

# ABSTRACTION IN ASIA

## beyond the material world<sup>1</sup>

Alison Carroll

There have been a number of waves of artistic influence from Asia on the European West in the last few hundred years. Chinoiserie was one in the eighteenth century, driven by fashion, followed by Japonisme in the late nineteenth, driven by the discovery of a very different aesthetic. In the twentieth century the main influence has been culturally much deeper: into the depths of understanding of the world through philosophy, belief and religion. It only happened – as influence always does – because the receiver is in the right moment to listen, see, understand, and then incorporate these new ideas into their own work.

I am speaking of the decades after World War II, a time of cross-cultural intellectual openness, when Western artists responded to Asian art and its relation to new notions around "abstraction". Think of Mark Tobey, the American who visited China and Japan in the 1950s and called his black splatter works 'sumi' acknowledging their roots in Japanese ink painting. Think of John Cage and his understanding of Zen philosophy. There was a confluence of thinking in both Japan and America (New York specifically, the powerhouse of Western art of the time) about what has been called conceptual art. Yoko Ono is the best known of the Japanese artists who went to New York, perhaps Lucio Fontana the best known Western artist in Japan. However, despite the importance of this period, the abstract or conceptual art made then has had less focus now perhaps because the work has a more complex genesis from two cultures in the process of great change, and it is also less showy, and less long-lasting, than the crowd pleasers of the current day blockbusters or contemporary biennales.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of this edition of *Artlink*, it is possible to ask how important is the "abstract" to Asian ideology? Abstraction, like modernism, means something different to each person and most cultures. Basically non-figurative, it can be either benign, as in most of Asia (rejecting the importance of the object with a nuance of equanimity), or aggressive (purposefully "destroying and reconstructing" the object<sup>3</sup>) as in mid-century Europe and America. The great streams of Asian culture come from Islam in the Middle East, Hinduism and Buddhism in India and Confucianism in China and they influence all thought, still. All focus on process rather than the end result, with the emphasis on personal reflection and action. Abstract art in this context comes naturally, from a state of mind within each person, rather than being the revolutionary *reaction* to the material that it embodied in Europe.

However, as with Tobey and Cage, things are actually more complex. The founder of so much Western thought, Plato, spoke of the beauty of shapes which give "pleasure on their own, quite free from the itch of desire"<sup>4</sup>, an idea central to Buddhist teaching, aiming to be "free from desire" and focus on the essentials of existence, often using the process of meditation to get there.

The relationship between Japan and the US at this time is intriguing. The conceptual artists of the Gutai and Mono-ha movements were uniquely North Asian (Japanese with Korean input), and rivalled what was going on in New York. They followed North Asian ideas of the importance of the action or the process in the making of the artwork, not in the end result. They valued "anti-matter", the energy of the spirit within the artist and his or her action, in the "presence of absence" or a different valuing of objects in space. That is all deeply different from the West. Shozo Shimamoto in his *Work: Holes* of 1950-51, which seems to pre-date Lucio Fontana's broken canvases, were made as he struck the canvases from behind. He said he knew he had done something profound. The painting action of Korean Minimalist artists of the 1960s and 70s is comparable to the actions of Buddhist meditation. And today leading artists like Cai Guo-Qiang are making huge work with gunpowder in the same tradition.

Elsewhere in this edition is a special focus on Islam and the visual arts. But it should be included in this context of the abstract, or the non-figurative. Islam has had its own figurative streams (as in the art of Persian miniatures translated into Indian Mughal paintings), but its non-figurative dicta came really to roost in two cultures driven by a political agenda: first, Pakistan which was founded in 1947 based on its Islamic belief and paying a very bloody price for it at Partition, and second, Malaysia responding to the local issue of Chinese economic dominance with a pressure on favoured Muslim artists to represent the tenets of the faith.<sup>5</sup> Many artists ignored this in both cases but enough of calibre did pay heed to make it a significant part of the recent past in Asia.

One of the conundrums of following abstraction in post-World War II Asia is the impact of politics – the American decades and where their art of Abstract Expressionism had most sway. The Communists in China and Vietnam were well out of it and no large New York-style abstract canvases were made there; Japan had the interesting to and fro relationship with New York (indeed aided by American presence in Japan

Anish Kapoor *Ascension* 2003, mixed media, dimensions variable,  
installation: Basilica di San Giorgio, Venice, 2011. Photo: Lorenzo Fiaschi  
/ Oak Taylor-Smith. Courtesy: the artist and Galleria Continua.





