

Women struggle to break into Asia

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Asia is a region of great cultural diversity but the gender gap seems to be a constant



Since the beginning of the 2000s, contemporary art from Southeast Asia has been on the rise. At the same time, browsing catalogues and visiting exhibitions, you notice that not enough space is given to female artists compared to their male counterparts. In spite of the diversity of cultures and attitudes towards women in the region, the gender gap seems to be a constant.

Representation and Gatekeepers

A few weeks ago, Indonesian artist Grace Siregar highlighted the issue via Facebook: “I’m stunned that my male artist colleagues are always presented as the face of the Indonesian contemporary art world. How about the Indonesian female artists who are doing amazing work but rarely given the same attention in the media and by researchers and academics?”

According to Grace, gender bias is present in both the contemporary arts scene and society at large. It is also intersectional with other forms of discrimination that exist in Indonesian society, like those dependent on ethnicity, socioeconomic status and religion.

While role models of strong, independent and opinionated women are noticeably scarce in the Indonesian media, within the art world the sidelining of women from decision-making positions is subtler, and results in very few female curators, gallerists and critics. Grace sees this exclusion as beginning within families, who influence a daughter's study and career choices from an early age.

"All of this influences an artist's access to galleries both domestically and overseas and means that we tend to see the same few faces representing Indonesian contemporary art internationally."

In this scenario, international curators, scholars and critics are also responsible for perpetuating gender bias. With limited time to research or identify artists, they find themselves reliant on a handful of gatekeepers who control the access Indonesian artists have to international audiences.

"These are Indonesian curators, art critics and gallerists with connections overseas and they are overwhelmingly over-fifty and male," explains Grace. "They tend to steer foreign researchers toward the same limited list of Indonesian artists, who tend to fall within the same demographic."

Nora Taylor, Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at SAIC, finds a similar pattern in the Vietnamese art world. A lack of networking power results in a smaller number of female Vietnamese artists on the international art scene: "International dealers and curators tend to depend on local contacts for introductions to artists. That task often falls on individuals with charisma and advanced language skills," she explains.

"So far, the gatekeepers have been male artists. Men tend to have more power in establishing themselves as spokespeople or leaders in the artistic community."

You might think that in a country like the Philippines, which have been culturally more prone to equality, gender gaps in the arts don't exist.

"The Philippines was largely a matriarchal society in pre-colonial times, in which leaders were women and men could even take the names of women if they wished. Healers were women too, and men had to wear female clothing to perform a rite," says Filipino curator Lian Ladia. "This is very different from the empowerment of the suffragettes of the West."

Gender equality seems to persist today, as the latest World Economic Forum's 2014 report on the Global Gender Gap lists the Philippines as the only country in the region to make the top ten globally. Nevertheless, from her long experience in the Filipino art world, Lian Ladia says she is deeply aware of gender imbalances, from unequal labour force to unpaid internships for women.

Furthermore, when thinking about gender, she refuses to limit herself to the men/women dichotomy: "As highly as the Philippines are placed by the World Economic Forum Gender Index, I think this itself is questionable because it only takes into account men and women. I think the third gender needs to be included."

Themes and Stereotypes

In many Southeast Asian countries, historical circumstances determined how women entered the arts. In Vietnam, before the 20th century, Confucianism prevented women from receiving a writing and fine arts education. "It was not until the post-independence period, starting in 1945, that women were given opportunities to study art. Part of the Communist Party's mandate was to offer equal positions for women and that extended to artists," says Nora Taylor.

In the 1960s and 1970s Vietnamese women were not making artwork that could be clearly distinguished from that of their male counterparts in terms of subject matter, as they too were restricted to revolutionary themes or topics that touched on farming and labour.

“That has changed more recently, since the late 1990s, when many more women artists started making work that I would qualify as ‘feminist’ - that touches on issues of the body, maternity and sexuality.”

In Vietnam, the exploration of these themes was an important moment in art history. Today, however, women artists focusing on intimate, personal issues while male artists interest themselves in the socio-political can lead to stereotype.

