

A Quiet Presence: Southeast Asian Pavilions at Venice Biennale | COBO Social

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Thailand, Krungthep BANGKOK . 57th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, Viva Arte Viva





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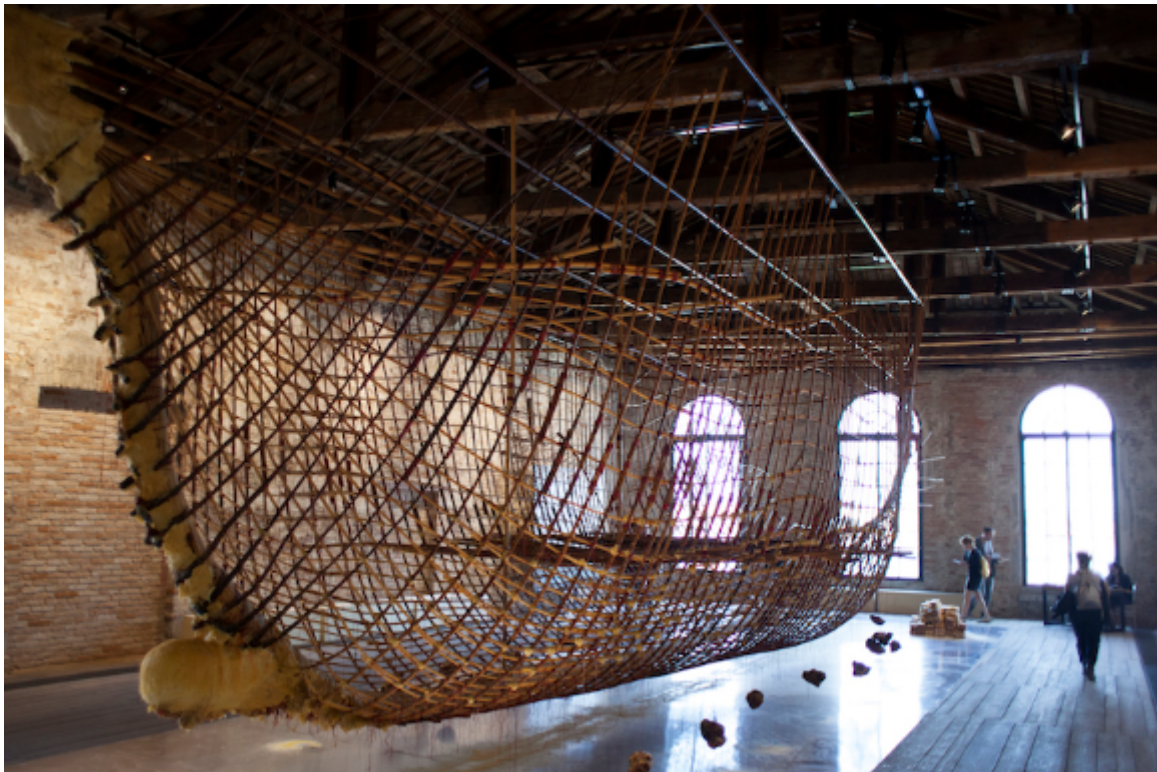




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[Naima Morelli](#)

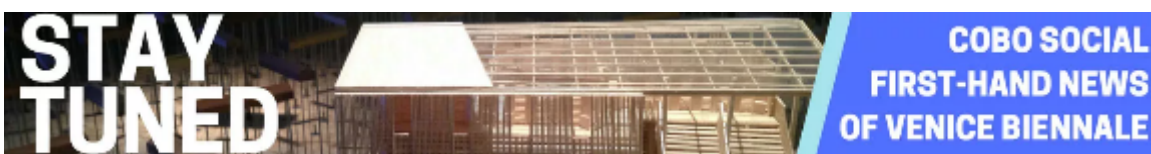
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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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This year the Southeast Asian Pavilions didn't make waves. Naima Morelli share her opinions on what happened and why.

TEXTS: *Naima Morelli*

IMAGES: Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

One school of thought thinks that showing up to international art events is more important than the way you decide to show up. It is persistency that pays off in the long run. Conversely, another school of thought thinks that you don't need to be under the spotlights all the time; you just come out when you are sure you'll be able to present your very best.

