Empowering Asian Artists: The Art Futures Award Initiative

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ABSTRACT

This conference paper introduces the Art Futures Awards Initiatives as an innovative framework designed to restore academic rigor to art award evaluation processes and empower Asian artists within the international art community. It systematically presents the literature review, methodology, framework design, scope of influence, assessment methods, outcomes, and data analysis, offering a comprehensive model applicable for art practitioners, artists, curators, and educators. Art awards significantly influence contemporary art by affecting artists' recognition, career development, and creative explorations. In recent decades, many major art awards have transitioned from academic partnership to private and corporate oversight, raising concerns regarding subjective biases, inconsistent standards, and the prioritization of commercial interests. In the meantime, despite their widespread importance, scholarly examinations of award evaluation processes remain limited. Addressing this gap, the Art Futures Award Initiative emerges as a collaborative effort between academic institutions and industry partners throughout East Asia.

Keywords: Art award evaluation, Curating, The art future award, Asian contemporary art, Cultural representation

INTRODUCTION

Asian artists have encountered marginalisation within the global art scene, often constrained by stereotypical cultural representations, restricting broader international exposure of their contemporary artistic practices. The Art Futures Awards Initiatives addresses these issues by creating an international exchange platform that recognise emerging Asian artists' creative excellence, enhances their international visibility, and emphasises their engagement with contemporary artistic practices beyond traditional boundaries.

The initiatives devise a hybrid evaluation model that combines digital frameworks with traditional expert judgment. Art colleges and academies across Asia nominate outstanding graduates, whose portfolios are submitted via a digital platform. This platform uses remote evaluations through a standardised rubric that quantitatively assesses creativity, innovation, and technical skill by groups of International Academics, artists and curators. Then last panel of internationally renowned artists, curators, and academics

provides on-site evaluations in the final stage that recognizes artistic merit. This integrated evaluation approach minimises biases while preserving the importance of expert judgement.

The Art Futures Awards Initiatives provides an original contribution to both scholarly discourse and practical application by offering a replicable framework for art award evaluations that balances quantitative rigor with expert intuition. Preliminary findings demonstrate the model's effectiveness in reducing implicit biases and enhancing transparency, thereby establishing a fairer evaluation framework. Additionally, the initiatives actively promote inclusive representation, empowering Asian artists to express diverse cultural identities and ensuring their meaningful participation in global art discourse. Contemporary art awards significantly influence artists' careers, conferring recognition, financial support, and networking opportunities that can catalyse creative development. In recent decades, however, many prominent art awards have shifted from academia to private or corporate sponsorship, raising concerns about bias and inconsistent standards. Studies show that the art world remains marked by disparities in representation Such Orientalist biases often confine Asian artists to stereotypical cultural themes, limiting their visibility in international discourse (Shi, 2023). In parallel, young artists across Asia face structural challenges including precarious employment and scarce opportunities, hindering their career development (Jang & Lee, 2023). These conditions underscore an urgent need for more equitable, transparent, and academically grounded award frameworks that can empower emerging Asian artists.

The Art Futures Awards Initiatives were conceived in response to these challenges. Launched in 2022 as a collaboration between academic institutions and industry partners in East Asia, this initiative aims to restore rigor and fairness to art award evaluations while amplifying the voices of Asian artists. It introduces a hybrid evaluation model – blending digital assessment tools with traditional expert judgment – to reduce subjectivity and cultural bias in award selection. By leveraging human-cantered design principles and digital transformation in curatorial practice, the project seeks to promote inclusive representation and address global artistic disparities. This paper presents the framework and early outcomes of the Art Futures Awards Initiatives, contextualizing it within themes of curating, Orientalism, visual art, and empowerment of Asian artists. We discuss how a human-cantered, data-informed approach to award evaluation can enhance fairness and academic integrity and examine the role of academia in redressing inequities in the international art ecosystem.

