

# M.A.TTER UNBOUND

A Periodical of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme

Issue 1, 2017

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## Editorial

Dear Readers

*I am delighted to announce the first issue of M.A.TTER UNBOUND, an annual publication by the Masters in Asian Art Histories Programme, developed with the intention of promoting critical writing as a way for students to develop their own voice within the field. On this note, I would like to thank all the contributors and student editorial committee members in making the publication a great success. Also, I will like to add my special thanks to my colleagues Jeffrey Say, Programme Leader and Dr. Clare Veal, who were the instigating and motivating forces for the publication.*

Dr S. Chandrasekaran

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photo credit: Jeffrey Say

A Periodical of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme

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**W**e are delighted to launch the inaugural issue of *M.A.TTER UNBOUND*, a periodical of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts. To be published annually, *M.A.TTER UNBOUND* is first and foremost a platform to showcase the research and writings of students and alumni of the MA Programme. The majority of the essays presented here have been distilled from selected theses and module papers, completed as part of the Programme. The selections are based on the theme of a particular issue. *M.A.TTER UNBOUND* will eventually be hosted as an online periodical on the MA Asian Art Histories page of the LASALLE website, with expanded features and multimedia functions such as videos. This will happen once the LASALLE website has been revamped in the second half of 2017. Future issues may also include commissioned writings.

The name *M.A.TTER UNBOUND* implies a concatenation of meanings. The term “Matter” not only suggests that art and art history are the subject *matter* of this publication,

but it also connotes art’s preoccupation with materiality and medium. “Unbound” signals the publication’s digitised content; free from the “bound” journal format, it acts as a space to explore the discursive possibilities of art history. Together, *M.A.TTER UNBOUND* makes clear the interdisciplinary aims of the publication, which focuses on scholarly work that is able to embody the paradoxes of artistic preoccupations with the material world and their metaphysical significances. The period after the letters M and A signify the publication as a platform for the writings of the Programme’s students and alumni. Coincidentally, the term “matter unbound” was coined by cultural anthropologist, Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld, to encompass the social effects of objects that create fluid and contingent understandings. This too seems highly relevant for our explorations into art and art history.

The inaugural issue of *M.A.TTER UNBOUND* is organised around the theme of ‘education.’ Taken in a broad sense, education here provides a number of entry-points to think



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through the significance of the Programme in relation to the art ecologies in which it is situated. The articles and reviews collected here thus present important critical perspectives on arts pedagogies and their influence on artistic and art historical discourses from the region. For example, Lucia Cordeschi's article explores the role of the artist-teacher through a close study of Filippino artist Roberto Chabet's pedagogical strategies, and the problematics of his 'influence' on his former students' work. Similarly, Loredana Pazzini Paracciani examines the relationship between Thai artistic practices and the educational background of individual artists. Moreover, by examining the trope of the 'classroom' in the photographic work of several Chinese and Chinese-diaspora artists, Kong Yen Lin makes clear the ideological implications of education when it is linked to the goals of repressive states.

In addition to these longer articles, this issue also features a range of reviews and reports that extrapolate the pedagogical implications of exhibitions and publications. These include, Elaine Chiew Peck Leng's review of MAAAH lecturer June Yap's 2016 publication, *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia*. Usha Chandradas' report from the 11<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Biennale is also linked closely to the program: this was the destination for the graduating cohort's class trip in 2016. Our issue closes with current student Rosalie Kwok's review of *On Sharks and Humanity*, shown at the newly opened Parkview Museum in Singapore, in which she evaluates the capacity for art exhibitions to educate their audiences about wider social and ecological issues.

As the articles published here demonstrate, the issue of arts pedagogy in Asia is not unproblematic, being one that requires constant critical reflection. However, as the

breadth, diversity and, above all, originality of the research undertaken by these students and alumni signify, its role in determining the future of historical, theoretical and artistic practices is one of great significance.



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## The artist-teacher and lasting traces of influence

Lucia Cordeschi

Conceptual artist Roberto Chabet (Manila, 1937–2013) was a pivotal figure in the transition from modern to contemporary art in the Philippines. He was also a curator, and he taught and mentored hundreds of aspiring artists. Numerous tribute exhibitions<sup>1</sup> and homages,<sup>2</sup> as well as a monograph<sup>3</sup> suggest that he was an influential figure. This study aims to understand his teaching methodology and assess tangible modes of its positive and negative impact on the artistic practices of his former students. Furthermore, I propose that this might pose a number of entry points in advancing an art historical discussion on the development of contemporary art in the Philippines. In the process, this study develops ways to conceptualise artistic influence when this does not translate into a distinctive technical style.

Chabet produced a diverse artistic practice,<sup>4</sup> which included paintings, drawings, collages, installations, found objects and creative fiction.<sup>5</sup> He initiated an alternative artist-run space named *Shop 6*,<sup>6</sup> was the founding director of the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP)<sup>7</sup> and curated exhibitions for over forty years.<sup>8</sup> He travelled extensively abroad, particularly to Europe and the United States,<sup>9</sup>

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*Chabet as artist-teacher is here understood as adopting a specific philosophy in seeing and understanding educational problems in a way that directly derived from his artistic practice*

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during a time of protests against the commodification of art through institutions<sup>10</sup> and just as conceptualism was attempting to redefine the nature of art. This resonated with Chabet and translated into a persistent exploration of alternative forms of visual expression and ways of thinking about art, which are reflected in his art production and teachings.

Chabet taught hundreds of students at the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts (UP CFA)<sup>11</sup> and through private seminars.<sup>12</sup> His death on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2013 prompted a plethora of messages of gratitude and remembrance from the artists he had taught and mentored. A group of his former students is committed to “serve and honour his memory”.<sup>13</sup>

### *Chabet – The artist-teacher*

The designation artist-teacher extends beyond the fact that Chabet was an art-teacher and a practising artist. Embracing James G. Daichendt’s views,<sup>14</sup> Chabet as artist-teacher is here understood as adopting a specific philosophy in seeing and understanding educational problems in a way that directly derived from his artistic practice.

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Chabet rapidly acquired a reputation as an innovative but demanding educator among his students, resulting in a polarised perception and reception of his teaching methods. Judy Freya Sibayan,<sup>15</sup> Ronald Achacoso<sup>16</sup> and Lena Cobangbang,<sup>17</sup> who became Chabet's students in 1972, 1983 and 1996 respectively, provide a written account of their learning experience that is not dissimilar from the majority of the artists interviewed. In particular, Chabet's teaching methods appear to be characterised by extensive practice<sup>18</sup> and exposure.

Chabet's introductory learning activities consisted of routines of cutting magazines and arranging the cut pieces into series of collages. These activities also included the execution of "100 drawings" on bond paper, which were to be completed within a short time.<sup>19</sup> These time constraints meant that each student, free to arrange the collages and to draw at will, had to concentrate on their process and visual thinking, rather than the work's technical finish. As an observer and facilitator, Chabet would ask the students to compare the first and last works in the series they had produced, in order to assess their differences and reflect on the changes that had taken place during the process. This student-centred approach to education appears to have been grounded in a project-based pedagogy aided by a practice of reflection. This would provoke students to self-analyse their works in order to develop and refine their visual thinking, rather than following pre-constructed ideas of composition and expression. This approach differed from Chabet's counterparts in UP CFA who pursued technical style and finish over conceptualisation of works.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, these assignments also bear a close affinity with Chabet's own practice, which included extensive series of collages<sup>21</sup> and drawings.<sup>22</sup>

Following these initial activities, Chabet would then instruct students to paint an enlarged image of a few of these drawings and collages onto a big canvas, following a grid method, painting one inch square at a time. The grid responded to theoretical discussions of the international avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s<sup>23</sup> and was adopted as an educational technique for technical and methodological motives that were distinct from the traditional academic procedure of accurately reproducing the overall image as a whole. Whilst the series of drawings and collages forced the student to concentrate on the overall image composition and its conceptual underpinnings, the grid assignments forced focus on the qualities of the paint itself and, by limiting the amount of visual information to units of one inch square at a time, changed the figurative perception of the decontextualized fragment into simple geometrical shapes and colour fields. Instructing students to paint large canvases was a radical change from the small-sized canvases typically assigned within the educational institution.

Advanced assignments required students to respond to a theme, an idea or a material. These assignments aimed to encourage independent thinking, required intellectual engagement with ideas and concepts, and fostered an experimental approach to forms and materials prior to execution. Chabet challenged students to confront non-traditional mediums such as found materials and objects, which were not within generally accepted teaching parameters. He would guide students to rethink their assumptions and perceptions through a reflection on materials. He would challenge his students to "make art out of ice, out of wax paper, out of aluminium foil, out of eating, and sleeping" recalls Sibayan.<sup>24</sup> Sibayan's reference to the use of materials such as ice is significant, as it represents

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the archetypal conceptual material due to its extreme ephemerality, which causes the artwork to disappear altogether, leaving just a memory of itself.

Chabet would lend art books and magazines from his vast personal library to students based on their interests. It should be noted that between the 1970s–1990s, this meant giving students access to information otherwise not easily available in the Philippines.<sup>25</sup> Classes frequently centred around discussions of artworks, exhibition reviews or films, which were used as a way for students to practically relate to art theory and art history, and to prompt explorations of new ideas, which were then applied as concepts and visual strategies.<sup>26</sup>

This learning practice also included exhibiting artworks to the public. This aimed to shift the emphasis from the artwork as an autonomous art object to its presentation and contextualisation within the unique conditions of the exhibition space. Chabet's own practice spread the network of the art object beyond the boundaries of the object itself.

It is evident that Chabet's teachings were characterised by a conceptual stance and differed from the conservative teaching environment in UP CFA in the 1970s–1990s.<sup>27</sup> Apinan Poshyananda, in this regard, notes that conceptualism was discouraged in many schools in Southeast Asia "for fear that it would incite students to challenge institutional authority."<sup>28</sup> It is also evident that Chabet offered to his students at UP CFA a "conditional freedom". This caused friction between the artist-teacher

and the faculty; however, it conferred onto him an influential position among his students.

## *The danger of students imitating their teacher*

The artist-teacher faced the inherent danger of unwittingly imparting his art onto students who might imitate it in terms of themes, style and medium, thus forging unthinking disciples and negating the desired learning outcome of developing independent sensibilities. Bearing close similarities with 'teaching for artistic behaviour', Chabet intended for his students to take control of their learning, differing from the pedagogy of traditional 'studio' style

settings where the learner follows the lead of the teacher in style, themes and methods; the "Amorsolo school" representing a pertinent example of this in the Philippines.

Statements of gratitude from Chabet's former students upon his death testify to the extent of his impact as an artist-teacher and his teachings are widely perceived to have exerted a profound influence over

his students. However, the parameters of his impact on the artworks produced by his students appears elusive. This is because influence in the creative process does not translate here into recognisable resemblance with the source of influence in terms of stylistic or formal qualities.

## *Issues around artistic influence*

Göran Hermerén's scholarly research on artistic influence<sup>29</sup>

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suggests that artists may not be aware of their influences and that works of art that influence one another may not display “obvious and easily discovered similarities.”<sup>30</sup> This is partly because whenever one work influences another, the artist’s contact with the influential work or with its creator is a “contributory cause”<sup>31</sup> of its creation. Accordingly, for one artist to be influenced by another, he/she must be open to new ideas, “be in a formative state of...development, or in other words have a disposition to become influenced.”<sup>32</sup> These conditions are arguably met within the relation between students and the artist-teacher.

Hermerén also suggests that views on influence are affected by the contextual cultural stance around the value of originality, which produces additional pressures around the notion of the artistic autonomous ego as identified by Harold Bloom.<sup>33</sup> In the Philippines, anxieties over artistic originality are further complicated by a post-colonial cultural context. Hermerén poignantly warns that our knowledge and expectations determine what similarities (or differences) we notice and what importance we give to them. Similarly, judgements on whether an influence is desirable or undesirable are dictated by biased expectations of what art should be and look like.

Views expressed with respect to Chabet and consequent judgements related to the impact of his influence on his former students, are dictated by personal experiences and biases that, in the 1980s and 1990s were inextricably linked to the dichotomy between conceptualism and social-realism. Interviews reveal that Chabet’s influence is considered to have had both a positive and a negative impact. From a positive perspective, he provided a way of thinking about art and art making that was an alternative to the prevalence of social-realism or traditional figurative art,

which fostered critically-minded artists. Concurrently, he is seen to have had a negative impact by discouraging a large number of students from pursuing art and encouraging highly intellectualised forms of expression, purged of socio-political content or local visual elements. Furthermore, there is a belief that his influence resulted in an over-dependence on his advice, opinions, ideas and support in some students, which was in contradiction with his teaching aim of nurturing independent critical artists. It is unclear whether he fully recognised the impact of his influence.

## *Difficulties in tracing influence*

Hermerén suggests that influence in the creative process does not necessarily translate into a recognisable resemblance with the source of influence in stylistic or formal terms. Furthermore, influence might not refer to an entity in its entirety, but might instead reference elements that are selectively extracted and adapted from the source, to be changed and reinterpreted in order to acquire new purposes. The difficulty in illustrating the parameters of Chabet’s influence primarily resides in the fact that it is primarily to be understood as an ideological one, which is focused around the definition of art, the ontology of the art object, an epistemological questioning of art appreciation as well as the role of the artist. Concurrently, some traces of technical influence emerge: the practice of collage,<sup>34</sup> the grid painting process,<sup>35</sup> the intertextual dialogical reflections in the artworks and, crucially, the experimental use of materials and their ontological implications<sup>36</sup> through which an artwork’s meaning is conveyed by its materiality. Chabet’s pedagogical practice focused on experimentation with found materials,<sup>37</sup> aimed to challenge and disrupt the accepted values of the art system and generate a practice open towards materials and processes. This sensibility was

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transferred to Chabet's students who display an uninhibited attitude towards materials. Artist Alwin Reamillo<sup>38</sup> and art historian Patrick Flores<sup>39</sup> explicitly note this impact on the artistic praxis of Chabet's former students and view it as one of his contributions to the development of contemporary art in the Philippines.

