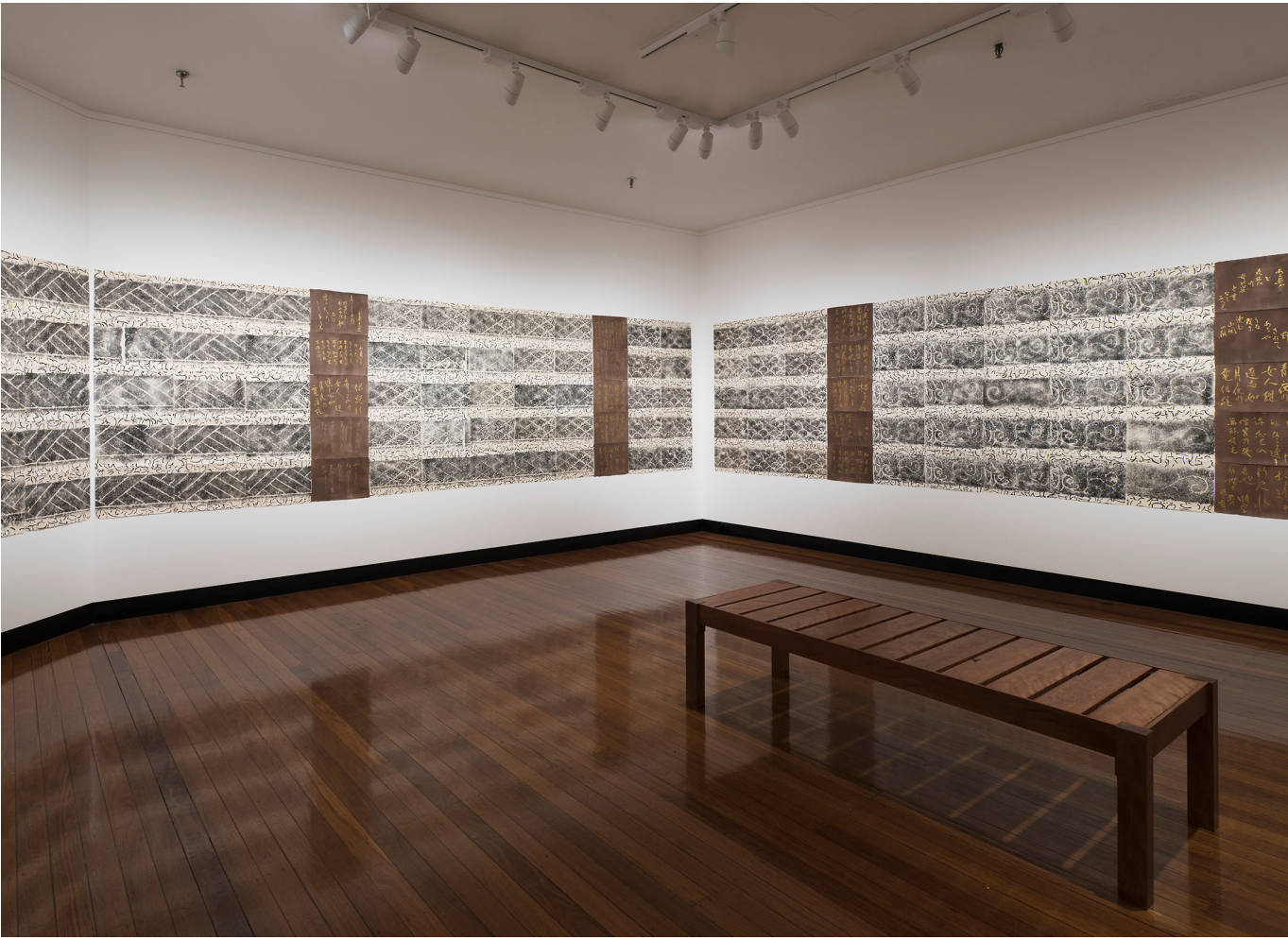




All that Arises: Savanhdary Vongpoothorn exhibition view, Drill Hall Gallery 2019.
Photo: Brenton McGeachie.



ASCENDING THE NIGATSU-DŌ STEPS

Chaitanya Sambrani

For me, the act of ascending the steps of the
Nigatsu-dō became a journey in exploring cross-
cultural collaboration.

My connection to the steps of the Nigatsu-dō is a relatively recent one. This came about in the course of curating an exhibition of Savanhdary Vongpoothorn's work for the Drill Hall, which was open to the public from August to October 2019. I accompanied Savanhdary and *tanka* poet Noriko Tanaka on their second journey to collect rubbings at the Nigatsu-dō in March 2018.

