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Review: A modern Silk Road passes through OCMA's Pacific Rim show

Asia powerfully interacts with the Americas, rather than just Europe, in the Orange County Museum of Art's triennial show.

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic

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More than 2,000 years ago, the Silk Road emerged as a network of flourishing trade routes between Asia and Europe, as well as parts of North and East Africa. Cultures crossfertilized. Civilizations prospered, others flamed out. Art recorded the complex new entanglements.

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For the next 4½ months, a modern Silk Road is passing through Southern California. This superhighway runs through the [Orange County Museum of Art](#), where the 2013 California-Pacific Triennial is now on view.

A prime difference from its ancient predecessor is that Asia's trading partners here focus on the Americas, not Europe. Enlarging the geographic purview to encompass artists working in countries around the vast Pacific Rim, OCMA has changed its old biennial format, which looked exclusively at California artists.

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The organization period necessarily grew from two years to three. As OCMA curator Dan Cameron notes in the show's catalog, the Pacific Ocean is by far the largest single geographic entity on the planet. It dwarfs continents, even making the sky look rather small.

So one difficulty in shifting from a California focus is that the vast Pacific Rim geography can make the happily ambitious show feel thin. It surveys current painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation art in 15 countries as diverse as Honduras, Thailand, Peru, Indonesia, the West Coast of Canada and the U.S. and more — but there are only 32 artists. It's a thumbnail sketch.

The show might better be described as offering a quiet curatorial polemic. It means to shake off a narrow but very common American cultural view, which looks out across the world of art from a perspective confined to a perch at the edge of the Atlantic Rim. That shift is important, and it manifests itself in several thoughtful ways.

First is a beautiful mural encompassing the entry gallery. Titled "Sharawadgi," a gardening term that means "borrowed landscape," the walls are covered in an exquisitely painted chinoiserie pattern, all sinuous floral motifs, fanciful pagodas and gracefully attired scholars set against a limpid, sky-blue background.

Chinoiserie emerged in the 1600s as a wildly popular European design style that embodied a colonial fantasy of the Mysterious Orient. "Sharawadgi," however, is by China's Michael Lin. His chinoiserie slyly suggests that any concept of cultural authenticity is its own fantasy, especially questionable in a media-saturated, post-colonial world.

That theme gets a comic turn in a raucous homage to the Vatican by Mark Dean Veca (U.S.). His big installation reconfigures Bernini's extravagantly Baroque throne of St. Peter using florid design motifs recalling intestines and an alimentary canal. Scatology merges with eschatology, the end of digestion with the end of the world. Deposited as the centerpiece is a beanbag chair in sparkly gold vinyl — part suburban rec-room vulgarity and part VIP-room furnishing for an urban nightclub.

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With Europe's art-historical glories thus summarily dispatched, the show teases out its New Silk Road analogy with something specific: Diverse works by half a dozen artists are focused on textiles.

The most compelling are by Lin Tianmao (China), whose rainbow of silk threads puddles on the floor, cascading down from a frieze of mammal bones that rings the gallery and puts human and animal life on equal footing; Kimsooja (Korea), whose nearly silent video of traditional Peruvian weavers exposes a powerful social choreography centered on the feminine hand, flourishing within our technological era; Tiffany Chung (Vietnam), whose homespun but otherwise vaguely ominous aerial maps (think bombing and surveillance targets) are sewn with colorful embroidery, sequins and buttons; and Raquel Ormella (Australia), who unravels her national flag, transforming the arbitrary borders it represents from a political insignia into a celebratory shower of stars.

Even paintings by Hugo Crossthwaite (Mexico) could be seen in this light. Chaotic, absurd and finally poignant pictorial mashups evoke freaky sex and violence in a format that derives from sideshow banners common in rural carnivals.

The age range in the triennial is wide, with an emphasis on midcareer artists. Half are in their 40s.

The eldest is Mexico's Pedro Friedeberg, 77. The artist was born in Florence, Italy, and he and his family fled the darkening clouds of World War II when he was 3. He's represented by 16 drawings, prints and sculptures made over the last 50 years — a miniature retrospective within a show otherwise limited to recent art. With work displayed in both of the museum's two main halves, he's positioned as the show's godfather.

Friedeberg is famous for his iconic, 1962 Pop Surrealist hand-chair. Like a gilded hand of Buddha, its palm forms a seat, bony fingers a backrest and bent thumb an armrest.

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I've never acquired a taste for Friedeberg's dense graphics — maze-like compositions assembled from arcane texts and Victorian-style collage elements, as if they are ancient manuscripts left behind by a lost era that is in fact the present. His sculptures, including the chair and a devotional assemblage that blends Catholic, Hindu and Aztec iconography, are more persuasive. The hybrid work's thematic usefulness for the triennial is plain.

More engaging overall are displays of ordinary cultural artifacts — Mexican American-themed record album covers, cheap knickknacks, etc. — archived by Robert Legorreta as conventional indicators of twisted identity. Legorreta, known for his transvestite performance character Cyclona, is a self-taught artist.

That resonates against one kinship among these artists that is largely unacknowledged. Despite the Pacific Rim diversity — 12 artists from North America, two from Australia and nine each from Latin America and Asia — most went to art school in the U.S. and Europe or have at least lived there. Post-minimalism emerged in the West in the 1970s, soon becoming academic orthodoxy; it's everywhere at OCMA.

That's fine, but it also shows that traveling the Silk Road can mean getting stuck in a rut. For instance, paintings by Kim Beom (Korea) are composed by coordinating firm brush strokes with the artist's loud grunting noises, rehearsing long-dead claims of abstraction as a representation of inchoate inner urges; clearly intended as satire, it just feels wheezingly out of date.

Two other installations are stand-outs. Both suggest the apocalypse is now, its entertainment value among its most sinister features.

"No Exit" is a portentous sound-and-light installation by Danial Nord (U.S.). Suspended in a darkened room above a plush black carpet that invites prone contemplation, a stage-flat with three open doors is internally illuminated by flashing LED lights. The trinity of rectangular doors mimics the aspect-ratio of a movie screen. Both the lights and the thunderous, explosive soundtrack were edited from crash-and-burn scenes in Hollywood action-adventure movies.

Similarly stark is "Látex," a video-projection by Yoshua Okón (Mexico). Grim scenes of an authoritarian-themed performance artwork are juxtaposed with shots of a fashionable, blandly attentive audience — slyly shifting the work's focus onto us, doing the same in the gallery. Individual actions have social consequences.

That's a common theme. Tension reverberates in descriptive paintings of elaborate scientific experiments by Masaya Chiba (Japan), where nature struggles on life support. Videos by Koki Tanaka (U.S.) gather five piano students at a single keyboard and nine scissors-wielding hairdressers around one woman's head, then let them negotiate how to proceed simultaneously with their singular art.

Speaking of Tanaka: Born north of Tokyo in 1975, he lives and works in L.A. He is representing Japan this summer in Italy's Venice Biennale. Whether that counts as Pacific Rim, Atlantic Rim or maybe just Global Rimlessness I cannot say — and I'm not sure it finally matters anyway.

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2013 California-Pacific Triennial

Where: Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach

When: Through Nov. 17. Closed Mon. and Tue.

Contact: (949) 759-1122, <http://www.ocma.net>

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