

Asian International Art Exhibition

Asia @ Asia,
Manifesting Diversity”

BY NGIOM

Jeganathan Ramachandram, Malaysia
Entitled: 'Blogger' 2009
Acrylic on canvas



Choong Kam Kow, Malaysia
Entitled: Fit for Life-Taiji
Acrylic on canvas

Shi Jianguo, China
Entitled: Sisters
Ink wash on paper

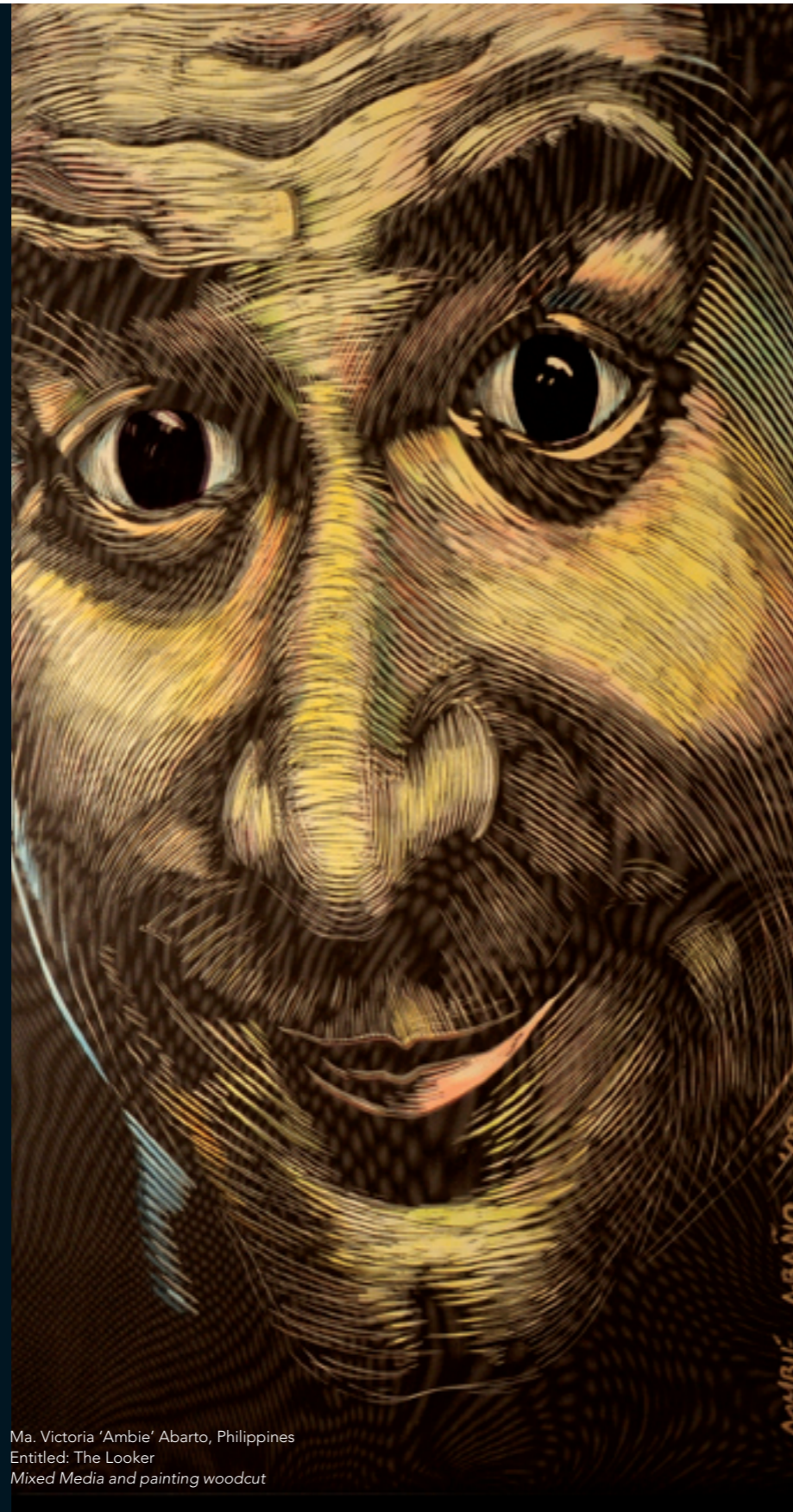
EVERY YEAR, SINCE 1985, AN ASIAN-WIDE ART EXHIBITION, CALLED THE ASIAN INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, BETTER KNOWN BY ITS ACRONYM, AIAE IS HELD BY ROTATION AT VARIOUS ASIAN COUNTRIES. ARTISTS FROM JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA AND TAIWAN INITIALLY STARTED THE AIAE; IT NOW ALSO INCLUDES WORKS FROM TEN OTHER ASIAN COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THIS YEAR'S HOST, MALAYSIA. THE AIAE IS SEEN AS A BAROMETER OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGES IN ART IN ASIA, AND HAS BECOME A SHOWCASE FOR NEW WORKS, IN A VARIETY OF ART MEDIA. IT IS ALSO QUOTED AS A SOURCE FOR NETWORKING AMONG ARTISTS AND IT IS AN AVENUE FOR CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN THE PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES.



