

EXHIBITION Dazzling work by neighbouring artists delights **Gabriella Coslovich**.

An art for blurring borders

THE Asia Pacific is all the rage among Australia's state galleries: everyone wants to collect or exhibit or expand according to this exalted geographical region. It's enough to make you wonder whether the obsession has more to do with political and economic expediency than an authentic interest in the art of the region.

With these nagging questions, I headed to Brisbane for the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial, not especially expecting to be astonished or moved. After all, I'd travelled to the pinnacle of art fairs last year, the Venice Biennale. How could the Asia Pacific Triennial in prosaic Brisbane possibly beat that? As titles go, Asia Pacific Triennial is an earnest little mouthful that seems to promise anything but a good time. How thrilling it was to be proved wrong.

The visual splendour and dynamism began from the moment I walked into the vast ground floor of the Gallery of Modern Art, sweeping away any lingering doubts about the merit of staging an exhibition dedicated to the Asia Pacific.

In many ways, the art I saw there and the layers of stories and themes presented felt more relevant, more urgent and more salient than some of the navel-gazing conceptual frippery that I've become accustomed to seeing in the Eurocentric, Western art world. The Asia Pacific Triennial was a revelation — it felt fresh, connected, vibrant. Here were artists with something to say, the skill to say it and the ability to combine the visually dazzling with the meaningful.

Perhaps I never should have doubted. Since its inception in 1994, the Asia Pacific Triennial, founded by the Queensland Art Gallery's previous director, Doug Hall, has been at the forefront of presenting contemporary Asian art, not only in Australia but also the world. The triennial remains the only recurring exhibition in the world to focus on the contemporary art of Asia, Australia and the Pacific.

"So much effort goes into it, it's not a trivial undertaking. On the other hand, I think some of the other state galleries treat Asia Pacific art as an add-on, as an 'oh we have to do it because it's politically important but we're not going to put too much effort in,'" says Alison Carroll, director of the arts program at Melbourne University's Asialink organisation and a former curator of the APT. She was also on the triennial's national advisory committee from 1991-99.

Doug Hall's successor, Tony Ellwood, has taken on the baton with typical enthusiasm and ambition. This year, the triennial occupies the entirety of the Gallery of Modern Art, as well as large sections of the

adjacent sister site of the Queensland Art Gallery. More than 25 countries are represented, with the inclusion for the first time of works from Tibet, North Korea, Turkey, Iran and countries of the Mekong region, such as Cambodia and Burma.

It is almost impossible to impose an overarching theme on an exhibition as sprawling as this, but if there is a binding motif, it is the ability of art to transcend cultural and political boundaries and to provide a more complex insight into the lives of people in our region. The primary aim of the triennial, though, is to show the best contemporary art from the Asia Pacific: the art, not the politics, must come first.

The maximum visual punch has been deliberately reserved for the ground floor of GOMA, the audience's entry to the triennial. A pop sensibility reigns but not at the expense of substance. In quick succession, audiences are regaled with a breathtaking bunch of works — from Indian artist Subodh Gupta's giant mushroom cloud composed of castaway copper and brass pots bubbling ominously towards the ceiling to Japanese artist Kohei Nawa's crystal-and-glass-bead-encrusted elk.

On opening weekend, people gasped as they entered a small, glacially white room and came face to face with the unexpected beauty of Nawa's dead, taxidermed elk. The work continues to haunt me; it is the most sublime expression of the distance between the real and the virtual.

Nawa bought the elk online, where it existed as an odourless, neat, pixellated version of itself, and had it transported to his studio, where its reality was gross and pungent. He then transformed it into something else again, a corporeal and yet fragmented hybrid, covered in pixels of crystal and glass. The elk is part of a series of sculptures Nawa has created on this theme and speaks eloquently about the splintering of reality in the digital age, and about life and death.

If you look closely at the work, titled *PixCell-Elk #2*, you can discern the coarse, individual

hairs of the elk's fur magnified under those glass and crystal beads. There is something particularly moving about that sight of those hairs, signs of extinguished life. You can also see multiple images of yourself reflected in the crystal-and-glass bubbles.

