

Living on the Border, Facing a Dilemma

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Asian society has recently undergone a series of drastic changes, and likewise women's living conditions in these societies. In this exhibition, we not only examine the lives of female artists based in Asia but also female artists who, for a variety of reasons, have left their home countries, and the countless works these women have distilled from their lives over the last approximately 30 years. Though the exhibition, organized by five Japanese curators, is rooted in a selective view from the present, it is an attempt to locate the role of Asian women artists in history, and to relativize a male- and Western-centric focus. At the same time, we have tried to shed light on pressing issues that confront everyone, regardless of their gender. While two of the curators, Kokatsu Reiko and Rawanchaikul Toshiko, have undertaken a comprehensive discussion containing detailed information on the exhibition and outlining trends inside and outside Asia, in this essay, I would like to offer my personal views of the works on display and their significance.

In 1984, Imelda Cajipe Endaya made the work *Land of Golgotha* [p. 106] in the Philippines. One year earlier Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr., the most vocal opponent of the Marcos regime, was assassinated at Manila International Airport, which had fallen under the tight control of the army. His widow, Corazon Aquino, was later sworn in as Asia's first female president on the back of the EDSA Revolution in which close to one million citizens were roused to action. Clad in yellow, the sight of Aquino forming an "L" with her fingers and holding her hand high in the air remains an indelible memory. It was perhaps at this moment, prompted by the earth-shaking actions of this vast number of people, that marked the start of a new era for Asian women.¹ Not long after, Aung San Suu Kyi spoke to large crowds of people in Burma (now, Myanmar), and spurred the 8888 Uprising, which became a symbol of conditions in the country; and 35-year-old Benazir Bhutto was sworn in as the first female prime minister of an Islamic nation (Pakistan).

Starting with *Land of Golgotha*, which exudes an air of this era, the exhibition consists of works from throughout Asia.² And with a total of 111 works (204 pieces), it represents the largest collection of work by Asian women artists ever shown in Japan. Moreover, 63 of the works are part of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum collection. Thus, in tracing currents since the 80s through the works on display, it is also possible to follow the evolution of this facility from its origins in the Fukuoka Art Museum. After opening in 1979, the Fukuoka Art Museum launched the Asian Art Show, which was held on four occasions once every five years, and by acquiring works from these exhibitions, the museum was able to build up a substantial collection of Asian art. This policy was then adopted by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, established to

house the collection, which since it opened in 1999 has attempted to reexamine Asian art from many different perspectives in events like the *Fukuoka Triennale*. At the outset, however, the number of works by female artists in the collection was extremely small. In addition, in the first triennale, which focused on current conditions in Asia, only one-fifth of the participants were female (ten out of 55 people), and even in the second event, which saw a substantial increase, only 14 out of 37 were women.³ Though further research into the social conditions surrounding female artists in each country and region was warranted, these figures suggest that the museum failed to focus enough on women in its attempts to reexamine Asian art in a multifaceted manner. In that sense, this historical retrospective of female artists, both within and without Asia, carries a great deal of significance.

In visiting Asia, it quickly becomes evident that women artists are ever bit the equal of male artists. And in recent years, the number of female artists is also comparable to that of male artists. In preparation for this exhibition, I visited the Indian cities of Mumbai, Bangalore, and Delhi to conduct a survey of female artists who had already achieved a certain amount in their careers on both a domestic and an international level. I was deeply impressed by the concepts, the formal intensity, and the diversity of expressive means and themes in their work. Though there are five Indian artists in the exhibition, this is still not enough to accurately convey the depth and breadth of the work made by women in the country. Unfortunately, it is logistically impossible to present any more Indian artists. But this is more or less the case with the other countries too, and due to shipping costs and space constraints, we were unable to include work by contemporary artists such as Agnes Arellano of the Philippines and Suzann Victor of Singapore, both of whom are notable figures in their respective homelands. Although we are only able to introduce a handful of artists in the exhibition, all of the works by the 50 participants reflect urgent issues facing Asian women and the diverse lifestyles they have adopted to deal with them. Further, we as curators have made every effort to create an exhibition that does not undermine this sense of diversity.

The five sections in the exhibition represent a wide range of interests and various aspects of the artists' work, but here I would like to discuss the significance of the show by looking at the fifth and final section, which contains many younger artists, and the work of Yamashiro Chikako.

