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## Reflecting on Southeast Asia at the 59th Venice Biennale



Coming to Venice for the Biennale is always special. The train finally entering the lagoon after a long trip, the water on either side of the train tracks. The smell of moss. Exiting the station, the first impactful structure that you see is a magical church with a cerulean cupula, with its steps going all the way into the water.

Then, you take the boat to the Arsenale and Giardini, where most of the national pavilions of the Biennale are located. Or perhaps walking there, you lose yourself in the incredible maze of bridges, piers, courtyards, Arabian-style windows, and run-down walls.



Image of the Arsenale, where many Biennale events are located. Image: La Biennale di Venezia

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You feel a bit like the comic book character [Corto Maltese](#) created by Venetian author Hugo Pratt, who is always waiting for an adventure to reveal itself. As for us, we await the adventure of contemporary art.

### **An engaging, visceral curatorial vision**

And who doesn't like art that feels like an adventure?

The 2022 Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams* includes over two hundred artists from 58 countries. The title comes from a book by Surrealist Leonora Carrington, who muses on "a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination".

The Biennale's curator Cecilia Alemani wouldn't have it any other way. In the main show that she curated, we found a world transformed. It showcased a number of works with a compelling, visceral aesthetic, which really spoke to the visitors' guts.



Portrait of urator Cecilia Alemani. Image: La Biennale di Venezia.

She focused this 59th Venice Biennale on three themes: the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; and the connection between bodies and the Earth.

And it's incredibly engaging. All the themes speak to the core of humanity's desire; subverting power dynamics; dismantling the idea of a coherent identity; technology, and birth. It's all in the vein of Leonora Carrington, the Surrealist artist who inspired this Biennale's concept. In her writings, she described herself as the product of the communion between humans, animals, and machines.

Of course, on vaporettos (the typical Venetian water buses) and around Venetian cafes, I heard a number of conformist visitors grumbling about curatorial choices that were "too feminist," "too ethnic." Comments like "women are the fashion now" and "African art is just what's in vogue" were too many to mention, and sounded like the wailing of dinosaurs right before extinction.



Tronchetto Water Bus Station in Venice Italy. Image: [Tomas Martinez](#) on Unsplash.

Truth is that this edition of the Biennale finally let a wide range of voices sing in a choir. It did this in such a natural, seamless way, that it can't help but signal a long-overdue change, breaking free from the narrow tenets of a patriarchal art world.

This year, approximately 9 out of 10 artists are women. Alemani described her decision to fill the Biennale with female artists – whose works will be viewed by hundreds of thousands of visitors – as "a choice that reflects an international art scene full of creative ferment and a deliberate rethinking of man's centrality in the history of art and contemporary culture."

With the American, the French, and the New Zealand pavilions, the Venice Biennale also welcomed non-gender conforming artists and the exploration of anti-colonial narratives.

### But what about Southeast Asia?

The only disappointing note is that this year Southeast Asia had a much smaller presence compared to previous years. It is important to mention that over the past few years, the Southeast Asian presence at the Venice Biennale was still being consolidated.

Laos, Myanmar, and Brunei never had an official pavilion in Venice. The same goes for Cambodia, even though artists like Sopheap Pich exhibited at the main show in 2017.

Among the staples at the Arsenale, only the Philippines and Singapore remained. Pavilions from countries that made waves in the past few years, such as the Indonesian one, were completely absent.

How to forget the playful *Voyage/Trokomod*, the Trojan horse by artist Heri Dono, or the collective shows that showed, over the years, both the traditional facets and the technological ethos of Indonesian contemporary artists?

Visitors were able to experience a little corner of Indonesia in Venice, as artist **Eddy Susanto** had a show at the Giudecca Art District (GAD) on the namesake island. This was initiated by Bandung-based ArtSociates, and curated by Valentina Levy and yours very truly.

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Exhibition view of *The Allegory of Hell from Borobudur to Dante*. Covering the floor are the Javanese texts Susanto referenced in his works and the drawing pens he used. Image courtesy of the artist and ArtSociates.

The absence of Indonesia and Malaysia at the Arsenale is particularly significant, and it showed to the visitors that these countries might not have fully recovered from the pandemic to present their best at this international event.

To not bail on the high hopes elicited by its first official pavilion back in 2019, Malaysia had a collateral show. Prior to the pandemic, Malaysia presented its first-ever pavilion titled *Holding Up A Mirror*. Curated by Lim Wei-Ling, the show featured Anurendra Jegadeva, H.H. Lim, Ivan Lam, and Zulkifli Yusoff. It dissected the concept of identity and society with regard to political, social, and economic shifts.

For this 2022 Biennale, the country proposed a collateral show at the Archivi della Misericordia, an area that's far north from the main exhibition space, with the intriguing title *Pera + Flora + Fauna* (Pera means pear in Italian, but the title alludes to Perak Port in Malaysia). Chosen by a diverse curatorial team, the works in the show engage with indigenesness and nature, and look at the mainstream cultural attitudes of industrialised nations.





Exhibition view of *Pera + Flora + Fauna*. Image: Port Perak Venice.

It features Saiful Razman, Azizan Paiman, Kamal Sabran and Kim Ng, while arts community and space Kapallorek and multi-disciplinary outfit Projek Rabak complete the Malaysian line-up. Oddly, Italian contemporary artist Stefano Cagol is also a part of it.

There is no official representation of Thailand – a diverse art scene that deserved to be represented on the international stage – except from one Thai artist, Pinaree Sanpitak, who was featured in the main show.

Her body of work addresses womanhood, motherhood, and the self. Inspired by her own experience of motherhood and breastfeeding in the 1990s, Pinaree created earthy canvases depicting the shapes of breasts, eggs and curved profiles.



Artist Pinaree Sanpitak. Image: STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

The series of big acrylic paintings saw her use gold and silver leaves and silk. In these, she reflects on the vessel as the body, and the body as the vessel, while still evoking the breast motif. She conceives the body as sacred by referencing Buddhist offering bowls and stupa shrines.

Vietnam has been represented twice in recent years, primarily in 2017 with the collateral show *Personal Structures*, featuring Nguyen Trung, Ly Tran Quynh Giang and Nguyen Son, and in 2019 when Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh Vo was included in the main show.

Vo is again Vietnam's only representative this year, as he participated in a collective collateral show at Fondazione Querini Stampalia. He also curated the show together with the museum's curator Chiara Bertola. He exhibited alongside Park Seo-Bo, known as the father of the Korean Dansaekhwa movement, and the late American sculptor, architect, and designer Isamu Noguchi.

### **Singapore: only the tip of the iceberg**

There have been high expectations for *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book* by Shubigil Rao, the first woman selected to represent the country in a solo exhibition, alongside curator Uta Meta Bauer. At its 10th participation at the Biennale, Singapore is quite serious about Venice. In fact, it signed a 20-year lease for its pavilion space in the Arsenale in 2015.



Ute Meta Bauer, curator, and Shubigi Rao, artist, Singapore Pavilion, Biennale Arte 2022. Photograph by Alessandro Brasile.

Entering the Singapore pavilion on the second floor of the Arsenale's building, you immediately realise it's about books. Thin tents resembling paper sheets, with citations in the margins, separated the space. This evoked a three-dimensional approach to the page, which was a metaphorical way to present the work. A video complimented the installation, together with stacks of Rao's books for people to browse through.



Shubigi Rao, *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, 2022. Installation view, Singapore Pavilion, Biennale Arte 2022. Photograph by Alessandro Brasile.

I remember interviewing Rao in 2015-2016, as she was working on the initial iteration of her *Pulp* project. She told me that growing up in a remote part of the Himalayas in Darjeeling, India, in the 1970s, she spent all her time with books, to the point where she viewed them as if they were family.

With *Pulp*, Rao investigated, over the years, the human desire to speak and tell stories. In *Pulp III* (which was made specifically for the Biennale), she explored the endangered language Kristang, and featured author Melissa De Silva from Singapore and academic Stefanie Pillai from Malaysia, who both learned about the language as adults.

Other sections looked at Malay print histories in Singapore, including an erotic Jawi novel published by Qalam Press, which was known to print didactic Islamic texts. This apparent contradiction was not uncommon to find at the dawn of the publishing industry in Southeast Asia.

I observed that the book medium is perhaps not the most immediately engaging when it comes to creating a dialogue with the Biennale visitors. While the setup was intentionally minimalistic, perhaps it was too sparse for visitors who came to the pavilion after a morning full of visceral artworks.

The connection with the main theme – namely the idea of giving voice to neglected narratives – was apparent, but it's a lot to ask the time-pressured, overly stimulated viewer, to plunge into the dimension of silence that Rao's work requires.



Shubigi Rao, *Pulp III: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, 2022. Installation view, Singapore Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia. Commissioned by National Arts Council, Singapore, curated by Ute Meta Bau

Also, with the project being one iteration of a larger, multi-layered work, it lacked a strong first impact that would visually convey the depth of Rao's ideas.

As *Pulp III* was only one iteration of a larger, multi-layered work, I felt that the nuances and intricacies of

As *Up in* was only one relation of a larger, multi-layered work, I felt that the nuances and intricacies of Shubigi's research got completely lost. Comprising a selection of books to browse and a video, the Singapore pavilion looked more like the tip of an iceberg than a complete representation of Rao's practice. The project itself remains great, but the Biennale was not the best alley to show it.

### Philippines: found – rather than lost – in translation

Walking in the Philippines pavilion at the Arsenale felt like entering a multi-layered, stimulating dimension. Music and videos played while carpets hung from the ceiling and covered the ground, immediately making a strong first impression.

Titled *Andi taku e sana, Amung taku di sana / All of us present, This is our gathering*, the pavilion featured artist Gerardo Tan, musicologist Felicidad A. Prudente, and weaver Sammy Buhle in communication with each other.

The display was built on Tan's field research on indigenous weaving practices across the Philippines and the sounds they produced. Here, we could see contemporary art connect with craft, as the work visually communicated elements of Filipino culture.



*Andi taku e sana, Amung taku di sana / All of us present, This is our gathering*, presents a highly mediated process of blending sound, performance, images and objects. This was made possible by producing and translating sounds of chanting and weaving into notations, visual art and textiles. Image: Jeanne Severo.

The title comes from a line of a traditional chant that is usually performed prior to a peaceful dialogue among the members of the indigenous community. In the work, Jose Pangsiw performed the chant while Felicidad A. Prudente, one of the leading ethnomusicologists in the country, created a transcription.

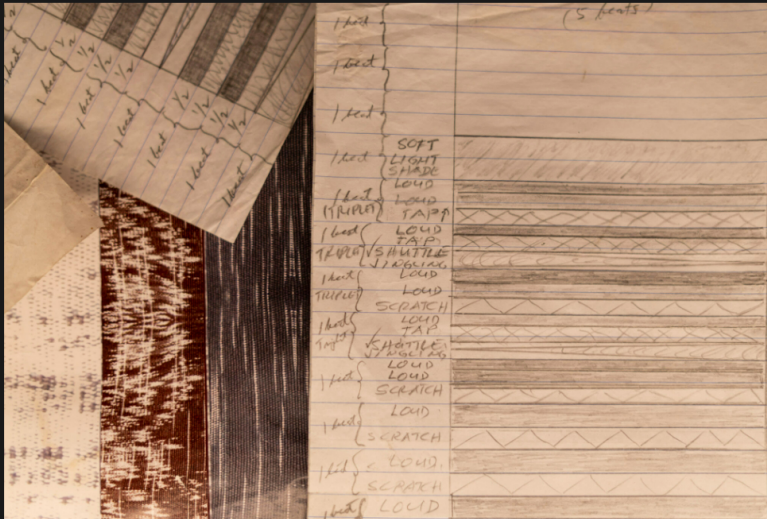
This was subsequently depicted as a performative painting in a two-channel video installation *Speaking in Tongue*, which Tan created for the work. The video welcomed visitors as they entered the space. It was meant to be a translation of the traditional chant, with the video featuring Tan using his tongue to paint squid ink onto glass.



*Speaking in Tongue*, a two-channel video installation featuring the translation of a chant from Kalinga, Philippines, and the performative painting of visual artist Gerardo Tan using squid ink. Image: Andrea D'Altoé

Following this was a series of videos called *Renderings*. Each video showed a different series of textile works being woven while it emitted sounds from traditional weaving practices, which were then translated into textile patterns.

This was done via an interdisciplinary process that began with an audio recording of weaving sounds from different weaving houses around the Philippines. These were notated as a musical score by Prudente. Tan then sketched this, in consultation with established Ifugao weaver Sammy N. Buhle, before Buhle transformed it into a woven fabric.



Notation and design study of *Rendering 11* (Abra - Ifugao), with transcriptions and musical notations by Felicidad A. Prudente. Image: Andrea D'Altoé.

In this multi-disciplinary collaboration, Buhle, Prudente, and Tan – three artists with completely diverse practices – created new forms of knowledge, process, and language, which show what can be gained through exchange and translation.

Tan explained, "A lot of my work has this self-referential aspect. It feeds back on itself. There's a loop that's being created. As a viewer, when you approach the work, you are presented with different realities at the same time. There's a dialogue between materials and processes."

### What we took away

After the pandemic resulted in the initial postponement of this edition of the Venice Biennale, we have been starved for art. The enthusiasm of being finally back among the canals, seeing art in person, and meeting other art enthusiasts recharged us.

The hope is that with this renewed energy and the new connections that were formed, the Biennale will present an increasing number of Southeast Asian artists and art practices from the region. Ideally, such representation expands to other international events, allowing audiences to learn more about the region.

The 59<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, titled *The Milk of Dreams*, runs from 23 April to 27 November 2022. [Click here](#) to learn more.

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