800 (1803) by Jacques Louis David. By his intriguing employment of the Western art historical canon, Semu ‘reverses the tables’ and reclaims the history of his ancestors. He introduces Maori warriors into the portrait, creating a new dimension to David’s work that challenges the myth of the Maori as uncultivated, primitive savages living in a state of nature. Instead, Semu presents them, like David’s Napoleon, as triumphant, victorious rulers of their land. The foreign is rendered familiar to viewers through the ‘hybrid language’ of art that has developed over time.

RADICALISING THE PAST

Parastou Forouhar is another artist whose work is charged with a deep appreciation of art history. Her refreshingly powerful use of Farsi calligraphy engages with the broader history of the revered position given to the written word in Islam and Persian/Iranian culture. Forouhar’s works offer encounters that are ‘simultaneously tempting and irritating’ to the viewer, to encourage them to give up their distanced, ambivalent positions and rethink their presumptions. For APT7, Forouhar continues her Schriftbraum (Written Room) series (1999–ongoing) of enlarged and illegible interpretations of Farsi script. Superimposing and interweaving calligraphic text onto the walls and floor of the white cube space, she deconstructs the calligraphic tradition to create ‘easy and unquestioning’ works while avoiding an atmosphere of exoticism. Despite its aesthetic allure, this immersive calligraphy possesses no definitive meaning; it is ‘fragmented and obscure’, an ‘abstract visual language [in] an environment that cultivates subjective experience’.

Forouhar embeds her own history here – the meaninglessness of the script references her own loss of command in the Persian language after years of living in exile in Germany since the early 1990s. Like the vibrant aesthetics of the work, her native tongue is now merely a ‘beautiful memory’. Forouhar destabilises our encounters with the past and translates violence and loss into beauty.

Born in 1975 in Son La, Vietnam, the year direct US involvement in Vietnam ceased, Nguyen Minh Phuoc draws on symbols and associations we use to connect with the past. In Red Rites (2009) Nguyen focuses on an elderly lady performing tranquil Tai Chi movements. Against her plays a vivid series of daily rituals in Hanoi depicting changing social circumstances in contemporary Vietnamese society. The contrasting micro and macro perspectives deal with the discontinuities of Vietnam’s history and with an uninhibited directness that projects into the present. The work offers a deep, affective experience, an invitation to move with the subject as she seemingly guides the viewer through various forms of Tai Chi. The gentle and meditative quality of her movements is however disrupted by the disturbing memory of military rule and control, poignantly symbolised both by her uniform and the bright communist red fans. Tai Chi’s inherent control and precision is yet another reference to the complex, controlling histories of the Vietnamese struggle for independence, and the remnants of this aggressive and violent past. The ostensibly repetitive, constant looping of these movements prevents any sense of moving forward, suggesting a future for Vietnam that continues to be held down by the chains of history. By presenting the past with the present, Nguyen highlights the prevailing role of history in the consciousness and memory of a nation.

THE CITY AS A SITE OF HISTORICITY

While Forouhar and Nguyen use beauty and contemplation to negotiate history, Phuan Thai Meng creates provoking and confronting cityscapes that reference tradition and change, albeit less explicitly. Born of a desire to understand the history of Malaysia, Phuan’s dynamic multi-panel photorealist paintings make visible the changes and history of development in Malaysian society over the last few decades. His works engage with notions of ‘urban geography’ and the social and political status of the nation? In The Luring of [ ] 流水不腐, 戶枢不蠹 (2012), Phuan reflects on the history of place and space amidst progress in Kuala Lumpur. The city’s ever-increasing overpasses and highways dominate the canvas, structures that signify urban development and growth. Unlike the bright, unblemished cityscapes welcoming tourists that we have come to associate with the Malaysia Truly Asia ads – filled with luxuriant landscapes, sunny beaches, and the
passengers and the many cars have no drivers. Phuan reveals a soulless Kuala Lumpur (the price paid for rapid development), and poses a subtle political challenge – questioning the very purpose of development and these ambitious multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects. Where are the citizens for whom they are ostensibly built in this development-for-development’s-sake scenario?

When placed collectively in dialogue with each other, these energetic works highlight the constant negotiation artists undertake to create new ways of understanding historical discourse. The multivalent narratives disable common stereotypes and expose the complexities of the past. They facilitate broader discussions over contentious historical and political questions – questions and challenges with no definitive solutions yet which remain fundamental to our understanding of our present and future.

5. Parasitou Forouhar, An Interview with Bree Richards, APT 7: The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (exhibition catalogue), 2012, Queensland Art Gallery, p. 117.
6. QAGOMA Interview at APT 7, 8 December 2012.
7. Artist presentation at the opening of APT 7, December 2012.

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imposing Petronas Twin Towers – Phuan’s work portrays urban scenes that are depressing, grey and decrepit. Pronounced incisions on the work strip away the immediate surface to reveal the hidden, simple structures that support the canvas thereby encouraging the viewer to think beyond the surface.

The ‘Selamat Datang’ billboard (meaning ‘Welcome’ in Bahasa Malaysia), an institution on many Malaysian roads, is a jaded reminder of a past that remains constant in an otherwise changing cityscape. Ironically, Phuan’s city is devoid of people: his buses are without

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