

Syncretic Art and New Avatars



Art writer **Dr. Vaishali Sharma** reviews 'The Tradition of the New,' the group exhibition featuring nine artists from across Asia, curated by writer and museum manager, Andre Lee, at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, recently.

Generally speaking, art begins in the society and ends in it, but when a truly authentic artist is at work, it begins in society, pauses in him, and then ends in society. It is for the truly authentic artist to change and transform what society offers him and then create new tastes and values of artistic production and appreciation. But only those ideas and works which stimulate to proselytise would be more likely to survive and become popular than the ones which did not elicit such activity. The highly individualistic artistic styles can, therefore, be the cultural cognitive maps, reflecting not merely the available materials and techniques but socio-cultural situations at a given time. Taiwanese Curator Andre Lee has attempted to filter such potential geniuses for the recent show, 'The Tradition of the New,' held at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai.

It is, however, seen that such geniuses have not been always appreciated in their own times. In 1959, the US critic Harold Rosenberg published an essay titled, 'Tradition of the New,' to argue in support of a new form of artistic expression in American painting, Action Painting, which then became a favoured alternative to Abstract Expressionism. However, what was new and less acceptable fifty years back is now seen as a classic in modern art history.

In 21st Century, canvasses are largely replaced by the new arena of digital, analogue, electronic and mechanical assemblages. The art forms and styles of young generation, who grew up surrounded by technology, are reflective of this change. But the so-called new media art is still new to the market and to the generation who have grown up understanding art as painting. It is in this context that Andre has borrowed the title from Harold to argue in support of the 'new art.' He further argues that 'in a truly outstanding work of art new and traditional are just different sides of the same coin.'

The exhibited works of nine young artists, (all of them below 40 years of age) hailing from Iran, Turkey, Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan and India, were the expressions of their national identities and the art styles representative of their respective cultural complexities.

Iranian photojournalist Newsha Tavakolian's sublime photographic documentation of 'Jashne Taklif, The Day I Become a Woman,' was glimpses into the hermetic world of Iranian girls celebrating the coming of age. Though the work was drawn in the orbit of Islamic culture, yet

Newsha's choice of theme, the subject matter, and the revealing of interpersonal relationships, were presumably governed by Margaret Mead's anthropology and thereby, opened a vast interpretative horizon. The significant photograph wherein an angel, wearing the official chador and pink wings on her shoulder, shown walking in the mystically charged backyard, was apparent of the poetics ruling the captured moments in her work.

In Noriko Yamaguchi's works, one could see an astounding interplay of human experience, culture and technology. In the stimulating video, 'Peppermint Girl,' the sexually charged examination of Noriko's figure from eye to the erogenous zones by animated peppermint chewing gums, moving and quivering like worms, was enthralling. After watching the eerie metamorphoses enacted by Noriko, one is bound to ponder, was that the futuristic vision/version of the coming of age?

In 'Ketai Girl,' Noriko camouflaged herself with a skin tight techno-garb implanted with cell phones, wires and a pair of headphones and face covered with Butoh (a traditional white powdery make up) to show a futuristic image of a human body as "walking and talking cellular device." Ketai Girl appeared like a personification of Japan's mobile revolutionary age where people are connected but yearning for physical communication, ironically reminding of "Informational Black Hole" - a 300-year-long phase of isolation when Japan was yearning for communication with the outside world.

It was only after 1868 that her frontiers were opened to voraciously imbibe Western culture, art and technology, but the desire to keep rooted remained in the form of spiritual traditions like, pulling down and rebuilding of Ise Shrine, a center of Shintoism, after every 20 years as way of passing the building techniques from one generation to the next to ensure that this sacred place will stand till eternity. Noriko's transfiguration in new age goddesses through reconstruction of a second skin and its replacement with new materials in each work might have elicited from such traditions of Shinto, even though its significance have transgressed from the sacred to the erotic. Is Noriko camouflaging herself to continue her assertive tradition to eternity? Whatsoever, she lures us to witness it!

Another artist who provocatively represented the issues of female identity was Lale Tara (Turkish), whose truly Eurasian works especially, 'Madonna Con Bambino,' needs a special mention here. Lale re-examined the 15th Century mode of representation of this classical European motif from a new perspective. The juxtaposition of a sex doll with child and an old abandoned church setting not only blurred the boundaries of dualities like, sacred/secular, ludicrous/tender, fantasy/fetishism, and beauty/destruction, but also the vulnerable space created in it successfully confronted the new dynamics of social positioning of women and the struggle between identity and commodity. The luminance

on the images resembling the dramatic lighting of Baroque reinforced the alternative realities and heightened the potential grandeur.

Jompet Kuswidananto's installation, 'Long March to Java,' appeared like a techno-age Wayang Kulit (the theater of shadow puppetry) performing the same function as in ancient time-storytelling. The group of eerie zombies suspended on strings like puppets, wearing the uniform of the Royal Javanese army, was resuscitated from a medieval oblivion for telling the story of the 18th Century Javanese Kingdom when Dutch colonisation deterred Java soldiers from their military function. Their existence only served a symbolic prominence, suggesting a strategy of syncretism, a defensive mechanism to reconcile and negotiate contradictory beliefs and cultures. Jompet's installation had a bee in its bonnet about Javanese syncretism. The man lashing the whip on drum in a video positioned as face of the phantom being synchronised with the sound of the beating of drums, set the atmosphere of the drama. Even after exhaustive experience of Javanese culture in Jompet's work, it was hard to ignore the resemblance with Damian Ortega's works. They both employ strings for suspending the assemblages in midair, although the difference in purpose is evident and hidden in their countries' ideologies.

