The preparations for the *Realism in Asian Art* exhibition began with an international symposium on the subject held in Seoul in September 2007.¹ The conference papers were published in *Modern Art Studies*, in which I provided a summary of the symposium proceedings.² In the course of preparing for this exhibition, many of the discussions from that symposium became important references and even frameworks for the consideration of the large body of artworks and materials. This paper is a re-working of the summary, organised not by the proceedings of the symposium but by a number of critical themes and discussions that have evolved over the last two years in the further consideration of the topic of realism in Asian art.

**Definitions of Realism**

I noted in the summary that the ‘Realism Controversy’ in Japanese art discourse during the 1940s, discussed by Tsutomu Mizusawa, provided a good reference to map the variants of realism in Japan that could help provide a framework to look at realisms in Asia. A useful starting point has been to define realism in Asian art, and to recount the contesting ideas and models that helped frame the positions and definitions of realism.

Mizusawa noted three positions on realism in Japan during the period 1946–1949:

1. **Mimetic realism** (charting points along evolution of art historical progression), defined by Kiyoshi Nagai, who maintained that *Courtesan* (1872) and *Salmon* (1877) by Yoshiaki Takahashi exemplified “epitomic reality;”

2. **Avant-garde realism**, defined by Takachiyo Uemura, who saw modernist trends in capturing “reality of interior,” and

3. **Live (réalité)** realism, advocated by Teiichi Hijikata, with regard to paintings that suggested the presence of human beings (objectivity of subjective experience) in the social realist tradition of Gustav Courbet, and in opposition to modernist subjectivism.³
These definitions help us clarify that the scope of the current exhibition covers more the first and third definitions, which may broadly be known as figurative or representation art, notwithstanding the fact that the second, ‘avant-garde realism’ may potentially be the most interesting of the Asian realism variants because of its direct links with Asian aesthetic traditions. It is also through showing the differences among versions of realism that we could introduce the discussions surrounding realism in Asia.

The three kinds of realism speak of very different philosophical underpinnings which serve as a useful set of conceptual coordinates in considering the relation of art to 1. the perceived world; 2. materiality, and 3. social aspirations. Invoking the perceived or ocular world, i.e., mimetic realism (“looks real”), materiality (“in fact real”) and societal references (“as real”), as a way of talking about art is applicable to art from most, if not all, regions in the world. In a sense, art is always ‘realistic’ or about ‘realism.’

**Realist Impulses and 20th Century Realism**

One of the most important attempts at a “world art history,” David Summers’s *Real Spaces* (2003) has the word “real” in the title, as the foundation of this book is based on the idea that all artistic expressions share the common ground of the world we live in. What, then, is the special significance of discussing an Asian realism? I believe the most significant reason is that the Asian art tradition did not have a realist accentuation notwithstanding the presence of key moments of the realist impulse throughout art history. In the symposium, Cai Tao cited, for instance, the late Ming (early 17th century) perspective of scholar Gu Yanwu who noted that ‘representing the object’ was originally the essence of ancient Chinese painting though literati painting that developed in the later age became the mainstream.

It is realism against a backdrop of low priority given to, and the general lack of advancement in, mimetic realism that makes the current exhibition project significant. As the Japanese ‘Realism Controversy’ above shows, there had always been a strong feeling for ‘realism’ in the sense of materiality as opposed to mimetic realism in the course of Asian art history. The concern for materiality was taken further in the subsequent Mono-ha art movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which is often compared with Concrete Art, Minimalism and Arte Povera in the West, in taking the materiality, spatial relations and physical processes of art to a new level of consciousness. Such concerns had a close affiliation with Korea through the close association Mono-ha had with Lee U-Fan. The Chinese art historian Gao Minglu regards Mono-ha as having taken ancient aesthetic value of East Asia to a further extent than other art movements in the course of modernity in art in Asia.

The concern of the current project is that spectrum of expressions in Asia in the 20th-century, which were ‘realistic’ in the sense of perceived realism, encompassing realist, impressionist, romantic and representational tendencies. Social realism and socialist realism are also part of the scope of the current project. More significantly, the divergent route to realism in Asia, which unlike the evolution in Western art history that grew out of the tradition of Renaissance painting and single-point perspective, saw
successive realist movements in the 20th century in cultural and social contexts, which witnessed equally dramatic changes.

**A Syncretic Notion of ‘Truth’**

Another critical issue in attempting to define realism in Asia is the syncretistic perspective on the notion of ‘truth’ in Asian philosophies, which encompasses all the realms represented in the three concepts of realism—mimicry, materiality and societal references. Kristine Michael, during the symposium, spoke of the inclusive or composite notion of ‘real’ in Indian philosophy, which, in fact, holds sound rather than picture in the highest regard. Veneration for sacred sound was given expression in the concept supreme knowledge (*scuti*) obtained through direct revelation. Traditional arts were guided by the *silpashastras*, or the art/craft manuals, so as to emphasise both the iconometry and iconography to manifest the *sruti*. Of parallel importance is the *prana*, “visual energy or breath.”

