

WORLD BEAT

What's going on around the globe

Paris

As guest curator at the Louvre in Paris this month, Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison mixes ancient art with so-called slam poetry, with the aim of opening a dialogue between the historic art museum and young rappers in the troubled French suburbs.

"I was instantly interested in making the connection [between the museum and the youths]," says Morrison (below) at the start of the month-long event organised around her chosen theme of The Foreigner's Home.

Last month was the first anniversary of the start of three weeks of riots, France's worst in 40 years, by disgruntled youths, mainly of immigrant descent.

Morrison, whose works explore slavery and African-American identity, says French descendants of Africans or other foreigners should look to contributions to US culture by African-Americans, such as jazz or rap, for inspiration.

"They created within their country a powerful culture that was specifically of themselves, but, at the same time, magnificently universal. You can use your disadvantages and energy comes a new thing that has never been seen before."

Immigrants and their descendants are well placed to inject new ideas into society, she says. "After the 'please, please, let us in', comes the other thing – the creative energy that is inside."

The issue of feeling at home or not in a foreign country is relevant to many people today,

Morrison says, referring not only to refugees, exiles or immigrants, but also to diplomats and human-rights workers.

Interested in how writers represent their homes, she suggested the theme to the Louvre and worked with a team from the museum "to try to involve as many disciplines as possible". With Morrison as a focal point, the events unite art forms through the ages, from the treatment of foreigners in ancient Greek, Egyptian and Assyrian art, to discussions with international authors, film projections, music and a performance by 10 "slammers" offering their interpretations of French and Italian masterpieces (slam poetry is performed in the form of rap).

"I'm really interested in something I can only call 'unpoliced language' – language that is outside the gaze of the cops," says Morrison.

The project is the second time the Louvre, open to the public since 1793, has invited a guest curator to suggest a new approach to its collections and to spark cultural debate. Last year, Robert Badinter, a French politician, lawyer and professor, took part for the first time in what will be an annual project to invite thinkers, writers, composers and artists to the museum.

"They're capable of bringing out something new from our art collections and our public," says museum director Henri Loyrette. *Sophie Nicholson, AFP*

The Foreigner's Home, Louvre Museum, Paris. Ends Wednesday



Photo: AFP

soundbites

How much of your experience at the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2006, in which Hong Kong participated for the first time, is reflected in the response exhibition?

Joshua Lau, a curator for Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale 2006:

"To some extent, the Hong Kong Venue Exhibition is unique because we built a lot. This year's theme is Cities, Architecture and Society, curated by Richard Burdett. The main exhibition focused on key factors faced by large cities such as migration, and also the uncertainties tied to development.



"In our response exhibition, which opened earlier this month, [fellow curator Alvin Yip] and I were fascinated by this built experience that we imposed in Venice. For instance, CL3 Architects' bamboo ladder and the scissors staircase installation – a six-metre tall pavilion occupying most of the courtyard – were believed to be among the tallest structures at the biennial.

"Perhaps such a hardcore architectural presence is the most appropriate way to represent Hong Kong."

What do you want to achieve with this exhibition?

"We want to bring a miniature version of the Hong Kong show in Venice, to present a snapshot of the city, frozen in time. Another aim is to create valuable works that will become part of Hong Kong's architectural history and theory, as well as a reference for researchers and students.

Vice Versa, Bank of China Tower, lobby, ends Dec 1; Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre, Kowloon Park, Dec 8 - Feb 21

