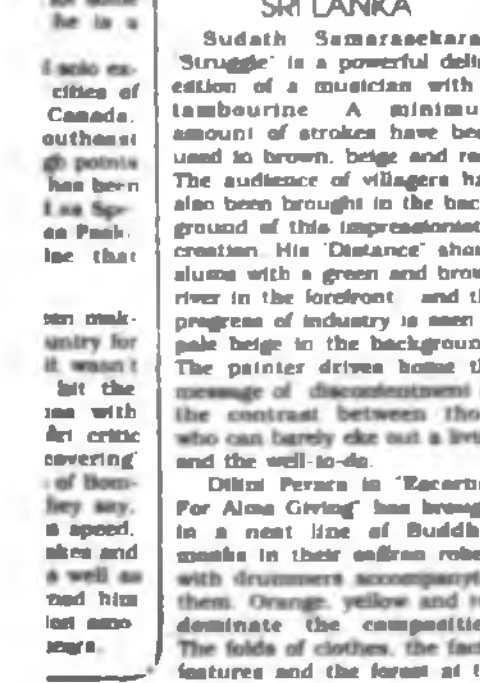
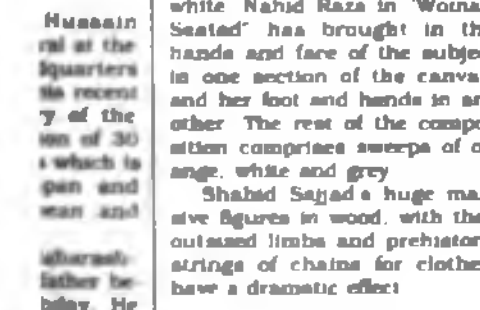


# 10th Art Biennale 1993



## The Emergence of Asian Art

by Syed Manzoorul Islam

CONCEPTIONS of region and nation are bound to be different in politics and art, although there may be areas of overlap or even integration. When we talk of national art in the sense of a cultural formulation that has a history and mythology, as well as a living tradition, the components may spill over the political boundary and become shared properties of linguistic and cultural groups on both sides of the line of demarcation, as can be seen in many nations in Europe and Asia today. These groups operate on certain terms of commonness, even homogeneity; although on a political plane, their roles may be adversarial and antagonistic. The political definition of nation displays a rigidity that is asymptomatic both of a will to assert one's distinctiveness in terms of political formation, and an anxiety of disintegration in the face of global socio-economic developments that particularly disadvantage small nations. Political nation formations have always stressed this fear; hence, the need of policing the borders, to take an obvious example, although there may be more psychological and metaphorical manifestations of this fear. Art transcends this anxiety and this fear by the very nature of its constructs — while the notion of difference is implied in art, it actually inscribes correspondence — its components often erecting unific structures of feeling that disparate nations can claim equally as their own. Thus, when the colonial India was waging a war against the hegemonic British rule, its art was operating an open discourse with the imperial culture.

are, we can almost use the word, universal.

HISTORY tells us that cultural monocentrism, practised by nations that persisted under a self-enforced political insularity did not work in the long run. Elements of culture, as TS Eliot would testify, are always dynamic, and their combinations are unpredictable. The politically expedient mono-culturalism of Europe in the middle ages was disrupted by the advent of Renaissance; and again when the nineteenth century neo-puritanism and Anglican reinforced that notion in Germany and to some extent in England, the breakthroughs in technology undid it faster than it could solidify. In the twentieth century, with the world taking on the appearance of a McLuhanesque global village, monoculturalism is a thing of the past.

Should we then, in the context of globalisation of the media, culture and even local food habits, talk about an Asian art? Should we not be concerned with two obvious manifestations of art, taking our cue from Raymond Williams and others — national (which subsumes para-national formations) and universal? This classification would be appealing to those who find in this pairing an expansion of the binary opposition of particular-general. 'Asian' is an uncomfortable grouping of individual nations whose cultural identities are, in some cases, (for example Qatar and Cambodia) as different as between those of any two countries of the globe. In the seminars, in the last few Biennales in Dhaka, this question of Asianness — what constitutes it, what are its manifestations — came up for close and extensive discussion. As it happens in academic deliberations, no universal definition could be arrived at, but components and constituent elements were identified, geography was charted and a consensus was reached that there may be an Asian art after all. What that art was, however, was not clear — but explanations were offered, starting from the simplistic notion that any art created within the Asian boundary was Asian, and ending up with post-colonial interpretations like the art of the 'Other'/'Periphery' as against the 'Self'/'Centre' (i.e. Asian, or art that rebels against any colonial hegemony was Asian — although these distinctions — started getting blurred — would African anti-hegemonic art then be considered Asian? Dr Parveen Hasan raised the question can there be an Asian art? In the fourth Biennale, and her answer, which was in the affirmative, explored commonalities in both form and spirit that bring an otherwise scattered enterprise together in the fifth Biennale, there was more discussion on the form and spirit that inform Asian art, and the contents that seem to

