



Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

"Jaonua: The Nothingness & Sanook Dee Museum": Thailand's Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook at Tyler Rollins Fine Art – artist profile and interview

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Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook explores awareness, attachment and the relations between film and buddhism.

Art Radar talks to the artist about her current exhibition project "Jaonua: The Nothingness & Sanook Dee Museum"



"Jaonua: The Nothingness & Sanook Dee Museum", installation view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, June 1 – July 28, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *Jaonua: The Nothingness* (2016) is a five-channel video installation, which was originally commissioned for the 2016-17 **Singapore Biennale**. The work now makes its international debut in an expanded exhibition format in "**Jaonua: The Nothingness & Sanook Dee Museum**" at New York's **Tyler Rollins Fine Art** until 28 July 2017, where it is shown alongside *Sanook Dee Museum* (2017), a single-channel video being exhibited for the first time.

Since the late 1990s, video has been the primary medium of **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's** artistic practice. Still informed by her early sculptural installation work, her videos explore the physicality of light, surface and colour in ways that echo the conceptual experiments of early structural film. This media specific exploration of the medium of film and its physicality mirror the content's focus on the physicality of the body: her films often present figures placed in semi-abstract rural or urban environments. The formalism of her questions around the structure of film as a medium and her exploration of the body, mind and spirit come together in video works that explore the physical presence of the audience in near participatory ways. Her works find ways of highlighting the presence of an audience that is both observing the action and ceremonially participating in it.



"Jaonua: The Nothingness & Sanook Dee Museum", installation view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, June 1 - July 28, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Buddhist film: exploring the relations between memory, projection and experience

Jaonua: The Nothingness might be called a 'retrospective work' to the extent that it weaves together previous works in Araya's portfolio, bringing together distinct thematic strands from throughout her career into a powerfully integrated whole. The installation work is thus visually, conceptually and formally complex as it carries a number of references and re-performances of earlier works. Five connected narratives are projected onto various surfaces of domestic objects – a bed, a window, a rug. Video clips taken from her earlier work are incorporated into a series of almost surreal narrative fragments informed by Buddhist teachings relating to the nature of suffering, attachment and karma, alongside musings on the Western philosophy of Being. A montage of visual motifs coalesces into a powerful vision of the cycle of life, exploring the nature of attachment in its many forms – whether to sex or eating, to rigid philosophical systems, or even to the sensuality of the artwork.

As viewers move through this abstract yet familiar domestic environment they are encouraged to enter a dream state, in which memory, projection and experience blend, thus establishing a relationship between film and experience, and offering the artist's Buddhist reading of what film can teach us about human perception.



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, 'Four Monks with Three Ladies in Sanook Dee Museum', 2017, digital print, 31 x 47 in., edition of 7. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Revisiting previous works in *Sanook Dee Museum* (2017)

Since 2008 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook has been engaged with critiquing the forms of distribution of art in a global context, and has sought to make projects that actively demystify modern and contemporary art to diverse publics. *Sanook Dee Museum* returns to one of Rasdjarmrearnsook's most acclaimed works, *Two Planets* (2008) and *Village and Elsewhere* (2011), in which she placed framed reproductions of iconic Western paintings in rural villages, markets and Buddhist temples in Thailand, and filmed groups of farmers discussing the artworks, sometimes along with Buddhist monks. In *Sanook Dee Museum*, she brings these participants into the museum, which becomes the stage for a dynamic conversation.

Art Radar talked to Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook about the exhibition.

You have said in the past that your installation work is an exploration of "the inseparable entanglement of things/lives/subjects". Could you unpack this complex turn of phrase a little? Does art merely reflect the relationships between things, lives and subjects or can it intervene, reconfiguring these entanglements?

Actually the statement was from me for a curator to provide an overall picture of my work. But I will elaborate more on this. To live as an individual on a single road from home to kindergarten was neither easy nor difficult for a little girl to walk there in the morning and return home in the evening. But on the day she had to cross the road to the temple facing directly opposite to her home to her mom's funeral to cremate her, the little girl realised that the same road could take her "elsewhere" other than to her school back and forth every day in the morning and evening sun. The river that nurtures the town flows past her house in the back all three seasons in which she enjoyed swimming and paddling around on the weekend afternoon and holidays.

But one night in the rainy season when her mom passed away after the candle light festival of Loy Kratong, the rushing torrent made the familiar river with the candle light in the banana leaf floats and the beautiful flowers in it that mom and I raised above our heads to pray and apologise to the river, became a "distrustful picture". The flower floats that were supposed to bring good luck became a mere object of stepping out of the object of tradition and festival to an object of personal meaning. The relationship of things and between things could have been more than "merely" if placed next to "exploration". In particular an exploration of life context and art. One could detect some minute charming details. I prefer the word "awareness" rather than the previous word "exploration".

