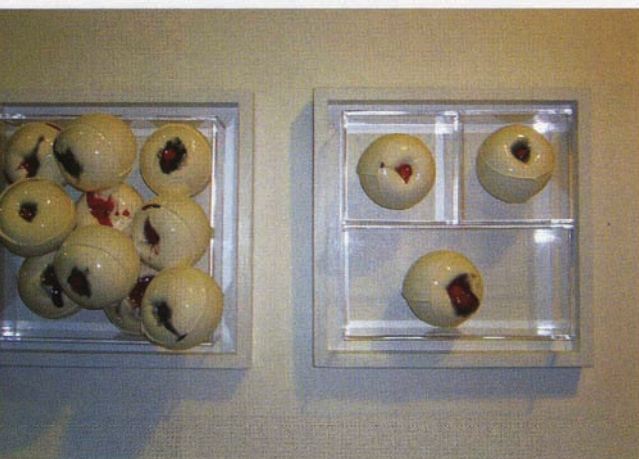


A Contemporary Asian Art Fair in New York— but what is 'Asia'?

Natasha Bissonauth



ACAFNY V.I.P. Lounge.



Jong Sook Kang, *Manhattan in Apple series*, 15" x 15" each, 2007.

The 1st Asian Contemporary Art Fair found a home in the Big Apple and quite appropriately as contemporary Asian art is becoming more globally concerned. Jong Sook Kang's *Manhattan in Apple* series, on view at Susan Eley Fine Art is an eloquent visual for this very phenomenon. As a Jersey-based Korean artist, her lived experience alone places her at the heart of this project. As for her art, the voluptuous castings are ripe and burst with conviction, as the red centers are on the verge of dousing the apples with their rightful tone. Similarly, this fair as a new chapter in the history of contemporary Asian art and is indicative of the scene's rightful presence in the art world at large.

The visitor count could have been better, but there was a healthy flow to the fair. The private reception was buzzing with interest which spilled over the entire event. Serious collectors were also lacking, but curiosity was plentiful. Also, the fair was clearly dominated by Chinese and Korean stalls. While the Indian presence was sparse, the galleries held their own. As the first US-based gallery dedicated to modern and contemporary Indian art, Aicon Gallery is quite aligned with the fair's intentions, Director Priyanka Mathew notes. In the same vein, Sundaram Tagore Gallery is a pioneer of interdisciplinary and East-West exhibitions.

ACAFNY Director Thomas Arnold and his team set up a highly contextualized platform, which has generated a refreshing dialogue outside the auction houses. Along with collectors, curators, students, participating gallerists roamed the hallways, curious about their neighbors – both geographically and in the fair. After all, the various artworlds that have sprung with Asia – China, India, Korea, Japan and Vietnam – have all received significant and unprecedented attention but they are still becoming acquainted with each other as well. This fair has fostered this exchange.

Which begs the question, what is Asia? Michael Goedhuis of Goedhuis Contemporary put it best when he states,

"We are witnessing a cultural revolution, the re-emergence of ancient civilizations and that has never happened before". This new reality requires a new language that addresses 'Asia' as "an omnipresent *idea*...scattered around the globe", in Eric C. Shiner and Lilly Wei's words.

At first their curated exhibition, *'Simulasian: Refiguring 'Asia' for the 21st Century* playfully communicates this but closer scrutiny reveals larger themes of social commentary, religion and identity politics. As with most fairs, the ACAFNY is a survey of marketable work but thematic threads surface nonetheless. For instance, historical references are abounding. There is a long tradition of ceramics in Asia but contemporary endeavors have resituated the practice within the present. From Krampf & Pei Gallery, Beijing ceramist Ma Jun's *New China* series uses traditional china aesthetics and creates everyday objects – a television, a radio or the timeless channel perfume bottle. The medium, so intrinsically connected to the culture (after all it is not coincidental that China in English refers to both the country and the porcelain), binds tradition to today's consumerism – both in art and society at large.

From Kang So Lee's swift strokes to Hang Joo Kim's grid of feces-looking characters, calligraphy has made its presence known in various ways. Similarly Atul Dodiya's calligraphic investigations form *A Landscape Out of Text*, as Vadehra Gallery curator Vidya Shivadas remarks. At Lillian Heidenberg, *L'enfant Margarita de cinq ans* by Nie Jian Bing superimposes his shameless copy of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* with a constellation of acupuncture meridians. This subtle twist sparks a jarring and somehow fateful union between the various juxtapositions at play: East and West, history and the present, science and superstition. Technology and new media were well incorporated in the fair, firmly positioning itself within the 21st century. Examples range from the slightly annoying musical robots from the Taipei Cultural Center to the more serene *String Mirror Hands* of Sung Chul Hong at Gallery IHN. The photographs are printed onto elastic strings, spaced out in multiple planes, which form a seemingly

three-dimensional mirage. At Gallery Kong, Seon Ghi Bahk's installation *Relationship* suspends charcoal in mid-air with nylon strings that form tables. Probably the most visited booth in the fair, Galerie Teo's *KAGE-KAGE* by Motoshi Chikamori + Kyoko Kunoh was one of the only interactive pieces at ACAFNY. As visitors touch the tip of the cones on the walls, their shadows move, transform and eventually traverse walls. This couple's interest in democratic interactivity and direct audience participation was a definite crowd pleaser.

And, as with most things related to art, sexual innuendoes would not be evaded. Whether you passed by the coquette and scantily clad girls of Ken Matsuyama at Noda Contemporary or the pornographic cartoons in Hye-Rim Lee's *Candyland* at Kukje Gallery, there was a case for every fetish. Still, the overall sexual content was rather tame compared to other exhibitions and fairs in the West, suggesting the reservations (or de-sensitization) of some markets over others.



Chenju Pan, *Incubator*, 40 Pieces, 2005.