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**Twenty-First Century Thai Art Practices:  
Common Themes and Methodologies**

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## **Twenty-First Century Thai Art Practices: Common Themes and Methodologies**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Scholarly focus on contemporary Thai art in English is relatively recent and mostly conducted within a regional framework whereby Thai art is approached as part of the wider Southeast Asia.

This paper extends the study of Thai art towards local investigation, that is, to focus on emerging Thai artists in order to examine which are (if any) the common themes and methodologies fostered by young art practitioners.

Over the last decade, young and promising Thai artists seem to have developed a variety of visual interests and methodologies through which they express their artistic inclinations. New media (digital and computer-based artwork), for example, is used alongside traditional mediums such as leather carving, a comparatively vernacular practice. Figurative paintings are produced at the same time as technically sophisticated installations that combine aesthetic pleasure with community values. Are there some detectable common themes and methodologies in the practices of twenty-first century Thai artists (those born in the 1970s and 80s)? And, if so, how do they differ from the lessons of the senior artists (those born in the 1950s and 60s)?

In a country with a long history of artistic practice—one deeply rooted in the cultural context—but with a written art history still nascent, it is difficult to highlight generational shifts within the local art scene. However, this paper aims to contribute to the current Thai art discourse by arguing that there is a substantial transition from the 1950s/60s generation to the 1970s/80s generation and that such a transition can be visible in new paradigms pertaining to twenty-first century Thai art.

### **GENERATIONAL TRANSITION: THE ARTISTS BORN IN THE 1970S AND 80S**

A sample of young, emerging artists—who have both influenced and are influential on the current Thai art scene—is selected in this essay as a representative population of new artistic tendencies in Thailand.

Artists Chusak Srikwan (b. 1983), Ruangsak Anuwatwimon (b. 1975), Montri Toemsombat (b. 1975), Preeyachanok Ketsuwan (b. 1985), Tawan Wattuya (b. 1973), Vichaya Mukdamanee (b. 1984), Porntaweesak Rimasakul (b. 1979), Piyatat Hemmatat (b. 1976), Chulayarnnon Siriphol (b. 1986), Taiki Saenjaroen (b. 1975) and Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit (b. 1984) all belong to the generation of the 1970s and 80s. They have thus far worked extensively in Thailand and internationally developing a new Thai artists' community, which remains widely undiscussed in most Thai and international literature.

Calling for immediate attention, this essay analyses their art practice in the light of the cultural, social and economic changes that have occurred in the last decades, from the tumultuous years of the 1970s stained with violence and student massacres, the rise of neo-traditional and nationalist art in the 80s, to the more introspective art of the 90s, which started to experiment with multimedia and interactive works based on issues related to identity and "Thai-ness". It was in the 90s that for the first time socially engaged artistic practices were (and still are) fostered by pioneer artists such as Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957) with his multimedia installations, Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) with his

poignant photographic works, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (b. 1957) with her engaging video works and Sutee Kunavichayanont (b. 1965) with his interactive installations, among many others. These artists and their contemporaries are still busy making art alongside the younger art practitioners born in the mid-1970s onwards, towards which we should all take an attentive, if critical, look.

The aim of this essay is not to compare one generation against the other to determine which achieves the higher score in art history, but rather to critically observe which cultural and artistic practices are favoured by the younger players and why, in order to formulate an informed understanding on whether the emerging artists are continuing, moving away or simply readapting the lessons of their seniors.

### COMMON THEMES AND METHODOLOGIES

Thematically, and broadly grouped, the most common tendencies of twenty-first century art practices seem to focus mainly on *Spirituality or Faith*, alluded as a governing force over the cycle of life and death, but also embraced as a means of political critique of the *Sangha*; *Social Issues*, often expressed in the form of cultural dysfunctions and social dislocation; *History* intended as memory and political commentary (or lack of thereof).

On the medium front, besides painting and mixed-media installations, the language preferred by the younger generation, as opposed to their seniors, is new media (digitally based works). The younger, more travelled generation is widely exposed to technological advancements, tools such as Facebook, Twitter and smart devices alike, which all facilitate and elicit the use of technology in their artistic practice.

