



YINCHUAN *BIENNALE*

Kevin Jones heads to China and asks if Kochi magic can help put Yinchuan on the artworld map?





Everyone has high hopes for the newborn Yinchuan Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA). Only a year old, the gleaming white institution – a futuristic gnarl of stratified glass-reinforced plastic – writhes amid remote wetlands some 40 kilometres from Yinchuan, a provincial capital in northwest China. Its director, Liu Wenching, believes her museum will be an artistic epicentre within a decade. Its creative director likens it to a “sapling... growing into an ageless tree.” The museum’s backers no doubt anticipate urbanising tides engulfing the far-flung site, while the government sees it as a jewel in its strategy to invigorate cultural and economic exchange with China’s western neighbours. Meanwhile, Bose Krishnamachari, curator of Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) fame, hopes to put the fledgling institution on the

artworld map with an inaugural 73-artist biennial entitled *For an Image, Faster than Light*.

Speed is all around the Biennale. China’s museum bulimia is well known: the country has fast-tracked around 4000 institutions into existence since 1978, sometimes clocking in upward of 200 per year. Economically, there is some urgency for China to engage with its neighbouring developing nations (“to vent some of its surplus,” as one economist put it). Unsurprisingly, culture has been enlisted into the soft power plays in this largely Muslim Hui minority region, the lynchpin of the government’s “One Belt, One Road” economic scheme to bolster relations along the ancient Silk Road, notably with Central Asia and the Middle East. In this context, the enterprising Yinchuan MoCA, in spite of its distance from any urban

Opening pages: Yoko Ono. *Exit*. 2016. Four photographs, archival inkjet print, one sculpture, cedar timbermate woodfiller. 32 x 187 x 50 cm.

Facing page: Sudarshan Shetty. *Shoonya Gar (Empty is this House)*. 2016. Multi-media installation. Variable dimensions.

This page: Hassan Sharif. *Black Knots*. 2015. Cotton rope and acrylic. 303 x 127 x 40 cm; *White Knots*. 2015. Cotton rope and acrylic. 303 x 127 x 40 cm.





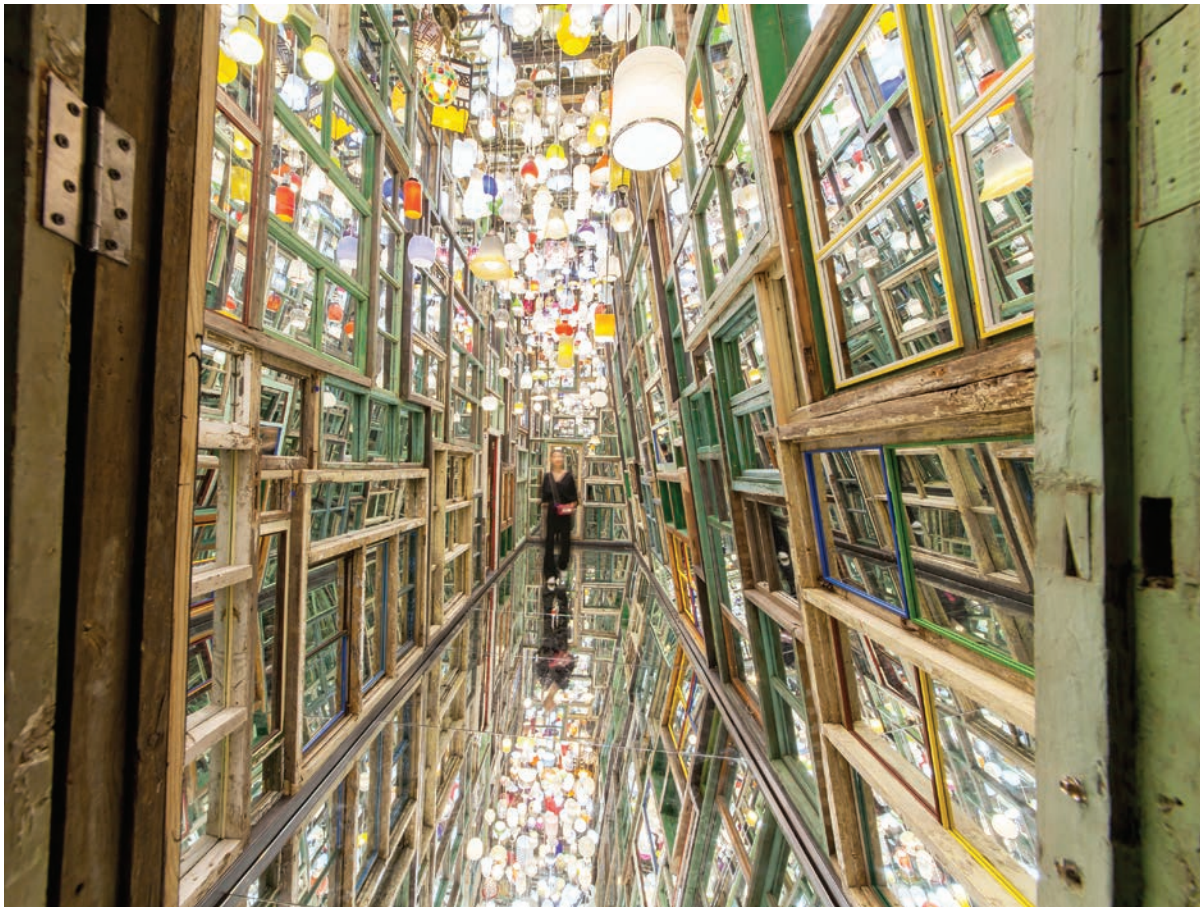
art hub, lost no time in kicking into biennial gear. And Krishnamachari seemed like the perfect pilot for the maiden drive.