The countries' exhibits are accompanied by pamphlets that make official commentaries on the state of their art. Several commentaries touch on globalisation and the impact that borderless information are having on contemporary Asian art, resulting in concerns about native cultural identity. The title of this year's exhibition seems almost inevitable: "Asia @ Asia: Manifesting Diversity", seems obvious in an exhibition of this sort. It needs to be said that similar debate pervades in architecture, and in literary critiques. It seems a psychological necessity, to have a bulwark against the pervasive western dominance in all kinds of media, particularly, as said so many times in artistic commentaries, the need to assert an Asian alternative in whatever nuances that can be found in the field of art.

Through the support of officialdom, the support to display a collection of diversified art works is institutionalised, which could be a good thing, in that the public can come to the exhibition and have an aesthetic exchange with works from several places in Asia. There is however a drawback in institutionalising artistic exchange in that a narrow band of art qualifies to be selected in view of the required decorum and the need to avoid controversy. What is striking about the works is that they are overtly apolitical (except those from the Philippines) and on the main, visually pleasing. So, there is the underlying question whether the works selected are cutting edge works from the various countries – in other words, whether these works test the boundaries in their own countries.

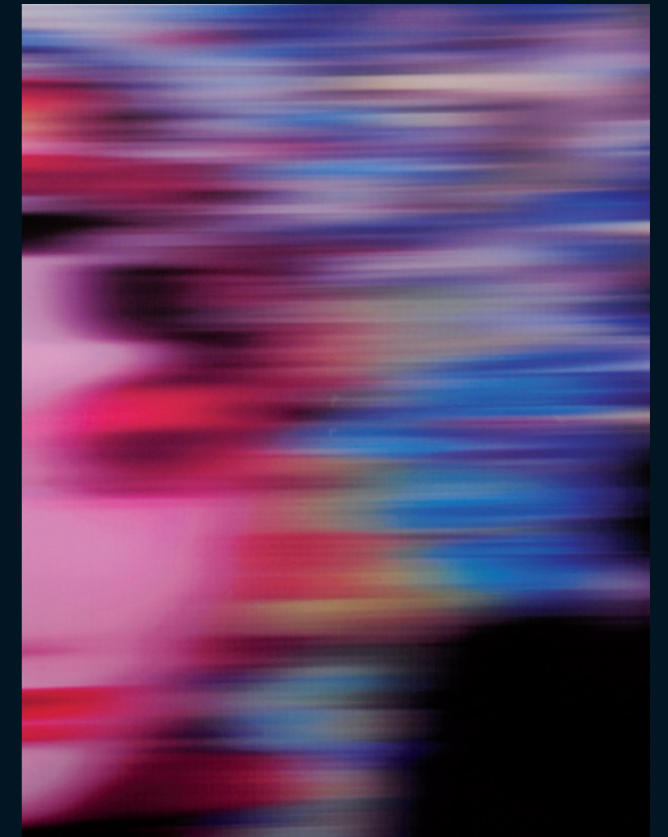
Taking away these issues, what remains to be expressed are forms and techniques. Being already selected and curated in the various countries, the techniques are of a high order and often, the mastery of the techniques are admired. It would be simplistic to try to generalise the exhibits, as even those that are offered by each country are diverse in technique, form and attitude. To know each work of art is really having to know the artists as individuals, who are somewhat submerged by the other works around her, as each artist is represented by just one art piece. Among the countless number of artists in each



