

By ALISON CARROLL

IT WAS AS a young Australian art museum curator, holidaying in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, that I first saw the 'cultural triangle' of that country: Anuradhapura, Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa. Besides my interest in these marvellous cultural sites dating from the 4th century BC, my main thought was shock that after six years of studying art history in Australia and Italy (my main area of focus was 17th-century Venice where I think I knew every picture painted) that I had never ever heard the names of these sites before. No in-depth study of course, but not even hearing their names in passing ... Is it better anywhere else, either then or even now?

This started a 30-year endeavour to bring more knowledge of the art of Asia to Australian audiences, and vice versa. My experience has always been that we have to find an entry point into a new cultural area for the audience, and for the Asia/Australia/Western nexus, I concentrated on where the interaction in the visual arts had been – mostly the art of the last four centuries. This works even better with contemporary art, where the audience already shares the period of creation if not the cultural details of each piece. I curated an exhibition in 1985 using the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia where I worked called *East and West*, and traced paintings, prints, drawings, ceramics and sculpture which showed cultural influence from East to West and back again. It was a rich and rewarding exhibition, but in the process I also learnt of the paucity of information available on this art at that time, especially of the 20th century.

My Asialink work involved extensive travel throughout Asia, from Pakistan to Japan, China to Indonesia (19 countries in all) setting up programmes, speaking about exchange, and generally seeing as much art of each place as I could. The art historian still lurked beneath. In the last 20 years, many publications have appeared on the art of the recent past in Asia, especially nationally based ones, with Malaysia/Singapore taking an early lead, Apinan Poshyananda's *Modern Art in Thailand* (1992) – a key book, Jim Supangkat's work in Indonesia always important as well as that of foreign scholars, and many publications from Japan, often led by the Japan Foundation's Asia Centre. Gradually Korea and Taiwan added their stories, and more recently India and of course in very recent years China.

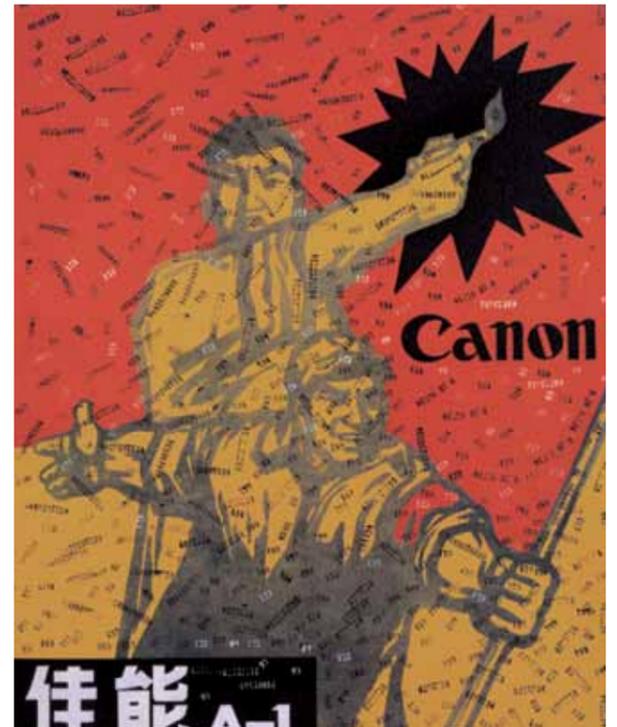
However, I still watched people grapple with the larger picture, not sure of how each national story tied in with those of their neighbours. I also watched how the increasing information available on contemporary art made this area so much more accessible than it had been. However, there remained a gulf between this new art, and what had made it so, and the arts of the traditional Asian past: what had happened in those intervening years of the 20th century.

The period from around 1900 to 2000, besides being little known especially on a broader level, is very important artistically. It has suffered however from 'Asianists' being uncomfortable with its international/non-Asian focus, and 'international' art historians being uncomfortable with the Asian side of the equation. The latter just do not know enough. I watched and waited for this gap to be filled. John Clark of the University of Sydney wrote an erudite book on the period, but not across the whole region, and not intended for the general audience. So over the last five years, I have written a book on the subject that I hope helps overcome the lack of information on the period and gives some structure from which to start making sense of it all.

