

► **TAIPEI**

November 16, 2016 Written by [Luise Guest](#)

## Slaying Monsters: The 2016 Kuandu Biennale, Taipei

It sounds like the start of a fairy tale. Ten curators from nine different countries are given a task to perform: Each must choose one artist with whom to create a major show. The resulting [Kuandu Biennale](#) in Taipei, *Slaying Monsters*, is made up of separate "solo exhibitions" from Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Taiwan, an interesting spin on the usual biennale format and a challenge to its conventional predictability. The Kuandu Biennale puts curatorial practice front and center, a potentially risky strategy, but in so doing, close collaborations between the curators and their chosen artists result in a theatrically engaging, conceptually rigorous, and provocative exhibition, with moments of real excitement. Taking its title from the world of video games, the biennale challenges the "gamification" of the artworld—the contemporary emphasis on spectacle, gossip, art stars, and international uber-curators—with its interesting and unexpected inclusions.



Tsubaki Noburu. *Daisy Bell*, 2014; polyester cloth; 700 x 600 x 800 cm. Courtesy of the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts.

Tsubaki Noboru's 2014 *Daisy Bell* (curator Kenichiro Mogi) dominates the entrance to the gallery. An artist who has continually reinvented himself since his involvement in the Japanese "mono-ha" painting movement, Noboru's work references popular culture, myth, and Japanese tradition. *Daisy Bell* is a giant inflatable creature that looms over the spectator, at once cute and monstrous. This ambiguous, almost entirely featureless hybrid love-child of Jeff Koons' *Puppy* and a creature from the imaginary world of a medieval bestiary insists, as soon as the visitor enters the exhibition, that monsters are already among us.

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Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran. *Pewter Dickhead 3*, 2016; earthenware, glass, gold leaf, platinum leaf, porcelain, twine, and human hair; 127 x 47 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei, Taiwan.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran worked with curator Glenn Barkley to develop his characteristic totemic sculptures (currently showing in the Australian National Gallery, Canberra) into works on a monumental scale for the biennale, drawing on Hindu and Christian devotional iconography mashed up with pop culture references to superheroes and pornography. Nithiyendran's "deities" exude raw sexual power, leavened by ironic humor and a playfully irreverent sensibility. *Pewter Dickhead 3* (2016) is made of unfired earthenware—the artist wants these works to return to the earth after the exhibition closes, presumably leaving behind the remains of their adornments of gold and platinum lustre, porcelain, twine, and human hair. Like a voodoo doll or shamanic fetish, this creature with its gold claws and sharp pointy teeth is both charismatic and alarming.



Zhang-Xu Zhan. *Inferiority Bat (Hsin Hsin Joss Paper Store Series—Room 003)*, 2014-2015; 6-channel video animation installation; 5 min. Courtesy of the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts.

Taiwan's thousands of temples are filled with the statues of innumerable gods. A drive through the verdant landscapes of southern Taiwan is punctuated by brilliantly painted tiny shrines and temples containing the figures of numerous gods, many of whom once walked the earth in human form. On the corners of the back streets in old towns, brightly colored puppet theaters perform, not for human children, but for an audience of the gods residing in the temple. Zhang-Xu Zhan (curator Gong Jow-Jiun) presents an innovative work steeped in this Taiwanese folk culture: *Inferiority Bat (Hsin Hsin Joss Paper store series—Room 003)* (2014-2015) is a 6-channel video installation that begins with the humble vernacular material of papier mâché. Generations of Zhan's family specialized in the craft of making paper offerings and effigies for religious rituals and funerals, and he marries this tradition with video and new media, creating entirely contemporary works. With paper puppets brought to life by stop-motion animation techniques Zhan creates a fecund universe: plant forms hang on separate screens like creepers in a jungle, swaying gently, rising and falling, and seemingly moving in response to the hypnotic sound track. His tiny puppet theater teems with frantic activity, like battles between gods and demons. Beneath the eccentric charm of his work there is a palpable sense of loss; like so many other ancient traditions, Taiwanese paper crafts are in danger of becoming obsolete in a modern culture of mass production and the seduction of global brands.

