The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, organized by the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) in Brisbane, profiles contemporary art from a broad and diverse region. Planning for the eighth edition (APT8), guided by a team of 20-plus internal as well as external curators, was beholden to a number of issues: governmental arts funding continues to suffer from deep cuts, leading to increased pressure on corporate and private support; and QAGOMA’s ongoing focus on collecting from its own exhibitions meant the curatorial team needed to select artworks that related to both the Gallery’s permanent collection and APT8 as a whole. That APT8 succeeded within such parameters is a testament to QAGOMA’s curatorial teamwork, as its move away from the spectacle of previous editions ultimately worked to the exhibition’s benefit. Performance is the thematic spine of APT8, elaborated through actions, video, kinetic art, figurative painting and sculptural installations. The inclusion of late New Zealand auteur Len Lye is a masterstroke: his steel-and-cork work _Blade_ (1959) welcomes visitors to the exhibition, coming alive hourly to perform a coital, bodily weave. The body as a site of struggle—politically, sexually, socially and physically—is strongly explored across APT8, though its large-scale commissions are a mixed bag. Huang Xiang’s _Soul LeVonn Upside Down — Open Modular Cubes (Small)_ (2015), located in a cavernous space in the older QAG building, suffered from a lack of movement, without the beguiling elements of motion seen in Yang’s earlier sculptures—which are conceptually indebted to Lye’s pioneering kinetic installations—_Soul LeVonn Upside Down_ feels ironically cumbersome.

More engaging is Asian Waqif’s _A2 We Leave Behind are the Memories_ (2015), for which the artist repurposed timber from demolished Brisbane structures. Hidden among thick, blackened blocks that have been bolted upward and across the central space of GOMA are directional speakers and proximity sensors, encouraging viewers to move through and activate the sound installation, and participate in creating a musical soundtrack reminiscent of distant earthworks. Waqif’s commission prospered from its reference to the local Deen Brothers demolition firm, which was responsible for the destruction of historic Brisbane landmarks from the 1980s onward.

The Triennial proper begins with the distinctive, wood-fake-marquetry forms of New Zealand sculptor Francis Upritchard, who revels in the material excesses of her quasi-human, polymer-clay figures, comprising theatrically contorted faces and limbs emerging from white satin pintuions and billowing togs. As an opening piece they are magnetic—equally attention-seeking and down. Nearby is Leang Seckon’s painting _Hell of Dual Seng_ (2016), depicting the horror of Cambodia’s largest, most notorious detention center under the Khmer Rouge. As one of few artists to survive that period, Leang makes work that is an important reminder of art’s role in recording and revivifying oppressed histories. Filipino artist Kiri Dalena’s “Erased Slogans” series (2008–14) also utilizes archival images, showing protests from 1970s Manila, last prior to the declaration of martial law by then president Ferdinand Marcos. In each image Dalena has carefully erased text from the placards of the protesters. It is unclear whether the intervention is in response to the politics of the 1970s or today, the ambiguity effectively leading viewers to contemplate both.

Zhou Ta’s _Blue and Red_ (2014) further elaborates on the idea of politics as abstraction. The film portrays a place of languid, contemporary stasis, where people seem trapped within varying states of leisure without clear purpose or context. Filmed in urban Guangzhou and Bangkok, the scenes are shown through predominantly blue and red hues. The Bitter visuals, however, are punctuated twice by an acute sense of reality: once with scenes of Occupy Bangkok (2013–14), showing protesters scrambling amid tear gas and a lone, bloody figure; and again with the torrent of a river—contaminated by zinc, lead, copper and...
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Opposite page, top

STAR (SCHOOL OF THEORY 
AND ACTIVISM, BISHKEK) 

(Aleksandr Gursky)

2011

32 from video 1100 35 sec

Courtesy the artists.

Opposite page, bottom

MING WONG

Aku Ata: Ber衔uruh/ \ W.I.L \ Survivor (Brazil)

2015

Film still from multimedia installation, 

dimensions variable

Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | 

Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

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UMIO SHIHA

KASHIKASHI (Splash Cloud)

2008-17

Chrome-plated development prints, 

dimensions variable

Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | 

Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

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DAVID MEDALLA

Cloud Canyons No. 23

2016

Plexiglas tubing, mirror, pump, 

water and detergent, 90x60x60 cm

Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | 

Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

cadmium—flowing from the Dabaoshan heavy-
metal mine in Guangdong.

Grappelling with troubled waters of a different 
context, Lieko Shiga’s RASEN KAGAN (Spiral 
Court) (2008-12) deals with the 2011 Tohoku 
earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Three years 
before, Shiga had taken on the role of official 
photographer for Kikakama, a small village later 
devastated by the tsunami. In the aftermath, Shiga 
assisted in rebuilding Kikakama’s community, 
personally collecting, sorting and cleaning over 
350,000 displaced photographs belonging to local 
citizens. For RASEN KAGAN, Shiga printed large-

scale photographs of Kikakama on high-gloss, 

rippling stock and has propped the images up with 
wood, using a complicated lighting system to create 
undulating reflections on the darkened gallery floor.

Upstairs, the warping of light and sound 
continues with Lawrence English’s Auslidity (2015).

English has constructed two half-dome structures 
that conduct reverberate inaudible sounds, and 
reflect noises captured from the surrounding gallery 
space. As viewers stand at the edge of the structures, 
their inky, oil-slick interior beckons the body closer 
and envelops one’s vision. In an adjacent gallery 

space is Yasumasa Morimura’s White Darkness 
(1994), a photograph featuring the cloven interior of 

a cow’s carcass, appearing as a dark void like that 
in English’s Auslidity. Beside the carcass stands 

Morimura in a pair of metallic high heels, head 

tilted backward and body bare. The work strongly 

asserts the gallery space’s thematic thread, which 

explores the queer or "revised" body.

Elsewhere in this space is Ming Wong’s Aku 

Akan Ber衔uruh/ I Will Survive (2015), inspired by 

Yoyoskatua’s queer performance scene. 

Collaborating with trans and queer artists, Wong 

reformulated pop-culture narratives that feature 

predominately white, cisnormative people 

in scenic landscapes—like Nicolas Roeg’s film 

Walkabout (1979) and Peter Weir’s Picnic at Hanging 

Rock (1975)—updating them to reflect a more 

inclusive, diverse present. Also showing are the 

videos of Kyrgyz artist-activist platform STAB 

(School of Theory and Activism, Bishkek), which 

revive overlooked feminist and sexual minority 

politics of the Soviet Union.

Alternative queer perspectives are further 

presented by Indigenous Australian artist Christian 

Thompson’s “Polari” (2014). Featuring 

video and photographs, the series investigates 

cultural fragmentation in relation to Polari, 

an underground language used by gay and other 

subcultures in 1930s to early 1970s Britain. Here, 

Polari emerges as a site of resistance and self-

determination. Such ideas are expanded upon 

in South Korean artist Siren Yun Young Jung’s 

video Art of Affair (2013), which reflects on the 

contemporary practice of a traditional Korean all-

female musical theater called yeongong gugyeok, 

by documenting the process that its actors undergo 
in inhabiting their roles as practitioners of a dying art 

form. The emotive, unique vocal quality of yeongong 

gugyeok is moving in itself, especially as a rebuttal to 

Korea’s traditional patriarchal structure.

Within this context, David Medalla’s Cloud 

Canyons No. 25 (1963/2015) becomes a critique on 

the inherent patriarchy and phallocentrism of 20th-

century modernist sculpture. Plexiglas tubes 

were found white foam that stretch upward, with 

tips that drop down in defeated coils. Equally 

dynamic are Chilean-Australian painter Juan 

Davila’s six large-scale canvases, hung on a pink 

and beige wallpaper. One piece, Island (2015), 

depicts a buff, sexually aroused man, dressed 

in black sandals in the searing desert sun of 

the outback, and a coil of barbed wire referencing 

Australia’s notorious detention centers. Next to 

him is a bushtronger-cum-frontiersman strapped 

with a rifle, pouring a glass of water onto a hot, 

concrete slab. Davila’s paintings are complex, 

searing polemic against a country that has lost its 

way, styled as a vacuous mockery on a de Chirico-

esque surrealistic montage.

Among such complex threads, APT8 is also 
game for some humor, allowing for Richard Bell to 
critique the Triennial in his amusing video 5for58 
(2015), in which viewers witness the very building 

they stand to explode at the hands of the livid 
artist. Tellingly, the stars of APT8 are the art and 

the artists, as, thankfully, curatorial interference is 

modest and not overreaching. The exhibition 

ultimately proves itself through the quality of the 

art that it presents.

TIM WALSH