

Australian/Asian cultural exchange
by
Jennifer Eurell



*Portrait of an Australian,
Jonathan Tse.*

Source: <http://www.msbrownslounge.com.au/atcproject/jtse.html>

Australia's program of cultural exchange with Asia has developed rapidly since the 1990s. This essay looks at support for cultural exchange and the implications for artists and art publics.

How has the increasing mix of Asian and Australian culture evolved? Australia has a history of immigration policy and attitudinal changes to Asia over the last 30 years, but globalisation must also be acknowledged as there have been similar cultural interactions between Asia, Europe and the USA. Asian outlook and economies have transformed and Chinese contemporary art, in particular, has virtually exploded in the last 20 years. China has moved from 'yellow peril' to Australia's major trading partner.

Many say that the 21st century will be an Asian century. Chinese contemporary art may become the focus, just as the 19th century art centered on Europe and the 20th century on America. The artwork networks of the 21st century are already complex

and far reaching to the point that some artists can only be described as international – they are born in one country, study and work in others and exhibit world wide.

Historically Australia has had two waves of Asian immigration – the Chinese to the gold fields in the 1880s, and refugees from Vietnam after the Vietnam War. In between The White Australia policy deterred non-white immigrants. In the early 1900s European artists were fascinated with ‘The Orient’, but this trend was not strong in Australian art.

Prior to the 1990’s there were few Asian artists working in Australia, however, there were Australian artists in Asia. English born Ian Fairweather (b. 1892-1974) lived in China, The Philippines, Bali and India before settling in Queensland (Murray, 1981). Fairweather was influenced by Chinese writing and his paintings became very ‘calligraphic’. Margaret Olley (b. 1923) first travelled to Asia in the 1960s. Desiredous Orban (1884-1986), Laurence Daws (b. 1927) and Rod Milgate (b. 1934) all have an Eastern influence in their work, and Milgate was a pre 1990 exhibiter in Japan (Drury, N. 1990)

In the 1960-70s it was a rite of passage for young Australians to sail to England and return via the overland route through Europe and Asia. For an artist, it would be hard to not notice the culture, art and architecture along the way. Brisbane artist Wendy Mills (b. 1950) followed this path and her early work *Lake on a Mountain, 1982*, references Mt. Kailish, Tibet, considered sacred by Hindus, Buddhists and Jains as the centre of the Earth (Morrell 2003).

However, around the 1990s the Australian government started backing Australia/Asian cultural exchange with funding to artists, distribution of art publications and promotion of exhibitions. Artists have benefitted from The Australia Council for the Arts which rent ten overseas studios through the International Studio Program, including one in Tokyo. Funding is through the Visual Arts board and includes a stipend of \$10,000 for air fares and living expenses for three months, an

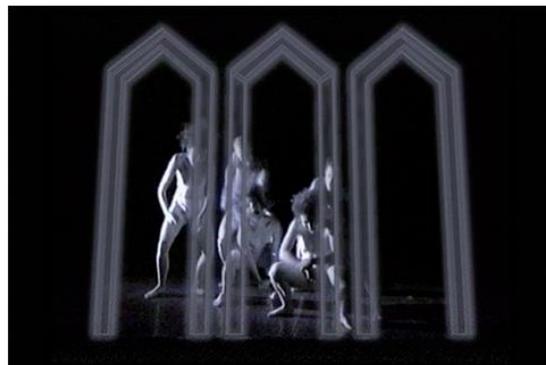
amount that has not changed since it's inception in 1987 (Australia Council 2010).

The grant allows an artist to live in Tokyo and absorb what it has to offer.

Wendy Mills became one of the early residents, her introduction to Japanese Butoh dancers leading to her work *Antarctica (Thawing of memories)*, 1983. Janet Laurence, Patricia Picannini and Yvonne Boag were also Tokyo studio grant recipients.

Picannini more recently was assisted by the National Council for the Centenary of Federation in Australia to present her cutting edge work in the Australia-Japan New Media Gallery at the Australian Embassy, Tokyo, and is currently exhibiting at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, in the *Tokyo Art Meeting Transformation* exhibition (Picannini 2010, Australian Embassy 2010).).

