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# The Monthly

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## The 21st Biennale of Sydney

BY **Julie Ewington**

**This latest edition offers a contemporary take on elemental balance**

Mami Kataoka, the subtle and urbane chief curator at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, is, remarkably, the Biennale of Sydney's first Asian artistic director in its 45-year history. Significantly, this 21<sup>st</sup> edition picks up the strong Asian, especially Japanese, presence in the first and second Biennales of 1973 and 1976. Kataoka's theme this year – *Superposition: Equilibrium & Engagement* – is drawn directly from the Chinese philosophy of *Wuxing* in which five basic elements of existence – wood, fire, earth, metal and water – work symbiotically. The theme sits well in Sydney, with its strong Asian communities. While the “super” in “superposition” might be hip in today's Japanese vernacular, balance and harmony in the universe have been sought in East Asian worldviews for centuries.

Such sweeping themes conventionally precede ambitious contemporary art exhibitions in order to structure them, often less than successfully. Kataoka's emblem is astute: her thoroughly traditional premise translates into the contemporary notion, drawing on quantum mechanics, that all aspects of life are interconnected. Within this

broad range, Kataoka has faithfully followed her basic materials, expressed in a considered mix of works, across the exhibition's six venues. This supple structure plays out well in the great abandoned industrial spaces of Cockatoo Island, to take just one site, where the artists' making processes are revealed. Australian Yasmin Smith has set up a workshop transforming her clays, Parramatta River mangrove wood for glazes, and the salt of Sydney Harbour in a beautifully calibrated process that will endure throughout the exhibition; her drying room, on the island's upper level, is physically separate but conceptually integral. And the Thai sculptor Tawatchai Puntusawasdi is showing beautiful metal forms – simple enough but obeying the complex laws of their curves – alongside the templates and measurements used to devise them.

This site specificity is consistently registered in Kataoka's Biennale; indeed, exploring Sydney has become one of the chief charms of the Biennale. On Cockatoo Island's upper areas, across two abandoned factory buildings, the veteran American Suzanne Lacy has installed *The Circle and the Square* (2016), a poignant examination of the death of a once-great textile industry in north-west England and the healing community experience of singing and chanting together. In no other setting would this glorious work be so powerful: one stands where hundreds once worked, and their presence, intimated by video interviews of their English counterparts, is palpable. Nearby, Ryan Gander revisits his English childhood in a newly commissioned installation replete with magical specificity; it's another world, but a miniature version of Cockatoo Island's famous Dog Leg Tunnel, cut through the island's massive rock, becomes the skewed telescope of memory. This motif of placement and displacement recurs all over the island.

Across town, Redfern's Carriageworks has never looked better. Kataoka has mastered its cavernous reaches with an extended play on painting, deploying imposing works without intervening walls. (There was no budget for building, as Kataoka wryly noted at the media preview, and the space is all the better for it.) The grand scale of all the works in the huge room is breathtaking. The installation includes works by the Western Desert painter George Tjungurrayi, which are backed by a video exploration of the same country by the French artist Laurent Grasso. The English duo Semiconductor (Ruth Jarman and Joe Gerhardt) stand out. Their pulsing multi-screen animations, riffing on seismic data and mineral samples, constantly transform the gloom with dazzling changing colour. This is the finest of many works across the entire exhibition evoking cosmic power, elemental forces.

At Carriageworks two particular elements are notable, each suggesting the sophistication of the whole. In the tiny cinema in the furthest corner, easily overlooked but not to be missed, is Nguyen Trinh Thi's video *Letters from Panduranga* (2015). Her gentle epistolary study of the Cham people of southern coastal Vietnam suggests something of the complexity of inter-cultural dialogues within and across Asia, an alertness that runs through this entire Biennale. Nguyen's softly spoken voice-over is, from time to time, interrupted by faint booming echoes: Marco Fusinato's great wall is being struck by a baseball bat in another huge room nearby, like a temple gong registering merit. Sound resonates elsewhere in the Biennale, including in another wonderful monolith: Jacob Kirkegaard's *Through the Wall* (2013), at the Museum of Contemporary Art, replicates the West Bank barrier separating Israel and Palestine, summoning sounds heard at that sad, fraught site. On a more positive note, Japanese theatre director Akira Takayama's lovely *Our Songs – Sydney Kabuki Project* (2018), at Chinatown's 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, gracefully celebrates community stories and was filmed in the Victorian splendour of Sydney Town Hall. And if you can get a ticket, don't miss Oliver Beer's ecstatic *Composition for Tuning an Architectural Space* (2012/18) at the Sydney Opera House until May 18.

