

# Southeast Asian Pavilions at the 2019 Venice Biennale | COBO Social

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*Long overdue, the art of Southeast Asia in recent years has finally garnered the international attention it deserves. Here we analyze and review the exhibitions of Southeast Asian pavilions at the 2019 Venice Biennale.*

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Images: Courtesy of National Pavilions & Venice Biennale

Each century in history is relevant for its own peculiar reasons, and they all have their own art that reflects the spirit of the time. However, during some periods more than others, artists call on other artists to step in and wake up the hearts of the dormant and the disengaged.

Whether they battle fear and hate in the form of political division, economic values placed before humanity, environmental destruction or racism, artists try to formulate positive futures. But before they can do that, they are asked to both understand and explain the reasons for the fear. They do this on an emotional

level by looking at personal or historical traumas.

What we can observe in the 2019 Venice Biennale is a step in the direction of change. The title, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, refers to what was for centuries wrongly understood as an ancient Chinese curse. It actually comes from a speech given in the late 1930s by Austen Chamberlain, a member of the British Parliament.

The title refers to the West's Orientalist approach and to something being "lost in translation". In that regard, Asian artists more than others need to take a stance to define their own notion of "interesting times".

The pavilions of Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand reflect on their country's past in order to formulate their future. And yes, it is as safe a formula as it sounds, but still a necessary one. Indonesia and Singapore attempted a more modern approach, presenting updated narratives extending beyond the 'ethnic' label.

### **Malaysia: diverse instances in the global scenario**



Anurendra Jegadeva, Installation view of Malaysian Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2019, Image Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia

*Holding up a Mirror* is an honest debut for Malaysia, which decides to talk about its culture in a variety of ways through the work of Anurendra Jegadeva, H.H. Lim, Ivan Lam and Zulkifli Yusoff. The pavilion was organized by gallery director Lim Wei-Ling from Wei Ling Gallery, who single-handedly convinced the government to give its official support. She also curated the show.

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The overarching discourse is on cultural identity in the globalized world. Again, this is not breaking news, but it is still a central issue of our time that's in continuous mutation. It presents artists from different generations, as well as diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. While their practices are varied, they are all united by a spirit which embodies what happened in the country after the first electoral change in 2018.



Zulkifli Yusoff, Installation View Malaysian Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2019, Image Courtesy La Biennale Venezia

Strolling around the exhibition, we can find Jegadeva's figurative paintings, which have strong autobiographical, social and political reference. We can observe how H.H. Lim, who is based in Rome, bridges both Italian conceptual art and his own Malay roots, making the perfect trait d'union across cultures in the process. Zulkifli Yusoff created an installation of wood and resin that denounces urbanisation and lost fundamental values. But one of the most mysterious works is definitely by Ivan Lam, who places functioning screens so that they face the wall.







Ivan Lam, Installation View Malaysian Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2019,  
Image Courtesy La Biennale Venezia

### **Singapore: minor narratives at play**



Pavilion of SINGAPORE, *Music For Everyone: Variations on a Theme*, 58.  
Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, *May You Live In  
Interesting Times*  
58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *May You Live In  
Interesting Times*, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli,  
Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

We know that postmodernism gave full legitimacy to small history versus grand history. However, in a context like the Venice Biennale, we should ask ourselves: when is a minor narrative too minor? For their 9th participation in the Venice Biennale, Singapore decided to put up one that is maybe too narrow, which resulted in it having an understated pavilion.

*Music for Everyone: Variations On A Theme* by the artist Song-Ming Ang and curator Michelle Ho, retraces Singapore's musical history through a series of music concerts. These were organised in the '70s by the government in order to promote Western classical music education. The feeling is that the show –

which is very thoughtful and well-realized indeed – would have best suited the previous 2017 Biennale, *Viva Arte Viva*, which was a celebration of the joy of making art, and so was devoid of political urgency.



#### Pavilion of SINGAPORE

Music For Everyone: Variations on a Theme, 58. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, MayYou Live In Interesting Times  
58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, MayYou Live In Interesting Times, Photo by: Andrea Avezzù, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

However, in such a rich Biennale, full of intense experiences, we would have loved the Singapore Pavilion to explore socio-political themes and the core issues of contemporary times head-on. The city-state has had its fair share of issues and innovative solutions. It would have a lot to say in the global arena. So, why then doesn't it tackle this with conviction?

#### **Thailand: fake narratives and hard truths**





Pavilion of Thailand, *The Revolving World*, 58. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, *MayYou Live In Interesting Times*  
58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *MayYou Live In Interesting Times*, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

The Thai pavilion is called *The Revolving World* and focuses on the stories and histories from different phases of the Thai Kingdom. Curated by Tawatchai Somkong, it features works by Panya Vijinthanarn, Somsak Chowtadapong and Krit Ngamsom.

Panya Vijinthanarn reactualizes Buddhist tales by reinterpreting the murals of the Scripture Hall in Wat Bang Khae Yai, Samut Songkhram. The passing of stories from generation to generation – and how they've assumed unrealistic features – is exemplified by the paintings in light boxes by Somsak Chowtadapong. Finally, Krit Ngamsom creates a wunderkammern, where artefacts from the East and West tell the history of Thailand since the reign of King Rama V.



