



Buhlebezwe Siwani. *AmaHubo*. 2018. Video with sound; 13 mins 1 sec. Image courtesy of the artist, WHATIFTHEWORLD and Osange Art Foundation

## WE USED TO ROAR LIKE LIONS

The Osage Art Foundation in Hong Kong has a Regional Perspectives exhibition platform that places Asian art practices in the context of other cultural geographies. *Present Passing: South by Southeast* (runs until 26 May) is the latest example of these different locational articulations. Creating visual motifs and connections between Southeast Asia, the Caribbean – which sits southwards of North America – and South Africa, this ambitious show sheds new light on themes of positionality in contemporary culture and regionalism(s) in art, by looking outward.

Words by Payal Uttam

Upon stepping inside Hong Kong's Osage Gallery, I am confronted by South African artist Lhola Amira's searing gaze. Her cinematic video work *LAGOM: Breaking Bread with The Self-Righteous* (2017) is set against haunting, instrumental music and projected on the large entrance wall. Dressed in a towering yellow turban and an earth-brown jumpsuit, Amira stares directly at the viewer as she cuts through a field of flowers in Sweden while clutching a bright red suitcase. At one point, she raises her *itshoba*, a patterned Zulu divination stick, before marching through a train station ignoring onlooking Swedes. She appears regal,

defiant even, but this stance sometimes wanes into uneasiness with different kinds of negotiations of the gaze.

Amira's superimposition of her body onto Swedish territory seems more than a fleeting performance; it leaves an impression on a landscape that has prospered as a result of imperialism. Her presence challenges Sweden's often-glorified public image and pushes to the surface the country's buried history of colonialism and slavery in Ghana (being the first nation to colonize it in the 1650s and then the island of Saint-Barthélemy in 1784, for almost a century).



Kiyoko Sakata. *Oscillating Vessels*, 2016/2019. Mixed media. 15cm x 500cm x 150cm; *Row the Sky*. 2018. Mixed media. 200 cm x 40 cm x 7 cm



Lhola Amira. *LAGOM - Breaking Bread with the Self-Righteous*. 2017. Video & digital prints. 9 mins 56 secs. Image courtesy of the artist, SMAC GALLERY and Osage Art Foundation

REVIEW



Chris Chong Chan Fui. *Badminton Training*. 2015. Video Installation. Image courtesy of the artist and Chan+Hori Contemporary

The video incites questions about the directionality of our gaze and the repercussions of colonial history. ‘Lagom’ in the title, refers to a Swedish aphorism meaning just the right amount – not too much or too little. This tension sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition, which brings together 16 artists from South Africa, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. Just as Amira resists being objectified, this well-calibrated exhibition shatters generalisations about the Southern Hemisphere, expanding perspectives and deepening an understanding of the regional imaginary. “It challenges any idea of the ‘Global South’ as a place of subjugation where people don’t have much agency and they are victims of global politics or local ethnic differences,” says co-curator Natasha Becker. “These artists are very much agents.” Yet that is true only to the extent that many of the artists reimagine themselves in scenes that navigate and stage historical sites of loss.

South African artist Thania Petersen, for instance, reimagines herself as a royal figure in performative self-portraiture. A descendant of an exiled Indonesian prince, she grew up in the ostracized Cape Malay community. A photograph from the *Remnants* series (2016) shows her in a billowing red gown at a mausoleum in Surat, India, once the headquarters of the Dutch East India Company.

Towering above the graves of the company’s officials, who forcefully moved her forbears from Indonesia to Africa, Petersen lends this community a level of visibility and dignity.

Her work is just one example of how this exhibition shines a light on marginalized communities in the region. Another includes Charlene Khan, an artist of Indian origin, whose video works and embroidered mixed-media pieces expose her family’s harrowing experience of indentureship in South Africa. The exhibition’s strength, however, lies not in illuminating historical ties between the continents but in looking at their repercussions and at how artists confront their past today. “They recreate, in the present, their own sense of self and identity and that’s empowering... especially when it’s not [labels that are] imposed on you,” adds Becker.

Among the most powerful works is South African artist Buhlebezwe Siwani’s film *Amahubo* (2018), in which she reclaims her fraught history. An initiated *sangoma* (traditional healer), she examines how her ancestors were stripped of their land and how the arrival of Christianity led to the demonisation of African spirituality. She aestheticises this trauma through stunning aerial scenes of women in white moving across an arid landscape. Barren and scarred, the land symbolizes the helplessness of her people, which is echoed in scenes of the women



Samak Kosem. *Ethnography of the House*. 2019. Field-note with photo. 10 panels. 42 cm x 29.7 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist

falling to the ground like corpses. She implores, “How will they ever appease our silenced and violently wound-up spirits?” Jolting in impact, the work exposes the terrors of the past while also reasserting tradition. We see the fallen women rise and stand again and Siwani performs a healing ritual by stepping into red-pink pigment barefoot, staining the soil.

Practices of healing course through the show, which moves past the region’s history of oppression in these meditative journeys. Such motifs are perhaps most salient in Japanese artist Kiyoko Sakata’s sculptures *Oscillating Vessels* (2016/2019) and *Row the Sky* (2018). The former is a series of open books laid on the floor forming the shape of a boat encrusted with a thick layer of salt crystals, and the latter is a wall-mounted oar with a blade made of feathers. In a direct interpretation, the salt acts like a fog obscuring conventional readings of the past, while the fragile oar suggests the difficulty in journeying towards a new reality.

Grappling not only with historical wounds but also contemporary struggles, Thai artist Samak Kosem’s ethnographic series *Bordering on Desire* (2019) reveals the present-day plight of stateless men in Southeast Asia. In a blue-walled alcove, cheerful Thai music plays in the background while three television sets display scenes of young men

exercising, singing and flirting with women. Once you realise the former are sex workers from the Shan state on the border of northern Thailand and Myanmar, you understand their vulnerability. Including photographs of their belongings, the video humanizes the bereft men. The show soars in powerful moments like this. Instead of lumping together artists from the Southern Hemisphere as a composite whole, the curators present rich, complex works expressing singular and often deeply personal narratives.

As Becker explains, the aim of this ambitious show is to map out a new cartography: “It’s less a North-South axis but more a new way of thinking about geography and globalization... There are islands of the Global South that float and anchor in different places.” This idea of unmoored islands underscores the individualism and freedom of artists who are no longer suffocated by labels dictating their identity. While they may be different, heard together their voices are amplified. Walking out of the show, what echoes most in my mind is a rendition of Norman Vincent Peale’s words (“Americans used to roar like lions for liberty; now we bleat like sheep for security”) through Siwani’s affirmation: “Indeed, we used to roar like lions.”

And when you are once again faced with Amira’s piercing glare near the door, you realize they still do.