Sufficient time has passed since the founding in 1993 of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art to reflect on its historical significance. I will focus here on the formative role the APT has played in the development of contemporary Asian art during the 1990s. I begin with a narrative of my involvement with the APT. I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, went to the USA for higher studies, and returned to Karachi during the 1990s, working and living as an artist. I was aware of contemporary art in the USA and Europe, and was beginning to become cognizant of contemporary practices emerging in East, South and Southeast Asia. But from Karachi, there was very little knowledge of artistic developments in neighboring India, not to speak of other areas in Asia. Karachi during the 1990s was facing a very difficult time, a depressed economy and deteriorating law and order, with the result that due to lack of journals, magazines and visitors and before the age of the Internet, one felt cut off from developments outside and remained isolated.

One sensed that learning about the challenges and breakthroughs that contemporary Asian artists were making at that time was far more salient than the more remote social and institutional context in which Western contemporary art flourished. But this was not possible. Indeed, it was not until about 1996 that I became aware of the scope and ambition of the APT project, and this recognition came about through discussions with Thai curator Apinan Poshyananda, and Indian artist Nalini Malani, whom I had met at an exhibition in Europe that year.

It must be stressed also that the question of multiculturalism in contemporary art was just beginning to emerge as a significant issue globally in the early 1990s, as exemplified by Rasheed Araeen’s curated exhibition, The Other Story, which opened in London and some of the tensions associated with the project and the justifiable critiques levelled against it, such as the over privileging of mainland Chinese artists in terms of space, resources and commissions over all others. There was also a sense of uneasiness for many participants, that the APT project was a way for Australia, a “white” country with erstwhile Europeanised pretensions, to attempt to exert a neo-imperial hegemony in a largely non-white region at a key historical juncture, when that region was finally beginning to rediscover itself. Many of these critiques were openly voiced and debated in the conferences. For one of the challenges facing the APT in its first decade during the 1990s was nothing less than mapping emergent currents in its contemporary art, in many ways, an impossible charge. It must be remembered that Asia was never, and is still not, a stable construct, and its valences change, depending on where one is situated. For example, East Asia is often privileged in many discussions about Asia to the degree that it stands in for Asia itself. At other times, the developed emerging economic giants such as China, India and Japan wielded silent discursive privilege, so that artists from these nations enjoy far greater opportunities in the international arena as compared to artists from smaller or less developed regions. And finally, the more one moves westward, the less secure the appellation of “Asia” appears to be, so that even today, despite the conception of Central Asia and West Asia, many informed people remain puzzled by the inclusion of Turkey and Iraq as being fully Asian, for example.

Furthermore, as a continent, Asia contains well over half of the global population, and is home to probably more diversity in terms of languages, cultures, religions and race as well as of its unevenness of development and the development of its erstwhile Europeanised pretensions, to attempt to exert a neo-imperial hegemony in a largely non-white region at a key historical juncture, when that region was finally beginning to rediscover itself. Many of these critiques were openly voiced and debated in the conferences. For one of the challenges facing the APT in its first decade during the 1990s was nothing less than mapping emergent currents in its contemporary art, in many ways, an impossible charge. It must be remembered that Asia was never, and is still not, a stable construct, and its valences change, depending on where one is situated. For example, East Asia is often privileged in many discussions about Asia to the degree that it stands in for Asia itself. At other times, the developed emerging economic giants such as China, India and Japan wielded silent discursive privilege, so that artists from these nations enjoy far greater opportunities in the international arena as compared to artists from smaller or less developed regions. And finally, the more one moves westward, the less secure the appellation of “Asia” appears to be, so that even today, despite the conception of Central Asia and West Asia, many informed people remain puzzled by the inclusion of Turkey and Iraq as being fully Asian, for example.

Further challenges facing the APT in its first decade during the 1990s was nothing less than mapping emergent currents in its contemporary art, in many ways, an impossible charge. It must be remembered that Asia was never, and is still not, a stable construct, and its valences change, depending on where one is situated. For example, East Asia is often privileged in many discussions about Asia to the degree that it stands in for Asia itself. At other times, the developed emerging economic giants such as China, India and Japan wielded silent discursive privilege, so that artists from these nations enjoy far greater opportunities in the international arena as compared to artists from smaller or less developed regions. And finally, the more one moves westward, the less secure the appellation of “Asia” appears to be, so that even today, despite the conception of Central Asia and West Asia, many informed people remain puzzled by the inclusion of Turkey and Iraq as being fully Asian, for example.

From its beginning the APT as an institution positioned itself to avoid the sole burden of representing contemporary Asian art. With the establishment of museums in Singapore and Fukuoka, the work by the Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archives in documentation, and the increasing presence of Asian artists in exhibitions beyond Asia, the singular role that the APT played in its first decade is now being complemented by others. But given the enormous scale of Asia and the rapid growth of its contemporary art, the APT, with its outstanding collection of contemporary art, its rich archives and publications and its continued advocacy for Asian art, remains a vital force.

Finally, the APT has also been innovative in conjointing Asia with the Pacific Island region. Undoubtedly, this is due to the specific geographic exigencies and motivations of Australia. Nevertheless, for Asian artists, scholars and curators, it has provided a unique venue to encounter artists and works from the Pacific, a region largely consisting of smaller islands with far fewer resources for human development than many Asian countries. The presence of the numerous Pacific artists and their works was sobering and eye opening to me. It powerfully brought home the sense that even less developed Asian regions enjoy a hidden privilege that they refuse to interrogate. Many Asians still consider themselves victims of modern history, but in comparison, it is many of the Pacific Island regions that have been far more marginalised and subalternised.

The APT should be applauded for the major role it continues to play in showcasing and commissioning works from the Pacific region. And the lessons Asia-based curators and institutions might learn from this is to develop a keener sense of how marginality can be reinscribed as a form of power by those who see themselves as marginal. Asian institutions will need to develop greater humility in their self-perception towards the Pacific region, and begin a process of engagement in a respectful and supportive manner in a region intimately tied to Asia, yet frequently overlooked by its cultural institutions and thinkers.
Tiffany Chung, Roaming with the dawn–snow drifts, rain falls, desert wind blows (detail), 2012
Photo courtesy the artist