be common in the art of different nations. It was felt by some discussants that the term Asian may have been a coinage of Western art history which, overwhelmed by the vastness and diversity of the art of Asian nations, found comfort in a blanket term, but after several centuries of application, it has assumed a relevance of its own. The term also has a centring function that is important if individual identities of smaller nations have to be strengthened without their being bypassed by larger and stronger cultures like China or India.

In the context of Asian art, however, smaller nations have an equitable role, and a contribution that is not weighted in terms of their political clout or their cultural positionality. Mr Paritosh Sen, the noted Indian artist commented that just as individual nations need to interact to strengthen their cultural identities, Asia itself needs out to reach to the West for a grand sharing of ideas and thoughts. And my suggestion in the keynote paper I read at the Seminar was that if we rewrite Asian art history in the light of our own expectations, achievements, desires, dreams, dilemmas, and our dominant sensibilities, we shall be surprised to find ourselves face to face with a rich and varied art that responds to all human emotions and endeavours, and not simply to transcendentalism or spirituality — as the West believes to be the dominant contents of Asian art.

many nations together. If not for a solution, at least for a statement of the obvious; and in the sphere of culture (this coming together was reflected by a need for interaction. It is true that the West was the obvious look-out for such newly aware cultures — as artists and art students went to art academies in Europe and America for learning and training, but at the end a regional approach began forming.

This began first as an understanding of what is one's own — a kind of close encounter with one's own history, mythology and cultural paradigms. Then the reaching out to other cultures of the region which helped an individual nation to understand its uniqueness better, for a comparison in terms of sameness is as important as a contrast in terms of divergence. Thus the coinage 'Asian' — this time from an Asian perspective. The spirit of Dhaka Biennales reflects that post-colonial, self-exploratory and non-western perception in which region is as much a valid geography as nation in cultural formulations.

that are unconsciously projected as an array of paintings and sculptures from different countries are displayed on the side. The post-colonial perception of the Asian identity is something that is hard to ignore; art of individual nations carry distinct impressions of their own identities but regional influences are also obvious in many cases. This is not just where an Indian painter uses Chinese brush-strokes or a Bangladeshi sculptor tries to accommodate techniques of Japanese installation art, where a dominant style of one nation's art influences the work of another art (but not necessarily works of Indian artists, as encouraging Nepali artists to do so to their financial benefit is ideal).

Over the years, the pursuit of commonness is becoming more marked, leading to the degree that traditional forms are being discouraged. The art of Asian nations is not indigenous traditions but forms for strength and distinction, as well as for confrontation. One encounters rich exhibitions where folk forms and techniques are shared by more extensively than one suspects, there emerge after formations that can be labelled regional or even Asian, but wholly unconscious formations, therefore, more relevant than art-works themselves, but ideas

back have been done in details. Lionel Ranawera's 'Nature' an oil, shows patterns of leaves in semi abstract forms in blue, brown and beige, with subtle strokes and geometrical shapes surrounding the leaves.

Senananda Indrajith Marthisa's 'Discus' presents two women with trailing black hair and yellow clothes, one holding on to a pink flower and both deeply engrossed in gazing.

**NEPAL**

S Sherjean Rah Bhandari's oil 'Composition' shows a child with its broken toys done in a surrealist fashion, lying down helpless in the middle of a temple with flags in the foreground is a temple bell with religious decorations and floating clouds in the right hand corner is a small delineation of the same child resting on a bedspread on the floor. The effect is dreamlike. It is in grey, black, brown, red, yellow and mauve and brings in scenes from the homes, temples and playgrounds.

Shahid Ahsan's acrylic 'Kal Ki Avatar' which has a framework of speeding horars leaping over their fences has been depicted in distorted impressionistic forms in the centre is a man with eight hands with a twisted face and limbs. This is in orange, pink and white. At times geometrical designs are subtly inserted in between the distorted figures. This is a symbolic piece.

Prohanto Shrestha's 'Composition', as oil on canvas, shows a young woman in a 'sari' with an outstretched hand, with another figure at the back. This is a delightful impressionistic work in greens, yellows, and pinks and is pulsating with life.

