

Collecting Southeast Asian art

The consumption of transnational culture has become an appeal in post-modern society.
How and why does one collect regional works of art? **BY Sarah Abu Bakar**

In Southeast Asia, cross-cultural works of art have been circulated regionally and internationally since the mid-1980s and throughout the nineties. It started with the “boom” in Indonesia and the Philippines’ art markets; Malaysia and Singapore’s economic growth; Vietnam’s Doi Moi reform period; and Thailand’s flourishing commercial art galleries in the mid-nineties, until the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997.

Malaysian art collectors have expanded and diversified their portfolio to include Southeast Asian works of art due to close cultural connection, historical significance and, perhaps, for lucrative investment returns.

At the forefront of Asia’s art market today is Hong Kong, since the inception of Art HK in 2008 until its merger with Art Basel — the organiser of art fairs in Basel and Miami — inaugurating Asia’s first edition in Hong Kong that took place in May 2013. The art fair showcases the best of Eastern and Western art.

In 2011, Art Stage was established in Singapore, focusing on contemporary Asian art and was first held at Marina Bay Sands’ Sands Expo & Convention Centre. It is now into its seventh edition (Art Stage Singapore 2017 will take place from Jan 12 to 15 at the centre), with a branch installed in Jakarta last August, elevating the status of the Art Stage brand into Southeast Asia’s boutique commercial art fair.

Other art fairs in the region include Art Jog in Jogjakarta, Art Fair Philippines in Manila, Art Expo in Kuala Lumpur, and Affordable Art Fair in Singapore. But one of the oldest fairs of Asian contemporary art is the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane. It showcases contemporary art series, which started in 1993. According to its website, “the APT series has drawn more than three million visitors with its unique mix of visual spectacle and cross-cultural insight” for more than two decades. Although the triennial fair is mainly educational rather than commercial, it is a significant occasion for the participating artists representing their respective countries to increase their professional artistic merits, just like the world’s most prestigious Venice Biennale, which was founded in 1895.

Other important biennales (biennials) and triennials in Asia are the Taipei Biennial (founded in 1992), Gwangju Biennale (founded in 1995), Shanghai Biennale (founded in 1996), Yokohama Triennale (founded in 2001), and Singapore Biennale (founded in 2006).

Auctions

Ever since the world’s two main auction houses — Christie’s and Sotheby’s — relocated their sales of Southeast Asian arts from Singapore to Hong Kong in 2002 and 2008 re-



Internationally renowned Indonesian artist Heri Dono’s whimsical painting entitled *An Astronaut with a Magical Bowl* (2015) will go under the hammer at The Edge Auction on March 5. Its estimated price is RM26,000 to RM30,000.

spectively, the gap in the market has been filled by local regional auction houses such as Borobudur Auction, 33 Auction, The Edge Auction, and Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers.

In the fifth edition of The Edge Auction on March 5, an exciting range of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art will be featured. Representing Indonesia are the likes of John van der Sterren, 78; Josephine Linggar, 73; Heri Dono, 56; Ugy Sugiarto, 48; Hudi Alfa, 47; Agus “Baqu” Purnomo, 41; Riki Antoni, 39; I Dewa Ngakan Made Ardana, 36; Hendra ‘Blankon’ Priyadhani, 35; Saman and Hardi Marsono. And from Vietnam are Hong Viet Dung, 54, and Phuong Quoc Tri, 40, who will be offering artworks for the first time.

The appeal of Indonesian art stems from cultural and historical values, where artistic expressions are influenced by the people and natural landscape of the archipelago, external exposure to China, the Middle East and Europe, and contemporary social and political climate. Most of the modern Indonesian artworks contain elements of romanticism as pioneered by Raden Saleh, the 19th-century Arab-Javanese painter renowned for his romantic-naturalistic works during the Dutch East Indies period in Indonesia.

A popular genre called “Mooi Indie” (Dutch for beautiful Indies) was developed during colonial Dutch East Indies, depicting the quixotic scenes of the colonial Indies. Echo-



Vietnamese artist Hong Viet Dung’s *Summer Morning* (dated 2011) will make its debut at The Edge Auction, priced at RM30,000 to RM50,000

ing the style of his ancestors, John van der Sterren, who was born in Sukabumi, West Java, in 1938 created an Impressionist-style landscape oil painting on canvas circa 1990s, measuring 60cm by 70cm. Priced at about RM13,000 to RM17,000, this work will make its debut at The Edge Auction in March.

Another work that captures the nostalgic scene of yesteryear is award-winning Hudi Alfa’s oil painting *Old Batavia II*. Painted in 2015 and measuring 60cm by 80cm, the monochromatic streetscape of Jakarta pre-1949 carries a price tag

of about RM6,000 to RM8,000. An illustrator by profession before becoming a painter, Hudi Alfa is also known for his figurative paintings as represented in two other works on offer: *Winner Takes All* (dated 2006), measuring 130cm by 93cm, and featuring a cockfight scene, and *Three Dancers* (2015), measuring 80cm by 100cm. Both oil on canvas works are priced at RM6,000 to RM8,000.

In the contemporary segment, collectors will have an opportunity to acquire an abstract expressionist work on canvas by Agus “Baqu” Purnomo, *Twilight #2*. Painted in 2013

and measuring 200cm by 180cm, this vibrant painting depicts “random numeric sequencings that collide with colour and brushstroke to create a rich and dynamic tapestry of various skies throughout the day”, according to the text written by curator Eva McGovern for Agus’ solo exhibition, *Numbers in the Sky*, held during Jogja Contemporary at Sangkring Art Space in 2012. By using purple hues as a base and yellow to accentuate the roman numerals on the foreground, the effervescent aesthetics of *Twilight #2* is priced at RM7,000 to RM10,000.

A member of the Ace House Collective, an artist collective based in Jogjakarta, Hendra “Blankon” Priyadhani is a contemporary visual artist who incorporates found objects from flea markets in his two- or three-dimensional mixed-media works. On offer is a quartet of wall sculptures *Re-United of Post Power Syndrome* created from 2014 to 2016 and priced at RM1,300 to RM2,600 each.

Similar to Indonesian art, Vietnamese art had evolved since the beginning of the 19th century when French artistic influence spread into Vietnam. In the early 20th century, the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine (Indochina College of Arts) was established to educate students on European artistic methods. The college exercised its influence mostly in Hanoi and Saigon.

A graduate of the Hanoi Industrial College of Fine Art in 1984, Hong Viet Dung has exhibited his works in countries like Russia, Germany, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, Norway, the US, Australia and the UK. A devout Buddhist, Hong’s works capture the calmness and serenity of nature. Up for sale at the upcoming auction is *Summer Morning* (dated 2011). The yellow landscape, measuring 135cm by 155cm, depicts the soft silhouette of a mangrove forest by the river and a solitary boat. It is tagged at RM30,000 to RM50,000. The current owner acquired the oil painting from an art gallery in Hong Kong.

Another Vietnamese work on offer is a portrait of a young woman by Phuong Quoc Tri, whose main themes include women from the minority tribes, nudes and women in traditional ao dai dresses. Measuring 130cm by 110cm, *Highland Lady* (dated 2011) depicts the beauty of a Degar woman. Also known as Montagnard, the Degar are indigenous people of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Executed on a large scale but with minimal palette, the artwork is estimated to be sold at RM15,000 to RM20,000 at the auction. **E**

The Edge Auction will be held at Hilton Kuala Lumpur on March 5. For details, please visit www.theedgegallery.com.