A close analysis of the artistic production of one of Chabet's former students illustrates some areas of influence in the methodology of art making and conceptual development. However, it also demonstrates that taking into account the intentions of the artist is key to unravelling meaningful similarities rather than superficial resemblances in the physical and aesthetic properties of artworks.

## *A case study*

Gary-Ross Pastrana (Manila, b. 1977) enrolled at the UP CFA in 1996, graduating with a Bachelor in Painting in 2000 and the Dominador Castaneda Award for Best Thesis. He is an artist-curator whose artistic practice includes collage, installations, video and photography. He was the co-founder of an independent art space, Future Prospects, which is now defunct.<sup>40</sup> Similar to Chabet, Pastrana's practice is also associated with his mentorship of younger artists.<sup>41</sup>

Pastrana identifies the beginning of his mature artistic formation phase with a specific school assignment



Figure 1. Gary-Ross Pastrana, *Sustaining Symmetry*, 2000, grains and seeds, live birds. Image courtesy Roberto Chabet; Gary-Ross Pastrana. Acknowledgement to The Chabet Archive, Asia Art Archive for making this image accessible.



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completed in 1999.<sup>42</sup> The work involved a process of destruction and material transformation, which has remained central to the artist's praxis through the years.

Chabet directly challenged his students with problem-based assignments, encouraging an independent intellectual engagement with unconventional materials. This educational foundation is evident in the work that Pastrana submitted as part of his dissertation, *Sustaining Symmetry* (2000) (Figure 1).<sup>43</sup> The artwork involved a slow, methodical and meditative process of arranging seeds and grains in concentric circles over several days, resulting in

the composition of a mandala. The artwork was then left for birds to consume.

Pastrana's meditations on the ontology of the art object have continued through the years, resulting in ephemeral works such as his ice sculpture *Hour Glass* (2004),<sup>44</sup> or more recent works like *Homecoming (Yellow)* (2014) (<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/gary-ross-pastrana-homecoming-yellow>) for which he takes sand from hourglasses and returns it to the beach where, removed of its utilitarian function of measuring time, it is laid to simulate a doormat on the shore, exposed to the rising sea tide.

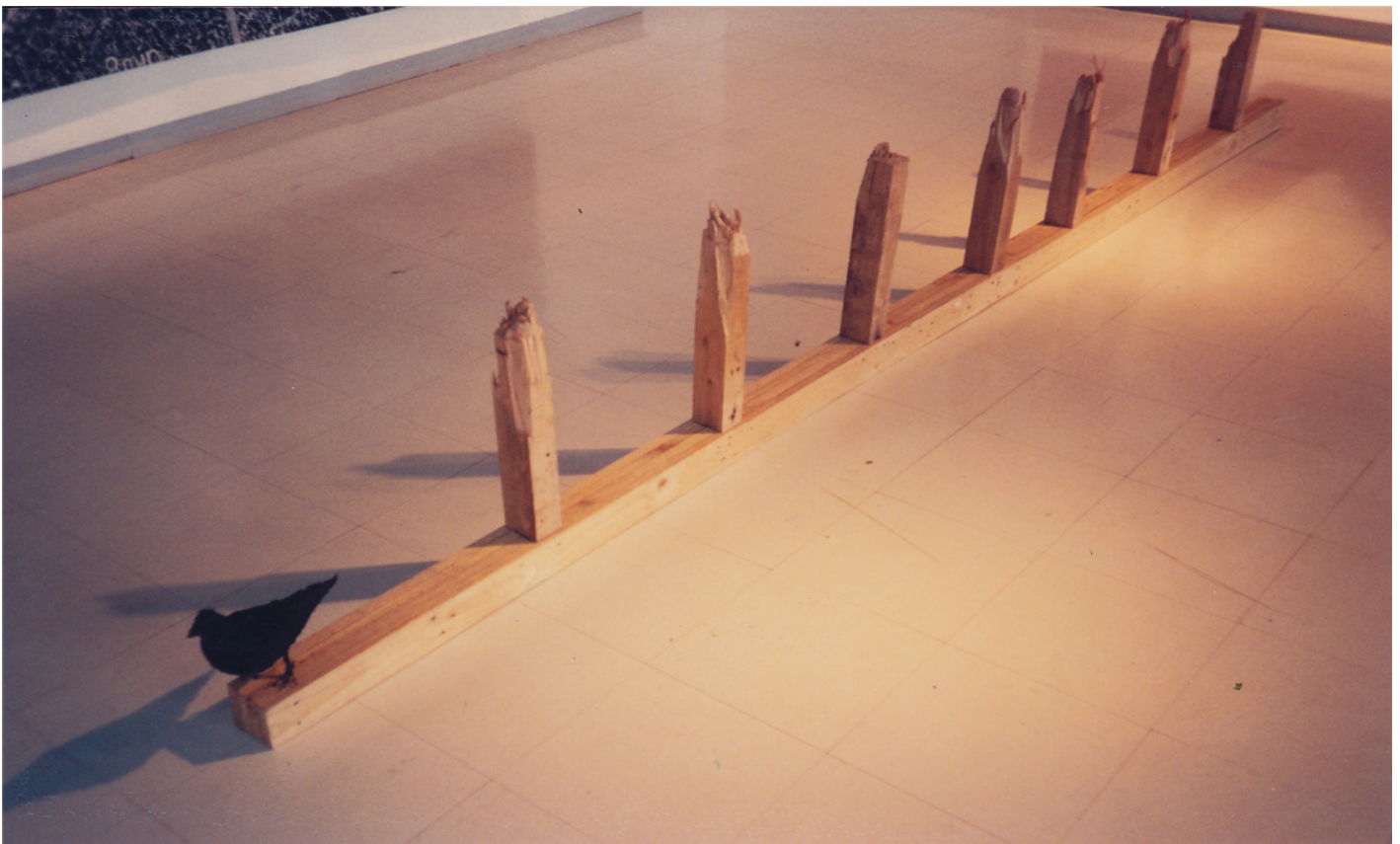


Figure 2. Gary-Ross Pastrana, *Set Fire to Free*, 2002, wood. Image courtesy Roberto Chabet; Gary-Ross Pastrana. Acknowledgement to The Chabet Archive, Asia Art Archive for making this image accessible.

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Pastrana's aporetic use of materials resonates in works where it is treated in poetic, witty, surprising and contradictory forms. For example, in *Echolalia* (2009), Pastrana interprets writer Zoe Dulay's stories into a simulacrum of ordinary objects, which are made from incongruous materials. Further evidence of this can be found in earlier works such as *Mum* (2008), where Pastrana sculpts a pacifier using gun powder, *Thumb* (2006), where a life-sized sculpture of a section of the artist thumb is made from a melted plastic ruler, or in *The Fall of Meaning* (2000) where dictionary pages are cut, glazed and shaped to resemble autumn leaves that have fallen to the ground. The artist wittily plays on the tension between material, form and title to stimulate the viewers' engagement with the artwork in a way that raises questions without providing answers or solutions.

Pastrana has also created a number of compelling process-driven works such as *Set Fire to Free* (2002) (Figure 2). In this work, Pastrana manually removes a fundamental section of a wooden ladder, thus permanently interfering with its conventional function. He then burns the detached part and recomposes the charred wood pieces into a bird shape that is placed by the broken ladder. With this work the artist explores the object's ontological dimension after its original function has been disrupted. Pursuing a conceptually comparable idea, for *Two Rings* (2008), he borrows two golden rings from his mother and asks a goldsmith to melt them into a miniature sword. He cuts his arm with the sword then melts the sword sculpture back into the original ring shapes.<sup>45</sup> The artwork's process enquires where the personal value of jewellery resides and meditates on the implications of this value. Through the process of physical transformation, the artist aims to provoke the viewer into questioning their perceptions of reality as dictated by conventional orders of measurement.



Figure 3. Gary-Ross Pastrana, *Stream*, 2008-2011, re-assembled wooden boat. Image courtesy Gary-Ross Pastrana. Acknowledgement to The Chabet Archive, Asia Art Archive for making this image accessible.

This concept is investigated further with *99%* (2014), where a laborious process of deconstruction is used to enquire into the relationship between the part and the whole.<sup>46</sup> *Stream* (2008) (Figure 3) is another topical manifestation of Pastrana's aesthetic sensibility of challenging the integrity of the objects to investigate their afterlife; here the artist cuts into pieces a disused boat, found in Kyoto, Japan, in order



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to reconstruct it like a puzzle for the 2008 Busan Biennale in Korea.<sup>47</sup>

The dematerialisation of these artworks, which is articulated in their ephemerality as well as through processes of deconstruction and transformation, fundamentally questions the nature of the artwork, shifting its essence from the object to the idea. Concurrently, they allow Pastrana to face challenges of epistemic distance from the event. He remediates the impermanence of his artworks by documenting these events and representing the stories through lens-based media. These artworks reveal some manifestations of the impact of Chabet's teachings on Pastrana's praxis.

Pastrana's works suggest that there are two broad areas of influence: methodological and conceptual. For example, methodological aspects include the adoption of collage as art practice.<sup>48</sup> However, the adoption of a medium does not imply genuine influence. Pastrana's collages fundamentally differ from Chabet's "picture morgue".<sup>49</sup> Whilst the latter represent a disparate personal collection of largely unaltered and often-recognisable everyday paper objects, assembled according to their connections, Pastrana's collages bear no connection with their original form and are an expression of abstract composition. He dissects images into units to be reassembled into entirely new forms. These are focused on balancing colours and abstract shapes, in which the harmony of the composition derives from juxtaposing and repeating specific shades of colour, moving permanently away from the images' original form and any narrative they might have held.

Similarly, Pastrana's *Stream* offers the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of comparative methodologies in

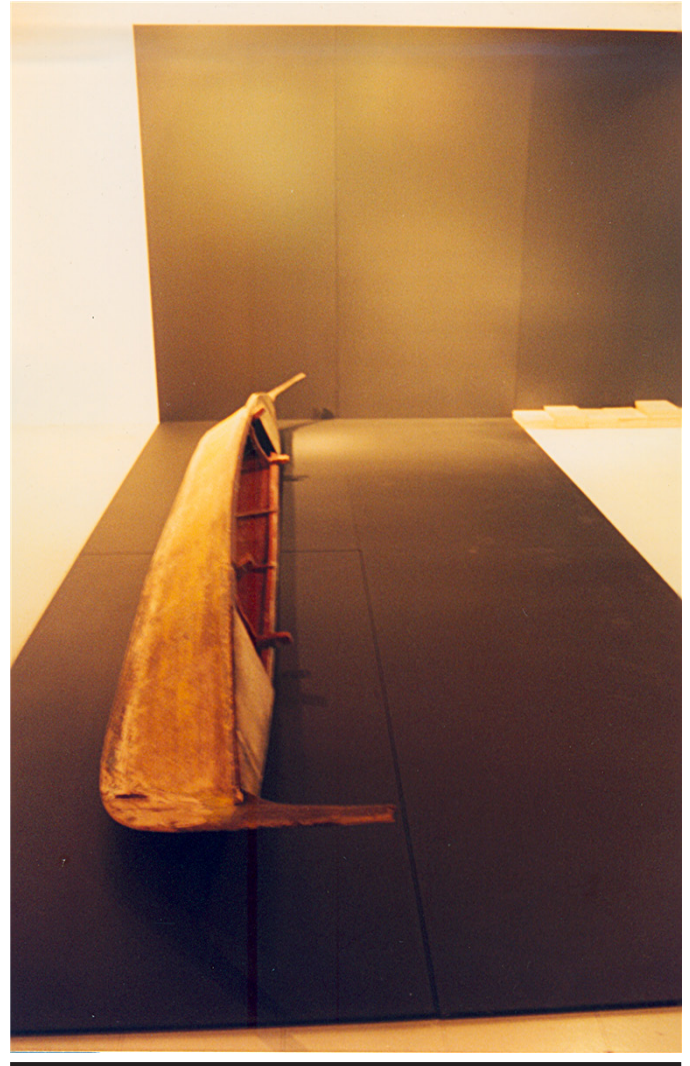


Figure 4. Roberto Chabet, *Boat*, 1996, plywood, acrylic, wooden boat, framed children's drawings, 243.84 x 609.6 x 487.68 cm. Image courtesy Roberto Chabet; Joy Dayrit. Acknowledgement to The Chabet Archive, Asia Art Archive for making this image accessible.

the assessment of influence from one artist or artwork to another, with respect to one or multiple specific characteristics. *Stream* presents a reassembled disused boat shipped from Kyoto to the exhibition space. The boat is one of the recurrent "anxious objects" in Chabet's



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Figure 5. Ringo Bunoan, *Cut Boat Work after Chabet #5*, 2009, Roberto Chabet's wooden dug-out boats. Image courtesy Ringo Bunoan. Acknowledgement to The Chabet Archive, Asia Art Archive for making this image accessible.

artworks, appearing in many forms including the life-sized *Boat* (1996), exhibited as part of *Regarding Place, No Place* (1996),<sup>50</sup> (Figure 4) and an untitled work from 2003, consisting of dug out wooden boats cut into five sections (Figure 5).<sup>51</sup> It can be reasonably assumed that Pastrana had direct knowledge of these works given the interactions of the two artists at that time. The physical resemblance between the works is undeniable, however, any attempt to trace similarities between Pastrana's *Stream* and Chabet's artworks would be misleading. The boat in Chabet's works holds a semantic value of space intended as an artistic dimension, which fundamentally differs from Pastrana's artistic intention already illustrated.<sup>52</sup> This demonstrates that the intention of the artist is key in unravelling meaningful similarities beyond superficial resemblances in the physical

and aesthetic properties of the work.

