



**MEKONG – NEW MYTHOLOGIES**  
Hong Kong Arts Centre

What do we mean by the term ‘Asia’? Initially the name given by the Ancient Greeks to the territories east of the Aegean Sea, today it still broadly refers to the ‘East’, as set in geopolitical distinction to the ‘West’: something generally defined from without as opposed to from within. Amongst other connotations and projections, perhaps one of the most misconstrued is the idea that some form of integral pan-Asian unity or essence exists. Thus to invoke ‘Asia’ is to risk being implicated in a levelling of distinct territories and identities into a landscape of false equivalencies.

‘Mekong – New Mythologies’ poses the world’s 12th-longest river – which flows from the Tibetan plateaus through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam – as a physical and metaphoric ‘liquid territory’. The work of the 12 artists and collectives featured purports to demonstrate the mutability and transience of borders and definitions, coalescing mythology with history and evincing affinities derived from the regional landscape.

That the contributors are billed as Southeast Asian artists – erroneously including Pakistan, China and Hong Kong – is an initial indication of the difficulties in escaping prescribed socio-geographic categories. Indeed, sometimes geography is all that seems to link the artists: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan’s *InHabit* (2017), for example, alludes to artistic collaboration through a cardboard collage, while Heman Chong’s ‘Things that Remain Unwritten’ (2017) is a series of abstract blue paintings interspersed throughout the gallery. Elsewhere, soft resonances are drawn out between artists taking natural elements as their subject

matter. Leung Chi Wo’s *Untitled (Blue Water)* (2014), a triptych of photographs of the sea, faces Dinh Q. Lê’s *The Scroll of the Mediterranean Sea, April 12th, 2015* (2016), which cascades glossily from the ceiling. In their three-channel video work, *The night is immenser than its hours. Pure memory is bigger than its borders* (2017), Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier succeed in teasing-out complexities of nation versus environment through their juxtaposition of footage of industrial scenes alongside open expanses of river.

The invocation of a liquid territory, we might conclude, is most provocative if taken in the sense of constituting a ‘space of flows’ – as network theorist Manuel Castells describes the all-pervasive circulation of information and ideas that defines our current society. Rather than essentializing works of art by their geographic, cultural or ecological features, this show is strongest where it illuminates both the ubiquity of culture and its distinct permutations. Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s video *Two Planets: Manet’s Luncheon on the Grass and the Thai Villagers* (2008), for instance, depicts a group of locals seated in an open field in front of a projection of Édouard Manet’s famous reclining nude. The film is subtitled with their bemused comments:

‘Western women cannot get naked like that,’ says one; ‘They only take their clothes off when they exercise,’ says another. The work demonstrates the disjunctive and often comical ways in which ideas get circulated. Instead of ‘navigating unique specificities’ of so-called territories, as the exhibition catalogue suggests, it is more productive to think about how art has fractured notions of global and local along different fault lines. As evidenced in Samson Young’s landscapes of musical registers distinguishing sounds in Hong Kong from Mainland China (*Liquid Borders I [Tsim Bei Tsui & Sha Tau Kok]*, 2012) and Cao Fei’s escape into the virtual world of Second Life (*Cao Fei [SL Avatar: China Tracy], China Tracy Portrait 06*, 2007), artistic production creates its own mythologies and imagined territories, articulating new solidarities to both empowering and effacing effect.

Ming Lin

**ELIZABETH ZVONAR**  
Burrard Arts Foundation, Vancouver, Canada

In Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* (1966), the protagonist takes some photographs at a park and, only later, in the darkroom, discovers in them evidence of a murder. He makes successive enlargements of the negatives, becoming obsessed with what the ghostly, grainy prints might reveal. Elizabeth Zvonar’s art, too, is driven by the seductive pull of images that provoke the compulsion to look, handle, print, reprint. Working mostly in collage, the Vancouver-based artist arranges purloined pictures in strange visual compositions and enlarges them to unfamiliar scales. The aleatory collision of imagery in her work may reflect a bubbling of surrealist sensibilities in recent artistic activity in the city. For Zvonar, the return to the instinctual offers, alongside pleasure and play, a strategy of protest against the sovereignty of consciousness.

The surreal is littered throughout Zvonar’s solo show at the Burrard Arts Foundation Gallery, which presents a body of work born out of a residency there in 2016. By the entrance hangs *Reading List* (all works 2016), two conjoined photographs of a collection of books focused on mysteries of the psychical and the supernatural; titles in this combined library range from canonical to obscure, from W.B. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925) to Hans Holzer’s *Elvis Presley Speaks* (1978). In *Visionary Feminist (after Jill Soloway and bell hooks)*, a blonde woman has a glinting ruby in place of her face; she wears a futuristic metallic visor that appears to melt into a dark backdrop, as if made of the same black matter. Such fragmented bodily imagery abounds in Zvonar’s work; in her visual universe, parts proliferate but never arrive at a whole.

