

# BANGKOK REPORT

## IN THE NEW SIAM

Refusing to be constrained by tradition, neglect or touristic clichés, vanguard Thai artists deftly engage the modern world.

BY GREGORY GALLIGAN

SINCE THE LATE 1990s “Asian contemporary” has been largely defined by the progressive Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Indian art featured in global biennials, museum shows, commercial galleries and auctions. Recently, however, the bursting of the economic bubble in the world’s most highly developed nations has allowed avant-garde art in Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and even politically oppressed Myanmar—to emerge from the shadows and offer new possibilities for the future.

At the center of this development is the contemporary art scene of Thailand, currently concentrated in Bangkok, the nation’s capital, and Chiang Mai, a comparatively relaxed city in the northwestern region of the country. (The provincial outpost—relatively cheap and milder in climate—offers residency programs, collectives, a university arts center and a small but growing number of commercial galleries, all some 430 miles away from the grimy turmoil of Bangkok.) Over the past two decades, the country’s experimental artists have increasingly exhibited in Asia, America and Europe. In addition, Thailand has sponsored a national pavilion at four consecutive Venice Biennales since 2003, a record unmatched by any of its Southeast Asian neighbors. Sculptor and installation artist Montien Boonma (1953-2000), known for melding Buddhist beliefs with a modernist sensibility, was posthumously honored by a major retrospective—“Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind”—at New York’s Asia Society and Museum in 2003 [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. ’04]. And Rirkrit Tiravanija, born in Brazil in 1961 to Thai parents, gained worldwide attention with his food-sharing “stir fry” events



Manit Sriwanichpoom: *Pink Man Opera #3: Do not export family secrets; do not import trouble from outside*, 2009, C-print, 20 by 24 inches.

of the 1990’s. Long identified with Thailand, where he has resided on and off over the years, the globe-trotting artist continues to inspire a new generation of Bangkok-based colleagues, who tend to be less interested in painting and sculpture than in time-based and often interactive projects.

A constitutional monarchy since 1932 with a current population of 65 million, Thailand is sometimes patronizingly described in the international press as a “land of smiles”—a stereotype fostered by the country’s indefatigable tourism industry, which plays to the West’s persistent desire to see Southeast Asia as a Bali Hai of sensual indulgences. At the same time, this primarily Buddhist nation, though never colonized, has long been beset by civic

corruption, political factionalism and raucous, even violent social upheaval. Earlier this year, the looming specter of a return to power by former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra weighed heavily on the capital’s contemporary art community. Elected by popular vote in 2001, Shinawatra was driven from office by a military coup in 2006, after being widely accused of subverting the constitution and abusing his position for personal profit. Although Thailand’s progressive artists doubtless benefited from Shinawatra’s promotion of rapid modernization and “boutique” consumerism, most of them regard

the self-made telecommunications tycoon as an unqualified enemy of open expression and a free press. At this writing, his supporters continue to rally, although Shinawatra himself has gone into hiding in Cambodia, following the confiscation of \$1.4 billion of his assets by the Thai supreme court.

ONE TANGIBLE OUTCOME of Thailand's accelerated modernization since the turn of the millennium is the capital's new municipally sponsored contemporary art museum, the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC), which opened in the fall of 2008 after a decade of intense lobbying by Bangkok's vanguard art community. (Many were irate that the National Gallery of Thailand, in a city awash with historical sites and museums, offers only a tiny collection of modernist art and a few hit-or-miss shows of contemporary work.) Viewed from its cavernous atrium, the BACC's nine levels—two additional subterranean floors accommodate an art library and a capacious auditorium—draw one's eye up a series of concentrically stacked rings. No philosophically inspired nautilus, the structure was conceived as a consumer magnet, sited within a stone's throw of Bangkok's new luxury shopping mecca, Siam Paragon. In fact, the first three stories above the rotunda were designed to accommodate brand-name retailers; the art museum proper begins on the fifth floor.