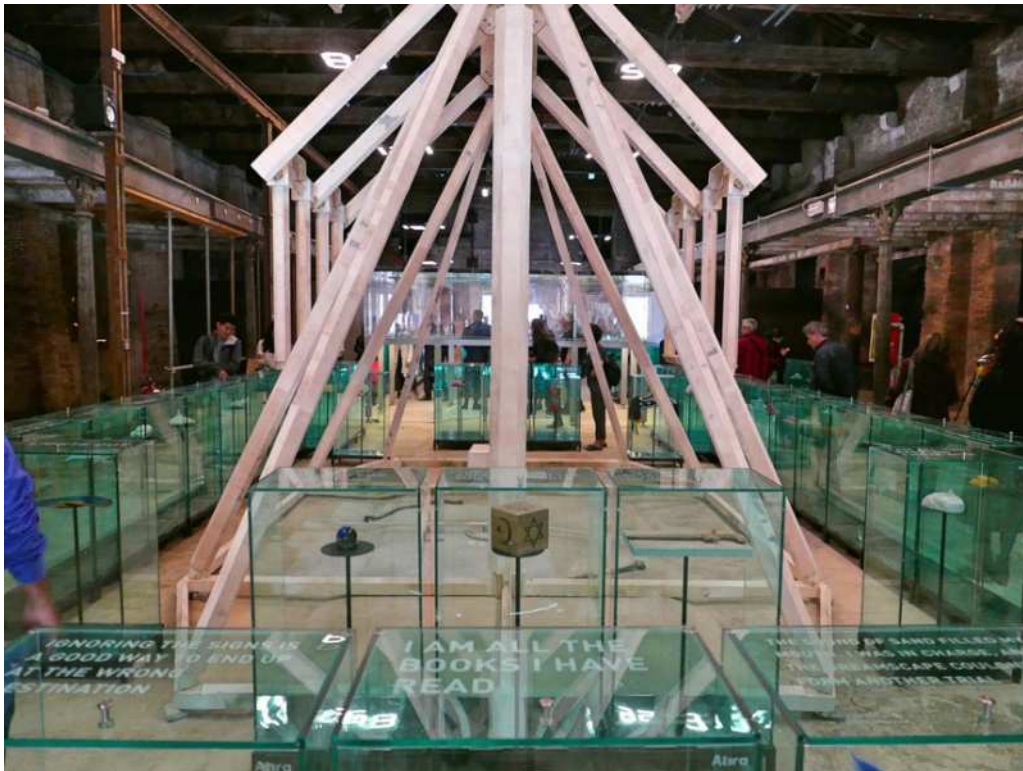
Pavilion of Thailand, *The Revolving World*, 58. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, *MayYou Live In Interesting Times*  
58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *MayYou Live In*



Interesting Times, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

Of course, some visitors who might have wanted the pavilion to have a more “internationalist” look were asking the same old question: why are the “new geographies” expected to look “ethnic”, while Europe and the US are not? Of course, we know that it is still very important for Southeast Asian countries to tell the truth about the lies that were spread about their past, and salvage a tradition from savage modernisation. History is a subject that is far from exhausted in Southeast Asia. What’s more, we can see the interconnectivity of the global scenario in this intermingling of historical truth and fake mythologies.

### **Indonesia: interaction and negotiation**



Pavilion of Indonesia, Lost Verses, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, MayYou Live In Interesting Times, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

Indonesia has carried out a similar strategy this year to the one it used two years ago with the exhibition *1001 Martian Homes* at the 2017 Venice Biennale. This marked a change from the previous pavilions, *Sakti* and *Trokomod*. The previous two editions described the delicate balance between tradition and future, while in the last two Biennales, Indonesia has started to be more interactive with the viewer and played around with this more.

Called *Lost Verses: Akal Tak Sekali Datang, Runding Tak Sekali Tiba* (Reason and Negotiation Never Come Just Once), the exhibition is curated by Asmudjo Jono Irianto and Yacobus Ari Respati, and features a collaborative project by artists Handiwirman Saputra and Syagini Ratna Wulan.

The pavilion highlights Indonesia's most important values in these times of uncertainty and conflict; namely the power of negotiation. The artists go on to create a visual metaphor for it; a playful space made of 400 transparent lockers that form a labyrinth, negotiation tables, smoking rooms and a ferry, representing the game of life.



Pavilion of Indonesia, *Lost Verses*, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

Demanding conceptual interaction from the rushed Biennale viewer is often risky. Visitors tend to skip what doesn't touch their heart straight away. This is why Indonesia's pavilion tries to be as immersive as possible. To miss the message would be a shame because the concept of negotiation is so key in our times, and no other country is more apt at talking about it than Indonesia.

### **Philippines: infinite wonder**








Pavilion of PHILIPPINES, Island Weather, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, MayYou Live In Interesting Times, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

Mark Justiniani never fails to impress. Once you have seen his *Infinity* series you will not forget the experience. His abysses and deep mirrors capture the viewer, but it's not just a theatrical trick. It provides a strong reflection on deceptive appearances and a strong sense of wonder – the kind that stops the visitor in their tracks, and never results in anything superficial.

This experience is magnified in the Philippines pavilion, curated by [Tessa Maria Guazon](#), where the last instalment of his infinity mirrors creates *Island Weather*. This site-specific installation invites the viewer to look through pond-like shapes in the pavement. Here, the mirrors construct endless layers and stratifications through the depth of the earth, where a number of everyday objects and ancient relics are buried. These are related to the history of the Philippines and the archipelago across time, space and narratives.





Pavilion of PHILIPPINES, Island Weather, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, MayYou Live In Interesting Times, Photo by: Andrea Avezzi, Italo Rondinella, Francesco Galli, Jacopo Salvi, Image Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

And yet, this work assumes a new powerful meaning in a country like Italy, where the underground – or, in Venice’s case, the underwater – contains endless layers of history.

We might have heard it – and said it – a million times, but it’s precisely from those buried layers that the most valuable lessons are found. What goes for Venice also goes for Southeast Asia and the world. That’s where we need to restart to navigate these “interesting times” and start reconstructing a more hopeful future where fear has little space. All that excavation is a dirty job, but someone has to do it. And this year it’s the artists.