



Asia  
Society®

14 April – 16 September 2012

Texas Center

# CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART: TEXAS CONNECTIONS

*Contemporary Asian Art: Texas Connections* brings together thirteen Asian and Asian American artists who have lived in Texas or whose work is held in private or public collections in the state. They represent diverse Asian countries including China, India, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Thailand, and Vietnam, as well as the United States. Some of the artists reflect on their experiences as immigrants, addressing their split cultural identities and the interaction of Eastern and Western cultures. Others pose questions about history, gender, and the meaning of artistic forms. Although each artist has a distinct style and presents his or her own background and interests in the work, my hope is that the exhibition will reveal the multi-layered network of connections among their

varied geographies, artistic practices, materials, and concerns. This exhibition celebrates the insights of Texas collectors and the treasures of contemporary pan-Asian art in our state. In keeping with the Asia Society Texas Center's mission of fostering exchange, encouraging creative expression, and promoting dialogue between cultures and nations, it is my goal for *Contemporary Asian Art: Texas Connections* to emphasize the relationships formed among the artists and art works on view.

*Kimberly Davenport*

*Director, Rice University Art Gallery*

*Guest Curator, Contemporary Asian Art: Texas Connections*

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Art works are listed in order as seen entering and moving clockwise through the Faye Sarofim Grand Hall (First Floor, Asia Society Texas Center). The last three works, by Mel Chin, Dinh Q. Le and Rirkrit Tiravanija, are located in the North gallery to the right of the front entrance (prior to reaching the café).

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*Contemporary Art: Texas Connections* is curated by Kimberly Davenport, Director, Rice University Art Gallery.

Entries are contributed by Katia Zavistovski, doctoral candidate, Department of Art History, Rice University.

We wish to express our gratitude to the artists and lenders, and to thank the following for their special assistance in this project: Anya Tish, Annette Carozzi, Mel Chin, Jeanne Chvosta, Matthew Droege, Melisa Durkee, Steven Evans, Thomas Feulmer, Joshua Fischer, Wendy Griffiths, Angela Guiberteau, Amy Henry, Amy E. Hofland, Christine Medina, Robyn Molen, Kelly O'Connor, Marla Price, Katie Rashid, Nina Schwarz, Junko Shimada, Leigh Smith, Jeremy Strick, Susanne Tatum, Anne Wilkes Tucker, Maggie Williams, and Del Zogg.

This exhibition is made possible through the generous support of Nancy C. Allen, with additional assistance provided by Bebe Wooley.



**Yoshitomo Nara** (b. 1959 Hirosaki, Japan)  
***Little Thinker, 2000***  
acrylic on canvas  
Collection of Leigh and Reggie Smith

Artist Yoshitomo Nara emerged onto the art scene with the Japanese Neo Pop art movement in the 1990s. Among Nara's influences are childhood, Japanese anime, and manga comic books, which is evident in his sculptures and paintings of children and animals that are depicted in a stylized, cartoon-like manner. Although Nara explores cute and playful subjects such as schoolchildren and puppies, they are often shown in a menacing, surreal light – many of them wield tiny knives or express latent anger in their sidelong glances. Though such violence is not apparent in *Little Thinker*, the painting is still indicative of the artist's style. It is a portrait of a child with a large, bulbous head; painted in muted hues and against a blank background, the figure's closed eyes and pursed lips lend an intriguing atmosphere to the picture. *Little Thinker* provokes ambiguous and even conflicting feelings, ranging from childhood nostalgia and calm to disquiet and befuddlement.

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**Yoshitomo Nara** (b. 1959 Hirosaki, Japan)  
***Quiet, Quiet, 1999***  
fiberglass, resin, wood, and lacquer  
Collection of Leigh and Reggie Smith

*Quiet, Quiet* is a sculpture made of fiberglass, resin, and wood, which is then finished with pristine coats of lacquer. In this sculpture, a tower of two disembodied heads that appear to be part monkey, part human child, sit in a three-foot-wide teacup that is tinted light sea-foam green. The sculpture is whimsical and fantastical, perhaps recalling scenes from the tea party in *Alice in Wonderland*, but it is also troubling – the heads are precariously stacked and bear expressions of sadness or vulnerability. At first glance, *Quiet, Quiet* may make us smile, but it leaves us pondering what lies beneath the surface of the work.