Shozo Shimamoto *Work-Holes* 1950-1, paint and pencil on newspaper on wooden structure, 194 x 130.6 cm. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

post War) but the strong Japanese Zen aesthetic certainly kept its own core through this. India under Jawaharlal Nehru and his Non-Aligned movement (keeping a power bloc separate from US/Russian domination) kept a lid on wholesale responses to the New York School there. Where American Abstract Expressionism really flourished is where these circumstances were different: in Pakistan and Malaya/Singapore<sup>6</sup> stretching their way to new international (post British) engagement, very overtly in the recent American colony of the Philippines, still with its huge US military presence (Subic Bay was only returned in 1991), and in Australia.

Pakistan is interesting. The British colonial power had strongly supported figurative art. But, as noted, then came the pressure to be overtly Islamic as well as respond to the post-War American attractions of Abstract Expressionism. Both forces found responses. Shakir Ali, the first Pakistani-born head of the main art school in Pakistan, the National College of Art, and most of whose work was figurative, was notable for his *Beit ul Qu'ran* mural almost totally of calligraphic

writing, painted in 1966 in the Punjab Public Library in Lahore. It is a huge work, nearly seven metres long and four high, with the linear beauty of calligraphy dancing across the wall, only interspersed by background leaf motifs. Others who included calligraphy are Hanif Ramay, Ahmed Khan, Zahoor ul Akhlaque, Iqbal Jafree, Dabir Ahmed and A.J. Shemza.

On the other hand artists like Ismail Gulgee, “a star of another kind of firmament”<sup>7</sup>, became known for painting large abstract canvases after meeting American artist Elaine Hamilton who was in Karachi from the late 1950s to early 1960s. But was he only influenced by these American works? Rasheed Araeen, in ‘Perspectives; An Open Letter to Artists in Pakistan’, insists the contemplative quality of Gulgee’s brushwork comes from Islamic calligraphy, not “the gestural angst of action painting”<sup>8</sup>.

The Philippines is always the ‘different’ person of Asia due to its extreme experience of colonialism. To survive, as José Rizal so poignantly describes in *Noli me tangere* in 1887, you bent to the wishes of the powerful, whoever that was. After the (mostly benign) presence of the Americans pre-World War II came the propaganda machine of General MacArthur and his followers post-War, spreading American doctrine throughout the islands until very recently. One can imagine the glamour of America in Filipino minds at this height of American power: JFK, Marilyn Monroe, and then the Abstract Expressionists. Scholarships were made available for Filipinos in the US; US shows came to Manila. Here Abstract Expressionism had its most effective response in the region. A member of this school, José Joya, was chosen with great fanfare to represent the Philippines at the 1964 *Venice Biennale* but “won no prizes”<sup>9</sup>. Joya was feted at home, but the international result was so disappointing that the huge effort to attend such events fizzled (and has not re-emerged to this day). A phlegmatic description of the Venetian experience is given by Purita Kalaw-Ledesma & Amadis Ma. Guerrero in 1974 under the rubric ‘Towards Internationalism’. They describe the politics of Venice ten years before and then ask: “How did the Filipino artists fare in this all-important exhibition? The general impression was that our entries were lost in a sea of similar works, each working with the same school of abstract thought. Our entries did not have originality, a distinctive quality”<sup>10</sup>.

Confucian restraint, Zen “anti-matter”, and Islamic non-figuration all naturally sympathise with the idea of the abstract. Hinduism is a humanist, narrative culture which in its overt manifestations takes on the full glories of figuration.<sup>11</sup> However, there are aspects of it that have been exploited by artists to create non-figurative outcomes, mostly coming to the fore again in the abstract-sensitive 1960s, with the art of Tantra. Abstraction in India is an interesting conundrum. The home of Buddhism would be likely to produce artworks about the infinite, but what has evolved in terms of the non-figurative in recent times is more closely aligned to first Hinduism and then American modernism.<sup>12</sup> The sympathy however with cosmic universals hovers around the idea of India both at home and abroad. It was most clearly articulated in the work of influential arts guru J. Swaminathan who said art had a mystical existence of its own and no meaning outside itself.<sup>13</sup> The cosmos literally, if that is possible, comes into play with the Neo-Tantric artists of the 1960s, particularly

seen in the work of G.R. Santosh. After a youthful interest in Cubism he sought more local sources in the Hindu beliefs of Tantra, where ritual designs and symbols reflected the individual's relation to the universal.

