

Asian Art by Women: Focusing on the 1990s

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While doing research in Beijing at the end of 1994 during a freezing cold winter, I heard from several women about an exhibition of women's art. At that time, the controls on speech and expression instituted by the government after Tiananmen Square protests were still in effect, and avant-garde artists were reduced to holding exhibitions for each other in private homes and other places out of the public eye. Because there were so few chances to see the work of progressive artists in open exhibitions, I was more than a little surprised to hear about this show. I well remember how excited those women were about this public exhibition of women's art. Their joy was a ray of sunshine in the cold city.

The exhibition they spoke of was the *Chinese Women's Artists Invitation Show* at the National Gallery of China, Beijing in September 1995. Another exhibition of women's art was presented concurrently at the World Trade Center in Beijing with work by women from 27 countries.¹ Both exhibitions were organized in conjunction with the fourth World Conference on Women that convened in Beijing that September. The political purpose of the exhibitions was to deflect international criticism of the Chinese government for its abuses of human rights, so the government was invested in the success of the conference and invited participants from around the world, including representatives of the United Nations and human rights organizations dealing specifically with women's rights. The *Chinese Women's Artists Invitation Show* was the first major event of its kind in China, successfully bringing together a large group of contemporary women artists in one place. In addition to Lin Tianmiao [p. 32], who is also included in the present exhibition, it featured such important artists as Xiang Jing and Jiang Jie, who are still making sculptures dealing with the female body.

This exhibition focuses on the 1990s, a period when women artists came into their own in Asia, becoming an important presence in terms of their numbers and the conceptual and esthetic quality of their work. The show is chiefly composed of artworks created in that decade as well as recent work by artists who were starting their careers or going through a major transition at the time. It also includes artworks that were created during the 1980s and formed the historical background for the work of the nineties.

In this essay, as one of the planners of the exhibition, I would like to discuss the factors, including social background and developments in women's art, that led us to concentrate on this period, giving my personal views on the necessity and purpose of the exhibition and describing our approach to selecting the artists and artworks. Please refer to the essay by Kokatsu Reiko in this catalogue for further discussion of the theme of the exhibition and how this show should be seen in relation to other domestic and international exhibitions with similar aims.

Let us begin by looking at art by Asian women in the 1970s and 1980s,² since it was roughly around this time that women artists in many countries began to consciously confront the reality of being a woman both physically and socially and seriously express their concerns in art.

In the time period we are dealing with, many of the Asian nations

were relatively young, having achieved independence in the wake of World War II. As a result, many artists were concerned with defining the cultural identity of their home countries as well as exploring their own individual identity and values as artists. At the same time, they were engaged in adapting international or universal styles and modes of expression to their own needs. They often chose the history, traditional culture, and symbolic landscapes of their own countries as themes and experimented with ways of combining this subject matter with international and universal forms of expression. An artist who exemplified this approach was Imelda Cajipe Endaya of the Philippines [p. 106], who is included in this exhibition. She took a strong interest in the historical and cultural identity of her country when she began her career in the 1970s.

As time went on, women artists began to deal more and more with the conditions of being a woman reflect this awareness in their art. This tendency became especially pronounced in the 1980s. In the 1970s, women artists had shown an interest in their own bodies and their experience of being stifled by the values and practices of a male-dominated society. In the 1980s, women began making art that strongly opposed discrimination and violence against women (including the effects of war and terrorism) and explored gender roles and the conditions of women's lives (including pregnancy and childbirth). Many women artists began attracting attention for working in new formats, such as installation and performance, and using techniques and materials conventionally associated with women, such as fiber, beads, and lace. The 1980s was also a time when women artists began to express themselves more forcefully with respect to social issues. Endaya, the artist I have already mentioned, continued to explore the history of the hybrid culture of the Philippines and Filipino identity but broadened the range of her concerns to include the issue of violence to all weaker members of society, including women and children, using familiar everyday materials.

Unfortunately, these new approaches were easily overlooked amid the larger trends that dominated the art world. In addition to a longstanding lack of interest in the modern art of Asia, it was common in the 1990s for people to react negatively or with insufficient understanding to gender-related art. In the art world, men were in charge of art museums, and for the most part, at least in Japan, they were not particularly interested in showcasing Asian women artists. In the early 2000s on, many more women curators were being trained and going to work for museums while at the same time there was a growing understanding of gender issues in society at large. As a result, exhibitions of women artists from Asia have been organized more frequently since then. See Kokatsu Reiko's essay for more information on this subject. Most of these exhibitions, however, have focused on current art rather than providing a historical perspective. In the present exhibition, we assess the achievements of women artists from a historical point of view while also examining contemporary work and looking to future possibilities. The Fukuoka Art Museum, and its successor, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, have dealt with contemporary Asian art since the end of the 1970s, but there has been an unfortunate lack of interest in women artists and insufficient opportunities to study their work. One reason for organizing this exhibition is to make up for this previous neglect. I believe there is an urgent need to reflect on the historical development of women's art in Asia in order to achieve a broader appreciation of women's art and how it has changed over time.³

In considering the factors behind the growing activity of women

artists, we need to look at the larger social changes involving women. In the early 1970s, women's liberation movements burgeoned around the world, leading to the United Nations' designation of 1975 as International Women's Year and the first World Conference on Women, which was organized that same year. In 1979-1981, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Children was adopted, signed, and promulgated with the purpose of creating complete equality between men and women. In many Asian countries, there was a growing effort to elevate the position of women and eliminate gender-based discrimination, and a number of exhibitions of women's art were organized in conjunction with the International Women's Year and the World Conference on Women. It is difficult to say how much these exhibitions helped to promote women's art, but they did provide valuable experience for women artists in countries where their opportunities were still quite limited during the 1970s and 1980s, giving them a greater ability to confront the meaning of being a woman as well as a chance to show their art.

