Out of the ashes

Artists at this year’s Gwangju Biennale want to torch what came before

GWANGJU BIENNIALE

Gwangju, few other biennials are as firmly rooted in their location and historical context of the host country as the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. Jessica Morgan, the artistic director of the tenth edition, brings together 116 artists from 36 countries, stressing that Gwangju “is not a tourist spot”. The biennial is in fact to commemorate a specific political event, a living memorial to the citizens, more than 200, who died in May 1980 when Gwangju’s population rose up against a hardline military dictatorship, thereby starting the democratic movement in Korea. As a result, this history and context necessarily influences the exhibition, says Morgan, who is the curator of international art at Tate Modern, London.

Turbulent past

Her curatorial vision, conveyed in the title “Burning Down the House”, embraces the “radical spirit of burning down the status quo”, she says. The process of annihilation, followed by renewal and regeneration, underpins the thematic framework. Works that reflect South Korea’s turbulent 20th-century past and emergence as an economic powerhouse are particularly potent.

Minjoo Lim, one of 19 participating Korean artists, will show a work incorporating the remains of victims killed during the Korean War (1950-53). The bones, which were retrieved by the victims’ relatives from the site of a massacre, are housed in a container on display at the biennial. Relatedly will carry a series of sculptural objects made by Lim to the exhibition site. The project, Navajis JD, 2016, is a process of smoothing, but one that is addressed to the present day rather than the historical past.” Morgan says.

Lee Bul’s performance works, including Abortion, 1989, a startling portrait of self-centrism, mirror the fraught Korean political situation of the 1980s.

New commissions

The Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong has made a 20-panel painting about the generation of Gwangju born after the 1989 uprising, portraying high school students in various guises. The work is one of 15 new commissions. Other artists who have made new works include the Slovakian-born Korean Otaegi,

LEI BUL, ABORTION, 1989

Narutis Ramirez-Figueroa of Guatemala, and Polish artist Cecylia Bielawska.

Morgan also aims to celebrate the “bedroom of sound and movement” of the ‘80s, adding a touch of anxiety to the proceedings. “The open and open approach of the participating artists, I have worked with the biennial team to make an exhibition that physically embodies this commitment.”

Morgan singles out a work that exemplifies this commitment: the film by Anshul Puriwalla that contains a story of a woman’s life that consists purely of a song. We Are Not Your Models, 1996, uses song and the rhythm of the drums to create its anti-message. The film traces the mythological origins of the “untouchables”, or Dalit, at the bottom of India’s caste system, offering the Dalit perspective on the epic Hindu legend known as Ravana.

The transformative power of fire, which symbolises energy and metabolism, is present in the works of Huma Mulji and Eduardo Basualdo, the latter will present a born house, The Island, 2006-08, that can be entered, allowing visitors to examine a surreal interior space at the centre. The Los Angeles-based artist Sterling Ruby presents a series of specially produced turning stones. Placed in the Biennale Square, they will be a large trail for visitors to the Biennial.

Gareth Barry

• Gwangju Biennale, Biennale Hall, Jungnang Park, 5 September - 4 January 2015

Chinese whispering

Paula Tsui, chose seven artists representing “a mix of positions”, that he, “will add up to make the sum of their parts”. Of the seven artists—artists from New York, London, Los Angeles, Berlin, and Paris—only Ruby has previously been shown in Beijing. All, except for Ceylon, have more new works for the exhibition, and all have collaborated with the designer Brian Rechtman on a series of artists’ books, produced in place of a catalogue. J.G.