Given such vastly divergent philosophical underpinnings on the place of visual perception within the *real*, a definition of realism in Asian art had to even begin with the fundamental philosophical issues of the role of visual representation. In considering Asian realism in the 20th century, such cultural lineages must further be located within the social and political transformations that accentuated different relations with the past. There are many instances of invoking traditional genres and iconography, in concurrent relation with nationalism and modernisation. Realism often provided a platform for the confluence of cultural forces and ideas, partly due to the association of such ‘new’ imagery with new media and communicative channels of the century—photography, film and the print media.

**Artistic Exchanges with the West**

From the Age of Discovery in the 16th century onwards, there were sporadic exchanges in art between Europe and Asia. Mizusawa noted that in the case of Japan, the encounter was so intense at one point that the ‘*nanban*’ (or southern barbarians) art thrived as a genre of Japanese art. However, having closed its doors and strictly limiting international exchange from the 1630s until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan had little chance to learn about post-Renaissance Western affairs directly. The Japanese reception of Western art during the Meiji Era in the latter half of the 19th century formed a new high point of a systematic adaptation of Western knowledge and technology. Similarly, for China, the period of so-called ‘Self-Strengthening Movement’ in the latter half of the 19th century also saw the incorporation of Western painting into school syllabi, but more as a technical subject than as one of art and the humanities.

With the transition into the 20th century, the reception of realist paintings became grounded in the contexts of photography, film and broad circulation of images in the print media. This was followed by intense debates between the realist and traditional schools in aesthetic thoughts. Such discourse was further predicated on political and nationalist aspirations and sentiments, with many cultural concerns entrenched in postcolonial concerns, thus making the borrowing of realism from the West a highly complex and multi-faceted cultural phenomenon.
Asian artists like Shindu Sudjojono of Indonesia (see plates 2 and 6) and Victorio Edades of the Philippines (see plate 34) proclaimed that art should be about ‘truth,’ another key idea in Asian realism that has affinity with the mid-19th-century realism of Gustav Courbet. While there were also references made to Charles Baudelaire’s proclamation of modernism as being about ‘truth,’ and that modernity contained “poetry within history,” with the modern person’s role being “to distill the eternal from the transitory,” it was truth not in the universalist sense but in social visioning and criticism that were given greater emphasis. On the other hand, while modernism in the West began with a departure from the convention of mimicry or representation in celebration of sub-reality and the transitory, the higher ‘truth’ in Asian realism often drew on representational techniques coupled with expressionist tendencies.

Realism and Spirituality

The Indonesian art theorist Jim Supangkat noted during the symposium the gap and even contradiction between art-historical conceptions of realism and the Asian artists’ understanding of realism. Art-historical reflections on reality have basically been the perception of the physical-objective world. However, from the time of Courbet, realism could be separated from realistic painting as Courbet pluralised the realist technique by ignoring academism and opened up the possibility of realism by varied techniques. The realism discourse gave rise to contending views on social reality. Realism further took on the meaning of the ‘bearer of truth.’ This was an intriguing position for Asia as traditionally the Asian perceptions of ‘real’ always included the non-physical world.

Supangkat lamented that the notions of spirituality (and intuitions) are unfortunately taken to be a ‘dustbin concept’ in the world art-sphere as such ‘Eastern’ expressions are deemed vague and too localised and traditional. This is because the dominant global art discourse is largely predicated on the nihilistic tendencies in structuralism and deconstruction, i.e., the ‘death’ of the perception of reality as all perceptions are trapped within ideology. The irony of this argument is that since realism and reality were premised on the perceptual world, the extension of this reality into theorisation and abstraction did not include a foundation in the non-material and spiritual from the outset; consequently, this narrowly defined realism is regarded as being trapped in ideology.

What Supangkat described about the exclusion of ‘spiritual form’ would be in distinct contrast with the accentuation on the ‘spirituality’ in the early 20th-century Asian art discourse, discussed in an important recent study by the Calcutta-based historian, Tapati Guha-Thakurta. Explicating the cross relations in the artistic nationalism of the Nihonga in Japan and the ‘Indian’ art movement evoked by Rabindranath Tagore, Guha-Thakurta relates the mutual reverence of India and Japan in the writings of Okakura Tenshin and Tagore. Okakura’s Ideals of the East (1903), which has the opening line “Asia is One,” was celebrated for its abstraction of the ‘spirituality’ of Asia. Guha-Thakurta noted that this discourse of the ‘spiritual’ nurtured a particular vocabulary of art writing and art practice and also found relevance in the Bengali term ‘bhavavyanjana,’ which became synonymous both with the Indian-ness and the modernity of a painting.
The relevance of this discussion here is to highlight the need to reconsider traditional aesthetic concepts and values so that any discussion on realism in Asia is not framed within confines of prevalent definitions of realism, as in Supangkat’s argument for necessity in the inclusion of premodern values of spirituality. On the other hand, the critical assessment of spirituality as a historically grounded category in Guha-Thakurta’s analysis is equally significant. Such is the necessary expansive scope that is needed in considering realism in Asian art.

