

VERNISSAGE / ENVIRONMENTAL ART

Ecology in Focus



Singaporean artist Zen Teh is one in a growing number of artists who use their work to bring awareness to ecological issues. She created the 2017 *Garden State Palimpsest* photographic sculpture series based on accounts of life in kampongs

Images courtesy of Zen Teh

Text

Payal Uttam

Walking through her neighbourhood one day, Singaporean artist Zen Teh noticed hundreds of metres of an oil-like residue coating the water in a canal. 'I was alarmed, but I looked around and no one was bothered,' she says. She started investigating and decided to collaborate with an ecologist to create a large-scale installation titled *Mirror of Water* in 2019. The work consists of a long pool of water with aluminium discs imprinted with photographs evoking the oily surface, as well as a video of the oil deposits; the accompanying wall text discusses the dangers of water pollution. 'I wanted to bring people something that engaged their physical being, that they had to walk through and engage with so when they reached the end they realised the gravity of the issue,' she says, explaining that people tend to be desensitised when it comes to the state of the environment. In 2021, Teh's thought-provoking works won her a Young Artist Award, one of Singapore's top accolades. She's among a growing number of artists in the region who are tackling ecological topics and using art to trigger dialogues about our impact on the natural world.

Like Teh, Dutch-Filipino artist Martha Atienza — a regular in the international art fair and biennale circuit — is shining a light on issues affecting her community on Bantayan Island in the Philippines. For a recent black-and-white video work, she filmed the island's desolate coastline and decaying houses, her intention to show the bleak reality of a coastal community suffering because of rising sea levels and natural disasters provoked by global warming. To underscore the challenges faced by seafarers, she also created a haunting three-channel video piece depicting fishermen struggling in rough waves, repeatedly emerging for air. It's a poignant portrait of resilience in the face of the escalating climate crisis.

While Teh and Atienza are known for their ecologically focused works, artists who previously explored other issues are now also turning their attention to the environment. Emerging Thai performance artist Kawita Vatanajyankur, for instance, recently became interested in air pollution after she was invited to participate in an exhibition organised by air quality activists and contemporary artists in Chiang Mai.



For the 2021 exhibition, titled *Art for Air*, Vatanajyankur created *Air*, a series of satirical video works in which she transformed her body into a vacuum cleaner. One piece, which appeared on a billboard at a busy intersection, depicts the artist with a vacuum cleaner head in her mouth, vacuuming a carpet in a bubblegum-pink setting. Mimicking the language of advertising, she wanted to show the work on a roadside to make a public statement. 'People were attracted to the work at first because it's candy-coloured, but actually it's like Snow White's apple. It looks red and beautiful, but when you eat it, it's toxic,' she explains of the work's sinister undertones. Motorcyclists and passers-by would gaze up and discuss the meaning of the piece while waiting in traffic. 'I think people could relate to it because at the time the sky was filled with fine particles, or PM 2.5, and everyone was cleaning up dust in their houses at the time,' she says.

The project transformed Vatanajyankur's practice, and she's now delving deeper into environmental issues. 'I'm questioning the capitalist system because it's exploiting nature,' she says, adding that she sees it as her responsibility to use art as a platform to raise awareness. She compares our lives today to Pac-Man, the greedy video game character that eats its way through a maze — a metaphor for the overconsumption that is ultimately destroying the planet. 'People think it's a happy game but it's a nightmare world. What's worse is that it's real and we live in it. If we don't fix the problem now, it'll be too late.'



Through her 2019 video work *Tarong*
11°16'12.0"N 123°45'23.4"E 2019-08-06 Tue
2:27 PM PST 1.50 meters High Tide, Dutch-
Filipino artist Martha Atienza brings attention to
the plight of fishing communities in the Philippines
Images courtesy of Silverlens Gallery