The Asian persona so frequently—and sanctimoniously—invoked in “Fever Variations” was not Asian in the broad sense at all. It was East Asian, in an idealized, self-exoticized version.

Many works in the first part of the show dealt directly with Asian cultural heritage and identity. Xu Bing, Chinese-born but long resident in the U.S., displayed a “shadow” version of Korean master Huh Baek-ryun’s Landscape after Rainfall (1947). On the front of a 32½-foot-wide scrim is what looks like a vastly enlarged traditional Eastern landscape painting. On the other side, however, a tangle of branches, straw and weeds spreads across the floor, with bits strategically tarred to the back of the scrim to create the gray-toned pseudo-ink picture on the recto plane—a compelling metaphor for the messy reality that often lies behind such spiritualized images.

In a similar vein, Jižitš Kalat showed seven large lightbox photos of roti, the flat pan-bread staple from his native India, progressively eaten away to resemble the phases of the moon. Korea’s Lee Sookyung glued together discarded fragments of broken traditional-style ceramics to form the irregular hybrid vessels of Translated Vases (2002). In Mobile Landscape (2006) by Kim Jong-ku, also from Korea, a wall-projected video image seems to depict—in time-honored Eastern fashion—a sweep of hills and blank-space valleys; but, instead of ink on paper or silk, the pictorial medium turns out to be piles of steel powder strewn on the floor before a low-lying camera. David Hammons’s Praying to Safety (1997) features two kneeling Buddha figures, each with hands pressed together in prayer, joined by a taut thread bearing a safety pin suspended at midpoint. Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê’s The Headless Buddha (1998), an obvious riff on Nam June Paik’s classic TV Buddha (1974), has the head of a Buddha statue perched on a pedestal, seemingly contemplating a lightbox image of a headless Buddha-statue body. Chen Chieh-Jen, from Taiwan, presented Lingchi: Echoes of a Historical Photograph (2002), a three-screen, black-and-white video installation that reenacts—in slow-moving, highly ritualized fashion—the execution by repeated cutting of a prisoner in early 20th-century China.

Chen’s film, mesmerizing and horrifically beautiful, might well be seen as a meditation on the refinement of cruelty in a particular time and place, or in the human psyche in general. Instead, it was woefully mischaracterized by catalogue essayist Chia Chi Jason Wang as “a metaphor of the power relations between weak and strong under the hegemony of the First World, with its designs to project globalization.” The author somehow arrives at this interpretation despite the fact that there is not a single Western face in the video, that the now abandoned lingchi (sometimes known as “slicing,” “death by a thousand cuts” or “death by dismemberment”) was an indigenous Chinese punishment that long predated (and ended before) contemporary globalization, and that the practice so reviled early Western visitors that photos of it were circulated, occasionally in postcard form, as self-serving “evidence” of the Far East’s moral perversion. Such historical facts and complications are clearly of no interest to Chen’s commentator, whose present-day anti-capitalist, anti-Western agenda perfectly reflected the underlying political bias of the Biennale as a whole.

Even in this esthetically diverse first chapter of the exhibition, the social-activist art on display varied little in ideological content. At the rude and energetic extreme was Thai artist Vasan