

**The New York Times**

February 21, 2013

# Acquired Tastes of Asian Art

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Recently, and resoundingly, America's big museums have shifted their collecting habits. Not only are they buying new art like mad, but a lot of that art also comes from outside the Western Hemisphere, particularly from Asia. The [Guggenheim Museum](#), now embarked on a single-mindedly non-Western shopping spree, leads the pack.

After a decade or two of trying to colonize the planet with Guggenheim franchises the museum is now taking the easier route of bringing the world to New York through an acquisitions campaign supported by the Swiss bank UBS. Over the next five years, under the auspices of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, the museum will focus on buying art in three roughly defined geographic areas: South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa.

Purchases will be scouted out by curators hired on two-year residencies and the results put on view in three exhibitions, the first of which, "No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia," is up and running. Organized by [June Yap](#), an independent curator from Singapore, with help from Helen Hsu and Alexandra Munroe of the Guggenheim, it's a smallish show of 22 artists and collectives, but it takes in an immense stretch of turf — the Indian subcontinent, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The title, adapted from a [Yeats poem](#), is meant to warn us off seeing the art as either narrowly representative of various nations or as expressing the spirit of some exotic, never-never land Asia. Yet many of the strongest pieces speak quite specifically about the cultures from which they come, as, of course, does most "Western" art, even if we're too close to it to see its determining contexts.

A few of the artists in the Guggenheim show are internationally prominent and have been for some time. Two of them — Amar Kanwar, from India, and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, from Thailand — work primarily in video. Their contributions are being screened in the museum's New Media Theater and are absolutely worth seeking out.

Best known for her 2005 Buddhist-inflected video called "The Class," in which she instructs

six shroud-covered corpses in the art of dying, Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook also appears in her new video here, this time sitting on a futon with some of her pet dogs watching television. The show on her TV looks like a high-gloss soap opera, but other images start leaking through: buildings burning, policemen swarming and protesters being bludgeoned. Soon similar images are flickering, large, across the walls of the room, immersing the artist and her pets in a sea of political chaos.

Mr. Kanwar has routinely worked on an epic scale; violence, active or latent, is a recurrent subject, as it is in the trilogy of videos here, which in different ways refer to the 1947 partition of India and its bloody, long-term consequences. The first film documents the daily changing of the guard at a checkpoint on the India-Pakistan border, a ritual of precisely choreographed provocation. The second revisits the assassination of Gandhi in 1948. A third piece, "Night of Prophecy," is in effect a choral symphony of anguished chants and prayers.

In galleries on the second floor pride of place is given, by size alone, to a painting by [Navin Rawanchaikul](#), who made a youthful New York debut at Asia Society in 1996, when a global market for contemporary Asian work could hardly be imagined. In the 2009 painting here, done in mock-heroic Bollywood billboard style, he reviews his own history as the son of Indian immigrants to Thailand and a globe-trotting art star.

Several other artists similarly invest popular and traditional forms with new meaning. Vincent Leong, from Malaysia, produces witty, obviously impromptu versions of formal colonial-era family photographs. Khadim Ali, from Pakistan, uses the conventions of miniature painting to comment on the repression of an ethnic minority in Afghanistan from which he is descended. The Vietnamese artist [Tuan Andrew Nguyen](#) carves small wood images of the monk [Thich Quanc Duc](#) who in 1963 immolated himself in protest against the United States-supported Diem regime. The wood Mr. Nguyen uses for his carvings are American baseball bats.

Other cultural heroes, huge in their homelands but barely known here, also get attention. Two artists from Myanmar, Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu, husband and wife, have assembled a multimedia tribute to the Burmese independence leader [U Aung San](#) (1915-47), father of the pro-democracy leader [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#). What we see in the gallery — a painting, two videos, a group of plaster busts — is a merely the tip of an archival project consisting of thousands of objects and documents.

The writing of history is almost unavoidably partisan, political and personal, though in ways

not necessarily easy to read. The messages are clear in a text painting by Norberto Roldan about the colonization of the Philippines, and in a lethal-looking sculpture of a marriage bed made of stainless steel razors by Tayeba Begum Lipi, an artist from Bangladesh. But other work, removed from where it was made, is less accessible.

To understand a video by the Vietnamese artist [Tran Luong](#) in which unseen hands snap red scarves against the artist's bare torso, you have to know the scarves were part of uniforms once worn by schoolchildren under communism. A 1990s oil painting by another Vietnamese artist, Truong Tan, of a nude male figure strapped horizontally to a cross makes full sense only when you know that it refers to trials undergone by the artist as an openly gay man in a homophobic society.

And then there are pieces that give no clues as to their meaning but are enticing anyway. This is true of a group portrait photograph by the Filipino artist Poklong Anading in which all the sitters hold mirrors, reflective side turned toward the camera, producing a blinding explosion of light.

It's also true of an extraordinary video by an Indonesian artist, Reza Afisina, who literally slaps himself black-and-blue, as if under brutal interrogation, while reciting verses about truth telling and salvation from the New Testament. And it's true in another work, a video by Ho Tzu Nyen from Singapore. Called "The Cloud of Unknowing," it combines mysticism, madness and the mundanities of daily life with references to El Greco, Constable and Chinese painting. The piece makes no logical sense and is completely transporting.

Even this intensely experiential film benefits from information provided by wall labels. Other work in the show requires such information to be understood in its new location. Inevitably this will be an irritant for viewers who demand that art should visually hand them everything they need to know. And it is partly that blinkered, slow-to-die attitude that has kept the New York art world narrow in its interests and short on global information.

To what extent we want to receive such information through a museum's alliance with a bank — especially one that features an Art Competence Center and offers its clients "valuable access to a global network of art experts" — is a question too. The corporate character of the present art market is a vexing subject for many longtime art world insiders, who see it as antithetical to an old-time cottage-industry model of artistic creativity. As it is, the Guggenheim's South and Southeast Asian collection gathered so far has few out-of-market surprises. References to biennials and Documentas pepper these artists' résumés.

To most visitors, though, the only thing that matters is what's on the wall — or the floor, or the video monitor. And by those lights the inaugural acquisitions show has serious attractions.

It's also worth noting that for the next few months the New York Guggenheim will virtually be a pan-Asian museum, with a [Gutai](#) survey filling the rotunda, an exquisite solo show by the Indian-American artist [Zarina](#) in side galleries, and work by this year's Hugo Boss prizewinner, [Danh Vo](#), who was born in Vietnam, arriving in March.

But loan shows like these are temporary. The permanent collection, theoretically at least, stays forever. The collection is the museum. In "No Country" you're seeing part of an institutional future taking shape as you watch.

*"No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia" continues through May 22 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3587, [guggenheim.org](http://guggenheim.org).*