

# LAND, LANDLESSNESS, MOBILITY

Asian and Indigenous Artists Disrupt Colonial Chronology

BY GODFRE LEUNG



In his essay for the 2008 Gwangju Biennale, curator Okwui Enwezor describes our time as the “Asian Century”: “Judging from the shape and turn of events, the clockwork convergence of Asia’s polyglot cultures, the large and still-growing consumer society and middle class, and the rapidly changing technology that knits them together, it may not be premature to think that we are facing an Asian moment. This emergence of global Asia, in fact, does not benefit Asia alone; it creates a model for other societies in transition, especially in Africa and Latin America.” “Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965” (2016), the last major exhibition that Enwezor staged in his lifetime, offered an alternate history of the second half of the 20th century, not sprung from the Yalta Conference or Marshall Plan but from the Konferensi Asia-Afrika in Bandung in 1955. Not only did the exhibition track the emergence of the Global South and the international solidarity of subaltern states, it also re-envisioned the postwar period as a worldwide project of decolonization.

More than a decade after Enwezor’s “Asian moment,” the touring group exhibition “Third Realm,” curated by Davide Quadrio for the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, brought together works, most of them dated 2006–11, by 17 artists and groups to restage the global rise of Asian contemporary art. That moment’s most commonly cited signposts include the debut of Art HK (now Art Basel Hong Kong) in 2008—the same year as the Beijing Olympics—and, in North America, the seeming inescapability of Zhang Huan following his 2007 Asia Society retrospective “Altered States.” However, instead of centering China and its

economic miracles, “Third Realm” defined the “Asian moment” similarly to Enwezor: as the “convergence of Asia’s polyglot cultures” with decolonization, revealing colonial specters in the layering of hyperdeveloping Asia’s multiple past and present realities.

Named for Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto’s 2011 Venice Biennale project, “Third Realm” highlighted Indonesia, with its diverse mixture of ethnicities, languages, and religions, as an exemplar of Asia’s productive heterogeneity. The namesake installation presents a military procession in silhouette, the ghosts of marchers signaled by bodiless uniforms and accoutrements suspended from the ceiling. Jompet has described this work as carnivalesque, “a celebration of moments and processes that are created within the web of contesting cultures, that are in perpetual negotiations, [and] which change and shape realities.” A megaphone held atop an invisible horse seemingly leads the procession from the rear. One imagines an Indonesian audience taking in this work—some who feel addressed by the megaphone, others emboldened to grasp it, the intensity of each person’s relationship to Dutch colonialism, or perceived historical distance from it, constituting the stereophony that is the exhibition’s emotional center.

A pair of large-format photographs from Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s 2009 project *Primitive*—out of which emerged his celebrated gothic-futurist film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010)—bookends Jompet’s procession, highlighting the exhibition’s postcolonial stakes. The two photographs depict the lingering trauma of decades-long Thai military oppression in the northeastern Thai town of Nabua, while also hinting at the long tail of colonialism in what had been a region of interethnic fluidity, before the Franco-Siamese War created the Laos-Thai border and a vicious national policy of militarized assimilation was enacted. The staging confounds linear history: as Apichatpong’s masked sci-fi protagonist in *Ghost Teen* (2009) gazes at the future, Jompet’s procession marches toward Nabua’s haunting past, evoked in a landscape photograph depicting a fire set by the national army during the “Thaification” period.

Within days of “Third Realm” landing at The Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver, another touring group exhibition, “Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts,” curated by Candice Hopkins and Dylan Robinson, opened at the nearby University of British Columbia (UBC)’s Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. “Soundings” was organized around the question “How can a [musical] score be a call and tool for decolonization?” and featured projects by a core group of 13 Indigenous artists or collaborations, to which additional artists and performers responded at

Installation view of “Third Realm: Contemporary Art from Asia,” at The Polygon Gallery, Vancouver, 2020. Photo by SITE Photography. Courtesy FarEastFarWest Collection.

each tour stop. In light of Enwezor's 2008 hypothesis that Asia might serve as a model for inhabitants of other formerly colonized territories, we might ask of these overlapping exhibitions whether a productive dialogue can be held between Asian art in its world-stage moment and Indigenous artists, who, while in a moment of unprecedented visibility, are still living under active colonization.

Like "Third Realm," "Soundings" engaged its audience in multiple temporalities, playing with the usually linear sequence of score to performance to documentation. Targeting desensitization as one of settler-colonialism's effects, many works pursued decolonization through practices of inhabiting the world guided by traditional Indigenous knowledge and a reconceived environmental stewardship. Two works enacted this by drawing on the exhibition's title—"sounding," in this sense, causing something to make a sound—to creatively reanimate objects from ethnographic museum collections, a practice that Alutiiq artist Tanya Lukin Linklater has likened to repatriation. Tahltan artist Peter Morin's *NDN Love Songs* (2018) is a series of video portraits of drums from the Royal British Columbia Museum, soundtracked by musicians' utilizations of the portraits as scores, while Lukin Linklater's video installation *We wear one another* (2019) depicts a collaborative performance by two dancers and a violinist scored by an Inuvialuit gut-skin parka from the Manitoba Museum. Like much contemporary score-based art, the methodologies used to interpret these "scores" are left opaque to the audience but likely are partly informed by the objects' traditional uses and the animist belief that they are incarnations of the animals whose skins they were made from.

As Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck and artist C. Ree have written, "Decolonization must mean attending to ghosts, and arresting widespread denial of the violence done to them." In their interventions, Morin and Lukin Linklater insist on the objects' generative existence in the present, upending our expectation that they be restored to a past and now absent way of life. The sounds in *NDN Love Songs* are not of the drums themselves—whose sounding, in some cases, may be inappropriate outside of a ceremonial context, if not also harmful to the fragile object—but of musicians "reading" them. The two works model Indigenous reclamation as a process that makes stewardship, not possession, its end goal—a temporality in which decolonization does not rest so integrally on the "firstness" of the First Peoples. (To be clear, these works still insist on land repatriation as decolonization's necessary *first* step.)

Thematizing the exhibition's mobility, Lukin Linklater adds to the stewardship in her and Morin's works an ethics of visitation, built on relations of mutual guesthood and cross-nation sharing of knowledge. Her video installation depicts an offsite performance that occurred during the first "Soundings" exhibition, at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston. Shifting relationships between the dancers, the gallery floor, the picturesque Lake Ontario landscape that is always in view, the reverberation of Laura Ortman's sustain-heavy electric violin, and the constantly moving handheld camera that records all of this animate the absent parka, which was on display

at the exhibition's main site. At the Belkin, the video was projected vertically onto a low wooden support, which emphasized to its downward-looking viewers the displacement of the performance from traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee land (what is now Kingston) to UBC, on the unceded territory of the Musqueam peoples. The work calls on viewers in its new locations to re-sensitize themselves to their own environments through the performers' coexistence with the Eastern Ontario landscape, learned from studying a transplanted Arctic garment.

The crux of a geopolitics involving global Asia and the Indigenous peoples of settler-colonial states might be to collectively reconceive our concepts of land, landlessness, and mobility. In the words of Métis painter David Garneau, a fellow traveller to the artists in "Soundings," "we are sovereign by virtue of our motion, our performance of territory. Moving, visiting, migrating, and the powwow circuit are all exercises of domain rather than claims of dominion." Writing in the context of "Transits and Returns," a bi-continental traveling exhibition of contemporary Indigenous North American and Australasian art, Garneau defines Indigeneity as coalitional, "an inter-National identity formed by First Peoples who have more in common with each other than they do with the colonial nations that surround them." This rhymes with Taiwanese scholar Kuan-hsing Chen's proposal in 2010 of "Asia as method," a strategic intermingling of Asian identities based on heterogeneity as much as commonality "to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our [postcolonial] anxiety over the West [as center] can be diluted."

Hidden in the title of "Third Realm" is the original, now lost, meaning of Third World—"third," not as behind Western democracies in "development," but as a coalition of "societies in transition," unaligned with the two Cold War power blocs. The two exhibitions' challenges to temporal linearity unsettle Vancouver's settler-centered history, in which Indigenous peoples are prehistoric and Asian immigration is dystopian. In their overlap, we might envision intersections that undo the structural matrix of North American settler society that literary critic Iyko Day pithily describes as "mixing alien labor with Indigenous land to expand white property."

Installation view of TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER's *We wear one another*, 2019, single-channel video installation: 25 min 18 sec., at "Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts," Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2020. Photo by Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