Senior artist Kamol Phaosavasdi (b. 1958) started experimenting with new media practices in the late 1990s in alternative spaces that were emerging then.<sup>1</sup> But, at that time, those art practitioners were “a minority of artists, since the majority here [in Thailand] still focus on academic and formalist works...”.<sup>2</sup> This attitude seems to be changing now. The “advantage” of using new media, occasionally combined with Thai vernacular mediums, seems to be the international language that it speaks. Computer-based works easily embrace a wider range of audiences and issues not necessarily locally related, unlike the works by the senior generation, which are more concerned with locally rooted issues and languages.<sup>3</sup>

Though challenging, the claim of allocating the current art practices to the themes and methodologies mentioned above is a must when arguing that these are the most distinguished trends detectable in the current Thai art scene whether carried over from the senior generation or fostered and reinterpreted by the individual emerging artists according to their preferences of

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Project 304, founded, among others, by artists Montien Boonma, Kamol Phaosavasdi, Chatchai Puipia, Micheal Shoawanasai, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Prapon Kumjim, and art critic Gridthiya Gaweewong. It was founded in 1996 to support contemporary artistic and cultural activities through art exhibitions as well as media and time-based works and events including the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival. *Project 304*, accessed March 5, 2011, <http://www.project304.info/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gridthiya Gaweewong, “Experimental Art in Thailand: Work in (a slow) Progress”, in *Next Move* (Singapore: LASALLE College of the Arts, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance the installation *History Class (Thanon Ratchadamnoen)* (2000) by Sutee Kunavichayanont, where the artist uses familiar objects (school desks) retrieved from public spaces (school classrooms) and reinterprets them for the communitarian involvement of the audience.

mediums and subjects. An analytical approach to the works produced by the artists selected in this essay offers the opportunity to value the relevance of the younger players, which is, at times, accompanied by the lessons or, indeed, the works brought to the fore by the senior generation.

## **SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH**

As one of the three pillars of the State (King-Nation-Religion), Buddhism, and indeed faith intended in its wider sense as spirituality, moral choice and social conduct is often embraced by Thai artists as a critical entry point.

Between the persistent criticism of the *Sangha-Dharma-Buddha* triad started by their seniors,<sup>4</sup> and the distorted vision of the nascent consumerist culture oblivious to moral rectitude, younger artists too relate to this bonding magnet of Thai culture—Religion—though their approach is less activist and more distant, at times individualistic.

Chusak Srikwan adopts Buddhist iconography in his oeuvre as a language easily recognisable and familiar to most Thais, thus producing works of literal message if read by an audience familiar with the tales he recounts. Injecting new energy into the long and debated argument of preserving traditional art in Thailand<sup>5</sup>, Chusak chooses the vernacular tradition of shadow puppetry, producing formal and impactful installations of leather carvings. Used for the longest time as a tool of propaganda, Thai traditional puppetry historically addresses social and religious themes. Similarly, Chusak in his practice cites contemporary social and political issues, emphasising, through them, the moral choice we should all make.

Other Thai senior artists have employed shadow puppetry to convey social and political messages as in the case of Vasan Sitthiket.<sup>6</sup> Vasan, however, personifies the puppets in his highly political performances designed to shock the audience, whereas Chusak meditates over his pieces in endless hours spent in drawing, cutting and assembling the images.

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<sup>4</sup> Vasan Sitthiket is one of the most vocal artists addressing controversial, religious issues personified by the Sangha.

<sup>5</sup> See on this topic the recent exhibition *EMERGING PATTERNS Contemporary Art: Songkla/Pattani/Yala/Narathiwat* held in 2011 at Bangkok Art and Culture Centre and involved artists from these four provinces in Thailand. The exhibition showcased pattern-making commonly seen in everyday life and traditional culture.

<sup>6</sup> Vasan Sitthiket started using puppetry media in 2002. He has designed almost 200 characters from politicians, villagers, farmers to well-known figures like Bush, Gandhi, Hitler, Blair, Mao, Jesus Christ, Marx, Lenin etc. He composes stories around them and plays them with music. According to the artist's e-mail exchange with the writer, dated April 2, 2011.



**Chusak Srikwan, *Shadow-Play Dharma*, 2010, leather carving, dimensions variable.**

Images courtesy of Loredana Paracciani.

