

# ART & DEAL

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**56<sup>TH</sup> BIENNALE DI VENEZIA**

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## AT THE HEART OF THE 56<sup>TH</sup> BIENNALE DI VENEZIA IS A CONSIDERATION OF THE STATE OF THINGS

Okwui Enwezor, director of the Biennale and curator of the international exhibition, organized a show that pushes his audience to ponder the occasionally tenuous relationship between art and social realities. Constellating, or rather reaffirming the connection between, the contemporary global condition and a recent history that spans a century of catastrophe, Enwezor asks us to evaluate the ways in which our conceptualizations and methodologies of humanity breed the tempest of perils and ills that we collectively refer to as the present. In non-academic jargon, the curator asks us to consider how the way we live, and even how we understand what it means to live, is the root of all problems that afflict the contemporary age. What his exhibition asks us to do is to look at contemporary art, the meaningful and discourse-laden objects of the present, and see the problems of our existence.

Acclaimed by The Art Newspaper as one of the best exhibitions within All the World's Futures, *Frontiers Reimagined*, a Collateral Event of the 56th Venice Biennale, realizes Enwezor's vision in an unmistakably optimistic way.

A collaboration between the Tagore Foundation International and the Polo Museale del Veneto, *Frontiers Reimagined*, co-curated by Marius-

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*Ryujin I and Ryujin II*, multi-panel installation with acrylic and fluorescent pigments on Japanese mulberry paper by Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju © 2015 Nacasa& Partners Inc. Image courtesy of the artist



Kwint and Sundaram Tagore, represents a powerful statement and a visual manifestation of the organization's core mission.

Tagore Foundation International, named for and inspired by the ideals of Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature and the organizer of a watershed Bauhaus exhibition in India in the 1920s, is dedicated to breaking the restrictive boundaries of nationalism and promoting intercultural dialogue through the arts. The foundation endeavors to honor the tradition of Asian art and architecture through its preservation, and by sharing it with contemporary audiences.

With a core mission that closely aligns with those of the foundation, Sundaram Tagore operates an international gallery, with locations

in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore, that is on the forefront of the art world. The gallery is devoted to examining artistic exchanges between the East and West, and represents established and emerging contemporary artists who exemplify the interconnected and interdependent nature of the present.

*Frontiers Reimagined* recontextualizes cultural boundaries as a concept, tackling issues of globalization and cultural entanglement through the exposition of artists that attempt to transcend the East/West dichotomy and works that illustrate unique stories of intercultural dialogue, blending, and fusion from a variety of different perspectives and international arenas.

But what does that actually mean? The practice and work of the late Sohan Qadri, a master Indian

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*Works from Korean artist Chun Kwang Young's Aggregations series, Mixed media with Korean mulberry paper © 2015 Tagore Foundation International*



abstractionist painter exhibited in *Frontiers Reimagined*, speaks directly to the theme of the exhibition and reflects the contemporary realities that the Biennale attempts to highlight.

The global journey that would comprise Qadri's life and undergird his practice began in a small village in Punjab in the 1930s. Though his birth in a rural village, the quintessentially local setting, might seem to contradict the globetrotter he would become, Qadri had an incredibly multicultural upbringing. Positioned in a 'borderland' between two religions, the artist was exposed to a variety of different religious traditions and through these encounters developed a distinctly non-denominational and syncretic faith – based in Tantric Yoga, Sufism and Sikhism, as well as Tibetan Buddhism. Exposed to an internationally- and Western-focused art education in Bombay, his unique affinity for abstraction was

born, and the process of integrating his beliefs into his increasingly color-focused artistic practice began. Departing India, Qadri had his first international exhibition in Nairobi, Kenya; but, he would prove restless and eventually venture off to Europe, traveling around the continent to exhibit and participate with artistic movements for a time. At the invitation of the Danish Ministry of Culture, Qadri moved to Copenhagen where he was able to develop focus on the evolution of his religious and artistic practice; and would eventually meet Sundaram Tagore, who was paramount in his artistic career and catalyzed his recognition as a global master on par with other modern painters like V.S. Gaitonde and Akbar Padamsee.

Having almost an entire room to his compositions, *Frontiers Reimagined* in some ways creates a Qadri 'chapel' for the viewer to immerse themselves in. Paired with

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*Works on paper by Indian artist and Tantric guru Sohan Qadri.*

© 2015 Tagore Foundation International



an intricate sculpture by Dutch artist Fréllgen and an original Robert Rauschenberg, the exhibition showcases a trio of Qadri's pieces that succinctly and beautifully synopsise his mature style. The three works exhibit the truly masterful ways that Qadri incised his paper in order to imbue it with a three-dimensionality that enhances the vibrant dyes which he applies. Originally composing in oil on canvas, Qadri shifted away from this traditional method to develop an artistic practice that more readily lent itself to his work, which should be understood as the outward manifestation of an internal meditation.

In one of his exhibited works, *Vinjaya* (2010), radiant shades of cerulean, turquoise and indigo are punctuated by undulating waves of incisions that find a focus in a centralized presentation of disks that orbit around Qadri's bindi, a symbolic element that conveys the

meditative practice of his work and plays with understandings of positive and negative space. A master colorist whose work effortlessly demonstrates a fluency in tantric thought and practices, his work mesmerizes its viewers and imparts an experience transcendent of statement or rational understanding.

A truly remarkable exposition of the late Sohan Qadri's masterpieces, *Frontiers Reimagined* exhibits an incredibly diverse, conceptual and aesthetic art from around the globe and truly represents one of the fuller cross-sections of the contemporary art world in recent memory. The largest presentation of Thai art within the Biennale, Tagore shares the work of three Thai artists: an intricately carved three-dimensional print by Kamolpan Chotvichai and a radiant painting by Chatchai Puipia as well as a breath-taking installation by Nino Sarabutra that has been likened to a carpet of skulls; each artist has



an idiosyncratic practice and history all of their own, but all speak to the contemporary realities of Thailand and demonstrate the centrality of Buddhist traditions to their culture and their art.

Showcasing the works of artists celebrated in the West – like Robert Rauschenberg and Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Frontiers Reimagined* also gives voice to emerging artists from Asia, such as Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan whose frequent transformation of everyday materials into socially-activated, aesthetically beautiful art mirrors the photographic series of Vik Muniz, whose work is also exhibited. Crafting a larger conversation on the reality of culture and identity, the exhibition creates a space in which an endless number of connections can be made between artists and works from a variety of different international contexts. Similarly working with mundane objects, Tayeba Lipi, a Bangladeshi

artist in the Guggenheim collection who builds domestic sculptures out of symbolically-charged razor blades, is fundamental to the mission of *Frontiers Reimagined*: Lipi attempts to shift the conversation about her region away from the geo-political entities and to the everyday realities of the people and their culture with her artwork; she simultaneously points to the cultural oppression of women and the fortitude of these communities who forge on into the future without much support for their lives or their art.

Reflecting the diverse formats contemporary artists are using to make their work and convey their meaning, *Frontiers Reimagined* showcase a wide variety of media – even including a number of installation works by major contemporary artists. Visitors find a perplexing and breathtaking Chun Kwang Young *Aggregation* in juxtaposition to an installation

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Work by Iranian artist Golnaz Fathi (left) and Japanese-born metal artist Miya Ando (right) © 2015 Tagore Foundation International



of two traditional Japanese screens emblazoned by two of Hiroshi Senju's fluorescent night falls; both working with Korean mulberry paper, Young creates triangular forms that simultaneously evoke celestial bodies and 'microorganic' invaders while Senju encapsulates the beauty of nature and the world around us. As talented, though early in her career, Miya Ando has crafted a miniature temple that speaks to her Japanese heritage and showcases her metal artistry.

As any Biennale or associated exhibition of this nature should do, *Frontiers Reimagined* presents its viewers with a view of the art scene; but it goes further. Rather than systematizing the artists within a concretized thesis on contemporary works and practices, the exhibition points to the ever-evolving nature of the world, as it pertains to art and otherwise. As the dream-like 'vespa' installation of Eddi Prabandono

and mesmerizing photography of Sebastião Salgado convey, we live in a state of flux in which art attempts to meet, or at least catch up, with the rapidly evolving people and cultures of our world. Even though the anthropologists have been struggling with this issue since the inception of their discipline, there is no such thing, and there never was of a static culture – or, for that matter, a bounded, singular understanding of culture. As such, artists and denizens alike find themselves straddling a diverse number of contexts and embody multiple and plural identities. This is the thesis of Okwui Enwezor and this is the reality that *Frontiers Reimagined* transforms from theory into a visual and artful statement.

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*Agony*, 2015, installation by Bangladesh-born artist Tayeba Begum Lipi made from stainless-steel razor blades © 2015 Tagore Foundation International