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**Simeen Ishaque Farhat** (b. 1964 Karachi, Pakistan)  
***Ablaze, 2011***  
acrylic on cast urethane resin  
Courtesy of Tudor, Pickering, Holt & Co.

Pakistani artist Simeen Ishaque Farhat's installations and sculptures combine the visual with the verbal. Her *Speech Bubbles* series of wall-mounted sculptures features calligraphic script that is cast out of urethane resin. The text that Farhat articulates in work such as *Ablaze*, which is part of the *Speech Bubbles* project, is appropriated from famous Farsi and Urdu poems written by authors such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mirza Ghalib. Notably, these revolutionary writers address the controversial subjects of human struggle, freedom of thought and expression in their work. Tangled in a knot of bright yellow, swirling shapes, the Urdu words that comprise *Ablaze* become intertwined and difficult to read, appearing more like abstract forms than language. In addition, the shadows cast on Farhat's *Ablaze* leave viewers pondering the linguistic and visual power of her work.



**Huang Yan** (b. 1966 Jilin, China)  
***Chinese Shang Shui Tattoo No. 6-2 Series, 1999***  
c-print  
Courtesy of the Chaney Family Collection

Chinese artist Huang Yan is celebrated for his artistic practice that merges painting, photography, and performance art. Yan believes that the most authentic representation of the philosophy of the ancient Chinese literati is the classical landscape. In his signature work, Yan transposes this traditional art form onto the human body – often his own. In *Chinese Shang Shui Tattoo No. 6-2 Series*, for example, the body serves as the artist's canvas. This life-size photograph portrays a figure's torso and arms that are bent at the elbows. A scene depicting mountains is painted onto his chest, and trees crawl up his forearms. Yan calls attention to the material of the paint and of the body – details such as a meditating figure and a cabin are visible, as are tiny wrinkles in the skin upon which the scene is painted. Employing the genres of portraiture and traditional Chinese landscape painting, while also referencing tattoo practices and performance art, whose primary medium is the body, Yan brings traditional Chinese culture in contact with the contemporary global world.

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**Siah Armajani** (b. 1939 Tehran, Iran)  
***Dictionary for Building: Door in Window #2, 1982-1983***  
painted wood, Plexiglas, and screen  
Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection,  
Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas

Siah Armajani is an Iranian-born sculptor and architect widely celebrated for installations and public artworks that combine functional architecture and references to American poetry and history. In *Dictionary for Building*, a series of works that Armajani began in 1979, he deconstructs building elements such as doors, windows, stairs, and tables. *Dictionary for Building: Door in Window #2*, a work from this series, consists of two black, hinged doors that open to support one another as a single, freestanding sculpture. On the right is a screened door, while the one on the left is a solid door with a long oval window. The window's oval shape has been enlarged and repeated behind the door as a kind of frame – a door in a window. Armajani calls attention to the beauty of the basic architectural elements we encounter in everyday life, while at the same time leaving us to contemplate the nature of these portals.

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**Shao Fan** (b. 1964 Beijing, China)  
***project no. 1 of 2004 chair, 2004***  
elm wood and acrylic  
From the collection of Leticia Loya

In addition to being a painter and sculptor, Beijing-based artist Shao Fan is also a familiar name in the contemporary Chinese design industry. Fan is best known for taking apart and redesigning ancient Chinese furniture. In his reconstructive furniture sculptures, he combines traditional Chinese materials and techniques with contemporary design practices that utilize an aesthetic of clean, geometric lines. By deconstructing antique furniture and integrating modern materials and design, Fan communicates the significant cultural changes that he perceives China undergoing today. In *project no. 1 of 2004 chair*, for example, he deconstructs a chair derived from the Ming Dynasty. Although fragmented, each element of the antique chair is held in place by thick sheets of clear plastic. As a result, the basic structure of the Chinese antiquity remains visible, but each piece seems to catapult into space. While suggesting nostalgia for the past, *project no. 1 of 2004 chair* also expresses a dynamic move into the future.