These works suggest that whilst Pastrana's practice has evolved in concepts, themes and modes of expression, the kernel ideas, along with the sensibilities and the modes of creation, share fundamentals that find their genesis in his formative years in Chabet's classes. The artist-teacher challenged his students to confront materials, promoting an experimental approach to art making. Pastrana's practice demonstrates a continuation, on individual terms, of a creative engagement with material to introduce innovative and unexpected combinations, while challenging accepted formulations of meaning and value. The artist-teacher introduced students to works that sought to redefine notions of art by posing ontological challenges to notions of permanence and tangibility in artworks. Altering the

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physicality of the objects, in order to observe the process of transformation in a way that disrupts the accepted connotations of artworks, is Pastrana's way to reflect on those preoccupations. Moreover, the narrative of his works is developed from layers of cues for the viewer to unravel, a lineage derived from Chabet's belief that the viewers' interpretation is a key element of an artwork.<sup>53</sup> Both Pastrana's and Chabet's works are neither didactic nor descriptive, but instead open a discursive relationship with the viewer, who is called to unravel the unexpected visual codes and reflect on their disparate semantic elements.

*Lucia Cordeschi graduated from the University of L'Aquila in Italy, with B.A (Hons) in Foreign Languages and Literature in 1995, completing a dissertation in Comparative Literature. Relocating from London to Singapore in 2012, she soon developed an interest in Southeast Asian contemporary art leading her to pursue a MA in Asian Art Histories at LASALLE, which she completed in 2015.*

## Endnotes

1 Primary examples include *Chabet 50 years* (2011-2012) a series of 18 exhibitions organised by King Kong Arts Projects Unlimited in collaboration with various art institutions in the Philippines, Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as *What does it all matter, as long as the wounds fit the arrows? - a Tribute to Roberto Chabet*, (Manila: Cultural Centre of the Philippines, 30 Aug-26 Oct 2014).

2 Examples include Annie Cabigting, *Tearing Into Pieces* (2005), a painting reproduction of a photograph of Roberto Chabet's work *Tearing Into Pieces* (1973); Jose Tence Ruiz's painting titled *The Pro-rated Wage of the Abang Guard* (2011), which depicted Chabet among three icons of the art canon; Norberto Roldan's

series of works titled *100 Altars for Roberto Chabet* (2013-). See also, Ringo Bunoan's exhibition, *Archiving Roberto Chabet* (Manila: UP Vargas Museum, 3 Mar-4 Apr 2009); Elaine Navas' solo exhibition *After Sir* (Manila: Finale Art File, 5 Jul-2 Aug 2014); and Pardo De Leon's solo exhibition, *The Veils: Passing Prayers (After Chabet's Head Collages)* (Manila: Finale Art File, 11 Nov-4 Dec 2014), amongst others.

3 Ringo Bunoan ed. *Roberto Chabet* (Manila: King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, 2015)

4 Chabet debuted onto the art scene in 1961 at the Arturo Luz Gallery, Manila. That year he had graduated with a degree in Architecture from the University of Santo Thomas, Manila.

5 Along with his childhood friends Benjamin Bautista and Ramon Katigbak, Chabet fabricated the fictional artist Angel Flores (1936-1968).

6 *Shop 6* was re-enacted by Chabet's former student Ringo Bunoan in the exhibition *Shop 6 Revisited: The Readymade Made and Unmade* (Manila: MO\_Space, 4 Jun-13 Jul 2011). The exhibition intended to recreate a day in 1974, when 101 artists went to *Shop 6*, bringing with them various readymade and discarded objects.

7 Upon recommendation of Arturo Luz, Chabet was appointed founding Museum Director of the CCP by Imelda Marcos (Chairman) on 22 November 1967. The Centre was inaugurated in September 1969. Chabet resigned from his position in 1970. During his brief tenure, he made the museum's initial acquisitions, staged its first exhibitions and initiated the Thirteen Artist Award, which was created to identify artists who embraced the challenge "to restructure, re-strengthen, and renew art making and art thinking." Roberto Chabet, *Thirteen Artists*, exh. cat. (Manila: Cultural Centre

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of the Philippines, 15 Jun–31 Jul 1970), 2. The award continues to date.

8 Most of the exhibitions Chabet curated from the 1980s onwards included works by his students and former students.

9 In the early 1960s, Chabet enrolled in a postgraduate course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. Prior to that he enrolled at the Universidad Central de Madrid in Spain. He then returned to the Philippines in 1963 without completing his degree. See, Armando Manalo, "Total Experience: Chabet and the Avant-garde", *Philippines Sunday Express*, 11 June 1972. Later, following his appointment as Museum Director of the Cultural Centre of the Philippines in 1967, he was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation Grant to observe museum practices around the world. Archival documents related to his travel arrangements, confirm that he spent at least seven months in New York from January 1968, travelled throughout the United States, then visited Italy, France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland, before returning to United States and visiting Mexico. He completed his observations in the United Kingdom in January 1969.

10 1968 was a tumultuous year in Europe and America, where the premises of modernism were radically challenged and conceptual art was attempting to redefine the nature of art.

11 Chabet taught at UP CFA from 1971 until retirement in 2002. He started his teaching career in 1964 at the University of Santo Thomas (UST). In 1972, he became a permanent faculty member at UP CFA, where Jose Joya, Dean from 1970–1978, invited him to join as an "Interim Instructor (part-time)" in July 1971. He received the Fernando Amorsolo Professorial Chair Award in Fine Arts in 1999 and retired in 2002. UST was "the bastion of modern art" in Manila until the 1970s, while UP CFA was distinctly

conservative, in line with its origins in the Academia de Dibujo and following the vestiges of Fernando Amorsolo who was its Dean in the 1950s. Jose Joya aimed to revise the art education curriculum to include a more liberal arts programme. It can be reasonably assumed that Chabet joined UP CFA because of the modernisation endeavour embarked upon by Joya. Chabet was also a visiting instructor at the Philippines High School of the Arts (PHSA). Among the students Chabet taught there was Pablo Biglang-Awa, author of a video work called *D-I-Y Chabet* (2011), showing the process of art making reduced to a step-by-step exercise.

12 Chabet led classes, workshops and seminars at Surrounded by Water, Big Sky Mind and Future Prospects, independent art spaces run by some of his former students.

13 This is taken from the opening message of the exhibition catalogue, "*What Does It All Matter, as Long as the Wounds Fit the Arrows?*" - a Tribute to Roberto Chabet," (Manila: Cultural Centre of the Philippines, 30 Aug–26 Oct 2014).

14 G. James Daichendt, *Artist-Teacher: A Philosophy for Creating and Teaching* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010).

15 Judy Freya Sibayan, *The Hypertext of Herme(S)* (London: KT Press, 2014). Sibayan was one of Chabet's first students at UP CFA. She enrolled his classes in 1972 and completed her studies in 1976.

16 Ronald Achacoso, "Kick in the Eye to Enlightenment 101," in *Roberto Chabet*, ed. Ringo Bunoan (Taguig: King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, 2015), 32–41.

17 *Roberto Chabet*, ed. Ringo Bunoan (Taguig: King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, 2015)



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18 The concept of “learning by doing” was initially promoted by the American pedagogue John Dewey (1859-1952). The description is here embraced loosely and does not imply Chabet’s full adoption of Dewey’s pedagogy. John Dewey, also an aesthetic and social philosopher, published the seminal text *Art as Experience* in 1934. The text caused intense debate several years after its publication, particularly during and after the 1980s, and is considered to have been an influence on Donald Judd, as well as on the conceptual grounding of Land Art. Dewey’s theory contributed to shifting understandings of the art process from its physical manifestations to the process in its entirety. He argued that the development of an experience is the fundamental object of artistic practice, rather than the material art object. It is not known if Chabet read Dewey, however, his work touches on theoretical aspects close to Chabet’s sensibility.

19 Typically between three days to one week.

20 Gerardo Tan, Interview with the author, 5 February 2015. According to Tan, traditional fine arts teaching involved the completion of five to six artworks within the fourteen weeks of each semester. Chabet, however, would require the execution of multiple works each week.

21 Chabet started producing collages in the 1960s and started exhibiting these to the public in 1980. Chabet’s collages were developed in series over several years; the most extensive of these being the series entitled, *China Collages*, which included over three hundred collages realised over a period of more than ten years.

22 Bunoan explains that Chabet, “drew in a very particular way, often beginning a drawing by tracing a previous one. [...] He rarely made one-offs; instead he worked in cycles that stretched like seasons over time.” and also he “explained that drawing is not

so much about a finished picture, but is a continuous process of making marks.” Ringo Bunoan, “Seeing and Unseeing: The Works of Roberto Chabet,” in *Roberto Chabet*, ed. Ringo Bunoan (Taguig: King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, 2015), 72.

23 Rosalind Krauss argued that the grid is a critical element in the development of modern art. See, Rosalind Krauss, “Grids”, *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50-64. Similarly, John Elderfield criticized the “exploitation of the grid to merely inaugurate paintings”. See, John Elderfield, “Grids”, *Artforum* 10 (May 1972): 52-9. Photo-realist painters Chuck Close and Malcolm Morley use the grid as structure to expand images into large paintings, underpinned by a reconsideration of visual perception in the painting process.

24 Sibayan, *The Hypertext of Herme(S)*. 110.

25 There are frequent references to Chabet’s subscription to the U.S. art magazine *Artforum*. However, he also acquired other publications including *Art in America*. All former students interviewed and many published tributes make reference to their gratitude for the access to information that he provided.

26 Art history and art theory were not intended to be taught within Chabet classes, but within the Art Theory Department. However, until the mid 1990s the curriculum of art history and art theory generally did not extend to contemporary art. Therefore, Chabet included them in the class’ practice attempting to forge an awareness of the reasons behind those concerns that shaped the international art scene.

27 The High School for the Arts, founded in 1976, was an exception to this. Visual arts teachers at the school included Roberto Feleo, Alwin Reamillo and several former students of

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Chabet who, after the late-1970s, adopted some of his teaching methods.

28 Apinan Poshyananda, "'Con Art' Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in Southeast Asia," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin*, 1950-1980s, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 19 Dec. 1999 - 5 Mar. 2000), 143.

29 Göran Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975)

30 Ibid., 99.

31 Ibid., 93

32 Ibid., 6. This assertion also evokes John Clark's view that influence derives from a wilful exploration of a style, which "is sought because of its absence in the local discourse". See, John Clark, "Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art" in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: Wild peony, 1993), 4.

33 *Influence in Art and Literature*, 99.

34 Collage, deployed by Chabet as an educational tool, has become an artistic practice of a number of his former students who continue to explore the medium. An exhibition presented by Silverlens gallery in Manila in 2009 titled *Tears, Cuts & Ruptures: A Philippine Collage Review*, traces the tradition of collage in the Philippines to Chabet's practice from the 1970s and his consistent educational use of the medium.

35 This process has been retained by some of Chabet's former students in their large-scale photo-realistic painting praxis. For example, the adoption of the grid is evident in works by Elaine Navas, Yasmin Sison, Annie Cabigting, Marina Cruz, Geraldine

Javier, Wire Tuazon, Bembol de La Cruz, as well as Pardo Leon.

36 A creative approach that privileges the idea of the work over its physicality expands the medium's possibilities to, as Lucy Lippard put it, "ephemeral, cheap unpretentious, and/or dematerialised" potentialities. Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art, Art & Ideas* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997), 14.

37 This did not imply a rejection of traditional materials such as oil paint, which Chabet particularly liked, according to his former students.

38 "I think Chabet's students are more unrestricted in terms of using of materials." *Interview with Alwin Reamillo*, 7 Feb. 2015.

39 To the question of whether Chabet, either as an artist or as a teacher, changed the way of making art in the Philippines and if so how, Flores responded "Maybe the concept of material, what can be material for art, which was closely tied up to traditional media at the time. Maybe a certain level of conceptualism too... art that is not just about representation but about thinking... that would be a contribution." *Interview with Patrick Flores*, 6 Feb. 2015

40 Pastrana co-founded Future Prospects, an artist-run space, in 2005.

41 Kat-Gosiengfiao, installation artist, writes of her experience with mentor Pastrana at Artery Mentorship Program. She suggests that the transmission of Chabet's main teaching tenets focused primarily around attention to the potentials implied in the materiality of objects and encouragement to go beyond mere representations of subject matter. Kat-Gosiengfiao, "Criticism with Gary Ross Pastrana", *AMP Bog*, last accessed 5 May 2017, <http://ampartistsblog.tumblr.com/post/101916343857/criticism-with-gary-ross-pastrana>

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42 *Interview with Gary-Ross Pastrana, 5 Dec. 2014.*

43 For this work Pastrana received the Dominador Castaneda Award for Best Thesis. Ringo Bunoan, "To the other side and back - Gary-Ross Pastrana's Echolalia", *Business World*, 10 July 2002.

44 Hourglass could only hold its shape momentarily, allowing little time to document the art object. The artist was attracted to ice for this work because of how the ice appears to take a temporary form which then dissolves into ordinary water. This quality renders ice the archetypal conceptual material.

45 Pastrana did not anticipate the material loss during the process. This meant the rings could not be returned to their full initial shape, driving the artist to investigate that loss further in artworks including *Balloon* (2012) and *Coin* (2014), where silver dust from a silver coin is blown onto a glass window. The works aim to evaluate whether the artistic process has enhanced or devalued the material by negating its utilitarian function.

46 This artwork consists of a sculpture and video documentation of the process through which it was produced (<https://vimeo.com/97499432>). Pastrana purchased a car, had it dismantled and sold 99% of the metal parts. With the proceeds of the sale of the car parts he purchased 24-karat gold. The precious metal obtained was melted and shaped into a small "nugget" that is attached to the 1% of the car he had saved.

47 The artwork was later exhibited in Manila at Silverlens Gallery in 2009; in Hong Kong at Osage Gallery in 2010 and in Singapore at the Louis Vuitton space in 2011.

48 As a student, Pastrana did not appreciate the importance of the task, but has practised collage since 1999. Cocoy Lumbao,

*Tears, Cuts and Ruptures—a Philippine Collage Review*, exh. cat. (Manila: Silverlens, 16 Sep.–17 Oct. 2009), 5–6.

49 Carina Evangelista, "Roberto Chabet: China Collages", in *Chabet: 50 Years*, ed. Ringo Bunoan (Manila: King Kong Art Projects Unlimited, 2012).

