



A Natural Canvas

Experimental artists from around Asia have used the sky, sea and shore as their canvas since the 1960s. But as the climate crisis worsens, their art is more urgent—and important—than ever before

By Payal Uttam

Image: *Event to Change the Image of Snow* (1970) by GUN, photo © Hanaga Mitsutoshi



A performance work, *Current of Contemporary Art* (1969), by Japanese artist collective The Play. **Opposite page:** *Event to Change the Image of Snow* (1970) by Japanese artist collective GUN



Whether they're setting off explosives rigged to a ladder in the sky above a Mainland Chinese fishing village; scattering hundreds of bamboo seeds in rural Bangladesh; or sculpting found fishing nets into island-like forms off the coast of Krabi, Thailand, contemporary artists across Asia are making dramatic incursions into the natural world. Transcending the limits of white cube galleries, they are trading pencils, paint and other conventional media for earth, fire, wind and water to make provocative statements about the environment—and humans' devastating impact on nature.

Tatler Avant-garde Asian artists first began using the environment as their canvas as early as the 1960s, but their work was often dismissed. "It was not so visible to the

general public. There was some mass media publicity but that primarily mocked the weirdness of their practice as 'art,'" says curator Reiko Tomii, explaining the public's reaction to experimental environmental art in post-war Japan. Artists elsewhere on the continent experienced a similar reaction.

Meanwhile, in the west, raw outdoor installations of a similar nature were being celebrated as 'land art.' The term was born in the 1960s when artists in Europe and North America, particularly in the US, ventured into the wilderness and began creating art directly onto the land as a protest against the increasingly commercial nature of the art world. Unlike paintings, prints and drawings, these monumental installations couldn't easily be sold.

Image Courtesy of The Play

The poster boy of this movement was American artist Robert Smithson, who in 1970 created a 460-metre-long earthwork sculpture titled *Spiral Jetty*. Made of mud, salt crystals and basalt rocks, the coil juts dramatically into Utah's Great Salt Lake, where it remains to this day, carefully preserved by the local community and the Dia Art Foundation.

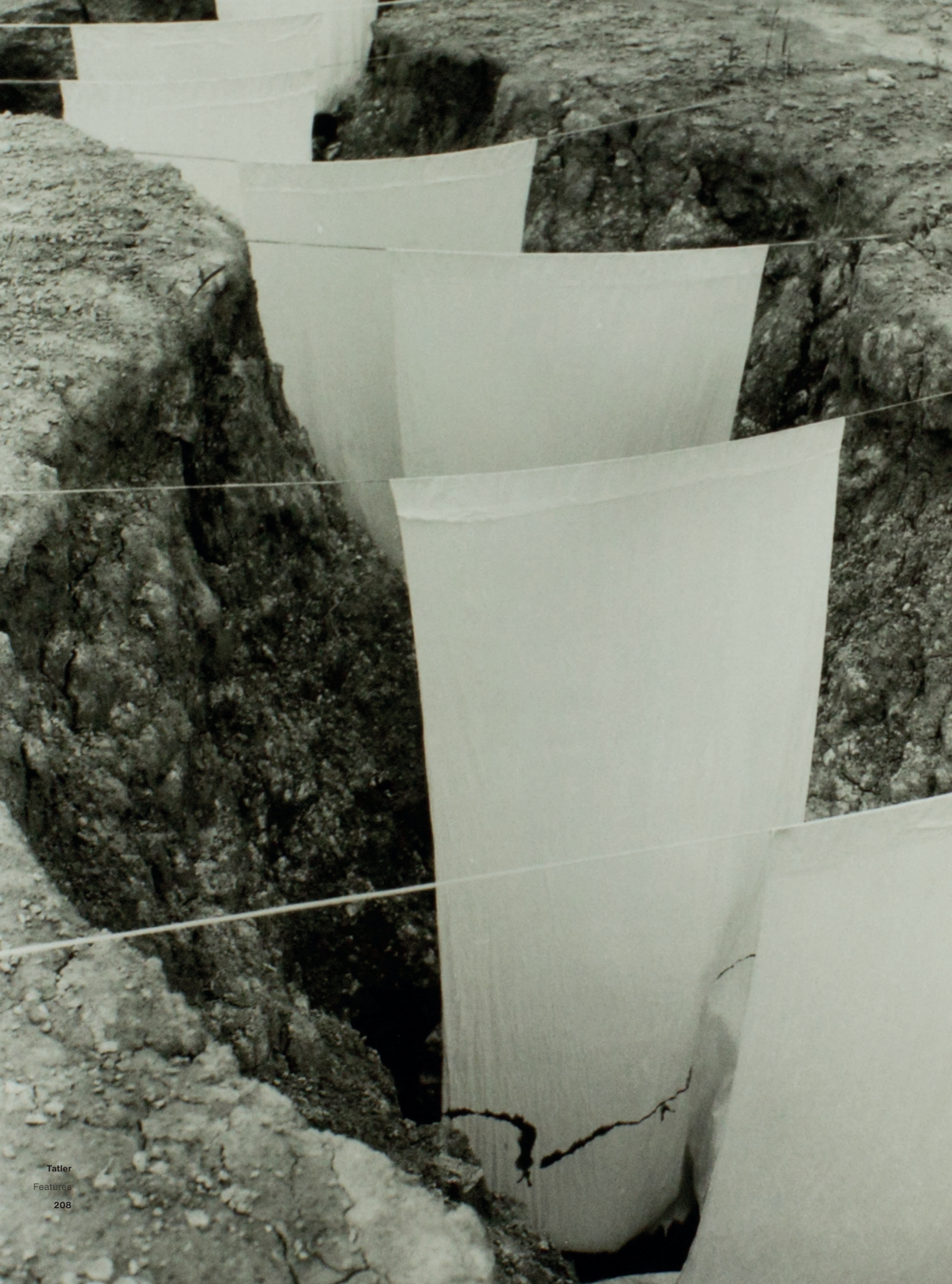
Today, land artists from Asia are finally being similarly celebrated—but adding them to the artistic canon isn't going to be straightforward. "It's dangerous to typecast Asia as opposed to the west," says Tomii. "Rather than adding some major works from Asia to the [list of] well-known western examples such as Smithson's... we need to begin with [Asian artists] to construct a global canon."

