



Curriculum K–12 Directorate

## Asian–Australian artists: Cultural shifts in Australia

*The following article could provide material for a case study with a focus on curatorial practice, art critical practice, cross-overs or borders, e.g. regional or international art; Asian–Australian (Western)—or relationships between the agencies of the conceptual framework: artist, world, audience.*

One of the most significant cultural shifts in Australia over the last twenty years has been a re-orientation towards the Asia-Pacific region. Although the impetus for this shift in focus came largely from a perceived economic necessity, first publicly promoted during the Hawke and then Keating years, the emphasis quickly evolved into ideas of the “Asianisation” of Australia. Although a popular catchcry in media and business sectors, the “Asianisation” of Australia is problematic, insofar as it conceives of Australia and Asia as discrete, separate and rigid identities. Ien Ang and Jon Stratton have discussed the way in which the “Asianisation” of Australia re-affirms a binary and oppositional relationship between the two. They state that “where ‘Asia’ was discursively constructed as the Orient, that Other against which ‘the West’ defined itself, ‘Australia’ was constructed as a settled outpost of ‘the West’, an attempt to realise a society on the principles of European modernity in a space outside Europe”.<sup>1</sup> While Ang and Stratton’s conception of binary relations appears to be a persistent and recognisable model of engagement between Australia and Asia, it is nevertheless dependent upon a mutual identification with the broader terms of East and West. As Ang and Stratton are quick to acknowledge, the conditions of Australia’s engagement with Asia are more complex than an East and West philosophical divide, because of Australia’s peripheral location to the West (outside of Europe). Yet the problem with a general theory based on such binaries, is that it doesn’t allow for



Curriculum K–12 Directorate



a consideration of any of the subtleties or contradictions inherent in the relationship. One of the specific limitations of this binary logic is a lack of acknowledgment of regional differences within Australia. The Northern Territory is a case in point, where the long history of Asian, and in particular Chinese migration, has had a significant impact on the community. Although the Northern Territory was governed by South Australia at the turn of the century, Eric Rolls has written that it was “virtually a distant, separate Chinese settlement”.<sup>2</sup> This history, and the Territory’s contemporary status, now including diverse populations of Indonesians, Filipinos and Malaysians, might well suggest a different model of relations between Australia and Asia.

Another illustration of the difficulty of applying binaries conceived through an East and West model lies in the way that Australia perceived Asia, which differed greatly from a European perspective. Alison Broinowski describes Australia’s ties to Britain in the 1800s as a significant factor in the consideration of Asia as a geographical threat.<sup>3</sup> The threat of Asia was never an issue for Europeans, who were so far removed not only geographically, but also culturally. Another example of this difference is contained in an observation made by Mary Eagle, who stated that Australia’s proximity to Asia underscored the Australian impressionists determination to be “European”.<sup>4</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the European approach towards Asian cultures, which were often appropriated into an art canon as European art forms, as in the case of *chinoiserie* and *japonisme*. These differences further deconstruct the idea that Australia has the same relationship as the West with Asia, recognising the specificity of the Australian situation and, in particular, the aspects that make Australia different from the West, itself an homogenising and largely useless epithet.

An interesting aspect of the current situation is the way Australia ‘imagines’ itself within the region. By this I mean the way that Australia chooses to project and promote representations of itself within Asia. Nowhere can the results of this presentation be seen more clearly than in the visual arts. One of the best examples of this was in the first *Asia-Pacific Triennial* at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1993. In spite of the fact that this expansive event was an attempt to position Australia as a cultural centre within the region, the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* illustrated a number of contradictions in the way Australia seeks to present itself to Asia. On the one hand, Australia expresses a desire to be part of Asia yet defines itself culturally against Asia. The national selection of Australian artists, for example, depicted Australia as dominantly Anglo-European, notwithstanding the contribution of indigenous artists. The artists featured were Judy Watson, Gloria Petyarre, Kathleen Petyarre, Ada Bird Petyarre, Jon Cattapan, Marian Drew, Bronwyn

Oliver, Giuseppe Romeo and Gareth Sansom. Although this selection acknowledged the impact of European post-war migration on Australian culture the selection did not, significantly, include any Asian-Australian artists, maintaining a conception of Asia and Australia as somehow separate.