50 The exhibition, curated by Chabet, also featured works by Danilo Dalena, Fernando Modesto, and Antonio Austria. Chabet notes that "Placement, location is central in art. The artist stakes out territories, establishes boundaries, or represents a sense of place. This sense of place is the artist's sense of self." Roberto Chabet, *Regarding Place, No Place*, (Manila: The Art Center, SM Megamall, 12–25 May 1996).

51 The artwork was undocumented but was reconstructed by Bunoan in 2009 as *Cut Boat (Work After Chabet #5)* in the exhibition *Archiving Roberto Chabet* at Jorge B. Vargas Museum, 3 Mar.–4 Apr. 2009.

52 As highlighted, Pastrana's work is driven by an aesthetic sensibility based on challenging the integrity of objects to investigate their afterlife, meditating on philosophical aesthetic questions around the nature of the artwork and shifting its essence from the object to the idea.

53 Chabet gave little to no interpretation or explanation of his art; by not stating what the work is about, the viewer can independently evaluate the work.



## The role of art education in Bangkok and its relevance to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Thai art practices

Loredana Pazzini Paracciani

The thought process that led to this research was triggered by close observation of the diverse and, at times, contrasting art practices in contemporary Thailand. For example, new media (digital and computer-based artworks) is used alongside mediums such as leather carving, a comparatively vernacular practice. Figurative paintings are produced at the same time as technically sophisticated installations that combine aesthetic pleasure with community values. The questions of what the driving forces behind these practices are, and how they shape the visual language of 21st century Thai art arose several times in the preliminary research that led to this paper.

In 1993 Prof Poshyananda wrote, “national identity formation is disseminated throughout institutions including ... universities ... Visual arts have been manipulated as the vehicle to promote a reassuring and serene world of ... Thai-ness”.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Apinan comments on the dominant role of the government and art education in Thailand by elaborating on the way “young artists have been groomed since their high school days to regard art awards as the ultimate achievement.”<sup>2</sup> Here, Apinan suggests that art schools and education have performed a critical role in forming national identity in Thailand, as well as promoting social and cultural values among Thai artists. It is important to note that his views on art education were expressed in the 1990s. Almost 30 years have passed; do these views still

apply to contemporary Thai art education?

A limited amount of literature in English is available on this topic.<sup>3</sup> So far, Apinan’s study and John Clark’s recent book *Asian Modernities* (2010) are the only texts dealing with the role of art education vis-à-vis the art production of younger artists.<sup>4</sup> As a new contribution to this field, this paper evaluates the relevance of art education to 21st century art practice in Thailand, through a study of three major universities in Bangkok: Silpakorn University, Chulalongkorn University and Bangkok University. What are the commonalities or differences, if any, between the curricula of these universities? To what extent are art graduates influenced by the art system of each university? Do these artists share common themes or methodologies in their art practice?

This study also attempts to determine common visual themes and methodologies specific to 21st century Thai artists. By conducting several in-depth interviews with selected artists, I attempt to identify these possible commonalities and the art education these artists received from the aforementioned universities.

Silpakorn University (SU), established in 1943 by the Italian artist Corrado Feroci (later Silpa Bhirasri), is a ‘Beaux-Art’ school with a curriculum based on the European art

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academy model.<sup>5</sup> Due to its prestige, most of its alumni have tended to continue on at the school as academic members.<sup>6</sup> Historically, the selection process to study at SU's Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts (PSG) was considered very competitive. Now, due to the *in loco* examination, up to 50 percent of new students do not have an art background. This has affected the quality of the students' figurative skills, thus prompting a more interdisciplinary approach. Overall, SU is likely to produce artists with higher basic skills, due to the selection process and curriculum. However, limited exposure to conceptual practices means that students seem to encounter difficulties in developing critical approaches to art-making. Exposure to Thai art subjects—compulsory throughout the five years of the degree program—also means that students often develop proficiency in Thai vernacular themes and techniques. SU students also tend to produce work involving communal themes and preoccupations, since their course requires social commitment and national duties.

Since its founding in the 1980s, Chulalongkorn University (CU) has encouraged academic recruitment from other institutions in Thailand and internationally. However, around 70 percent of the academic staff are former alumni and newly graduated artists are not employed to refresh the faculty, as in the case of SU. This indicates that new artists might pursue academic work at other universities, where the art education identity is more clearly manifested and the curriculum stronger. At the time of writing, CU has never revised its curriculum and this has had a bearing on the number of students admitted yearly. In keeping with CU's policy of providing equal opportunities to

all students, both selection methods allow for students with no art background to be admitted.

Overall, CU produces artists with lower figurative skills and execution abilities than those from SU. This is due to the selection process being geared towards a wider student population, as well as a lack of clear direction for curriculum development. The now-obsolete curriculum was quite radical in the 1980s, as it incorporated an intermedia major, which was not enlisted elsewhere at the time. As a direct consequence, artists who graduated in the 1980s and 1990s benefited most from the department's alternative pedagogical techniques and conceptual curriculum. Conversely, students graduating today frequently lack the training that would facilitate their success in Thailand's

art scene, as shown by CU's diminishing student intake. In contrast, Bangkok University's (BU) Visual Art department was founded by its current dean, Prof Sansern Milindasuta, and board members, who selected and shaped its curriculum in accordance with local and international educational trends. Today, the BU faculty is a heterogeneous cohort of established professors, mainly SU and CU graduates, who are themselves practicing artists.

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*SU students also tend to produce work involving communal themes and preoccupations, since their course requires social commitment and national duties.*

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A point to note: the first generation of artists who graduated from CU's Visual Art department are the very ones who campaigned for the founding of BU's Visual Art department.<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing, national and international lecturers constitute BU's faculty. Generally, students who have not succeeded in enrolling in prestigious public art schools enter BU by the *in loco* examination. Overall, BU is likely to produce students with a strong creative and critical

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understanding of art. This is due to the contemporary bent the school has towards art-making, and hence the focus of the curriculum's core subjects, which are constantly updated. As a result, while students are likely to show proficiency in technical skills, they may be lacking traditional ones.

## *Artists' case studies*

### Chusak Srikwan

Artist Chusak Srikwan was born in Songkhla, Thailand

in 1983 and was the only student from this region to be admitted by SU. He obtained his BFA in 2006 with a major in Thai Art. Chusak's choice of university was dictated by his interest in Thai traditional art: "SU has always had a strong reputation in terms of art, so since the beginning I specifically decided to attend the Thai Art department within PSG."<sup>8</sup> Chusak envisions this as the key quality in SU's curriculum and referred specifically to the university's "strong (artistic) history [that has] continually developed for more than 60 years" and is deeply embedded in the university's culture and philosophy. Furthermore, he says, "SU aims to develop the experience and quality of students



Fig. 1 Chusak Srikwan, *Free Form Avaricious is a Precious Blessing*, 2009, leather carving, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



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by “strengthening their graphic skills.”<sup>9</sup> Chusak’s practice since graduation revolves around the use of a vernacular medium, leather, through a vernacular iconography (shadow puppets), to address contemporary issues.

Historically used as a tool for political propaganda, Thai traditional puppetry often addresses social and religious themes.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Chusak cites contemporary social and political issues as one of his main sources of inspiration. In addition, he notes the influence of the older generation of artists who, he claims, inspire “hard work, continuations and development of creative progress.”<sup>11</sup> In his view, breaking away from the practice of a senior mentor is in itself a

demonstration of what can be learnt from them, before deciding to take a step further.

A final consideration is the role of the commercial art market. As Chusak argues, the Thai art world still revolves around patronage and sponsorship. Yet, Thai audiences remain interested in aesthetically pleasing, bordering on decorative, works. As a result, audiences do not seem ready for contemporary art, a situation that has consequences for artistic practice.

## Montri Toemsombat

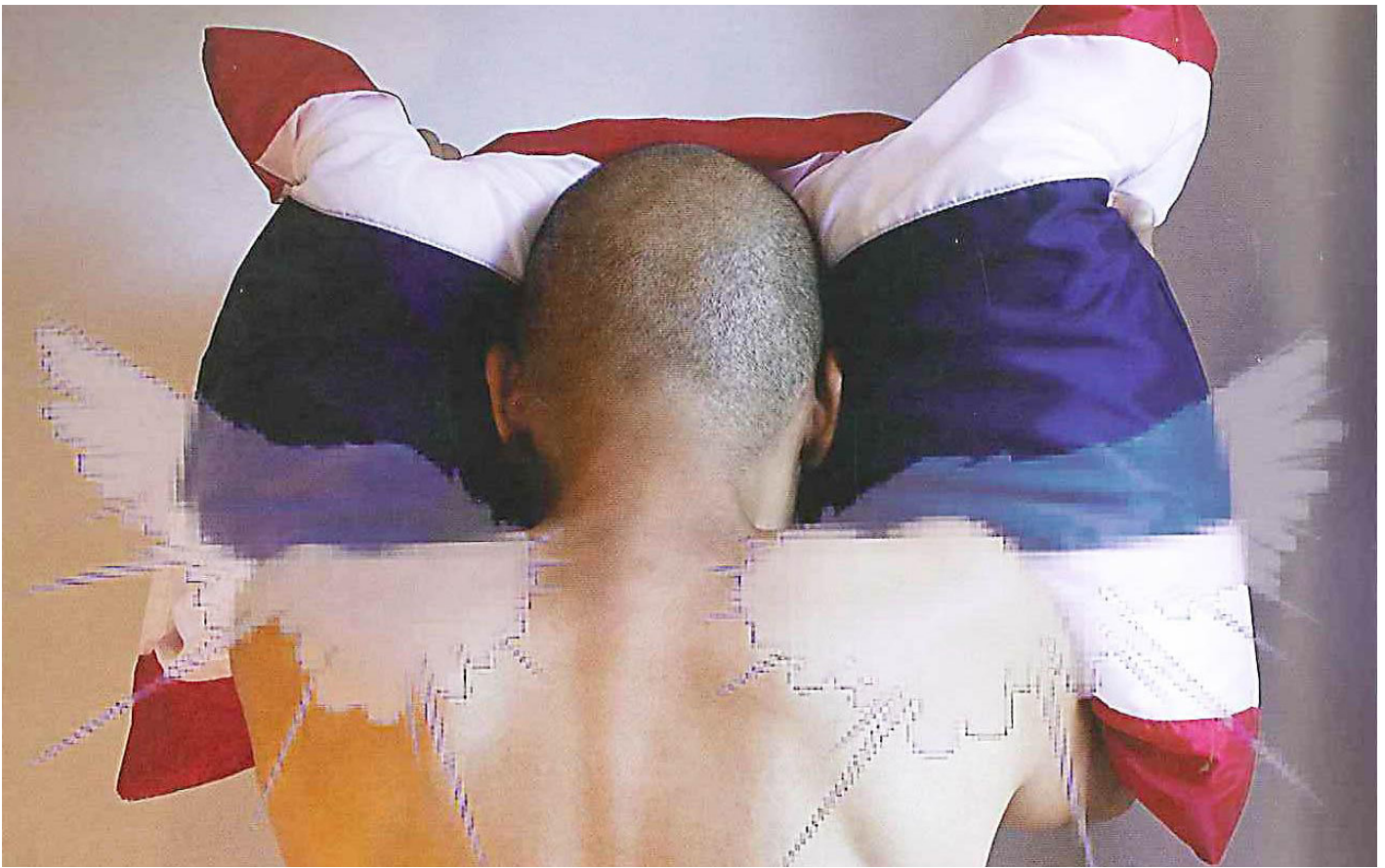


Fig. 2 Montri Toemsombat, *Thai Freedom*, 2008, C-print, 100 × 130 cm. Image courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery.



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In 1994 artist Montri Toemsombat entered the Visual Art department at CU. Coming from the North-Eastern province of Chaiyaphum, he was selected to study at CU by virtue of the numerous art awards he had received during his school years. CU manifested itself as a “transitional place”<sup>12</sup> in Montri’s career, allowing him to progressively move beyond his regional roots. Here he learnt to freely express his individuality and to develop artworks based on a newly acquired self-confidence. Montri’s artistic practice consists of installation, performance, sculpture, photography and video art. Although his approach to art is often framed by conceptual discourse, which he developed during his studies, he draws most of his motifs from his upbringing: “I come from a market-less village in North-Eastern Thailand where we produce most of the basic necessities that we consume, so there is no reason for excess.”<sup>13</sup> This contrasted starkly with the reality he faced after migrating to Bangkok.

During his undergraduate years, Montri embarked on his first project *Natural-born Consumer* (1997-99), which elaborated on the world of the privileged youth within the shopping area of Silom-Bangkok, where CU is located. Montri’s main intentions were to convey his personal feelings (pain, angst, humour etc.) and reflect his perception of a Buddhist harmony between life, culture and nature. Here, he used Thai iconography, including rice, silk, monks’ robes and the farming buffalo, to link his rural past to consumerist society in the present.

According to Montri, patronage has a great influence because it is “needed wherever art exists.” However, his understanding of patronage does not refer to financial support, which may limit the artist’s creativity, but rather to the mentoring and guiding role played by those who “can

appreciate and understand art.”<sup>14</sup> Here, Montri locates the “value and beauty of art” in the audience’s ability to share and exchange experiences.

## Yuree Kensaku

Thai-Japanese artist Yuree Kensaku graduated from BU in 2002 after undertaking her BFA in the Visual Art department. From the beginning of her academic career she was



Fig. 3 Yuree Kensaku, *Whirlpool*, 2010, acrylic and collage on canvas, 181 × 130 cm. Image courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.

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interested in art programmes that allowed for freedom of visual expression. BU seemed to be the right university, offering a rather “experimental” approach to art education. Throughout the entire undergraduate programme the university was “very open”<sup>15</sup> in providing learning alternatives. For instance, external lecturers were invited by the university to teach and discuss their art practice with the students. In addition, BU professors emphasise the “thinking” process, the time of which is accounted for leading up to the final execution of artworks.

