

the Asia-Pacific. The Queensland Art Gallery's emphasis on contemporary art has come about because we have been convinced that a knowledge of the changing societies of our region underpins Australia's engagement with the region. The extensive funding for the project has largely come from the Queensland Art Gallery's own budget, and grants from the Australian and Queensland governments, but the exhibition is selected as an art exhibition and not as a formal Government exchange.

The First Triennial exhibition was held in 1993 and featured 200 art works by 76 artists from 13 countries. It was attended by 60,000 people. The Second Triennial exhibition held in 1996 to January 1997 had over 100 artists participating from 16 countries and 120,000 visitors. The success of the First Asia-Pacific Triennial was recognized by critics at the time. Australia "was ready," to use Apinan's term, for this project. My director has frequently said, "It was a project waiting to be done." Critical reaction to the Second Triennial has been equally positive.

Within Australia, the audience and media response has been quite extraordinary. In our country, there has been a reaction which recognizes that the Triennial has changed the way many Australians see the region through its contemporary art. That reaction, with attendance doubling in three years, is overwhelmingly positive. John McDonald, for example, a leading Australian art critic, wrote in the major Australian daily newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, of the 1996 Triennial: "It is a show to restore one's faith in contemporary art." Unlike the New York critics, I believe Australian critics have held back and admitted what they don't know about the art, not that I want to imply that critical reaction in Australia is perfect. But if anything, there has been a hesitancy to express opinions and to judge too fully and a willingness to listen to what artists and critics from the region say about their art.

The Triennial also builds on the knowledge and the experience of the growing number of Australians who have expertise in the region, yet it also acknowledges our lack of knowledge. Fundamental to the Triennial's philosophy is that it is an evolving project based on genuine partnerships between colleagues within the region. Over 40 curators from Australia and the participating countries in the region were involved in the selections for the 1996 exhibition, and 77 writers from the region wrote for the catalogue. When I quoted the statistics at a conference in Italy recently, this created quite an angry reaction from a New York-based critic. My immediate thought was, "Well who should write about the art of the region? Is it to be Australians? Is it to be New York art critics?" What we have tried to do in writing about the Triennial, at least as the project evolves and develops, is to admit that we have much to learn and to invite critics from the region to write about the art. In the same way, we have invited curators from the region to join us in selecting the art. I believe that we, together, have built a shared vision for the project. So the Asia-Pacific Triennial is a process as much as an exhibition, and the six years have certainly been an exciting voyage of discovery for the many Australians who have been involved in the project teams. We have certainly had to change our ideas along the way, and change direction many times. This is an enormous project,

intellectually and logistically the most demanding every undertaken at the Queensland Art Gallery, and possibly the most demanding ever undertaken in Australia. Unlike most international exhibitions of the Triennial type, such as the Venice Biennale, selections are not based on nations choosing representatives. The concept for the Triennial is to have Australian curators work with curators in each of the countries in a small team to select the works. The concept of the Triennial, through multiple curatorship, is partnership in selections. The aim is to break down cultural assumptions, and open up a genuine debate on the issues. But I will make the point that genuine partnership in curating is not always easy, but has been a very productive and worthwhile experience for all of those who have been engaged in the process. In emphasizing the teamwork and co-curatorship between selectors from different countries, I should make the point that the Australian art for the last exhibition was selected by a Thai scholar, Dr. Apinan Poshyananda. In each country, Australians work with experts in the art of that country, and if there is a contradiction in the selection for the Triennials, with an inevitable national focus, we have tried to resolve this by an emphasis on context and themes, rather than nations and national identity. The work is, for example, no longer displayed by countries, but the artists are scattered within the exhibition according to themes. In the end, it is the voice of the individual artist which is of fundamental significance. We place great emphasis on giving artists a major place in our conferences and education programs. For example, 56 artists attended the last Triennial, and all of them participated in the education programs. Artists today are global travelers and we have chosen to remain to a great extent within the bounds of physical geography. Within Australia there is a major international biennale, the Sydney Biennale, which deals with international art, so ours is a regionally-based exhibition. But nevertheless, the challenging issue of the exile and the expatriate, what I would call "the geography of the mind," has been faced in our selections and will be an issue in the 1999 selections.

I have always said that it would be impossible to predict the outcomes of a project such as the Triennial, and that is why it was so important to commit, at the beginning, to at least a 10-year project. But as I have said, the Triennials now will continue into the next century. And I would also stress that the publications, conferences and education programs associated with the exhibitions are essential to their success. That includes artists going to every city in Australia, to the countryside and even into schools, so that the impact of the Triennial is not limited to those who attend the exhibition. Several of our staff are also learning Asian languages. We are planning to complement future Triennials with further exhibitions of 20th-century Asian modernism. We are also developing an important collection of contemporary Asia-Pacific art, and an extensive library and arts research database. We are now working with Australian and international art institutions, including Japan, in documenting and researching aspects of the modern and contemporary art of the region. We are also setting up a new center for the study of Asia-Pacific modern and contemporary art so that scholars, within Australia and elsewhere, can use the Queensland Art Gallery as a base for their re-



