

In and Out of Focus

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Artist

I paint from historical photographs. My subjects include turn-of-the-century child prostitutes, upper class women with bound feet, Qing Dynasty courtesans, the Empress Dowager, imperial court eunuchs, the emperor Pu Yi, the empress Wan Rong, school girls of the 1930s imitating western behavior and fashion, a male Peking Opera star playing a female character, immigrant children working in an early 20th century cannery in Baltimore, my mother and grandmother, as well as myself as a student in post-revolutionary China, a farmer during the Cultural Revolution, and as a "resident alien" in the United States. The paintings I make are sometimes shaped according to 19th century photo-templates (arches, ovals, etc.) or the actual organic outlines of my subjects, and I have often added such objects as lacquered shelves, antique Chinese artifacts or architectural fragments, and Chinese bird cages in order to reinforce the shrine-like formality of the photographs I paint from. Occasionally, I also create public scale installations that may include railroad tracks, a "gold" mountain of 200,000 actual fortune cookies, and commonplace artifacts excavated from specific public sites.

As an American artist born and raised in China until the age of thirty-six, I am interested in the migration of personal identity across genders, cultures, languages, and epochs, with special emphasis on the history of Chinese femininity since the invention of photography. Modern China corresponds with the period since photography was invented and imported from the West. Often, the historical photographs I paint from were elaborately staged in photo-studio settings designed to associate the subject, usually a woman, with the accouterments of western civilization and art. But whether child prostitutes, infant emperors, beheaded rebels, or myself in my ancestral Manchurian village, these images come down to us today as pastiches of styles and clashes of cultures that were postmodern before they were modern. As a painter, I try to excavate the photo-surface, locating the stories beneath it. Since many of my paintings are of women, to "make-up" the faded areas of an old photograph with paint, color and heavy washes of oil is to substitute the artifice of painting for the artifice of photography. As a painter I try to render portraits of ironic historical and cultural ambiguity in which the projection of feminine identity and the fixation of the gaze that captures it are broken open. I paint posed historical photographs candidly.

I think much of the meaning of my painting over the past five years has come from the way the washes and drips dissolve the documentary authority of the photographs I paint from, opening them to a slower kind of looking, revealing perhaps the cultural and personal narratives frozen in the formality of the photographic instant. I've also begun to use clusters of brushstrokes and passages of color and shape to preserve or emphasize certain parts of the image. Between this dissolving and preserving is a rich middle-ground where the meaning of an image may be found. So the process of painting has become an investigation of the photo-document, which stands between history and me. So the process of painting has become an investigation of the photo-document, which stands between history and me. But in painting its image, I screen the photograph through my experience, which is imperfect and can be easily forgotten or made-up - in the same way that a photograph can be worn out or faded. Out of this screening an ambiguity arises which is bigger than either my subjective experience or the photographic facts. I am interested to see how far away I can get from the

photographic document and how close I can get to the historical memories.

During the Cultural Revolution, when I would hide my paint box under my coat and sneak into the fields by pretending to take a walk, my artistic goals were simply to paint, or at least to paint something that didn't have Mao's face on it. My goals are different now. Fundamentally, I would like to make paintings that continue to surprise me. Like the ancient Chinese landscape painters, I want to fold multiple perspectives into my work, respecting tradition while avoiding formulas. I would like my paintings - and installations - to be culturally specific yet globally resonant, contributing to an international vocabulary of migratory experiences and cultural narratives in a post-modern world.

After brain-washing, propaganda, class struggle, and book burning, I face the media-age, websites, e-mail, and fast service. Social responsibility was once an ideology that was forced upon me - to "serve the people heart and soul" - and is now an ideal I am asked to personalize in my own way. I have seen real political correctness in action, and it doesn't serve art or society. In America there are also party lines, but they are academic and of the marketplace. As an artist, I try to unearth hidden imagery, remember forgotten stories, locate misplaced histories, memorialize anonymous individuals, critique historical documents, and recycle recovered information in ways that hold me accountable to my own experience as an immigrant old enough to have seen Mao and met Mickey Mouse. In this way, perhaps I can be a better witness to my time.

But in my career as a Chinese born American woman artist, more attention has been paid to either my own personal story or to the stories of the subjects I paint than to the paintings themselves. Although my subjects bring their own narrative content to the painting, they are not the whole story. While it is true that I was trained in Chinese Socialist Realism, it is also important to know that 19th Russian Romantic painting and French Realism, which the Russians adapted, are both just beneath the surface. Traditional Chinese influences include ancient Buddhist murals (like those in Dunhuang), Chinese ink painting, and calligraphy, the staining and fluidity of which are central to my painting today. In other words, my painting is a hybrid of European and Asian styles that came to America through California on its way to New York (and now Tokyo), picking up influences of figurative abstraction, Pop, and feminism along the way. So these styles have migrated with me, congealing into what the critic Libby Lumpkin calls my own melting pot. For me, the story of cross-cultural identity comes not only from my subjects, but from the mongrel nature of my objects too.

