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REVIEW: Dojima River Biennale 2013



Photo by Darryl Jingwen Wee

Guests at the opening on July 19 included Mori Art Museum director Fumio Nanjo, chair of the Mori Art Museum Yoshiko Mori, and gallerist Mutsumi Urano of Arataniurano.

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OSAKA — Curated by **Rudy Tseng**, the third edition of the Dojima River Biennale, “Little Water,” opened with quiet fanfare on July 19. Several of the 28 participating artists were in attendance, including Wolfgang Laib, Su-Mei Tse, Lee Mingwei, Charwei Tsai, Lyota Yagi, and Taro Shinoda.

As guests streamed through the glass doors of the sleek Dojima River Forum mixed-use development, a long, slender stone table with water-filled depressions carved into it like snaking rivulets greeted them. The lush grove of freshly cut white, yellow and red roses in this “Moving Garden” was **Lee**

Mingwei's invitation to each visitor to take one of these blooms home with them upon leaving the venue, on the condition that they "make a detour along the way and present it to a stranger as a gift." Concise and elegant in its conception and nourished by the poignant fact that these gorgeous flowers are destined to quickly wilt once plucked from this life-sustaining source of water (especially in the parched Osaka midsummer heat), Lee's work was a deserving centerpiece for an exhibition that hinted at themes of fluidity, fickleness, and the mercurial forces of life itself.

Among the Japanese artists who participated, both **Hiroshi Sugimoto** and **teamLab** had contributed waterfall pieces. Sugimoto's photograph "Kegon Waterfall" was a careful study in monochrome gradation and motion and stillness, while teamLab's "Universe of Water Particles" formed a stunning ten-meter backdrop that cascaded with a compelling, hyper-tactile presence (water particles are depicted at a resolution five times that of full HD).

Compared with illusion of endless plenitude that teamLab's finicky digital engineering had helped to create, **Pak Sheung Chuen**'s "The Horizon Placed at Home — Low Tide (N22° 17'400" Version)" documents how he collects a glass of water at regular intervals across Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor in order to recreate a miniature horizon-like representation of this iconic waterfront in the form of a Japanese-style "borrowed landscape" to be displayed in his own home — a more economical gesture that attempts to take symbolic possession of that unattainable perfect ocean view being commandeered by luxury condominium developments in the harbor city's prime downtown locations.

The works that felt freshest in this context, however, were those by the Southeast Asian contingent, which despite being included in the Guggenheim's new UBS MAP Global Art initiative "[No Country](#)" and other high profile international exhibitions, have so far received scant attention in this country (a notable exception being the Yokohama Museum of Art's "[Welcome to the Jungle](#)" earlier this spring). A trio of **Sopheap Pich**'s rattan, bamboo, and burlap sculptures traced fluid, organic forms with a sensibility that referenced local craft traditions, issues of vernacular material, as well as soft sculpture, bodily presence, and abstraction. Meanwhile, **Charles Lim**'s "Sea State: drift (stay still now to move)" depicted a man bobbing in and out of the Straits of Johor at some ambiguously defined point in the waters between Singapore and Malaysia — a wry invocation of the territorial marine politics that underwrite the postwar relationship between the two nations, the vague morass of identities, legal claims, and national and ethnic loyalties that are endemic to this part of Southeast Asia, with its myriad islands and archipelagos.

The other tour-de-force that seemed a particularly apt inclusion in an exhibition which, despite a tightness and concision that is increasingly rare in an era of encyclopedic, will-to-fill biennials, is fairly marginal even within the limited context of East Asia, was **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook**'s "Two Planets: Millet's The Gleaners and The Thai Farmers."

Placing a framed reproduction of the 19th century Barbizon painter Jean-Francois Millet in front of a group of Thai villagers and recording their reactions, Rasdjarmrearnsook takes apart the hoary bourgeois myth that the "uneducated" classes don't understand fine art. On the contrary — compared to the mannered "naturalist" attempts at depicting country life by bourgeois painters like Millet, the frankly acerbic commentary of these Thai peasants shed fresh light on the finer points of crop harvest

know-how and local vegetation.

Rasdjarmrearnsook's work suggests that the most pressing work that remains to be done by contemporary art in Asia is a matter of hasty perceptions and haughty prejudices with regard to its audiences, whether real or projected — a painfully salient point to make, but particularly resonant embedded within this show of mostly Asian artists.

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