This year I have found the Southeast Asian Pavilion decisively underwhelming compared to the previous years. Back from the Biennale's opening, everybody has been talking about the controversial German Pavilion, or the anthropology-based Italian Pavilion, or perhaps of the politically and symbolically-charged Russian Pavilion. Or, if you are more into the so-called "new geographies of art", there was Egypt, impressive with its storytelling through video art, or perhaps the Australian Pavilion with its photographs which married cinematic beauty with social engagement.

But for Southeast Asia as a whole, this Biennale looked a bit like a missed opportunity to show the raw talent available in the region. It is not the artist's fault; looking at the portfolio of the representative artists, each one of them has produced amazing work in their own right. Nor we should blame it on the curators, who are all known to be top-notch.

Of course, it is not about finding who to put the blame on, but rather pondering the big why going into the decision to participate to international events at all costs. As art lovers and arts writers, more useful than criticizing the art itself, is to observe what conditions we have been presented with, and what does it mean.

Thailand: what it says on the tin

For the show "Krungthep BANGKOK", artist Somboon Hormtiemtong selected objects including wooden trunks, Buddha statues, elephants and plastic containers in order to create a feel for the Thai capital in all its diverse aspects. In addition to that, Hormtiemtong also realized realistic charcoal drawings of hidden corners of the city.



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What "Krungthep BANGKOK" looked like to an outsider, is an exercise of style tailored on Bangkok. The artist used the linguistic code of the readymade which we are well-accustomed to, to create an atmosphere – but one which doesn't say much to those who are not familiar with the country. One might wonder why, in the complex times Thailand is facing, the Pavilion couldn't have further elaborate on these hints. as this didn't looked like the right

context for such an ample freedom of interpretation.



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Considering that the Biennale audience is diverse and multicultural, an artist is not able to resort to common cues and intuitions about the meaning of his selected objects. The curator addressed the problem of lack of reference points in the catalogue’s text, though he didn’t resolved it in any concrete way, leaving it vague. Therefore, the only possible reading of the show is exactly what it declared to be: a display of objects from Bangkok.

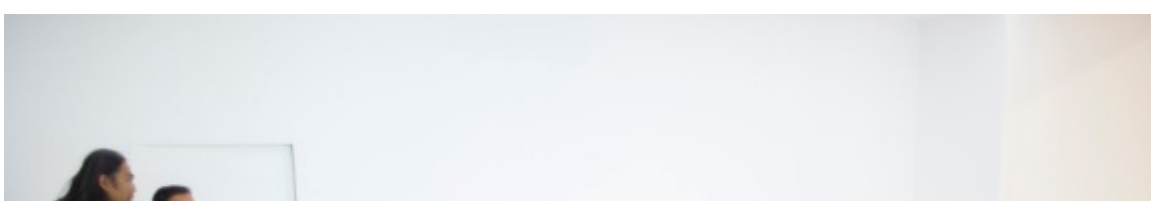
Indonesia Pavilion: from the lagoon to the mall

Tintin is a cosmopolitan artist whose work is a direct reflection of her nomadic life. Her interest is indeed in breaking borders in a time which is timely to acknowledge our commonalities rather than our differences. Consequently, the Pavilion was very far from the Indonesian-looking Trokomod – Heri Dono’s work from the 2015 Venice Biennale – or Sakti – the collective show at the Indonesian Pavilion from 2013.



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Tintin’s work was meant to be less theatrical than Heri Dono’s larger-than-life Comodo Dragon and to the impact of a big-size evocative creature, the artist preferred to engage with the public through interactivity. Called “1001 Martian Homes”, the show consisted in three interactive installations exhibited simultaneously in Venice and at Senayan City shopping mall in South Jakarta. One installation recorded the images of the public visiting the pavilion and looking through a peephole.





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On a symbolical level – not encompassed in the original meaning of the work – it is interesting how the installation linked the Venetian institution – which used to be the most important validation in the art world – is linked to the modern-day creator of values: the shopping mall.

