

Features: The Arts

'Traditions/Tensions': Contemporary art from Asia

NEW YORK (JP): An exciting and ground-breaking show has opened in New York City. For the first time in the United States, an international exhibition of contemporary art from Asia is on view.

Shows of work from Asia usually meant one of two things: the work is traditional in form and historical in content, or Asia only included China or Japan.

Traditions/Tensions, organized by a Thai art historian and critic, Apiman Poshyananda, is a welcome sight as it introduces the works of 27 artists from five countries, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand to the New York art world.

The exhibition, which opens on Oct 2 and will continue until January next year, is currently being held at three venues in New York City—the Asia Society, Grey Art Gallery at New York University and the Queens Museum of Arts.

In conjunction with the show, the Asia Society and New York University hosted a two-day symposium entitled *Fast*

By Diyan Achyodi

Forward: The Contemporary Art Scene in Asia, and the Queens Museum held a panel discussion with both Asian and Asian-American artists.

Traditions/Tensions is an ambitious undertaking for the Asia Society. One of the strongest aspects of this show is evident in the familiarity of the curator with the material; the work chosen is indicative of Asia today, the post-colonial Asia, a hybrid of influences and histories that have syncretized, which is neither Old nor New.

There is awareness and content, the art not being merely beautiful but imbued with cultural and socio-political meaning. The show is significant, from a region with a long past of age-old traditions, customs and religions, yet also of new nations often-visited by tourists and travelers, with growing numbers of foreign franchises, fast-food havens,

of Coca Cola and Wal-Mart.

The two other venues of the exhibition were chosen for specific reasons. The Queens Museum of Art is situated in a borough of New York City that is home to a large population of Asian immigrants. The Grey Art Gallery is affiliated with New York University, which has a strong East-Asian Studies program as well a large body of both Asian and Asian-American students.

Also, it is close to SoHo, the proverbial art center of New York City, giving it access to the "average" gallery-goer.

As you walk into the lobby of the Asia Society, *Plastic Happiness*, a giant yellow inflated pig (Choi Jeong Hwa, South Korea, 1995) greets you with a bang of motorized periodic deflation and re-inflation. Choi also has a huge yellow fabric robot in the Queens Museum (*About Being Irritated*—The Death of a Robot, 1995) which collapses and enlarges with a huge hissing noise. These pieces seem to speak of the fast pace of contemporary Asian society, things moving and changing

with great clamor yet really staying the same. The robot is lying down, taking up the floor of an entire room. Similarly, the pig is jolly and fat; there is nothing menacing about these yellow beings. These objects present elements of mass-produced pop culture (robots and plastic pigs) as larger-than-life beings, given the status of deities.

Indonesia's Heri Dono presents *Ceremony of the Soul*, 1995, an installation of Borobuduresque torsos with plastic mannequin heads and wooden arms emanating tape-recorded sounds continually pouring forth in an unintelligible drone.

This piece brings to mind classes I've had in which no learning is actually done, just a lot of empty note-taking and repetition. It intelligently blends an ancient symbol, the calm torso of Buddha, with modern plastic and noise to present an army of blank-faced bodies, immobile and frozen, trapped in a uniform formation at the crossroads of the ancient and the modern.

Dadang Christanto's sculpture, *Kekerasan* (Violence I), 1995, consists of a pile of grinning terra-cotta heads, arranged in a pyramid fashion. These disembodied heads recall newspaper images of piles of skulls and bones languishing perhaps as a warning to the enemy.

The twisted, gnarled faces seem to be struggling for air, their mouths open in a silent scream. Each head is similar to the next, piled on top of each other, with no room for any individual to stand out. As strong as the image is, *Kekerasan* is not as successful as the untitled piece last summer, consisting of male and female terra-cotta bodies placed in the beach in Ancol, North Jakarta, which stood there for days until the tide swept them away.

The elements of time and water had made the Ancol installation a more complete experience. Both Christanto and Dono seem to speak of a certain kind of anonymity and

invisibility, a space in which there are so many bodies that few people are able to have a voice of their own.

Arahmaiani showed work that dealt with the idea of hybrid-ness and a myriad of cultural influences. One piece, *Etalase*, 1994, is a glass vitrine with a number of objects: a photograph, the Koran, a fan, a *Pakwas* mirror, a drum, an icon, a Coca Cola bottle, a pack of condoms, and a box containing sand, forcing these objects to share a common space and a common meaning. Apparently the work had been severely criticized by religious officials for its "sacrilegious" combination of items.

Indonesia, being a nation with the motto *Unity In Diversity*, is a pluralistic nation of various ethnic groups, languages, and religions. The piece seems to speak about this diversity of influences that may often contradict one another, yet are all culturally valid.

Another piece, *Lingga/Yoni*, 1994 (displayed next to a *Lingga/Yoni* sculpture from the Asia Society collection) is an iconic painting of a Lingga and Yoni (male and female fertility symbols, representative of genitalia) floating on top of a background of Malay-Arabic script *Nature of Book* and Sanskrit writing in the Palawa script (*Courageous, honest in fulfilling his duty, leader of mankind, his excellency Purnawarman* (King of the Tarumanagara kingdom in West Java). Again, she is combining three strong images, all taken from Indonesia's rich and varied past, and proclaiming all of them as equally valid.

