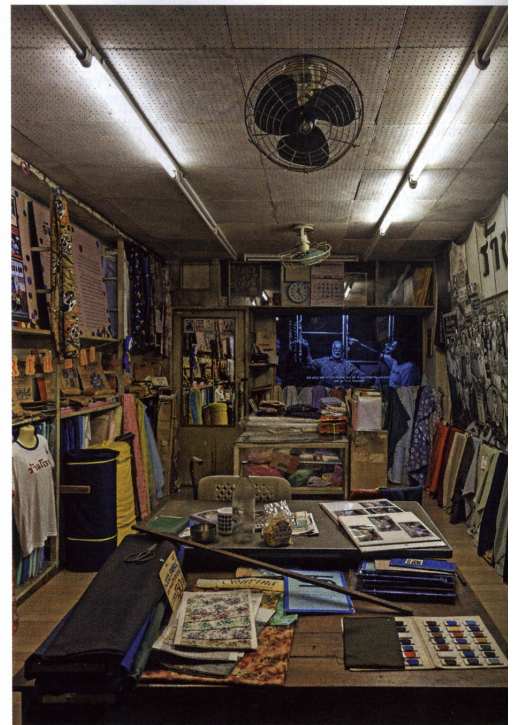




From left: FX Harsono, *Voice Without a Voice Sign*, 1993-94, silk screen on canvas, wooden stools, stamps. Installation view, National Art Center, Tokyo, 2017. Sway Ken, *Coming from Harvesting Palm Juice*, 1996, oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 19 3/4". Mori Art Museum. Navin Rawanchaikul, *A Tale of Two Homes*, 2015, video, acrylic on canvas, found objects. Installation view, National Art Center, Tokyo, 2017. Photo: Ueno Norihiro.



“Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia, 1980s to Now”

NATIONAL ART CENTER AND
MORI ART MUSEUM, TOKYO

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AT “SUNSHOWER,” pomp and circumstance matter. Organized to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the exhibition brings together some 190 works by eighty-six artists, spread across the Mori Art Museum and the National Art Center in Tokyo. Advertised as the “largest-ever” show of contemporary Southeast Asian

art, “Sunshower” announces Japan’s commitment to Southeast Asia, if not its centrality to the region’s artistic fortunes—and fraught histories.

A state-backed project of this scale—and its celebratory rhetoric—is bound to provoke skepticism. What does it mean for Japan, a wealthy ex-colonial power, to tell the story of one of its former territories? Who benefits from this narrative of the region, and from an organization of artworks and cultural materials that is as compelling as it is ultimately fictional? How can the relationship between players of disparate power be negotiated justly? These questions deserve urgent attention, especially given the ongoing push by museums such as the National Gallery in Singapore and M+ in Hong Kong to institutionalize knowledge and consolidate art histories.

But the relationship between official mandates, state sponsorship, and curation is hardly straightforward. Arranged in nine broad thematic sections rather than by nation, the “Sunshower” installation reveals the conceptual risks taken by its curatorial team. Their framework posits that contemporary art is better historicized in terms of shared trajectories such as urbanization, protest, and the rise of alternative artist spaces than as the outgrowth of national modernisms. Though less tethered to geographic demarcations, a narrative based on social and economic shifts is nevertheless subject to other, no less institutional imperatives—namely, the promotion of heavily redacted histories of development by the authoritarian regimes that belong to ASEAN. Like many sprawling contemporary art exhibitions, “Sunshower” is caught in a double bind,

attempting to extricate artists and artworks from identitarian frameworks while still operating within the rigid politics of international relations.

The exhibition most successfully evades the reproduction of official discourse when viewers are challenged by sensorial experiences that defy easy categorization. As a frontispiece for the Mori venue, Zulkifli Mahmud’s rattling metal towers, *VIBRATE Vibration*, 2017, produce a maddening hum that follows viewers far into the show’s opening section, “Growth and Loss.” The steady vibration gives way to the thumping hip-hop beats of Korakrit Arunanondchai’s music video *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3*, 2015, wherein the artist plays a new age Buddhist shaman, a native of urban wastelands who leads the way into the next chapter, “Medium as Meditation.” Then there are moments of deafening silence. In “Dialogue with History,” viewers linger in front of Vandy Rattana’s photographs of Cambodian landscapes pitted by American bombs or Hoang Duong Cam’s abstract paintings, based on found photographs from the Vietnam War. This affective journey fleshes out each theme with psychological insight.

