

Talking Southeast Asia

By Paul Khoo

In the void created by the exit of the Valentine Willie Fine Art, it appears that Yavuz Fine Art has stepped into the role of the leading Southeast Asian gallery in Singapore. Thematically consistent with earlier Yavuz exhibitions, particularly a strong solo show by Thai giant Vasan Sitthiket and a photography show anchored by Thai activist photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom, Yavuz has commissioned a solo exhibition by the rising Vietnamese artist Bui Công Khánh, *For Home and Country*, which runs from January 25 to March 10. Curated by Iola Lenzi, Bui's show is an ambitious exploration of multiple media, the clash of tradition and modernity, and

political unease. The show consists of three pieces: the first is a set of landscape paintings interspersed with traditional ceramic plates, the second is an installation consisting of wooden doors carved with Confucian/communist pieties, and the third is a miniature of a slum with supporting multimedia material. All this is supported by a comprehensive catalogue anchored by a lengthy, erudite essay by Lenzi.

Amid the proliferation of day-tripping Southeast Asian shows common in the Singapore gallery scene today, which usually amount to a hastily pastiched collection of not particularly original works by Southeast Asian stars, *For Home and Country* stands out in its ambition. Bui has a message in his works, namely that the rhetoric of Confucian community or Marxist egalitarianism that has traditionally characterised ▶

Below
Saigon Slum by Bui Công Khánh, 2012.
Installation view. Mixed media, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Yavuz Fine Art.

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For Home And Country by Bui Công Khánh, 2013.
Installation view.

Left: *Quiet Tam Zay Dung Gia Dinh Van Hoa*,
Oil on canvas, 170 x 200 cm, hand-painted and signed
porcelain plate, 40 cm diameter.
Right: *Lien To Van Hoa*, Oil on canvas, 170 x 200 cm,
hand-painted and signed porcelain plate,
40 cm diameter.
Courtesy Yavuz Fine Art.





Vietnam is an empty shell amid the triumph of global neoliberal capitalist order. Besides a fairly direct message, brave in its own right, in contrast to the sappy postmodernist or identity-based musings catering to the biennale circuit that characterises some of the new generation of Vietnamese artists, Bui is also grounded in the material reality of Vietnam. We see this in the ceramic plates, and the traditional doors and

lacquer chest, and the slum. We sense that Bui, except for the constraints of the gallery and the art market, may have wanted to build a even bigger and more ambitious installation.

While material reality roots Bui in a Vietnamese and Southeast Asian context, it does not translate into the type of commodity fetishism all too common among Southeast Asian installations these days. Perhaps inspired by the large outsourced installation works of the mainland Chinese contemporary stars, Southeast Asian installation has been suffering from over-creep. But Bui avoids bombast in his work. Instead, there is a type of silent contemplation which takes the form of the absence of people. One of the more affecting features of the slum installation is the accompanying video, a montage of the sounds of everyday life, families interacting amid the constant patter of rain.

There is little of the frenetic exaggeration often seen in multimedia pieces under the guise of new media. Instead, we feel a sense of loss of a type of life, older, more communal, amid the onslaughts of the million-dollar condo developments that threaten the communities Bui memorialises. The Singapore gallery scene has entered a new era of globalisation, symbolised by both Art Stage and Gilman Barracks. The new model is the international, multi-establishment gallery featuring a buffet of international all-stars (Hirst, Kusama, Richter), supplemented by Southeast Asian stars (Eko Nugroho, Heri Dono), with minimal social context in the curatorial themes of shows. As such, it is fair to ask whether the concept of a Southeast Asian gallery, one devoted to artist development and giving space to the nuances of the region, is outdated. But if we believe art needs

to speak about and mediate society, *For Home and Country* shows us the need. For a Singapore audience, the silences in the show speak to the limited agency of society amid the march of economic development, as seen in the unprecedented civic action recently over the government Population White Paper, which argued for a drastic increase in population through immigration for the sake of continued economic growth. ■