Graphic design was the career Yuree wanted to pursue when she first joined the university and, as a result, she “never thought to go to SU.”<sup>16</sup> She feels the works produced by SU students go in a direction she does not want to follow, specifically because SU is a “fine art academy” with a focus on technical skills.<sup>17</sup>

Yuree’s artistic practice revolves around paintings and mixed media installations. Throughout her artistic career, she has experimented with various mediums, though remaining true to her own style. Memory, family and her social environment are her main creative inspirations: “Imagination is like a special key to rooms that allow us to transfuse frustration, rearrange meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, she pulls most of her visual motifs from her childhood and family experience. Miniature toys, animals, individuals and random objects are scattered across her canvases, reminding audiences of their own childhoods. As to what role senior artists play, Yuree alludes to them as a reference point for junior artists to use before moving away and into their own practice.<sup>19</sup>

## ***Common themes and methodologies : preliminary Conclusions***

From this brief description of the art background of the three selected artists, some provisional conclusions can be drawn regarding recurrent themes and preoccupations of young art practitioners in 21st century Thailand.<sup>20</sup> These may be identified in three main categories:

- *Spirituality: expressed through religious iconography or alluded to as harmony and respect for others.*<sup>21</sup>
- *Interactive works: expressed through performative works, which may involve audience intervention.*<sup>22</sup>
- *Interest in non-national concerns: expressed through more intimate and/or playful approaches to visual communication.*

What also becomes evident in the younger generation of artists is their preoccupation with producing artworks that can communicate to Asian and non-Asian audiences alike. This is seen, for example, in the tendency to add high-technology strategies to visual narratives, as in the case of artists Yuree Kensaku and Montri Toemsombat, in order to develop an artistic language based on universally understood concerns such as alienation, social relations and materialistic supremacy.

**Spirituality:** Thai visual art was traditionally based on the representation of religious imagery, primarily Buddhist, prominently portrayed in temples and architecture. It is important to remember that in pre-modern Thailand, art education was mainly conducted in temples and centred

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on the reinforcement of cultural ideology and Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> From religious representations of Lord Buddha's life on the walls of Thai temples, to current criticism of the *Sangha*,<sup>24</sup> Thai Buddhism is investigated by a large number of modern and contemporary Thai artists.<sup>25</sup>

There is a widespread sentiment that Buddhist beliefs are on the verge of disappearing from everyday life, being replaced by individual interests and personal ambition. Against this



Fig. 4 Chusak Srikwan, *Shadow-Play*, 2008, leather carving, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

sentiment, the young generation of artists, such as Chusak Srikwan, adopt Buddhist iconography in their oeuvre as an easily recognisable language that is familiar to most Thais. For example, in the Siamese Smile exhibition presented at the Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre (BACC) in 2008,

Chusak created aesthetically beautiful works representing mythological demons and angels. By incorporating craft and local memory in his installations, Chusak's practice reinforces a sense of community belonging and the continuation



Fig. 5 Montri Toemsombat, *Reverie and Phantasm in the Epoch of Global Trauma*, 2003, performance, 50th Venice Biennale, Italy. Image courtesy of the artist.

of local memories,<sup>26</sup> fostered through the predominantly religious and mythological content of his puppets.<sup>27</sup>

Themes such as religion, harmony, and community values are also advanced in Montri Toemsombat's work. Often referring to the concept of harmony as "the essential factor bonding life, society, culture and nature",<sup>28</sup> Montri's work aims to address contemporary social issues on national and international levels. For instance, in *Reverie and Phantasm in the Epoch of Global Trauma*, performed at the Venice Biennale in 2003, the artist responds to how the "West" sees Asia in a time of globalisation.

**Interactive works:** Contemporary art is increasingly fostering the practice of dissuading audiences from



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passively contemplating artworks. The addition of digital or kinetic works is particular to 21st century art practitioners.<sup>29</sup> Kamol Phaosavasdi started experimental media practices in the late 1990s in alternative spaces and projects that were emerging in those years.<sup>30</sup> However, art critic and co-founder of Project 304, Gridthiya Gaweewong, referred to those art practitioners as “a minority of artists, since the majority here [in Thailand] still focus on academic and formalist works.”<sup>31</sup>

This attitude seems to be changing: more and more artists are embracing new media, occasionally combining it with Thai vernacular techniques to create skilful, entertaining works. Whether translated into physical interaction or aimed at social engagement, new media works allow artists to engage audiences by prolonging or transforming artworks. The advantage of new media seems to be the international language that it carries.



Fig.6 Yuree Kensaku, *Complicated Mountain*, 2011, acrylic and collage on canvas, 132 × 176 cm. Image courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.



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**Interest in non-national concerns:** Whether they are strictly self-focused or whether they envision their work in terms of a wider social commitment, many young artists long to engage with audiences through articulating their works in relation to contemporary concerns—alienation, sexuality, social relationships, materialistic supremacy—that reflect the traits of a society caught in the midst of choosing between the old and the new, the local and the global.<sup>32</sup>

Yuree Kensaku's canvases and mixed media installations are aesthetically and graphically attractive, and most relate to her life experiences and self-reflective take on reality. For instance, the "stage" set-up in *Complicated Mountain* (2011)



Fig. 7 Montri Toemsombat, *Fake Me*, 2002, barb wire, life-size costume, video installation, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

alludes to the hierarchical nature of social relationships restrained by conventional ties and temptations.<sup>33</sup>

Montri Toemsombat combines digitally-based artworks with historically relevant contexts. Photography and video are key components in his installations, and these coexist alongside natural elements like rice, or common materials such as barbed wire. For example, in the installation and performance *Fake Me* (2002), first presented for his residency in Japan, Montri compares himself to a bonsai (made from barbed wire) to criticise oppressive Asian societies.<sup>34</sup> Throughout, Montri's work remains profoundly self-reflective, tackling his life experiences as a means to critique consumerism in contemporary society.

Based on the analysis of SU graduate Chusak Srikwan, it can be said that his practice reflects the main qualities nurtured by his educational background. He is distinctively recognisable for his outstanding figurative skills, a trademark of most SU graduates. This quality matches his choice to use traditional arts and crafts, specifically, shadow puppets, to address a Buddhist-based iconography. Religion is, in fact, one of the pillars of Thai-ness, historically based on the monarchy-nation-religion triad.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in Thai modern art history, this is a language that most Thais find approachable. On a deeper level, the choice of these themes reflects SU's direction, which reinforces national identity, historically defined as Thai-ness. Due perhaps to the philosophy fostered by CU (the oldest university in Thailand), Montri's art practice assumes Thai themes both aesthetically, through a sensitivity to artistic beauty, and culturally, by being locally rooted and internationally approachable. Conversely, BU students/artists have developed a visual language removed from local themes and concerns. Whereas Yuree's adoption of a colloquial and universally understood language<sup>36</sup> appeals equally to

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national and international audiences, her practice seems removed from Thai cultural threads. This may be a result of the absence of a political agenda in BU's curriculum. BU artists appear to embrace a global view on contemporary art,<sup>37</sup> whereas at SU and CU, a sense of national belonging is nurtured and broadly expressed in the students' practice.

## **Postscript**

This article summarises a much wider research project conducted between 2010 and 2011, focused on Thai art education. This eventually led to the author's Masters thesis *The Role of Art Education in Bangkok and its Relevance on 21st Century Thai Art Practices*. While the research was original and ground-breaking at that time, as no other similar study had been conducted in Thai or in English, the social and educational contexts may have changed and developed since then.

Silpakorn University is still a very prominent university that perseveres in nurturing outstanding artistic skills, often recognised at national level through Thailand's major art competitions. The fine art department of Chulalongkorn University has been quiet lately in terms of new artistic contributions to the local art scene. The closure of the Art Centre in February 2017—one of the most cutting-edge institutional art spaces in Thailand, founded in 1995 by Prof. Poshyananda—may in the long run have an impact on the artistic prominence of Chulalongkorn University. Bangkok University, despite remaining a very dynamic school, has seen a decrease in student intake over the last few years. This may be due to the fact that similar programmes have opened in government colleges (Bangkok University is a private school). This aside, BU continues to offer a variety of opportunities to its students, as well as a residency

programme in which the university hosts Asian artists, and at the end of the program exhibits their work in Bangkok University Gallery, the university's modern 'white cube.' In addition to this, artists in Thailand, as elsewhere, are exposed to online information, international residencies, and, of course, travel. Many young Thai artists complete their art education abroad and this adds new strands of thought to the local art scene. In conclusion, while referring to the educational background of each artist can indeed indicate specific artistic tendencies in current Thai art education, it is equally important to apprehend the social and cultural contexts in which those very educational backgrounds are set, especially in present when Thailand is facing great social and political turmoil and uncertainty of its future.

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## Endnotes

1 Apinan Poshyananda, "The Future: Post-Cold War, Post-modernism, Postmarginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants)", in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 13.

2 Apinan Poshyananda, "Taste, Value and Commodity", in *Modern Art in Thailand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 173–4.

3 This is according to research completed for this study at the LASALLE Library, Singapore; the National Library, Singapore; and Chulalongkorn University library, Bangkok, Thailand. The latter is the only library in Bangkok that carries some English publications.

4 John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010). A note for consideration is that this book concludes its research in the year 1999.

5 Silpakorn was first initiated by Silpa Bhirasri in 1933 as the School of Fine Arts. In 1943 the school was accorded the status of a university and was renamed 'Silpakorn.'

6 About 70 percent of the staff are former alumni of the school. Some academic members are very young, being only in their 20s.

7 These included Dean Sansern Milandesuta and Prof Thanet Awisinsiri, to mention but a few.

8 Interview with Chusak Srikwan, 1 Feb. 2011.

9 Ibid.

10 Another Thai contemporary artist who uses puppetry in his practice to convey political themes is Vasan Sitthiket.

11 Interview with Chusak Srikwan, 1 Feb. 2011.

12 Ibid.

13 Steven Pettifor, *Flavours—Thai Contemporary Art* (Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery Ltd, Amarin Printing Company, 2003).

14 Interview with Montri Toemsombat, 30 Nov. 2011.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Thanet Awisiri, *Love in Platinum Frame*, exh. cat., (Bangkok: The Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University, 2007).

19 Interview with Yuree Kensaku, 18 Jan. 2011

20 To be noted that this is a generalisation based on the population analysed in this paper, that is, the three selected artists. The researcher is aware that exceptions and finer connections, at historical and social levels, can be made within these themes. However, for the purpose of this study, such groupings help to clarify the structure of the topic.

21 Both modern and contemporary Thai artists have broadly used similar visual themes. The concept of spirituality, for

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instance, or “moral choice” as offered by Iola Lenzi, is profoundly embedded in the works of several senior Thai artists, including Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. See Iola Lenzi, “Negotiating Home, History and Nation”, in *Negotiating Home, History and Nation*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011).

22 The idea of producing interactive works has also been historically approached by a number of Thai contemporary artists. The 2000 installation *History Class (Thanon Ratchadamnoen)* (2000–) by Sutee Kunavichayanont is an example where the artist uses familiar objects (school desks) retrieved from public spaces (school classrooms), which are then reinterpreted for the community and active involvement of audiences in reclaiming ownership over ‘forgotten’ history. See Iola Lenzi, *Inflated Nostalgia*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Atelier Frank & Lee, 2001), reprinted in *Next Move*, exh. cat. (Singapore: LaSalle, 2003).

23 Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand*.

24 In the catalogue for the seminal exhibition, *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, Prof Poshyananda writes extensively about the decadence of a “pure” Thai Buddhist society and the relevance of Buddhism within the definition of Thai-ness. Apinan Poshyananda, “Contemporary Thai Art: Nationalism and Sexuality a la Thai”, in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996).

25 An example of a controversial approach to religious issues is found in the socially engaged art practice of senior artist Vasan Sitthiket, who often tackles themes related to spirituality and ‘choice’ in a consumerist culture.

26 On the role of the community in Thai contemporary art, see Iola Lenzi, “Negotiating Home, History and Nation”, in *Negotiating Home, History and Nation*, ed. Iola Lenzi, exh. cat. (Singapore:

Singapore Art Museum, 2011).

27 However, Chusak’s most recent show, held in 2010 at Ardel Gallery, Bangkok, featured works with a stronger political inclination. See Steven Pettifor, “Chusak Srikwan at Ardel Gallery of Modern Art”, in *Asian Art News* 20, no. 5 (2010).

28 “Art beyond boundaries,” *Bangkok Post*, last accessed 4 Apr. 2011, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/arts-and-culture/art/190871/art-beyond-boundaries>.

29 Senior artists like Sutee Kunavichayanont or Pinaree Sanpitak had already initiated this approach in the 1990s via traditional or craft-based mediums. See Iola Lenzi, “Breast Idiom”, in *Breast and Beyond* by Pinaree Sanpitak, *Noon-Nom*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: Bangkok University Art Gallery, 2002).

30 These include Project 304, founded, by artists Montien Boonma, Kamol Phaosavasdi, Chatchai Puipia, Micheal Shaowanasai, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Prapon Kumjim, among others, as well as art critic Gridthiya Gaweewong. Gaweewong says, “Project 304 is a non-profit art space. It was founded in 1996 to support contemporary artistic and cultural activities through art exhibitions, as well as media and time-based works and events including the *Bangkok Experimental Film Festival*.” See, “Project 304”, last accessed 5 Mar. 2011, <http://www.project304.info/>.

31 Gridthiya Gaweewong, “Experimental Art in Thailand: Work in (a slow) Progress”, in *Next Move*, exh. cat. (Singapore: LaSalle, 2003).

32 Gridthiya Gaweewong, “What’s New Here?”, in *Brand New 2009*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: Bangkok University, 2009). Gridthiya was invited to curate the 2009 *Brand New Project* at Bangkok University.



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On this occasion, she interviewed some of the young artists about their main concerns.

33 Interview with Yuree Kensaku, 18 Jan. 2011.

34 Gridthiya Gaweewong, "Montri Toemsombat", in *Next Move*, exh. cat. (Singapore: LaSalle, 2003).

35 Apinan Poshyananda, "The Development of Contemporary Art of Thailand: Traditionalism in Reverse", in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 102.

36 That is, based on daily concerns of contemporary society, such as alienation, sex, social relationships and materialistic supremacy.

37 BU curriculum offers three optional classes throughout the entire programme that are focused on Thai art: 'Modernisation and Thai Arts', 'Epistemology Through Thai Architecture' and 'Thai Arts and Cultural Identities'.

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## School of thought : The iconography of the student in Asian contemporary photography

Kong Yen Lin

### *Setting the scene: Staged photography as a force of visual interruption*

Since its advent in 1839, photography's primary claims to reality and objectivity have been challenged time and again—more so in the 21st century. Art historian

George Baker observes that an “epistemological slipperiness” is emerging to expand the visual field of photography beyond its traditional role of static and mechanical documentation. The genre of conceptual photography, especially, has hybridised ‘straight’ camera documentation with elements of dramatic theatre, performance and even classical painting.

A prime example of photography's broadening visual language is illustrated by the technique of staged photography, which adopts the theatrical semantics of the *mise-en-scène*. *Mise-en-scène*, which means “setting” or “setting up” in French, refers to a deliberate orchestration of actors, costumes, make-up and

props to create dramatic moments as part of a theatrical narrative. However, when appropriated in photography, this approach substitutes the eyes of the audience with the camera's photographic eye, and it is through this dramatised vision, composed and captured, that viewers can then interpret the emblematic meanings and symbolisms embedded within the frame.

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*The medium and technique challenge our perception and understanding of reality; they force us to reexamine more carefully what has been overlooked by confounding what is ordinarily regarded as the familiar and prosaic.*

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As staged photography has no time referent, photographers adopt, in art critic Hal Foster's words, a “non-synchronous” method. Like a magpie, they draw upon a pool of common and recognisable visual symbols and metaphors such as places or mannerisms, recycle old symbols and recombine them in a new vocabulary, or even translate visual cues from one medium to another in order to assemble a logical and dramatic allegory. Most crucially, this subversion and manipulation of visual codes in a staged photograph generates a form of visual interruption. The medium and technique challenge our perception

and understanding of reality; they force us to reexamine more carefully what has been overlooked by confounding what is ordinarily regarded as the familiar and prosaic.

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In the milieu of staged photography in Asia, the iconography of the student or classroom stands out as one of the most commonly used, especially by photographers of Chinese ethnicity. One possible explanation may be linked to the relationship between the nation-state and the education system in Chinese-speaking regions of Asia, where Confucian values are upheld. Confucian teachings expound that it is only through proper education and scholastic achievements that individuals can establish personal order, which consequently allows for social order and harmony to prevail. Moreover, modern nation-states have also heavily emphasised the significance of education to developing a skilled and competitive workforce. Educational institutions and associated instruments such as standardised tests are hence an avenue to churn out citizen-commodities with greater exchange value or social capital in the global marketplace. Moreover, in Foucauldian discourse, schools and the education system constitute key components in the complex web of power relations existing between the state

and its citizenry by perpetuating dominant ideologies that establishes and maintains the former's legitimacy to rule.

## **Wang Qingsong (王庆松) :** ***The artist as provocateur***

The iconography of schools and students are hence fertile grounds from which artists could launch their critiques, not only towards the education system, but towards power relations and hierarchies of domination existing in society in general. This is evident in Chinese artist Wang Qingsong's photographic practice. Working almost in the style of a film director, Wang is known for his epic-scale tableaux of meticulously staged scenes and narratives.

In *Follow Me*, Wang poses as a lecturer before a massive blackboard covered with slogans and symbols in English and Chinese, reflecting a growing commodity and



Fig.1 Wang Qingsong, *Follow Me*, 2003, 120x300cm, Collection of the artist.

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consumerist culture in Chinese society (fig.1). Texts scribbled on the board are mainly taken from English language textbooks and manuals in China, in particular, the English-language teaching series on China State Television called "Follow Me", which was first introduced in 1982 when Wang was still a high school student. In his memory, it was the nation's first introductory lesson to the West and all things modern. Ironically, Wang finds himself left behind in this rapid race towards modernisation, as he is still regretfully unable to speak English, the lingua franca of modernity, fluently, a situation common among many others of his generation who have fallen between the cracks of China's dramatic transition.

In this work, Wang is playing with sarcasm and parody: "Follow Me" he says, almost intoning the Chinese

government's exultation of China taking over the reins from the former superpowers, and calling upon others to follow its lead. He leaves viewers to ponder, "But where exactly is China headed to?" A decade later, Wang would reprise his use of the iconography of the classroom setting in *Follow You* (2013) (fig.2). This time, he shifts the camera perspective to the audience of the lesson initiated in *Follow Me*. Representing a classroom, with neat rows of anonymous students resting their heads on their tables, the image draws subtle parallels between the public education system and the machinery of propaganda—the state's thinly veiled weaponry utilised to reproduce economic ideals and class structure. Seated in the middle and peering up amidst this sea of students is Wang himself, dressed up as a sage and hooked up to an intravenous drip. He questions with macabre humour: What kind of students is the education



Fig.2 Wang Qingsong, *Follow You*, 2013, 180 x 300 cm, Collection of the artist.



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system cultivating? Are they prepared for a future in a globalised world? Is tradition no longer relevant today?"

Wang's conscious efforts to insert himself into the photograph as a subject can be attributed to his desire to represent the people who live at the bottom of society. He adds, "So people can relate [to the artwork] when they see my image in the works." By exploring how an ordinary Chinese man on the street finds his place in the midst of social transformations, Wang opens doors for viewers to make their own interpretations and engage in a dialogue with him.

## Weng Fen (翁奋): *Staging observation in a symbolic landscape*

Another Chinese artist who draws inspiration from the dramatic upheavals of a nation in transition is Hainan-born Weng Fen. A lecturer at the Haikou-Hai Nan Arts Academy since 1985, Weng often extends his insights and experiences as an educator into his artworks. However, unlike Wang Qingsong who constructs dramatically different tableaux of the education setting to convey his messages, Weng prefers to keep to a highly consistent aesthetic style and theme throughout his photographic practice—the figure of the female school student in uniform, her back turned against the camera, looking out towards a symbolically charged landscape. Weng also chooses to stage his photos not in a studio, but against backdrops that exist in reality, thereby drawing upon contextual settings to establish meaning.

In the early 2000s, Weng embarked on his series *Sitting on the Wall*, where he positions teenage school girls perched

on a wall and looking out towards panoramic skylines of apartment buildings and towering skyscrapers in some of the fastest developing cities in China, including Shenzhen and Haikou (fig. 3 and 4). The contrast between the foreground where the students are situated—simple, unadorned and rugged spaces—with backdrops of cosmopolitan city skylines—symbols of economic and social modernity—succinctly conveys Weng's message: China is hurtling into a future that seems bright and full of prospects, but is this future within the grasp of its younger generations?



Fig. 3 Weng Fen, *Sitting on the Wall – Shenzhen 1*, 2002-2003. Collection of the artist.

The choice of using female teenage students with their backs turned is also strategic. A possible parallel could be made between the teenage years—a transition period between adolescence and adulthood—and the great leap China had to take in the early 2000s, from a third world agrarian society to an export giant deeply integrated into the global economy. As precursors to growth, both

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Fig. 4 Weng Fen, *Sitting on the Wall – Haikou*, 2001. Collection of the artist.

processes are equally fraught with angst and uncertainty. With their backs turned to the camera, the sense of ambiguity is heightened. In a previous interview, Weng stated that the school girls are mirrors of Chinese desire in face of modernity, “Through them, we are at the same time excited, puzzled, waiting”.

Literal meanings also abound in the series. The title itself is similar to the idiom of “sitting on the fence”, which refers to a dilemma in choosing between two conflicting sides. The artist may be illustrating the uncertainty of Chinese people when confronted with this abrupt social change. Does one cross over to a brave new world or stay on the safe side of the wall?

## ***Lau Chi-chung (刘智聪): The dramatisation of education as dystopia***

For Hong Kong photographer Lau Chi-Ching, the adoption of students as a leitmotif is a visual device to contemplate intangible losses resulting from the city state’s rapid urban renewal. In the photographic series *After School* (2012), he critiques the efficacy of the educational system in preparing students to navigate life in an urbanised, fast-paced social setting.

In his images, students are disconnected from their external realities, engaged in their own pursuits or lost in their own worlds. A blindfolded student feels her way through a dilapidated classroom, textbooks scattered across her feet in a haphazard fashion. The walls of the classroom have crumbled; a gaping hole stretches across its roof (fig. 5). This is Lau’s dystopic vision of education, in which students have to rely on their own instincts to navigate their way out into the open world. Instead of acting as a crutch, knowledge imparted from school education has now turned into a liability, preventing one from advancing further. In another image, a lone female student wearing an award sash stands



Fig 5. Lau Chi-chung, *Untitled*, from the series *After School*, 2012. Collection of the artist.

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Fig 5. Lau Chi-chung, *Untitled*, from the series *After School*, 2012. Collection of the artist.

in the distance amidst ruins of abandoned architecture (fig. 6). Her figure appears subdued and vulnerable, as if she is in danger of being swallowed by the wilderness. The lighting across the entire series is strangely muted and there is a general sense of foreboding and tension.

According to Lau, theoretical knowledge acquired from school is often vastly different from, and at times inapplicable to, practical, real-life demands. He also finds it confounding how students seem more inquisitive about their surroundings when compared to adults, who tend to keep within safe boundaries of the tried and tested.

His photo series therefore questions if the repetitive rigours and rituals of school life have dulled the spirit of exploration and discovery in students, and if critical thought and creativity are sacrificed to meeting academic goals.

The artist's choice of derelict and uninhabited landscapes defies the glittering and picturesque image of Hong Kong so frequently painted in the media. While his vision of

education may seem bleak, it is not entirely divorced from reality. Recent happenings such as the eruption of large-scale street demonstrations in 2012 by students against a new compulsory pro-China school curriculum, as well as the pro-democracy student-led Umbrella Movement in 2014, serve to further highlight the contentious nature of education and its role as a battleground where contesting ideologies and power struggles are constantly being fought out.

## ***Wilfred Lim: The staged self-portrait as a retrieval of personal and social memories***

For Malaysian-born Chinese artist Wilfred Lim, the staged photo offers a window for personal introspection. His *Self Portrait* series (2011) includes meticulously composed photographic scenarios that often represent heightened realities. Imbued with self-deprecating humour, these works deal with issues of social identity, urbanisation, environmental destruction and the loss of memories.

Of particular significance within the series is a photograph staged within a classroom (fig. 7). In it, the artist poses his younger brother (seated) to represent his younger self, leaning back and looking upwards to his older self, which is Lim himself standing atop a table. Next to them is a pile of paper boats, a reference to Lim's memories of folding boat origami to pass the time during lessons in Malaysia. The image represents a critique of the Malaysian education system and its institutionalised discrimination against Chinese minorities. In an interview, Lim revealed how he was jolted into recognising the propagandistic content of school textbooks and the double standards of treatment



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Fig. 7 Wilfred Lim, *Untitled*, from the series *Self-Portraits*, 2011. Collection of the artist.

towards students of different ethnicities in Malaysia when he started schooling in Singapore: "Living there, I have never felt like a first-class citizen... Instead I yearned to come to Singapore where I'll have a fairer shot in education and work," he says.<sup>9</sup> By refusing to establish eye contact with the viewer in his photographs, Lim conveys his refusal to identify with an education system which he feels was defunct and unjust. The cropping of his face also symbolises the erasure of his identity as an ethnic minority, being sidelined in every aspect of life in Malaysia.

The iconography of the school student is hence used by Lim to interrogate social and personal memories. By scrutinising his own recollections of school in Malaysia as compared to his experiences of studying in Singapore, Lim is challenging

the social construction of knowledge in Malaysian society and the state's reinforcement of social hierarchies through the education system. While memory is a burden he carries to his new life in Singapore, it is also the channel through which he makes sense of his place in the histories and societies of both Singapore and Malaysia. His experiences of being consistently treated as an outsider, both in Malaysia and Singapore, indirectly inform his art. Through this he simultaneously reclaims a position for himself literally and figuratively through staging—a technique where he gains full control over the process of conception—while also addressing social issues related to life on the margins.

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## **Conclusion**

This essay has demonstrated through various case studies, that artists who utilise photography have critically used the iconography of the student in four distinct ways. Firstly, Wang Qingsong uses the student as a form of socio-political commentary on modernisation, Weng Fen pairs the student with symbolic landscapes to contemplate issues of urbanisation, Lau Chi-chung dramatises education as dystopian landscapes in order to question the relevancy of school and knowledge and lastly, Wilfred Lim frames the student as a manifestation of personal memory and identity. In these works, the student is not merely an aesthetic device: they are a conceptual manifestation of the photographers' own sensibilities and curiosities towards transformations in themselves and society at large. Photographers resemble students of the world, filled with hope and aspirations in equal measures as doubt and judgment.

The genre of staged photography is hence highly empowering, offering boundless conceptual and aesthetic possibilities: it enables artists to tap on allegories and personal memories, or a vocabulary of symbols and iconography, while at the same time harnessing the medium's unique capacity for achieving verisimilitude. It is also noteworthy that most of the photographers discussed here are grappling with the issue of modernity in their own unique socio-historical contexts. By stepping into their own artworks as both actors and directors, they take on active roles as social agents, empathising with marginalised communities, giving voice to the forgotten or oppressed and hence raising awareness of social issues. Staging demands crew and actors, which means communities are mobilised. This aspect of participation broadens the possibilities of photography beyond a solitary pursuit

involving just the photographer and his/her subject, instead allowing others to gain agency in engaging with or resisting certain social structures or policies.

*Yen Lin is an art writer and curator specializing in photography. She was formerly a photo sub-editor with Reuters Global Picture Desk and was involved in the 4th and 5th Singapore International Photography Festival as an Education Programme Manager. Subsequently, she piloted DECK's photography education programmes. In 2016, she earned her Masters in Asian Art Histories at LASALLE College of the Arts, and is presently a programme manager at The Arts House, overseeing photography, film and Chinese literary arts projects.*

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## Endnotes

- 1 George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field," *MIT Press Journals*, no. 114 (2005): 120.
- 2 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (London: MIT Press, 1996).
- 3 Ivan Kreilkamp, "One More Picture: Robert Browning's optical unconscious," *ELH* 73, no. 2 (2006): 409–435.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
- 5 Umber Majeed, "Social Change and Art, Wang Qingsong's Way – Artnet video interview", *Art Radar*, 2 May 2015, last accessed 16 Nov. 2015, <http://artradarjournal.com/2014/05/02/social-change-and-art-wang-qingsongs-way-artnet-video-interview/>
- 6 Marine Cabos, "Weng Fen, Photographer", *Photography of China*, last accessed 30 Nov. 2015, <http://photographyofchina.com/blog/interview-weng-fen>
- 7 Lau Chi-chung, "After School", last accessed 29 Nov. 2015, <http://www.lauchichung.com/>
- 8 James Promfret, "Hong Kong backs down on China education plan," *Reuters*, 8 Sept. 2012, last accessed 29 Nov. 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/08/us-hongkong-politics-education-idUSBRE88706I20120908>
- 9 Interview with Wilfred Lim, 23 Nov. 2015.



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## Book Review

### Retrospective : A historiographical aesthetic in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia

Elaine Chiew

*How shall we begin to construct an art history for a region?* This fundamental inquiry forms the crux of June Yap's new book, *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia*. Using Singapore and Malaysia as case studies, in this text, Yap, in effect, 'curates' a tour of some of these countries' most iconic artworks from a period ostensibly marking the Asian modern—the 1950s onwards—and the contemporary, which Yap intimates as beginning from the 1990s. In so doing, Yap's focus on artworks that reference past events or narratives forms an ontological approach that looks at the production of history via an aesthetic project, hence her titular use of term "historiographical aesthetic."

As expected, some of the works re-visited include well-canonised ones, such as Redza Piyadasa's *The Great Malaysian Landscape* (1972) and *Entry Points* (1978), artworks by Nanyang-style luminaries Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang, Cheng Chong Swee and Georgette Chen, although Chen

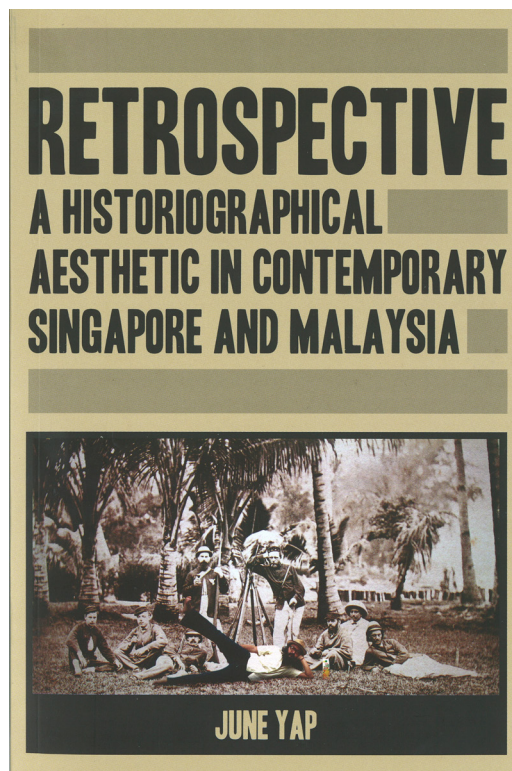
was not one of the group that went to Bali,<sup>1</sup> in addition to Green Zeng's *Malayan Exchange* (2011), Josef Ng's *Brother Cane* (1994) (for performance art), and Tang Da Wu's *Don't Give Money to the Arts* (1995).

June Yap, long active in Southeast Asia as an independent

curator, is also an art historian, writer and teacher. She curated a well-regarded exhibition of Southeast Asian contemporary art for the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2012, entitled *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia*. In 2011, she also organised the Singapore Pavilion for the Venice Biennale, featuring Ho Tzu Nyen. Yap holds a Ph.D. from the National University of Singapore.

Yap's wealth of curatorial expertise is particularly evidenced in her sophisticated treatment of the history of exhibitions. For example, in her discussion of *Tanah Ayer: Malaysian Stories from the Land*, curated by Eva McGovern in 2011, she argues that

this exhibition extended the historical (and nationalistic) trajectory of Redza Piyadasa's seminal show, *The Treatment*



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of the *Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art, 1930-1981*, held at the National Art Gallery in Malaysia in 1972. What her exegesis illuminates is how art history is produced through the organisation of a national exhibition, what this signified for the cultural identity of the newly-birthing nation of Malaysia, and especially, how subsequent exhibitions such as *Tanah Ayer*, in their homage to historical artworks and exhibitions, evince Harold Bloom's powerfully articulated "anxiety of influence."<sup>2</sup> Yap illustrates insightfully how this anxiety plays out in Tan Nan See's *I Want To Be A Contemporary Artist (2006-07)*, which in turn references a past exhibition curated by Piyadasa in 1998, entitled *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987-1997*. Tan, in caricaturing herself in her dioramas in this work, is "overwhelmed" by a "plethora of books and other artworks," weighted under this anxiety of influence (p. 226). Tan's other work, *Study of Malaysia Modern Visual Arts in Landscape (2006-ongoing)*, likewise unfurls an intriguing viewpoint via painted and framed postcards hung upon a wall painted maroon; the postcards reproduce famous artworks from contemporary Malaysian artists such as Latiff Mohidin, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and of course, Piyadasa's aforementioned two works. Yap argues that these subsequent exhibitions not only extend the historical operations of Piyadasa's *Local Landscape* exhibition, but more importantly, inject a crucial exhibitionary dimension to canonisation; even the maroon wall, she contends, which "separat[es] the wall from the rest of the exhibition's [*Tanah Ayer*] artworks," is "effectively co-opting the gallery structure into the artwork." (p. 226-27)

Another riveting section of the book is Yap's attempt to penetrate the shroud of secrecy surrounding Operation Coldstore (1963), which Green Zeng's above-mentioned work directly references, and Operation Spectrum (1987), as folded into Jason Wee's simply-named multi-media

installation 1987 (2006). Both covert operations were acts of swift political reprisals by the Singapore government to stifle dissent through the detention of multiple individuals, without trial and for many years. Yap persuasively shows how artworks like Zeng's and Wee's, which explore political repression through a historical lens, walk a fine line between bearing testimony (by unveiling aspects perhaps not previously divulged to the public, thereby running the risk of government persecution of the artist and implicated participants) and aesthetic concerns (which go beyond factual historicity in affect and intensive registers). In this sense, they create a tension-filled encounter, which is not always reconcilable for the viewer in the artworks' multiple presencing of divergent historical and aesthetic tracks. Yap correctly notes that the historiographical approach performed within artworks like Zeng's *Malayan Exchange* is founded not so much on the excavation of a historical event inasmuch as it is founded upon history as "narrative prose discourse", which is in effect the story of "history". (p. 29)

Thus, the term and framework that Yap has proposed for this study—the "historiographical aesthetic"—betrays an interesting contradiction-in-terms. However, she leaves this term inexplicit: its meaning is loosely sketched out through works that do not just illustrate a historical past but actively examine the nature and production of history through their frameworks and expressions. Yap has organised the structure of her study as follows: the first section examines the commonalities of land, history and art; as she succinctly states, "art depicts history and land, history validates land and art, and art is grounds for the two" (p. 10). The second section posits three interpretative approaches to access the historiographical content of these artworks: their gestures towards history, their poetics (or aesthetic aspects), and finally, their ontological contributions. Overall, the study

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reinforces an understanding that artworks, which excavate and *re-present* historical events, bear triple burdens in the acts of re-witnessing, testament, and the building of collective memory. Each of these is analysed specifically within Yap's study, and yet, the main purpose of such artworks is not the transmission of historical narratives. Complicating these operations is the anxious power, and coming-of-age struggles, of the post-colonial state in nationalising narratives, and how artworks, within the context of national exhibitions, may be complicit, even as their attempts to 'swerve' or challenge such narratives are manifest.

Inasmuch as this reframing of history through contemporary artworks from Malaysia and Singapore is refreshing, intelligent, and original, the study could have benefitted from more clarity on a number of levels. Technically, the study's selection criteria denoted works from the 1990s onwards, but confusingly also incorporates analysis of works from at least as early as 1938. This includes a sideways look at Raden Saleh's *The Arrest of Pangeran Diponegoro* (1857) and a long diversion into Nadiah Bamadhaj's *enamlima sekarang* (2003), which implicates the October 1965 Indonesia massacre, the logic of including these works not being immediately apparent.

Stylistically, in any 'curated' reading of a decades-spanning exercise, following the first mention of an artwork or exhibition with the year it was produced or hosted, and the same for any historical interlude, would have anchored the reader temporally in place and time. As well, frequent intertextual referencing makes choppy what is often a dense interlayering of theory and case-detailed analysis. Most importantly, structurally, a tightening of framework and logical connections would have driven points home: for

example, the surmised definition of the "historiographical aesthetic" casts a broad net. Granted, no study can be exhaustive, yet, the selection criteria does not quite explain why particular works are included while omitting others that might also fall within the penumbra of the "historiographical aesthetic." These could have included, for example, Jason Wee's series of *Self-Portraits (No More Tears Mr. Lee)* (2009), which specifically addresses Singapore's separation from Malaysia, or Wong Hoy Cheong's *Text Tiles* (2000) as an example of Bloom's *kenosis*, a mutual emptying-out of influence. The latter work even involves actual texts, albeit a pulping of them.

Similarly, though possessing the same origins, given the increasingly divergent "imagined communities" of Singapore and Malaysia, the logic of clumping them together in the age of the contemporary needs explication. The interposition of Bloom's various technical dimensions of a theory of poetry—*clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, just to name a few—onto contemporary artworks, while certainly thought-provoking, produces mixed results because some aspects of Bloom's theory in poetry fit better than others for art production and art making. If their similarities are manifold, they are also nuanced and ontological, requiring more careful parsing. Lastly, the comparison of contemporary Singaporean and Malaysian canonising efforts to eminent historical tomes like Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* does not quite bridge the vast temporal and East-West divides, conveying paradoxically an impression of an imbued anxiety of influence.

Unwieldy as this structure may be, however, Yap's retrospective of contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean art viewed through the framework of the "historiographical



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aesthetic” is a bold attempt to interrogate the role(s) history plays in art, and art in history.

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## Endnotes

1 Nanyang here, taken to represent, per T.K. Sabapathy, either “a historical institution, an art movement or an aesthetic form.”

2 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Second Edition. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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## Report from the 11th Shanghai Biennale “Why not ask again?”

Usha Chandradas

“Why not ask again?” This was the curatorial theme of the 11th Shanghai Biennale, which the 2016 student cohort of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme were privileged to attend as part of our overseas study trip. This was indeed a fitting question as it brought to the fore issues which we had covered in the classroom during the very first semester of the Programme. Tony Bennett’s “The Exhibitionary Complex” will be a familiar article to those who have trodden the hallowed pathways of the Asian Art Histories Programme. It is one of the first pieces of required reading for the module on “Exhibitions and the Making of Art Histories in Asia.”

The basic idea—if slightly sinister—is a simple one. The concept of “panopticism” (an idea of permanent visibility created through a physical structure which allows for surveillance from a central point), is one which philosophically underpins modern museology. The most direct illustration of such idea lies within the carceral systems of 18th century Europe, whereby prison guards would centrally locate themselves in an observation tower so as to be able to view all prisoners at once. The element of spectacle fuses with power relations as exemplified through the all-mighty surveilling gaze.

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*Conceptually, the art biennale occupies an intermediate space, somewhere between the worlds of the commercial gallery, public museum and national tourism initiatives.*

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Museums arguably apply similar concepts insofar as they “reverse the panoptical principle,” by “fixing the eyes of the multitude upon an assemblage of glamorous commodities.”<sup>1</sup> In so doing, the power which accompanies knowledge (so derived from the ability to consume ideas about the various articles on display), is transferred to the viewer. Additionally, the viewers themselves become part the spectacle (for

example, in being advised to adhere to dress codes, or when different classes of visitors are segregated in terms of access to events, or by ticket prices).

Conceptually, the art biennale occupies an intermediate space, somewhere between the worlds of the commercial gallery, public museum and national tourism initiatives. The works displayed are not for sale and yet inclusion in such prominent shows may well raise prices of works for

the artists involved. The shows may be privately curated, but associations with sovereign geographic regions (i.e. Shanghai in China, Venice in Italy, etc.) clearly imbue such events with a nationalistic flavour, allowing countries to “shock and awe” with their own brand of artistic acrobatics.

The Shanghai Biennale has a particularly colourful history.

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Its third iteration in 2000 -2001 saw a satellite exhibition by Ai Wei Wei and independent curator Feng Boyi, entitled *Fuck Off* (or, as translated into more politically correct Chinese, “Uncooperative Attitude”). The works were deeply subversive and controversial; and the show was closed down a few days after its opening.

The 2016 Shanghai Biennale, while far less provocative, was no less engaging. We viewed a plethora of works, but for the purposes of this article, a brief selection of works will be discussed, chosen in terms of those that best embody the principles referred to above.

In terms of “shock and awe” value, Mou Sen and MSG’s *The Great Chain of Being—Planet Trilogy* (Fig. 1), delivered in

spades. It was a cavernous interactive installation which one entered through a gigantic “crashed” airplane structure, wedged in the middle of the exhibition space. Almost forty works were combined into a megastructure whose development was inspired by writers Samuel Beckett and William Shakespeare, as well as by the Red Flag Canal (an irrigation canal in Henan province, and propagandist symbol in Mao-era China). Whether by design or not, the work saw little by way of curatorial explanation, with viewers being left to simply experience the work’s overwhelming magnitude. Described as a “storytelling machine”,<sup>2</sup> the piece was undoubtedly absorbing and all-consuming. It was impossible to photograph in its entirety and begged the question if it was even “art” in the first place, resembling more of a theme park amusement than something typically



Fig. 1 Mou Sen and MSG, *The Great Chain of Being—Planet Trilogy*, 2016. Experimental theatre space, videos, sound, objects and bees. Photo credit: Eunice Lacaste



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Fig. 2 Sammy Baloji, *Kolwezi*, 2011 -2012. Archival inkjet prints. Photo credit: Usha Chandradas

displayed in an art biennale or museum.