In contrast to her earlier, cacophonous collages, however, most of the works here comprise only two or three

**Above**  
Heman Chong,  
*Things That Remain Unwritten #94*, 2017,  
acrylic on canvas,  
61 x 46 cm

**Below**  
Elizabeth Zvonar,  
*Reading List*,  
2016, photograph,  
71 x 48 cm





**Above**  
Elizabeth Zvonar,  
*Peace Bong*, 2016,  
56 x 49 cm

**Below**  
Jorge Satorre,  
*Modern Moral Subjects, Decorating the Pit*, 2017,  
exhibition view

components, and some only one – not technically collages at all. In such cases, estrangement is achieved entirely through process and scale rather than a surrealist hybridization of their subjects' forms. What Zvonar's process of collaging, scanning, enlarging and printing takes from its source, and what it leaves, is unpredictable. Take *Relativity*, which makes use of a *New Yorker* cartoon of a post-coital Albert Einstein sitting beside a woman in bed, captioned with the punch line: 'To you it was fast.' Blown up, the cartoonist's clean lines take on jagged edges – visual commotion that diverts our attention. The resultant image is ungainly, and loses its punchy delivery.

Walter Benjamin believed that photography – with its ability to frame, isolate, enlarge and reduce its subject – could unleash what he called the 'optical unconscious': the furtive elements of the visual field that we don't consciously perceive but nevertheless register affectively. Zvonar's practice digs at this substratum of the visible by asking what the nonhuman can see. In her work, mechanical optics reveal secrets: the scanner skirts the biases of conscious sight, enlargement stretches the skeins of the image, and the naked eye discovers in the resulting picture what had appeared not to be there. A close look at *Run to the Sun*, for example, begins to dissolve the image from a picture of a running boy into a field of Ben-Day dots – the tactile stuff that, in ordinary life, slips below the threshold of consciousness. The Lacanian psychoanalyst Darian Leader once remarked: 'The world of vision captures us due to what we do not see.' This provocative claim is implied in the body of works on view, which reveals in the allure of that which evades plain sight.

Amy Luo

## JORGE SATORRE LABOR, Mexico City, Mexico

The work of Jorge Satorre is full of anecdotes. The artist uses historical myths and misremembered stories as a dynamic driving force in his work. The drawings and photographs in his project *National Balloon* (2006), for instance, document a trip Satorre made to the factory where Chris Burden completed his famous performance *Shoot* (1971), and the experience of informing the current owner, a balloon manufacturer, of the violent act committed there. His 2011 series 'The Blacks' similarly used fictionalized encounters and elaborations to reconstruct the story of a miller named Menocchio, condemned to death by the Italian Inquisition, whose tale is told by historian Carlos Ginzburg in *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976). In that book, Ginzburg introduces the concept of 'micro-history' – which suggests that, in order to better understand larger historical narratives, we must focus on small, personal details.

In 'Modern Moral Subjects, Decorating the Pit' (all works 2017), Satorre's latest exhibition at LABOR, the artist affirms his interest in micro-history but, rather than explicit historical and artistic references, he explores more oneiric, abstract aspects of various characters and places. Here, Satorre draws from the architectural history of the gallery itself – a modernist house built in the 1940s by the functionalist architect Enrique del Moral, largely altered by a later owner in the 2000s – to reflect on memory, individual agency and the affective power of architecture. Our relationships to the vegetal and

animal worlds, but also to construction and destruction processes (taken both on literal and figurative planes), are further strong conceptual drives within the show.

The main gallery space is dominated by a large manual crane that Satorre designed to lift a monumental concrete cast of an earthen excavation from the gallery's garden. The wall separating the interior from the garden has been removed, forcibly restoring the original open design of the house, while also literally destroying part of its current structure. Satorre's creation and displacement of the huge cast, imprinted with concave patterns of leaves and dog paws, is an enormous and impressive endeavour for an artist lacking formal engineering training. Accompanying the sculptural installation is a set of drawings (some slightly older, but most produced for the exhibition) that depicts formal elements of the house, installation and its inhabitants (primarily the gallery owner's white dogs, who are shown quietly urinating in several drawings). Many unidentifiable human figures also appear, engaging in mostly festive activities such as partying, drinking or having sex, adding a sensual quality to the otherwise austere, monumental installation. The difference in scale between both elements – the small, cartoonish drawings and the overbearingly architectural sculptures – highlights the scale of the human body and subtly critiques the fetishistic obsession with modernism prevalent in contemporary Mexico. In his characteristically humorous and deconstructive style, Satorre thus continues to undermine the mythologies of our flawed earthen civilization.

Dorothee Dupuis