Image © Hanaga Mitsutoshi

As part of her effort to redefine this movement, Tomii curated an insightful exhibition last year at New York's Japan Society, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: Japanese Artists in the Global 1960s*. The show shone a spotlight on boundary-pushing land artists who worked outside of Japan's major cities.

One of the most striking pieces of land art featured in the show is documentation of *Event to Change the Image of Snow* created by the Japanese artist collective GUN. On a cold day in February in 1970, four artists from the collective borrowed a pesticide sprayer from a local farmer and unleashed vibrant pigments onto a blanket of snow on a dry riverbed in Tōkamachi, a rural area roughly three hours' drive from Tokyo. They received an

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Opposite page: Singaporean artist Tang Da Wu hung sheets of cloth in muddy gullies to create *Gully Curtains* (1979). **Above:** *Gully Curtains* on show at the National Gallery Singapore

Images Courtesy of Tang Da Wu / Courtesy of the National Gallery Singapore

enormous donation of 120 kilograms of pigments, valued at some 450,000 yen (the equivalent of US\$1,250 at the time), from a large chemical company. Images in the exhibition showed how they used the stark white surface of the snow as a canvas for striking colour-field abstractions. “When vanguard artists wanted to go beyond the accepted norm and defy the status quo, nature nearby was as appealing as the urban streets,” explains Tomii. “Their snow project [was] fundamentally inspired by their gloomy reality of living in remote, snowy country... Their goal was to transform a hardship into a pleasant surprise.” Four days later, more GUN members trekked out to repeat the work, but their plan was foiled by heavy snow within minutes.

Singapore was also a hotbed of creativity in the '60s, though its art scene at the time is sadly under-documented. “Several artists were experimental and bold and forced audiences to rethink their ideas and understanding of what art can or should be,” says Charmaine Toh, a curator at the National Gallery Singapore. Only

recently did the gallery rediscover the first known examples of land art from the city—a series of works by performance artist Tang Da Wu. One piece, *Gully Curtains*, hadn't been unpacked since the '80s.

Wu was concerned to see Singapore's landscape increasingly stripped of trees to build public housing. As a result of soil erosion, deep gullies scarred the land near his home. In response, he climbed into one of these muddy crevices and positioned seven pieces of cloth of different lengths inside it, adding jagged black marks indicating the depth of the ditch. He left the fabric there for three months, inviting nature to collaborate. The result was a series of delicate patterns on fabric created by tropical rainstorms, heavy winds and stains from the contact with the moist mud. It's a powerful reminder of the damage to nature that rapid urbanisation can cause. But at the time, Wu was a solitary—almost underground—figure, and he didn't invite anyone to see the work.

Several contemporary artists around the region are taking a more public stance on the plight of the



HELP, Junma's Protest (2010-2011)
by Asim Waqif



Ghost Island (2018)
by Map Office

environment. A few years ago, the word “HELP” in giant LED lights appeared on the murky surface of Yamuna River at night in Delhi, India. Floating between two major bridges, it stopped several passers-by in their tracks. “I wanted my work to be a little mysterious. So questions arise in people’s mind without me prompting them,” says Indian artist Asim Waqif, who created the piece using discarded plastic bottles collected with the help of homeless scavengers. It was a plea to locals to stop polluting what has become one of the dirtiest rivers in the world. “Environmental activists are sometimes very critical of people they are trying to affect. But if you don’t know whether it’s activism or art, if it sits on the border, that ambiguity helps in affecting people’s subconscious,” says Waqif.