Does art merely reflect the relationships between things, lives and subjects or can it intervene, reconfiguring these entanglements? What meanings do you get from viewing my artwork as "things" under the title which are your subjects and perceptions that cannot be separated from your lives? Everything exists in existence and doesn't need words, but explaining an art perspective requires words and those words were chosen. Is a dog's mane (hair?) "things" like a corpse? Then what is more valuable, death, mania, success?

The process of this work is that of weaving together several sections of life and art. If it turns out to be a finished concept, one calls it an "amazing object" that contains several dimensions, different time and places on its flat plane. The tale may remind you that you cannot learn through other's experience but your own. If this is true, what use is art? It would be just a light touch mentally or an illusion of what seems gorgeous/splendid via reception. If the perception ends at the significance or art attitude itself (the intentional paradoxical attitude to make art absolutely nonsense or absurd as we often experience in contemporary art) will this be enough?

Yet, if art "merely" makes you think or makes you aware and then opens ways for you to reflect on it further, will this be enough? In the overwhelming decorations and over acting of art there is always "nothingness", that is so and so, this is not and so on. The name of the dog part of the project is Jao Nua which means "rather pudgy" is a key characteristic of the victim as a consumer.



"Jaonua: The Nothingness & Sanook Dee Museum", installation view at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, June 1 – July 28, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

In your project "Joa Nua: Nothingness" you have five segments of film projected onto the surface of sheets and a bed. Could you talk about this decision to take control of the surface of projection? How would you characterise the relations you set up in this work between domesticity, sleep and film?

I have instinctively felt that "Video 5" would need a concrete form in some way. The picture and meaning is not beyond our life conduct. I decided to project the work on what we are familiar with the most, a room whose soft carpet we walk on, a bed (warm or cold) inviting us to lie down on, a nice picture in a gold frame and a window to look through with large colourful pictures on the wallpaper.

I intended to show the funeral rite on the bed to convey restfulness. The original artwork of Jeff Koon walking in the local market is tilted winding around the stalls from a vertical to a horizontal angle while the coffin is put on the crematorium. All the meanings are combined to relate the resting, disintegration, destruction, perseverance which come to nothingness. And a projection produces a 'Non-identity' projected picture.

Both works in the Tyler Rollins exhibition reference earlier works of yours. What motivated you to revisit these earlier projects at this point in your career and life?

Going back to the earlier projects means the same as joining the celebration of time/space sharing in the past before saying goodbye to each other.



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, 'Amusement in Sanook Dee Museum', 2017, digital print, 31 x 47 in., edition of 7. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

In Sanook Dee Museum you return to working with the same workers and monks that participated in your 2011 video work *Village and Elsewhere*. What was particularly different about the working process this time? What challenges did you have to overcome?

Since I was able to buy a new car without having to sell the old one, I kept the old car because it has a scene when my first dog and I travelled together all the time until she (Jao Nua) was gone. The car accumulated the distance, the time and the little scenes of our relationship to call for a smile for "our scenes". In *Sanook Dee Museum*, I arranged a farewell party for the old works determining not to go back to them. During the process, I inserted a song when I was a freshman in the only art university in Thailand at the time. I was the first freshman standing in the row of female students of the first faculty of Art University. (I was the tallest). I led the students of all faculties to all activities, which we participated. I was the most outstanding to be noticed singing a faculty song "very pure art, as pure as the moonlight" while questioning "what is art for, to remain to create what?" I've reversed the song myself because what I've created has never been accepted in the sophisticated culture of the Thai Art and I've violated the ethics so far.



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, 'Jaonua: The Nothingness', 2016, digital print, 31 x 47 in., edition of 7.
Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

What communities, philosophies and fellow artist practices have been important for your most recent developments as an artist?

Chumchon Deratchan (bestial/or subhuman community), Nietzsche's philosophy of "human all too human" and Camus's a giant pushing stone under the inescapable shadow of a joyless attitude = No "Sanook Dee" with life (Buddhist view), all of those have been wrapped around me in the gloomy atmosphere tempting one to commit suicide. All of the above can be diluted by more optimistic thought of Peter Singer's animal rights. Art may be a way out to "burst out laughing" that reflects the above situation while being satirical at the same time in order to survive once more.

I question your use of the word 'development', I dare not use the word. It is merely among back and forth as the way out of one knot of problems and a deed and of another knot. It is good, it is good that I can "now go through it once again" as both an art maker and life director.

Rebecca Close