

GROUP SHOWS

The galleries look like the furniture floor of a department store. Paintings, sculptures and installations, each with a considerable visual impact, come into sight overlapping one another. The viewer may suspect that the exhibition title has little to do with the actual exhibits, as is the case with many other group shows.

In "The Elegance of Silence: Contemporary Art from East Asia," works by 26 artists from China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are displayed in two sections: the first is named "San Sui," which means "mountain and water" or landscapes with such natural elements, gathering works that revisit the traditional notion of landscape painting. Xu Bing's installation with numerous cutouts of Chinese ideograms for "bird" hung from the ceiling at increasing heights, composing a virtual flock of birds flying off into the sky. The second part, entitled "Feng Shui" (an ancient Chinese

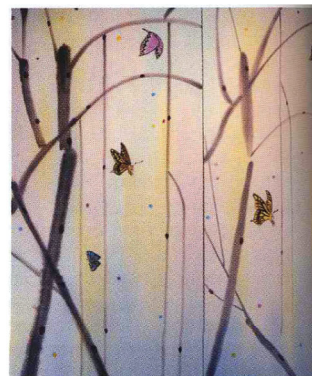
theory to optimize the flow of energy in architecture), features works showcasing artists' ideas about indoor living spaces. One highlight from this section is a set of living-room furniture covered with a vivid flowery pattern, by Taiwanese artist Michael Lin.

Korean Yoo Seung-Ho's three landscapes in an old style of India-ink drawing are actually composed of swarms of minute Chinese characters, Roman alphabet letters and Korean phonograms. Yoshitomo Nara's wooden crates contain miniature rooms that are decorated with the artist's trademark drawings, to be peeped into by the audience through small windows.

From most of the works, neither elegance nor silence is felt. A few good exceptions are Korean artist Kang Un's huge oil painting of clouds, in which the artist seeks "the pure abstraction that only nature can create;" Japanese artist Naofumi

Maruyama's landscapes produced by staining cotton canvas with acrylic, a technique reminiscent of traditional India-ink art but applied to render the modern artist's unique dreamy views; and Japanese artist Yasuko Iba's quiet oils photorealistically representing such motifs as bedclothes. Justice is hardly done to Kang's and Maruyama's works, since they have been deprived their appropriate space in this messy exhibition layout, ironically organized by a feng shui expert hired by the museum.

The museum's Korean curator Kim Sun Hee has stated that "silence" in the exhibition title "embodies the situation of art and tradition in East Asia" and that the exhibition was meant to counteract Western prejudice toward East Asian art. But people here are aware that, in terms of both traditional and contemporary art, and of present-day politics as well, Chinese and Koreans are much



MARUYAMA NAOFUMI, *Butterfly song*, 2004. Acrylic on cotton, 260 x 260 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Shugoarts, Tokyo.

more expressive and aggressive than the Japanese. The curator's idea of replacing the modern white-cube exhibition space with a feng shui mixture rather hampers the right understanding that East Asia itself is a sharply multicultural world.

—Satoru Nagoya

Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE, FRANKFURT

"Ideal Worlds" puts forward the notion that there is a prevalent sensibility of New Romanticism in contemporary art. The curators couch their argument in a positivist reading of the romantic and its emancipatory potential hinging on individuality, hope and desire. 13 artists are presented, most of whom are painters. Romanticism was a movement bridging the 17th and 18th centuries and championed in Germany by the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, the dramas of Friedrich von Schiller and the paintings of Casper David Friedrich. In Schiller's aesthetic letters (1793-1795) he talks of the dichotomous relationship between reason and nature and tries to define a place in the middle informed by beauty, truth, and knowledge. It is this third way, or what he calls the "play drive" that facilitates action in which man "...is only fully a human being when he plays." The play drive is in part what underlies Romanticism's embrace of the imagination and the unique

creative spirit. But Schiller's intent goes beyond individuality, however, concerning itself with improving the human condition, which means that there is responsibility involved and therefore what might be called "play with intent." There has to be a point of productive communication. It's this point that starts to divide the artists in this exhibition.

A common thread running through many of the works presented is an embrace of a kitsch aesthetic and techniques associated with craft, such as cut-out paper, sequins, day-glo paint, and other cheap and common materials. However, a schism occurs between the pieces that venture too far into the subjective, thereby imploding, closing off any kind of potentiality vis-a-vis works that are more open ended. David Altmejd's multi-faceted mirrored platforms, Catherine Opie's photographs of surfers waiting patiently for the next wave, and Christian Ward's lushly articulated paintings of



CHRISTIAN WARD, *Inside the Island*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 312 x 200 cm. Courtesy the Saatchi Gallery, London.

endless caves and caverns, present worlds that seem in formation, possessing a potential for expanding human experience. This is a form of Romanticism that opens up the possibility for an inclusive practice — a place where what is seen is not a hermetically sealed snapshot entirely controlled by the

artist's heroic vision. These works avoid the absolute, yet have failure as their redeeming failure. That is to say that the works acknowledge the impossibility of finding that ideal world. They acknowledge the never-ending search, the process of seeking.

—Randall Anderson