

A LOOK AT ARARIO GALLERY'S INAUGURAL EXHIBITION 'VOICE OF ASIA' AT ITS NEW SHANGHAI SPACE BY FRANCES ARNOLD

Giving Voice



Arario Gallery inaugurated its new space in Shanghai with the summer group exhibition 'Voice of Asia' which opened on 1 July and ended on 27 August. As well as shining a spotlight on a range of social realities experienced throughout the region – Aono Fumiaki's found objects, for example, sourced from an area devastated by Japan's 2011 earthquake; and Choi Byungso's newspaper "censorship" of historical Korean government propaganda — the show also revealed how in Southeast Asia in particular, artists are driving change within their communities.

Newly moved to Shanghai's burgeoning West Bund art quarter after three years in the city's Xuhui district, Arario is the latest of a string of galleries to relocate to the riverside spot. Set across two distinct spaces separated by a semi-covered courtyard, Arario's new digs are impressive, with this mixed media group show pointing to the potential of the space. Viewed as a whole, the exhibition presents a comprehensive overview of a region whose assertive and ongoing emergence on the global stage these past 20 years has helped shape a new world map, with Asia's growing significance in the realm of contemporary art witnessed by an ever increasing number of fairs, institutions, and collectors.

Discussing Asia's ascension in the art world, Arario Gallery's Executive Director, Dr. Henna Joo points to the reciprocity of creative influences within the region, as well as rapid urban and economic changes. "In the West, many advances happened in a very step-by-step way since the 1970s – changes in thinking, liberalism, and at the same time, the internet for cultural exchange." But in large swathes of Asia, she notes, rapid economic development has accelerated





not just societal shifts, but in some cases, and particularly in the region's southeast, a first generation of contemporary artists.

"Different countries have different concepts of age," she explains. "In Indonesia, for example, someone in their thirties is already considered established because their history of contemporary art is so short. So this is the first contemporary art generation. They have been working for ten to 15 years and are now leading the contemporary art scene of Southeast Asia. It creates some kind of responsibility, either to their art circle, or a kind of social responsibility."

Several artists featured in 'Voice of Asia' embody precisely this spirit of generosity through art-facilitated social projects. Already a global name thanks to recent showcases at New York's Asia Society, at the Indonesian Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale, as well as an ongoing exhibition at Singapore Art Museum, Eko Nugroho is one such arts activist. Emerging onto the scene in the late 1990s,

he responded to events such as Indonesia's tumultuous transition to democracy, and the 1997 financial crisis, through graffiti.

More recently, however, he has become known for intricate tapestries, manually embroidered by local craftspeople and based on his colorful paintings. "He asked, 'How I can use art to communicate and do something good for local society?'" Traditional embroiders [in Indonesia] are losing their jobs due to the digitalisation of their industry, so he gave them a painting and asked them to make a textile," explains Joo. 'Voice of Asia' featured two of the vibrant, collaborative works, worn by placard-wielding mannequins.

Positioned opposite Nugroho's colorful characters was an altogether darker work by Philippines artist, Leslie De Chavez. "It's about violence," says the artist of his large-scale painting, 'Defeat Ushered by Surrender is the New Oblivion'. Known for addressing socio-political themes in his work, as well as those of national identity, De Chavez's participation

Clockwise from top left: Installation view of 'Voice of Asia'. On the left wall: Geraldine Javier, 'New Cloud Forming', 2017, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183cm. Next to it is a sculpture by Eko Nugroho. Image courtesy Arario Gallery; Arario Gallery's new space in Shanghai. Image courtesy Arario Gallery; Installation view of Leslie de Chavez, 'Defeat Ushered by Surrender is the New Oblivion', 2017, oil on canvas, 195x247cm. Image courtesy the artist and Arario Gallery; Li Hui, Dissociative Self, 2011-2015, stainless steel 450 x 190 x 210 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Arario Gallery.

in the exhibition sees two men – they might be executioners, or friends bearing a third's lifeless body – gagged and blindfolded respectively. An articulation of how, as a society, we turn a blind eye to certain acts of violence, it is one of the most troubling works on show.

Like others represented in 'Voice of Asia', De Chavez represents a first generation of contemporary artists in his country. And, like others on show here, he has applied his experience and profile to give back to his local and artistic community. After a year-long residency in Korea in 2005, De Chavez established Project Space Pilipinas in Manila, since relocated to Lucban in Quezon province and home to the Neo-Emerging Artist Residency (NEAR). "The experience in the residency made me realise the importance of having the time and space for artists to further their craft and other artistic endeavours," explains De Chavez over email. "[Residencies] could also provide a valuable time for an artist to reflect not only on the directivity of his or her practice, but of one's role or contribution to the bigger artistic community as well."

Conscious of the project's twofold goals, he continues, "Art appreciation in local communities like Lucban is totally different from that of Manila. That is why it is also crucial for our art projects and programming to be at least available if not yet (totally) accessible to the local audience." For De Chavez, that its locale is significantly not Manila is important: "Even if signals, tendencies, and major activities about art are being sent or presented in the centre, there should be an equal acknowledgement of developments, dissemination of information and opportunities about art to and from the regions," he said of his support for art's decentralisation.

Voice of Asia is not an exhibition exclusively about artist-led social initiatives or activism; rather it is a snapshot of the region's richness, diversity and depth now. Nonetheless, of the myriad networks of connection that crisscross this most remarkable of regions, a palpable, practical championing of social issues emerges, particularly in emerging economies. An impressive start to Arario's next chapter in Shanghai, and testament to its strong stable of artists, 'Voice of Asia' amplifies the clamoring creativity of artists from Japan to Jogjakarta, Seoul to Shanghai, and everywhere in between. ■