

Art & Culture

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Artful awakenings at the Aichi Triennale



*Is it big in Japan?
You can bet
your bottom yen.
Contemporary art —
purveyed by 76 artists
from Japan and the rest
of the world — takes
on life on our unsteady
yet figuratively
unshakeable planet.*

All quiet flows the foam: "Foam" by Kohei Nawa is one of the highlights of this year's Aichi Triennale in Japan.

ARTMAGEDDON



By IGAN D'BAYAN

NAGOYA, Japan — In between calamities, life manages to seep through. So does art. A sliver of blue over a blackened world. Art is more than just filling up an empty room as Damien Hirst suggested. Some would argue about what matters art in the greater scheme of things. But it could be communal, therapeutic and grand. An idea, a philosophical ark, the sound of 40 voices, foam flowing on coldly in the dark. Something that gives us either mystery or moments of clarity. Sometimes both.

We are here in a city a couple of hours away by the Shinkansen bullet train from Tokyo. By "we," I mean a veritable United Nations of art journalists (from Cuba, Estonia, Israel, France, the Netherlands, England, Belgium, Portugal, Canada, Australia and the good ole R.P.). Our mission — which



People of the sun: Kenji Yanobe's "Wedding of the Sun" installation at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art is where couples can get married — for real. Nearby, cutesy Japanese teens can pose beside Yanobe's "Queen Mamma" sculpture.

we have wholeheartedly accepted from the Japan Foundation in our respective countries — is to cover the Aichi Triennale. (Take note, the foundation develops programs in three different fields: arts and cultural exchange, Japanese-language education overseas, and Japanese studies and intellectual exchange. Japan Foundation-Manila led by director Shuji Takatori presents a slew of interesting cultural activities year after year.)

Japan's largest international arts festival held every three years (the only one in the country with an opera component) returns for its second incarnation with the theme, "Awakening — Where Are We Standing? — Earth, Memory and Resurrection." The featured works are supposed to draw attention to the social shifts taking place globally, including the changes caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake, 3/11.

The trip would take us around Tokyo; to places such as Okayama, Nagoya and Okazaki; and back to Shinagawa in the capital city, making use of all different modes of transportation (planes, trains, automobiles, ferries — Daan van Lent from the Netherlands wanted to have a go at a bike), mulling over contemporary art in museums as well as makeshift art spaces (a mall, train stations, the city streets, alleyways and arcades, even a bowling alley!)... and talking to artists, curators, the hardworking men and women of the Aichi Triennale Organizing Committee led by artistic director Taro Igarashi. Along with this is a steady diet of authentic Japanese food (*unagi*, anyone?), after-work beer ("For relaxing times make

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Room at the end of the world: "Falling" by Tomoko Mukaiyama + Jean Kalman

ARTFUL AWAKENINGS AT THE AICHI TRIENNALE

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it Sundry time!), and assorted illuminations on art, history and contemporary life in Japan.

Igarashi says one cannot avoid reflecting on 3/11; crucial, even. His laboratory at Tohoku University in Sendai where he teaches Architecture and Building Science was shattered by the disaster. He visited the affected areas after the earthquake. The artistic director explains, "The theme of this year's triennial, 'Awakening,' does not intend to make the whole festival a 'Triennale Tribute to the Earthquake.'" Although it's the first major international art exhibition that tackles the subject matter head on. The word "awakening" can have a wider, meatier meaning. "It can be interpreted as a critical situation where the place we stand and our identities are fluctuating. Any crisis affecting the lives of the artists (in their respective countries) can also be reflected by the theme."

We sit with Igarashi at Art Lab Aichi, which serves as welcoming digs for the festival participants. Wow... the night before, Yoshitomo Nara served as artist-host. Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi, who drew cute graffiti-commentary on the glass windows of the Aichi Arts Center, sits in with us. Haito Masahiko and Shihoko Iida join the group as well.

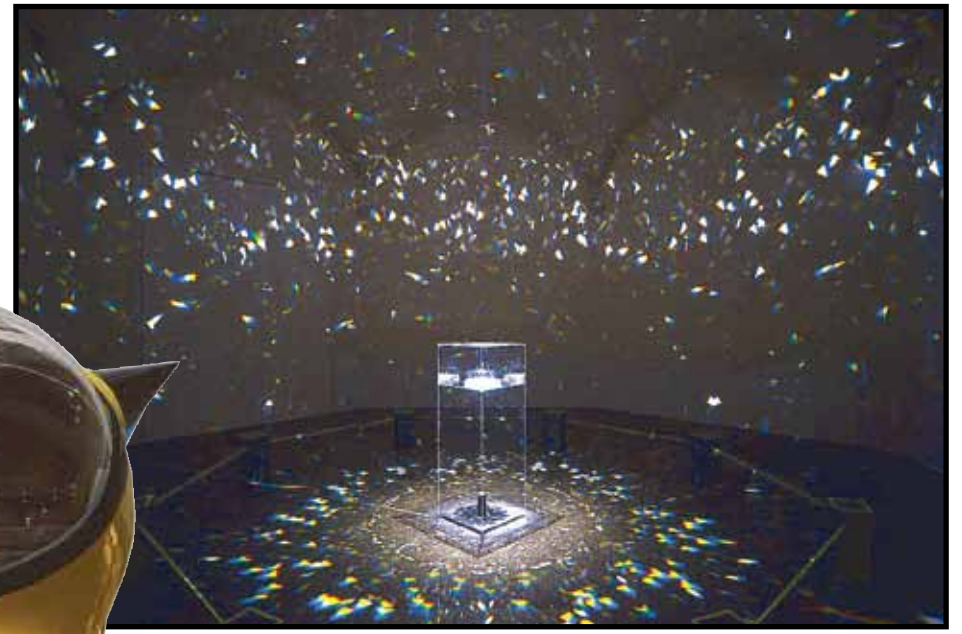
The art festival is also about creatively engaging space. Not at all surprising since Taro is an architect by profession. In one example, Japanese artist Katsuhiko Miyamoto created upon the wall, floor and the ceiling of the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art a 1:1 scale drawing of the Fukushima Power Plant, "reproducing" the reactor building inside the venue itself. Yes, there have been critical, quizical murmurs as expected (like "Is it okay to show these types of exhibition using the government tax money?") — art has always been the designated ruffler of feathers — but Igarashi encourages people to think for themselves. Kenji Yanobe's "Sun Child No. 2" is perhaps a jab at Japan's reliance on nuclear energy, but it can also be interpreted as the world moving into solar power — a mammoth manga kid ushering mankind into the future. Here comes the sun... doo doo doo doo... A host of memories for a generation who grew up on Astroboy and 20th Century Boys.

The sculpture could be seen as a symbol of this era, like a big pop Buddha. Yanobe's installation features a stained glass temple of the sun — based on an original drawing by Beat Takeshi and a print by Henri Matisse —



Space odyssey: "Sun Child No. 2" by Kenji Yanobe

Darkness and paper everywhere, broken pianos playing, an eerie tunnel of light here and a wheelchair there. Visitors can watch figures scavenging for something. How we don't readily know what that something is makes it all the more seductive.



We all shine on: "Parts of a Light House" by Yoko Ono



Clay nation: A scene from Alison Schulnik's Forest

ing trills, visitors can watch the figures scavenging for something. (Well if they have the *cojones* to sit beside creepy children wearing masks!) How we don't readily know what that something is makes it all the more seductive.

That the installation is set on a floor of a department store no longer in use makes it an ideal setting for Beckett theater.

What makes a good triennial, asks French journalist Jean-Christophe Castelain.

In this triennial, Igarashi answers, the artists try to (really) follow the theme. "There is an installation called 'Foam' (by Kohei Nawa), which expresses this quite well. There is no (latent) social or political message. He brought in sand and gravel. He lets visitors imagine that this could be the beginning of the world — and from that earth emerged form." All darkness and much burbling. A landscape of lather. Reminiscent of our very own David Medalla's Bubble Machines.

There has been much quibble about how a Japanese word (which literally means "shaking earth") in the theme has been translated into English as "awakening."

Igarashi answers, "'Awakening' could mean anything. It could be about identity or something else. What we take for granted could be not as solid as we probably think." As examples, he cites video installations by Nicolas Provost or Go Watanabe showing ordinary objects, calm landscapes. Take Watanabe: here be the natural, the peaceful — then appears a crack. Things fall apart and the center, as Yeats lamented in poetry, cannot hold. After mere anarchy, things return to their original state.

A metaphor perhaps for something that is always overcoming, coping and — like the Japanese people, like we Filipinos after calamity upon calamity — ever enduring.

So, what matters art in our terribly unsteady world?

There is always room for awe.

In the course of three months, the Aichi Triennale would register 626,842 visitors from all over the world — that's 50,000 more visitors than its predecessor in 2010. Taro Igarashi concludes, "I strongly feel that this international exhibition has caused tremendous ripple effects in all those involved. Our visitors enjoyed ample opportunities to engage in conversations about the essence of art, participated in creating a unique atmosphere in each place and have been inspired by innumerable works of art programs conducted in urban space. I hope these effects will lead to handing over the baton to the next triennial."

For information, visit <http://aichitriennale.jp/english/> or <http://www.facebook.com/AICHI-TRIENNALE>.

Special thanks to Keiko Okawa of Japan Foundation and our flag-waving, ultra-cheerful tour guide Hiroko Shiotsuka.



Garden of discarded delights: "Secret Garden" by Guerra de la Paz

creating a space in which an actual wedding can take place. In another interview, Yanobe explains the Aichi Prefecture is big on weddings, even non-Catholic Japanese love the quiet magnificence of a church wedding: the ceremony itself, the bridal gown, the marching down the aisle to organ music and a new life. "The largest number of wedding churches exists in this prefecture. The culture of weddings in Aichi is wider and deeper than in any other region."

True enough, the first thing we saw when we checked in at the Nagoya Tokyu Hotel is a wedding. The bridesmaids were all in a row in their crimson kimonos. We journalist spent our allotted 15-minute break staring at the proceedings, snapping pix.

The creator of the "Sun Child" stresses that since the Great East Japan Earthquake, "artists who try to express themselves within the existing artistic framework, may all be tripped up." He explains, "We have no choice but to question once again as to what meanings the art has to exist in this world... I think that I will have to present something which is almost embarrassingly positive."

Yoko Ono has been saying "yes" all her life. That's how she met John. In her artwork for the triennial, she sublimely created a space filled with light ("Parts of a Light House"). Her other installation allows visitors to send messages to their respective moms ("My Mommy is Beautiful"), while another muses on seven "happineses" and eight treasures. In the text, she talks about how the warrior Yamanaka Shikanosuke prayed to the new moon to be given seven difficulties and eight sufferings in life.

"When my husband passed away," Yoko writes, "It really made me think about the way my life was. What did I do wrong? Then Yamanaka Shikanosuke praying to the new moon came into my vision." She changed the mantra



Osamu Honda, managing director of the Arts and Culture Department of the Japan Foundation



Aichi Triennale artistic director Taro Igarashi



Having dinner at Shibuya are visiting journalists Daan van Lent (NRC Handelsblad), Isabel Gama Salema (Daily Publico), Galia Yahav (Haaretz Daily Newspaper), David Balzer (Canada Art), Heili Sibrits-Bondarenko (Newspaper Postimes), John McDonald (Australian Financial Review), Samuel Philips (Frieze) and the author Igan D'Bayan

and asked to be given seven happiness and eight treasures instead. "And it worked! Well, not entirely. But it's working slowly but surely..."

Such is Yoko's joy in life. She even billboards the message on a TV tower.

The works at the Aichi Arts Center impress. There is Aernout Mik's labyrinth of cardboard dividers; Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's "The Forty Part Motet" (40 speakers blast out 40 individual voices singing Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium [Hope in Any Other]* — taking sense-surround sound to a whole new existential level); and the massive documentation of the catastrophe by the Rias Ark Museum of Art.

But the artworks at the Okazaki area (the birthplace of the shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa) make the entire trip to the triennial essential.

I get disoriented inside Bashir Makhoul's "Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost" maze of cardboard Arab town/refugee camp at the fifth floor of the Cibico shopping mall, Kosei Site. I keep following this old Japanese lady and — through the twist and turns of the installation — expect her to pop right

behind me any second. (More illusory shocks such as those at the Naoshima art island courtesy of artist James Turrell in my next article.)

I am floored by Guerra de la Paz's (Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz) "Secret Garden" at the Higashi-Okazaki Station Site. There is pride in the face of my newfound friend Pedro de la Hoz from Cuba — raves about *lechon*, smokes strong H. Upmann cigarettes (cough, cough!), will invite me to the next Havana Biennale — as he surveys the ingenious Japanese garden sculpture made entirely of discarded clothing. "They are Cubans," he says with a big grin. I read somewhere that the *ukay-ukay* culture is shared by Okazaki and the duo's Miami home base.

Back at the Cibico is where suspension of disbelief begins. We don't actually get to see the performance itself, but the shell is oracular enough: "Falling" by Tomoko Mukaiyama + Jean Kalman presents a world gone horribly Samuel Beckett — darkness and paper everywhere, broken pianos playing, an eerie tunnel of light here and a wheelchair there. Inside a lit room, away from the unnerv-