CALMER KARMA

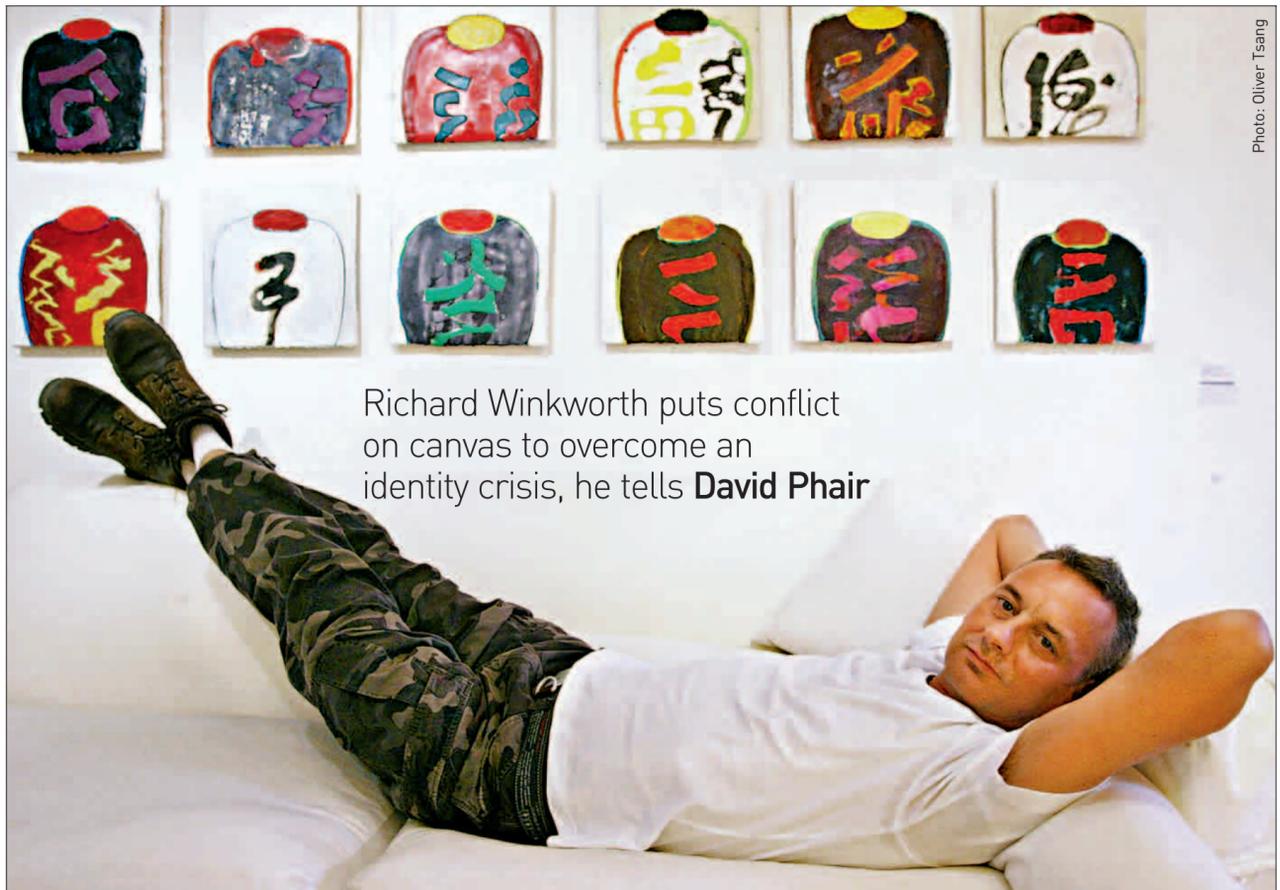


Photo: Oliver Tsang

Richard Winkworth puts conflict on canvas to overcome an identity crisis, he tells David Phair

RICHARD WINKWORTH is fuelled by rage. But you'd never guess it from his tranquil images of jars and bowls in varying hues of red, blue, green and gold on display behind him in the gallery.

Where lurks the conflict that appears absent from the 43-year-old and his work? "What I paint and what you see is the antidote to what I've felt and what I still feel."

Born in Bombay, Winkworth has lived in Singapore and Hong Kong. When he was 12, his parents moved back to England. Feeling neither English nor Asian, he despaired over his lack of identity. "I spent most of the time looking out of the window and getting into fights, wondering why my parents brought me there."