**PAKISTAN**

Quddus Mirza in 'Only This' ('hair is Red') brings a flamboyant abstraction in red, orange, green, brown and mauve. Quddus A Naaz presents more abstraction in her pieces in mauve, green, black and white. Nahid Raza in 'Woman Seated' has brought in the hands and face of the subject in one section of the canvas and her feet and hands in another. The rest of the composition comprises sweeps of orange, white and grey.

Shahid Sajad's huge mauve figures in wood, with their outstretched limbs and prehistoric strings of chains for clothes, have a dramatic effect.

**SRI LANKA**

Sudath Samarasekera's 'Struggle' is a powerful delineation of a musician with a tambourine. A minimum amount of strokes have been used to bring brown, beige and red. The audience of villagers has also been brought in the background of this impressionistic creation. His 'Distance' shows a woman in the foreground and the progress of industry is seen in pale beige in the background. The painter drives home the message of disconnection at the contrast between those who can barely eke out a living and the well-to-do.

Dilini Perera in 'Escorting For Alms Giving' has brought in a neat line of Buddhist monks in their orange robes, with drummers accompanying them. Orange, yellow and red dominate the composition. The folds of clothes, the faces and features and the forest at the

**SAUDI ARABIA**

Abdullah Noorani's oil depicts people in a market place with an enormous white bird soaring on top of the figures. Trees are done in soft circular green spheres. The market itself has been delineated in orange, blue and yellow depicting people buying and selling. The background consists of flowing brown colours. White

buildings are included in the foreground. This decorative piece has been composed in an imaginative way.

Ibrahim Al Meather's surrealist creation is in brilliant green, orange and brown. Heads of men are included in the composition. Geometrical delineation of vibrant carpets, placed vertically and horizontally, are also to be seen. Large blue horns are included in the background.

Ibrahim Abdou's 'From the Heritage' depicts a house in grey, pink, green, geometrical forms — triangles, rectangles and circles. The background is a combination of silver and gold. Floral motifs are worked into the geometrical patterns. The painting is a gorgeous merging of mauve, greens, black and gold.

**IRAN**

Shahid Kalawari has done an impressionistic work of the sky and cliffs, in orange, grey and white. This imagines live work verges on abstraction. Swirls of grey and orange dominate the foreground where the cliffs have been brought in.

**JORDAN**

Nabil Halim has brought in dramatic strokes with deep hues coming from the top of the painting to the bottom. The vertical sweeps are combined with horizontal ones. There is a good contrast of light and shade.

With a considerable number of fair sized art galleries coming up in the capital city, one gets an opportunity to view the works of local artists regularly. It is only in a rare extravagant display such as the Asian Biennale of Bangladesh that one gets acquainted with the progress in the field of visual art in other parts of Asia, unless one has the fortune to travel and view art exhibits oneself.

**BHUTAN**

Guru Shupouba has embroidered on silk, depicting a seated Buddha, done in orange, blue and beige, resting on a cushion surrounded by exotic flowers in white, yellow and deep pink. The backdrop is deep blue, bearing offerings of devotees. The piece is framed in deep red and golden yellow.

Sangay Dorji shows an enormous black deity standing on pink clouds, with skeletons on its hand, and has numerous swirls of gold, brown, blue and black clouds surrounding him.

Thinley's 'Guru Rinpoche' has yet another deity with heavy grey, brown and blue clothes. Clouds, flowers and fruits are seen around the god, and create an exotic atmosphere.

**CHINA**

Zhao Wenhui, in his composition has two men in blue and purple clothes and grey faces. Behind them are distorted figures in grey and black. There is a brown dog to be seen in the left hand corner. There are mountains and heads of men in brown in the background of this impressionistic piece.

Zhao Changling's 'Reciprocity', an oil on canvas, is a large abstract creation in brown, orange and beige spheres. At the bottom is a suggestion of a woman lying down, with distorted forms of limbs and

head.

Shun Xiang Yang's 'Shepherd' an oil painting, depicts the subject in a fur lined coat riding on a white steed, with dry tall grass in front and a large flock of sheep in the background. The subject has a proud, contented face and a powerfully built body. The crescent moon adds lyricism to the composition.

Shan Zeng's entry is a large abstraction with geometrical forms of circles, surrounded by rectangles and squares. There is minute work done in geometrical forms so that they appear like blocks of prints with more rectangular inlaid designs. This is in black, white and red.

Cui Kaixia's 'Roamers' has cows done in black, white and grey grazing on a strip of land against a white fence. The reflection of the animals in front in a stream and the blue expanse of the sky create a peaceful effect.