For me, the act of ascending the steps of the Nigatsu-dō became a journey in exploring cross-cultural collaboration. As a student and teacher of Asian art I have developed an interest in different Asian and non-Asian philosophies of art, including Buddhist philosophy. When Noriko alerted me to the fact that there was a story about the origin

of the fifty-three steps on the Nigatsu-dō I was very intrigued. Why are there fifty-three steps leading up to the Nigatsu-dō? What does this represent?

The Tōdaiji temple complex, of which the Nigatsu-dō is one part, originated in the eighth century. The Nigatsu-dō itself burned down during an *Omizutori* ceremony in 1667 and was rebuilt two years later. The stone steps, however, are presumed to date back to the middle of the eighth century. As we ascend the steps going up to the Nigatsu-dō we retrace a former journey, although most do not know it. One of the foundational scriptures of Buddhism is the *Avatamsaka sutra*, [Flower Ornament Scripture] which was brought to Japan in the eighth century by the Indian monk Bodhisena.

All that Arises: Savanhdary Yongpoothorn exhibition view, Drill Hall Gallery 2019. Photo: Brenton McGeachie.



This sutra came to Japan via a circuitous route and, like all good stories, its narrative incorporated other elements that were encountered along the way. By the time it is codified into Japanese Buddhism and into Japanese architecture it is no longer the same story of Prince Sudhana as it is when it leaves India. It becomes a story of enlightenment that is undertaken by a young man—a wanderer—who on his travels meets fifty-three teachers (in some versions there are fifty-two or fifty-five teachers). Each of these fifty-three teachers play a role in alerting the young man to some aspect of the truth.

While trying to figure out the meanings of the patterns that were engraved on these steps, I came across a pattern book for designers

called *Hamonshū*. This 1903 publication was the work of Mori Yuzan, who died in 1917, and marks the great fascination with the systematisation of knowledge in Meiji Japan. It is a sourcebook for designers that documents all the different ways of making wave patterns in Japanese art and design over the centuries. The designs held in this sourcebook provide some clues as to the meanings behind these engravings. *Zenzai dōji* is a boy deity in Japan. Boy deities are popular in Japan and China as symbols of prosperity. There is a theory that the image of the boy deity, *dōji*, gets absorbed into Buddhism in Japan. Prince Sudhana goes on this journey of enlightenment across these fifty-three steps, and by the time he comes to rest in Nara has become *Zenzai dōji*.



The story of *Zenzai dōji*, or the story of Prince Sudhana, or the story of the *Avatamsaka sutra* as it travels across land and sea becomes the story of the transmission of Buddhism. It is also a story of the pervasive influence of certain kinds of art practices within the Buddhist world. This is also something that is taking place in Savanhdary's own studio through her collaboration with Noriko. The rubbings that Savanhdary and Noriko made in Nara in 2017 and 2018 were brought back to Australia and were tacked up in Savanhdary's studio. They acquired borders and were rearranged in various ways. Savanhdary started using elements from some of her previous work, including *Damning the Naga* (2016), in her collaboration with Noriko, particularly the image of broken calligraphy. This broken calligraphy is in fact different renditions of sacred Buddhist texts in Lao Pali. These broken Lao

Pali sutras are now making an appearance on the borders of the rubbings from the Nigatsu-dō. These broken sutras—which are completely illegible once they have been cut up and rearranged—introduce an eruption of 'disorder' into the seemingly ordered, geometric patterns from the steps on the ascension towards enlightenment.

There is a story here about how these stone steps come to be permeated with meanings that may be quite different from what was intended in their first iteration. Savanhdary and Noriko's joint art installation adds a contemporary twist to this story with each bringing something of their own cultural context into the ongoing relationships between Japan, Australia and the wider world. This story of how people, faith and works of art travel is, for me, what makes objects exquisite.



Chaitanya Sambrani is an art historian and curator specialising in modern and contemporary art in Asia. Since 1996, Sambrani has curated exhibitions and contributed to scholarly publications and conferences in India, Australia, the US, China, Singapore and Korea. He has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses on modernism and contemporary art in India, Indonesia, China and Japan at The Australian National University, Canberra since 2002. Current projects include the book *At Home in the World: The Art and Life of Gulammohammed Sheikh* (New Delhi: Vadehra and Tulika, 2019) and a survey exhibition of Lao-Australian artist Savanhdary Vongpoothorn (Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, 2019).