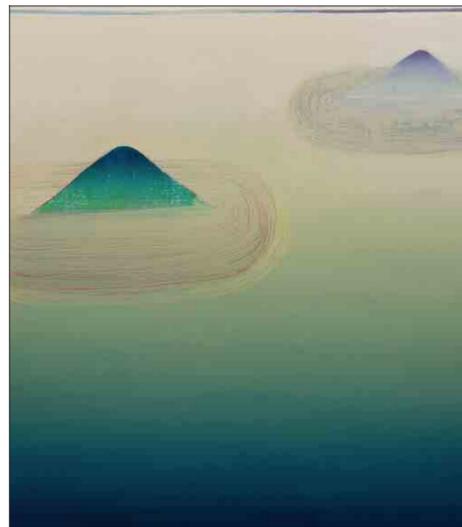
Time hasn't eased his unhappy memories of England. "I feel very angry that it's so ugly. There's a tremendous lack of urban planning," he says.

So when he paints, it's to Asia that he lovingly returns on canvas – to a time when he was immersed in the haunting beauty of the landscapes and cultures.

These images possess an innocent quality, and there's a surrealism to the still lifes. Playing with perspective, Winkworth creates illusions, resulting in distortions of scale that open up the space the images inhabit.

Garden is based on a small, dry, Japanese garden – but the image is like being in front of a vast ocean. *Jar I-IX* is a collection of nine jars that uses the encaustic painting technique, in which beeswax and pigment are heated and re-heated to create an enamel-like finish.

"Asia is so colourful," says Winkworth. "For me, England is in black and white, whereas Asia is in technicolour. It's a kaleidoscope of colours."



Among the works of Richard Winkworth (top) on display are *Garden* (left) and *Jars I-IX* (right)

"For me, England is in black and white, whereas Asia is in technicolour. It's a kaleidoscope of colours"

At school in England, Winkworth didn't conform. Although he was recognised as bright, he wouldn't cooperate. Except when it came to art. "Drawing is a primeval urge," he says. "All children scribble before they can speak."

On the advice of his art teacher, Winkworth was sent to an art school in Hastings, England. Along with his paint brushes, he took along an object from home: a ginger jar from Singapore. "Just by drawing the object I found I was transported back to Asia in my head. It was the first time since coming back to England that this spark suddenly returned to me. It was then that I started to create these still lifes."

Winkworth says he doesn't decide what he wants to paint – he just goes with the flow. "I can't produce a plan. It's like falling in love – it just happens. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't."

He likens the experience to walking through a jungle, coming across a temple and walking inside to find a red altar and gold Buddha. "The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I feel a tightness in my throat and then I know the painting is starting to come alive for me."

Winkworth has just returned from Cambodia, for him a source of great inspiration but also a land of upsetting images. He talks of groups of parents milling outside a hospital, worried about their children who were victims of a severe outbreak of dengue fever.

Winkworth says he wants to do a show in which he can contribute to Cambodia's rehabilitation. "There's something obscene in that you can have a meal for a handful of dollars in Cambodia yet the people giving it to you are desperately impoverished. I think it's very unfair that some of us are born in countries with healthcare provided while others are not."

Three years ago, Winkworth returned to Mumbai with his widowed mother. It was a celebration of his 40th birthday, but also a return to a way of life for which he still feels immense nostalgia. They called by the house where they used to live in two rooms on the top floor. The landlady recognised them immediately and ushered them inside, where the adult Winkworth ventured upstairs to the roof. He remembers being on the roof as a child when it was so hot during the day that he could only walk barefoot in the shadows.

"Looking down towards the ocean it was as if nothing had changed from all those years before," he says. "And as I looked to the horizon, the sky and the ocean seemed to merge and turn white. And in that blink of a moment I felt I'd at last been reconnected both spiritually and intellectually."

Making Space featuring Richard Winkworth's work, Amelia Johnson Contemporary, GF6-10 Shin Hing Street, Central. Inquiries: 2548 2286. Ends Dec 2



A long, long history of harmony is cause for celebration

Now in their 75th year (or maybe only their 72nd), the Hong Kong Singers are in good voice, writes Annemarie Evans

From oratorios to *Oklahoma!*, the Hong Kong Singers have come a long way since starting out as a bunch of expatriates on stage some 75 years ago.