In my newest work, I have shifted my interest from staged, historically specific images to more-or-less candid photographs of anonymous subjects, including Chinese children, or a mother and daughter pulling boats upstream, who seem to be caught in the margins of historical events. They represent the anonymity of the witness in the crowd, usually looking outside the picture at something we cannot see. Painting from staged historical photographs is like facing history head-on; now, I am slicing through it at an angle, obliquely. Though my subjects are candid and unknown, I am interested in the mythic resonance beneath their poses: the poses of struggling, eating, laughing, being trapped or lost, or just observing historical events from the wings. These are mundane human acts, but their consequences can be grave. I want this sense of gravity in my new paintings, a weight that cannot be felt in their photographic sources alone, but which can only be achieved the way a painting is: one stroke at a time. In this way, I hope to impart a certain dignity to my anonymous, commonplace subjects, a dignity that may be symbolic of the emerging and varied faces of Asia.

Cultural Sentinels at the Crossroads

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With recent increase of international exhibitions never before have so many artists from so many countries shown in mega -exhibitions (biennales, triennials) in various cities all over the globe. The effects of these international art exhibitions are clearly exerting on the art infrastructure in Asia.

The criss-crossing of borders in labyrinthine routes seem to confirm the effects of globalization and new world order where periphery, marginality, locality are given recognition and emphasis. However, inclination to move to decentered-centers has revealed that the Third World is fraught with inequalities and contradictions among various religions, tribes, classes, genders, and ethnicities.

Transnational economic trends have hierarchies. Saskia Saseen has observed the new geography of power in the age of globalization with territorial organization of economic activity.¹ While Masao Miyoshi has aptly questioned is there a borderless world?² Like economic hegemony and globalization where transnational corporations are geared toward regional targets, many international art exhibitions aim to reflect the globalization of culture and break down of national borders. But with the mushrooming of these biennales and extravaganza shows some urgent questions have arisen regarding purpose and underlying intention such as economic, political, and social interests. Moreover, there are problems in respect of territorial exclusivity, cultural and artistic control through corporate-like organization, cultural diplomacy, selectivity, and circulation of artists and art work.

I will offer a critique on these issues that might reflect the state and situation of contemporary Asian art in this symposium "Asian Contemporary Art Reconsidered".

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Let me recall the important discussion in this conference room in 1994 at the symposium on "The Potential of Asian Thought". There were some extremely important topics discussed concerning the effects of modernization on Asian art. I also recollect that my paper "Asian art in the Posthegemonic World"³ which opened debate on Japan's role and cultural involvement in Asia as reciprocation of friendship and/or cultural hegemony and intimate manipulation resulted in some intense heavy breathing, smoke puffing, air sucking by our Japanese comrades. Since I am the only remaining speaker from that symposium I will not dwell too much on this but must stress that the intention or challenge was meant for a good course. Some of the points I left for contemplation in 1994 have been reconsidered and practiced in recent successful art projects by Japanese organizers.

I believe issues of cultural management and role of aesthetic arbiters are vital and deserve space in our rethinking of Asian contemporary art. I will focus on the emerging roles of Asian artistic managers or "cultural sentinels" as follow:

1. Transformation from behind-the-scene organizer to a more central role of cultural mediator.
2. Selectors who frame taste or open up venues for new talent or marginalized art into the mainstream.

3. The role of transnational curator working in space of dissolved cultural frontiers.
4. Dilemma of representing Asian artists with "identity tags" and reciprocation with "foreign" audience.
5. Pan-Asian curatorial teams that advise and assist Asian artists in international art exhibitions.

The first two points have been the recent phenomena in contemporary art in Asia. The word "curator" which is a noun in English in its museum sense has recently become a verb. To curate, Asian curators have to be knowledgeable not only of their nation's art but comparative works of artists at regional and international levels.

The desire to catch up with expanding internationalism has resulted in many Asian curators to screen works in order to plug into global art circuit. At the same time, many have reacted to restrictive perimeters of the canon of Western modernism/postmodernism. Their response to Euroamerican paradigm allows space for Asian-centric discourse that evoke commonality and comradeship. By resisting paradigm of the other ("them/white"), "we/us" Asian brothers/sisters seek common ground for a beneficial course.

This new role for curators has resulted in a network where group ethnicity takes priority in regional art exhibitions. Here, I define the word region to cover various areas such as Southeast Asia, the Far East, and Asia Pacific. Therefore, the "inter" or "trans" national curators in this region require to have vision in art that reflects distinctive characteristics. The trends are inclined toward issues that are shared among countries instead of uniqueness within a nation-state. For instance, multicultural identities and communities have been favorable themes.

