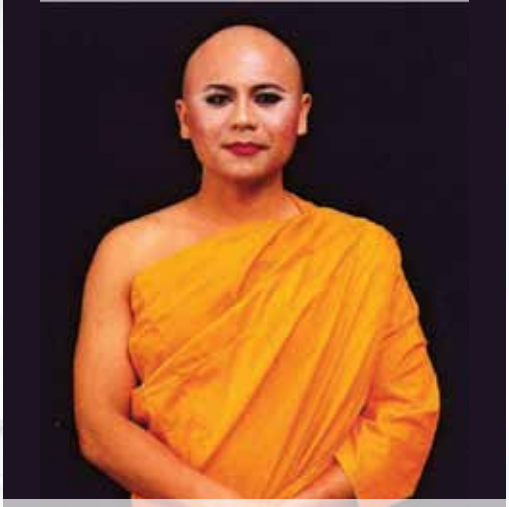
Vu Dan Tan, Vietnam, *Amazon Series no 8, 2002*, cut, folded and hammered sheet metal, approx 130 x 50 x 10 cm; *photo courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia*



Michael Shaowanasai, Thailand, *Portrait of a Man in Habits no. 1*, 2000, C-print, 142 x 91.5 cm; *photo courtesy of the author*

Nguyen Van Cuong, Vietnam, *Porcelain Diary*,2000, enamelled porcelain, H 28 cm; *photo courtesy of the artist*

Negotiating Home, History and Nation

Two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011

By Iola Lenzi

Contemporary art from Southeast Asia is increasingly visible on the global art stage. Yet, while offered at auction and on the biennale circuit, it is seldom the object of curated exhibitions. I welcomed the chance, in collaboration with the Singapore Art Museum, to remedy this gap with *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011*.

Several years in gestation, this made-in-Singapore exhibition is the first of its kind in depth, scope and breadth. Including over 70 works from Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia, the exhibition not only features seminal pieces of the last two decades (many recently acquired by SAM for the show), but also presents them in conversation with each other. Ground-breaking artists include Montien Boonma and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook of Thailand, Lee Wen and Suzann Victor of Singapore, Heri Dono and Agus Suwage of Indonesia, Tran Luong and Vu Dan Tan of Vietnam, the Aquilizan duo from the Philippines and Wong Hoy Cheong of Malaysia.

First and foremost, the survey showcases the visual brilliance and conceptual purpose of recent Southeast Asian art. As well as offering audiences the opportunity to experience a spectrum of regional talent of unprecedented size, it deliberately provides regional comparisons illuminating the common themes, aesthetic approaches and conceptual tendencies surfacing from the exhibition framework.

Emerging in the waning years of the twentieth century, the art featured here is neither in the shadow of China, nor tributary to Western currents. Indeed, the show argues for a view of the region's practices on the region's terms. The curatorial references used to contextualise the work are mined from Southeast Asian history, geography and culture. The exhibition is predicated on the contention that the confluence of recent regional socio-political history, profound cultural shifts and artists' confidence *vis à vis* their deep-rooted aesthetic and spiritual baggage, are significant causes explaining the creation of the visually potent and conceptually original work of the last two decades.

Home, History and Nation is dominated by installations and performances documented either by video or still photography. This preponderance reveals the artists' predilection for genres that are deemed to best fit their ideas where both content and form are concerned. Painting has not been abandoned, but is now one of many possible media.

A number of specifically Southeast Asian themes and commonalities emerge from the exhibition. These include the idea of woman as both actor and subject, the evolving place of faith, the contestation of nation-building discourses, the ongoing rural-urban dichotomy, the reappraisal of the craft/high-art divide, the communitarian focus of regional practice and its connection with politics and finally, the ownership of history and memory.

Blockbusters in Singapore are often imported, the art they feature made far from our shores. That some local institutions now have the confidence to shine a candid spotlight on regional culture augurs well. *Home, History and Nation* offers insights into the region through the honest appraisal of its recent art. It is also a celebration of some of today's most exciting art.

A fully illustrated catalogue including critical essays by regional scholars and a specially commissioned short story by Malaysian novelist Tash Aw document the exhibition.

Iola Lenzi *is a Singapore-based critic and curator of Southeast Asian contemporary art who has staged exhibitions in Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta. She is a regular contributor to exhibition catalogues around the region, is the Singapore correspondent of* Asian Art, London, *a contributing editor of* C-ARTS, *and the author of* Museums of Southeast Asia.