

Alison Carroll

*The revolutionary century:
art in Asia, 1900-2000*

Macmillan Publishers Australia,
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CAROLINE TURNER

THE-SELF PORTRAIT BY TETSUGORO YOROZU (1912) on the cover of Alison Carroll's *The revolutionary century* brilliantly captures the sense of vibrant and restless experimentation which characterises so much of the art covered in this volume. This book fills a major gap and will necessarily be an essential text in the field of contemporary Asian art. Carroll's intention is an accessible introduction to the art of the region through an encyclopaedic overview discussing nineteen countries.

There are, of course, other critical studies of art in the region. John Clark's seminal *Modern Asian Art* (1998) will undoubtedly remain an irreplaceable reference but Carroll covers a wider geographical area. Clark's groundbreaking book was essentially concerned to 'map and then understand what modern Asian art has become,' focusing on the great cultures of Japan, China and India, with references to Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, and illuminating the diverse modernisms in Asia. Carroll's volume, published in 2010, a decade later, has the benefit of rapidly developing perceptions over the last decade of a new global art beyond the confines of Euro-America. Her last chapter is about the important role of Asian artists, including Diaspora artists, in global art today. Carroll acknowledges the art histories of individual nations which will remain essential to the field. The towering scholarship of authors such as Geeta Kapur, Salima Hashmi, Jim Supangkat, the late Redza Piyadasa, T.K. Sabapathy, Patrick Flores, Apinan Poshyananda, Vishakha Desai, Akira Tatehata, Kim Youngna and Alexandra Munroe come to mind. However the great quality of Carroll's book is its synthesis and the originality of her ideas.

Carroll is in an almost unique position to provide this synthesis. As an Australian art historian who curated some of the first East-West exhibitions in the 1980s, and as the founding director of the Asialink Arts initiative overseeing an incredible program of nearly eighty exhibitions in twenty years in and around eighteen countries in Asia, she draws on her extensive fieldwork in the region. Carroll explains the enormous differences across this dynamic region. While her book focuses on the 20th century as a time of revolutionary change and the responses of artists to those changes, it also deploys the perspectives of a writer in the first decade of the 21st century. This is in fact a book for a new 'revolutionary' century – a century many are now calling the 'Asian century'.



Jenny Watson, *Alice in Tokyo*, 1984, oil, synthetic polymer paint, ink and horse hair on hessian, 224 x 174cm. Image courtesy the artist, Transit Gallery, Belgium, and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide.

subject of a major solo exhibition at the gallery during July/August, is already Eastern (or Middle Eastern), a native of Iran who emigrated to Australia as a young man a few years after graduating from Tehran's School of Fine Art. One may easily discern an 'eastern-ness' in the characteristically poetic and minimalist dimensions of his practice. While his work has featured in many international contexts, Valamanesh is yet to show in India; a residency in nearby Lahore, Pakistan, led to a well-received exhibition at its National College of Arts in 1999, and in 1997 he was the Grand Prize winner at Dhaka (Bangladesh)'s 8th Asian Art Biennale. Jenny Watson's accolades strike closer to home in Delhi. In 1986, her large-scale painting *Alice in Tokyo* (1984) won the gold medal at the Indian Triennale, held at Delhi's Lalit Kala Academy. As Greenaway points out, India remains an inspiration for the artist, not least in Watson's sourcing of silks and other fabrics

which form both material and metaphoric layers within her female-image dominated work.

As the sole Australian gallerist, Greenaway also goes out on a limb at Art Stage Singapore, Asia's newest art fair which debuts mid-January under the direction of seasoned art fair founder Rudolf Lorenzo. Time will tell how soon or well other Australian galleries follow Greenaway's lead.

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The India Art Summit: India's Modern and Contemporary Art Fair takes place at Hall No. 18, Pragati Maidan (India Trade Promotion Organisation), New Delhi, 20 to 23 January 2011. www.indiaartsummit.com

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1. Robert Storr is a critic, curator and Dean at the Yale University School of Art, Connecticut, USA. This comment was made as part of his feedback to the India Art Summit (2009).
2. Jitish Kallat in interview, NewsX TV, India, 24 August 2009.