With transnational curators working in space of dissolved cultural frontiers such practice have been relatively new in Asia. With exception of Japan where curators from art institutions (Tokyo, Hiroshima, Fukuoka) have regularly visited Korea, China, Southeast Asia in order to curate and collect materials and art works for their institutions and audience. Such endeavor has been beneficial for a better Japanese understanding of their Asian others.

But the one-way mirror where Asian art and artists have been objects of the gaze and scrutiny by Japanese "experts" has altered. New gazers such as those from Australia and Singapore have added enriching vision and foresight to art in this region. Inevitably, projects and exhibitions initiated from various art institutions have resulted in competition among curators. I find this to be availing as the standard of curatorship has elevated to surpass what have been "controlled" art projects designed solely to project an exotic vision of harmony and brotherhood such as the ASEAN visual art programs.

The North-South, center-periphery axis is believed by many to be more important today than the East-West axis. The equilibrium at the center has become more disequilibrated and destabilized. It could be said that center and periphery exchange determinations. As a result, Asian curators are encouraged to make peripheral formations become "true" centers while the central formations peripheralize. Ours is the age of Third Worlds, minorities, and multicultural voices which seem to uniformly reject Euroamerican paradigm. But such repudiation has become too simplistic.

We learn that cultural hegemony comes in various guises. As recognized experts of art world establishment curators are placed at the position where they act as catalysts and intermediaries of taste as well as avant-garde concepts. However, there has been criticism on curators who place themselves at the service of elite audiences or specialized groups. Curators have been compared as brokers whose power and position allow them to mediate in areas of economic exchanges namely cultural goods.⁴ As John Clark points out in his paper "Modern Asian Art: its construction and reception"⁵ that the market mechanisms through curatorial intervention across borders have generated production of art which is received at sites between cultures and different kinds of cultural habitus.

Naturally, Asian curators who are involved in selection of artists at home to show abroad often face challenge regarding criteria, selectivity, and personal preference. When artists are selected for international exhibitions and their works collected by cultural institutions abroad recognition and price tend to rise. Here, many Asian artists are relying more than ever on curators to get their names plugged into international art circuit (the same could be said vice versa). Because the tradition of curatorship in contemporary Asian art is relatively new, the curator-artist relationship still needs time for improvement.

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My own recent experience in curating exhibitions between cultures has certainly been illuminating. I was fortunate to encounter international art circuit as curator to represent my country as well as guest curator to show regionalist (Asian) art in international exhibitions. My role as guest curator for the exhibition "Traditions/Tensions" that opened at three venues in New York and traveling in Asia has been reviewed extensively but there is no time here to discuss this reception.⁶ Similarly, my position as curatorial co-ordinator for Australian section of the Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT) in Brisbane which coincided almost exactly with the New York project has been praised and criticized widely.⁷ Standing on precarious thin threads my task on these two major projects last year has taught much (perhaps too much) about curating contemporary art between cultures. Complex process in transporting art originating from peripheral regions to New York helped to push the borders of contemporary art and challenged cultural frontiers. The strategy where a cultural institution (The Asia Society) in New York patronizes Asian contemporary art to be viewed by American audience through Asian curatorial eye was an intricate procedure. As we know change of fixated perception takes time. Especially, in the US where lack of knowledge and discourse on modern Asian art has made discrimination on taste, artistic value, and authenticity based on relativity of American standard. In addition, "identity tags" of nations are still considered strongly. Despite discourse on multiculturalism many American art critics could not grasp the concept of an exhibition with five Asian countries. I painstakingly explained to a writer from a well-known New York art magazine as to why "Traditions/Tensions" covered some countries and thematic sinews and not others. Why it was intentionally not nicely packaged and pigeon holed for American audience. After two hours, her doltish stare still fixated as she commented, "Gee! this is too complicated for me. Can you tell me why Japan is not included?"

My role for the second Asia-Pacific Triennial was different but equally complicated. The task was to select Australian artists for the APT. Instead of Australian curatorial gaze at Asian artists, mine was a reverse look at our distant neighbors. I had noted criticism on the first APT regarding lack of aboriginal representation and involvement with local art community. One of my aims was to consider Australian artists' position in this transnational/regionalist blockbuster. Instead of established names I focused on artists

whose concern was class-based, race-based cultural difference. For instance, the project outside and inside the Queensland Art Gallery by local artists Campfire Group was meant to critique on questions over inclusion/exclusion, visibility/invisibility, speech/silence. Moreover, Campfire touched on sensitive debate on cultural industry, aboriginality, and indigenous consumerism. It should be noted that Doug Hall, Director of the Queensland Art Gallery, was open minded and willing enough to take part in this lively venture. Luke Roberts' fictitious invention in his installation "Mu Consulate and Margaret Mead Memorial Sandpit" poignantly reconstructs imagined community and exotica. His collection of cultural goods are signifiers of desire for cultural difference. Both these projects appropriately served as reversed exoticization of Asia's Pacific other.

