

4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Japan

4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (FT4), Japan 5 September – 23 November 2009

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A Chinese artist makes work about Tibet titled *Water to Save the Nations*. Hackles rise. What is he saying? A hand-drawn map on the wall shows the vast areas where China, Tibet and India meet. What do the markings on this map denote? On flanking walls is a serene array of Buddhist banner paintings, thangka, designed by the artist and executed by Tibetan traditional painters; a flowing ink drawing shows mountain peaks, a fairytale Buddhist monastery town above a giant hydroelectric scheme, damming and diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra River. The artist is Qiu Zhijie, often cited as one of China's most radical intellectuals. His work on colonialism and Tibet for The Long March group caused most of the Westerners to issue statements of outrage. His long term research into Tibet started years earlier at ground level; with his legs chained together, he followed the route of a railway from China to Tibet mapped by the British when they were trying to appropriate Tibet. He collected

metal objects and forged a replica of the rail lines. Zhijie made the work *Water to Save the Nations* to line up with the theme of this Fukuoka Triennale *Live and Let Live* pointing to the need for symbiotic relationships in Asia. Yet the hydro-scheme would divert 33% of the river to western China and involve gigantic tunnels through the Himalayas. The enigmatic structure of the work hints at doublespeak to elude Chinese retribution.



Ten years after a group of far-sighted people in the city of Fukuoka created a new museum to show Japanese audiences new art from the Asian region, its 4th Asian Art Triennale opened in September 2009, recession or not, in the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. The show sits comfortably on two upper floors of a typical glass tower in the centre of this brilliantly polished city way down in the south of Japan, a bridge to both Korea and China and historically the site of skirmishing with the outside world before Japan finally opened its borders.



The first Triennale was already heir to a ten year history of research into Asian art, and with each of the four editions the field has expanded, this year to include a larger contingent of Japanese artists, originally excluded. The FTs now are regarded world-wide as an extraordinary seedbed for arts development based on person to person contacts.

Senior curator Raiji Kuroda has travelled with the project since the early days. For FT4 research and selection was an in-house team of FAAM staff working with a group of curatorial advisers from Japan and China and the influential Pooja Sood from India. The Triennale has brought artists and artworkers in Asian countries together, often helping them find out what others are doing within their own countries. This was particularly true of India, which has grown from a fragmented scene to one which projects itself with increasing confidence.

In this tenth year of FTs the museum departed from its regular goal which is to assiduously trawl the region for new talent, helping to bring new artists to the attention of the global network of curators, biennales and museums. Given the unimaginable changes that have overtaken the fortunes of Asian art over the decade, they decided to take account of this huge shift, by revisiting some now well known earlier inclusions such as Subodh Gupta and Wong Hoy Cheong, but also artists who are already global stars such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba and Shazia Sikander but who were never part of a FT.

This mixture of familiar and new gives a special frisson to the exhibition, spiced up further by the hosting of two ongoing social experiment pieces both working at the level of community. The Osaka-based group AHA! (Archive for Human Activities) a group of socially minded people, mostly not artists but from a range of professions, encourage other citizens, including many old people, to rescue and value memories in the form of their old family 8mm home movies, which are archived and informally screened and shared. The Singapore group Post Museum with their Really Really Free Market project have embraced a utopian global movement proposing an alternative gift economy where no money changes hands, which in a time of bleak financial situation, was enthusiastically workshopped in the public arena over the month of September.

The works in FT4 are predominantly large installations, many based around video. Two stood out as unbearable reminders of the giant gulf between haves and have-nots. Yasmine Kabir and Ronnie Ahmmed from Bangladesh document the shipbreaking which takes place in their country as massive steel ships are taken apart by hand, piece by gruesome piece, and dragged through mud to where they can be sold for scrap. The camera records impassively the faces and bodies of groups of men and sometimes women joining their strength to shift enormous slabs, which in a normal shipyard would be easily moved by a crane. After this the incessant toils in the outdoor laundries of Mumbai, as recorded by Korean woman video artist Kimsooja, with monumental mounds of saris, each tagged to be finally returned to the homes of higher caste women, seem almost benign.

In more poignant mood, Sajana Joshi's half-vehicle half-animal carts and scooters, fur-covered with goat and cattle hide, attest to the intense value and sad lives of these humble beasts in her native and adopted lands, Nepal and Pakistan, their milk often the difference between a child's life or death. Here they point to the plight of the animals themselves in the survival stakes.

Even buildings can cry, according to An Jungju from Korea/Berlin, whose document of the demolition of a large school building is made from cut up sections of footage rearranged to make a soundscape changing the random sound of crashing masonry into rhythmical sequences.

In the two large galleries, highly crafted works sit alongside pieces using or depicting very simple everyday things; politics and social commentary is never far away. Perhaps the title of FT4 Live and Let Live: Creators of Tomorrow is an attempt to encapsulate this.

A huge fragile floating shape made from rattan fibre is revealed to be in the shape of a human stomach, a vital part of the body, yet this work by Sopheap Pich from Cambodia is called Delta. The piece itself as a work of fine fibre construction on a large scale is something to behold, but its creation was directly inspired by the fate of a lake in Phnom Penh sold to foreign investors for a new financial district. A lake that the city had earmarked for a park area. Like the toxic finances which almost brought world economics to ruin, the stomach, depicted in dry vegetation, shrivels into uselessness.