Since then, Waqif has created increasingly bold works of land art. In contrast to his earlier more ephemeral interventions, he is currently working on a deeply permanent project: a living sculpture in the form of a bamboo

forest. It’s situated in Srihatta, an arts centre and sculpture park in Sylhet, Bangladesh founded by art patrons Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani. The piece is titled *Bamsera Bamsi*, which means “bamboo flute” in Bengali, and Waqif plans to grow it for the next 15 years.

Waqif’s forest began as a 42-by-32-metre plot set amid lush paddy fields, but is slowly expanding. He has planted some 250 seeds so far and is working with local villagers to turn the installation into a wild, labyrinthine environment filled with aeolian instruments that will amplify sounds of wind, submersing visitors in an ethereal soundscape. The instruments were partly inspired by warbling bamboo propellers and other historic wind-driven instruments previously used as wayfinders in thick plantations. “There is a suspension of disbelief in this immersive space,” says Waqif. “You can transport viewers into a different world.” While this work doesn’t carry a blatant environmental message, it is an ode

Image Raoul Amaar Abbas

of sorts to a simpler way of life, local practices and the power of nature.

Just as Waqif involved villagers in his project, Hong Kong-based artists Map Office, consisting of the duo Valerie Portefaix and Laurent Gutierrez, recently worked with local fishermen to create *Ghost Islands*, a stunning series of floating bamboo structures layered with a 9-metre-tall pile of ghost nets (nets abandoned or lost at sea) on a beach in Krabi. With the help of activist divers they sourced 300kg of nets from around Krabi National Park, helping to clean the ocean and protect marine wildlife.

For the duo, collaborating with fishermen and divers was a highlight of creating their first major work of land art, which was one of the most talked about works in the Thailand Biennale in 2018. “In museums we work in a totally controlled environment... but here we had the unique opportunity to work with the sea nomads [the Moken, a group of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers living

Image MAP Office

on the west coast of Thailand] in Krabi, and learn from their relationship with the ocean,” says Portefaix, who adds that working with nature was very unpredictable. During high tide, these green, fishing net-clad structures would hover on the surface of the ocean, evoking islands in the distance. At low tide, the structures sat on the beach and acted as a shelter of sorts. “We could sit inside during storms, visited by thousands of little crabs, and cook squid on a fire while strong tides were coming up,” recalls Portefaix.

While artists like Waqif and Map Office are working abroad, several artists in Mainland China are developing projects close to home. Zheng Guogu—who recently had a major solo exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art—is working on an ongoing project, *Liao Garden*, in his hometown Yangjiang. It is inspired by the computer game series *Age of Empires*, in which players lead ancient civilisations, such as the Egyptian and



Above: *Elegy: Explosion Event for the Opening of Cai Guo-Qiang: The Ninth Wave* (2014) by Cai Guo-Qiang. **Opposite page:** Cai's *Sky Ladder* (2015)

Roman empires. In 2000, Zheng began creating his own 'empire' by bringing to life scenes from the video game in a 5,000-square-metre plot of land outside the coastal city. The project has grown since then—he has now developed some 40,000 square metres of land into an overgrown, utopian garden and arts hub that now spans multiple sites across the city. On some plots he has even built roads and various unusual structures that house his studio and multi-use arts spaces. The way Zheng continually redevelops and expands *Liao Garden* is a nod to the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of physical objects—and a reminder that nothing lasts forever.

Art world titan Cai Guo-qiang spent a similarly long time trying to realise his dramatic installation *Sky Ladder*, a towering ladder of fire that took nearly 20 years to execute. He eventually succeeded five years ago, when he secretly set off a string of explosives in the shape of a 500-metre ladder in Huiyu Island Harbour, off the coast of his hometown of Quanzhou. The blazing installation

was intended to connect Earth to the heavens. According to Cai, when a video of the event was leaked a few months later, it went viral on WeChat and amassed more than 30 million views in the span of two days. Cai's work on *Sky Ladder* was the subject of an award-winning documentary of the same name, which was produced by Wendi Murdoch and released on Netflix in 2016.

Like many pieces of land art, the work itself was fleeting but its impact was explosive. "Impermanence is interesting. When you put something in public space, after some time people stop looking at it and it disappears into the greyness of the landscape," muses Waqif. "On the other hand, absence is very important. The memory of your encounter with the object or situation that [has been removed] has a lot more potential and power." At a time when our planet is in peril, land art is charged with great possibilities. Not only do these works of art draw our attention to the immense beauty of nature—they are also a poignant reminder of the urgent need to preserve it. ┘

Photography Lin Yi, courtesy of Cai Studio / Wen-you Cai, courtesy of Cai Studio

