

**F** P. Traditionally, the artistic canon has been developed in the West. Is Asia now setting the new trends? Will it drive the artistic canon?

new fees?

R. When I was studying Art History at Sydney University it didn't even include Australian art, it was just European. The stories we were taught about Asia were all pre-modern and ancient. No way! Asian art is not just about the past. It has to reflect all of us and all the complexity of the continent. From what is described as the Global South, we have been working for years to broaden the understanding of narratives and who is making them to include the great absences, whether they are women or people of color in places that have not been recognized or have not received the attention they deserved. And that is partly because there was no institutional framework in place to provide those storylines in a coherent and substantive way. The creation of new institutions is crucial in this knowledge building: it's about recognizing that there were and are great artists who have come from Asia. When I am asked if Asia is becoming more powerful..., I think Asia has always been powerful. It is full of fabulous creators, artists, designers, performers and writers. We are just learning to value them and understand the complexity of how they fit into such a densely interconnected contemporary world with large migrant populations. My story is exactly that: the story of people everywhere. I'm from Sri Lanka, Australia, the UK.... And now from Hong Kong.

**P. In recent years Hong Kong has emerged as the new stronghold of the art market, surpassing London and Paris. We see it especially in auctions, with stratospheric records that used to be set in Europe. How is this boom reflected in the museum?**

R. Hong Kong is a real *hub*. It has displaced London in commercial terms and even rivals New York. The M+ has 2.5 million visitors a year and in a very short time we have positioned ourselves among the top 20 museums in the world. But there is a peculiarity that is not found elsewhere: 80% of our audience is between 18 and 45 years old. People come because they find things they can't see anywhere else. In fact, there is no collection like the one at M+ in the whole world. And that means we are a destination institution, the only one that brings all these disciplines together in one place. An example: Japan has the largest number of Pritzker Prize-winning architects in the world, but no institution that deals with analyzing, exhibiting and valuing architecture. We do it, we show cross disciplines.

**P. Your area of influence is immense: all of Southeast Asia, where in recent years there has been a veritable explosion of biennials and triennials. It's a vertiginous rhythm, unthinkable in the West, even though the Venice Biennale is still the most transcendent.**

R. Yes, the growth is amazing. They are very important platforms to assess what is happening today: a place to review, educate and reach out. Venice was one of the first, but you forget Sydney, which is now half a century old. Asia's rise is due to changing economies, the development of significant middle and upper classes, and with it the responsibility and obligation to reach out to all audiences. The obvious question is: How does the old world, the European and North American world, with 100+ year old collecting institutions that reflect histories of colonialism and empires, function? How can those collections be looked at again intelligently and with empathy? We must think about our world today in a more reflective way, always from humanism, respecting the pain that some of these collections have embodied?

**P. One of the hot debates in Europe is that of decolonization, which many governments and museums have approached in different ways, often generating loud controversies. How do you decolonize a museum?**

R. There is no one way. Obviously, you have to involve governments because of repatriation issues. But sometimes it is also about institutions having the legal right to have a work as *custodians*, not as *owners*. Because in the end we are talking about human cultural capital. It belongs to all humanity, but at the same time to certain peoples who should have access to these pieces because they are ancestral and part of their history. It is a multi-layered work, that is why it is so complex. The fact that there are wide-ranging discussions, including

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controversial, it is positive, it helps to give more elaborated and reflexive answers. There is no single recipe, it is a work in progress, a journey, not an end in itself.