“Sometimes this is an external prejudice, but sometimes, female artists also censor themselves and are worried about venturing away from ‘safe’ topics or forms of expression. Thankfully there are a number of wonderful exceptions to this rule,” reflects Grace Siregar, who herself tackles a variety of issues in her artwork.

The theme of women transgressing the boundary of their prescribed gender role is what Australian artist Kate Blackmore set out to explore through her upcoming Asialink project in India. Her work will focus on the Gulabi Gang, a vigilante group of over 400,000 Indian women who formed in 2007 in response to the widespread domestic violence in the province of Uttar Pradesh.

“The Gulabis have created an empowering model of delivering alternative justice to women in their community through confronting violence with direct action,” explains Kate. “They visit abusive husbands and threaten to beat them with sticks unless they stop abusing their wives.”

“Since the brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey in 2012, Indian women have put increasing pressure on the government through protests and collective action to address gender inequality,” explains Kate. “Thanks to my experience working with the female art collective Brown Council, I am interested in how groups of women mobilise and work together, and I wanted to find out more about the situation in India.”

On discovering the Gulabi Gang, she was intrigued by the way in which they inverted the ‘women as victim’ narrative: “Most Western studies on violence to date concentrate on men as perpetrators and women as victims, leading to the universalisation of men as aggressive and women as passive. I’m interested in exploring how violent women in non-Western countries are perceived.”

Women-only shows

In collaboration with Brown Council, Kate Blackmore exhibited as part of Contemporary Australia: Women at GOMA in 2012. In her view, women-only exhibitions create an important space for women to be recognised and valued, “but one-off exhibitions don’t do anything to change the entrenched sexism in the art world.”

Grace Siregar points out that the risk with women-only exhibitions is the treatment of women as a minority rather than half the human race: “I wish women-only exhibitions were unnecessary and therefore didn’t exist unless happening by coincidence. At the same time they do offer important moments for women artists to get access to exhibition opportunities.”

There are though alternative ways to frame women-only exhibitions. In 2013 Lian Ladia curated the international women’s show ‘You Have Every Right’. The exhibition featured process-oriented works created in response to Manila, but embedded in these works was a study of discrimination, objectification, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping and the role of power.

“It was an open question which basically allowed themes of gender, the masculine, the feminine, the queer and the neutral to be fleshed out. I worked with women artists with strong political leanings and the issues they chose to explore while in Manila.”

Lian wanted to step away from feminist approaches that considered the semiotics of the female/masculine gaze in Western art: “My concept of the feminist eye is the theoretical gesture of feminism, rather than the gender itself, which can be limiting.” In this sense, the show also became an opportunity to create an environment of support and mentorship amongst female artists.

Another deeply investigative women-only show was Prof. Nora Taylor's 'Changing Identity: Recent Work by Women Artists from Vietnam', which she curated in 2007. Since then things have evolved greatly for Vietnamese women artists. Today they tend to experiment more and not rely on standard artistic forms, such as oil-painted nudes and still lifes.

"In my view, male artists and curators still dominate the field, even though, in terms of numbers, the gap doesn't seem very wide," observes Prof. Taylor. At the same time, there are some positive signals: "Top gallerists are women. Vietnam's most prominent curator is an Australian woman, Zoe Butt."

Closing the gap

In order to close the gender gap, the increasing presence of women in all the roles of the art system is fundamental. "Women curators and directors are generally more supportive of female artists, so we need to see more of them in positions of power," says Kate Blackmore. "Institutions need to be targeting sexism in more holistic ways through adopting policies of equal gender representation across all exhibitions and collections."

For a wider representation of artists from Southeast Asia, Grace Siregar suggests that those outside Indonesia should travel more widely within the country. They should also try to build as many bridges into as many different arts communities as possible, to prevent their being at the mercy of the aforementioned gatekeepers.

"Indonesian galleries also need to work harder to open themselves up to women artists, to take risks with younger artists, to those outside the familiar cliques," she adds. "Arts colleges need to do much more outreach to more remote areas within the country. Arts critics and journalists need to do the same thing. We all need to challenge laziness and complacency in our exploration and celebration of women artists. We have so much to say and so much to share!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.