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'Phantoms of Asia' review: Ambitious exhibition

Kenneth Baker
Saturday, May 19, 2012

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Crazy about zigzags



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Kaz Tsuruta

A detail of Bae Young Whan's encased "Frozen Waves," in which caladon objects are intended to evoke the artist's brainwaves.

Since before its move from Golden Gate Park to the repurposed Old Main Library in 2003, the Asian Art Museum has struggled to link contemporary art cogently with the histories embodied in its magisterial collections. The most ambitious effort of this kind to date, "Phantoms of Asia: Contemporary Awakens the Past," opened Friday.

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"Phantoms" bursts the customary bounds of the Asian's special exhibitions, scattering itself through the permanent collection galleries, and outside, in the form of Choi Jeong Hwa's giant red inflated lotus blossom on Civic Center Plaza - a sort of corsage for the occasion.

Organized by Mami Kataoka, chief curator at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, "Phantoms" proposes that

certain themes and preoccupations have pervaded the Asian arts across many cultures and times, down to the present day: cosmology (in mythic form), cycles of life, time and ritual, intuitions of invisible energy and symbolic motifs such as sacred mountains.

The project burns with curatorial ambition, but at too many points it generates neither light nor heat. The largely anonymous craft brilliance and spiritual ardor imbuing the antiquities leave the contemporary artists' efforts - with some outstanding exceptions - looking contrived or as if straining for effect.

Perhaps this impression merely registers how vaguely we recognize antique creative conventions, such as those embodied in a battery of centuries-old religious sculptures from the Asian's collection in the first-floor Hambrecht Gallery.

Then again, it might indicate that without conventions to contain and shape their expressive ambitions, many contemporary artists cannot, despite trying, genuinely enter the thematic streams that "Phantoms" attempts to trace.

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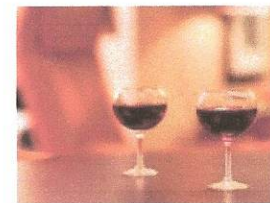
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Jagannath Panda's "The Cult of Survival II" (2011) easily earns its place among several historical Indian paintings that typify mythic and metaphoric meanings of serpents in South Asian tradition.

But Panda's piece, with its startling upswept circuit of black plastic pipe, clad here and there in faux snakeskin - with heads swallowing tails - and in plastic flowers and other ornaments, could stand its ground anywhere in the international contemporary art context. It links a mythic figure of cosmic dynamism - the self-consuming serpent - with current anxieties about resources and waste through the sort of sculptural structure we might find in art by Richard Deacon, Tony Cragg or an American post-minimalist.

No less effective as art and even more surprising is Apichatpong Weerasethakul's projected video "Phantoms of Nabua" (2009). Its title, a label informs us, refers to a Thai region long racked by political violence, connected by local legend to the influence of a female demon.

But the label text fades from the mind when in the video we see men in darkness appearing to kick around a flaming soccer ball (or two) until they "score" by making it ignite and consume a fabric screen on which we have already seen projected images of synthetic lightning. The burned-away screen leaves the projector behind it flashing unintelligible bursts of light directly into the camera.

Fixed meaning is the elusive figment here, no matter what the label says. The men might be engaged in metaphoric combat or they might evoke mythic deities kicking

worlds around until their conflagration burns away a veil of illusion. The video works its spellbinding effect regardless.

The mysterious rightness of Weerasethakul's piece, needing no enhancement by interpretation, sparks a thought that resurfaces at several points in the exhibition: Whatever persuasively qualifies something new as art must rank for us among the fugitive entities of the "phantom" domain.

The Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook offers "The Class" (2005), in which she gives a 16-minute lecture on death to a group of scantily shrouded cadavers. This work's strange mingling of ghoulishness, low-key comic absurdity, creative nerve and spiritual curiosity will leave many viewers reeling, but they will leave it, as they will from few other things on view, trailed by phantoms of reflection and uneasy memory.

Rasdjarmrearnsook's video also positions itself in a context wider than the Asian arts. Anyone who has heard of Joseph Beuys' notorious performance "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" (1965) - which did involve a dead hare - will think of it here.

Bae Young Whan's encased "Frozen Waves" (2010) - celadon objects intended to evoke the artist's brainwaves - insinuate themselves into the museum's Korean art collection, resourcefully entwining contemporary and historic references.

"Phantoms of Asia" attempts too much, but no one who cares about art should overlook it. It argues forcefully that the new art in any tradition will always unsettle meanings embedded in its ancestry. If nothing else, it will lead visitors back into permanent collection galleries at the Asian that they may have neglected for too long.

Phantoms of Asia: Contemporary Awakens the Past: Paintings, sculpture, photography, video and installations. Through Sept. 2. Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., S.F. (415) 581-3500. www.asianart.org.

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This article appeared on page E - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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