Antarctica (Thawing of Memories), 1993
Wendy Mills
Combined animation and video of Zen Zen
Zoh dancers
Source: www.wendy-mills.com



Janet Laurence had her first Asian solo exhibition in 1991 at the Seibu Gallery in Tokyo and since then has exhibited regularly in Tokyo and Nagoya, Japan. Laurence created a permanent installation, *Elixer*, in the 2003 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in Japan (a triennial also supported by Asialink, Australia Council and Australian Embassy). Perez (2010) points out that the Tokyo residency had a lasting impression on Laurence which continued in *Elixer*, where she converted a wooden storage house into a 'laboratory'. The work was described by Laurence as 'part botanical museum and part apothecary' and uses Japanese house and garden spatial elements (Perez 2010) combined with her interest in alchemy.



Elixir, Janet Laurence
Permanent installation for Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, Japan, 2003
Source: Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

Even more Asia oriented is Visual Arts Board funding for Asialink to administer Asian residencies. This program started in 1989 in Thailand and Malaysia through the Visual Arts Residency Program in Asia, and was taken over by Asialink in 1991. In the first 20 years Asialink supported 450 Australian artists (Sedgewick 2007).

The Asialink Arts Residency Program currently provides residencies for 40 Australian artists, writers, performers and art managers per year in Asia. Some of Australia's well known artists benefitted from the experience including George Gittoes in China, Judy Watson and Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott in India, Pat Hoffie in the Philippines and Vietnam, Jenny Watson also in Vietnam, Hossein Valamanesh in Pakistan and Fiona Hall in Sri Lanka. Australian artists of Asian origin also take up studio grants – Lindy Lee in China, Guan Wei in Singapore and My Le Thi in Vietnam (Asialink 2010).

The Asialink residencies differ from the Australia Council studio in that they are community based. The host nation provides studio space and the Asialink grant of \$12,000 covers accommodation, living expenses, airfares and exhibitions. This set up has led to more collaborative works. Megan Keating's (b. 1971) residency in the Taipei International Artists' Village, Taiwan, in 2006 resulted in a collaboration using her cut paper work in a performance by local performance artist Mei Li, set to poetry written by a German author-in-residence (Sedgewick 2007).

Recently three reciprocal residency programs were initiated with the Taipei Artist Village, the Tokyo Wonder Site and the National Art Studio, Korea. This allows Asian artists to work in Australia and currently (2010) Korean Jeong Hoo Lee is at Artspace, Sydney, Jia Jen Lin from Taipei at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Japanese artist COBRA at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne (Asialink Arts 2010).

Sometimes the Asian country puts forward the offer. In 2006 Hossein Valamanesh (b. 1949) an Iranian artist who has worked in Australia since 1973, took up a residency with the Art Centre in Aomori, Japan (Sherman Galleries 2010). The Gyeonggi Creation Center Residency Studio Program also offers visual art residencies in South Korea which covers studio, living quarters, return airfares, and a stipend of around \$450 per month. Yvonne Boag exhibits in Korea and Japan but her Korean residency was supported by an Australian Korean Foundation grant (Asialink 2010).

The residencies facilitate Asian/Australian cultural exchange, but there is much more going on. Not only are there Australian artists experiencing Asia, but there are Asian artists working in Australia. Many work on the subject of cultural identity in a multicultural society.

William Yang, (b. 1943), is an Australian born Chinese questioning his Chinese identity through annotated photographs. Is he Chinese? He see's himself as 'the other' either in Australia or China as he looks 'different' in Australia, and doesn't speak the language in China.