**Yasumasa Morimura** (b. 1951 Osaka, Japan)  
***Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Marlene Dietrich 1*, 1996**  
ilfochrome print on acrylic sheet  
The Rachofsky Collection

Yasumasa Morimura is a Japanese artist whose photographs and performances appropriate famous images derived from popular culture and art history to create both humorous and unsettling self-portraits. Through the extensive use of costumes, make-up, props, and digital manipulation, Morimura transforms himself into the subjects of art historical masterpieces, political figures, and celebrities. *Self-Portrait (Actress) / After Marlene Dietrich 1* is part of Morimura's series that is based on Hollywood film stars. The photograph represents Morimura dressed up like Marlene Dietrich in her role as the cabaret singer Lola Lola from the 1930 film *The Blue Angel*, which brought Dietrich to fame. Copying the publicity photo from the film, Morimura portrays himself in a glamorous and playful pose seated on top of a wooden barrel and wearing a wig, dress, stockings, and heels. In his self-portrait photographs, Morimura both pays homage to these iconic figures and challenges the idea of celebrity.

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**Priya Kambli** (b. 1975 Mumbai, India)  
***Me (Flour)*, 2009**  
inkjet print, edition 1/10  
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Purchase with funds provided by Photo Forum 2010

Born in India, Priya Kambli moved to the United States at the age of eighteen. Her photographs are informed by her experience as an immigrant and reflect both her childhood memories growing up in India and her current life in America. Referencing her split cultural identity, *Me (Flour)* depicts two separate images that the artist has arranged in a carefully balanced composition to create a single photograph. The image on the right portrays a fragile cone of flour, while the one on the left shows a kneeling woman whose dress has a floral pattern that is also made of flour. The flour drawings, which recall Indian prints, are based on a traditional folk art called "Rangolis." Rangolis are decorative designs that are made on floors and courtyards during Hindu festivals. They are made using materials such as sand, rice, or flour, and are meant to welcome sacred Hindu deities. In *Me (Flour)*, Kambli addresses the idea of displacement by drawing our attention to the delicate quality of the flour that can easily blow away.

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**Surasi Kusolwong** (b. 1965 Ayutthaya, Thailand)  
***Small is Beautiful (Gold Floating Market)*, 2002**  
inkjet print on plywood, plastic objects, and twine  
Courtesy of the Linda Pace Foundation

Surasi Kusolwong is a Bangkok-based artist whose work addresses consumer society and the economic market. His performances and large-scale installations recreate market environments in museum or gallery settings, ironically juxtaposing the concept of the street market with the idea of the art market. In Kusolwong's temporary installations, the event of buying and selling becomes an interactive public art performance. For example, in his ongoing *Market* project, which he began in 1999, he invites visitors to purchase a variety of inexpensive, mass-manufactured items such as plastic utensils and toys that he sells inside the exhibition space. Kusolwong's *Small is Beautiful (Gold Floating Market)* is a photograph of a typical Thai floating market, on which many of his performances and installation projects are loosely based. Kusolwong's artistic practice highlights the relationship between people, art, and consumer products, and he emphasizes social interaction and audience participation rather than economic exchange.



**Shahzia Sikander** (b. 1969, Lahore, Pakistan)  
***Hohlraum*, 2011**  
ink, gouache and graphite on prepared paper  
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

Shahzia Sikander is internationally recognized for her paintings, drawings, and watercolors that challenge stereotypes of culture, gender, and religion. Her densely layered and intricately detailed compositions combine the style of traditional Persian and Indian miniature painting with images from contemporary western culture. *Hohlraum* illustrates a wide variety of figural, abstract, and textual forms. Translating to “hollow chamber” in German, “hohlraum” is a scientific term that references a state of equilibrium in radiation thermodynamics. In Sikander’s *Hohlraum*, delicate drawings of animals including a mouse, an eagle, and an upside-down deer share the same space as human arms and legs, a wheel, what appears to be a fountain or a vase in the center of the image, and a large green grenade on the right side of the picture. In addition, calligraphic text and confetti-like shapes cover the composition. Both festive and explosive, Sikander’s multilayered drawing resists any simple interpretation. In 1995-1997, Shahzia Sikander was a Core Fellow at the Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Art, Houston

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**Yayoi Kusama** (b. 1929 Matsumoto-shi, Japan)  
***Nets Obsession TTS*, 2002**  
acrylic on canvas  
Courtesy of Nina and Michael Zilkha

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama is internationally recognized for her large and diverse body of work, which includes painting, soft sculpture, collage, environmental installations, and performance art. Although she employs a wide variety of artistic media and techniques, a common thread that runs throughout her *oeuvre* is an interest in repetition, pattern, and psychedelic colors and forms. Beginning in the early 1950s, Kusama began covering surfaces of canvases, household objects, her own sculptures, and entire rooms with polka dots and what she called “infinity nets.” Vast fields of dots and nets became a trademark of her work, and directly reference the artist’s hallucinatory visions. Kusama described her *Infinity Nets* as paintings “without beginning, end, or center.” *Nets Obsession TTS* is part of this body of work. In this abstract painting, a web of small, repetitive looped marks is thickly painted in silver and covers the dark gray canvas. The mesmerizing, rhythmic painting is like an organic, metallic net that has been cast across our field of vision.

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**Yayoi Kusama** (b. 1929 Matsumoto-shi, Japan)  
***Untitled*, 1974**  
painted bronze  
Courtesy of the Linda Pace Foundation

*Untitled* is distinct from much of Kusama’s other work. Unlike the soft fabric sculptures for which she is known, this enigmatic work is cast in bronze. However, *Untitled* still retains evidence of the artist’s hand. The surface of the abstract form shows visible marks where the artist used her fingers to shape her material.



**Dinh Q. Le** (b. 1968 Hà Tiên, Vietnam)  
***Untitled (SPAM)*, 2007**  
c-print and linen tape  
Courtesy of the Chaney Family Collection

Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Le is best known for his trademark woven photographs. When he was a child, Le's aunt taught him the traditional Vietnamese weaving technique that he now employs in his artwork. To make *Untitled (SPAM)* Le wove together strips of photographs as one would weave a basket or a Vietnamese grass mat. Taken from both eastern and western sources, Le uses pictures of commercial products, of himself and his family, and of the Vietnam War. As we view his woven photograph, the interlaced images transform before our eyes: dark gray circles visible on the top left side of *Untitled (SPAM)* appear one minute like the centers of white daisies and like bullet holes the next. Other visual elements that shift in and out of view include the words "SPAM," "Hickory Smoke," and "Kleenex," as well as images of fists, soldiers wielding spears, and pallbearers carrying a coffin. The longer one looks at Le's woven photograph, the more images come into view.

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**Rirkrit Tiravanija** (b. 1961 Thai, born Argentina)  
***untitled (young man, if my wife makes it...)*, 1999**  
plastic, wood, and enamel plate, edition 27  
Courtesy of the Linda Pace Foundation

Rirkrit Tiravanija's experiences as an itinerant are a source of inspiration for his work. The artist was born in Argentina, is of Thai origin, and was raised in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada. Tiravanija's was educated in Chicago and New York, and now lives and works in New York and Berlin while continuing to spend time in Thailand. Instead of falling under conventional categories of art, Tiravanija's artistic practice emphasizes the social role that art can play and promotes cultural interaction, particularly through the activity of cooking and eating. Many of Tiravanija's installations involve him cooking dishes such as Pad Thai in the gallery space. *Untitled (young man, if my wife makes it...)*, is based on the plastic food that the artist saw showcased in restaurant window displays in Japan. For this sculpture, Tiravanija made a realistic plastic cast of the Pad Thai that he cooked for visitors to one of his gallery exhibitions in Japan. The big bowl of noodles with chopsticks hovering in mid-air may stir happy memories of sharing meals and conversation.

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**Mel Chin** (b. 1951 Houston)  
***Cabinet of Craving*, 2011**  
ebony-polished white oak, glass, antique porcelain, and silver  
Courtesy of the artist

Mel Chin's sculptures, installations, videos, and public art projects evade easy classification. In his wide-ranging artistic practice, he explores subjects such as ecology, technology, history, and war. Like most of Chin's work, *Cabinet of Craving* addresses political, social, and environmental concerns. This monumental sculpture of a spider that almost reaches the ceiling of the exhibition space has the grimacing face of an English Bulldog, and is slightly comical, but also frightening. Just behind the face and standing in for the spider's body is a Victorian-style glass curio case holding a porcelain teapot that sits atop a silver tray. Chin refers to the sculpture as "a hybrid monster born out of addictions, in this case, the Victorian English craving for tea and porcelain, and the Chinese desire for silver that lead to the Opium Wars."