There is always an elephant in the room in this era. The 20th century is one of Western hegemony with Western influence at the core of much of the change



Untitled (Girl with Fan) by A R Chughtai, watercolour, 54 x 60 cm



Great Criticism – Canon (1992) by Wang Guangyi, 148 x 119 cm

Twentieth Century Asian Art

in all aspects of Asian society, including art. There is a reaction for Westerners of 'spotting the influence' from the West in Asian art of this period and thinking it is 'just derivative'. This would be true if Asian artists did little with what they saw in the West but so often they saw, adapted and synthesised what they saw from outside with local issues and forms, and created something new, wonderful and pertinent to their own culture.

Western viewers might not know enough about the local practice informing each work and need to keep open minds on this major issue. An instance of the need to keep an open mind is Indonesian artist Lucia Hartini's paintings of the 1990s. To a Western viewer they seem 'surrealist' and indeed Hartini knew European surrealist art, but she extended this through her Javanese acceptance of the magical, being 'real' in a way alien to a European, and the line between what the West sees as separate, for her, melds to give her work extra presence. And, of course, an issue that still needs vigilance in the West is knowledge of the importance of Asian art to the development of revolutionary Western practices over the last few hundred years. That Gauguin learnt so much from Borobodur (though he thought it was in Cambodia) is acknowledged by scholars, but still in the hearts of Western viewers he is seen as original in a way that for Lucia Hartini, at this moment, is still a struggle.

Looking at the period of the 20th century across the region, these are some of the themes that emerge. The first is the challenge of the ideas from Europe on traditional practice at the turn of the century, especially in Japan. The conservatives wanted to preserve traditional culture and the revolutionaries were keen to introduce new ideas. This spread to China, and led to the interesting Pan Asia movement in Calcutta where Japanese and Indian arts leaders joined to press forward the idea of a united 'Asian' practice.

The strength of new ideas reached its apex in the 1920s and 1930s especially in Japan, China, the Philippines and India,



Yellow Flame (1995) by Yayoi Kusama, detail, acrylic on canvas, 3 panels, each 194 x 130 cm

where strong schools of artists joined to take forward their ideas with great gusto. Tokyo was the centre in Japan, Shanghai in China, Manila in the Philippines and Calcutta in India. Young artists flocked to these places to join in the new ideas and the energy of the times is palpable in their work.

The 1940s were dominated by war: World War II throughout the whole region, with the Japanese dominant, and on-going struggles for supremacy in China between the Nationalists and Communists, seeping over the border into Vietnam. This experience is echoed in the art of the time, with various government-supported, and privately believed propaganda works encouraged and exhibited. These images are often very strong emotionally and also wonderful social documents of the time. The end of the World War encouraged independence

movements through South and Southeast Asia, with artists very involved, particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia.

This mid-century upheaval in China and Vietnam and the rise of propaganda art is often ignored by East Asia art historians, but the work is some of the most memorable of the century, and that surely attests to its power – imagine the art of recent times across the world without the dominant image of Mao Zedong looming out.

An instance of a very different mindset in Japan was the rise of exceptional conceptual art there in the 1950s and 1960s, an isolated movement in the region. No other place was more than slightly interested in such work, with painting remaining dominant elsewhere. For the only time in the century, abstract painting took hold in the 1960s, encouraged by post-war internationalist pressures. This was in contrast to the focus on people as the subject for most of the rest of the century.

The last theme chronologically was the dominance of socially critical paintings and installations in the 1990s, across the region.

Two other issues should be noted: first, that specific centres rose to create periods of high creative activity and then this energy subsided: Calcutta at the turn of the century as noted above; in Bali in the 1930s and in Colombo in the 1940s; and second, to reappraise and interpret local traditions. Underlying the 'new' was a tradition known to all the practitioners of the region which it was possible to use when the need arose.

The Revolutionary Century:
Art in Asia 1900-2000 by Alison Carroll,
Palgrave Macmillan Australia,
ISBN-13 9781921394171, A\$99,
Macmillan Art, 2010.
In 1990, Alison Carroll started the Asialink Arts programme at the University of Melbourne which was involved in literal cultural exchange between contemporary artists and arts of Asia and Australia, www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au.