



**GALLERY WEEKEND  
KUALA LUMPUR**

*Pioneering culture-building networks*

**Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra**

**UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS**

**VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1, 2021**

# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur  
VOLUME 7: ISSUE 1: 2021

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Cover Image: Ernesto Pujazon  
Totem to "Wiracocha", Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2007–2008

ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal

an Openly Published Journal affiliated with

The UNESCO Observatory at

The University of Melbourne

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert

Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory

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Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education



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**ABOUT THE  
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

# Editorial

## Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of  
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

### BIOGRAPHY



**Shalini Ganendra's** impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

## FOREWORD

### **Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur**

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

# Connecting Cultures through Art

## AUTHOR

**Marika Sardar**, Southeast Asia Curator at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto

## BIOGRAPHY

**Marika Sardar** is the Curator, South East Asia, at the Aga Khan Museum. She previously worked at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar as well as being the Associate Curator of Southern Asian and Islamic Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Previously, Dr Sardar worked for six years in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's department of Islamic Arts.

She received her Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU in 2007. She is an Islamic arts specialist, with a focus on the 16th and 17th-century paintings, architecture and



textiles of South Asia. In 2017, Dr Sardar edited the book *Epic Tales from Ancient India: Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art*. Past books which she co-authored include *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500–1700: Opulence and Fantasy* (2015) and *Asian Art* (2014).

Her position at the Aga Khan Museum additionally involves engaging with artists from regions with large Muslim populations - particularly regions in South and Southeast Asia. Dr Sardar ensures that the Aga Khan Museum is committed to including contemporary artists in each of its programmes, inviting them to engage with themes raised by the museum's collection of historic Islamic art.

Dr Sardar was a Luminary for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2019. She spoke at “Understanding Exhibition”, held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

*GWKL brought together some with long-term experience in the region and some brand new to it to get a pulse on the arts and heritage scene in Kuala Lumpur. Being on the newer end of the spectrum, the variety of small galleries, established museums, artists and art activists we were introduced to was a fantastic introduction to the scene, the issues of representation and preservation, and the political issues of relevance to artists working now. Many new connections were forged for possible projects in the future.*

- Dr Marika Sardar



## Connecting Cultures through Art

Founded on the belief that art is a powerful tool for changing perceptions, the mission of the Aga Khan Museum is “to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Muslim civilisations have made to world heritage.” This museum, located in Toronto, Canada, has a core collection of about 1000 objects assembled by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan (1933–2003). Using these outstanding examples of Islamic art, dating between the 9th and the 19th centuries, the museum aims to connect cultures through art, providing a space for North American audiences to learn more about the culture and history of the Middle East, North Africa and western and southern Asia.

Figure 1: The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, designed by Fumihiko Maki. Photograph © Aly Manji.



Having reached our fifth anniversary at the Aga Khan Museum, we have now settled into a pattern of hosting two major seasons a year, each with a mix of programming across the visual arts, performing arts and education. These seasons are most often based on the themes of the two major exhibitions for the year, special shows may number as many as 200 objects, a majority of which are loans from other museums that involve months of coordination. While most often dealing with historical subjects—the art and architecture of different Muslim dynasties—the museum has initiated a more consistent programme of engagement with contemporary art. This may take the form of artists who are invited to create works in response a historical exhibition; artists whose work is featured in the short-term, small-scale exhibitions shown between the main loan exhibitions; or major exhibitions of all contemporary art.

Figure 2: Manal Al Dowayan, *Suspended Together*, 2018, exhibited at the Aga Khan Museum. Photograph © Aly Manji.



A sampling of recent projects reflects these different modes of presentation. On view at the time of writing, for instance, is a set of works by the Toronto-based artist Ekow Nimako, *Building Black: Civilisations* (2019-20). Already engaged in ideas about representations of Africa and the writing of history, he was invited to respond to the exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, which focuses on western Africa as the cultural and economic heart of the world during the medieval period. For this commission, Nimako created a set of black LEGO sculptures representing the themes of journey and exchange. Through this, Nimako conjured up heroic figures and cities from a mythical African past, a way to fill history books that often overlook this part of the world. These works have proved incredibly successful—because of their inventive use of a material we all know and have played with, Nimako has been able to get viewers to think more deeply rather serious issues. These works have also proven to be eminently Instagrammable, and as we learn more and more, today the social media component of any programming is key. It is the most effective way of getting the word out and creating a buzz for exhibitions, and if the visual impact is immediate, visitors are enticed to take in the academic content of our shows, something that is difficult to convey in traditional advertising, and that might not otherwise be immediately appealing.

One of our most successful ‘between’ projects was *The Museum as Studio*, an on-site residence by the artist Kevork Mourad (2019). Mourad worked in the museum galleries in a period between the de-installation of one exhibition and the mounting of the next. He often stages performances of painting in tandem with the musician Kinan Azmeh, which made his practice ideal for this particular type of project, in which he created a work of art in a publicly accessible part of the museum, where he could be observed by visitors, and where they could speak to him.

As with many of his pieces, the one created during his residency responds to Syria's current civil war, with references to the great historical cities of Syria, the people who inhabit them today, and the sad destruction of so much of the country's heritage. The museum then acquired this work of art, an installation of ink paintings on cloth, and continues to display it.

Figure 3: Kevork Mourad, The Museum as Studio, 2019. Photograph © Connie Tsang.



Finally, we have had a handful of exhibitions devoted completely to contemporary art. Several notable examples explored the artists of a particular country—Iran, in *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet* (2017); Syria, in *Syrian Symphony: New Compositions in Sight and Sound* (2017); and Pakistan, in *The Garden of Ideas* (2014-15), to name just a few. Providing a venue in Toronto that focuses specifically on the region introducing our audiences to artists they might not see at museums elsewhere in the city, who deal with histories, politics and daily concerns so different from our own here in Canada.

At the AKM, the curatorial team drives most of the content but suggestions for programming come from in many departments—any staff members who have seen artists of interest are invited to propose them. We from our final selection from among these proposals with a set of criteria based on the quality of the work (there is almost always an immediate reaction when everyone agrees on a particular artist), the relationship to our permanent collection (whether the artist is from one of the regions we represent or draws from the forms or subjects in our historical collection), and the relevance to our mission of connecting cultures and changing perceptions.

With this growing commitment to working with artists active today, the partnership with Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur came at an opportune time. Just as the AKM aims to connect cultures, GWKL aims to connect wider audiences to the arts scene in Southeast Asia, providing a platform often missing in cultural institutions outside the region, while giving local artists and curators an insider's view into the way museums and galleries identify international projects and partners, and the best way to connect to those resources. Being new to the arts and heritage scene in Kuala Lumpur, the variety of small galleries, established museums, artists and art activists I saw during GWKL was impressive. It was also instructive to learn about the issues of relevance to today's artists from Southeast Asia, and the issues of representation and preservation of history came across as the most forceful issues at play now.

Figure 4: Marika Sardar speaking at the GWKL 2019 panel "Understanding Exhibition", held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 5: Marika Sardar (far left) visiting landscape architect Ng Sek San's art collection with fellow GWKL 2019 Luminaries. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.

