

AUSTRALIAN ART ABROAD

doing it b-e-t-t-e-r

■ Alison Carroll

This is a tale of two cities, the yin and yang of international engagement for Australian artists, a tale of caution and a tale of risk, of reflection and of action. But like yin and yang, the seesaw of fate, both are essential to the other – calculated and informed risk-taking, action, but thoughtful action.

As Director of the Arts Program at Asialink I used to say to aspiring curators that they needed to have a few projects in Australia under their belt before attempting something on the bigger, harder, more expensive international stage. “Learn your craft with an audience you understand, where if it fails the fall-out is less devastating”. For artists and curators thinking of exhibitions for audiences, here or overseas, the key is knowledge of your audience. This doesn’t mean everyone wanting to show overseas needs to know those audiences, but they need to rely on someone who does know: a museum with international links; a gallery representative who has good connections; an agency which is on its toes.

Working in Asia for twenty years, I have seen the un-thoughtful reactions to ‘getting into Asia’ come and go. Western Australia and Queensland governments have been most prone to this – talking with phrases like ‘export ready’, with unrealistic chest-beating about how these programs are going to be so successful in Asia, then when the programs fade away, the policies follow. In the early 1990s the cultural carpetbaggers alerted to the possible spoils in Asia proliferated, then, with the harsher times under John Howard, they too faded away. I suppose this would be called market forces, and they failed because in all these cases the protagonists weren’t well enough prepared, nor had they put in the hard yards to understand what it really takes to be involved in international engagement or to understand their market (oops, audience).

So, let me say a few words about how I see the stage at the moment – based on two years fairly constant travel in Asia and Europe looking at museums and galleries, and talking

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to people. The bottom line is that now is an excellent time for Australia to be very active internationally. The scene in Europe is weak, Asia is active, but at a cross roads methinks, and we are very well-placed with excellent art, excellent infrastructure and money. Yes, we are.

Europe is the same-old, same-old. The same artists are featured in museum after museum, as if the curators have lost all control or all courage. Just go with the known, and flatter the people who have given the money to show them. The European (old) names that emerge again and again are (still) Joseph Beuys, Mario Merz, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer and Americans Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. All chaps you notice. In Munich, in beautiful museums next to each other, the Museum Brandhorst (named for the man who gave the collection to the city) and the Modern Museum, you could almost do a step-by-step pairing of the artists shown. The Palazzo Grassi in Venice, now owned by the Pinault Foundation (of another very rich man), had a show on during the Biennale by curator Caroline Bourgeois, titled *The World Belongs to You* and used the phrase “we must encourage an outward movement of openness to the world”. I was interested they did this at all – good in principle and quite rare – but it was a show in the usual Western individualistic position of ‘name after name’, adding up. No Australians and all the ‘Americans’ were from the USA. Of the Asian artists six out of eight were from China (see more below).

My response to ‘beyond-Europe’ in Europe is that it is extremely limited, though there are pockets where people try to be proactive. The Germans are rebuilding their museum facility for non-Western cultural items (after the very old-fashioned displays in Dahlem), including Australian Indigenous work, in a new building they are calling the Humboldt Forum. They want to do something more contemporarily relevant than the Musée Quai Branly where the result is ‘ethnic and crafty’ rather than the fine and sophisticated and splendidly relevant work that it is.

Where there is a response to Asia, it is, of course, to China. The *sine qua non* of this is the current show at the Louvre, subtitled *Emperors of China and Kings of France*, about the Chinese Emperors of the 13-19th centuries (showing some

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wonderful paintings by the Qianlong Emperor – yes, the Chinese do value culture – can you imagine Julia Gillard matching it with our best artists...). The French comparison of the Chinese Emperors with their own Kings has the subtext that they were all brothers in the past and will be in the future. I can just imagine the PR meetings that lead into that.