In 1994, Sneja Gunew commented that Asian-Australian artists remain under-utilised despite being “uniquely qualified to act as cultural mediators” in Australia’s struggle to define itself anew within the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>5</sup> In this way, one could also argue that Asian-Australian artists present the greatest challenge to the binary distinctions that maintain the construct of “Asia” as “Other” and furthermore, Australia as the “West”. This challenge is embodied in the notion of *diaspora*, which includes artists who were born in Asia and currently reside in Australia as well as artists who possess an Asian cultural background. Diaspora is often described as a condition of dislocation between here (Australia) and there (original culture), indeed this condition is its defining feature. The significance of Asian-Australian artists lies in their knowledge and understanding of an Asian culture, yet their location within an Australian context provides an entirely unique denial of the fixed notions of Australia and Asia. It is only in recent years, however, that Asian-Australian artists have had any impact on Australian contemporary art. This can be attributed to a number of factors, the most significant being curatorial interests, which have now begun to include Asian-Australian artists. Over the last decade, a number of exhibitions have addressed various aspects of the perceived relationship between Australia and Asia. Although exhibitions in the early 1990s tended to focus on Anglo-Australian perceptions of “Asia”, mostly as an exotic location and culture, this later developed into an interest in Asian-Australian artists. Perhaps the first exhibition to include Asian-Australian artists exclusively was *Here Not There* at the Institute of Modern Art in 1993, which included artists such as Laurens Tan, Felicia Kan, Maria Cruz and Simryn Gill. The travelling exhibition initiated in 1996 titled *Above and Beyond* was another important project which featured Asian-Australian artists. While the curatorial rationale of *Above and Beyond* illustrated a sophisticated understanding of the debates surrounding cultural exchange between Australia and Asia, in essence it did little to alter the parameters of the discussion.

While the inclusion of Asian-Australian artists within exhibitions has most frequently been interpreted through a localised multiculturalism, the national debates about Australia’s relationship with Asia have made the reception of their work all the more complex. One of the most persistent yet problematic interpretations of work by Asian-Australian artists is the tendency to overplay their cultural or biographical history. While some Asian-Australian artists do make work based upon a re-discovery



of their cultural heritage, such as Kate Beynon and Hanh Ngo, there are a number of artists whose work is not relevant to such an interpretation, namely Felicia Kan, Katherine Huang, Natsuho Takita and Bill Seeto. The process of constantly relating art work to a personal or biographical dimension also has the effect of locating it outside mainstream contemporary art practice as a kind of testimonial art, limiting its ability to interact within dominant discourses. A timely warning against the application of such an interpretive model is given by Ang, who states that “the question of ‘where you’re from’ threatens to overwhelm the reality of ‘where you’re at’, the idea of diaspora becomes a disempowering one”.<sup>6</sup> The work of Asian-Australian artists must be interpreted within an Australian idiom (where they’re at) rather than an Asian culture (where they’re from). Interestingly, when one examines these Asian-Australian artists as a group, it becomes evident that they possess more differences in terms of their cultural background and biographical history than similarities. It remains an irony then, that what unifies these artists are their differences within an Australian context.

