

EXHIBITIONS, INTERNATIONAL SHOWS · NAIMA MORELLI · NOVEMBER 15, 2024

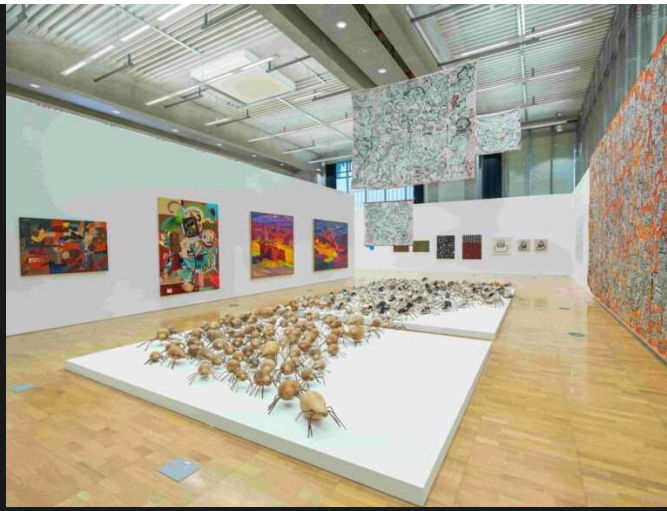
The Gwangju and Busan Biennales: Southeast Asian Artists Speak



There's nothing quite like a biennale to help us take stock of the art world — not just artistic trends, but also the currents of thought flowing through culture at large. And 2024 has given us plenty of international biennales to do just that.

In the West, the Venice Biennale dominates the cultural conversation. But in Asia, two South Korean biennales serve as litmus tests for the state of contemporary Asian art.

The first takes place in the city of Gwangju and is considered — rather hyperbolically — the Venice Biennale of Asia. The second is the Busan Biennale (originally called the Busan Youth Biennale), which these days is open to both young and not-so-young artists.



Southeast Asian artworks at the National Asian Culture Center. Images courtesy of the Gwangju Biennale.

This year, both biennales have a big Southeast Asian presence, evidencing — and also further fostering — strong connections between Korea and the region. This is all the more significant considering that this year's Venice Biennale only has three Southeast Asian pavilions (the Philippines, Singapore, and **Timor-Leste**), though Southeast Asian modern and contemporary artists are well-represented at the biennale's Main Exhibition and the collateral show *The Spirits of Maritime Crossing* respectively. In comparison, the 15th Gwangju Biennale has dedicated a specific building — the National Asian Culture Center — to the "ASEAN Pavilion."

If we continue our Venice-Gwangju comparison, we should note that Nicolas Bourriaud, Artistic Director at Gwangju, is not happy at all with this year's Venice Biennale. "It's just not my cup of tea," he said, pointing out that it resembles a museum show more than a living organism. And while he didn't conceive his Gwangju Biennale presentation as a direct answer to Venice, he did focus his curation largely on emerging and younger artists.

A world without us

Sitting in the press room, I and four other journalists ask Bourriaud about the confluence of four events — the Gwangju and Busan biennales, as well as the Kiaf (Korea International Art Fair) and Frieze Seoul fairs — currently creating incredible momentum for the Korean art scene. But to the French curator and critic, whose influence on the language of contemporary art and criticism through concepts like "relational aesthetics" is difficult to overstate, fairs are not particularly interesting.

French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, Artistic Director of the 15th Gwangju Biennale.

To Bourriaud, the Korean biennale acts as a canvas (not a white one, but one charged with history) upon which to extend his reflections about the world — reflections articulated over the past three decades through other biennales, books, and curatorial projects. One of his many interests, articulated especially in his book *The Exform* (2016), is the role of detritus, of waste, of all that is left out of society.

And indeed, venturing through the half-empty rooms of the exhibition about to open, I get the feeling that this is a biennale of detritus. A biennale where the human element is slowly disappearing, making room for artificial intelligence, plants, and other nonhuman forms of existence — to borrow the words of writer Alan Weisman, a “world without us.”

Many voices

Entitled *Pansori: A Soundscape of the 21st Century*, this year’s Gwangju Biennale (7 September to 1 December 2024) explores our relationship with space and landscape, addressing issues such as climate change, overpopulation, and the coexistence of human and nonhuman species through musical metaphors. Literally meaning “the noise from the public place,” the Korean word *pansori* refers to a musical form originating in the 17th century and is used here to symbolise the voice of the people. The biennale’s main exhibition is divided into three sections that use sound-related concepts — “Feedback Effect,” “Polyphonies,” and “Primordial Sound” — to express various ideas about the contemporary world.

Nicolas Bourriaud conducts a tour at the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall.

Created by international artists and spread across different venues in the city, including public spaces and cultural institutions, the artworks cover not just spatial transformations but also themes of emancipation, feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, and decolonisation. Extending the musical metaphor, Bourriaud conceives of the biennale as a “choral organism” of voices that invites us to rethink the relationships between man and the environment.

Southeast Asia at the Gwangju Biennale

Spiritual, ecological, and migratory experiences emerge as common threads among the Southeast Asian pavilions. These themes are also being discussed at the Korea Foundation and ASEAN-Korea Centre, which are facilitating further cultural exchanges through exhibitions, film screenings, and other programmes.

The National Asian Cultural Center hosts the Gwangju Biennale's "ASEAN Pavilion."

The first pavilion I encounter is the Malaysian pavilion by artist Zulkefli Jais, curated by Erry Arham Azmi and Syahrul Niza Ahmad Zaini. Entitled *Passing Patterns: Exploring Temporary Markings in Urban Spaces*, it features an impactful installation of bright orange, high-visibility work vests, with the words "History will repeat itself" printed on the walls. Drawing on the turbulent history of the artist's hometown Teluk Intan — as, among other things, a haven for refugees and a flood-prone "sinking town" — the work confronts viewers with the stark realities of climate change and human displacement. The curatorial description further emphasises history's cyclical nature: how "human experiences, societal dynamics, and historical phenomena follow predictable patterns or cycles, echoing throughout time."

Zulkefli Jais, *Project: Temporary Marking* (2024), installation.

In contrast, the Vietnamese pavilion opts for elegant minimalism, presenting a folding screen of panels depicting both serene nature and busy urban scenes. This work *Frame of Reference* is part of *The Laboratory for Experimental (Meta)physics*, an ongoing project by Hanoi-based artist Phạm Minh Hiếu that ponders the multiple, fragmented realities we exist between: natural and artificial, past and present, East and West. Yet to me, Pham's work evokes a sense of harmony, providing a soothing counterpoint to the more visceral displays.

Images from Phạm Minh Hiếu's *Frame of Reference* (2024), lenticular prints on folding metal frames, 180 x 56.3 x 5 cm (each panel), presented as part of

Titled *Locations of Freedom*, the Philippine pavilion has a highly political slant, commemorating multiple forms of revolution from the historical to the everyday. Featuring pieces by Adjani Arumpac, Avie Felix, Dennis “Sio” Montera, Paul Eric Roca, Sari Dalena, Toym Leon Imao, and Veejay Villafranca, the pavilion sets works of various mediums in dialogue with each other.

Toym Leon Imao, *Desaparecidos* (2016–2024), polymer resin, welded steel, and wood.

As the biennale unfolds, pieces like these contribute to a larger narrative of cultural preservation, memory, and the intersection of nature and human intervention. Entitled *The Composition of Unknown Melodies*, the Thai pavilion features work by five artists, including Jakkai Siributr’s textile work *IDP Story Cloth* (2016). Inspired by the story cloth tradition of the Hmong ethnic community, four hand-embroidered panels detail the torturous journeys of ethnic minority groups migrating through Thailand to escape their own countries.

Turn Your Face to the Wind and Follow the Movement of the Sun, the Singapore pavilion by Zarina Muhammad and curated by Shubigi Rao, taps into sensory experiences, connecting reclaimed land and sea with performances that evoke renewal, ritual, and time. Through sight and smell — incense, flowers, and ritualistic objects — viewers are anchored in a multisensory experience of reflection and rebirth, related to the submergence and reemergence of Singapore’s Cyrene Reef.

“Rather than privileging a single voice, Zarina works collaboratively with the ungovernable, with restless topographies and beings,” writes the curator.

Installation view of Zarina Muhammad’s *Turn Your Face to the Wind and Follow the Movement of the Sun*.

Finally, the Myanmar pavilion — an important presence considering the current state of the country, plagued by military dictatorship — presents works by Aung Myint, Chan Aye, Htein Lin, Htoo Aung Kyaw, Khin Maung Yin, and Zaw Win Pe under the title *Heritage of the Golden Land: Mother's Embrace*. Covering themes of ethnic identity, nature, tradition, and an “evolving national ethos towards freedom,” the pavilion centres on the metaphor of the mother and accompanying ideas of origins and care.

Particularly striking are Htein Lin's surreal, transformative works, like shoes morphing into spiders, which evoke themes of metamorphosis, displacement, and survival, as well as the political struggles and resistance present in many Southeast Asian societies.

Installation view of work by Htein Lin in *Heritage of the Golden Land: Mother's Embrace*.

Southeast Asia at the Busan Biennale

At both the Gwangju and Busan Biennales, contemporary conversations and issues are often presented through the lenses of history, tradition, and spirituality — an approach found in the work of many Southeast Asian artists. In an era dominated by technology, ancient magical practices can offer us fresh ways to view the world.

Themed *Seeing in the Dark*, the Busan Biennale (17 August to 20 October 2024) placed a significant emphasis on spiritual and ritualistic practices. Using darkness as metaphor for a space of discovery and insight, co-curators Vera Mey and Philippe Pirotte emphasised Asia-Pacific vernacular practices, particularly Buddhist traditions, while seamlessly integrating them with contemporary work.

Philippe Parotte and Vera Mey, co-curators of the Busan Biennale 2024.
Images courtesy of the Busan Biennale Organising Committee.

For instance, the Korean monk and artist Song Cheon created two 10-metre-high paintings — entitled *Avalokiteshvara* and *Mary – The Truth Has Never Left My Side* — specifically for the Biennale.

One painting depicted a bodhisattva, while the other combined multicultural elements with a Buddhist painting style. Greeting visitors as they entered the exhibition space, the pieces established a foundational tone for the show.

“While we didn’t want to have a regional group prevailing over the other, you indeed see many Southeast Asian names in the show,” said Mey, over Zoom from London. As with the Gwangju Biennale, Busan had a notable Southeast Asian presence — unsurprising, considering Mey’s extensive background in the region (including co-founding the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore). It was refreshing to see the work of several Cambodian artists not regularly seen at biennales, such as Kanitha Tith’s steel sculptures, Theanly Chov’s paintings of “common people,” and Than Sok’s investigations of Cambodian spirituality.

Installation view of Kanitha Tith's work at the Busan Biennale.

Especially striking was Than Sok’s eight-painting series *Tomlorb*, created using acrylic paint and ash on burning canvases. Specifically focusing on the complexities of Cambodia’s relationship to Buddhism, Than is interested in how spiritual beliefs manifest in vernacular Khmer culture, and in questioning the effects of a strictly regulated collective morality.

Another impressive presentation was by the Thai artist Pratchaya Phinthong, comprising the installation *The Organ of Destiny (Assembly)* (2024) and the video work *Today Will Take Care of Tomorrow* (2022). Made from UXO (unexploded ordnance) materials sourced from Laos, the installation made reference to the endangered cranes living in the Korean DMZ, as well as to the B-21 Raider, a type of US stealth bomber aircraft often misidentified as a small bird. Together with the video, depicting a forest and a Buddhist temple ravaged by bombing in Laos, the work revealed connections between nature and global histories of violence.

Finally, *Sirens*, a thought-provoking work by Filipino artist Christina Lopez, plunged viewers into darkness, while a dim light flashed to reveal scary faces on the room’s walls. These faces were not of real people, but were composite faces made using artificial intelligence, based on the profiles of paid online trolls in the Philippines. Complete with multi-channel audio, the sensorially overwhelming experience captured the chaos and danger of the online world.