China China Bust No. 14
Ah Xian
Source: Eyesing

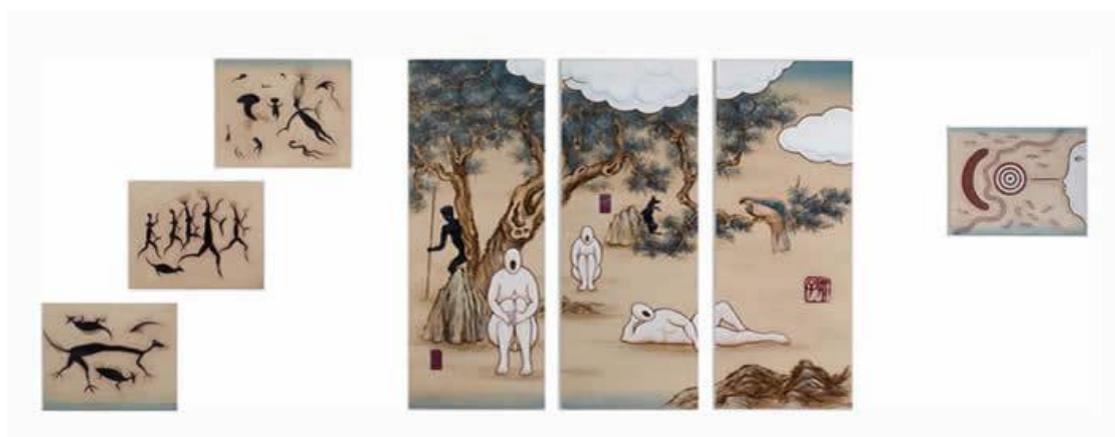


Other artists with blurred identity are Guan Wei, Ah Xian and My Le Thi. Ash (2010) notes that they 'contribute to the formation of a new and emerging global landscape of

art', and that they do this by referencing historical and cultural contexts in time and space but don't claim assimilation with any particular one. They are the product of postmodern geography as much as postmodern art.

Ah Xian (b. 1960) is a Chinese born artist working in Sydney. Xian used body castings of Chinese and non-Chinese friends to make porcelain busts. The porcelain busts are made in China and decorated with cloisonné Ming and Qing designs, combining European tradition with Chinese history, skills and cheap labour costs. Similarly, Pat Hoffie used Philipino billboard poster painters to create her large paintings for her *Pat Hoffie: Fully exploited labour exhibition*, a spin off from her 1993 residency in The Philippines (Morrell 2006).

A University of Tasmania residency brought Chinese born Guan Wei (b. 1957) to Australia in 1989. Eighteen years later he travelled outback and noticed the similarities between Aboriginal culture and Taoist philosophy, and painted an endearing mix of Chinese and Aboriginal imagery in his *A Mysterious Land* series (Wei 2007). Vietnamese born My Le Thi (b. 1964) also combines cultures including Western, Australian Aborigine, Ede, Vietnamese and Chinese in her painting, sculpture and multimedia work (Ash 2008).



A mysterious land series, by Guan Wei, 2007
Source: Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

The Visual Arts Board also funds individual projects but other grants come through the Australian International Cultural Council (AICC). In 2009 a \$44,000 AICC grant

went to the Wollongong City Gallery for the *Zhongian: Midway* exhibition to tour China, showcasing the work of 15 contemporary Chinese, Australian and Chinese-Australian artists.

A similar grant went through the Sydney Olympic Committee to the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing, to feature works by Australian artists, including indigenous artist Fiona Foley (DFAT 2010). In 2010 AICC granted \$40,000 to Catherine Croll to curate the *7+/- Australian Artists in China* at the same gallery. The same source also granted Michael Fowler \$16,000 towards a large-scale electro-acoustic sound installation to display Australian innovation in art at the Red Gate Gallery. (Smith 2010)

Lindy Lee (b. 1954) at one stage was a resident with Red Gate Gallery, but has also been a forerunner in Australian/Asian art promotion in Australia. Her work currently deals with her Australian-Chinese heritage and ‘the relationship between copies and originals in connection to notions of authenticity, selfhood and Zen Buddhism’ (Oxley, 2010). Lee is also a founding member of Gallery 4A in Sydney’s Chinatown, a trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and a former president of the Asian Australian Artists Association.

Lindy Lee, Grandma Lee Wooi, 2006, Archival pigmented inks on pure cotton canvas 211.5x60cm, unique print.
Source: National Trust



Another Sydney gallery dealing specifically with Chinese contemporary art is the White Rabbit Gallery. In contrast to the 4A Gallery it is a non-profit, privately funded gallery, showing works from the collection of Judith and Kerr

Nielsen, whereas the 4A Gallery receives Australia Council, State and City of Sydney funding (McDonald 2009, Gallery 4A 2010)

However, it is the public art galleries that attract the bulk of art publics. Even regional level galleries collect Asian art. The Rockhampton Art Gallery in Queensland has a surprisingly good collection of Japanese art. Initially, in the 1980s, the gallery received gifts from Rockhampton's sister city, Ibusuki, Japan, and other donors. Amongst these were a life-size bronze sculpture of a sand bather, a set of Japanese Court dolls, some paintings and a 19th century Imari Ware jar. Regional galleries are funded by local councils and work on slim budgets, so a gap in the art market was sought and affordable Japanese art purchased, focusing on the Edo period and later modern works including woodcuts and kimonos (Smith n.d.). A contemporary acquisition is Chinese artist Chi Peng's (b. 1981) digital photograph *Sprinting forward 2, 2005*.