Artist Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, too, focuses on spirituality intended as a set of rules and superstitions as well as a governing power. Reminiscent of Montien Boonma's (1953–2000) spiritually-inspired works, Ruangsak's seemingly hieratic installations, like the *Ash Heart Project* (2007)<sup>7</sup>, negotiate religion, animist ritualism and the concept of impermanence of life through the use of organic material such as ashes. The artworks are evocative of the cycle of life: as the source of all suffering, according to Buddhist teachings, karma is also the cause of reincarnation upon death for all living creatures. Though less literal than his peer Chusak's, Ruangsak's work embodies the very elements of Thai culture where the meaning of religion goes well beyond the concept of belief and worship.



**Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, *Ash Heart Project*, 2007, ashes from various sources, dimensions variable.**

Images courtesy of Loredana Paracciani.

<sup>8</sup> *Ash Heart Project* comprises one hundred sculptures made from the ashes of dead plant and animal specimens, mixed with resin and shaped as human hearts, which are suspended from the gallery ceiling by fragile nylon string, conveying a sense of primordial energy. The gallery space where the installation is set up does not correspond to its physical perimeter, instead becoming an invisible space, or volume, where history, religion and superstition merge into one element.

Emerging artist Piyatat Hemmatat debates the meaning of faith and Buddhism in current society through personal observation. In his photographic series *Vestige* (2007), the artist takes a step further into religion and faith by wondering about objects that once existed, represented in the photographic essay by images of mutilated Buddha statues. The shots were taken at various locations in Thailand, once places of worship and today transformed into tourist destinations. In the photographs, the Buddha sculptures stand proud of their holiness despite being mutilated, a memento for a degrading Thai culture that has become ever so distant from a true religious vision. Recalling Manit Sriwanichpoom's black-and-white photographic series *Masters* (2011), Piyatat's focus goes to the past, to images that were once places of worship and now bearing only the aesthetic, if distant, value of relicts.



Piyatat Hemmatat, *Vestige-No. 01*, 2008, Lamda print on Kodak paper.

Image courtesy of the artist.

## SOCIAL ISSUES

The theme of cultural dislocation, gender investigation and daily life is approached by many young artists through a variety of mediums. The reflection of daily life in the 1980s and 90s was mostly political uprising and mass killings: think of the 1992 massacre, for instance, depicted by many senior artists, from Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Horror in Pink* (2001) to Vasan Sitthiket's *Blue October* (1996). As I will discuss later, the interest to focus on political themes has slowly watered down—but not disappeared—in recent years due to the sentiment that art, and society for that matter, cannot make any change and has been replaced in current art practices by the interest of representing the dysfunctional modern culture. In a society caught between consumerism, progressive urbanisation and social acceptance, homosexuality and gender issues in general are becoming very important topics rarely addressed by the senior artists.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> An exception is Thai artist Michael Shaownasai (b. 1964). He started to address gender-related themes since the beginning of his career in the 90s.

Artist Preeyachanok Ketsuwan in her photographic and performative works negotiates essential elements of Buddhist philosophy and rituals from the past combined with gender issues in conservative Thai society.<sup>9</sup> Other Thai women artists occasionally deal with the ‘female’ in their works. Among them, Pinaree Sanpitak (b. 1961) and Arya Rasdjarmrearnsook (b. 1957) are the most established. While their works relate to the discovery of the self—intended as a woman’s body—in Pinaree’s work, or the elaboration of spirituality—intended as harmony or respect for the other—in Arya’s works, there has been in Thai culture neither a feminist movement towards improving the lives of women nor an art practice based on gender issues. Though Preeyachanok rebels against the rules. In a recent performance *Poached/Possessed* (2011), she had her mother shave her head in a ritualistic manner much like men do when entering monkhood, undeniably highlighting the common Buddhist belief that is based on gender discrimination, whereby only heterosexual men can achieve enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>



**Preeyachanok Ketsuwan, *Dusk*, 2011, drawing on C-print, hair and resin, 116 × 170 cm.**

Image courtesy of the artist.

Vichaya Mukdamanee’s concern is with the increasingly materialistic Thai society, which is progressively forsaking rural wisdom. His practice revolves mainly around video and mixed-media installations, mostly constructed from mundane material like rattan baskets, colourful plastic bags and dull office furniture—emblems of Thai consumerist society—sembled in precarious sculptural shapes. The balancing act of his sculptural installations echoes the precarious balance of Thai society caught between the accelerated developments towards consumerism on the one hand and the loss of the traditional sense of community on the other. The video works often complement his installations/assemblages, adding a process-oriented element shared by other younger artists in Thailand.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Her photographic essay *Poached/Possessed* shows the women of her family with their heads carefully wrapped in cloth and, in an almost unmoving stand, holding glittering silver bowls of offerings to the spirits. The large bowls are partially covered by strands of female hair—the quintessential symbol of feminine beauty—graphically represented by bold pen strokes.