The process of political negotiation and debate over questions of cultural difference and heterogeneity has affected art infrastructure in Asia as well as the Pacific. Who curate what? Who get selected? Who select the curators who in turn select cultural goods to be exhibited between borders? Often, the level of interest lies in what kind of exhibitions are represented rather than the names of artists in the show. Cultural mediators, aesthetic arbiters, artistic directors are becoming prominent than ever in international art scene. Inevitably, these individuals have been scrutinized as cultural controllers/manipulators or cultural brokers. If these individuals procure power in international art circuit it is pertinent to observe their future role and action in context of regionalist perspective.

In a recent conference on international exhibitions organized by Arts International (New York) in Bellagio Conference Center, Italy, artistic directors, chief curators, museum directors from all over the world attended to exchange insightful ideas and experience on the state of mega-art shows such as biennales of Venice, Istanbul, Cairo, São Paulo, Johannesburg, Havana, and APT. Among several issues raised I would like to point out two that might apply to our reconsideration of contemporary art in Asia.

I refer to my paper "Asian art in the Posthegemonic World" that called for a more equal working partnership between Japanese curators/experts and their counterparts. Here, I would like to extend my proposal for the future where a working force with multilateral partnership can expand and disseminate the potential of contemporary Asian art to the fullest.

It should be realized by now that in art circuits both at the transnational (global) and local (multicultural) levels consist of complex hierarchies. Although more doors and opportunities are opened to artists from the Third World many mega-shows still rely heavily on countries with available funds and financial support. The presence of Japanese and South Korean pavilions and the Taiwanese section in Venice Biennale are obvious examples. In 1995, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese artists were featured prominently in exhibitions "TransCulture," "Asiana," and "Tiger's Tail" in Venice. In biennales in Istanbul and Johannesburg, Japan and South Korea seemed to represent Asia. Why then in this new network of transnational curatorship/brotherhood artists from India, Pakistan, Southeast Asia are still sidelined or selected irregularly?

The answers are multifaceted. Plenty of talented artists but lack of cultural mediators; official red tapes that block instead of encourage contemporary art; lack of expertise and available materials for survey and selection; lack of discourse and programs that promote contemporary art. The list goes on but the bottom line seems to be artist-curator relations with funding to back the project. When it comes to the practical side of organization fund

raising tends to be confined within the scope of nation-states. Artists in biennales usually have to find expenses and costs covered from their own country. Presently, with the frequency of biennales all over the globe countries with available funding tend to have the advantage.

Here is the time for cultural institutions such as the Japan Foundation, museums, ASEAN art and culture programs, Australian Art Council to combine effort and improve the representation of Asian artists in international art circuits. To plan for regionalist shows every so often and congratulate among ourselves for the success are no longer enough. To increase a better discernment of contemporary Asian art these works have to be seen and appreciated regularly outside the region. Biennales have their shortcomings but the presence of Asian artists are essential for maximum international exposure.

Organization of international art exhibitions for Asian artists need to be formed in the near future. Finance and fund raising must be available for artists to apply when they are selected to represent Asia as the region. Transnational collaboration among art experts and "cultural sentinels" is an endeavor that must be achieved in order to properly reconsider the state of contemporary art in Asia.

Notes

¹ Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995)

² Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism (Decline of the Nation-State)," *Critical Inquiry* 19, Chicago, Summer 1993

³ Apinan Poshyananda, "Asian art in the Posthegemonic World," symposium paper printed in *The Potential of Asian Thought* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation ASEAN Cultural Center, 1994)

⁴ Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.21-38

⁵ John Clark, "Modern Asian Art: its construction and reception," paper presented at the symposium ""Asian Contemporary Art Reconsidered," The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo

⁶ See Timothy Morrell, "Cultural Crossfire: The Curatorial Travels of Apinan Poshyananda in Asia, America, and Australia," *Art Asia Pacific* Vol.3, No.4, 1996, pp.42-47. Eleanor Heartney, "Asia Now," *Art in America*, February 1997, pp.70-74. Alexandra Munro, "Contemporary Art in Asia," *Artforum*, Vol.35, No.8, April 1997, pp.86-87. Julie Ewington, "Pigs Might Fly," *Art Asia Pacific* No.15, pp.21-24. Alice Yang, "Brave New Faces," *Art Asia Pacific* No.15, pp.25-27.

⁷ See Nick Jose, "Over the Borders," *The Australian's Review of Books*, November 1996, pp.15-18.



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