At the State level the Art Gallery of New South Wales has collected Asian art since 1879 when ceramics and bronzes were gifted by the Government of Japan. The collection is now valued at over \$35 million and in 2003 an Asian gallery was opened to house it. The bulk of the art is from China and Japan, but the gallery is also developing their Thai, Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Indonesian art collections (Art Gallery of NSW 2010).



*PixCell – Elk #2, 2009,
Kohei Nawa (b. 1975), Japan
Taxidermied silk, glass, acrylic, crystal beads, 240 x 249.5 x
198 cm, at 6th APT, GoMA, Brisbane
Source: Arterimalaysia*

Although other State and the National Gallery have Asian collections, it is the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (QAG/GoMA) that is the prime mover behind contemporary Asian art in Australia, and hosts the Asia Pacific Triennials'

(APT). The 6th APT of Contemporary Art was held from December 2009 to February 2010 at GoMA, Brisbane, and featured the work of over 100 artists, filmmakers, collaborations and collectives and added Tibet, North Korea, Turkey, Iran, Cambodia and Myanmar to its already impressive coverage of the region.

The chief supporter of the APT is the Queensland Government; however they are assisted by the Australia Council, corporate sponsorship, many tourism and media partners and Australia/Asia foundations. The APT has given an enormous boost to the public interest in art and attracts local, interstate and overseas visitors with the first 5 events drawing over 1.3 million visitors (QAG and GoMA 2009).

The other major art show is the Sydney Biennale. In the 17th Biennale almost one fifth of the individual artists were Asian – from China, Tibet, South Korea, Japan, Thailand and India (Biennale of Sydney 2010).



*Exploding car installation at the 17th Biennale of Sydney, by Cai Guo-Qiang.
Source: Sydney Morning Herald*

Called *The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age* and sprawled over Sydney locations, the show tried to elucidate an ‘emphasis on indigenous artforms and exchanges between cultures’ through the spectacular in art, however McDonald (2010) also states that it would leave the general public footsore and confused.

One of the exhibitors, Daniel Crooks (b. 1973) is a New Zealander working in Melbourne, however his video *Static No. 12 (seek stillness in movement)* shows a merging image of a Chinese man doing Tai Chi in a Shanghai park. Crooks exhibits in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, The Netherlands, London, Korea and Spain. He recently had a joint exhibition with Jae Hoon Lee at IMA. Jae Hoon Lee is Korean born and working in New Zealand (Biennale of Sydney 2010). In many ways they show the intricacy of cultural interaction in the 21st century.



Daniel Crooks, Static No.12 (seek stillness in movement), 2009-10
Source: Biennale of Sydney

The implications for the future are that with continuing government support Australia/Asian cultural exchange will continue. There are many plans afoot. Some of the ideas mooted are ‘collaborative artists’ camps, carbon-neutral exchanges, cross-media incubators, long-term placements, cross cultural collaborations and virtual residencies’ (Asialink 2010).

As this essay was being written ten of China’s treasured ‘Terracotta Warriors’ arrived for the Art Gallery of New South Wales’ *The First Emperor: China’s entombed warriors* exhibition. This year Quentin Bryce opened the *Imagine Australia, the Year of Australian Culture in China* in Beijing followed by a performance by the Bangarra Dancers. Next year will be the year of China in Australia. Recently the University of Sydney hosted the *China and Revolution: History, Parody and Memory* exhibition (Meacham 2010), and then there is the OzAsia Festival in Adelaide (Gautier 2010), as well as plans for the itinerant Utopia biennale in 2012. The latter will involve cultural exchange between Tokyo, Beijing, Taipei, Hangzhou, New Delhi, Singapore, Chiang

Mai, Manila, Yogyakarta, Melbourne and Auckland (Asialink 2010). Australian and Asian cultural exchange is here to stay.

Geographically Australia is part of Asia rather than Europe. Like William Yang, Australia is 'the other' – a far flung colony of Europe, or a pale, English speaking neighbour of Asia. Australian artists, while building an Australian identity can no longer ignore Asia and certainly there is continuing and increasing government support to consider it, both from the point of view of the artist and the art going public.

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