

BRISBANE

Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)

8TH ASIA PACIFIC TRIENNIAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART



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 heave.

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. Haegue Yang's *Sol LeWitt Upside Down – Open Modular Cubes (Small)*, *Expanded 943 Times* (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—*Sol LeWitt Upside Down* feels ironically cumbersome.

More engaging is Asim Waqif's *All 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 guttural 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, voodoo-like marionette forms of New Zealand sculptor Francis Upritchard, who revels in the material exuberance of her quasi-human, polymer-clay figures, comprising theatrically contorted faces and limbs emerging from white satin pantaloons and billowing tops. As an opening piece they are magnetic—equally attention-seeking and dour. Nearby is Leang Seckon's painting *Hell of Tuol Sleng* (2014), 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 resuscitating repressed histories. Filipino artist Kiri Dalena's "Erased Slogans" series (2008–) also utilizes archival images, showing protests from 1970s Manila, just 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 Tao'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 listless 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



Opposite page, top**STAB (SCHOOL OF THEORY AND ACTIVISM, BISHKEK)**

Цех (Manufactory)
2012
Still from video: 1 min 35 sec.
Courtesy the artists.

Opposite page, bottom**MING WONG**

Aku Akan Bertahan / I Will Survive (detail)
2015
Film still from multimedia installation, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

This page, top**LIEKO SHIGA**

RASEN KAIGAN (Spiral Coast)
2008–12
Chromogenic development prints, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

This page, bottom**DAVID MEDALLA**

Cloud Canyons No. 25
1963/2015
Plexiglas tubing, motor pumps, alloy, water and detergent, 300 x 250 cm.
Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

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

Grappling with troubled waters of a different context, Lieko Shiga's *RASEN KAIGAN (Spiral Coast)* (2008–12) deals with the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Three years prior, Shiga had taken on the role of official photographer for Kitakama, a small village later devastated by the tsunami. In the aftermath, Shiga assisted in rebuilding Kitakama's community, personally collecting, sorting and cleaning over 30,000 displaced photographs belonging to local citizens. For *RASEN KAIGAN*, Shiga printed large-scale photographs of Kitakama 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 *Audition* (2015). English has constructed two half-dome structures that conduct and 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 *Audition*. 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 "othered" body.

Elsewhere in this space is Ming Wong's *Aku Akan Bertahan / I Will Survive* (2015), inspired by Yogyakarta's queer performance scene. Collaborating with trans and queer artists, Wong reformulated pop-culture narratives that feature predominantly white, cis-normative people in scenic landscapes—like Nicolas Roeg's film *Walkabout* (1971) 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 in 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 Eun Young Jung's video *Act of Affect* (2013), which reflects on the contemporary practice of a traditional Korean all-female musical theater called *yeosong gukgeuk*, 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 *yeosong gukgeuk* 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 phallicism of 20th-century modernist sculpture. Plexiglas tubes spew forth rods of white foam that stretch upward, with tips that droop 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 male, 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 bushranger-cum-frontiersman strapped with a rifle, pouring a glass of water onto a hot, concrete slab. Davila's paintings are a complex, searing polemic against a country that has lost its way, styled as a vacuous mockery on a de Chirico-esque surrealist montage.

Among such complex threads, APT8 is also game for some humor, allowing for Richard Bell to critique the Triennial in his amusing video *5 for 35* (2015), in which viewers witness the very building they stand in 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

