

A NEW LOOK FOR ASIA SOCIETY'S ART POWER

On the 60th anniversary of Asia Society, Tan Boon Hui is eager to show off all the diversity of Asian art forms.

STORY RYAN SWIFT

What do you do when the institution you've just joined has seemingly accomplished its original mission of 60 years ago? It's a question that is on the mind of Asia Society's new vice president of global arts and cultural programmes and director of New York's Asia Society Museum, Tan Boon Hui.

"The world that (the society's founder) [John D] Rockefeller envisioned has come to pass," says Tan. The original mission of the Asia Society was to promote understanding and cross cultural dialogue between Asia and the US. Art was to be one of the main foundations of that cross-cultural work. It was also [set up] to raise awareness of Asia among US citizens.

"Asia is rising and is now well-known. The world that Asia Society tried to create has happened. So our task in the next 60 years is to look at what's next."

Tan, a veteran of the Singaporean arts scene, is a lighthearted and effervescent man. He is also keen to transfer some of that personal energy into the Asia Society. At our meeting early this year, Tan exhibits nothing but excitement about the prospect of shaking up the arts programme of one of Asia's most venerable art institutions.

The question on Tan's mind is one of relevance and innovation: how to turn Asia Society back into a trailblazing place for the arts?

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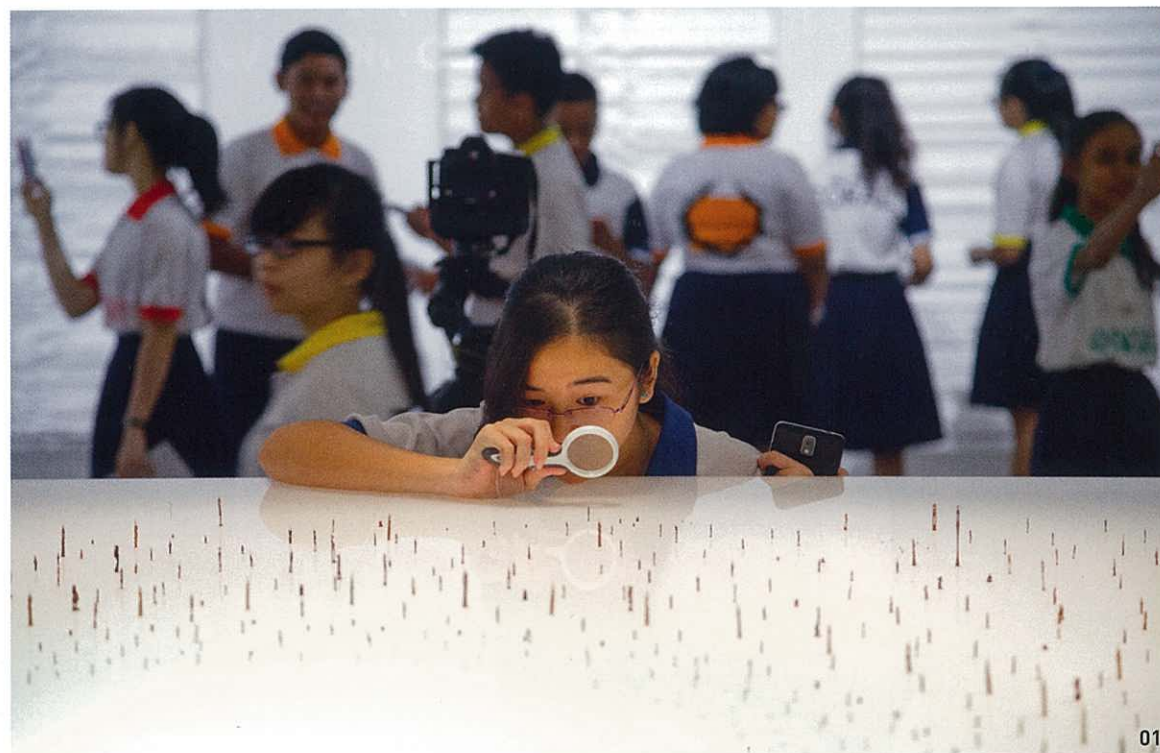


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01 *Cosmology of Life* by Toni Kanwa at the 2013 Singapore Biennale



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“I looked into the old documents and archives of the Asia Society, and I realised that, all along, it has been pioneering and risk taking,” Tan says. “As far as Asian cultural programming is concerned, it was the first to introduce Chinese contemporary art to the West through the Inside Out programme. It was the first to introduce southeast Asian art.”