I have already mentioned the fourth World Conference on Women, which was organized in China in 1995, the first such conference to be held in Asia. Asian women had not had a strong presence at the first conference, but they participated in the fourth conference in much larger numbers and spoke and acted with greater force.⁴ Their active participation demonstrated how much women in the countries and regions of Asia had become sensitized to women's issues over the preceding two decades. Statements made in the conference showed increased concern for the plight of women subject to discrimination and persecution under the deeply rooted patriarchal systems and religious values of premodern societies. It also became clear that development and economic growth promoted with foreign capital and aid had actually led to greater poverty and increased violence against women. A call was issued for "gender mainstreaming" in order to promote the elimination of gender differences in all government policies, measures, and projects. The kinds of issues raised in the fourth World Conference on Women have been observed with great sensitivity by Asian women in the actual context of society. A representative example is *Despoiled Shore* by Nalini Malani of India [p. 104], made during the Mumbai riots of 1993. This work embraces the themes treated by women artists up through the 1980s but also examines gender issues in relation to the history of colonialism, international economic disparities (as well as disparities between cities and rural regions); conflicts, violence, and inequality between religions, social classes, and ethnic communities; and the destruction of the natural environment. It reveals the imbalance in power relationships underlying these conditions. The 1990s saw an expansion of consciousness as well as brilliant handling of formal concerns in women's art, exemplified by Hanh Thi Pham's inquiries into the social position of immigrants, refugees, and homosexuals [p. 86] and Kimsooja's explorations of the geographical borders of art (paying attention to marginal art) [p. 126].

This exhibition takes a broad look at the ambitious work of Asian women artists dating back to the 1970s and its development in response to dramatic social changes, culminating in the mature expressions of the 1990s. I believe that this process led to an overall rise in the quality of women's art, establishing the position of women artists and expanding the number of venues where they could show their work. In selecting artists and artworks, we looked to artists who had responded sensitively to social change or helped elevate the position of women artists. That is, we sought out artists and artworks confronting a range of issues with strong awareness of gender, from a personal confrontation with

the conditions of being a woman to more general historical and social problems involving women. We also included artists like Arpita Singh of India [p. 60], whose work and personal example opened up new territory for women in society and in the art world, paving the way for the women artists who followed them.

This exhibition is composed of 111 works (204 pieces) by 50 artists from 16 Asian countries and regions that comprise most of the continent. It covers a historical span of over 30 years, from the 1980s (including film works by Idemitsu Mako from the 1970s) to the present. It is the first comprehensive touring exhibition to introduce the work of Asian women artists in Japan. Unfortunately, some artists occupying a leading position in their country or region could not be included because of limitations on transportation costs or the unavailability of works that could be exhibited. Also, because we gave priority to artists with little previous exposure in Japan, we decided to omit some important artists like Lee Bul, who has had numerous solo shows here plus a major retrospective at the Mori Art Museum in 2012. The fact that this show could be put together in spite of these exceptions shows the depth and strength of the women artists working in Asia. India in particular boasts a large number of exceptional women artists, and it would be possible to organize an exhibition of the same size devoted entirely to women artists from that country.

In Chapter 5, we introduce a number of younger artists who may not fit neatly into the conventional conception of a woman artist and artworks that are not primarily concerned with the theme of gender.

Our purpose here is to show the diversity of views and types of expression produced by women artists, which cannot be forced into a single mold. In order to create a comprehensive exhibition, we felt that it was necessary to present the varied expressions of women in all their multiplicity while calling attention to major trends, although this relativizing approach runs the risk of blurring the focus of the exhibition.

In the past, women artists have had fewer opportunities than men for receiving professional art training and fewer venues for showing their work due to the influence of religious or patriarchal values. In light of this situation, we wanted to examine the future prospects of younger artists who live in a world where values are diversifying in spite of the continuing existence of some restrictions and are pursuing careers that are less encumbered by the limitations of the past. I believe the work of these younger artists will give us a meaningful glimpse into the future of women artists in Asia.

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(translated by Stanley Nelson Anderson)

¹ On the exhibition at the World Trade Center in Beijing, where 880 works by women artists from 27 countries were exhibited, see the website below. http://nmwa.org/sites/default/files/shared/4.3.4.2-global_focus_collection.pdf

² On women artists in Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, see Rawanchaikul Toshiko, "Josei sakkatachi no Ajia – 70 nendai kara 80 nendai no sakuhin wo chushin ni" [Asia of women artists – focusing on works from the 1970s to the 1980s], *20 seiki no josei bijutsuka to shikaku hyosho no chosa kenkyu – Ajia ni okeru senso to diasupora no kioku (kiban kenkyu B)* [Study on Women Artists in the 20th Century and their Visual Representations – Memories of War and Diaspora in Asia (basic Study B)], report issued by Institute of Japanese Studies, Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, 2011, pp. 99-108. I drew heavily on this article in writing this essay.

³ An early example of such exhibitions in Asia was *text & subtext, International Contemporary Asian Women Artists Exhibition*, Earl Lu Gallery, Lasalle-SIA College of Arts, Singapore, 2000. This exhibition presented the work of 22 women artists from ten countries.

⁴ Matsui Yayori, *Onnatachi ga tsukuru Ajia* [The Asia created by women], Iwanami Shinsho, no. 462, 1996, p. 2. I referred to this book for information on the International Women's Year and the World Conference on Women.