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The Best Asian Art? You Can Vote on It

BY JOYCE LAU FEBRUARY 6, 2013 10:26 AM



"Wedding Memory" by Hassan Meer of Oman. Hassan Meer/Sovereign Art Foundation

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HONG KONG — Heading into its 10th year, the Sovereign Asian Art Prize has grown far beyond its Hong Kong base to span the very edges of the continent, including former Soviet republics and the Middle East.

Its list of 30 finalists, announced last week, was light on the usual contemporary art superpowers — there was only one name from mainland China — and heavy on Muslim-majority states that may not get as much attention in the art world. Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Oman and the Palestinian territories produced finalists for the first time.

Sovereign focuses on developing talents from developing nations. The \$30,000 award goes to a mid-career artist — someone who may be acclaimed in his or her home country, but who has not made it big internationally. (Its sponsor, the Hong Kong-based Sovereign Group, also has an award in Africa).

The majority of the Asian finalists are in their 30s and working in photography, prints or mixed media. While politics is nothing new in contemporary Asian art — those ironic Chairman Mao heads have become a stereotype in Chinese painting — these works also offer views on faith, culture and sexuality. (You can vote for your favorite here.)

Saudi Arabia is represented by Shadia Alem, whose photographic work "Supreme Ka'ba of God" represents her birthplace, Mecca.

"Wedding Memory" by Hassan Meer of Oman depicts a bride and groom, her face partly veiled, his entirely covered. The catalog notes describe the backdrop as the "room that accommodates the consummation of the marriage," though the black-and-white image shows the exterior of a home half-destroyed and marked by graffiti.

Raeda Saadeh, from the Palestinian territories, was born in Umm al-Fahm, an Arab city in the Haifa district of Israel. Her photograph "Penelope" depicts the mythical Greek figure calmly knitting and waiting on a pile of rubble and wire in East Jerusalem, where Israeli forces had destroyed homes.

Evgeny Boikov — representing Kyrgyzstan, but originally from Azerbaijan — depicts a protester who is said to represent the 2005 and 2010 uprisings in Kyrgyzstan, the former Soviet state. Mr. Boikov uses industrial-sized printers (the kind usually used for billboards) to print on small canvases. The result is the indigo imprint of a man bent over, though it's not clear whether from pain, exertion or something else.

From neighboring Kazakhstan, Said Atabekov photographs a girl holding a korpeshe, a traditional textile used as bedding, made here in the likeness of an American flag.

Also using textiles, Risham Syed, who teaches art in her native Pakistan, used acrylic, lace and army coat buttons on a square of Pakistani printed cotton to riff on Thomas Cole's 19th-century painting "Indians Viewing the Landscape."

Pakistan and Hong Kong had the best showings, with four finalists.

Faiza Butt printed a poem on a light box, in Urdu on one side and English on the other. It's a pretty, almost floral-looking work at first glance. On a closer look, you can see that she has used debris, garbage and half-eaten food as decoration.

Muhammad Ali, 24, fashioned a sepia-toned homoerotic portrait of two scantily clad men, an image that might not be risqué in the West but which could be controversial in a country where homosexuality is illegal.

Waseem Ahmed's "Fusion" is also sexually charged. A female nude, rendered in the type of Mughal classical art, is overlaid with details from a Western painting of Adam and Eve, just their groins showing, covered by fig leaves.

When the Man Asian Literary Prize was announced last month, it called into question two issues concerning arts prizes in Asia. First, where, exactly, does Asia begin and end? (The Man Asia included Orhan Pamuk on its short list, although Mr. Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel laureate, has written about his desire for Turkey to join the European Union). The second is whether Asia's budding cultural scene still needs Western corporate support. The Man Group, the hedge fund management firm, has said it would no longer underwrite the literary prize. The Sovereign Art Prize has the Swiss bank Julius Bär behind it.

An exhibition of the finalists runs through Friday at Exchange Square in Hong Kong and will later travel to Seoul and Singapore. The winner will be announced, and the works will be auctioned by Christie's, at the Four Seasons in Hong Kong on Feb. 21.

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