After dealing with myriad infrastructure problems (the building, by the American-run, Bangkok-based firm Robert G. Boughey and Associates, originally lacked proper lighting systems and adequate security features), acting BACC director Chatvichai Promadhattavedi has achieved a delicate balance between the museum's commercial and nonprofit aspects, carefully orchestrating a number of small shops and display areas—art galleries and temporary project spaces as well as privately run art supply stores, cafés and specialty bookshops—within the “Art-rium” section of the building. The museum's long-term mission, however, awaits full articulation. Under Promadhattavedi, whose status remains tentative despite his expertise in cultural development, the BACC has attempted to be all things to all audiences, its exhibitions tugging one's attention in widely



divergent directions. Largely honorific or socially didactic shows—local art school graduation thesis surveys, tributes to the royal court—alternate with more scholarly undertakings. Typical of the latter, “Krungthep 226” brought together architectural models, replicas of classical murals, paintings, sculptures, photographs and numerous other works (the roster exceeded 100 artists) to celebrate Bangkok's modernization. (“Krungthep” is a short form of the city's elaborate ceremonial name, and 226 the number of years from Bangkok's formal inception as a municipality to the 2008 exhibition.) Between the late fall of 2009 and the early spring of 2010, three successive BACC exhibitions—“Twist and Shout,” “Trans-Cool Tokyo” and “Thai Yo”—testified to the local appeal of contemporary art and popular culture from Japan. The first two shows surveyed young Japanese artists; the third presented 30 Thai artists and designers influenced by manga and other vernacular Japanese sources.

It may well be that the BACC's eclecticism stems from its late arrival to an art scene already well developed—and one about to evolve beyond all recognition. Western-style modern art made its first inroads in Thailand in the 1920s, with the arrival in Bangkok (by invitation of King Rama VI) of the Italian academic sculptor Corrado Feroci (1892-1962). Also known as Silpa Bhirasri (a name he adopted as a permanent expatriate and highly influential teacher), the artist

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designed or contributed to 18 figurative monuments in Thailand, nine of them in Bangkok. Although his own work remained formally conventional, Feroci founded a school in 1937 that quickly became a conduit for various modernist “-isms” from abroad and expanded, in 1943, into Silpakorn University, Bangkok's premier art academy. Artists of the immediate post-Feroci/Bhirasri era are today some of the country's most accomplished practitioners, sharing his intense regard for artworks as well-wrought objects of visual contemplation.

Painter and sculptor Chatchai Puipia (b. 1964), for example, makes expressionistic self-portraits that reflect a troubled personal attempt to reconcile Thai cultural heritage with the new world of unbridled consumerism (and simultaneous political and social unrest). For the “Pink Man” photo series (1997-present), Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) photographs a Thai everyman, played repeatedly by the same model in various urban circumstances. Dressed in a trademark

Left, view of Pinaree Sanpitak's *The Mirror*, 2009 (foreground), and *Brilliant Blue*, 2008 (on wall). Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.

Right, Surat Osathanugrah: *Thaka Floating Market, Mahasarakham Province*, 1999, inkjet print mounted on aluminium, 58¾ by 39 inches; at Bangkok University Gallery.

Below, Jakapan Vilasineekul: *The Lost Angel*, 2004, Thai canoe, bronze dolls, sand, motors and mixed mediums; in "Traces of a Siamese Smile" at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