**P. Decolonialism, feminism, climate change, indigenous creation? There are certain themes that are repeated in museums and biennials around the world. Although it's the public agenda in a globalized world, sometimes it gives the feeling that we see the same things in Madrid as in Gwangju (South Korea, where the oldest biennial in Asia is held). Isn't there a danger of falling into fads or a certain homogenization?**

R. Actually, I don't think so. We are now witnessing the recognition of diversity in many parts of the world. That's why we can also see similarities and parallels. Sometimes, yes, the same artists seem to be from here, but when you go there, things change. Let me explain: in our museum we have a very important collection.

of Duchamp and people ask, 'Why did you choose Duchamp? Because we have a very important collection of Chinese avant-garde art. And those Chinese artists use Duchamp as a tool, although when they were making their work they had never seen him. By incorporating Duchamp we decentralize it with the artists around him and it contributes to our understanding of how you might think about Duchamp from Hong Kong and the context in which his work is structured. I find it a beautiful thing to add a layer of thought and knowledge to the canon. There are a number of philosophical connections, an idea of the multiple, the sense of play or chance, which also have an Asian root.

**P. We talk a lot about Asia and the West, but as director of CIMAM, how do you see contemporary**

**more and more represented in museums around the world, but Africa always seems to be the forgotten...**

**R.** I don't think it has been forgotten. At CIMAM we have almost twenty members from Africa. Globally it is increasingly represented through exhibitions and collections. There is a lot happening on the African continent, although perhaps the West is not aware of it. From the Lagos Biennale to the work of new centers and institutions.... In time it will become much more visible. Very important centers are being created with high-level collections and professionals that tell the stories of the continent, of each region. Moreover, they are opening up to the world. The African art centers tell us: 'We are here, come. And we make sure we do it, but in the context that our partners tell us: 'This is how we would like you to come'. The nuance is very important: we can't just land there. We need to work together to build from equality.

**P. Since 2012, CIMAM has had a unique platform, the Museum Watch, an observatory that warns of irregularities or critical situations in museums. And this year it has denounced two cases of institutional malpractice in Spain: at the CAAC in Seville [the dismissal of its director by the Junta de Andalucía] and at the IVAM in Valencia [the attacks on Nuria Enguita by the 'conselleria' of Culture in the hands of VOX]. Despite best practice protocols, do politicians still intervene in museums?**

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**R.** The Museum Watch is something quite exceptional that articulates our core beliefs. Its members come from all over the world, with voices reflecting different positions and coming together to make a joint statement. Unfortunately, we are seeing more and more political intervention in museums globally. Codes of good practice, ethics and good governance are a matter of education. And I am talking about everyone: politicians and administrations, as well as communities, must be educated to understand the need for real independence in each of our institutions. To maintain our integrity, we must ensure our independence. Interestingly, several studies confirm that people trust museums more than politicians. They don't trust politicians or the media, but they do trust museums. We have an obligation and a responsibility to these citizens. If they trust the museum it is because they see the reflection, the research, the stories we tell in our exhibitions. When governments question that independence our job will be to advise and educate them so that they see that it is not a good idea. You can never take anything for granted, we are continually educating and advocating for that integrity in every way. We live in a time of changing moral codes within societies. Even now, in the 21st century, there are surprising censorship and you think, 'how is it possible for this to happen?' But it is. Our job is to point it out, address it and find ways to make room for it in our institutions. It's never straightforward or simple.

**P. Personally, throughout your career, have you suffered political or even commercial pressures?**

**R.** There was a time when I felt a lot of pressure and it was annoying.... I was living in the UK and people would ask me where I was from. "Australia," I'd say, "No, no, where are you really from, because I'm not Australian" (sighs).

Where am I really from? Because I'm also from Australia. And even though I was born in Sri Lanka, when I go back to the island they ask me where I'm from. I say Sri Lanka, but they say "No, you're not from here". Being in this place, or non-place, has helped me understand many artistic practices. I feel very comfortable always being from somewhere else. Accepting that physical and skin tone difference has allowed me to understand communities that are on the margins, that have been exiled or moved out of necessity, for economic reasons or pure survival.

**Q. And as a woman? There are more and more women museum directors, but in the 1990s there were hardly...**

**A.** Absolutely! It's been kind of the same thing... When I was in college in the late '70s and early '80s, there were very few women and I was also the only person of color. Now it's totally different. In fact, in the meetings with all the members of CIMAM there are already more women than men. It's a very good thing but we also have to think about our male colleagues, how we articulate ourselves to be

conscious of all of us. **N**