

ART

Shattering Stereotypes

Forget all the mystery: a show of contemporary Asian art is as political as the evening news

BY VIBHUTI PATEL

IT TOOK HALF A CENTURY OF POSTCOLONIALISM and an economic boom for contemporary Asian art to be seen in the West. New York's Asia Society recently celebrated its 40th anniversary with "Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions," an exhibit that shatters the stereotype of an "exotic" Asia, a monolith of timeless traditions, mystery and mysticism. With paintings, sculpture and installations as raw and political as the evening news, "Traditions/Tensions" showcases not the familiar Asians (Chinese and Japanese) but the "invisible" ones from India, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. Their art reflects the social problems of their countries: religious violence, the silencing of political minorities, the oppression of women and homosexuals and the fragmentation of urban life.

Many of the works are a hybrid of modern technology and ancient customs. The traditional Korean pig of prosperity is pre-

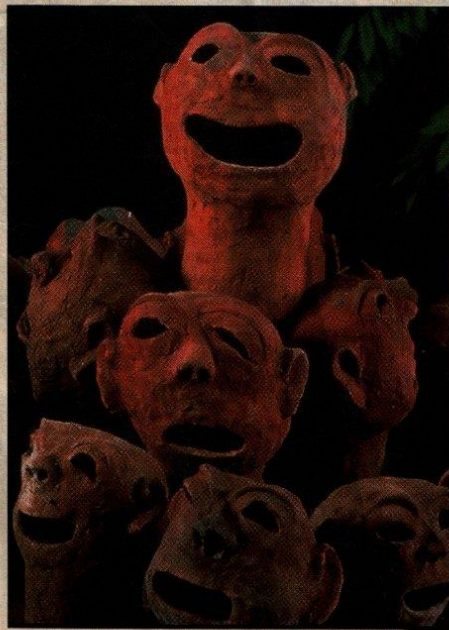
sented as a monumental balloon, "Plastic Happiness," that inflates and deflates automatically over the show's entrance, parodying the ritual talisman of Asian doorways. In another wry comment, this one on Asia's obsession with technology, a giant mechanical robot sprawls on the floor, tries to rise but keeps falling back.

Some art is designed to startle. Indian sculptor Ravinder Reddy paints his fiberglass nudes a sacrilegious blue (god Krishna's color) or shiny gold (a travesty of gilded goddesses). They stand at human height with pop art's bright red nails, lips and painted eyes, and elaborate coiffures that mock classical sculptures. By contrast, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya's "Filipina: DH" is a political installation. Suitcases, family photographs and letters from home, alongside brooms, aprons and the paraphernalia of a maid's work, speak movingly of the exploitation of domestic help, depicting the plight of "DH" solely through belongings.

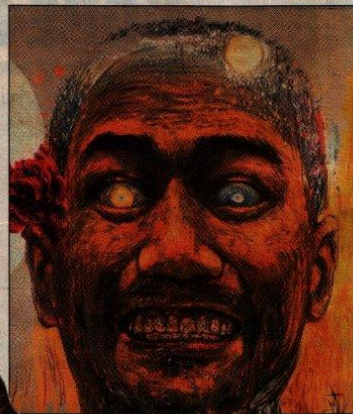
There are political messages, too, in

some Indonesian installations. Heri Dono lines up torsos of bug-eyed men, their chests wired with tape recorders, who stare blankly over the garbled noise of cassettes and whirring fans—electronic intelligence devices depicting a Kafkaesque police state. Dadang Christanto's pyramid of grotesque terra-cotta heads, with open eyes and slits for mouths, topped by a single, open-mouthed head, suggests speech is only for those in power.

Feminist issues (from prostitution to female feticide) are a powerful feature of the show. Korean Soo-Ja Kim makes a colorful statement on women's work through used clothing. Sheela Gowda from India uses cow dung to create abstract minimalist installations about right-wing religious violence. "Traditions/Tensions" moves to Vancouver in April and will then travel through Asia. But the show's contemporary artists have already delivered their message. ■



The invisibles: (Left to right) Indonesian heads, 'Filipina: DH' (detail), Chatchai Puipia's 'Siamese Smile'



PHOTOS COURTESY ASIA SOCIETY