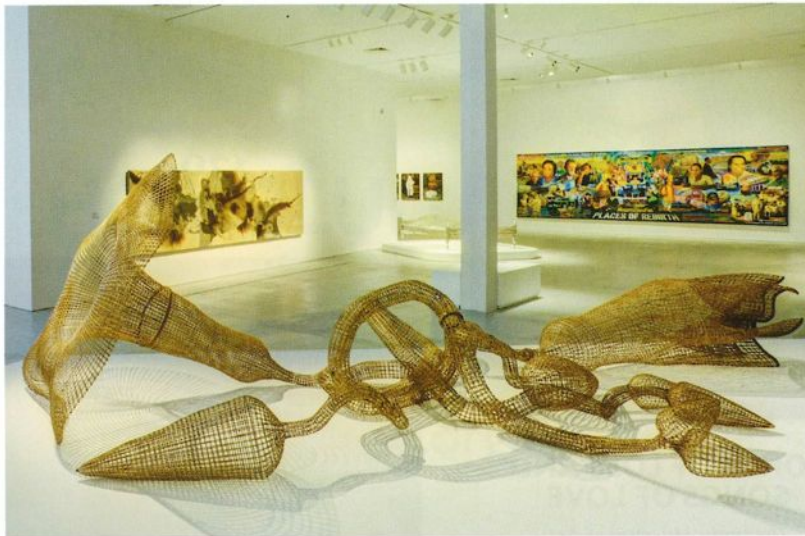


NO COUNTRY: CONTEMPORARY ART FOR SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA



First impressions can be everything. Assuming pride of place at the entrance to the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) was Sopheap Pich's *Morning Glory* (2011)—and rightfully so. Cambodian-born Pich is the Southeast Asian artist to watch at the moment, having recently enjoyed a solo presentation, "Cambodian Rattan" (2013), at the venerable Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a privilege as yet extended to no other contemporary artist from the region. The work itself, though, is as remarkable a feat: the circumfluous lines of *Morning Glory* coil, twine and undulate in a monumental rendering of the eponymous flower, its smooth curves and sinuous contours all the more striking considering the stiff canes of rattan and bamboo from which they are formed.

Pich's transfiguration of quotidian materials—rattan-woven furniture is ubiquitous in the tropics—perhaps set an appropriately localized tone for the latest iteration of the Guggenheim Museum's traveling exhibition, "No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia," which previously showed at the New York institution, as well as the Asia Society Hong Kong Center, in 2013–14. ("No Country" is the first of three exhibition projects, aimed at charting contemporary art practices in the geographic regions of South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa, presented under the rubric of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative.) Pich's sculpture was also apropos for the exhibition in a less direct way. Its open-weave technique results in a materially insubstantial work. Composed of what is essentially a hollow grid, the massive plant-form of *Morning Glory* seems to disappear against the visual information of its background—the various colors and shapes of other works on

a near wall. It seems to drift in and out of optical focus, depending on one's vantage point: now you see it, now you don't. It is an apt analogy for the show itself, where absences abounded.

For a major undertaking by one of the world's premier institutions of contemporary art, "No Country" came across as an opportunity lost. The curatorial framework was premised on the ideological and physical porosity of the modern nation-state, marking an attempt to recuperate the historical and cultural ties that bind the politics of today's South and Southeast Asia. The exhibition, by its own admission, "[relied] on the uniqueness of national, regional, and global constitutions—that is, the inherent assumptions and contradictions . . . prescribed by these boundaries—in order to exceed its representation." It was a tempting proposition. The various states of contemporary Southeast Asia, for instance, have been defined by their individual histories—their respective colonial experiences, migratory flows to their shores from disparate lands, their varying negotiations with the legacy of communism—rather than by any shared sense of commonality. In his introduction to the catalog for the groundbreaking 1996 exhibition, "Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art," at the Singapore Art Museum, art historian TK Sabapathy bemoans "the absence of a regional outlook," while fellow academic Joan Kee points out in a 2011 issue of the journal *Third Text* that "this diversity [of the region] cannot readily be conformed to the elegance of the nation-state model." The project of drawing out the connections between the divergent entities of Southeast Asia, then, remains an ongoing one, and June Yap, the curator of "No Country," deserves kudos for having taken on a topic so thorny and urgent at the same time.