The Influence and Shortcomings of Art Awards

Art awards play an important role in shaping artistic careers and trends in contemporary art. Beyond monetary prizes, awards confer prestige and validation, often leading to gallery representation, higher market value, and opportunities for exhibitions. They can enrich an artist's practice by opening avenues for mentorship and collaboration. However, traditional award systems have faced criticism for opacity and bias. With many awards

now run by private foundations or corporate sponsors, selection criteria may prioritize marketability or insider connections over scholarly merit. These imbalances reflect broader issues of representation in the art world. In the meantime, women and artists of colour remain disproportionately under-recognized in top accolades, mirroring their underrepresentation in museum collections and exhibitions. A large-scale analysis by Topaz et al. (2019) revealed that just 9% of works in leading U.S. museums were by Asian artists, aligning with findings that only ~6% of major exhibitions feature Asian artists. This marginalization is partly rooted in Orientalism (Said, 1978) – the historical tendency to view Asian art through a Western-centric lens of "otherness." Orientalist tropes have persisted into the 21st century: Shi (2023) argues that despite perceived progress, Asian contemporary art continues to be exotified and "othered" in global forums, an "unsavoury and harmful reality" that limits artists to narrow identities. These insights highlight the need for new award paradigms that consciously counter bias. There have been some efforts to recognize Asian artists – for example, the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award (Est. 2013) and the Sigg Prize (Est. 2018) focus on Asian regions. Yet, such awards often remain tied to corporate interests or single-region mandates. Academic institutions, by contrast, have the potential to provide more neutral and research-driven evaluation processes. As the Academy of Visual Arts of Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) and peer institutions in Asia recognize, they carry an obligation to "accelerate the development of contemporary art while promoting exchanges within the field", leveraging their resources and scholarly rigor. Möntmann (2021) observes that small-scale art organizations – including university art programs and artist-run spaces – can act as participatory platforms for decolonizing practices, working directly with artists and communities to "raise sensibilities" rather than upholding entrenched hierarchies. This perspective suggests that academia-driven awards could better champion diversity and experimental practice. Indeed, nonprofit and academic art initiatives in Asia have been key to supporting emerging talents outside the commercial gallery circuit. In Hong Kong's art ecology, for instance, nonprofit art centers and university museums have provided alternative spaces that counterbalance the market-driven Art Basel fairs (Poposki & Leung, 2022). These precedents set the stage for an award like Art Futures, which is explicitly structured to be inclusive, transparent, and oriented toward artistic innovation rather than sales potential.

The Art Futures Awards Framework: Objectives and Design Principles

The Art Futures Awards Initiatives were guided by four primary objectives: (1) Develop an innovative digital framework for fine arts assessment to efficiently screen talent in the initial phase; (2) Evaluate a hybrid procedure combining online and physical judging for effectiveness; (3) Conduct a longitudinal impact study on awardees' career development; and (4) Empower emerging Asian artists by enhancing their international exposure and encouraging diverse creative expressions. Underpinning these goals were design principles drawn from human-centred and intercultural

design paradigms. Firstly, academic rigor was prioritized – the criteria and processes were informed by literature on art evaluation and were peer-reviewed by art academics before implementation. For example, in developing the rubric, the committee consulted evaluation models from architecture and design education. The rubric was refined through a Delphi process with input from curators and art professors across Asia, similar to the method used by Tastan & Er (2025) to validate their portfolio assessment rubric. This ensured content validity and clarity of each criterion (e.g. Conceptual Innovation, Mastery of Medium, Cultural Relevance). Secondly, the framework emphasized bias mitigation. Anonymized submissions (artists' names and backgrounds were hidden during the digital review) prevent jurors from favouring candidates based on reputation or origin. Additionally, jurors are diverse: the network of judges includes representatives from China, India, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, balancing perspectives. Such diversity among decision-makers is known to broaden the range of what is valued, combating the parochial preferences that Orientalism can instil (UNESCO, 2022a). Thirdly, the initiative adopted a transparent communication approach – participants (nominating academies, jurors, and the artists) are informed of the evaluation criteria and process beforehand. After the awards, jurors' aggregated scoring feedback is shared with finalists, an uncommon practice in art awards. This feedback culture aligns with educational best practices and helps emerging artists learn and improve. It also introduces accountability for jurors, as their scores contribute to a dataset that can be analysed for consistency.

Table 1: Phase one rubric.