You, the viewer, are inescapably linked to the dead elk. In Japanese Shinto belief, deer are considered to be divine messengers. What is this one telling us? Are we all destined to become embalmed and pixellated versions of our former selves, strange hybrid creatures with one foot in the real, another in the virtual? Or is it warning us that reality is on the verge of extinction?

In delirious contrast to Nawa's elk are two rooms decorated in the most exuberantly ornate fashion, a mix of the gaudily baroque and the brazenly Bollywood. The rooms could only be the work of hip Indian duo Thukral and Tagra, both of whom are Punjabi. Decorated in a pulsating amalgam of East and West, Thukral and Tagra's living rooms are dedicated to the Punjabi people's characteristic hankering to travel abroad and seek their fortune.

As art works go, it is one of great relevance to Melbourne, whose reputation as a safe and tolerant city has suffered as a result of recent attacks on Indian people and the exploitation of Indian students.

Here is a work that simultaneously celebrates the adventurous and yet extroverted Punjabi spirit and yet suggests, too, the parents and relatives who are left behind. In one room, a glossy white table rises towards the ceiling like an aeroplane about to take off. At the lower end of the table a forlorn couple of chairs evoke the parents who grieve the departure of their offspring. The rooms, with their trophy cabinets and shiny white busts commemorating those lucky Punjabis who have flown off to greener economic pastures, are joyful, playful and ironic, with a gentle

undercurrent of longing. The viewer cannot help but identify with the aspirations and wanderlust of young Punjabis and delight in the decorative chaos of East-West fusion.

The work reminded me of a point made by Alison Carroll in her recent Asialink essay, *Ignorance is Not Bliss, Art and its Place in Australia-Asia Relations*. Carroll wrote: "One of the great benefits of seeing other cultures is seeing one's own culture with fresh eyes, and that is one of the possible outcomes, if the viewer is from the West, of looking at Asian art. It means putting aside accepted hierarchies, understanding differences, and acknowledging the influences in understanding of the last millennium that have flowed from East to West and back again."

The work of 85-year-old Iranian artist Monir Shahrroudi Farmanfarmanian is testament to this cultural toing and froing — as is her life, a remarkable journey between Tehran and New York that is documented in her memoir *A Mirror Garden*. The daughter of a liberal-minded politician, Farmanfarmanian attended a Zoroastrian high school in Tehran, which she describes in her memoir as being "a haven of diversity, attracting Armenian, Jewish and B'ahai students as well as Zoroastrians". She sadly notes that such high schools vanished soon enough.

Farmanfarmanian's art work is epic and spectacular, an astounding six-panel relief sculpture made from more than 4000 pieces of mirror, and inspired by Iranian architecture and geometry. The Iranian tradition of mirror mosaics stems from the 16th century, when mirrors imported from Venice and Bohemia would often

arrive broken, compelling the new owners to improvise by setting in the shards of glass in stucco to create decorative panels of multiple reflections.

Commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery and titled *Lighting for Neda*, Farmanfarmanian's work is partly a tribute to the young Iranian girl, Azita Soltani who died during the pro-Democracy protests in

Tehran last June. But "Neda" also means "voice" in Farsi and Farmanfarmanian's sculpture gives voice to the six virtues represented in Islamic culture by the six-sided hexagon: generosity, self-discipline, compassion, insight, patience and determination. With its repeated hexagonal motif, it is a scintillating call for a return to such ideals.

Much has been made of the inclusion of North Korea in this year's exhibition, to the point that Tony Ellwood feared the controversy surrounding the six North Korean artists who were denied entry to Australia might eclipse their work. After being given permission to travel to Brisbane for the triennial by their own government, the artists were knocked back by the Australian Government; the impasse was reported internationally.

Focusing on the art work itself, which is highly traditional, in the social realist and figurative mould, one might well ask if it deserves a place in an exhibition dedicated to the best of the contemporary. The longer I looked and the more I read about the creation of the suite of works, with curator Suhanya Raffel and British businessman and filmmaker Nicholas Bonner gently pushing the North Koreans beyond their comfort zones, the more I became convinced of the value of its inclusion. The North Korean display was five years in the making, and features more than 60 works, including a large mosaic mural commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery.

Kohei Nawa, Japan
b.1975.
PixCell-Elk#2 2009,
taxidermed elk,
glass, acrylic, crystal
beads.
Work created with
the support of the
Foundation
d'enterprise Hermes.
Courtesy the artist
and SCAI, Tokyo.
Photograph: Seiji
Toyonaga.