Yet, in the exhibition, omissions outweighed the inclusions, with the discontinuities more salient than the overarching narrative. The presence of South Asia in the show's mandate, for one, was a puzzler. The Subcontinent certainly did play a vital role in the development of Southeast Asia—both Hinduism and Islam, the preeminent religions of the region, arrived by way of India—but the other Asian giant, China, is no less of a formative influence (as evidenced by the enduring sobriquet cooked up by the French for their Southeast Asian possessions, *Indochine*). The question, of course, is: why one and not the other? The South Asian works on display seemed, if anything, to deal with issues particular to a certain time and place. Sheela Gowda's series of photographic images, "Loss" (2008), serves as a memento mori of lives lost to the ongoing territorial conflict in Kashmir; Shilpa Gupta's orb of pristine polyester twine, *1:14.9 (1188.5 Miles of Fenced Border - West, North-West)* (2011–12), foregrounds the fragility

Opposite page

Installation view of “No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia” at Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014.
Front: **SOPHEAP PICH**, *Morning Glory*, 2011, rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood, and steel, 188 x 533.4 x 261.6 cm.
Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore.

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TANG DA WU

Our Children

2012

Galvanized steel, glass and milk, three parts: 157.5 x 227.3 x 59.7 cm, 66.7 x 113 x 30.5 cm and 21.6 x 7.9 x 7.9 cm
Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore.

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Installation view of “No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia” at Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014.

Front: **TAYEBA BEGUM LIPI**, *Love Bed*, 2012, stainless steel, 79.4 x 184.8 x 221 cm; Back:

NAVIN RAWANCHAIKUL, *Places of Rebirth*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, triptych: 220 x 720 cm;

SHILPA GUPTA, *1:14.9 (1188.5 Miles of Fenced Border – West, North-West)*, 2011–12, polyester thread, wood, glass and brass, 163 x 55.9 x 50.8 cm.

Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore.

of the partition line between India and Pakistan. One has to look to Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul’s autobiographical take on his Pakistani lineage to even vaguely witness the show’s curatorial remit in operation, to get any sense of the historical links between South and Southeast Asia. *Places of Rebirth* (2009), painted in the neon-bright, larger-than-life aesthetics of Bollywood movie posters, is a panorama of family members and various individuals encountered on the artist’s maiden voyage to the land of his ancestors, tied together by images seen across the canvas of Rawanchaikul undergoing his pilgrimage in a *tuk-tuk* taxi, an inimitably Thai phenomenon.

In contrast to its own prescriptions, “No Country” presented a deracinated spectacle, removed from any contextual specificity. If, as Kee remarks, “contemporary Southeast Asian art exemplifies the degree to which contemporary art can be defined by its turn toward the local and away from the national and international”—if contemporary Southeast Asian art is interesting precisely because of certain strands that are resistant to co-option by the rapacious, homogenizing forces of globalism and global capitalism—then the gaps in the curatorial logic of “No Country” were doubly perplexing. Singaporean artist Tang Da Wu’s *Our Children* (2012), a gleaming sculptural statement on filial piety, is a case in point. Anyone familiar with Tang’s oeuvre, with his trademark deployment of elusive, subversive political undertones, would suspect a broader, underlying commentary in the dynamics between parent and servile child depicted in *Our Children*—a sly dig at authoritarian political culture in Singapore, perhaps—but the significance of the piece was presented in the wall caption as being little more than a straightforward illustration of a parable. Similarly, Pich’s *Morning Glory* belies the ghastriness of its iconography. The titular plant was apparently a common source of nourishment for the Cambodian people slowly starving to death under the Khmer Rouge; yet in the manicured, decidedly nonvisceral contours of this piece, which sat on its pedestal in an almost purely ornamental fashion, one detected no sense of urgency for the need to address this historical trauma.



Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that this edition of “No Country” was half the size of its original form. Works by some 16 artists and artists’ collectives were brought to Singapore, down from the 27 featured in the inaugural Guggenheim exhibition. While logistical issues must have determined the configurations of the CCA lineup, there seems to be little discernible reason as to why these particular works were selected over others. Missing in action, for instance, were both of the two Burmese works: Aung Myint’s *White Stupa Doesn’t Need Gold* (2010), an abstract-modernist painting of a Buddhist pagoda rendered in acrylic and gold leaf; and husband-and-wife duo Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung’s *Four Pieces (of White)* (2012), a multimedia installation referencing general Aung San (1915–47), a key figure in Myanmar’s independence movement from British colonial rule. One wonders why Myanmar slipped under the radar here, while the Subcontinent was well represented by five artists. Also regrettably absent were the Propeller Group’s brilliant and hugely entertaining video, *Television Commercial for Communism (TVCC)* (2011–12), which filters Vietnam’s political ideology through the lens of contemporary media, as well as Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen’s multimedia extravaganza, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), featuring eight vignettes that explore the representation of clouds in historically significant Western and Eastern artworks. (Fortunately, through either serendipity or calculation, Ho’s work was concurrently on view at the Singapore Art Museum, as part of the “Medium At Large” exhibition.)

Absences abounded—articulate, redolent ones.
LOUIS HO