Indeed, subjective specificity might be the only way to approach an idea as complex and unruly as Southeast Asia. Simryn Gill, an artist who divides her time between Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia, presents *Blue*, 2013, a suite of 210 paintings that concentrate on the subtle modulation of the color and its metaphorical associations with everything from impenetrable oceanic depth to the lightness of disintegrating sea-foam. Nearby are inscrutable



Clockwise, from left: Yee I-Lann, *Fluid World*, 2010, ink-jet print, acid dye, indigo dye, and batik crackle on silk twill, 51 x 111 3/4". National Art Center. Vandy Rattana, *Kompong Thom*, 2009, digital C-print, 35 3/4 x 41 3/4". National Art Center. Aung Myint, *Five Continents—Is the World Nearly Destroyed?*, 2009, acrylic, ink, and handmade paper on canvas, 32 1/4 x 64 1/4". National Art Center.



vignettes of rural life by Svay Ken, who began painting in 1993 at age sixty, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. His pictures challenge viewers to find a language to describe and discuss unfamiliar social interactions without simply exoticizing them. Brought together under the heading “Day by Day,” these disparate works—by the critically acclaimed globe-trotter and the naïf outsider—suggest the impossibility of measuring rates of artistic development or scales of artistic mobility in the region against any single standard.

Despite the effectiveness of these passages in complicating the representation of Southeast Asia, the inclusion of a vast number of works delivers watered-down historical

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lessons. Norberto Roldan’s *Dialectical Materialism*, 2013, which announces its title in giant painted letters, appears as an anodyne attempt to encapsulate the tumultuous history of political activism in the Philippines during the 1980s. Ringo Bunoan’s *For Lee Aguinaldo (Work After Chabet #3)*, 2009—chipboard soaked in buckets of water—summarizes Philippine conceptualism in one epistolary inside joke. Similar compressions apply to other political and art-historical narratives, often presented so obliquely that even the studious reader of wall texts is left grasping for connections.

The underlying problem with the exhibition’s mission to educate Japanese audiences about Southeast Asia is a lack of self-awareness. In sections titled “Archiving” and “What Is Art? Why Do It?,” the story of alternative artist spaces like the Artists Village in Singapore, among other socially engaged projects, is presented through dense photographic and textual ephemera. Yet there is great irony in a museum attempting to present, even assimilate, challenges to its own white cube. Also unacknowledged are previous Japanese attempts to expand the “archive” of Southeast Asian art through research and data collection. Works by ’90s flag bearers of contemporary Asian art such as Montien Boonma and FX Harsono are on loan from the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, one of the first institutions with an acquisitions program for contemporary Southeast Asian art. Any Japanese history of the region must also be a history of the nation’s own learning about the region, and the faint specter of a colonial enterprise will remain as long as its epistemological projects pose as neutral and authorless.

“Sunshower” also points to a broader crisis of authorship. As outspoken curators such as Apinan Poshyananda and Jim Supangkat gradually retire, few young exhibition-makers have stepped in to fill their shoes. Perhaps the strong authorial presence that the older generation commanded now appears overbearing or simply unattainable, when so-called independent voices are readily absorbed by official structures. Institutional collaboration—the new norm—foregrounds shared responsibility, deliberate inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity. All this makes for dutiful

professionalism. But as the field matures and bureaucratic infrastructure proliferates, how can curators assert criticality within the consensus-production machine of state-backed initiatives? Where is the balance between incorporation and divisive provocation? Can autonomy be sustained within the genre of the megaproject?

Perhaps what “Sunshower” needed was not a bolder conceptual framework, but rather a return to the most basic curatorial act of bringing objects together. Take the pairing of Aung Myint’s *Five Continents—Is the World Nearly Destroyed?*, 2009, and Yee I-Lann’s *Fluid World*, 2010, which greets viewers at the National Art Center location. The latter work, featured heavily in the exhibition’s publicity materials as an exemplar of borderless regionalism, shows a map disrupted by the blue crackle of batik dyeing. In Myint’s painting, hung opposite, rivulets of bloodred paint meander across wrinkled paper membranes, seeping through the boundaries of landmasses and pooling over screaming faces that crowd the continents. With one brilliant juxtaposition, the myth of Southeast Asia as site of utopian fluidity is broken, and revealed instead as a world *deformed* by fluidity—its divisions undone by the friction of movement and disrupted by unruly material processes. For a brief moment, the forced coherence of the exhibition recedes and art’s intractability reigns. □

“Sunshower” is on view through October 23; travels to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan, November 3–December 25.

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