The skill of the North Koreans is undeniable, a consequence of the rigorous training they receive, with a minimum of six to eight years of study in the areas of brush-and-ink painting (or chosunhua), calligraphy, oil painting, print-making, sculpture, ceramics, mural painting and the industrial arts.

There is no denying, either, that in North Korea, artists are part of the state machinery, employed to create art that glorifies industry and the Stalinist regime. Propagandist works are included in the triennial and many are remarkably beautiful, such as Hwang In Jae's linocut *Potato Flower Smell in the Daehongdan Highland*, featuring a group of workers carrying red revolutionary flags marching through lush green fields abloom with white potato flowers.

Those who denounce such works as mere "propaganda" forget that propaganda and art are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Social realism is a visual language and an art style that has emerged from the former Soviet Union, China, Vietnam and even the Australian labour movement. Having said that, not all the North Korean works are propagandist. Bonner and Raffel worked closely with the artists, encouraging them to create more truthful representations of life in North Korea, although the word "humble" was substituted for "truth".

"It's not that we could not use the word 'truth', we chose not to use it because it is a very complicated word. 'Humble' in fact is a very truthful way to describe the works developed by the artists for the Asia Pacific Triennial," Raffel explained.

She pointed me to the Indian postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who writes: "It is one of the great tragedies of history that there are times when a whole country disappears behind a heavy curtain. Sometimes this is the result of an authoritarian regime that wants to darken the lives of its own people; at other times, those outside the country choose to see it, for their own purposes, through a veil of ignorance. After a period behind the curtain, we expect artists to burst through the darkness and come rushing towards us with the 'truth'. We want to see the truth of the people; to examine the truth of everyday life. These artists resist the temptation to become truth-tellers — they know too much about the dangerous slide of dogmatic truth into political tyranny."

The more humble paintings created by the North Koreans include Im Hyok's *Breaktime*, a powerful portrait of a worker having that most



LEFT: Subodh Gupta, India b.1964. *Line of Control (1)* 2008, Stainless steel and steel structure, brass and copper utensils. Courtesy: The artist and Arario Gallery, Beijing.

universal of breaks — the smoko. The worker looks defiantly at the viewer, as if to ask, "What are you looking at?" In the triennial's catalogue the artist perceptively writes: "Perhaps in Australia people should be surprised as they know only their life — and they are thinking they have come to a gallery to observe art, but it is in fact a shock for them to be observed by a Korean worker."

Im Hyok is, in effect, raising very contemporary questions: what is art, and what is the role of an art gallery?

Over at the neighbouring Queensland Art Gallery, a soaring structure has been constructed that evokes Islamic architecture and harbours a universal message. Pakistani artist Ayaz Jokhio has created a giant white, octagonal and roofless room over the watermall, with an arched doorway and seven curved alcoves, suggesting the *mirhab*, or niche, built into the wall of a mosque facing Mecca for prayer. In Jokhio's tower, which is inspired by Sufi thought, the niches face in seven directions. The political message of the work is clear. Jokhio's God can be prayed to in multiple ways: fundamentalists do not have the stranglehold on faith.

But the message appeared lost on one young Australian woman who provided one of the triennial's more impromptu and unexpected moments of visual impact. She strutted her stuff down the runway-like platform leading to Jokhio's tower, jiggling her rump down the catwalk in her bottom-grazing denim mini, low-cut halter neck and soaring wedge heels, arms raised high above her head. It was a bizarre clash of cultures.

Not that one would want to overstate the dichotomy between East and West — the triennial is a densely social, cultural, historical, political and anthropological experience that blurs boundaries and challenges stereotypes. The Asia Pacific was shown to be anything but a neat category; within that vast region there is great diversity. The Asia Pacific Triennial gives us the opportunity to familiarise ourselves with some of that richness in the most beguiling, moving and exalting of fashions.

The sixth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art is on at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane until April 5.



LEFT: Thukral and Tagra Jiten Thukral, India b.1976 and Sumir Tagra, India b.1979. *Escape! For a dream land 2009*, Mixed-media installation. Project for APT6. Courtesy: The artists and Gallery Nature Morte, New Delhi.