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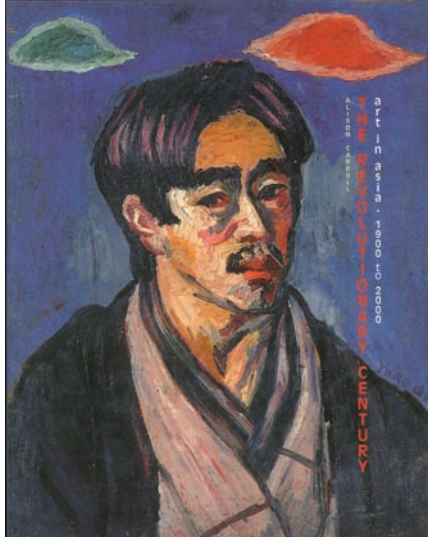
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The great distinction of the book is its commitment to 'seeing Asia from an Asian point of view'.² Carroll provides a concise and lucid exposition of the difference in attitudes to time and space exhibited by Asian and non-Asian artists, with an injunction to view art in terms of its originating cultures, and not to try to impose Western concepts. She shows definitively the story of 'acceptance, rejection and adaption'³ which characterises dynamic societies, and the mutual influence between East and West, and helps us move beyond the simplistic assumptions of the 'derivative' nature of Asian art. I well recall noted Thai scholar Apinan Poshyananda's reply to a Western observer using this term at John Clark's 1991 conference: 'How long do you in the West think you can own the ideas of modernism and postmodernism?' Carroll points out that such terms derive from Western art history and can thus imply imitation when used in connection with Asian art, and she deplores the familiar anomaly that one 'of the burdens carried by Asian artists in the West, and sometimes at home, is the expectation that they will continue with the traditional art of their homeland and never change, or deviate, or develop, or respond to outside ideas,' which, Carroll asserts, 'is to talk about death, not life'.⁴

A work of such genuinely encyclopaedic scope demands precise and acceptable organisation and structure: the term 'Asia' itself is meaningless without clear definition of boundaries. Carroll provides this at the outset, explaining that setting the limits of the study at Japan in the east and Pakistan in the west is 'purely to try to keep the complex stories already within this area in some manageable form' as is the wholly logical subdivision of 'the major geo-political groupings of Asia – North Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia'.⁵ She points out enormous changes in Asia during this revolutionary century from agrarian societies of elites to global industrialised cultures. The time-frame of the 20th century has its own integrity, as the period that saw both the culmination of Euro-American colonisation of the region, and also its complete extinction, with the Vietnamese triumph in the 'American War'.

Carroll covers the eras of colonialism and independence. What of course I think has to be borne in mind is how brief the period of Euro-American domination really was in terms of the vast spread of Asian history. The British obtained their first political foothold within India only in 1757, establishing full colonial administration in 1857, and ceding independence in 1949, so that the Raj, properly so-called, endured only ninety years in some 5000 years of recorded Indian history. The French imperium was even briefer, extending only sixty-nine years, from 1885 to 1954, in 2700 years of recorded Vietnamese history. The Spanish were something of an exception, as Carroll explains in her very full and insightful study of the art of the Philippines. But generally speaking the colonial interlude in terms of Asian history was not so much a transient phenomenon, more of a blip.

It is also worth mentioning that the 20th century was by far the most horrific in human history, in the number of victims of systemic violence, and almost certainly more horrific in Asia than



anywhere else, a circumstance not really reflected in the book. But neither, as Carroll observes, is it really reflected in the art of the region. (Indian artist Nalini Malani on Partition, and Indonesian-Australian artist Dadang Christanto on the Indonesian killings of 1965 would be exceptions.)