Ma. Victoria 'Ambie' Abarto, Philippines
Entitled: The Looker
Mixed Media and painting woodcut



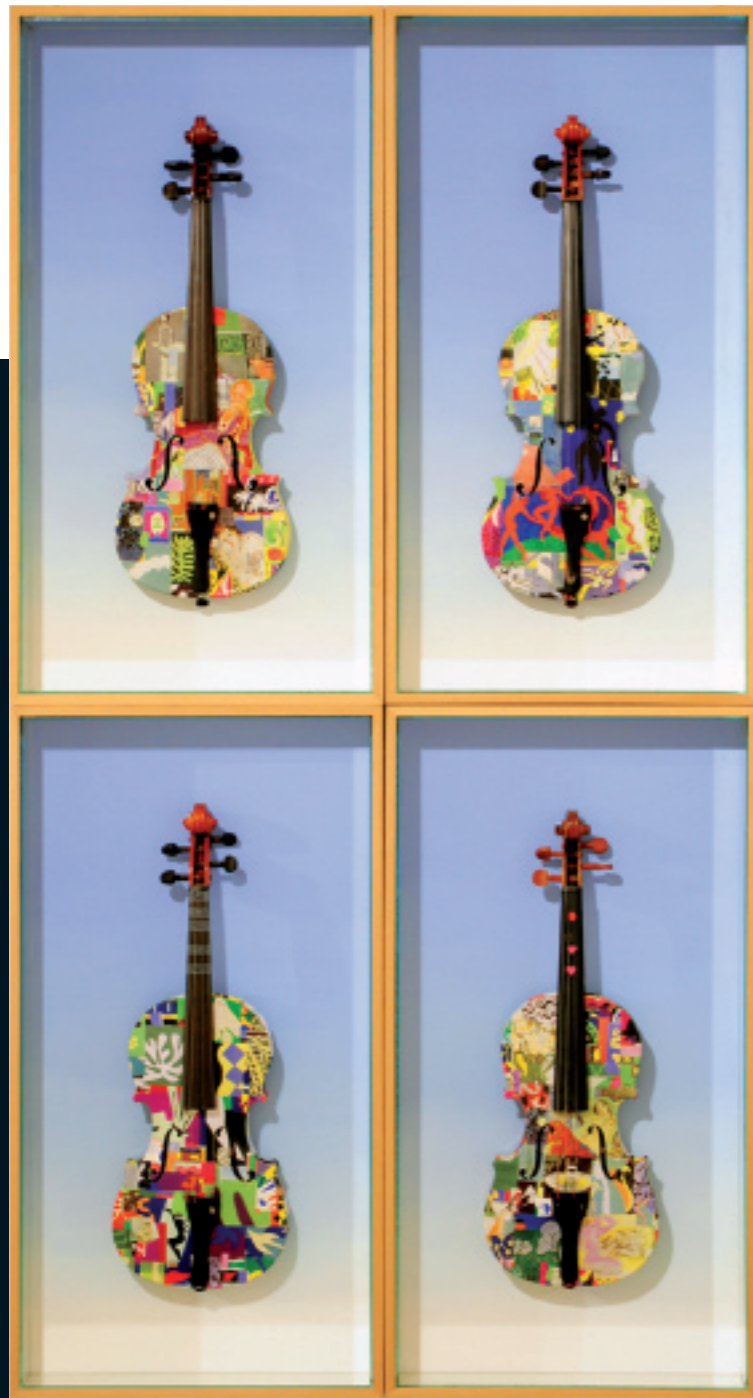
Tian Ye, China
Entitled: Scenery series 3 - Tianamen Square
Oil and Propylene on canvas



Liu Jun, China
Entitled: Peking Opera Blues
Digital image on canvas

country the criteria for selection would be an interesting one. Even the artists selected are a mixed bag: Taiwanese artists, for example are represented by artists who are self-taught as well as those who hold post-graduate qualifications in fine arts from American institutions. It is similar for Hong Kong representatives, two of whom hold doctorate degrees among several who are self-taught. Curiously, four of the Hong Kong representative

artists hold postgraduate degrees from a university in Australia (RMIT). Indicative of the structure and expectation of their societies, nearly all of Korean and Japanese artists are formally trained in art schools, and many also hold postgraduate degrees. Japanese academic expectations seem the highest as most of the artists are professors at various art institutions.



