

Re-Examining Postcolonial Asia Through the Works of 5 Artists – in the Singapore Biennale 2016



Karagatan (The Breadth of Oceans), 2016 Oil on mother-of-pearl shell and oil on pearl (set of 50) Diameter 2.54–5 cm (each); installation dimensions variable Collection of the Artist Singapore Biennale 2016 commission

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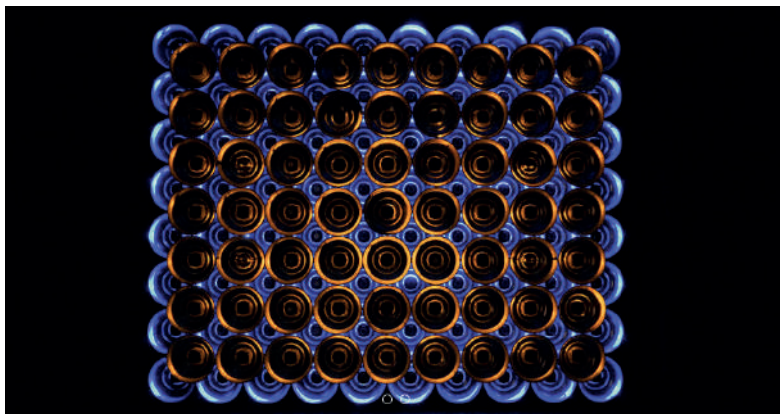
AUTHOR

Even if the title Atlas of Mirrors of the 5th edition of the Singapore Biennale has been criticized for being heavy handed, this show of 58 works by artists from Southeast, South and East Asia made for a lively discourse on postcolonial issues that repurposed our gaze on history, identity, and tradition.

TEXT: Bansie Vasvani

IMAGES: Courtesy of Singapore Biennale 2016

Housed mostly in the main venue of the Singapore Art Museum, (SAM) and the ancillary Q8 exhibition space, some of the most original works stood out for the ways in which they utilized traditional techniques and modern technology to unify Asian cultures.



SONICreflection, 2016

Wok lids, tweeters, pencil microphones, computer with software, amplifiers, sound card and aluminium

380 × 673 × 134 cm

Collection of the Artist

Singapore Biennale 2016 commission

For instance, Singaporean artist Zulfikre Mahmud's sound sculpture *SONICreflection*, 2016, consists of a number of lids taken from basic cooking woks that serve as speakers. Utilizing the idea of the Duchampian readymade to make a work of art, Mahmud's lids are fitted with microphones and tweeters that replay various recorded tongues spoken in new immigrant neighborhoods in Singapore. On close encounter, a cacophony of animated foreign languages that represent Little Myanmar, Little Philippines, Little Vietnam, and other Asian countries can be heard. Specific identities get blurred as sounds from different languages overlap and mingle with each another. Reflecting increasingly amalgamated urban societies that are made up of varied cultures, Mahmud's gold wok lids, which are arranged in a neat grid-like wall sculpture, communicate both the macro and micro aspects of cosmopolitan Asian societies.



Melampau Batas (Beyond Boundaries), 2016
Antique boat, terracotta and found materials
Dimensions variable
Collection of the Artist

In another area, Indonesian artist Made Djirna's installation *Melampau Batas (Beyond Boundaries)*, 2016, that occupies an entire room, is made up of hundreds of terracotta figures hung on the walls and arranged in and around a large found wooden boat and dead tree. Resembling the chambers of a voodoo room, these somewhat creepy and unsettling figures that are carved into the tree, and represent spirits being transported to another land in the boat, recall the traditional Indonesian belief in the spirits of the dead. Although these icons are specific to Indonesia, the tradition of spirits, and the custom of invoking one's ancestors is prevalent in almost all Asian cultures. Djirna's imaginative evocation of ancient practices and mores through his primordial clay figures inscribes the sociological significance of tracing underlying links to lost cultural beliefs in Asia. Like Mahmud's sound sculpture that integrates different cultures, Djirna's figures transcend specific boundaries to encompass a larger region with a history of such beliefs.