Australia in Europe is most obvious in Venice: I wondered at the choice of Hany Armanious. He is a conceptualist, a mode of art that Europe has in its bones, so if a foreigner is going to show conceptual art, you have to really do it so much b-e-t-t-e-r. There were also two small shows at the British Museum, of prints and of baskets held in the dreary galleries up the back stairs. It is a terrible venue – I've never seen anything look great there – but this too seems to be misguided. I gather it was driven by the collection of prints sought by the Australian-born curator at the BM, but again if one is in the mother-land of printmaking (as Britain certainly was to us) you have to do it b-e-t-t-e-r.

Asia is doing gangbusters, with confidence and action and money ABOUNDING. All those new privately-owned museums in Shanghai and a plethora of private galleries selling, selling, selling. They are selling Chinese art of course, very little else. In December I saw a show there of Takashi Murakami – the only non-Chinese art in my meanderings. Singapore has more art venues in its downtown arts sector than a reasonable person can visit and absorb. Bangkok is getting its new Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre up and running finally, after a long struggle. India is about to open its Art Fair with a raft of fancy speakers. I've just got the Yokohama Triennial catalogue, looking as beautiful and spruce as all Japanese publications do, full of good sense about that particular exhibition.

But despite this surge of energy, is the art standing up in the same way? I wonder. There was a real downturn in the art coming out of both Indonesia and Philippines after the fall of Suharto and Ferdinand Marcos, though protest against those regimes had fed the work now seen as the strongest in their recent histories. I felt the same in Bangkok, seeing a show from Chiang Mai of work that would have been relevant 20 years before as seeding, exciting, 'new' work coming to the fore. It built on the past and it was great to see work from the provinces in the capital (always a good sign), but it hadn't really moved on. In China, the crude vulgarity of the shocking work of the 1990s has produced a popular trend of the crudely vulgar for its own sake.

The other strain coming through is a return to Asian tradition – perhaps this is the way. All that Confucian contemplation on higher things and disinterest in the material and the political, just hinted at by artists using the most restrained of means. It shows in large works on paper by Ding Yi at Shanghai's

Minsheng Museum of abstracted imagery but traditional means, and Wong Chung Yu's traditional imagery using ink and paper, but translated through real-time computer interpretations (on show at Hanzart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong in September), and via the Yokohama Triennial curators' words about their show: "I feel that there is a need to recognise the ambiguous, the incomprehensible, and the wondrous; a need to acknowledge the existence of other values, and face the world with humility" says Eriko Osaka (p.56) followed by Akiko Miki (p.68): *Our Magic Hour* "focuses on art that is related to the mysteries of the world and everyday life, magical powers, and supernatural phenomena as well as works that are rooted in mythology, legends, and animism.... [b]y re-examining these realms, which cannot be explained through science or reason, I have attempted to shed light on values that have been marginalised or completely forgotten." Edward Saïd, where are you? This is the yin to the yang indeed.

So, where do we put Australia in this? Asialink toured exhibitions throughout Asia for all those twenty years I worked there. Increasingly individuals are included in the major shows, and the dialogue grows.

Thinking about anywhere in the world we have to play to our strengths. Aboriginal art of course, and responses to 'place' have always been strong. It's what all boat people have responded to (pro and con) and me too, driving across the Wimmera to Adelaide in the January shimmer, crossing the baked blue Murray at the Wellington Ferry, walking through the Margaret-Preston-delineated vegetation of the Fleurieu Peninsula. Imagining Aboriginal presence; knocked out by the wet (water in the lakes long dry), the sky and the beauty. The Australian National Gallery is presenting a show about the land at the Royal Academy in London soon. It's smart to do this, but I trust they will do it well and with courage.

So, now is a time of opportunity, but let us do it strategically, with forethought and understanding. We have to be out there. We have to keep pressure on our institutions of learning and exhibition to be proactive with courage and focus. We have to get the funders to think big and go for the best, and we have to lobby government to take it seriously.

I'd like to see a new International Cultural Agency, taking on those roles from the Australia Council and Foreign Affairs, run by arts professionals and just knowing about the world and doing it cleverly. I'd like to see us doing it b-e-t-t-e-r. ■

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