

Bridge-builder Alison Carroll spans cultural gap

- Rowan Callick
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Alison Carroll, who is stepping down as Asialink's arts director, at the Sidney Myer Asia Centre in Melbourne.

Picture: Stuart McEvoy

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AFTER 20 years battling for greater engagement in the arts between Australia and Asia, Alison Carroll says more work needs to be done. "We have to be more proactive than anyone else," she says, "but we are less."

For instance, France has just opened its fourth cultural centre in Indonesia. Australia has none. "That's such an indictment," she says.

Australia's Asian arts guru, Carroll has chalked up a long list of achievements in her two epic decades as Asialink's arts director, including opening an exhibition somewhere in the region every 23 days. But the challenges remain huge, she says. "I think Asians are basically benign about Australia. They think of us as a nice friendly country a long, long way away. But they don't know much about us, because we don't tell them much.

"A small amount of people know what we do in the arts, and that we are a sophisticated country. But we don't do enough to get through to the majority. We have to spend more and do more."

Carroll is about to leave Asialink in Melbourne to be based for a time in Liverpool, England, from where she will work as a freelance international curator, with her contacts already queuing to give her assignments. As an indication of her reputation in Australia's arts community, she was made a Member of the Order of Australia last week.

She says Australians miss out on trends that sweep our region through our failure to engage with it. This is partly because our education system largely leaves Asia out. "Japan is widely viewed as particularly cool right now," she says. "Indonesian art is fantastic - Yogyakarta is really buzzing - and Korean boy bands are huge everywhere in Asia." But not within the Anglosphere, which is where Australia's mass media, especially, remain trapped in time.

Younger Australians are starting to hang out in Asia, she says, but older members of the Australian elite still dream of sipping coffee in Paris. However, third-generation Asian migrants to Australia are starting to establish themselves as artists and audiences for the arts after their parents and grandparents have built a basis for prosperity that allows such creativity to be valued.

Asialink chairman Sid Myer says Carroll has built the notion of the arts as a diplomatic centrepiece, "and helped us as

a country . . . in the face of some difficulty, understand the place culture can play in engaging with Asia".

He says she has worked with the Australia Council and other organisations "to shift what had been a mostly Eurocentric view of the arts towards a more Asian worldview.

"She herself is an iconic name in this space," he says. "Hers are big shoes to fill."

Tim Lindsey, director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne and chairman of the Australia Indonesia Institute, says: "The Asian century, when the power shifts from the Atlantic to the Pacific, is not just about economics and politics. It is also about the arts.

"The arts in Asia have been going through a period of extraordinary dynamism and creativity in the last half century, which the West has been slow to notice. As the only Western country in Asia, Australia has been uniquely positioned to become a hub for Asia's artistic life, but sadly this is an opportunity we have not yet grasped.

"Alison, however, has been indefatigable in her efforts to make us see this, both by explaining contemporary Asian work to us as a curator and a writer, and by her tireless work to build bridges between artists here and in our region."

He says the arts residencies of which she was a pioneer - allowing Australians to live and work in Asia and Asian artists to do the same here - are "very important investments, but more is needed, as Alison has often pointed out".

Carroll has degrees in art history from the University of Melbourne, where she has taught frequently since her graduation. Her latest book, *The Revolutionary Century: Art in Asia 1900-2000*, which is to be launched next week, has many images not seen before beyond their home countries.

Artlink magazine described her this month as "visionary and generous": "Her contribution to Asia-Australia relations has been unsurpassed in the arts arena and hers will be an incredibly hard act to follow."

Carroll says Australians typically view any visit or sojourn in Asia as a holiday, which tends to trivialise efforts at serious engagement. "I've been to most Asian countries, but I haven't yet seen the sites. It's been great, but I've been working."

One of her favourite recent projects is a series of "how to" booklets aimed at Indonesian arts administrators, spelling out in the most concrete way how to tour an art exhibition, manage an event or arts festival and develop the cultural life of a community. They were translated into Indonesian and checked by people in those arts fields, then 6000 of each were printed. A short time later, only 1000 are left. Now Vietnamese arts administrators are asking for the booklets to be translated into Vietnamese.

Carroll says: "This is the kind of way that Australian cultural know-how can benefit our neighbours and ultimately benefit ourselves, because we are more likely as a result to be able to see art from the region."

She is unsurprisingly a great supporter of the Queensland Art Gallery's Asia-Pacific Triennial of contemporary art, which has been running since 1993.

She has also been championing the bold Utopia project, which would present a non-competitive arts Olympics every two years in an Asian centre. She flew to Sydney a few days ago to lobby Arts Minister Peter Garrett for support.

The governments of Japan and Singapore have already signed up as Australia's key partners in north and southeast Asia. Australia's formal engagement, though, remains tentative. Carroll says even though Utopia is Australia's idea, it will now have a life of its own, whether we sign up more wholeheartedly or not.

"We are basically a Western nation in the middle of this Asian treasure trove," she says, "and we are not accessing it for ourselves, or for our artists, who should be the best of us."