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John Buck's materials are as simple and unvarnished as his vision is dystopian. [ow.ly/INA0306Z6uV](https://ow.ly/INA0306Z6uV)



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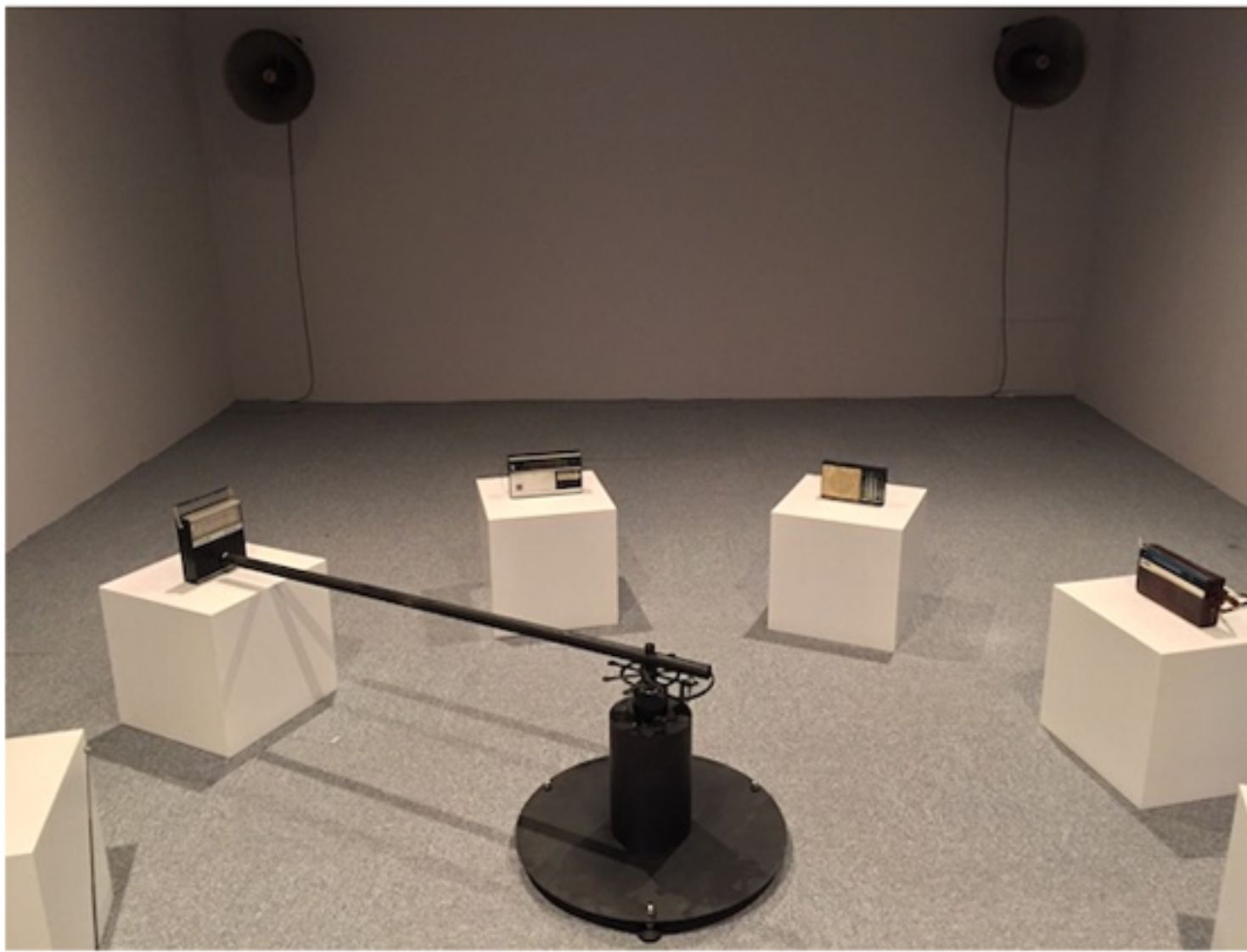
John Buck's work involves a dizzying array of iconic and allegorical figures that reflects mass media. [ow.ly/vd6S306Z6nm](https://ow.ly/vd6S306Z6nm)

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Zhang Pei-Li. *A standard, uplifting, and distinctive circle along with its sound system*, 2015; electric motor and metal rotating device, 25 Watt cylindrical horn speaker, old style "Made-in-China" transistor radios; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts.

Chinese new media pioneer Zhang Pei-Li (curator Lu Ming-Jun) is represented here by *A standard, uplifting, and distinctive circle along with its sound system* (2015). A circle of old-school Chinese transistor radios suggests a gathering, or a conversation round a table. A microphone on a long arm sweeps around the inside of the circle and picks up the individual sound of each transistor in turn. The suggestion of the long arm of the state apparatus of censorship and control is inescapable, representing a much more sinister kind of monster than the pixelated three-eyed creature in the biennale's publicity material: this cute pop monster references the unsophisticated video games of the 1980s and 1990s rather than a dark creature of the fearful imagination. However, each artist in this biennale has recognized something elemental in the human spirit. Beneath the playfulness of many works, and beneath the everyday, lies a fear of the encompassing darkness, the monster lurking behind the curtains of the conscious mind. The pressing question posed by the Kuandu Biennale is whether art has a role to play in slaying the "monsters" of the modern world, whatever shape they may take.

*Slaying Monsters*, the Kuandu Biennale 2016, will be on view through December 11, 2016 at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei.