



## After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History

Political art has gotten a bad reputation for being often didactic and shrill, preaching to the converted or worse yet, leaving minds unchanged. But the current exhibition at Asia Society might change that perception precisely because it offers viewers a lot to think about while allowing for multiple interpretations of the featured artworks. Concentrating on a mere seven artists and one collective from three countries—Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam—the show manages to succinctly encapsulate political upheavals and rapid development without diminishing the emotional impact of these forces.

TEXT: Barbara Pollack

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artists and Asia Society

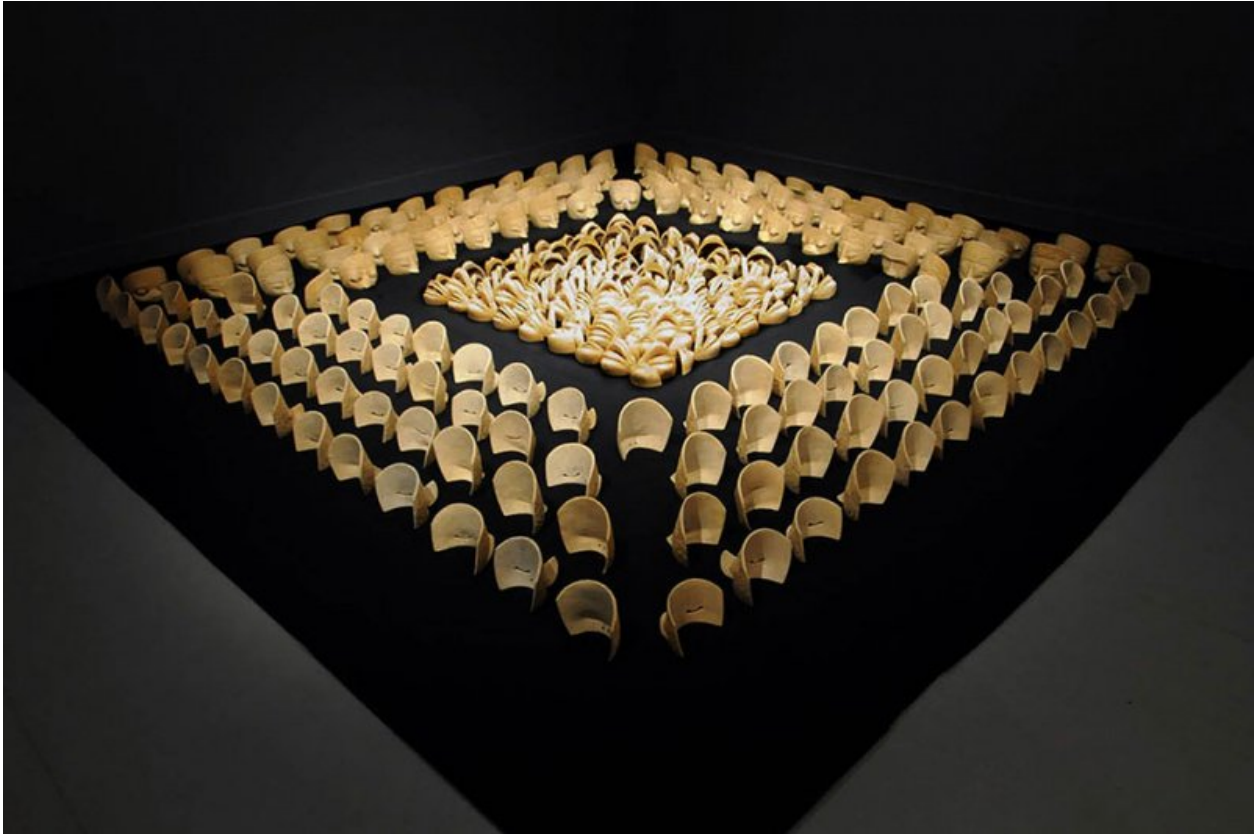


FX Harsono. Victim – Destruction I, 1997. Performance at the Alun-alun Selatan (Southern Square) during the opening for the exhibiton “Slot in the Box” at Cemeti Art House, 1997. Courtesy Cemeti Art House.

From Indonesia, there's pioneer artist FX Harsono, born 1949, Tintin Wulia, born 1972, and newcomer Angki Purbandono, born 1971, covering a time span that traces their country's development from the explosive 1998 Reformasi period to the present more democratic regime. From Vietnam, Dinh Q. Le, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai and The Propeller Group, both individually and collectively, respond to the legacy of the American-Vietnam War, offering a different perspective to American audiences. From Myanmar, Htein Lin and Ng Lay lay bare the trauma of past military regimes without specific reference to the current leadership of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

“There is a documentary and sometimes activist quality to the works of these artists, which are connected across geography and cultural specificities by a common thread: artists creating a lasting impact by illuminating difficult and at times controversial topics during their countries' periods of democratic transition,” says Boon Hui Tan, director of Asia Society Museum who curated the show with Michelle Yun, senior curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the institution. Making the point that the exhibition raises important issues in the current climate in the United States, Tan continued, “While there is currently great interest in the role of the artist as activist, this exhibition asks the question of whether it is art that has changed the world, or the world that has changed art. In the present, when art and artists are called upon to address the fractures and challenges of our time, the exhibition looks at how artists from other, non-western polities have responded to similar issues.”