The Social Dimension

Another significant aspect in the consideration of realism in Asia would be that of social commentary, spanning a spectrum from anti-colonial sentiment and nationalist aspirations to social criticism in a postcolonial context. Victoria Herrera at the symposium argued that in the Philippines, the two main expressions of realism—as a mode of representation and as a vehicle of social commentary—were indeed true to the Philippine experience. These two tendencies were already evident in the works of two late 19th-century painters: Simon Flores and Juan Luna. Luna’s Spoliarium (1884) in academic style and a winning entry in the 1884 Madrid Exposition was an allegory of Spain’s abuses and oppression, making it one of the first works to express anti-colonial sentiments.12

Social realism also found its beginnings in China during the May Fourth New Cultural Movement of the late 1910s and 1920s, and was further promoted by personalities like Lu Xun in the 1930s. This strain of realism found affiliation with the concern for ‘truth,’ as in Sudjojo’s proclamation of realism as “reality of the people.” He called realism “a world of works which come from daily life, proceed in the artist’s life itself…” For Sudjojo, art that expresses the reality of the truth is a manifestation of the artist’s integrity. Hence, “art is visible soul, so art is a spirit (as people see it).”13

In Singapore, inspired by Russian Peredvizhniki (or ‘The Wanderers’), which included realist artists such as Ilya Repin and Vasily Surikov who initiated the Society for Travelling Art Exhibitions in 1870, the Yishu yanjiuhui (‘Arts Association,’ of the Singapore Chinese High School graduates) travelled an exhibition from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur and Penang in 1953. Ong Zhen Min and Seng Yu Jin, whose paper was read at the symposium, quoted Marco Hsu, a Singaporean art historian writing in the 1960s, who observed then that the artworks featured in the travelling exhibition had “a common melancholic tone and realist tenor expressing the anger, sadness and injustice for the unfortunate,” and were inspired by the emerging nationalist sentiments ‘to help Malaya gain her independence and her process of nation building.” Ong and Seng noted that the artists’ desire for art as a vehicle for social change, to awaken a Malayan consciousness towards the path of independence, and to portray the living conditions of the working classes as a critique of the social and economic structures that perpetuate such conditions are rooted in the ideology of social realism.14

Realism in Asian Art

To summarise: Realism is generally regarded as art that captures the world as it is perceived ocularly, i.e., representational, figurative or mimetic art. Given the predilection of associating realism with notions or values of ‘truth,’ realism is often extended to non-figurative or abstract art. In realism in Asian art, the spectrum of mimetic, abstract-materialistic and realism in the sense of expression of truths and social aspirations and commentaries—a set of coordinates marked in this essay as “looks real, in fact real, as real”—forms a necessary framework to consider the many 20th-century art movements, trends and works dealing with realism and truth.
While the exhibition *Realism in Asian Art* presents works of representational, figurative and mimetic nature, its presentation is underpinned by the vastly different significance, or the lack thereof, in the so-called figurative/abstract divide in the context of Asia. The overarching accentuation on sound rather than visual in the lineage of Indian philosophical thought, for a start, posits the role of the visual in a dramatic contrast to the centrality of the visual in Western culture. Kristine Michael’s essay further discussed that due to the characteristic syncretic notion of ‘truth’ in Asian philosophical traditions, the isolation of the ocular visual from the broader artistic intend of expression and articulation of reality may be practically impossible.\(^1\) However, with the specific social and cultural trajectories in 20\(^{th}\)-century Asia, coupled with transformations in the communicative landscape (photography, film, mass distribution of print media, broadcasting) and political landscape (from the colonial to the postcolonial and nationalisms), the exhibition *Realism in Asian Art* offers an encompassing platform to consider the spectrum of artworks of figurative, representational and mimetic nature, in a broad scope of impressionist, realist, romantic, social realist, socialist realist, cubist as well as traditional formats of ink, lacquer, batik and others. This much is evident even from the selection of paintings from the exhibition that are featured in this book (see plates 1, 14, 19, 30, 33). In addition to the critical consideration of this group of works, how this realism differentiates from realism in the West, and how to regard this realism in the context of Asian aesthetic traditions and the social contexts of 20\(^{th}\) century Asia are key questions that this exhibition addresses.

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1 Organised by the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea and the Korean Foundation, in September 2007. Presenters at the symposium were Jim Supangkat, Cai Tao, Tsutomu Mizusawa, Eunju Choi, Kristine Michael, Joyce Fan, Rizki Zaelani, Victoria Herrera and Sutee Kunavichayanont. Moderator was Kwok Kian Chow. Additional paper contributors were Ong Zhen Min and Seng Yu Jin.


11 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ibid., 30-31.


13 Rizki A. Zaelani, “Realism by the Context of Indonesia,” Modern Art Studies 4, 261-270.


15 Michael, op. cit.