Philippines Pavilion: what you’d expect

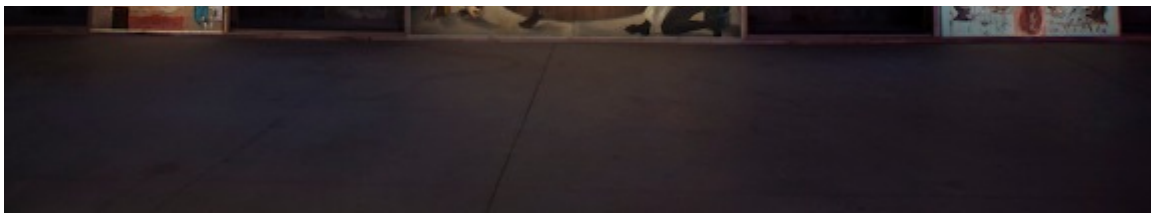
Two years ago the Philippines Pavilion “Tie A String Around the World”, curated by Patrick Flores, gave the audience a very conceptual picture of art-making in the Philippines. While being quite complex in its reading, the Pavilion elicited interest from viewers eager to know more about hidden aspects of the country – from its cinema to its geography.

In contrast, this year the Philippines pavilion was reassuring in being exactly what you’d expect from the Philippines. The show featured two celebrated artists, Lani Maestro – who presented a neon installation – and Manuel Ocampo – who brought three canvases with a style akin to social realism, describing the recent history of the Philippines.



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The curatorial concept was the “spectre of comparison”, a concept taken from the 1887 nationalist novel *Noli Me Tángere* (touch me not) by the Filipino writer José Rizal. In the book protagonist returns to the capital Manila after spending time abroad, which causes him to compare his homeland to the European cities he has seen. This idea didn’t come across in the works as much as in the background of Ocampo and Maestro, who like many other artists are dividing their time between the Philippines and other countries.

Singapore Pavilion: how not to be a slave

Two curator friends gave me two different definitions of artists. To one, artists are simply people who obsess over things. To the other, artists are those who are free in their own psychosis. I feel both definition apply to Zai Kuning.

A early member of the artist collective The Artist Village, this charismatic and whimsical figure had an important role in shaping the recent history of Singapore contemporary art. This is why I think he has been a good choice for the Singapore Pavilion.

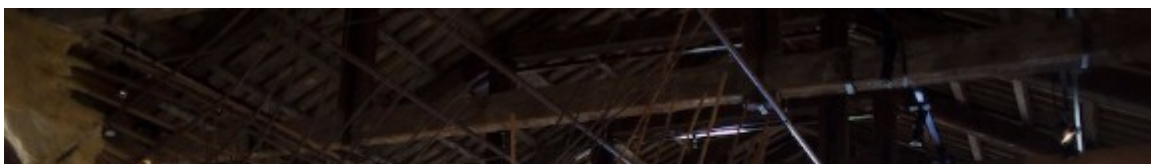


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Furthermore, observing such an unpredictable figure in an institutional context like the Venice Biennale – where the Lion City is trying to make a good impression on the international stage – tells volumes about Singapore’s struggle between bureaucracy and imagination, market and spirit. In the end, it felt the artist dealt with the entire biennale system in his own terms.

The coming into being of the Singapore Pavilion was troubled, from having the artist “fire” the designated curator June Yap, to the decision of going forward anyways. This picture of uncertainty is very unusual for Singapore, whose bureaucratic and ultra-organized ethos clashed with the uncompromising spirit of the artist.

At the opening the artist celebrated the people who helped him built the artwork – a sculpture of a ship made from rattan, strings and wax called: “Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge”. For the artwork Zai Kuning researched the disappearing cultures in Southeast Asia over the course of ten years, especially the ethnicity called Orang Laut. He was inspired by the seventh-century maharajah Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa.





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In his talk/performance following the neat and formal presentation by Singapore’s Minister of Culture, the artist started talking about the freedom of human beings as well as artist, and encouraged them not to be slaves.

An interesting fact is that the boat sculpture is a re-edition of a work presented in the Encounters section of Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2015. Going back to the symbolical realm that we mentioned when speaking about the Indonesia Pavilion, Kuning’s boat is not only navigating from Asia to Europe, but also from the commercial art world to the institutional art world. Once again, this is a telling fact: for good or for bad we can’t avoid to be slaves, except in our obsessions – or perhaps our imagination. It is there and only there that we can be really free.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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