

ArtSeen

November 2nd, 2017

## *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*

by [Vivian Li](#)

THE NATIONAL ART CENTER & MORI ART MUSEUM | JULY 5 – OCTOBER 23, 2017



UuDam Tran Nguyen, *Time Boomerang: Phase 1: The Real Distance of Things Measured*, 2014 - ongoing, metal casting of artist's hand, sculpture, performance video, mixed media, (Photo: Vivian Li).

Nation-themed contemporary art exhibitions can be problematic, especially now when so many artists work in the context of globalization. Nonetheless, national exhibitions still retain enough

public appeal to justify their continued existence. In this context, *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* is surprisingly thoughtful, in part because it does not hew too closely to mere geographical parameters. It succeeds further in bringing attention to artists from a region that is not often reflected upon with much critical depth.

The exhibition is split in two parts; the first half is at the National Art Center, Tokyo (NACT) and the second half fills the Mori Art Museum. *Sunshower* showcases painting, video, photography, installation, and performance works by eighty-six artists working in the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Though the exhibition is organized and supported to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the formation of the ASEAN, it is arranged thematically and loosely chronologically rather than by nation. The only visible gesture to the show's connection with ASEAN—besides the introductory text—is a modest map of the ASEAN countries hung midway in a transition zone of the show.



UuDam Tran Nguyen, *Time Boomerang, Phase 4: Creating the New Freaking World Order*, 2014—ongoing. Detail of molds for plaster world maps, sculpture, performance video, mixed media. Photo: Vivian Li.

Rather than focusing on national histories, the exhibition endeavors to excavate and make visible the variety and depth of contemporary art practiced and exhibited in Southeast Asia since the 1980s. Some of the participating artists have achieved international recognition—Dinh Q. Lê,

Ming Wong, and Rirkrit Tiravanija—but the strength of the show lies in works by less well known artists, many of whom are pioneers of contemporary art’s development in their home country, such as FX Harsono, leader of the Indonesian New Art Movement.

Harsono’s tower, *Monumen Bong Belung (Bone Cemetery Monument)*, 2011 explores the racial tensions specific to Indonesia and more broadly to Southeast Asia due to the generations of economic and political migration. Consisting of shoebox-size wooden boxes stacked in circular rows, *Bone Cemetery* commemorates the genocide of Chinese in Indonesia. Each wooden box houses the name of one of the victims, a copy of their photo, and two red electric prayer candles. The glow of so many candles makes Harsono’s memorial appear at first as an alluring beacon.



UuDam Tran Nguyen, *Time Boomerang, Phase 2: The New Conqueror With A Good Passport*, 2014-ongoing, video of artist planting fingertip, sculpture, performance video, mixed media, (Photo: Vivian Li).

In Aditya Novali’s installation *NGACO—Solution for Nation*, 2014 a building-materials store is filled with absurd products, such as uncalibrated measuring tapes and bricks that are increasingly discounted as they reduce in size. An accompanying comedic video shows a woman promoting the products on view of NGACO, a fictitious company but an effective satire on the absurd realities of substandard industrial development, familiar to those who live in developing nations.

In addition to presenting artworks, a gallery space at each venue is dedicated to exhibiting archival materials and ephemera to introduce the vast range of activity in the region’s contemporary art scene over the last three decades, which has been primarily grassroots and artist-driven. The Baguio Arts Guild founded in 1987 in the Philippines, the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture founded in 1998 in Cambodia, The Artists Village founded in 1988 in Singapore, the Indonesian Visual Art Archive founded in 2007 in Indonesia, and the Pangrok Sulap founded in 2010 in Malaysia are just a few of the art collectives and groups introduced in *Sunshower*.



FX Harsono, *Installation view of Monumen Bong Belung (Bone Cemetery Monument)*, 2011. Wood box, electric candle light, paper, and photograph (Photo: Vivian Li).

Though geopolitics are not emphasized in the show, they still play an invisible but undeniable role. The visitor is never told why Japan is commemorating the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, though it is the impetus for organizing the show. From the outset, the show also addresses the complexities of geopolitics in its first section, “Fluid Worlds.” In this section videos and remnants of UuDam Tran Nguyen's ongoing performance, *Time Boomerang* (since 2014) shows the artist planting on each continent a large spike containing a metal cast of one of his five fingertips. He attempts to grasp the world much in the fashion of explorers, conquistadors, and colonizers of old. In *Creating the Next Freaking World Order*, 2017, as part of *Time Boomerang* commissioned for the show, the museum’s staff and public take turns dropping plaster copies of a world map from a staircase. Some participants pause in reflection before letting go of the map, while others release it with glee.

Despite the problematic nature of the show’s geopolitical context, the integrity and energy of *Sunshower* comes from its dedication and conviction in using the nation-themed exhibition format to probe the unknown—unfamiliar artists, unprocessed archives, and unwritten histories of art. At the end of the exhibition at the Mori Art Museum, a documentary video shows the curatorial team on their research trips over two and a half years to sites and artists in the ASEAN countries. The video reveals that not everything the curators saw and experienced made the cut, purposefully making conscious the selective nature of the curator’s work, and leaving departing visitors wondering what else there might be.

Visiting *Sunshower* is best reflected in the experience of Surasi Kusolwong's *Golden Ghost (Why I'm Not Where You Are)* (2017). Kusolwong’s installation in the show is a treasure hunt where visitors wade through five tons of colored thread filling the entire room in search of nine golden necklaces. Enticed by instructions that visitors can keep the golden necklaces if they find them, as well as by framed pictures of past successful seekers hanging on the wall, the work is like the

exhibition itself. As a whole the show excites its visitors to explore the yet unfathomable sea of contemporary art and artistic developments in Southeast Asia, and perhaps like the curators we will also be surprised and rewarded in the process.

---

***Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* closes in Tokyo on October 23, then travels to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Fukuoka, Japan, November 3 to December 25, 2017.**

## **Contributor**

**Vivian Li**

VIVIAN LI is a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail.