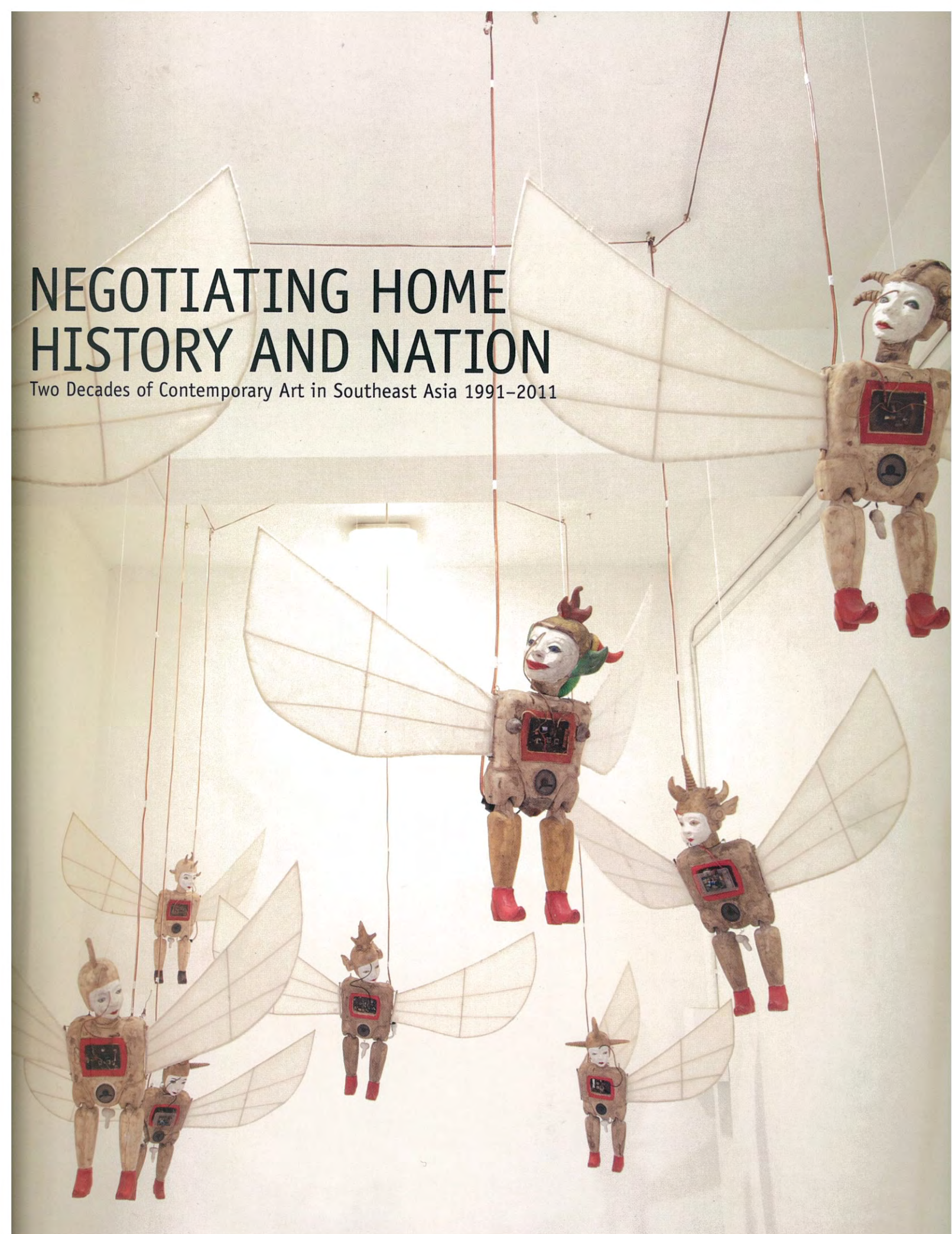


NEGOTIATING HOME HISTORY AND NATION

Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991–2011



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centre where the ruler was. Clifford Geertz's notion of the theatre state suggests the crucial role in which visual expression and especially visual performance through the body by the centre was crucial in constituting the Southeast Asian polity. The importance of image-making, which reached a peak in the Hindu-Buddhist civilisations of classical Java before the fall of Majapahit and continued to thrive on in the Buddhist kingdoms of the Mainland were layerings upon indigenous cultures that had a vibrant oral tradition. Storytelling and narrative were the ways in which rulers and cultures spoke of their world and the place of people in those worlds to a largely illiterate populace. One of the two most famous structures (the other being the Khmer Angkor Wat) from the classical period is Candi Borobudur in Central Java. The galleries of the lower levels are covered by narrative reliefs, 1,300 panels with a total length of 8,200 metres that tell of the life of Buddha and in the upper level galleries, the pilgrimage of Sudhana in search of the ultimate truth.¹² The importance of narrative as a communicative strategy has persisted into the coming of modern and contemporary art.

