

A New Festival Brings Asian Art to New York

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The inaugural Asia Society Triennial features artists and performers who have often been overlooked in the U.S.



A detail from Anne Samat's installation 'Follow Your Heart Wholeheartedly,' one of the works commissioned for the Asia Society Triennial.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF RICHARD KOH FINE ART AND THE ARTIST

To create "What you see is the unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities" (2016-18), a series of outsize cloth panels depicting illuminated chandeliers, the South Korean artist Kyungah Ham took risks—and not just artistic ones. The panels were hand-embroidered by needleworkers in North Korea, following instructions that had been smuggled across the border. Small finished pieces were then smuggled back into South Korea and assembled into the completed works. For everyone's safety, the artist didn't know the workers' identities, and no single participant knew what the entire artwork looked like. With a touch of humor, Ms. Ham lists the artworks' materials as not only silk threads on cotton but "middleman, smuggling, bribe, tension, anxiety, censorship, ideology."

That work is one of the highlights of the inaugural Asia Society Triennial, a festival of contemporary Asian and Asian-American art, music, performance and film that will open in New York on Oct. 27. Boon Hui Tan, director of the Asia Society Museum, notes that Asian artists like Ms. Ham are often overlooked in the American art world. "There were many artists that I was seeing in presentations in Asia and Europe," he said, "but for some reason they weren't finding their way here."



A panel from Kyungah Ham's 'What you see is the unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities' (2016-18).
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KUKJE GALLERY PHOTOGRAPH BY CHUNHO AN

Twenty-one visual and performance pieces were commissioned specifically for the Triennial. The installation "We the People: Xu Bing and Sun Xun Respond to the Declaration of Independence" pairs a rare, early-19th-century copy of the document with two works by Chinese artists who have spent significant time in New York. Indian artist Vibha Galhotra's three-channel video installation "Who Owns the Water?"—which will go on view in part two of the Triennial in March—explores the safety of New York's water sources, building on similar research that Ms. Galhotra did in New Delhi.

Such original projects are central to the Triennial's theme, said Mr. Tan: "That's what commissioning is. You have to dream together." One of the most striking commissioned works is "Follow Your Heart Wholeheartedly," a large-scale sculptural installation by Malaysian artist Anne Samat. Trained as a weaver, Ms. Samat drew on Southeast Asia's rich textile traditions to create four wall sculptures and a standing figure—all of them bristling with toy soldiers, rakes, metal washers and other household items.

According to Mr. Tan, the piece is Ms. Samat's tribute to the family members who gave her the courage to be an artist—not an easy path for women in Malaysian society. Michelle Yun, associate director of the Triennial, observed that Asian and Asian-American artists in general are seldom part of the art-world mainstream, but "female Asian and Asian American artists are even more exponentially marginalized." Countering that trend, more than half of the artists in the Triennial are women.

On Oct. 23, a few days before the Triennial opens at Asia Society, the New-York Historical Society will open "Dreaming Together: New-York Historical Society and Asia Society Museum," a collateral exhibition that brings together works from both museums' collections. "We're breaking open that iconic image of American art, putting it in dialogue with Asian and Asian American art," said Wendy Ikemoto, curator of American art at NYHS.



Scrolls #1 and 4 from Dinh Q. Lê's 'WTC from Four Perspectives' (2016).

PHOTO: PERRY HU DINH Q. L

In the Society's Dexter Hall gallery, Thomas Cole's majestic five-painting cycle "The Course of Empire" (1834-36) shares a wall with "Chinese Shan-Shui (Landscape)—Tattoo" (1999), a series of oversize photographs in which artist Huang Yan displays classical Chinese landscapes painted on his arms and torso. Elsewhere in the gallery, two scrolls from Dinh Q. Lê's series "WTC from Four Perspectives" (2016) cascade to the floor in shafts of color—steel gray, sky blue, burning orange—in a haunting evocation of the September 11 attacks.

In December, another New York icon will host a Triennial event. As part of the Times Square Arts "Midnight Moment," a multi-screen version of Daniel Crooks's video installation "The Subtle Knife" (2016) will take over the giant video billboards of Times Square every night of the month, starting at 11:57 p.m.

With New York performance spaces still closed, most of the Triennial's music, performance and film projects have been scheduled for next spring. And if live gatherings still aren't possible then? "We will do a combination of virtual events within the dates of the Triennial, and live events later," said Mr. Tan. "We're not going to be so bureaucratic—'Oh, it must literally end on the 27th of June.' Because we are living in quite extraordinary times."

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