An obvious benefit of an encyclopaedic approach is that it brings to light the art of smaller countries such as Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Brunei Darussalam which are inevitably overlooked in studies of the familiar fountainhead or dominant cultures, although these cultures also receive appropriate treatment. What one might not expect is original, arresting and sometimes challenging insights – for example, that seascapes are almost totally lacking in the art of the region. It is certainly not that Asians lacked a maritime history. Also intriguing is the observation that the 'period of shared prosperity at the beginning of the 20th century enabled four cultural centres in the region to flourish: Calcutta, Tokyo, Manila and Melbourne ... Imagine what the artists of these cities could have learned from each other if it was as normal for them to travel from Manila to Melbourne, as from Melbourne to London'.⁶

What makes the absence of any such South-South exchanges the more regrettable, in Carroll's view, is the fact that the experience of artists in at least Australia and the Philippines had significant elements in common. The inclusion of Australian artists in some aspects of the discussion provides fascinating juxtapositions for Australian readers. One of the most striking features of the book, apart from the breadth of its scholarship, may be the sympathy and insight with which Carroll writes of individual countries such as the Philippines. She claims for example that the 'most impressive art in the decades until 1940 occurred in the Philippines'.⁷ This might seem the more surprising in that the Philippines endured the longest period of colonial oppression, first from Spain from 1565 to 1898, then American occupation from 1898 after a brief moment of independence, then Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1944, finally achieving full independence in 1946. The Spanish might not be remembered as particularly gifted administrators but they brought two enduring contributions to their enormous empire, Catholicism and the baroque, which became the pervading and enduring style in the Philippines as in the Americas south of

the Rio Grande. And as Carroll observes, the characteristic quality of Philippines art is that it 'tells tales passionately. It also understands and exploits the political sentiment within Christianity of the equality of all people, of the meek inheriting the earth',⁸ the sentiment inspiring the movement for independence. The great Indonesian writer Pramoedya Toer acknowledged the leading role of the Philippines in the regional independence movement 'even if they were deceived by Spain and America'.⁹ By contrast, she observes that 'because there has not been a passionate push for political independence in Thailand' there has been a 'resultant reduction in parallel revolutionary explosions of artistic force,' although the highly explosive revolutionary art of Vasan Sittthiket would seem a departure from this pattern.¹⁰

Similarly arresting, indeed challenging, is the insightful treatment of Chinese revolutionary propaganda art, particularly 'social realism', with its highly unreal vision of a world in which 'everyone is smiling, children are plump and well-dressed, mothers radiant; colours are vibrant and sweet'.¹¹ But as she observes, some of their techniques of heroicising and romanticising 'had been created by the Doges and Medicis and Popes of Italy to impress both the populace and the outsider with images of the right to rule ...'¹² And the lurid colours and comic-strip characterisation of the propaganda style have been adopted with subversive intent by contemporary artists. It also appears to be, in its most ossified manifestation, the only accepted art form in North Korea.

Some may quibble with individual statements and assessments but the writing is always stimulating. Overall this book is an impressive contribution, supported by 276 endnotes and 180 colour illustrations. Macmillan has done a superb job of presentation, in the quality of paper and the excellent colour images on almost every page. The number and variety of these images allow the reader to compare art works in a way rare now in art publishing.

1. John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p. 29.
2. Alison Carroll, *The revolutionary century: art in Asia, 1900-2000*, Macmillan Publishers Australia, South Yarra, 2010, p. 9.
3. Carroll, 2010: p. 9.
4. Carroll, 2010: p. 15.
5. Carroll, 2010: p. 7.
6. Carroll, 2010: p. 21.
7. Carroll, 2010: p. 58.
8. Carroll, 2010: p. 58.
9. Carroll, 2010: p. 30.
10. Carroll, 2010: p. 30.
11. Carroll, 2010: p. 112.
12. Carroll, 2010: p. 114.

Dr Caroline Turner is a Senior Research Fellow at the ANU's Humanities Research Centre. She curated the exhibition Dadang Christanto: Wounds in our heart, which is showing at the ANU's Drill Hall Gallery, 12 November to 19 December 2010.



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