1) **Artistic Originality (25%)**	**Score**
The artwork shows an original and distinctive artistic style, reflecting the personal creative practice and positioning it within a larger creative context.	
Assess the quality of further creative development after the initial idea reception.	1 to 25
2) **Material Experimentation (25%)**	**Score**
The artwork demonstrates the creative use of craft, techniques/tools, and materials.	
Assess based on the skillful application of relevant practical skills and techniques in both visual practice and aesthetics.	1 to 25
3) **Creative Concept (25%)**	**Score**
The artwork shows complex, multi-leveled meaning.	
Assess the artistic thinking within a visual cultural context, adhering to critical review and reflecting cultural significance.	1 to 25
4) **Presentation and Articulation (25%)**	**Score**
The artwork is well presented and described. The candidate confidently presents arguments and their backgrounds with good execution of artistic practices, demonstrating control of the discourse.	
Articulation involves fluently expressing ideas and thoughts with appropriate language, and styling arguments through formal elements of the medium.	1 to 25

Central to the initiatives' framework is the conviction that neither purely algorithmic nor purely subjective methods are sufficient for fair art evaluation – a hybrid model can harness the benefits of each. The online quantitative stage injects a degree of objectivity, treating all submissions uniformly and generating measurable indicators. By quantifying multiple aesthetic dimensions, it attempts to address the multifaceted nature of art in a systematic way. Santos et al. (2021) review various approaches to visual art assessment and conclude that while no algorithm can fully emulate human aesthetic perception, structured feature evaluation can successfully identify works that align with expert preferences in terms of formal qualities. In our case, the rubric's structured scoring plays a similar role – it is essentially a human-driven algorithm that forces jurors to consider each key aspect of the artwork, rather than relying on vague overall impressions. This structured approach can diminish the impact of any single bias. For instance, a juror who personally dislikes political art cannot outright dismiss a socially themed work if it objectively demonstrates high creativity and skill; the rubric will reflect those strengths. Moreover, the digital platform randomizes the order of portfolio viewing for each juror to prevent order effects (a known issue where the first or last viewed items get undue advantage or scrutiny).

This initiatives successfully involved 74 art institutions from across Asia, which nominated a total of 118 exceptional graduates for the Art Futures Awards, demonstrating the initiatives' widespread recognition and credibility. Furthermore, it engaged 14 distinguished judges from across Asia and the world to assist in establishing a robust evaluation system. Throughout the competition: In the first round of the nomination stage, the system received 118 total nominations. As mentioned above, the nominators also acted as preliminary judges and adapted the assessment form as a framework to select the nominees. A total of 118 assessment forms were completed in this stage. Continuing in the first round, 8 judges were involved in shortlisting 30 finalists from the 118 nominees. The judges and the nominees were divided into two groups for the evaluation process, resulting in 472 assessment forms being completed. In the second round, 6 judges utilized the assessment form to evaluate the 30 finalists, completing 180 assessment forms. In the third round, 36 assessment forms were completed to finalize 6 shortlisted artists as 6 awardees, all managed through either digital or physical assessments. A total of 956 assessment forms were completed throughout the entire awarding procedure.

A pivotal aspect of the research was the development and implementation of digital assessment forms equipped with detailed rubrics. These forms ensured a structured and objective evaluation process, maintaining consistency and fairness across evaluations. The assessment criteria included artistic originality, material experimentation, creative concept, and presentation skills—each weighted equally at 25%. This balanced approach allowed nominators and judges to comprehensively evaluate each candidate's work, considering both technical prowess and conceptual innovation. The broad participation and the rigorous assessment process underscored the initiatives' success in meeting its objectives, contributing substantially to the field of visual arts while fostering professional development and community building across the region.

Table 2. Three-round hybrid awarding assessment.
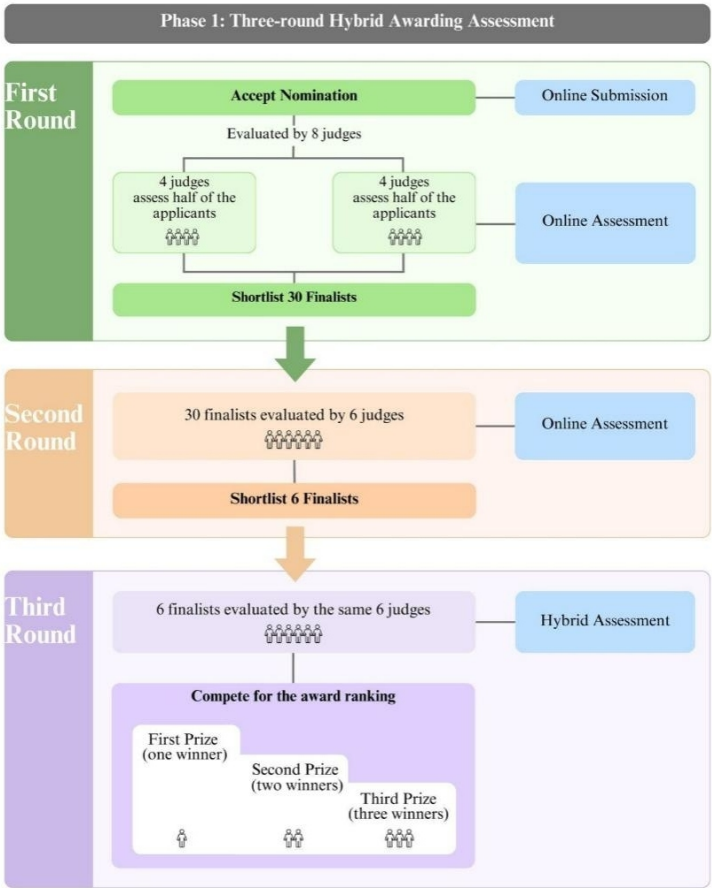
At the same time, the expert panel in Phase Two ensures that final decisions account for the holistic, nuanced understanding of art that numbers alone cannot capture. A purely quantitative ranking might miss intangible qualities – the emotional resonance of an artwork in person, the coherence of an artist's vision, or their growth trajectory. These are things seasoned art professionals can discern through discussion and direct engagement. The hybrid model preserves a space for expert intuition and contextual judgment. This underscores why the initiatives do not eliminate human intuition but rather scaffolds it with data. By minimizing subjectivity early on, the final deliberation can focus on qualitative comparisons among a small set of excellent candidates. This approach is supported by evidence from other fields – for example, in grant peer review, combining initial independent scoring with a final panel discussion has been found to improve fairness and acceptance of outcomes.

Additionally, the hybrid framework helps counteract any single cultural bias. The remote jurors in Phase One come from different countries, and their averaged scores tend to "even out" outlier opinions. If one juror is unfamiliar with an art style rooted in, say, Southeast Asian traditions and scores it low,

others who recognize its value can compensate. The Phase Two panel, being intentionally international, further balances perspectives. This design draws on postcolonial theory insights: to break Orientalist hierarchies, multiple voices from different cultures should be involved in determining artistic merit (Said, 1978; UNESCO, 2022b). The initiatives' network approach operationalizes this in collaborative evaluation. In doing so, it moves away from the historically Eurocentric gatekeeping of art accolades towards a more cosmopolitan model. As Poposki and Leung (2022) argue, making Hong Kong a true global art hub requires integrating diverse institutional players and perspectives, not just importing Western ones. The Art Futures award exemplifies such integration: Asian academic institutions co-leading the process with input from Western experts but on Asian terms (e.g., criteria include "engagement with local culture" as a positive factor). This implicitly challenges any residual notion that Asian artists must conform to Western expectations to be deemed excellent. Indeed, the award's early winners have spanned a range of practices from indigenous material explorations to avant-garde digital art, reflecting that excellence is multifaceted and culturally relative. The hybrid evaluation allowed each to shine on their own terms, so long as creativity and skill were present.

Results and Preliminary Findings

A primary goal of the Art Futures Awards Initiatives was to reduce implicit biases that disadvantage certain groups. While two editions are not enough for definitive conclusions, early indicators are positive. The demographic makeup of finalists and winners across 2022–23 was notably diverse: 65% of finalists were women, and multiple ethnic minorities were represented. This stands in contrast to the often-homogeneous winners of many established art awards (which skew male and Western). Of course, our pool itself was Asia-focused, but even within Asia, previous awards have been dominated by a few countries or styles. No significant correlation was found between an artist's country and their scores when controlling for criteria, providing no evidence of geographic bias in scoring. In other words, a well-presented portfolio from a lesser-known art scene could compete on equal footing with one from an established hub, so long as it excelled in creativity and execution. This is a promising sign that the rubric-centric approach succeeded in focusing jurors on the work itself.