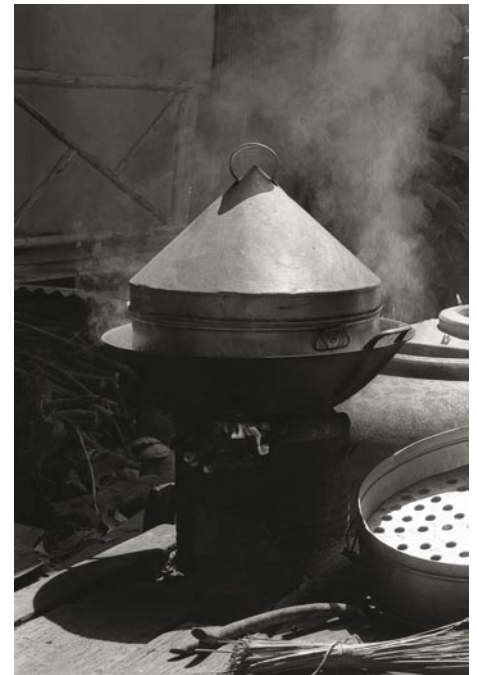


pink suit (the color is associated with bar girls, comedians and other socially marginalized types) and accompanied by a matching pink shopping cart, this deadpan character stands immobilized before the mad spectacle of Thai retail commerce and touristic "history" displays. Painter and installation artist Pinaree Sanpitak (b. 1961) offers something else altogether—meditative canvases and sculptural arrangements

whose stylized alms bowls, lotus blossoms and breast-stupa forms provide a respite from ceaseless urban confusion. Richard Tsao (b. 1954), long based in New York but closely linked to his Thai homeland, creates thickly layered, encrusted canvases distantly influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting but with a palette born in the flower market of Bangkok.

Other artists in the Feroci/Bhirasri lineage combine their studio practice with university teaching. Jakapan Vilasineekul (b. 1964), on the faculty of Silpakorn University, makes wry, large-scale assemblages that mix found objects (e.g., a stuffed elephant's head) with created forms. Be Takerng Pattanopas (b. 1965), of Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok's Harvard), evokes the vulnerability of the human body, and the presence of inner spirituality, in steel sculptures that allow one to peep into illuminated cavities filled with intense color. Kamol Phaovasadi (b. 1958), also of Chulalongkorn, frequently employs multiple video monitors to show sublime landscapes and other meditative subjects. Jakkai Siributr (b. 1969), a former studio instructor at Silpakorn University, stitches together swaths of popular Thai fabrics, turning the works' collaged surfaces into backgrounds for sewn "drawings" of animal and human characters.

YOUNGER artists tend to view the Feroci/Bhirasri legacy as a dated tradition to be transcended in favor of more esthetically radical approaches. Navin Rawanchaikul (b. 1971), often working through the artist collaborative Navin Production Co., Ltd., creates comic books, interactive projects (notably several involving taxicabs), installations and Bollywood-style billboards that comically address wide-ranging topical issues. Pratchaya Phinthong (b. 1974), a graduate of Silpakorn University, was



later trained in conceptualist and process-oriented methods at the highly experimental Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Städelschule) in Frankfurt. This background has become fairly typical, as many new-generation Thai have studied and/or shown their work abroad. After graduation, Phinthong made a three-month overland journey home to Thailand. His solo debut, "Missing Objects" (2005), at Chulalongkorn University Art Center, featured a host of items—empty cigarette packs, color photographs, cryptic writings, inkjet posters, tourist souvenirs and other chance ephemera—collected by the artist during the course of his pilgrimage. Documenting a gradual process of self-reclamation, the show was in part an homage to Phinthong's then recently deceased father, who had once bid adieu to an urbane life of academic studies in order to assume the role of a Buddhist monk in a rural temple.

Much of Bangkok's avant-garde activity has been spurred by the culture ministry's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC; instituted in 2002), which from 2003 to early 2009 was headed by the curatorial "dean" of Thai modern and contemporary art, Apinan Poshyananda. Holding a Cornell University PhD and the author of *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford, 1992), Poshyananda is best known to Western audiences as the organizer of

**THE TENSION BETWEEN SOCIAL COHESION AND UNFETTERED INDIVIDUALISM IS APTLY EXPRESSED IN TAWAN WATTUYA'S GROUP PORTRAITS OF PEOPLE SIMILARLY DRESSED, WITH SMEARED, ANONYMOUS FACES.**

"Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions" (1996) and the aforementioned "Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind," both for New York's Asia Society. He currently sits on the periodically convened Asian Art Council, a think tank directed by Alexandra

devoted to emerging Thai talents, many fresh out of art school. This spring, to mark the school's 40th anniversary, BUG showcased black-and-white shots of everyday objects by the prize winning photographer Surat Osathanugrah (1930-2008), a mega-businessman and founder of the university, who at various times headed Thailand's ministries of commerce, transport and the interior. BUG curator Ark Fongsmut broke with Osathanugrah's usual practice by arranging with the artist's heirs to print the images at large scale for this posthumous show.

