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HERI DONO  
*Flying Angels, Trap's Outer Rim*, 2001  
Fiberglass, bamboo, fabric, acrylic  
paint, transistor radio,  
cable, electronic and  
mechanical devices  
140 x 60 x 15 cm each (10 pieces)

# Negotiating Home, History and Nation: 2 Decades of SE Asian Contemporary Art

Carla Bianpoen

When Indonesia was represented with about 40 art works in *Art Paris + Guests 2009*, it was the first time works from beyond Europe had been included in a European art fair. This was over a decade after Jean Michel Hubert in 1989 launched the controversial

exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* at Centre Pompidou embracing cultural aesthetics globally, including Asia, Africa, Australia and Latin America. Nothing special happened in Europe to follow up. In America, the New York Asia Society is noted for its groundbreaking effort when it collaborated with Thai curator Apinan for an exhibition

in 1986 that included contemporary art from Indonesia, India, The Philippines, Thailand and Korea. Other noteworthy events are noted in the Asia Pacific region including Queensland Art Gallery's *Triennial of Contemporary Art* in 1993 and the Fukuoka's *Asian Art Museum's Triennial* in 1994. Gradually contemporary art from the region began to be included in exhibitions, or privately organized exhibitions were held here and there.

Today there is hardly any art event of note that would not include works from beyond Europe/America.

So what significance holds the exhibition *Negotiating Home, History and Nation* at the Singapore Art Museum which showcases works by artists from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines, particularly when most of the works are fairly familiar, at least for those who live in this part of the world?

SAM director **Tan Boon Hui** in a brief interview on the sidelines of Art Stage, pointed at the particular significance of the exhibition with its story telling quality. A fervent advocate of Southeast Asian contemporary art to take its place on the world's art-historical map, he underlines the importance of a museum to obtain recognition. He also sees the exhibition as a good opportunity for introduction to the international public that will come to the Singapore Biennale.

Meanwhile, guest curator **Iola Lenzi**, elaborates: Yes, certainly, contemporary art from the region is increasingly

present in global art events. But you must consider the nature of these events to understand the genesis of *Home, History and Nation*. You rightly mention *Traditions/Tensions*: to date, or at least since *Traditions/Tensions*, which took place in 1996, not '86, this presentation of Southeast Asian contemporary generally occurs in an *ad hoc* manner only.

Though 15 years old, Apinan Poshyananda's *Traditions* is in fact, in terms of Southeast Asian exhibition history, still considered a groundbreaker in the field, despite only showing work from three Southeast Asian countries along with art from outside the region. That show is still a reference in the field today precisely because no other exhibition has yet taken its lead. *Home, History and Nation* picks up the baton from *Traditions/Tensions* and opens the field of Southeast Asian art much more

▼  
LEE WEN, *Strange Fruit* (series of 12 pieces), 2004, C-print, 42 x 59.4 cm (Landscape), 59.4 x 42 cm (Portrait)





comprehensively. It pays its respects to *Traditions* and indeed includes several works presented in *Traditions*. However, it covers **six** Southeast Asian countries, not three as did *Traditions*. It covers twenty years of regional art-history, not the early to mid 1990s as did *Traditions*. And it focuses exclusively on Southeast Asian art, important if you wish, as SAM and I do with this show, to position regional art critically within the broader contemporary art context. This exhibition aims to show the best, but also aims to reveal some key characteristics of regional art. This has not yet ever been tackled. *Traditions* had very different goals to ours today: it was about introducing SEA art to the world (remember, it was made in collaboration with a Western institution, and put up in NY) whereas *Home, History and Nation* is about framing the canon of regional art history. These are important differences, never mind the fact that *Home, History and Nation* presents over 60 regional artists while *Traditions/Tensions* included 16.

The question then is why this show is being produced in Singapore now: note first that it is made in Southeast Asia, at the Singapore Art Museum, where it will first be seen by a regional

◀ ROBERTO FELEO  
*Ang Retablo Ng Bantaoay*, 2007  
 Planked marine plywood covered with  
 sawdust & eggshell dust  
 H. 508 x W. 410 x D. 17 cm

PINAREE SANPITAK  
*Noon Nom*, 2001-2002  
 Mixed-media installation  
 Variable



MELLA JAARSMAN  
*Saya Goreng Kamu I*, 2000  
 Squirrel skin, photos, fibreglass  
 170 x 50 x 30 cm; 4 pieces