Su Haigong's 'Boat' has the head of a deity done in red, and this is apparently the front side of the blue and brown boat. The water is depicted as

a huge crescent splash in the foreground.

**JAPAN**

Kijuro Yahagi shows the moon in a series of photographs. He brings in the moon on a block of wood, on the side of a house, on a fountain, in a staircase and in various common scenes of life. The photographs show the modernity of Japan.

Kasumi Sadahiro in his 'Chain Form' series, done with polyurethane, collage, pen and paper, depicts images derived from a basic mechanical three dimensional structure. The painting scheme is to create a new environmental space.

**SINGAPORE**

Yun Tang Mun Kit in his acrylic, wood dye and masonite board creation, termed 'Gostman', has shown an angular face in brown and black, with white horns, coming from the side. The background is grey, with an enormous splash of red for contrast. The combination of colours and experimentation of texture has a definite dramatic effect.

Lim Poh Teh's display is a depiction of large scale battle. There are two soldiers with bursting bombs, which have been depicted in orange and multicoloured flecks. There are swirls of grey and white spread over the entire massive canvas. Two large crosses are seen over the yelling soldiers.

Praphakara Jimoi Quek's 'Landscape With Trees' is an acrylic work on canvas. This has vertical lines in pink, blue, yellow, grey and red, with texture experimentation. This abstract piece leaves much to the imagination.

**KOREA**

Park Ji Sook has worked on pieces of cloth and paper, put together in a collage. On them are painted designs of a flower, a hand, a sea-shell, a butterfly, a heart, clouds and plants. This has been done in blues, black and white.

Cha Dae Young has an abstract creation with dots, swirls lines and geometrical

**THE PHILIPPINES**

Rosario Ritango, in his oil on canvas 'Crimson Tide' brings in rectangular and spherical forms in careful symmetry. This is an abstract creation with bold strokes and displays careful experimentation.

**LAOS**

Sivary brings in an idyllic countryside in the water colour entry. The village scene is peacefully with its background of trees in different hues. Sketches of people going about their work and a large tree on the left. This evokes an atmosphere of conventional harmony and peace of the villages of the east.

### HISTORY OF BIENNALE

IN the beginning it was Asian Art Bangladesh. Conceived and organized by the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, the first show was inaugurated by the then President Ziaur Rahman on January 4, 1981 at 10 am at the Academy premises.

The two other venues were Shilpa Academy and the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka. In all, fourteen countries participated. They were — Bhutan, China, Nepal, DPRK, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Pakistan, ROK, Sri Lanka, Thailand and host Bangladesh.

The art works were put on display in the galleries of Shilpakala Academy and Osmany Memorial Hall in the city.

A total of 14 Asian countries took part. They were — China, India, the Maldives, Japan, Kuwait, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Soviet Union, Nepal, Thailand, ROK, Turkey, Pakistan and host Bangladesh.

The art works were put on display in the galleries of Shilpakala Academy and Osmany Memorial Hall in the city.

Winners of the three top awards were: Ibjuka Kolchi (Japan), Thavorn Ko Luvavit (Thailand) and Alok Roy (Bangladesh). Besides, five artists received prizes of honour.

An international seminar on art was also held in the Academy auditorium.

THE fifth Asian Art Biennale was inaugurated on Nov 1, 1991 by President Abdur Rahman Bheera.

Four hundred and forty seven art works by the participants of 12 Asian countries were put on display in the galleries of Shilpakala Academy and Osmany Memorial Hall.

The participating countries were: China, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan, Qatar, ROK, Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and host Bangladesh.

Awards for the three best works went to GS Kabir (Bangladesh), Jamal Shah (Pakistan) and Keita Igami (Japan). Five others received prizes of honour.

A two-day special seminar dedicated to the memory of noted artist Qamrul Haasan was held. A dozen of Asian experts read out papers in the seminar.

PRIME Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is scheduled to open the Sixth Asian Art Biennale at the Osmany Memorial Hall at 11 am today (Nov 2, Tuesday).

A record 30 countries have so far confirmed participation. They are: Bahrain, Bhutan, China, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Qatar, ROK, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, the UAE, Yemen and the Russian Federation and host Bangladesh.

Among them Bahrain, Singapore, Laos, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, the UAE and Yemen are taking part for the first time.

The art works will be displayed in the galleries of Shilpakala Academy, Osmany Memorial and National Museum.

A 5 member jury board will declare awards for the best three works on the opening day.

A two day seminar on 'Impact of Globalisation on Asian Art Traditions' will begin at 9 am on November 3 in the Academy auditorium.



Saudi Arabia