All this speaks to the ingenuity and confidence with which Kataoka has woven together this study of equilibrium and engagement. Each venue is a microcosm of the whole, and as a fellow curator I greatly admire this density and sustained quiet thoughtfulness. And then there is the unexpected – always hoped for, ever crucial. Look at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for Sa Sa Art Projects from Phnom Penh as evidence of vibrant creative life in Cambodia, or the political acuity and biting humour of Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise from Africa, or exquisite orchestral experiments by the Sydney-trained, Hong Kong-based Samson Young. At the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia I cannot forget the probity of Maria Taniguchi's pristine black paintings and open wooden sculptures, or the persistent ingenuity of Tom Nicholson, manifested in an expansive pencil wall-drawing noting the creation of national boundaries since Federation, or the group of burial baskets by the great Ngarrindjeri weaver Yvonne Koolmatrice from South Australia, or the American Liza Lou's collaboration with Zulu artisans from South Africa in a sublime room filled with tiny beaded clouds. Good use is also made of works from local collections: one example is Geng Xue's mesmerising video *Poetry of Michelangelo* at Artspace; it normally lives in Sydney's White Rabbit collection of contemporary Chinese art.

What then of the elephant in the turbine shop? The late Nick Waterlow, who steered three editions, once said every Biennale needs its gimmick. Ai Weiwei's *Law of the Journey* (2017) at Cockatoo Island is this year's: the gigantic black rubber raft filled with oversize rubber asylum seekers was the media drawcard of the opening week. It is astonishing, so perfectly scaled in the enormous space that it appears, paradoxically, diminished, even mundane. Originally made for an exhibition in Prague, as an emphatic rebuke of the Czech Republic's refusal to accept refugees, the work sits just as well in Australia, with this country's record of offshore incarceration. It's very bad art, a gargantuan one-liner that Ai himself correctly described as "silly" during an interview at the

Sydney Opera House, but it has a message to deliver, as the numerous texts, many from Ai himself, around the base of the work attest. Ai's support for the refugees flooding into Europe in recent years has made him the most celebrated artist in the world; he received a hero's welcome at the Opera House.

Always ready to speak, Ai did name this Biennale's key problem. During an often petulant interview with Kataoka, Ai told the 2000-odd audience that, in effect, the Biennale of Sydney had an enormous international reputation but not the resources to match it. That's exactly right. I hinted as much two years ago, reviewing the 20<sup>th</sup> Biennale, but in 2018 it's clear the Biennale of Sydney is an organisation stretched beyond capacity. Kataoka herself tells me she sees the Biennale budget as "a mystery" and "extremely small". She continues, "One must invest for new commissions, site-specific works and longer research-based works to make it significant and meaningful ... it should not be only about market-friendly works." Moreover, "because the Biennale has free entrance, there is no way to generate its own income, and this is not positive in the future".

As Kataoka observed in a public forum at the MCA just two weeks before the exhibition's opening, her challenge was working out what to do given that there are so many biennales and the Sydney Biennale has only one office and no fixed venues, just longstanding partners. And there's the matter of the catalogue. At one of the opening weekend talks, David Elliott, artistic director of the 2010 Biennale, noted its absence. A comprehensive online catalogue is promised for the conclusion of the exhibition, there are very useful resources on the website, and the \$5 guide is great. But I already miss that print catalogue, the Biennale's permanent record.

In the circumstances, the fascinating Biennale archive on display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales took on a slightly valedictory cast: so much achievement over the decades, but where to next? Biennale visitors and critics are asking if the time of the large international extravaganza has come and gone. Chinese philosophy and quantum mechanics aside, Mami Kataoka's key terms of superposition, equilibrium and engagement might suggest something of the miracle of inter-institutional cooperation that is conspicuous in this year's edition. It sounds like a good story, Sydney pulling together. But is all this seasonal goodwill sufficient to sustain the Biennale of Sydney into the future?

*The 21<sup>st</sup> Biennale of Sydney: Superposition: Equilibrium & Engagement runs until June 11 at the Art Gallery of NSW, Artspace, Carriageworks, Cockatoo Island, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.*

## **JULIE EWINGTON**

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