Today, they're a cross-cultural theatre company and their latest production is *My Fair Lady*, the musical adapted from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. It tells the story of how Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle is turned blooming proper by the grammar ministrations of the misogynistic and snobbish phonetics professor, Henry Higgins.

"The last time we did this was 1977," says Hong Kong Singers treasurer Robert Nield. "So it's time we revisited it again."

The musical, to be performed with 12 dancers from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA), will also include two gala performances on December 1 and 8 in aid of Operation Santa Claus –

the annual fundraising campaign co-organised by RTHK and the *South China Morning Post*.

The Singers have a long tradition of helping good causes – the troupe raised funds for the Hong Kong Benevolent Society back in 1935.

Nield – a history buff and chairman of the Royal Asiatic Society in his remaining spare time – has been digging into the archives, old programmes, newspaper clippings and photographs to build up a history of the Singers.

This proved tricky. In the early 1930s written materials on the group were scarce and it's difficult to pin down exactly when it all started.

"In the past 12 years of programmes we've always said 1931, but I have a newspaper report of the singers making their debut at the Helena May

[Institute for Women] in 1934," says Nield. He says he'll solve the 75th anniversary conundrum "by celebrating for the next three years".

Programmes from the early days are full of British-sounding names, with a couple of Portuguese ones thrown in. By contrast, more than half of those involved in this year's *My Fair Lady* are local Chinese.

"When you look back to the early years, the Hong Kong Singers and the Hong Kong Philharmonic Society – then an amateur orchestra – would have been competing against movie theatres," Nield says. "The movies were still called talkies because films with sound were fairly new. So people had entertainment options and we had to go up against that."

The Singers haven't always performed musicals. Until 1959, their repertoire was a classical one – consisting of oratorios and items such as Haydn's *The Creation* and Mozart's *Requiem*. For reasons unknown, there was a sea change in 1959: the Singers crossed over to musicals and never looked back.

"I can track the last performance we gave in the second world war just before the Japanese invasion," says Nield, who has a part in the musical as George the barman. "It was a morale-boosting concert given to the troops in Stanley in 1941. It was Haydn's *Creation*."

In 1947, Lindsay Ride (vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong and head of the Royal Hongkong Defence Force and British Army Aid Group during the second world war) once more brought the singers together under his baton.

Twelve years later, the era of musicals began with *Mikado*, then all the well known works of Gilbert and Sullivan.

In 1962, the Singers were the first to perform a concert in the newly opened City Hall in Central. They staged *Chu Chin Chow* – described by one critic as a "brave" performance whose "tremendous effort did not come off".

Two years later, *Oklahoma!* came in for a roasting from the reviewers, but by 1965 things were picking up. "The *Yeomen of the*



The Hong Kong Singers will stage *My Fair Lady* this year with 12 dancers from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

Guard sees a new standard," says one headline.

Although there are plenty of good singers, dancing has always been an area of difficulty for the group, says Nield. "We're using 12 APA students [for *My Fair Lady*] to

help raise the overall quality of the rest of us." The choreography is by the APA's Mandy Petty.

The singers have a variety of day jobs, but each production usually pulls in some with a professional singing background.

"In 2004, when we did *Kiss Me Kate*, we put out public audition notices as usual. The male lead performer ended up being Olivier de Molina, who had sung in European opera houses. The female lead was Joanne Trevenna, who was previously at the English National Opera, and is now head of music at Island School. That's not to say that some of the amateur singers aren't of equal quality," says Nield.

Although the Singers lack the budget of professional productions, they hold their own, says Nield. With glossy props and a bank of costume designers and makers, the 500-strong troupe turn out professional productions. *My Fair Lady*, with a budget of HK\$750,000, is the most expensive production to date.

My Fair Lady, Hong Kong Singers and the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Drama Theatre, APA, Dec 1-10, various times, HK\$300, HK\$250 (children, matinees); gala performances with half proceeds going to Operation Santa Claus, Dec 1, 8, HK\$800. Inquiries: 2537 4180