As Kokatsu Reiko writes in her essay, the Indian artist Shilpa Gupta (whose work appears in the fifth chapter) was not especially keen on participating in an exhibition that is tied to the theme of "women."⁴

Similarly, it is difficult, on the surface at least, to view the work of the Bangladeshi artist Niloofer Chaman in terms of an inherently female perspective. Perhaps the inclusion of a younger generation of artists with such ambiguous characteristics in an exhibition of this type, which contains only female artists and is in part founded on the theme of gender, threatens to obscure our original intent. But if exhibitions as a whole are a kind of authoritarian system that revolves around the organizers in order to faithfully reproduce specific intentions, it seems appropriate for us to deliberately deal with artists that do not quite fit in—as this exhibition is meant to focus on the decentralization and diversification that lie “in between.” Moreover, while remaining aware of a variety of gaps, including generational differences, another objective of this exhibition is to fill in the gaps, and share and inherit experiences and values. Asian women’s living conditions are undergoing drastic changes. And in light of this situation, dealing with the changing awareness of gender issues is another important function of this exhibition. In addition, younger artists are inevitably faced with the problem of how to inherit past experiences and memories that they are not personally involved with.

This calls to mind Yamashiro Chikako’s video work *Your voice came out through my throat* [p. 113]. The work begins with a closeup of Yamashiro’s face. From her mouth comes a stream of memories related to the death of Japanese people on the island of Saipan. But the voice is that of an elderly man and Yamashiro simply repeats the same story. Then after a while, tears begin to roll down her cheeks, seemingly in sync with the man’s sorrowful memories. Not only is Yamashiro listening to the story, but by vibrating her vocal cords she physically relives the man’s experience and thus keenly conveys her fervent desire to capture it inside of her. But there also seems to be a completely different emotion mixed in with Yamashiro’s tears. This is related to the sense of sadness and regret that younger people without any experience of the war feel because they cannot understand the import of the man’s words as well as the dilemma of being caught between one’s self and others, and the past and present. In some part of her conscious, Yamashiro perceives this and cannot help but try to respond.⁵ But this dilemma is perhaps the fate of those who live in between—and something that is best manifested in Okinawa, the place where Yamashiro was born and raised, and the geopolitical border between Japan and the rest of Asia.

After Fukuoka, Tochigi, and Mie, this exhibition will travel to the Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum. Three of the participants are from Okinawa, which is extremely significant in light of the issues discussed above. How have the artists determined their position and decided how to express themselves within the wider context of Asia? It is also intriguing to consider how the people of Okinawa will respond to the works by these Asian women artists.

In closing, I would like to mention a project by Wu Mali whom we were unable to include in this exhibition. A pioneering female artist in her native Taiwan, Wu took part in *The 3rd Fukuoka Triennale* in 2005, and organized a regional exchange project called *Kuroshio Part I* in the fishing village of Shikanoshima. The project, originally titled *Republic of Kuroshio: His story has become our stories*, focused on the power of the Black Current (*Kuroshio*), which flows from the distant south of Fukuoka and crosses the borders of several countries, and the extensive marine biosphere that is linked by the sea. At the time, Wu remarked that we tend to think too much in terms of land. And from this landlocked perspective, the sea seems to be little more than a borderline to

mark off territories. This in turn has led to a history in which people and countries that are divided and connected by the sea have succumbed to an adversarial relationship in regard to territorial rights. Which explains why Wu set out to reverse such ideas, reconsider the world with the sea as its center, and propose a symbiotic relationship between people, all of whom are linked by the sea (border).

Though this exhibition focuses on women living in between, life on a border not only signifies dwelling between two places, it also suggests the need to confront a type of dilemma. Yet, this is not the same kind of dilemma faced by someone who occupies a superior position and who is free to wield power as they see fit. As Wu suggested in her project, it is instead the dilemma of those who attempt to relativize a multitude of values without simply judging them in terms of right and wrong, and who attempt to live with contradiction. And it is this way of living, feeling, and thinking that provides the type of strength and flexibility necessary to survive in society in the future.

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(translated by Christopher Stephens)

¹ The “L” stood for the Tagalog word “*laban*” (or fight).

² Though the video works by Idemitsu Mako that are being screened during the exhibition were produced in the 1970s, *Land of Golgotha* is the earliest of the standing works in the main display area. The exhibition also includes several works produced outside Asia.

³ The artists who took part both in the *Fukuoka Triennale* and the present exhibition include Amanda Heng and Navjot Altaf (first event); and Aisha Khalid, Ashmina Ranjit, Pinaree Sanpitak, Lin Tianmiao, Yin Xiuzhen, and Song Hyun Sook (second event).

⁴ See footnote 36 on p. 21.

⁵ In regard to this point, Watanabe Shinya also stresses the difficulty of inheriting experience: “I haven’t digested your experiences; they have only gone down my throat.”