

Sociopolitical whirls

‘After Utopia’ at Samstag

Christine Nicholls, *Adelaide*



After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Asian Contemporary Art, exhibition installation view, Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 2017; photo: Sam Noonan

The major focus of this year's annual OzAsia Festival was on Singapore's arts and culture. OzAsia's 2017 capstone visual arts event 'After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Asian Contemporary Art' was a redacted version of the original 2015 Singapore Art Museum (SAM) exhibition of the same name, along with some recently commissioned works. Presented at Adelaide's Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art and curated by SAM's Tan Siuli and Louis Ho, 'After Utopia' comprised artworks spanning diverse media by artists born in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and beyond.

The exhibition included four sub-themes. 'Other Edens' focused on the idea of the garden before the fall, as it were, obliquely suggesting Thomas More's original conceptualisation of utopia in which he imagined an idealised sociopolitical system on a fictional island. 'The City and Its Discontents' attested to the failure of the utopian ideal, as evident in many big cities and societies today, collectively presenting a convincing counterargument to More's *Utopia* (1516) – although his book, originally written in Latin, was in fact satirical, albeit indirectly. 'Legacies Left' addressed the 'after utopia' thematic, with works focusing on postcolonial situations and contemporary national ideologies in Southeast Asian countries, whether overtly political or not. Finally, the works in 'The Way Within' were marked by greater reflexivity and examined what is commonly held to be the underpinning idea of utopia: a flawless society in which sociopolitical justice prevails.

Entering Samstag, one was visually accosted by a mesmerising large-scale installation of mirrored torpedo-shaped glitter-bombs, suspended seductively – although a tad menacingly – from above. The work of Filipino artist Kawayan de Guia and titled *Bomba* (2011), this literally brilliant installation was visible from every vantage point in the gallery. *Bomba's* uber-presence and the powerful force field it exerted made it the ideated centre of 'After Utopia'. De Guia's imagery destabilises the viewer; one is uncertain of how to interpret this beautiful work. These objects are multivalent, possibly interpretable as fish – perhaps giant sturgeon – hanging on hooks in a fish market, their silver scales dazzling spectators. In fact, the SAM catalogue informs us that while *Bomba* is a Tagalog word meaning 'exposed' or 'naked', the principal reference in De Guia's complex, magical work is the extensive American bombing of Manila in the Second World War.

Samstag audiences flocked to view Singaporean artist Donna Ong's inventive *Letters From The Forest* (II) (2015), an installation of a nineteenth-century desk that included antique letter cases with cut paper butterflies arranged and pinned *wunderkammer*-style, speaking to the continuing legacy of the colonial rule imposed on many parts of Southeast Asia. In her accompanying single-channel video with soundtrack *The Forest Speaks Back* (I) (2014), Ong appropriated the colonial appropriators, thereby critiquing the past. From this emerges a different and more balanced narrative. Her work was juxtaposed



Left:

Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Beyond*, 2007–09, installation detail, 'After Utopia', Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 2017; bronze with gold leaf, dimensions variable, collection the artist; photo: Sam Noonan

Right

Shannon Lee Castleman, *Jurong West Street 81*, 2008, installation view, 'After Utopia', Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 2017; 16-screen video installation with sound, 13 mins duration, Singapore Art Museum; photo: Sam Noonan

with J. Walker's *A Map of Java* from 1817, a visual testament to colonial conquests in that region. An important inclusion in the exhibition, it served to contextualise not only Ong's installations but also many works in this exhibition.

Thai artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert's small-scale installation *Beyond* (2007–09) comprises 24 bronze sculptures of small figures embellished with gold leaf, seated in various poses. In dialogue with the installation was a larger vessel located centrestage in the gallery, appearing to demonstrate the permeable boundaries of past and present, the possible and impossible. *Beyond* is a work of authority, stripped of all pretension. Not only does it reference Buddhism and its practices and the struggle of the individual self for the dissolution of desire, but it also confirms this artist's high skill level as a maker. His exquisitely wrought works embrace the macro- and micro-levels of human existence.

Filipina artist Geraldine Javier's *Ella Amo' Apasionadamente y Fue Correspondida [For She Loved Fiercely, and She Is Well-Loved]* (2010) is a compelling work that doubles as a visual meditation on conventions and gender issues faced by women artists; Ian Woo's quasi-abstract work *We Have Crossed The Lake* (2009) does not speak to the simple carefree pleasures of nature but, rather, poses many questions; moving-image works by luminaries such as Malaysian artist Chris Chong Chan Fui's *Block B* (2008), The Propeller Group's extraordinary *Television Commercial for Communism* (2011–12), and Cambodian Svay

Sareth's *Mon Boulet* (2011), open up the mental worlds of the artists, providing a glimpse into their sociopolitical worlds.

The Japanese-born, Thai-based artist Miti Ruangkritya's work on paper *Dream Property: Excerpts from Bangkok Real Estate Advertising*, and photographic work *Dream Property: Room* (both 2016), critique the spatial order imposed on human populations living in huge cities. Finally, the Indonesian artist Maryanto's monochromatic *Pandora's Box* (2013, 2015 and 2017), a dramatically charged charcoal and carbon drawing on Samstag's northern wall, spoke eloquently to the dystopia forged by colonial forces in Indonesia – a situation that persists to this day via the continuing exploitation of the country's natural resources. Maryanto's imagery references this once beautiful but now bleak natural landscape that has been ravaged by industry.

While the social, political and environmental agonies (and some ecstasies) associated with contemporary living in Southeast Asia were not underplayed in 'After Utopia', its robust political dimension may have been missed by visitors merely browsing this marvellous exhibition. The irony is that the show's critical edge and sheer visual splendour promise to provide some hope for a better future.

'After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Asian Contemporary Art' was exhibited at the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide, from 22 September until 1 December 2017.