The failing of these pieces is that the specificity of the symbolism may require too much explanation for an American audience.

One of the strongest works in the show is FX Harsono's *Voices Without A Voice/Sign*, 1993-94. It consists of nine large silk-screen images of hands propped up against the wall, the hands writing the letters of the word *demokrasi*, the last hand bound with rope, in a struggle to finish the letter. In

front of each canvas is a table with a stamp of the corresponding screen, ink, and a pad of paper. Viewers are able to decipher the code of the sign by going to each table and taking an impression of the stamp on a piece of paper.

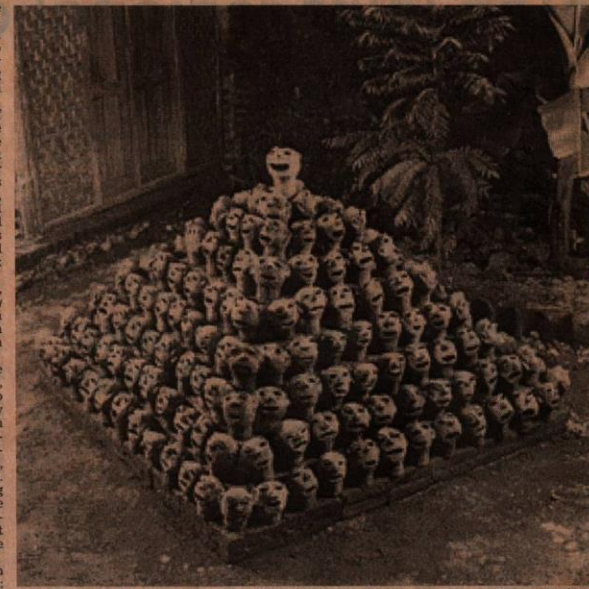
It is interesting in its use of sign language as a code—the language one must use to hide the truth when one does not feel free to speak. The rubber stamp as an object also brings about images of bureaucracy, being associated with official documents, legalization, and notarization. This piece is beautifully coded yet lucid and a poignant critique of the lack of freedom of speech.

Another piece by Harsono, *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers*, 1994, consists of a black square cloth with an array of unpainted wooden Javanese masks cut in half.

Beban Eksotika Jawa, (The Burden of Javanese Exotica), 1993, by Nindityo Adipurnama, is an elegantly arranged array of wooden carved *konde* (Javanese hair-knot) shapes containing a variety of objects: mirrors, jewelry, a Christian cross, photographs, 1993, by Nindityo Adipurnama, is an elegantly arranged array of wooden carved *konde* (Javanese hair-knot) shapes containing a variety of objects: mirrors, jewelry, a Christian cross, photographs.

The *konde* becomes a covering for hidden ideas. The pieces are beautiful, each *konde* just a little larger than a head, just awkward enough to give the impression of a heavy weight. There is a similarity between this and Arahmaiani's work; again, dealing with this multitude of influences that make up Indonesia. The burden of exoticism, having to explain one is not nearly as one-dimensional or "mysterious" as the definition. It is also a comment on the love-hate relationship one may have with one's cultural origins, especially if they are as strongly defined as the Javanese, in which one both admires and respects history while at the same time wanting to break away and define oneself apart from that history.

The most "traditional" (in the Western-European art-historical sense) of the works by the Indonesians is I Wayan Bend's *Revolution*, 1991. A painting in the style of Balinese Modern, it



Kekerasan I (Violence I) by Dadang Christanto

is lush and intricate, filled with hundreds of interesting details. The central image of the work is the Balinese fight against the Dutch colonialists. The timeline is surreally unclear. One finds a figure of a sharp-nosed Dutchman in an army uniform with a red-white-blue flag, in confrontation with a traditionally dressed Balinese man. In another corner, there are throngs of sharp-nosed people with huge zoom-lensed cameras pointed at the faces of traditional Balinese figures and buildings. Everywhere one finds the meeting of East and

West, Old and New, Traditional and Modern. This work demands hours of scrutiny, each look revealing a different anecdote.

The exhibition includes 59 works, all of them interesting in their explorations of the intersections of a variety of issues and ideas. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya presented *Filipina (DH)*, 1995, a poignant installation lamenting the situation of Philippine maids abroad.

Kim Ho-Suk's beautiful ink paintings portrayed events of the Japanese occupation of South Korea, incredibly mov-

ing in both the mastery of the technique and the potency of the image. Thailand's Navin Rawanchikul filled bottles with photographs of aged indigenous peoples, placing these bottles in locations such as libraries to give them, usually silenced, a visual voice.

Bhupen Khakhar (India) openly addresses male homosexuality in his large, colorful paintings.

All in all, *Traditions/Tensions* is a welcome, long-awaited and necessary addition to the New York contemporary art scene.



Dadang Christanto and his work.