The KMB changed a whole city. A favourite Krishnamachari anecdote is that the locals learned two words in his wake, “installation” and “biennale”, words that allude to the fusion of economic and cultural stimulation that the event fostered. But if Kochi is a sprawling, community-consuming affair, folding a string of sites and souls into its conquering enthusiasm, Yinchuan, confined largely to the walls of the institution, seems to brood in comparison. If Kochi embraces locality, Yinchuan seems indifferent to it: only one local artist is in the show (Mao Tong Qiang), without a single Chinese Muslim among the 73, despite the stated curatorial mission of exploring the “difference between the state of red and green,” of Communism and Islam. If Kochi embraces a spirit of improvisation, Yinchuan is deliberate, safe. In spite of an impressive round up of artists and consistently interesting work, the Yinchuan Biennale feels at once imported and insular.

“The world is broken” begins the curatorial statement, before careening off into exuberant evocations of how it might be fixed (By art! Of course!). The visitor navigates galleries bearing “chapter” titles relaying vicissitudes of distress and of hope: *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, *Soul Mountain*, *Dance of Heartbreak*, *All That’s White are Fallen Clouds*, *Raise the Red Lantern*. This fundamental tension between doom and redemption,

between darkness and enlightenment, courses through the veins of the show, with a tendency towards the bleak. Glimmers of hope simmer nonetheless in works like *Shoonya Ghar (Empty is this House)* (2016), an hour-long film and accompanying installation by upcoming 2016 KMB curator Sudarshan Shetty, and Kartik Sood’s paintings and projections *The Man Who Turned into a Tree* (2016), both of which foreground the soothing salvation of the circular: the beginning is the end, the end is the beginning. Similarly, Yoko Ono’s *Ex It* (2016) is an outdoor array of man-, woman-, and child-sized coffins, each with fruit trees (local Yinchuan wetland natives, hurrah!) sprouting out of them. Surely there’s solace in that.

Many of the works, though, explore the cracks and crevices of this broken world. Freshly graduated Sharjah-based Palestinian artist Alaa Al Qedra’s series *Lost* (2015–16) litters the steps of the main entrance: broken cement hobbyhorses conjure a blighted childhood squashed by blasted, collapsing buildings. Borders and smouldering conflict crop up in Lebanese artist Charbel-joseph H. Boutros’s *Mixed Water, Lebanon Israel* (2013): two maps are background to a single glass of water from separate Lebanese and Israeli sources. Song Dong’s space-filling mirrored installation *Through the Wall* (2016), composed of found door- and window-frames, speaks of separation and division. Mao Tong Qiang’s throbbing installation *15 Decibel* (2016) is a dusty, deliriously detailed



Facing page: Mao Tong Qiang. *15 Decibel*. 2016. Installation of wood, mirror, furniture, audio, neon light, hallucinogens, fruits, garbage of KTV. 500 x 800 cm.

This page: Song Dong. *Through the Wall*. 2016. Installation of found objects. 901 x 215 x 225 cm.

Images courtesy Yinchuan Biennale.

"luxury" Chinese karaoke (KTV) lounge rhythm by a synthesised rendition of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* accompanying manipulated footage of Chairman Mao visiting the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

The world has gone amok, not only politically but environmentally too. New Delhi-based Sonia Mehra Chawla examines the vanishing mangrove ecosystem through veiny, UV-printed panels in her *Residue* series (2016), while Singaporean artist Donna Ong counterpoints the Orientalist image of the tropics with photos of artificial tropical enclosures in *The Forest Speaks Back I and III* (2014–16). More broadly, Santiago Sierra's 10-channel video work *Destroyed Word* (2015–16) tugs at questions of globalisation and consumerism: the word KAPITALISM is spelt out in letters manufactured of varying materials in different countries. Each letter is destroyed by violent means. (The S, made of pig food in Holland, is devoured by pigs). "Look!" the work seems to shout. "Behold KAPITALISM, the culprit of all the troubles that rack our world. Savour its demise!"

Darkness – and the forms that emerge from it – constitutes a thoughtful leitmotif, from Cristiana de Marchi's *Black* (2013), in which texts from the UN Convention on Climate Change are transcribed in braille using black thread on black canvas, to Lala Rukh's haunting *Nightscares* (2011) and even Khaled Sabsabi's *At the Speed of Light* (2016), in which

the Sydney-based artist attempts to make a video at the speed of light. It is a welcome balance to what could have been construed as too idealistic a call to action to 'repair' our grim world in the curatorial text ("Think the Unthinkable and Do the Impossible"). Perhaps it was this kind of ebullient naivety that led Krishnamachari to evoke the prickly Red/Green fault line between the Chinese state and Islam in the first place. While many of the artists hail from countries influenced by Islam, few works engage with religion as cogently as they do with issues like the environment, consumerism, even politics. Odd for a soft power structure ostensibly courting neighbouring Muslims... and Muslim markets.

A biennial may have transformative powers, but Yinchuan is not yet Kochi. Today, Yinchuan MoCA is still remote, and the soft power at work behind the scenes will leverage it as currency in grander economic plans. With *For an Image, Faster than Light*, Krishnamachari has propelled the institution out of the starting block with a strong inaugural show. But the local powers-that-be will need to sustain the interest that brought a tiny nugget of the international art world to its far-flung wetland gates. Can it feel less imported, more locally engaged, but still have magnetism? Let's keep our hopes high that it can. 🍷

The Yinchuan Biennale runs until 18 December at MoCA Yinchuan. For more information visit www.moca-yinchuan.com