The importance of an Asian diaspora and the individuality of Asian-Australian artists lies in their potential to disturb the perception of an homogenous national culture. In an attempt to convey the diversity of these practices, the rest of this essay features a discussion of work by a number of Asian-Australian artists. The first generation and now most established and prominent Asian-Australian artists are Lindy Lee, John Young and William Yang. While the work of all three artists currently investigates, in varying degrees, their Chinese cultural heritage, this was not always the case. In fact the evolution of these artists’ work to incorporate an acknowledgment of their cultural heritage is a relatively recent aspect of their practice. In the 1980s, when Lee and Young were establishing themselves as artists, their work was decidedly post-modern. Lindy Lee’s brooding photocopied images of portraits by European Masters were theorised as an investigation into the endgame of mechanical reproduction and simulacra. Yet from 1995 onwards, a visible shift emerged in her practice through an exploration of Zen. Lee has recently acknowledged Zen as a way of negotiating a series of oppositions between abstraction and figuration, self and other, not to mention diasporic Chinese and Australian culture. Colour has also been an important element in her paintings (with black dominating) playing an increasingly symbolic role. Arranged from panels of orange, purple, red, blue and celadon green, her paintings currently show a more expressionistic use of paint, influenced in part by calligraphy studied by Lee while on a residency at the Central Academy in Beijing.

The notion of diaspora is further complicated by how far one is removed from an original culture. For example, first generation Australian-born Chinese, Lindy Lee and

third generation, William Yang represent different Chinese diasporas in Australia. The Chinese have been present in Australia at least since the 1880s, when they migrated to Australia (known to the Chinese as the ‘golden mountain’) where they were able to mine, farm and trade. As a result of this traffic between Australia and China, the perception of Asian cultures in Australia has frequently been dominated by Chinese. Notwithstanding this established diaspora, in the early 1990s a number of Chinese artists migrated to Australia following the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, such as Shen Jiawei, Guan Wei, Li Bao Hua, Wang Zhi Yuan, Guo Jian and Ah Xian. Their work draws upon their life experiences and education in mainland China to make sense of a new culture. Guan Wei’s paintings in the *Treasure Hunt* series from 1995 depict quirky and at times humorous narratives featuring cartoon-like native Australian animals populating barren but bright landscapes. Self-taught as an artist, Ah Xian’s most recent porcelain busts are an interesting convergence of Western and Chinese history. Using his Chinese friends and family as models, he creates fine cream busts in their likeness. He then paints various Chinese designs and motifs in quintessential Qing dynasty blue glaze such as dragons, wave patterns and plants onto their faces so that the design becomes inextricably linked to the corporeal form like a tattoo. Interestingly, the bust is a Western tradition of veneration rather than Chinese, despite the fact that Mao later adopted it.

Over the last three years, a younger generation of artists has emerged to provide a fresh series of perspectives. Coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and for the most part trained at art schools in Australia, these artists have a very different relationship to their cultural background from their predecessors. Unlike Lindy Lee and John Young, these artists have begun their careers recognising different cultures as a direct influence on their work. One of the most successful artists from this generation is Savanhdy Vongpoothorn. Born in 1971 in Laos, Vongpoothorn’s early installations comprised of seed pods and fragile flower stamens, suggested an interest in design and patterning. Following a journey to Laos, she was inspired by the Lao tradition of textiles. Some of Vongpoothorn’s most beautiful works have been influenced by Laotian textile designs, most notably her technique of perforating paper so that it begins to resemble the qualities of woven cloth. Another artist who draws upon her cultural heritage for inspiration is Kate Beynon. Her manipulation of chenille sticks are youthful and popular renditions of Chinese stories. She likens the gradations in fuzz to the sensitivity of a calligraphic brush stroke. In *Queen Li Ji* (1996), for instance, Beynon attempts to re-invent an old fable about a young girl who slays a python. Beynon’s renditions of traditional stories and images are an appealing reference to Chinese culture but they also reveal a disjuncture between her nostalgic view of Chinese culture and the contemporary reality.



Curriculum K–12 Directorate



This can be seen as one of the most common features of diaspora, a nostalgia for past traditions. Victoria Lobregat's paintings offer a similar sense of diasporic longing towards her Filipino heritage. Having migrated to Australia when she was six years old, her memories of the Philippines are of a hybrid culture. She cites the conjunction of European (Spanish) colonial vestiges merged with indigenous Filipino culture as well as more recent American popular culture as important influences in her work. Her paintings made up of ready-made canvas panels are placed together in grids to convey different sources—separate yet together at the same time. Images ranging from Australian suburban homes to catholic angels are shown with fabric remnants from Lobregat's collection acquired over the years from friends and family. This confluence of images, seemingly taken from random sources, are a mimicry of the cultural appropriation Lobregat associates with her memory of Filipino culture.