Han, Man Young, Korea
 Entitled: Reproduction of Time – Matisse.VM1
 Acrylic in box and object in collage



Kim Soo Ja, Korea
 Entitled: Diary – Existence 7
 Mixed media

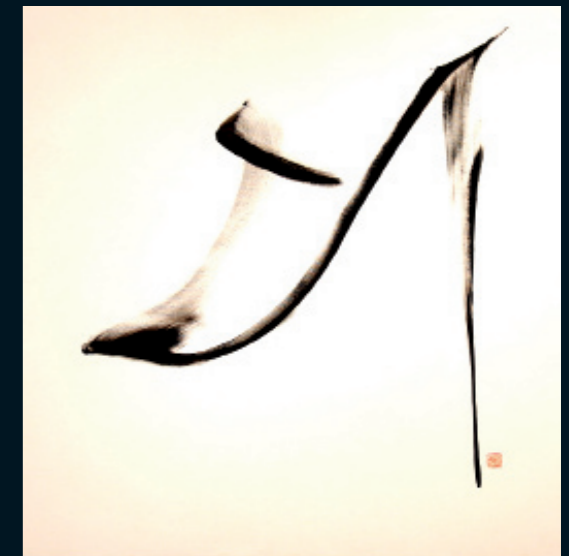
When gathered together, Malaysian, Singaporean and Macau art works have a generic cross-cultural feel, due perhaps to the socio-cultural history of these countries. The Singaporean and Macau art pieces are inclined toward Sinicism, whereas the Malaysian works have a strong ethnic accent among the different ethnic groups in several instances – there is a sense that the strength in Malaysian art lies in the strength of its diversity. Art training in these countries are equally diversified and artists come from diverse background, several of whom have spent considerable number of years abroad, while others are completely home-grown. It is impossible to provide a single narrative to this gathering of artists, as, quite apparently from the works, their individual journeys must have been eventful.

Thai, Indonesian and Filipino artists seem to be undergoing a similar stage of change, seemingly propelled by a search for cultural identity. There are suggestions that there are plenty of cross-references between artists across the Malay archipelago (Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia) and Thailand as similar works are popping up in these countries, not all of which are exhibited here.

Being further away from the main Asian landmass, the Filipino art works seems more layered in meaning, and in depth, relative to the other exhibits. It is interesting to note that among the ten artists representing the Philippines, two are architectural graduates, another is a major in advertising and yet, another is a major in interior design. From the curated works, it appears that artistic pursuit in the Philippines is more of practice, with little academic posturing; but instead filled with rich narratives. From this disparate group of artists, there is a strong sense that art in the Philippines may be reaching a tipping point, which could result in a paradigm shift.

Vietnamese representation is another interesting case in another point, in that all the artists represented graduated from Hanoi, most from Hanoi Fine Art University. It is difficult to say that the works are representative of Vietnamese art. It possibly reflects the control structure of the society, but there is a sense that the artists in general are on a learning curve, particularly towards finding a cultural identity in confidence, although without doubt, the talents are quite apparent.

Based on the works displayed in the AIAE, volumes could be written. However, the visual arts need to be seen to experience the narratives that come with the art, with each work carrying a long narrative about individual journeys. However, what is useful about events such as the AIAE is to experience the overall humanity of humankind and none better reflected than individual works of art, for each work is an investment of individual human soul, often too rich to be put into mere words.



Simon Lee, Singapore
 Entitled: Next Step
 Acrylic on canvas

When pictured overall, there is a sense that the Asian spirit is somewhat different from the west although contemporary Asian art owes much of its techniques to western innovations. The discourse on globalisation echoes the concern over the homogenisation of artistic techniques, as most new media emanates from the west. However, each country has a different social-cultural context, which is often unquantifiable, and beyond the visual appearance of things there is always the underlying background that we cannot escape. Art must always be a struggle, without which there can be no art, and the struggle must be contextualised by the artists' background, for otherwise the works of art become quite meaningless. ●