

# APT9

By Michael Young

**In Issue 45, Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) Curatorial Manager of Asian and Pacific Art, Zara Stanhope, spoke with Artist Profile about the ninth edition of QAGOMA's flagship exhibition series, 'The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art' (APT9), ahead of its opening.**

Zara Stanhope joined the gallery last year to assume responsibility for APT9 and found herself pitched straight into the challenge of bringing together eighty artists and artist groups from over thirty countries to craft the Asian region's only exhibition devoted exclusively to Asian, Pacific and Australian art. Even though one third of the artists had by then been selected, the process, predicated on extensive curatorial travel and fieldwork throughout South-East Asia, proved daunting.

Gallery Director Chris Saines had wanted something on show that would whet visitor's appetites well before APT officially opened. So, leading Chinese artist Qiu Zhijie has been hard at work painting one of his enormous site-specific maps directly onto the wall of QAGOMA's Long Gallery. At thirty metres long and sixteen metres high, it's his largest to date. As he worked, he was perched on top of a dizzyingly high ten-metre plus scissor lift that beeped and swayed as it moved through the space. After five days of intensive painting Zhijie's fingers were stained black and he looked exhausted. With its litany of pithy hand-drawn labels in both English and Mandarin, the *Map of Utopia* (2018) satirises many technological moments in world history.

Stanhope rattled off a list of visual artists who would be included in APT9, including filmmakers from India and South-East Asia in the curated film

program. There are 'new types of dramas coming out of India, what they call New Bollywood ... a different style of filmmaking ... where people who have become cinema-goers have decided to create their own films ... a bit more regional in style and content, looking at everyday life,' she says.

The ever-popular APT Kids area returns, featuring eight interactive projects including Australian artist Gary Carsley's *Purple Reign* (2018), an immersive secret garden populated with images of jacarandas and interactive experiences. There's also an animation by Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji that has inspired a paper boat-making activity, *A Boat to Carry your Dreams* (2018).

However the APT9 theme that emerges is one of customary practice. 'Women's practices and women's wealth are a big part of this APT, as are alternative forms of wealth and labour, partly touching on where they might be going,' Stanhope says.

Immense shell wheels from Papua New Guinea (PNG) are exhibited within cooee of Chinese artist Cao Fei's recent fictional narrative film, *Asia One* (2018), set in a logistics warehouse in China where millions of deliveries every day are driven by robots rather than humans. The hour-long film continues Fei's exploration of Artificial Intelligence and how, in her view, it will inevitably rule the world. First shown at New York's Guggenheim as part of the group show 'One Hand Clapping', *Asia One* was described by *The New York Times* as 'a mournfully beautiful hybrid of economic forecast and tragic love story'.

Stanhope is voluble about what she describes as a key exhibit – the Women's Wealth Project – a variety of customary works by a diverse group of eighty Bougainville women: weaving, fabrics, ceramics, pots, beading, woven baskets and textiles, offering a cultural snapshot of life in this autonomous region within PNG.

Ruth McDougall, QAGOMA's curator of Pacific Art, who had responsibility

for on-the-ground research earlier this year, later explained how a ten-day curatorial journey had taken her through remote villages in Bougainville to bring together such a diverse collection. 'I was going to villages and markets recruiting women to take part in the project. Sometimes the women would be sewing in the market and I asked if they would be interested in the project. Some said yes, others, no.' One hundred objects will be on display and all will be acquired by QAGOMA for its already significant collection of Asia-Pacific art.

While women's wealth is measured at APT by craft skills, other wealth can be more anthropological and esoteric. One such are the shell wheels from PNG that can be traded as a form of currency and which possess both social and economic value. Those at APT9 are created from thousands of shells and are described by the gallery as, 'large circular sculptural forms'. McDougall explains, 'As currency, the shells are strung on canes of different lengths and therefore different values. You can buy a packet of Twisties at the local shops with shell wheels.'

'Ideas about the natural world and human relationships with it are quite strong,' Stanhope says. Singaporean artists Donna Ong and Robert Zhao Renhui are collaborating on *My Forest is not Your Garden* (2016-2018), a project that will combine Ong's signature artificial flora with Zhao's archival research. It will populate the Watermill site of Queensland Art Gallery, a location that always proves a winner.

Women's wealth, environmental impact and labour are strong threads that run through many APT9 exhibits but there are many other gems to be seen.

Mongolian artist Enkhbold Togmidshiirev creates paintings from natural materials such as horse dung, felt, shrubs, ash and sheepskin, elements that derive from his nomadic culture that questions the materiality of painting.

Senior Thai textile artist Jakkai Siributr works with fabric to probe social contradictions and the frictions that exist between Muslims and Buddhists

in southern Thailand. Using hand stitching, applique and other vernacular craft techniques, he reworks dresses handed down to him by his mother and aunts to create visually lush hybrid clothing emboldened with family scenes that elucidate and explore the abuses of power that plague his country.

Similar situations can be found in Cambodia where avaricious land grabs sweep aside crumbling social housing – along with their inhabitants – to be replaced by luxury developments. Lack of maintenance had turned the iconic 1960s White Building in Phnom Penh into a festering slum. Even so, locals clung on to their apartments until last year when the wrecking ball swept through. Many of the inhabitants had installed tiny Spirit Houses in their apartments to honour the spirit of the home and bring good fortune to its inhabitants. Ubiquitous across South-East Asia, Spirit Houses are site specific and are left behind when residents move on. Cambodian artist Vuth Lyo retrieved over 180 Spirit Houses, and 119 will go on show suspended from a four-metre tower of cast iron gates, also rescued from the building, bringing the once religious iconographic symbolism into the gallery in a stunning display of ethnic diversity and vivid colour.

APT always does the monumental well and Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones has delivered *untitled (giran)* (2018), a soundscape (think of wind, bird song and whispering Indigenous voices) conjured into existence by thousands of feathers attached to two thousand small sculptural objects suggestive of birds in flight, suggesting a spiritual presence and contiguity with land, tropes that lie at the core of Jones' practice. *Untitled (giran)* is an evocation of something that was once lost and has now been found, a gentle persuasive pleading for ownership that is subtle, moving, deeply profound and aesthetically triumphant.

APT9 looks to be a gentle show and one can't help thinking that Stanhope's remit also includes running a metaphorical broom along APT's twenty-five year corridors in the pursuit of relevance in a region crowded with biennials

and art fairs. Even though the current APT model isn't broken, a pressing question for Stanhope, she confesses, is whether that model is sustainable.

Ideas concerning APT's future are being actively canvassed among senior staff at QAGOMA. Even though visitation numbers remain buoyant – 604,904 for APT8 in 2015 – the gallery remains determined to prevent ossification of what it sees as its leading brand. One of the subjects on the agenda is spilling the exhibition beyond the confines of the gallery so that it becomes less a museum show. 'I don't understand why this hasn't been done before,' says Stanhope. 'We don't want to reflect so much on the history of the APT; we want to reflect on where we are now and what is happening in the region. That is a question that needs to be asked now. I think in the future it (APT) will change. I would like to see it change. I think the gallery now is interested to do that,' she says.

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