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Two Southeast Asian exhibitions open in Tokyo

Culture and diversity of region celebrated through art

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"Fluid World" (Orang Besar Series), 2010, Yee I-Lann (Courtesy of Silverlens Galleries, Makati, The Philippines)

TOKYO Two groundbreaking exhibitions of Southeast Asian art opened in the Japanese capital in early July. One tells the story of the immense changes the region has experienced over the past few decades; the other focuses on Thailand's long history. Both, however, show many of the hidden aspects of one of the world's most diverse and dynamic regions.



"Strange Fruit," 2003, Lee Wen



A total of 86 artists and groups of artists are exhibiting at "Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now" across two museums -- the National Art Center, Tokyo, and the Mori Art Museum. The exhibition is being held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

About 190 works are on display, and the combined total floor space of 3,500 sq. meters in the two museums makes the event the largest Southeast Asian contemporary art exhibition ever held in Japan.

The exhibition's title is both a reference to the region's climate and a metaphor for its complex history, reflecting the dynasties that once prospered, colonial rule and eventual independence.

The first section at the national museum uses a cartographic theme to convey messages about the region's history and society. One of the works, Malaysian-born Yee I-Lann's "Fluid World," which is also the name of the section, is a batik piece showing Southeast Asia and the surrounding seas in the center of a map with the rest of the world blurred out in white. The work draws attention to the oceanic trade that has flourished in the region.

In the "Passion and Revolution" section, FX Harsono's "Bone Cemetery Monument" consists of layers of stacked boxes, each containing a photo of Chinese Indonesians who had been persecuted and killed. An Indonesian born in 1949, Harsono is one of the first generation of artists to lead Southeast Asia's contemporary art scene.

Lee Wen, a Singaporean of Chinese descent, was often taken for Chinese while studying in London. His photographic piece, "Strange Fruit," shows a person covered in red lanterns standing on a beach. Displaying such a distinctly Chinese item may be intended to prod people to question how identities are assigned based on superficial traits such as skin color.

For the Sunshower exhibition, 14 curators from Japan and Southeast Asia teamed up to conduct field research in all 10 ASEAN countries.

"We placed emphasis on political and social assertions as well as the strength of visual impact," explained Naoki Yoneda, a curator at the national museum.



"Thailand: Brilliant Land of the Buddha" celebrates 130 years of Japan-Thailand relations. 

Works exhibited in the "Day by Day" section depict the lives of ordinary people.

"The Post Boxes along Taiping-Bagan Serai Road," by Malaysian Ismail Hashim, is a simple yet strangely attractive arrangement of photos of mailboxes of various shapes. "A Tale of Two Homes," by Thai-born Navin Rawanchaikul, is a reproduction of the textile shop run by his father in Chiang Mai.

The period since the 1980s was chosen as it has marked a time of great change in Southeast Asia. Many Japanese manufacturers moved production bases to the region, contributing to its economic growth. Higher incomes opened doors for many to study fine art in the West, while restrictions on expression were gradually loosened.

At Mori Art Museum, the "Growth and Loss" section features works produced against the background of social divisions such as those epitomized by city high-rises and the poverty of rural life. "Hut of Angel," by Cambodian-born Tith Kanitha, is a partial reproduction of a project at her home in the Boeung Kak Lake area, where residents have been forced to move out by a property development project.

In the "Medium as Meditation" section, "Perfume Painting" is a round object made of herb-infused paper and wood by Thai artist Montien Boonma. It gives off a mild scent that is part of the unique piece. The artist was inspired by a visit to a temple while his wife was sick.

Southeast Asia is a hugely diverse region in terms of culture and languages, but "seeing art from the different countries in one space reveals just how much they have in common," said Hirokazu Tokuyama, an associate curator at the Mori Art Museum. The exhibition in Tokyo runs through Oct. 23 and will move to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in November.

On the other side of the capital, "Thailand: Brilliant Land of the Buddha" is an exhibition at the Tokyo National Museum that has been organized to celebrate 130 years of formal diplomatic relations between Japan and Thailand.



"Seated Buddha on Naga Muchilinda," National Museum, Bangkok (Photo by Kazuyoshi Miyoshi)



The exhibition is made up of five parts and shows Thailand's Buddhist art and a history of interaction between the two countries.

Part one is themed around ancient Buddhism, and is best represented by "Wheel of the Law," a seventh-century artifact showing the teachings of the Buddha spreading around the world as the wheel rotates. "Seated Buddha on Naga Muchilinda," from sometime between the end of the 12th century to the 13th century, is another characteristically Thai work. The Buddha is seated on a coiled *naga*, or mythical snake, whose seven heads spread out to protect him as he meditates.



"Miniature Elephant, Chao Sam Phraya National Museum



"In Thailand, images of Buddha often wear a smile, reflecting the national character of the 'Land of Smiles,'" explained curator Kaneki Inokuma.

Part two focuses on the Buddhist art of the Sukhothai Kingdom, founded in the 13th century. A typical example is "Walking Buddha," a statute produced sometime during the 14th or 15th century. This Buddha smiles as he walks gracefully, slightly raising the heel of his right foot. There are few comparable images anywhere else in the world.

Part three focuses on the many gold works of art that

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have been unearthed from the remains of the Ayutthaya dynasty, which flourished on international trade in central Thailand for about 400 years from the mid-14th century. "Miniature Elephant," produced in the early 15th century, is an intricately decorated small gold statue carrying a saddle that could have been intended for the king, or even Buddha.

Part four presents works depicting the interaction between Japan and Thailand that began long before the countries established formal diplomatic relations. The final section exhibits art from the current dynasty.

The exhibition runs through Aug. 27.