Taiwan, an epitome of economic miracle, is one of the four Asian Tigers, but lingering behind this facade is a gray cloud of political ambiguity and an uncertain historical identity. The resulting sentiments were implicit in the works of Taiwanese artists. One of the most critical works on display was 'Bu Num Civilisation Archeological Site,' by Tu Wei-Cheng. The installation seemed like a promo of an extensive project while it was appropriated to the institutional seriousness of anthropological displays. The fake remains of the fictitious Bu Num civilisation comprised of stone slabs, Aztec-like sculptures, prints, photographs of excavation site, and a documentary about the civilisation by historians and archeologists. Upon a closer inspection of the tableau, it was revealed that instead of expected figurines of man and beasts akin to ancient cultures, the engravings were iconic of the modern technological products like, keyboards, virtual dolls, electric sockets, and graphic icons of computer, found in contemporary culture, and additionally blended symbols from heterogeneous cultures. The fact that these modern technological products are pride and economic blood of Taiwan somehow stamped the 'Made in Taiwan' tag on Tu's simulation model, thereby folding the proactive complex cultural construct with immediate connotations of commodity. Recall that in Genesis, the wearing of clothes is distinctly associated with the loss of innocence!

An awe-inspiring mythology of Bu Num Civilisation was a story of dream and death. The dead that appears in dream always seems real; according to anthropologist Edward Tylor, this speculation gave birth to the earliest form of religion: animism, a belief in soul. Does Tu's belief in Bu Num Civilisation, with its analogy to the symbols like dream and death, make it a

new religion? Or, does its precise simulation of social reality and its appropriation to the ancient and at same time to the future by utilising strategic art as a device makes it a new science? But one thing is obvious, that it's re-defining of the concepts of art production, curation, conservation and consumption, makes it a new tradition in contemporary art.

In one dim room of the gallery behind the black curtain, a moving mystical landscape projected on the wall pronounced the brilliance of the artist's quirky mind. Wu chi-Tsung's simple yet influential technological installation, 'Wire IV,' comprised of metal plates, lens and motor. The image simulating an ink landscape was actually created by projecting a wire mesh through changing focus ('focusing, being in-focus, losing focus and complete lack of clarity'). Even after decoding the source of its origin, the lyricism persisted. In fact, it was fascinating to realise that the progressively unfolding image forms provided more intimacy and immediacy than its original object form. The optical illusion developed a new relationship between object and image whose unified character challenged the traditional image making and the instigation of automation declared its future. It was machine and art at its best!

The appealingness of Tsai Charwei's image, 'Sea Mantra,' lied in a precise use of metaphors for the evocation of Buddhist tenets- impermanence and change, which could be understood by the audience even without deciphering the meaning of the text written in orient calligraphy.

Taiwanese artist Kuo-I-Chen's 'Lost Contact,' a single-channel video installed in another dim room, was low on its technical capabilities and imagination. A prolonged video sequence with the familiar crackle and hum of white noise and the receding city views reminding the familiar Google Earth™, lost contact with its audience.

The image of a marching and saluting hysterical woman, dressed in white clothes with dangling sleeves, carrying a flagpole shoved in pajama, gave an eerie feeling when it occurred to the mind that the shamanistic evoking ongoing in Jompet's installation next room might have resuscitated another phantom spirit. Indian artist Shilpa Gupta's set of three large photographs, 'Half Widows,' as a metaphor of lunatic Kashmir valley impregnated with violence and pain, was a tribute to women whose husbands went missing in Kashmir violence but technically the work was not up to par and emasculated its sensitivity. Since Shilpa have already proved her excellence in visually vocalising this socio-political issue through the installation of sensitive and surreal video projections under the same title back in 2008, the disappointment with the displayed work could only be attributed to the curator's folly in the selection of her work.

Another curiosity that kept tickling over was about the exclusion of Korean artists from the comprehensive Asian sample, especially in view of the fact that Korea (Korean Avant-Garde

Association, formed in 1969) was one of the first two countries to start working in these 'new' techniques and was an important centre for its diffusion in Asia; the probability of filtering one hidden gem also becomes high in this case. Was this biasness, then, an undertone of the persisting Taiwanese love-hate relation with Korea even after the popularity of Hanliu phenomenon?

But of course, such loose ends are literally too minuscule to take anything away from a largely satisfying venture. Though the participating artists have long been identified and valued internationally and at home, the curatorial intervention, in coalescing them together, helped in creating a broader consciousness of the kind of artistic frameworks which the contemporary young Asian artists are working within.

All the exhibited works were created at the interface between technology, art and culture with refreshing and engaging modes of expression which further expanded the possibilities of their medium. The works of Noriko Yamaguchi, Wu Chi-Tsung and Tu Wei-Cheng stood out as notably important cultural translators and visual conversationalists; most relevant to the exhibition. Transdisciplinarity and syncretism brought forth by artistic intellectual mobility raises many interesting questions about the mythology of creation and observation, opening up a panorama of art that occasionally transgresses the borders of our understanding of art. Their syncretic art, so as to say in Belting's words, was 'post-historic and post-ethnic art,' that had a potential to affect the global discourses of contemporary art. The works raised the inquisitive glee common to science museum than art shows.

Thus, it could be concluded that the thematic cohesion succeeded in its aim of dissemination of information about new array of profound ideas and expressions that are thriving to create their own traditions that must be accommodated and expanded. Coalescence of futuristic visions of these few avatars was a much needed antidote to the apathy of recession-struck art scenario.

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