Other Map Series, 2016
Archival digital print, acrylic, ink, pencil on paper and canvas (20 pieces)
Various dimensions
Collection of the Artist
Singapore Biennale 2016 commission

In the same way, Pala Pothupitiye's imaginary reconfigurations of maps and colonized territories from his native Sri Lanka have a wider pan-Asian significance. History gets turned on its head in his *Other Map Series*, 2016, where colonial territories and boundaries that both corralled the locals and kept them at bay are reimagined through Pothupitiye's highly personal color coded areas. Using Ptolemy's maps of ancient Ceylon, and more current maps of Sri Lanka, he incorporates images of voyagers and ancient ships, as well as maps with lions' teeth that serve as the emblem of the Sri Lankan national Lion Flag. By referencing the history of Portuguese, Dutch, and British occupation in Sri Lanka, and the recent thirty-year-civil war that divided the country between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, Pothupitiye's maps remind viewers of the long history of disputes over land the world over. But more significantly, he amplifies the fact that the production and study of cartography rests between science and art.



Karagatan (The Breadth of Oceans), 2016
Oil on mother-of-pearl shell and oil on pearl (set of 50)
Diameter 2.54–5 cm (each); installation dimensions variable
Collection of the Artist
Singapore Biennale 2016 commission

At a much more micro level Gregory Halili's oil paintings on mother-of-pearl shells document the lives of fisherman, pearl divers, and traders in the Philippines through a series of portraits of their eyes. Referring to his work as *Karagatan (The Breadth of Oceans)*, 2016, Halili pays homage to the local denizens of the coastal regions in his country who subsist on their wares from the sea. Using the technique of traditional miniature painting, Halili's unusual portraits are captured with a great deal of empathy for his subjects. Through crevices, folds, drooping eyelids, and blurry pupils, Halili portrays the wear and tear of their lives. His minimalist paintings represent an entire swath of people, especially in developing countries, that struggle to make a living. As each individual eye looks back at us, the fragile condition of their lives, and the timeless relevance of these miniscule paintings are revealed.



Jaonua: The Nothingness (King of Meat: The Nothingness), 2016
 5-channel video installation
 Duration 35:00 mins
 Collection of the Artist
 Singapore Biennale 2016 commission

In the Thai artist Arya Rasdjarmrearnsook's 5-channel video *Jaonua: The Nothingness (King of Meat: The Nothingness)*, 2016 gluttony, desire, and innate human cruelty are explored. Through her method of projecting overlapping images on four hanging fabric screens, and finally on a bed in the back of the room, explicit sexual scenes, consumption of sumptuous meals, people relaxing, animals grazing and being tortured before being slaughtered in her native Thailand examine different aspects of life. Presented like a stream-of-consciousness, Rasdjarmrearnsook's take on consumption and our obsession with material and physical gratification is particularly significant in our times.

Serving as the most nuanced mirror of contemporary Asia, Rasdjarmrearnsook's video, like the works by Mahmod, Djirna, Pothupitiye and Halili, is pertinent not only in the way it reflects local concerns, but also for its expansive reach. Through such works, the 5th Singapore Biennale became the melting pot, and according to Susie Lingham, the former director of SAM, the "corridor between two Asias."



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Bansie Vasvani is a curator and art critic with a focus on Asian and other non-Western art practices. She investigates contemporary art that mines issues of cultural identity, politics, immigration, and the commingling of varied cultural influences. Bansie travels frequently to Asia to study, research, and write critically. Currently she is working on showcasing art from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India at several institutions.

Her work has appeared in Hyperallergic, ArtAsiaPacific, Art Review Asia, Artnet news, Art21 Magazine, Brooklyn Rail, Sculpture Magazine, Daily Serving, Aesthetica Magazine, and Modern Art Asia amongst many other publications.

Bansie has a BA in English literature, Bombay University; an MA in English and American Literature, Northeastern University; ABD (all but dissertation) in English and American Literature, CUNY Graduate Center; and an MA in Modern and Contemporary Art History, Christies Education, New York where she earned the Best Student Award.