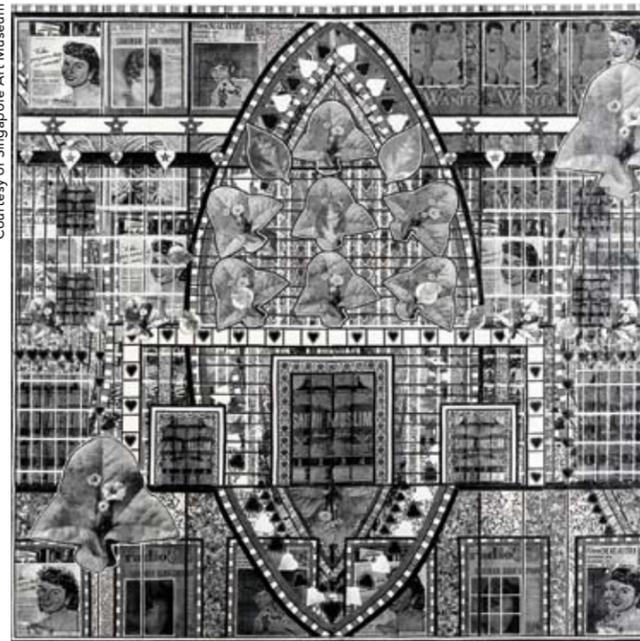
▲ EKO NUGROHO  
*Jembar Negarane, Cupet Pikirane (Immense is this Country, Narrow is its Mindset)*, 2007  
 Acrylic on canvas, 450 x 600 cm (triptych)

audience. This can't be said of Queensland's APT nor even of Fukuoka, which as well as being based outside the region, though important platforms for Southeast Asian art, as triennials, are about discovery, not canon. Singapore's SAM now has the means, but more importantly the confidence, to talk about its own backyard. This is a critical, art-historical show, not a rah-rah-propaganda show. It takes a fair bit of cultural assurance to present local art to people who think excellence is always foreign.

On the question of timing, *Home, History and Nation* is relevant now because there is now a significant mass of important work from the region, made over the course of two decades. Volume and time-span are important because they allow for critical comparison. Here one needs to consider the most visible face of the Southeast Asian art world of the last few years, dominated, sadly, not by critically salient exhibitions, but rather by the art market with its sensationalised auction results and art-fair stars. You mention Indonesian art in Paris, shown in conjunction with a big art fair. Do you think the works in that show were the stuff of Indonesian art history? Some names were certainly important ones, but then what of the presentation? Was the catalog a document of lasting importance like the one produced for *Traditions/Tensions*? Did the exhibition present the Indonesian art scene in all its sophistication and complexity? It may seem pretentious, but what my co-curators at SAM and I are saying is that it is time for a deeper, more rigorous critical appraisal

of the field. Auctions and fairs are fine, but they do not define art history. Who remembers the names of the commercially successful painters of late 19<sup>th</sup> century France? No one. They do not figure in the art history books even though they commanded far higher prices than the impressionists at the time. Cultural Institutions, and independents with interests beyond commerce, have been silent for too long in our region.

The Southeast Asian contemporary art forum is now deep, mature, and big enough to sustain a strong, unforgiving light. Art fairs are platforms for commerce and punctual comparisons. In contrast, large institutional surveys, particularly when they have pioneering ambitions, are designed to move the field forward in terms of ideas and theories. In the particular case of this survey, the art has been selected very specifically to argue the case of Southeast Asia as a critical framework for the art of Southeast Asia. This is not about regional chauvinism, or a post-colonial backlash, or the glorification of ASEAN as a supra-nationalist structure. Quite the opposite! It is about saying that there is such a thing as Southeast Art and here are some of its characteristics. It is about showing how works from different regional countries talk to each very easily either because they are speaking about similar topics, or speaking in similar languages. Art from the region is often analysed in relation to art from China or the West. This show argues that Southeast Asia, with its history, geography, and 21<sup>st</sup> century aspirations provides a valid framework for the critical understanding of Southeast Asian art of today.



▼ VU DAN TAN, *Amazon Series*, undated, sheet metal, 160 x 75 cm



◀ ZULKIFLI YUSOFF  
*Koleksi Ibu*, 2010  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 243 x 243 cm

▲ MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM  
*Horror in Pink #2*, 2001  
 C-print

About the exhibition name: this refers to ideas that many artists in the region have been grappling with for the past two decades. 'Home' refers to shifting identity, ethnic, cultural, or national. 'Nation' alludes to many things, including nationalisms that have defined post-colonial history in the region. Artists are often critical of the means used by the powers to consolidate the nation. Yet the nation is also a form of identity. So artists must think about the tensions arising between the two, hence the idea of negotiation. 'History' of course is one of the elements that links the civilizations of Southeast Asia. It is also, frequently, a theme of regional art. The exhibition title refers to major regional themes looked at critically by many Southeast Asian artists.

Finally, this exhibition is a celebration! Beyond the theory and this show's premise that the study of regional art via Southeast Asia as opposed to through Western theory is worth pursuing, there is the brilliance of the art. Blockbusters in Singapore are often imported, the art they feature made far from our shores. Surely we have the confidence now in Southeast Asia to celebrate our own talent. I grew up in the West, immersed in the great art and architecture of the West. I am therefore in a privileged position to know: Southeast Asian contemporary art is world class!

*Including over 70 works from 6 Southeast Asian countries, the exhibition is co-curated by Iola Lenzi, a Singapore based independent curator, researcher and art critic, and Khairudin Hori of the Singapore Art Museum. The exhibition is further illuminated with essays by Apinan Posyananda, Nora Taylor, Tash Aw, Nasir Tamara, Eileen Legaspi, Susan Lingham and the curatorial team, who are each specialist in their field.*