The interviewees also pointed out that some inherent bias could still exist, causing difficulties due to the diverse mediums of the artworks. However, no individual can be an expert in all art fields, and subjectivity can be affected by various factors. It is important to acknowledge that aesthetic judgment inherently involves some level of bias. When various interpretations can be offered for the existence of aesthetic qualities in art, these qualities do not ensure that individuals will have the same experience or reach the same judgment about a work's value. It emphasizes that implicit biases—subconscious influences shaped by personal and cultural contexts—play a significant role in shaping these differing perceptions and evaluations of art.

The presence of aesthetic properties does not guarantee uniformity in aesthetic experience or judgment concerning a work's value, suggesting that implicit bias may significantly influence these evaluations. This point underscores the complexity of art assessment and the ongoing need for research into the factors influencing judgment in art competitions. A key goal of the project is to establish the Art Futures awards Initiatives featuring distinguished international judges to maintain diversity and fairness as much as possible. Most feedback expressed positive satisfaction with the hybrid model and affirmed its necessity. This indicates that the online assessment in the preliminary step and the physical assessment in the subsequent stage indeed achieved a comprehensive and effective awarding system.

CONCLUSION

Art Futures Awards initiatives' success in reducing bias suggests a model for how other art and design competitions might increase equity. By using structured criteria and hybrid digital/physical judging, the process counters the "old boys' club" phenomenon where awards go repeatedly to those with the loudest advocates or most familiar styles. Our findings resonate with broader movements in the cultural sector. UNESCO's 2022 Global Report on cultural policies calls for rebalancing international cultural exchanges and giving voice to creatives from the Global South (UNESCO, 2022b). The Art Futures model operationalizes these recommendations by design – ensuring that evaluators and awardees come from across Asia and beyond, and that the evaluation metrics value diverse forms of creativity. The fact that women and minority artists figured prominently among our finalists is encouraging; it aligns with trends of increasing gender parity in some contemporary art arenas yet far exceeds the norm in many established awards (which often still show gender gaps). It is possible that the anonymized, criteria-focused screening helped strip away biases that disadvantage women and minority artists. This supports theories in social psychology that when evaluators concentrate on specific job-relevant criteria (here, artistic criteria) rather than general impressions, gender/race biases diminish. Future research could formally test this by comparing outcomes of our process with those of a more traditional award on metrics of diversity.

In the art world, there has been understandable scepticism about algorithmic or data-driven evaluation, fearing it could homogenize artistic values or sideline expert connoisseurship. Our project shows a complementary path: the digital component handles volume and provides analytical clarity, while human experts provide holistic appraisal and contextual insight. This synergy is akin to augmented intelligence approaches in other fields. The parallel extends to the need for trust and accountability. By keeping humans in the loop, our framework-maintained trust from stakeholders; artists knew their work would ultimately be seen and discussed by humans, not just "judged by a computer." In many ways, this can make the outcome more credible than a fully subjective process. We can point to documentation showing why the winners were chosen, which can be

important in pre-empting criticism or suspicion of favouritism. Other award-giving bodies might adopt similar practices.

This work has broader implications for the global art community. It provides a replicable model for rethinking how excellence in art can be identified and celebrated in a way that is culturally equitable and academically informed. Curators and jurors involved effectively "designed" a new communicative space where Eastern and Western aesthetic values dialogue on equal terms, mediated by a fair process. As such, the Art Futures Award serves as a case study in decolonizing an aspect of the art world by restructuring the power dynamics of evaluation. The role of academia proved crucial – universities functioned as neutral conveners and applied research hubs, ensuring that decisions were knowledge-driven and that the development of the framework itself was iterative and evidence-based. This underscores the potential for academic institutions globally to take a more active role in championing artistic diversity and influencing industry practices.

Looking ahead, the initiatives will continue to refine its methods (with ongoing assessment of the rubric's effectiveness and the long-term impact on artists' careers) and hopes to expand its network to include more regions of Asia and possibly other continents in collaborative exchange. In doing so, it aspires to not only empower individual artists but also to foster a more interconnected art world where evaluative communication – the language of critique and award – is inclusive and transparent. If art is to remain a vital reflection of our global plurality, the systems that elevate art must evolve to be as diverse and open as the creativity they seek to honour. The Art Futures Award Initiative offers one pathway toward that future.

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