Asia Society’s Inside Out programme, curated by Gao Minglu, was staged in 1998 and 1999 in the United States, and was widely regarded as one of the first exposés of the burgeoning Chinese contemporary art scene in the US. It was at around this time that famed art collector Uli Sigg was amassing his own encyclopedic collection.

For Tan, the time has come for Asia Society to aggressively explore and bring to light a diverse group of Asian art scenes that have been overlooked till now. These could be art and artists from south Asia, central Asia or southeast Asia. “I think it’s important that we

start highlighting these different trajectories [of art]. We are about showing Asia as a real, living and breathing entity. I think the main point is that, in Asia, there is more diversity than we realise.”

One of Tan’s own strengths, as he sees it, is a willingness to push boundaries and get curators looking outside their comfort zones, to dig up art that collectors and museums might have otherwise missed. In his native Singapore, he became known during his tenure at the Singapore Art Museum for daring, contemporary exhibitions. The museum organised the 2013 Singapore Biennale, which was well regarded for forgoing famed artists, instead bringing together a large number of curators who exposed a host of new southeast Asian talent. It’s this kind of work that excites Tan the most.

When asked if his idea of a good curator is someone who dons an Indiana Jones hat and goes out hunting for hidden treasures in the jungle, Tan laughs, but only



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02 *Rainbow Circle (Capturing a Natural Phenomenon)* by Suzann Victor at the 2013 Singapore Biennale

03 *We Never Fell* by Nguyen Tran Nam at the 2013 Singapore Biennale

a little. “You have to go and be where the artists are. There’s no substitute for going into the field, like an anthropologist,” he says.

Perhaps it’s the fact that Tan’s family were not involved in the arts, and that he himself got his master’s degree in geography, that he displays such interest; not only in fieldwork, but also in the handicrafts of Asian’s artisans. “When I went to the Singapore Art Museum, I said that I do not like textbook curators who only do library research. I need curators to be out in the field for a certain amount of time every year. I expect them to tell me things I don’t know, that I didn’t expect, about artists I’ve never heard of.”

Tan says that during his work on the 2013 Singapore Biennale, he asked his staff to take a look at all the biennales around the world and find out what percentage of the artists had not been featured in other biennales previously. The resulting number, he says, was

“horribly low.” Tan then mandated that two-thirds of artists being shown at the biennale be new. Reviews of the show noted approvingly of the sudden surge of new material and the ambition of the show.

One of the things that has got Tan particularly excited is the prospect of putting Asia Society’s global network of offices and exhibition centres to work. Though the rest of 2016 is already prepared and therefore won’t bear the imprint of Tan’s desire to showcase new artists, 2017 certainly will. And with such a big footprint globally, there is the possibility of programmes occurring across various networks, which in Tan’s view will allow for more diversity.

That diversity of Asian art also extends to the many artisans who do work that has, in Tan’s view, as much value as any piece of wall art. Tan talks excitedly about Asian artisans and their works in carving and lacquering. He views such things as an overlooked form of artistic expression that needs to be explored. In another interview, Tan cited the growth of Singapore Art Museum’s collection of southeast Asian gold jewellery as one highlight of his career.

The key point for Tan as he settles into his role is diversity. The world has moved on from the days of founder John D Rockefeller, and Tan sees his mission now as advancing the Asia Society into new terrain. From nearly all regions of Asia, Tan sees room for exploration of artistic scenes. Businessmen are often drawn to art from the places they do business and Tan agrees that, to some extent, this can help open up art. “In the case of China or Korea, as far as contemporary art collecting is concerned, the first large-scale interest comes from outside the country – it takes interest from collectors and a couple of PhDs ... to have a connection to the outside world.”

Tan would certainly like the Asia Society to play that role and indeed, he sees it happening already. He quickly mentions two exhibitions by Asia Society in New York in 2015 that displayed southeast Asian art. One was a first-time showing of statuary from Myanmar – the largest display ever offered by the government of Myanmar, according to Tan.

What is also true is that Asia Society was looking for newness. “Asia Society is now a global organisation, not just a New York one,” he says. “It was [a New York organisation] before, but my remit is to shift the centre of gravity a bit.” With so many international tools at his disposal, expect to see a much more diverse range of exhibitions going forward.

And will Asia Society curators suddenly find themselves on long range treks in search of new art? “I hope so,” Tan says with a slightly mischievous laugh. ☺