In 2006, the political crisis which emerged in Thailand led to the end of the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. That same year, the Thai artist Natee Utarit painted his works *The Western Light No. I* and *No. II*. Utarit's previous work has been more concerned with personal and aesthetic issues and *The Western Light No. I* was among his first works to address social and political issues. The painting, executed in a dark blue tone throughout has the massive figure of King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), the Kingdom's revered monarch and most successful reformer who was also the first ruler to travel to the West. It was largely due to the astute political stratagems of this monarch that Thailand maintained her independence from European colonial rule. Utarit's painting is of the most famous equestrian statue of the King, commissioned in 1908 and towering over Bangkok City's Royal Plaza as a testament to his achievement. However, the artist has painted the image from a contemporary toy version of the real statue. Painted in foreboding dark blue palette in contrast to the actual monument, the King leads the way towards the West and its modern world. In the companion piece, *The Western Light II*, the rider faces away from the viewer, as if contemplating the dream from that historical moment.¹³ Utarit seems to ask of the viewer whether that blazing destiny envisaged was ever achieved.

The persistence and desire for art to communicate a narrative has in fact been a main factor behind the flourishing of realist and especially figurative painting in Southeast Asian contemporary art. The death of painting makes no sense in the region because one cannot imagine the end of narrative. One serves to constitute the other.

The artworks described earlier in this text demonstrate how the adoption of specific genres like installation in the region needs to be seen also in terms of how artists in the region have drawn upon genres, materials and techniques that best suited their specific circumstances. This promiscuity of forms, materials and styles means that some artists often profitably use certain genres and materials without fully realising or considering as critical the context in which that genre was originally developed. In 1975, the Indonesian artist FX Harsono created the work *Paling Top '75 (The Most Top '75)*. This installation comprised a toy semi-automatic AK-47 in a wooden crate with a wire covering—basically cheap materials used for keeping domesticated livestock. The title of the work was printed in black on a piece of white cloth behind the toy gun. The work was a powerful statement against the violence that persisted in contemporary society. As a commentator stated, '(The) reluctance to be didactic is absent from Harsono's artistic activities. He wants his works to be didactic.'¹⁴



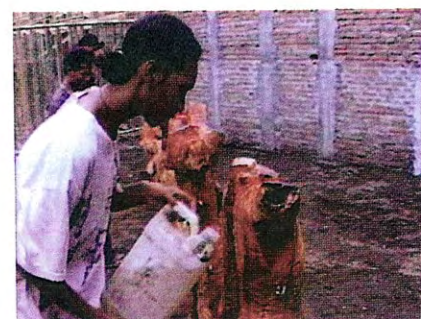
Natee Utarit, *The Western Light No. 1*, 2006, oil
200 x 180 cm, Singapore Art Museum Collection

FX Harsono, *Paling Top '75 (The Most Top '75)*,
gun, textile, wooden crate, wire mesh, 50 x 100
Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore

12. R. Soekmono, 'Indonesian Architecture of the Classical Period: A Brief Survey', in *Sculpture of Indonesia*, ed. Jan Fontein (Washington/New York: National Gallery of Art Press, 1990), 72.
13. Iola Lenzi, 'Beyond the Object: New Works by Natee Utarit', in *The Amusement of Hope and Perfection: Natee Utarit* (Bangkok: Numthong Gallery, 2007), 9.
14. Aart Van Zoest, 'FX Harsono's Engagement', in *FX Harsono Titik Nyeri/Points of Pain* (Jakarta: Langgeng Icon Gallery, 2007), 112. Essay originally published in 2007.



FX Harsono
Burned Victims, 1998
Burnt wood torsos, metal frames, burnt footwear
Variable dimensions
Singapore Art Museum Collection



Burned Victims, 1998
Performance video, edition 1 of 3
8:41 min
Singapore Art Museum Collection