

Business Times September 19, 2009

Island Art

Billionaire Soichiro Fukutake turned a small Japanese island into one of the most special and spectacular art destinations on earth, where art, architecture and nature coalesce.

By Geoffrey Eu

SOICHIRO Fukutake is someone whose success in the business world allows him to indulge in his greatest passion: collecting art - on a scale most people can only dream about. Over the past few decades, he has amassed a world-class collection of contemporary art.

Unlike the average billionaire, however, Mr Fukutake wanted to share it with the world - so he bought a large chunk of Naoshima, a small island in the Inland Sea, which separates three of Japan's main islands, and developed it into one of the most unique art destinations on earth.

Naoshima is an art lover's Utopian ideal, a spectacular convergence of art, architecture and nature. Since he bought the southern part of the island for a billion yen in the late-1980s, Fukutake - whose company the Benesse Corporation offers correspondence courses for schoolchildren, operates nursing homes and owns the Berlitz chain of language schools - has invested millions more to build museums, hotels, restaurants and site-specific artworks on various parts of the island.

The entire enterprise, which is a work in progress, features the architecture of Tadao Ando and a mouth-watering array of Japanese and international artists and is known as the Benesse Art Site Naoshima (www.naoshima-is.co.jp). As a result, Naoshima has been transformed from a sleepy island (population: 3,400) with two villages and a small port accessible only by ferry, into a major - if hard to reach - destination in the modern art world.

Ando's initial contribution was Benesse House in 1992, a museum-cum-hotel that showcases important works by artists like Jackson Pollack, Cy Twombly, Bruce Nauman, Richard Long and David Hockney. The architecture is almost seamlessly integrated with the natural hilly landscape on Naoshima. The Oval House (1995), for example, is a six-room annex built into the hilltop above the museum and accessible by funicular. Other accommodation options nearby overlook a crescent beach and a stretch of parkland beside the sea.

In 2004, Ando completed a second complex, the Chichu Art Museum (www.chichu.jp), designed specifically to house Mr Fukutake's prized collection of Impressionist paintings by Claude Monet. Visitors first have to walk past a garden modelled on Giverny, the garden in France that provided the inspiration for the artist's famed Water Lily series, to reach the museum, which is barely visible from above ground.

Most of the three floors of the museum are buried below ground. The marble-tiled room that contains five Monet paintings is bathed in diffused natural light, giving the room an ethereal, almost sacred quality. The Chichu also features monumental installations by the contemporary artists Walter De Maria and James Turrell. On an island filled with great art and architecture, the Chichu is an unforgettable highlight.

Mr Fukutake, 63, currently ranks at Number 17 on the Forbes magazine list of Japan's richest men (with a net worth of US\$1.4 billion), but he chooses to spend much of his time living on a modest boat moored off Naoshima. At a recent event to commemorate the completion of new installations by Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto and American artist Teresita Fernandez, he urged guests to spend their time on Naoshima reflecting on art and the meaning of living well - the word Benesse is derived from an Italian phrase meaning 'to live well'.

'My original idea was to ask Sugimoto to create a work that focuses on religion in contemporary society,' says Mr Fukutake through an interpreter. 'This is a theme that runs throughout the Chichu. The two themes I continue to explore are, to try to send a strong message about our role in society, and to create an arcadia where people can contemplate the meaning of true happiness.'

He adds: 'The population on these small islands is aging rapidly. My definition of happiness is wherever you can find old people who can smile. Naoshima is unique in the world because we can bring this about through contemporary art.'

Teresita Fernandez says working on a project in Naoshima was unlike any other experience she's had. 'All of this comes from a kind of corporate structure unlike any I'm familiar with,' she says. 'There's a sense of human connection and a good feeling that there is something productive and healthy going on here.'

According to art dealer David Maupin, director of the Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York, which represents Fernandez: 'This idea of cultural tourism has been building over the past decade, especially since the opening of the Guggenheim Bilbao and with the growth of the art fair and biennial circuit worldwide.'

'The Benesse Art Site Naoshima is in some ways part of this larger picture, but it is unique because it is the vision of one man, Mr Fukutake, who has commissioned some of the most thoughtful creative individuals working today to create spaces and works of art that really define the site.'

He adds: 'Because Naoshima is less accessible to many cultural travellers than a long-standing event like the Venice Biennale, it draws a special kind of visitor. Perhaps the most significant thing about the site is that the artists are encouraged to respond to environment and to create works that are indelibly part of the site.'

In 2008, some 30,000 visitors made their way to Naoshima, not much more than the number of people who visit The Louvre on a single day. There is something surprising and surreal about encountering art and architecture on this scale and quality in a rural setting, and it provokes precisely the kind of reaction among visitors that Mr Fukutake intended.

He started something special, and continues to raise the bar. In 2001 he bought a nearby island, Inujima, and turned a disused copper refinery there into the Inujima Art Project Seirenscho, once again fusing art, architecture and the environment to impressive effect. The project, designed by Hiroshi Sambuichi, was completed last year and set among the ruins of the refinery. The intent, says Sambuichi, was to express the earth's details through architecture.

The museum is buried underground and uses natural energy to cool or warm the building. The theme of recycling is evident in the art installations - a series of works by the artist Yukinori Yanagi that includes a zen garden with a urinal placed where rocks should be, and the deconstructed house of the nationalist author and poet Yukio Mishima. In one darkened room, his words are presented as a continuous red digital stream-of-consciousness while in another space his words hang in the air, swaying gently in the breeze.

The Inujima project is radical and refreshing, inventive and inspiring. Most of all, it confirms Soichio Fukutake as a man who uses his love of art to provoke thought and stimulate ideas about society and the way we view the world. Inujima was once a thriving symbol of Japan's industrial age - and now, it is home to an aged, rapidly declining population of just 50 people, the youngest of whom is 65 years old.

Fukutake intends to continue injecting life into these islands and transforming spaces through art and architecture. In April next year, the first of a series of international art events will be held here. 'Art is the only way we can try to understand the mentality of people in modern times,' says the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto. It has rarely been used to more powerful or captivating effect than here on Naoshima.

Naoshima is about 700km south of Tokyo and 200km from Osaka. Visitors can fly from Tokyo to Takamatsu and then take a one-hour ferry ride from the port, but the recommended way is to take the shinkansen from Osaka to Okayama (45 minutes), a bus or taxi to Uno port (30 minutes) and then a ferry to Miyanoura, the port of Naoshima (20 minutes). The Benesse Art Site venues are open all year, although the museums are closed on Mondays.