

BORDER CROSSINGS

VICTORIA HYNES admires the work of Tony Twigg, whose sculptural world encompasses Sydney and Manila.



Tony Twigg, *5 fishboxes in a row*, 2005, oil on found timber construction, 66 x 165 x 9cm. Private collection Malaysia.

Outside Tony Twigg's Sydney home studio, a traditional Filipino 'Padao' statue stands to attention — welcoming visitors and warding off evil spirits. Its primal vertical presence offers a taste of the interior space within. Inside Twigg's inner city studio, renovations are taking place, with planks of wood and stacks of work sitting amongst sawdust and rubble.

This chaotic scene is somewhat appropriate when you consider the artist's other life exists amongst the shambolic urban society of contemporary Manila and his mixed media artwork often references and contains elements of modern urban detritus.

At the time of the interview, Twigg had just opened his first solo Australian exhibition since 2004. His busy transglobal lifestyle has kept him over the past five years criss-crossing Asia, with nine solo shows in Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. The Sydney exhibition coincides with a publication marking the artist's fifteen-year engagement with South-East Asia. In fact, Twigg himself suggests that after a thirty-year career as an artist, he is now better known in Asia than in Australia. His work is represented in private and public collections in Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines and he has produced more than

forty solo exhibitions across Australia, South-East Asia and the United States.

Twigg's latest body of work moves between vertical, freestanding abstract constructions and elemental wall collages — often comprised from individual timber units that he slots together to form large geometric sculptural reliefs in monochromatic colours. In spite of their rough-hewn surfaces and seemingly spontaneous construction, Twigg's energetic sculptural forms demonstrate a deliberate compositional harmony and balance.

He has consistently used found wood as the primary source material for his artworks, yet, over more than three decades of art making, his practice has changed dramatically. Exhibiting at Sydney's Ray Hughes Gallery in the 1980s and early 1990s, his mixed media work was mainly narrative based and interpreted stories of Australian colonial history. Then a trip to the Philippines in 1995 to visit residing Australian painter Keith Looby changed his art and life irrevocably. He developed an immediate fascination with the country and applied for an Australia Council grant to work in its Manila studio in 1996. Ever since, Tony has divided his time between Sydney and Manila, with six months spent in each country in order to "avoid the winter". His engagement with Asia also led to a year-long residency in 2005 in Malaysia, at Rimbun Dahan, situated outside Kuala Lumpur. Since then he has held solo exhibitions at TAKSU Gallery in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

What first attracted Twigg to the Philippines was wandering through Metro Manila and viewing the dilapidated houses and shanty buildings, as well as the driftwood and bamboo scattered along the seashore. The raw aesthetic of this 'make-do' architecture, known as 'barong barong', provided a new inspiration for Twigg's drawings and collages. "You can't help walking around Manila and noticing that it's like an art gallery," says Twigg. "I keep telling people that it's wall to wall Rosalie Gascoigne and Robert Rauschenberg."

Twigg would endlessly photograph the city, then on his return to Australia assemble sculptures and installations from found objects, bamboo, rusted metal and timber. During his Malaysian residency, he even used discarded fish traps, stacking them together and reworking them into a new artistic life. He often refers to the works as "accidental art", as they are usually made from randomly collected materials, from which he creates carefully constructed and ordered three-dimensional compositions. Twigg's intention was never to appropriate Asian visual art forms but to develop a dynamic engagement between his work and this new visual language he had encountered.

Initially, he would divide each body of work into two exhibitions, one to be shown in Manila and one in Sydney, but increasingly he found that he received more critical and public response in the Philippines. Nevertheless, he has continued to bounce between countries with his artistic practice; his installation and performance work having been shown at leading

Australian art museums, including the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Queensland Art Gallery.

Throughout his career, Twigg's work has been remarkably diverse and multidisciplinary, oscillating from sculpture, collage, installation to performance art, set design, film and video work. (One of his short films was even screened in competition at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival.)

According to the artist, however, his core art practice is drawing. In fact, he refers to his installations as "landscape drawings in space". Twigg comments about his work: "It's completely abstract ... There's an attempt on my part to make something beautiful. But there's no narrative that you need to understand. I very simply want to make a work of art that can be read in Sydney, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Manila. I want it to speak to that broad cultural sweep."

As Gina Fairley writes in her essay in Twigg's recent monograph 'Encountering the Object', Twigg's work is perceived differently according to the culture in which it is shown. "This is why his work has been described as Filipino in the Philippines, as Pan-Asian fusion in Malaysia and evocative of Pukumani poles in Australia."

Some might call his lifestyle itinerant, but he prefers to see himself as a 'regional' artist, surpassing one single national identity. Journeying through the Asia-Pacific region, often with art materials packed in his luggage, he creates work that transcends cultural and geographic borders. "So much about Australia is about destination 'here' and 'over there'. A great deal of artists of my generation looked toward Europe and North America and that's where they went ... Now there's a new Asian art hub – quality art museums, a biennale in Singapore. There's a greater interest in the Asian region as cultural destinations, not just tourist destinations."

Essentially, Twigg's culturally diverse and multidimensional artistic practice sits outside sculptural conventions, which might explain why he hasn't achieved the amount of recognition in Australia that he has received in Asia. Perhaps, as more Australian artists start focusing their attention away from the Eurocentric art world towards their own region, Twigg's work might become as widely appreciated in this country as it is in our neighbouring backyard. □



Top: Tony Twigg, *5 sticks in any order (standing)*, 2004/2010, enamel on timber construction in 5 parts, 265 x 140 x 130cm. Image courtesy the artist and Damien Minton Gallery.

Right: Tony Twigg, *The accordions (Inhales)*, 2010, enamel on timber construction, 116 x 133 x 6.5cm. Image courtesy the artist and Damien Minton Gallery.