Since the 1990s, Bangkok has generated a plethora of commercial spaces scattered throughout the city, selling to both Thai and international collectors as well as some

adventurous, mostly foreign, museums. Dealers, rarely able to undertake the cost of participating in global art fairs, do most of their business on site, sometimes via the Internet. Known for its early championing of Thai contemporary art, Numthong Gallery (founded 1990) opened a new space at the BACC last winter. In February, 100 Tonson Gallery, which concentrates on contemporary Asian and Western masters, presented "Living Room," a collaboration conceived by the 29-year-



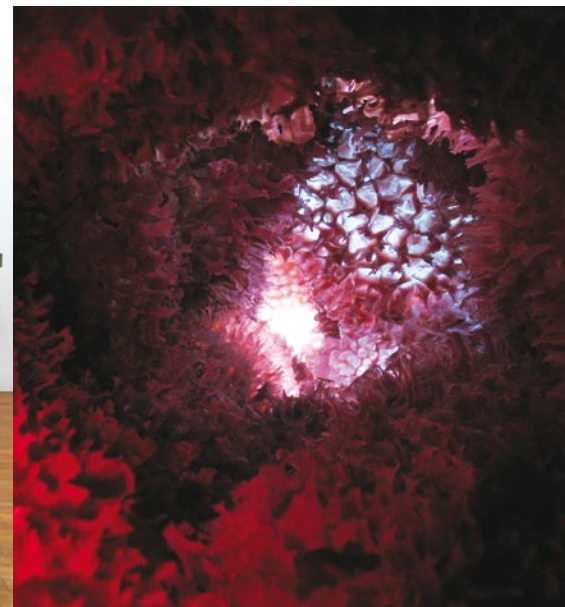
Above, Tawan Wattuya: *24 University Girls*, 2009, watercolor on paper, 2½ by 14¾ feet; in "Uniform/Uniformity" at Tang Contemporary Art.

Left, Kamol Phaosavadi: *Memories Haunt*, 2003, video, 10 minutes.

Below, exterior and interior views of Be Takerng Pattanopas's *HAL-0-2*, 2007, mixed mediums with LEDs, approx. 75 by 36 by 10 inches.

Munroe, senior curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Under Poshyananda's direction, the OCAC has funded Thai artists' residencies abroad, helped organize domestic art festivals and international exhibitions, and hosted various symposia and other events aimed at developing a new generation of Thai art administrators.

Academic institutions usually feature campus-based galleries or art centers, the most striking of which is Bangkok University Gallery (BUG), ensconced in a quasi-Bauhaus structure designed by the Thai firm Office of Architectural Transition. Launched in 1996, the gallery has, since 2003, organized the annual juried exhibition "Brand New,"



old curator Thanavi Chopradit. Drawing inspiration from a 1969 sound installation by the American composer Alvin Lucier, Chopradit brought together works by four Thai visual and sound artists: wall sculptures made of animal skulls encrusted with beads and baubles by Kata Sangkhae (b. 1976), a video projection of perpetually shifting abstract forms by Prinda Setabundhu (b. 1967) and a soundtrack of random pops, pings, echoes and drumbeats—playing through eight freestanding,

oriented shows. Thavibu Gallery carries work from Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar, and Sombat Permpoon Gallery, a 30-year-old institution specializing in Thai modern masters, has recently begun to market contemporary art as well.

ALTERNATIVE ART SPACES can also be found throughout Bangkok. The artist Pratchaya Phinthong long doubled as director of Gallery Ver, an alternative space founded in

and exhibits textile-related work by contemporary artists from around the world. In early 2010, she collaborated with the feng shui master Kotchakorn Promchai to mount “Golden Tiger/Hidden Monkey: Astrology, Art, Life,” a show examining how faith (especially as manifest in Brahma Jati, the Siamese horoscope) and science mutually contribute to our everyday understanding of reality. A hand-painted 19th-century Thai manuscript on the Brahma Jati (purchased by Thompson from Dutch



totemlike speakers—by composers Jiradej Setabundhu (b. 1967) and Anothai Nitibhon (b. 1978).

Also of note are H Gallery, showcasing Thai and Southeast Asian contemporary artists, and Kathmandu Photo Gallery (run by Manit Sriwanichpoom and independent film producer Ing Kanchanavanich), its bookstore and exhibition spaces tucked into an intimate shophouse (a storefront with residence above) in Bangkok’s Little India. Both Catherine Schubert Gallery and Tang Contemporary Art (with offshoots in Beijing and Hong Kong) represent contemporary Asian art, with an emphasis on China. In early 2010, Tang mounted “Uniform/Uniformity,” a show of recent watercolors by Tawan Wattuya (b. 1973), in which the prevailing tension between the Thai ideal of social cohesion and today’s push toward unfettered individualism found an apt metaphor in group portraits of schoolgirls, military officers and others more or less uniformly dressed (or, in one instance, uniformly nude like workers in some Bangkok sex emporiums), their faces occasionally smeared into anonymity. Gallery Soufflower represents East Indian as well as Thai artists, while Conference of Birds focuses on politically and socially

2000 by Rirkrit Tiravanija with art critic Phatarawadee Phataranawik and then-curator Chitti Kasemkitvatana. Launched as a publishing venture, the gallery still intermittently issues the small-circulation *VER* magazine. In March 2010, the facility relocated from a relatively remote loft space on the left side of the Chao Phraya River to a shophouse on the right bank in Phra Nakhon, the centrally situated Divine City (the seat, since its rise to power in 1782, of the still-ruling Chakri Dynasty). There, Gallery Ver continues to serve as an exhibition and brainstorming locale for many of Bangkok’s younger artists, steeped in French deconstructionist theory, semiotics and socio-critical practices.

The Jim Thompson Art Center (JTAC) is a decidedly hybrid institution, founded in 2003 at the Jim Thompson House historic site (a complex of six traditional-style teak houses brought together by an American-born, mid-20th-century silk merchant) and directed since 2006 by Gridthiya Gaweewong, recipient of an MA degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and one of Bangkok’s most respected international curators. Gaweewong organizes thematic shows drawn from the silk company’s archives and collections,

missionaries) was displayed along with colorful, astrologically inspired costumes by the young designer Roj Singhakul. Animation on the subject of the 12 signs of the Thai zodiac was contributed by Wisut Ponnimit (b. 1976), while Kamol Phaosavasdi offered *Open the Sky* (2009), a suspended cocoon filled with cloth, perfume and a meditative soundtrack, within which visitors could have their fortunes read by Thai cosmologists.

The experimental programming mix at the JTAC (which also boasts a public research library) grew out of Gaweewong’s involvement with the alternative Bangkok art scene of the late 1990s, when she headed Project 304, a gallery and artists’ collective that was active between 1996 and 2004. Memories of Project 304 (which survives today as a Web-based “nonsite”) still reverberate with the younger Gallery Ver generation.

In early 2009, another artist collective, As Yet Unnamed/Not Yet in Progress—originally formed at Project 304 a decade earlier—reconvened for an extended run at About Café, a downtown alternative space founded in the mid-1990s by local arts patron Klaomard Yipintsoi (granddaughter of the nationally

famous artist Misiem Yipintsoi), who is known for helping to support exhibitions, artist project spaces and various happenings on an ad hoc basis. A new manifesto proudly recalled the collective's 1998-99 inaugural exhibition—a freewheeling installation comprising numerous process-based, interactive and mixed-media works—and derided the last decade as one marred by the machinations of city politicians. A resolutely independent spirit also

BANGKOK'S PRIVATE collectors keep a low profile but play an important role—buying and caring for progressive art at a time when Thailand's museums lack any concerted acquisitions policy and commercial banks, the other major buyers, collect only conservative Thai modern works. Petch Osathanugrah, son of the Bangkok University founder and himself now its leading trustee, has amassed one of the more extensive collections of contemporary Thai

**PROMOTED AS A “LAND OF SMILES” OFFERING COUNTLESS SENSUOUS INDULGENCES, THIS MOSTLY BUDDHIST NATION HAS LONG BEEN BESET BY CIVIC CORRUPTION, POLITICAL FACTIONALISM AND RAUCOUS SOCIAL UPHEAVAL.**



Jakkai Siributr:  
*Yantra*, 2010,  
mixed mediums  
on canvas, 64  
by 63 inches.  
Courtesy Tyler  
Rollins Fine Art.

informs the Reading Room, a privately owned artists' space founded in 2009 by Narawan Pathomvat, who, though not a major collector or patron, hosts guest lectures, film screenings and related events in her family's renovated shophouse, a former photography studio now lined with art books.

The performance art scene in Bangkok is well represented annually by Asiatopia, an international festival directed by artist Chumpon Apisuk (b. 1946). Last November, in its 11th season, the event brought work by 15 artists (10 from Southeast Asia, 5 from elsewhere; down from an average total of 35) to audiences in both Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Varsha Nair (b. 1957), among the most prominent of Bangkok's performance artists, co-edits Ctrl+P, a Web-based chronicle of the global art scene.

painting in the region; so, too, has Jean-Michel Beurdeley, a retired French antiques dealer whose walled compound boasts its own gallery. The youthful entrepreneur Disaphol Chansiri just completed installing his collection of contemporary Thai and Western artists (Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Navin Rawanchaikul, Manit Sriwanichpoom, Ross Bleckner, Cindy Sherman, Francesco Clemente and others) in a private exhibition space in the apartment adjacent to his living quarters in a luxury condominium. And Chongrux Chanthaworrasut, a Thai stockbroker, is about to install a major collection of works by Montien Boonma and Chatchai Puipia in his own custom-built facility. For the moment, only the holdings of

Beurdeley and Chansiri are open to the general public (by appointment); the others remain accessible solely through personal invitation.

Last February, Michael Shaowanasai, a Bangkok artist-provocateur and indie film star (*The Adventure of Iron Pussy*, 2003), presented “In the House by the Canal” at Whitespace, an exhibition venue in the office quarters of a downtown architectural firm. The show's black-and-white portrait photographs and color video document the near disaster of the 2009 Venice Biennale, where Shaowanasai and four other artists representing Thailand rallied furiously to create an entirely new group installation after their artworks failed to arrive in time for the official vernissage. “Gondola al Paradiso Co., Ltd.,” both as originally designed and as improvised on the spot, took the form of a mock tourist agency that feigned the legendary Thai service ethic while lampooning the hypocrisy of disguising Thailand's fractious social reality [see *A.i.A.*, June/July '09].

Ironically, few people in the Thai intelligentsia even took note of the Venice pavilion or the artists' last-minute travails. Only a small number traveled to see the show, and the press carried no post-event commentary. Indeed, while Poshyananda, a de facto cultural official, ponders how Bangkok might someday host a regional biennial, Thai contemporary art finds itself increasingly the stuff of export and cultural diplomacy. Even as the global economy continues to stagger and the Thai art scene suffers financially, Shaowanasai remains optimistic. Bantering with me in a Bangkok café only months ago, he suddenly leaned forward as though to pass

on a secret: “Don't worry, *krup!* [the Thai term is an emphatic affirmation that serves as a verbal exclamation point]. Thai artists *really* get creative when we run out of cash.” ○

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