FX Harsono is a towering figure, dominant in the Indonesian art scene for the past forty years, and unsurprisingly, his works command the most attention in this exhibition. *Burned Victims* (1998), is a harrowing work comprised of charred wooden figures laying prone on metal frames close to the ground, the remnants of a visceral performance in response to a violent protest against the authoritarianism of President Suharto where rioters locked innocent civilians in a Jakarta mall and set fire to the building. (An accompanying video captures Harsono's brilliant actions.) Another work from that period titled *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers* (1994), is a powerful statement against censorship in which the top half of wooden masks, rows of eyes and noses, encircle a collection of mouths from the bottom half of those same masks, seemingly silencing them. These works overshadow the whimsical animations of Tintin Wulia or the artist's book by Angki Purbandono, younger artists from Indonesia who have less of an attachment to the historic events that framed Harsono's development.



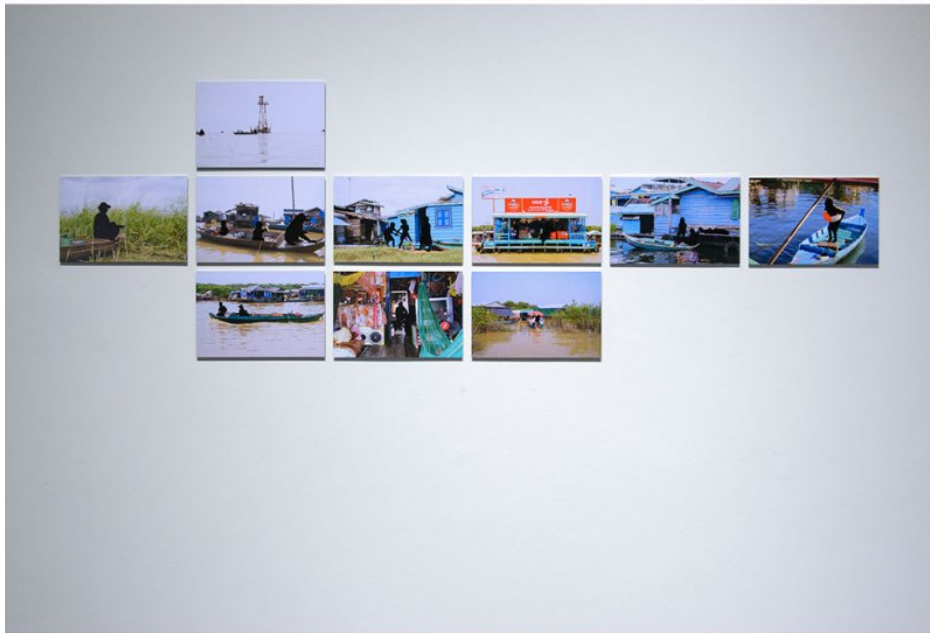
FX Harsono, *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers*, 1994. Wooden masks and cloth. H.  $11\frac{7}{8}$  x L.  $137\frac{3}{4}$  x W.  $137\frac{3}{4}$  in. (30 x 350 x 350 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Vietnam artist Ding Q. Le matches the power of Harsono's works with his installation *Light and Belief: Sketches from the Vietnam War* (2012). Here Le assembled 70 drawings in pencil and watercolor made by soldiers from the North Vietnamese Army during the war that captured the banality and tenderness of their daily routines. These works are accompanied by a short documentary of interviews with the artists that conveys their memories of the war and their passionate commitment to their cause. Far more ironic is The Propeller Group's installation, *The Guerillas of Cu Chi* (2012), in which a propaganda film produced by the Vietcong is paired with recent footage of one of their notorious tunnels, now a tourist site, where customers can shoot guns and relive the glory days of the war.



The Propeller Group, *The Guerrillas of Cu Chi*, 2012. Two-channel synchronized video installation with sound. Duration: 20 minutes, 4 seconds. Courtesy of the Propeller Group and James Cohan, New York. ©The Propeller Group, courtesy of James Cohan, New York

Concentrating on the more recent experience of Vietnamese refugees in Cambodia, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai created an installation inspired by her residency in this community in 2014. She built a bamboo hut in the gallery, housing photographs taken by an itinerant photographer who digitally altered portraits for his refugee-customers to make their poverty-stricken lives look upscale and fashionable. Outside the hut, Mai installed a series of her own photographs and a video that capture the conditions in a local fishing village where the refugees live. The contrast between the two sets of images made the conditions of her subjects—virtually stateless and without economic resources—heart wrenching and but never pathetic.



Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, *Shadow*, 2014. Ink on 11 digital C-prints mounted on aluminum. 1–10: H. 6¼ x 9⅜ in. (16 x 24 cm); 11: H. 13¾ x 20⅝ in. (35 x 52.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.



Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, (Still) *Day by Day*, 2014–15. Single-channel digital video with sound. Duration: 58 minutes. Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

Myanmar was best represented by the haunting installation of Burmese artist Htein Lin, a room full of plaster casts of hands of individuals who had been political prisoners. Lin himself fled Myanmar after a failed 1988 uprising, only to be arrested on his return and jailed for six years from 1998 to 2004. He later moved to London but returned home in 2013 and began this project which continues to today. In the all white room, the hands give the impression of rows of people pleading for attention. Each one was accompanied by a name label for the specific prisoner as well as recordings of interviews and a slide show.



Htein Lin, *A Show of Hands*, 2013–present. Surgical plaster and multimedia installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

While there were many other works in this exhibition and several more artists worthy of mention, the heart of the exhibition was truly the searing installations of Harsono and the emotional evocation of Lin's *A Show of Hands*. These elder statesmen truly outshined the efforts of most of the younger artists in the exhibition who had not gone through the same set of circumstances and could not evoke the same authority about the conditions in their homelands. But still, the exhibition on the whole was moving and persuasive, demonstrating how history impacted artists in three select countries. Whether those artists, in turn, impacted their societies is another question raised by the show. It is clear that in at least a few cases, this certainly is true.