The ubiquity of the large abstract canvases of the 1960s of either Zen abstract, Islamic, Tantric or American inspiration led to a very clear decision for the next generation of artists to turn to something else. In the 1970s and more so in the 1980s and 1990s, artists in Asia turned away from this mode to look to their own traditions, stories and often their own politics. For many a new political realism and content swam into the mix.

In recent years however there has been a return to thoughts of the abstract – a return to essential belief-driven roots. Young Chinese artists are looking to the infinite, with a recent exhibition by China Art Projects bringing together the work of Australian Indigenous artist Angeline Pwerle and Hu Qinwu under the title *Two spiritualities*. Amish Kapoor's work is all about infinity and Imran Qureshi, well-known Pakistani artist, has spoken of his move from figuration to abstraction in recent times: creating a tension between Islamic geometrical patterns and his "own belief in the religious side of...space".<sup>14</sup> ■

1 This article is a further discussion of the issues first raised in an exhibition at the *Adelaide Festival* 1994 called *Beyond the Material World*, about the importance of belief systems in Asia for contemporary artists there.

2 The centenary of John Cage's birth has recently encouraged a reassessment of his work and influence, broadcast on ABC Radio National in August 2012, and some European museums (the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin is an example) regularly include examples of this period. However, they often lack information about the different circumstances of the Asian artists' work. Recent Venice Biennales have included Japanese Gutai work, but as if it was the same as European conceptualism.

3 Michel Seuphor's *Abstract Painting, 50 years of accomplishment, from Kandinsky to the present*, Laurel Edition, 1964, p10.

4 Frederick Gore's *Abstract Art*, from *Movements in Modern Art* series of Crown Publishers, 1951, p5.

5 The calligraphy and overt reference to Middle Eastern visual culture is seen most clearly in the art of Suleiman Esa; see Virginia Hooker this issue of *Artlink*.

6 Malaysian artist Eric Quah calls himself an 'abstract expressionist' in 2012, see <http://artradarjournal.com/2012/01/04/malaysian-abstract-expressionist-eric-quahs-penang-retrospective>

7 Salima Hashmi 'Introduction', *50 Years of Visual Art in Pakistan*, Lahore, 1997, p38. Others in this mode include Bashir Mirza, Mashkoo Raza and Kamil Khan Mumtaz.

8 Rasheed Araeen 'Perspectives: An Open Letter to Artists in Pakistan', *Diaaologue*, Asian Art Archive, April, 2008.

9 The heartfelt desire for recognition is clear in the report of this event in recent Filipino art history: "The choice of Joya to represent the Philippines at the 1964 *Venice Biennial* represents a high peak in the rise of Modern Art in this country. His participation in that world-class art competition, enjoying the official blessings of the Philippine government, left no doubt that modernism on this side of the Pacific Rim had triumphed. Though he showed his best and strongest work, Joya won no prizes in that fiercely competitive biennial." Emmanuel Torres, 'The Rise of Neo-Realism', *Art Philippines*, Manila, 1992, pp167-8.

10 See Purita Kalaw-Ledesma & Amadis Ma. Guerrero, *The Struggle for Philippine Art*, Manila, 1974, p68.

11 Biren Nanda, High Commissioner for India in Australia, at *The Argumentative Indian* conference, Melbourne, 1 November 2012, spoke of India as "an orator's country" with "a resolutely oral and visual culture".

12 This had a reality. This post-War, post-Partition world of Indian politics, despite Nehru's Non-Aligned movement, witnessed the influential Clement Greenberg exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting*, with its huge Abstract Expressionist works, in New Delhi in 1967-68.

13 See Ashok Vajpeyi, 'Swaminathan', *ArtAsiaPacific*, Vol 2, no2, 1995, p64.

14 See interview with Susan Acret, *Diaaologue*, Asian Art Archive, June 2008.

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**Imran Qureshi *Blessings upon the land of my love* 2011, acrylic on tiled floor, site specific floor painting for *Sharjah Biennale 2011*, Bait Al Serkal, Sharjah. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation.**