Korean born Hyun Ju Lee utilises symbols of Korea's economic prosperity to call attention to the convergence of financial and cultural capital. Lee's paintings of national flags painted on a small scale replace the usual dominance of primary and strongly identifiable colours with sickly shades of pastel pinks, blues and yellows. This alteration of colour and scale transforms these national symbols into decorative insignificance. Lee's *Power of the World* depicts American bank notes as the faithfully valuable greenback, but instead of the usual national political figure she has inserted a tiger, a reference to Korea's identification with the tiger economies of Asia. These paintings show the interconnectedness of global flows of wealth between Western and Asian economies. My Lee Thi's work has explored issues related to ideas of cultural difference. Utilising physical signifiers of hair, skin and eye colour, Thi attempts to deconstruct racial stereotypes. Her most poignant work to date is *Black, White, Red, Yellow* (1997), a series of identical small plaster faces made in the likeness of Pauline Hanson. Each of the four faces was painted a different skin colour in a humorous alteration of Hanson's cultural ethnicity. At the height of One Nation's popularity, this work was an incisive critique of the seemingly arbitrary nature of racial discrimination.

While these artists draw upon their cultural heritage as a source of inspiration, this is only one aspect of the practice of Asian-Australian artists. A growing number of artists from different generations are working within a conceptual tradition with little overt reference to their cultural backgrounds. Significantly, these artists are rarely included within the Asia-Australia debates as their work does not slip easily into a biographical interpretation and has little relationship to a proposed "culture of origins". Bill Seeto is perhaps the best example. His sensitively conceived installations heighten our level of visual and spatial perception. From installations made up of corrugated brown boxes which

force a re-negotiation of space, to mirror-light works of infinite depth, Seeto is one of Australia's most accomplished installation artists. Felicia Kan's art practice offers a similar conceptual investigation. Her paintings and photographs are minimal and discrete observations of effect. Perhaps her best known works are photographs of fields, skies and landscapes. Presented as large cibachromes pinned to the top of the gallery wall, these images depict and engage with an Australian landscape tradition. The examples of Seeto and Kan, including the abstract painter Natsuho Takita, the photographer Dacchi Dang and the installation artists Paula Wong and Juliana Wong show that few Asian-Australian artists have similar life experiences or cultural backgrounds, let alone art practices in common.

The intention of this essay was not to identify any unified cultural movement, but rather to acknowledge the diversity of art practices by a number of Asian-Australian artists. The growing number of Australian artists whose work explores Asian cultures is also part of this cultural shift. With precursors such as Ian Fairweather, John Olsen, Brett Whiteley and Fred Williams, other artists such as Tim Johnson, Helga Groves, Joan Grounds, Diena Georgetti, Pat Hoffie, Neil Emmerson, Tony Clark and Geoff Lowe have, to varying degrees, been interested in and influenced by Asian art. This consistent interest demonstrates a broader cultural shift that is central to Australian contemporary art, but one that needs to go a lot further than a crass promotion linked to economic imperatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Ien Ang & Jon Stratton. (Jan. 1995). *The Asian Turn*, *Art + Text* 50. p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Rolls. (1996). *Citizens*. St Lucia QLD: University of Queensland Press. p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Broinowski. (1992). *The Yellow Lady: Australian impressions of Asia*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Eagle, cited in Alison Carroll. (1990). *Out of Asia*. Bulleen, Vic.: Heide Park and Art Gallery. p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Sneja Gunew, "Arts for a multicultural Australia: Redefining the culture", in S. Gunew & F. Rizvi (eds.) (1994). *Culture, Difference and the Arts*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ien Ang cited in Sneja Gunew, "Arts for a multicultural Australia: Redefining the culture", in S. Gunew and F. Rizvi. (eds.) (1994). *Culture, Difference and the Arts*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. p. 9.