searches into art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The Australian Triennial, of course, complements a growing interest in contemporary Asian art worldwide, and as other speakers have remarked, Asian artists are now included in world biennales. The pioneering Fukuoka Asian art exchanges, in particular Ushiroshoji Masahiro's The Fourth Asian Art Show ("Realism as an Attitude"), the Kwangju Biennale, the Tokyo-based exhibitions from the Japan Foundation, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, have been of great importance. Japan has been a leader. Also, significant exhibitions have been curated by other speakers here, such as Kwok Kian Chow's Singapore Art Museum exhibitions, as well as the exhibition curated by Apinan Poshyananda for the Asia Society and the work done by Vishakha N. Desai in developing a contemporary focus for that institution. Exciting possibilities are presented which, I hope, will be part of a discussion here today, for potential partnerships and shared projects between those institutions worldwide working in contemporary Asian art.

We have not adopted a single theme for either of the two previous Triennial exhibitions. The context, which Dr. Desai stressed, is extremely important. This is why I believe that the education programs, associated with our exhibition, are of fundamental importance. At this point, I think we have only brushed the surface of understanding the context of the art, so I would reinforce the remarks that she has made. For Australians, the concept of monolithic Asia disappeared with the First Triennial. We are all participants in the voyage of time and time can have many different meanings. We have accepted that contemporary art reflects the challenges of contemporary societies. As Australian-born critic Robert Hughes writes, "Art is rarely untouched by the deep currents moving in the society around it."

So while the Triennial has thus far had no constricting theme, many themes have emerged. Among these themes are identity, the place of tradition within rapidly changing societies, the issue of religion, ritual, mysticism and spirituality, the role of women, social and political concerns, migration and alienation, human sexuality and desire, the interior world of the mind, the urban transformation, and the worldwide problem of environmental degradation. But the Triennial has been particularly deeply affected by the strong and idealistic voices of the young committed to the concept of art as a means of shaping a better future.

While the Triennial has no one theme, it does have a thesis—that Euro-American-centric views are no longer appropriate in judging the art of this region. Australians have proved that they are willing to listen to what artists and critics from the region say about their art. The changing nature of the world at the end of the 20th century has certainly forced a new appraisal of the art of the region. But there is considerable evidence that what is happening in contemporary Asian and Pacific art is still not fully understood in the West. Recently visiting the Venice Biennale and Documenta, both very fine exhibitions, I was quite shocked to see how few Asian artists were included in those exhibitions. Cultural interaction is not always on terms of equality. Lingering historical and present tensions make the world an uneasy place and contemporary art continues to reflect those tensions.

Cultural interaction, however, is no new phenomena in the Asia-Pacific region and has taken place over the centuries. In Asian art, the span of ancient cultures may override later Western influences on the region, which may come to be seen in the future as relatively superficial in the context of history.

Artists today have to deal with a myriad of changes in making sense out of contemporary events. But what is very clear about the art that has come out of the Triennial exhibitions is a fundamental challenge to the concept of a universal global culture. It is a significant paradox, however, that while new national and regional local identities are at times being asserted, it is the artists' sophisticated knowledge of, engagement with, and sometimes rejection of, internationalism that has inspired some of the most interesting recent art.

The most consistent feature of the art of this region, in my opinion, is its rejection of a hierarchical internationalism in art. I would like to illustrate some of the points that I have been making by showing a few slides from the Triennial exhibitions. So if I could have the first slide, please.

I am beginning with two slides of Pacific art, although this forum is devoted to contemporary Asian art. Kathleen Petyarre is an Aboriginal artist whose work, *Mountain Devil Lizard* (fig.5), illustrates the very close connections between the land and culture in Aboriginal art, including body paints and decorations for the ceremonies and the spiritual ceremonies

In the 1996 Triennial, Michael and Anna Mel from Papua New Guinea returned to traditional culture with headdresses, body paint and performances (fig.6), but in fact with the intention of challenging our concept of what is contemporary art in a Pacific context. Michael Mel has been educated in Australia and has a Ph.D. Both of them wish to avoid the trap of non-Western art, codified by the West. Instead they seek to reveal a living and changing cultural tradition, challenging Western interpretations. I have found that it is the Pacific art which has raised some of the most challenging questions in the Triennial, as to what contemporary art is in a changing society.

So I now turn to the work of some Asian artists, both from the 1996 Triennial, Zhang Xiaogang's *Three Comrades* of 1994, which shows the loss of individuality in China and the idealization that occurred during the cultural revolution in the interests of ideology.

And Choi Jeong Hwa from Korea presented viewers with this huge synthetic tulip in *Super Flower Plastic Spring* to challenge the concepts of the real and invented or the natural and the man-made.

Wu Tien-Chang's work, *On the Damage to the 'Spring and Autumn Pavilion,'* I believe addresses the edgy uncertainties of Chinese culture in contemporary Taiwan.

And Cai Guo Qiang on this screen, *Dragon or Rainbow Serpent: A Myth Glorified or Feared*, was the preparatory drawing for an explosion which was to have occurred on the Brisbane River. That gun powder explosion could not go ahead, because of an accident at the gun powder factory, but Cai will be coming back to Australia to redo the explosion. This drawing, created by undertaking small explosions of gunpowder on paper, is the de-