In contrast, *Kolwezi* (Fig. 2) by Sammy Baloji provided a darkly humorous look at China's neo-colonial activities in Africa. Images of the barren slopes of copper and cobalt mines in Kolwezi (a city in the Democratic Republic of Congo), which have been developed and utilised by Chinese corporations, were laid alongside shiny, kitschy posters made in China. These posters decorate the makeshift bars, hotels, homes, hair salons and other social structures in "cities of tarpaulin",<sup>3</sup> which have been erected to support mining activities in the region. One could "almost believe" that "[the] images of utopian futures [represented] the Congo of tomorrow."<sup>4</sup> The ravaged natural landscapes formed a fascinating counterpoint to the glossy false images in the posters. On one level this work could be read as a damning indictment of exploitative Chinese economic activities. Consider, however, the situatedness

of the work (in China, at a national exhibition such as the Shanghai Biennale), and deeper levels of meaning emerge. There is perhaps an arrogance to the display of the work for consumption at a commercial event within China, suggesting perhaps that resistance to China's hegemony is futile, and that even biting social commentary is fair game for commodification within the juggernaut of Chinese geopolitical interests.

The Cell Art Group's work *As Long As You Work Hard* (Fig. 3) saw artists assemble manual tools from farmers and workers in Longshui into a "cellular"<sup>5</sup> form, suggesting growth and multiplication. Longshui's cottage industry of tool-making stands in "uneasy confrontation"<sup>6</sup> with the industrial production of tools over the past two decades. The work presents a sly dig at stereotypical notions of Chinese mass-production, offering a profusion of manual tools stuck painfully into a wall. Viewers are perhaps reminded of the

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Fig. 3 Cell Art Group, *As Long as You Work Hard*, 2013. Tools, steel wall, video. Photo credit: Eunice Lacaste

multiplicity of existing viewpoints, and of the fact that the Chinese are themselves not immune to the vagaries of consumerism and the advent of new technologies.

In many ways, the Shanghai Biennale in its simple yet profound exhortation to pose questions and “reflect on things as they change with the passage of time” was a fitting end to our last class outing before the cohort broke up for our final semester of independent thesis research. Having been freed from the panoptical confines of school and released into the wider world, the question remains of what MAAH lessons we will continue to carry with us? Certainly, we could do worse than to follow the advice of Xiang Liping, Chief Coordinator of the Biennale, who suggests that one should pose questions, “regardless of whether there is an

answer, or what the answer might be”, as doing so elevates one’s consciousness towards new questioning, opening up loopholes in our thinking, and allowing for new perspectives to filter through.



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The class at the Shanghai Biennale

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## Endnotes

1 Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (London, New York: Routledge), 65.

2 *Why Not Ask Again: 11th Shanghai Biennale*, ed. Power Station of Art and Raqs Media Collective (China: China Academy of Art Press, 2016), 77.

3 *Why Not Ask Again*, 63.

4 Ibid.

5 *Why Not Ask Again*, 120.

6 Ibid.

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## Exhibition Review

### “On sharks and humanity” : Art’s appeal to the heart

Rosalie Kwok

Edward Degas, the impressionist painter, once said, “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” It is precisely in this spirit that *On Sharks and Humanity* employs contemporary art to raise awareness of marine conservation and shark preservation. It seeks to challenge prevailing prejudices against the much-feared shark by highlighting the barbarity of its slaughter to stir sympathy and disgust, and to reconsider our complex relationship with nature.

The first instalment of the exhibition was realised with the support of Parkview Arts Action in collaboration with WildAid at the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco in 2014. It moved on to Moscow, and then to the National Museum of China in Beijing on a much larger scale, where it hoped to have an impact on a country with the highest consumption of shark fins.

Singapore is the exhibition’s fourth iteration in the newly opened Parkview Museum. This is particularly significant as shark hunting is prevalent in many Southeast Asian nations and affluent Chinese communities still consume a substantial amount of shark fins. The Parkview Museum is a private museum under the auspices of Parkview Group, a construction conglomerate. It is housed in the iconic “Gotham Tower” or Parkview Square on South Bridge Road. It has an impressive column-free space of 15,000 square feet and this expanse has been used well in the museum’s debut

exhibition with its excellent layout.

Curator Huang Du employs a multi-media approach by integrating installation, photography, poetry, painting, sculpture, video and public service campaigns to increase our understanding of the importance of maintaining the balance of marine ecosystems. Including 33 artworks by 29 artists, the curatorial objective is for viewers to have an intense artistic experience and through it, be encouraged to reflect upon the issues raised.

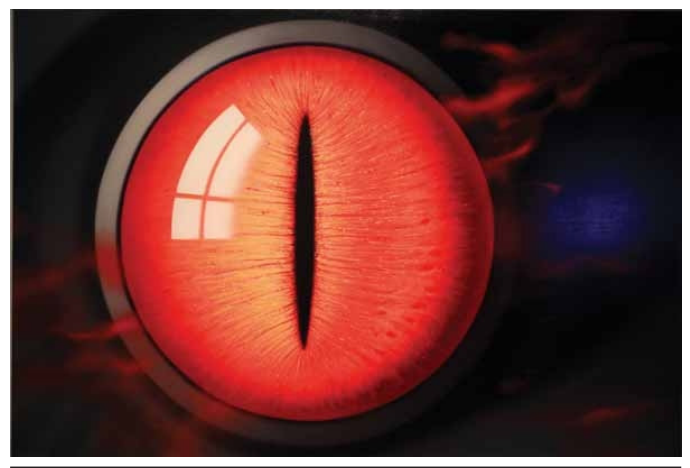


Fig. 1 Liu Zining, *Us*, 2014, Oil on canvas and propylene, 200 x 300cm.

Liu Zining’s *Us* (Fig. 1) is the first artwork that greets us. With a single red eye, the shark’s sorrow is articulated in the



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vibrant red streaks of blood around him. The shiny effect of the painting reflects the viewer's image, drawing them 'inside' the eye figuratively, and thus seemingly implicating them in this species' fate of near-extinction. The fearsome creature is somewhat humanised too with the large size of the canvas and intensity of the red painting. If eyes are the windows to one's soul, then Liu here exposes the cruel reality of humanity by depicting the desperation of the shark threatened by the human-predator. The title *Us* is a clear appeal for the harmonious co-existence of both humans and sharks. The curatorial intent of inextricably drawing viewers into the plight of these marine creatures is immediately achieved.

Wang Luyan was one of the founding members of China's avant-garde group "Stars" in the post-Cultural Revolution years of the late 1970s. As such, he believes that artists have an important role to educate and to change society. Instead of portraying sharks, he chose to awaken our conscience to humanity's avarice, in order to understand the reason behind the creature's fate. In *Downward Force on Upward Moving Object*, each one of the bright red buoys are speared from above by metal rods of varying lengths. These rods hang from rectangular blocks of steel, giving the impression that they are pushing the buoys down from the surface of the ocean. Human desire is expressed by Wang as an uncontrollable force, as the buoyancy of the floats

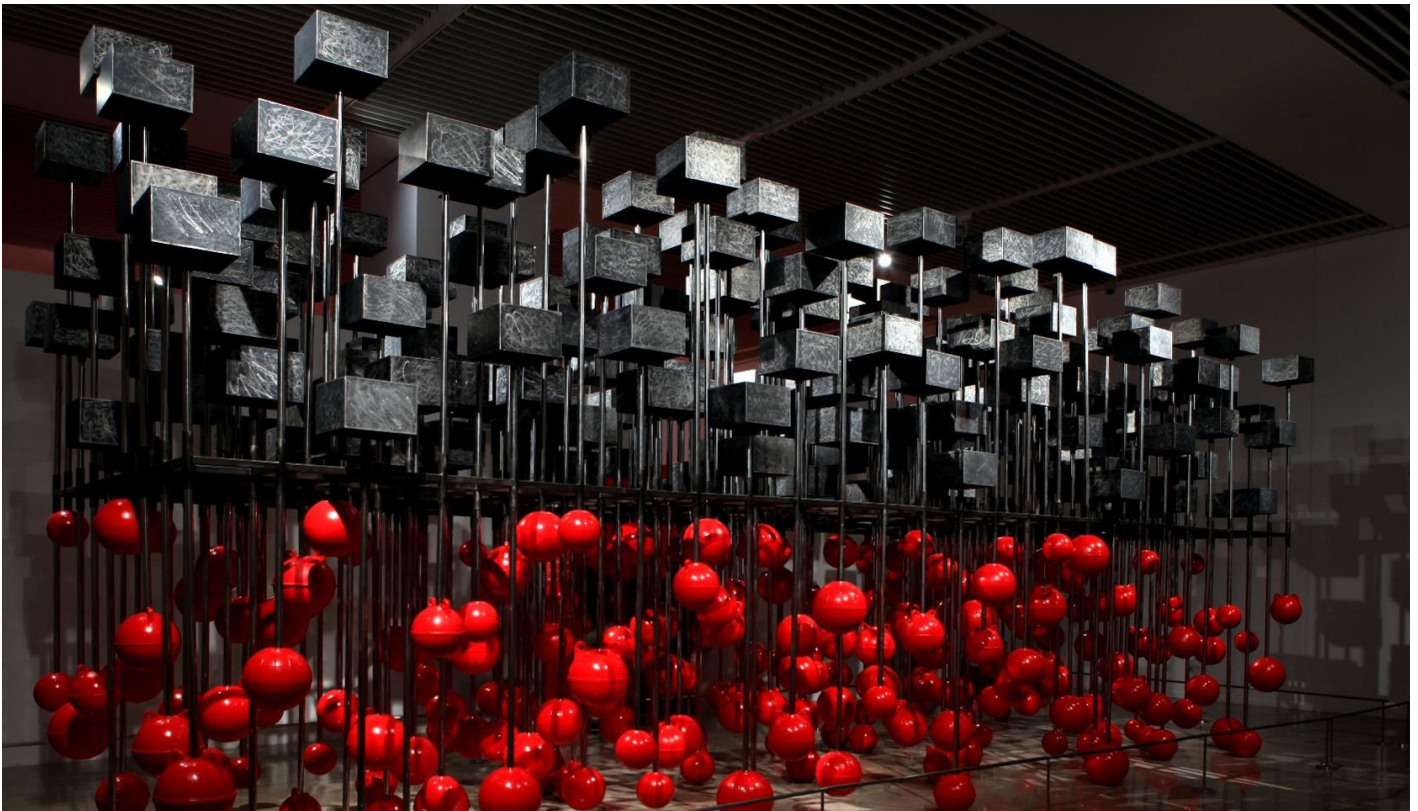


Fig. 2 Wang Luyan, *Downward Force on Upward Moving Objects*, 2015, lacquer paint, stainless steel, plastic and regular steel. 910 x 300 x 370cm.

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Fig. 3 Yu Yang, *Enlightenment*, 2014, stainless steel harpoons, 340 x 250 x 380cm.

mean that they persist in pushing upwards, despite being weighted down. The work's narrative concerns humanity's desire to control nature, leading to overharvesting and pollution of our natural resources, including the decimation of the shark population.

Harpoons are the weapons used to kill large sea creatures like whales and sharks. Mongolian-born artist Yu Yang attempts to project the suffering and struggles of a shark through *Enlightenment* (Fig. 3), his installation of a shark made from harpoons welded together. The conceptual portrayal of the animal is a manifestation of humanity's greed for the twisted and struggling shark. By hanging the work, there is an implication that the shark is a trapped species; being a prized possession on show that humanity

prides itself in slaughtering and consuming. The vague outline of a shark gives the impression that it is being continuously stabbed by the harpoons of different sizes. By employing the very weapon used to kill sharks as a medium, Yu's narrative is one that calls for pity and compassion.

Photography is a frozen moment from real life and the immediacy of this reality is poignant in its ability to draw a viewer's attention. In *The Harvest* (2010), Mark Leong, a fifth-generation American-Chinese photographer, has captured the world of shark-finning on the island of Lombok, Indonesia. Twenty-one of his photos fill up a wall, documenting the entire process from fishing, finning, desiccating, storing, weighing, selling and finally cooking the shark fins. Leong's work was not commissioned for this



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exhibition but was originally part of a three-year assignment for *National Geographic* magazine. Through his photos, viewers can gain a different point of view on the lives of workers who are earning their livelihood from this industry. One frozen moment is all it takes to reveal the harsh reality of how consumers' demand clearly continues the slaughter of these creatures for a mere part of its anatomy. Through this, the slogan of this exhibition, "No buying, no killing!"; is conveyed.



Fig. 4 Mark Leong, *The Harvest* (detail), 2010, photographs, 80 x 100cm.

One shortcoming of the exhibition is the lack of information on the individual panels, leaving visitors wondering about the materials used or the country of origin of the artists. However, the excellent thought-provoking artwork and the interesting touches outweigh these weaknesses. The exhibition begins on the second-floor courtyard. This floor includes a number of works, the most attention-catching of which is Zheng Lu's 6.5-metre-high, see-through stainless steel sculpture in the shape of a fin, entitled *The Butterfly in Love with the Flower*, which flamboyantly announces the

shark-related exhibition within. Then, stepping out of the third-floor elevators, sharks in different shades of blue, placed on the floor, welcome visitors into the exhibition hall. Blue lighting throughout the exhibition gives a marine-setting effect, in which artworks appear to 'swim' around the halls. Poems about nature are written on walls throughout the halls to remind us of its vulnerability.

Through its multi-faceted, the curatorial objectives of stirring our sympathy through an appreciation of aesthetics towards promoting preservation has been achieved. The power of art, appealing to the heart and making us see what we should see, as Degas said, is truly harnessed in this exhibition.

"On Sharks and Humanity" is a free exhibition that ends in June 2017.

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