<sup>11</sup> See also Thai artist Michael Shaownasai’s (b. 1964) *Portrait of a Man in Habits #1* (2000), depicting the artist wearing a Buddhist monk’s robe with heavy make-up and a pink handkerchief.

<sup>12</sup> An example is Arin Rungjang (b. 1976), who created the commissioned installation *Unequal Exchange/No Exchange Can Be Unequal* for Singapore Biennale 2011, for which he assembled cheap furniture to re-create a domestic environment.





**Vichaya Mukdamanee, *Re-Appearing*, 2012,**  
**mixed media and video installation, dimensions variable.**  
 Image courtesy of Loredana Paracciani.

The unstaged images of gritty everyday life are the focus of Tawan Wattuya's figurative works. The impressionistic quality of his watercolours, which depict the busy and complex life in the Thai capital, caught between the licit and illicit, carries with it a sense of simplification and humour, making his style unique in the Thai contemporary art scene. Tawan often derives images from magazine clippings, bars in the red-light district and various gatherings of people proudly parading their social uniforms; these are the emblems of Thai society that Tawan wants the audience to be aware of. In the chaotic and apparently unregulated life in the capital, most people opt for rules and compliance in order to accommodate a society that is still strongly critical of non-conformism.



**Tawan Wattuya, *Lady Boys*, 2009, watercolour on paper, 70 × 100 cm.**  
 Image courtesy of the artist.

### **HISTORY, MEMORY AND POLITICAL COMMENTARIES (OR LACK THEREOF)**

Undoubtedly, artists of the generation of the 1950s and 60s assumed, and continue to assume, a strong social and political role. Their ideals are taken to the streets or, indeed, assimilated in the production of socially engaged works that speak the language of the common people. Their art is both approachable and socially relevant.



Emerging artist Porntaweesak Rimsakul's mostly interactive installations deal , at times, with political themes. See, for instance, the installation *RGB's War* (2006), where the audience was invited to operate, as they liked, military helmets, representing soldiers, placed on a table, using remote controls. Colours—red, white and blue—would be automatically splashed onto the table as a result.<sup>14</sup>

Porntaweesak's own childhood is one of the influential elements in his practice: "In the world of toys and play, everything is possible if we understand the logic behind their use of space."<sup>15</sup> The toys, pulled from his own memory or newly created, have the ability to captivate the audience in their playful, off-guard mode. "A good combination between material and ideas"<sup>16</sup> is the core preoccupation of Porntaweesak's artworks, denying any reference to the senior generation of artists.



**Porntaweesak Rimsakul, *RGB's War*, 2006, soldiers' helmets on painted wooden board, dimensions variable.**

Image courtesy of 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.

Artist *Montri Toemsombat* combines digitally based artworks with historically relevant context. Photography and videos are the key components in Montri's installations and coexist with natural, basic elements like rice, or common materials such as barb wire. In the installation and performance *Fake Me* (2002), first presented for his residency in Japan, Montri compares himself to a bonsai (also made of barb wire) to criticise the suppressive Asian society.<sup>17</sup> His work remains throughout profoundly self-reflective, tackling his life experiences as a means to critique consumerism in contemporary society.

<sup>15</sup> See also Pandit Chanrochanakit, "Deforming Thai Politics: As Read through Thai Contemporary Art" in *Third Text* 25, 4 (July 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Chol Janepaphaphan, *Hybrid Technology* (Bangkok: 100 Tonson Gallery, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> From the writer's interview with Porntaweesak Rimsakul, January 18, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Gridthiya Gaweewong, "Montri Toemsombat", in *Next Move* (Singapore: LASALLE College of the Arts, 2003).



Montri Toemsombat, *Fake Me*, 2002,  
barb wire, life-size costume, video installation, dimensions variable.

## CONCLUSION

At the historical junction where the Thai artistic canon is redefined—or complemented—by the emerging community of artists, contemporary art becomes the fragmented expression of national and personal themes.

“Mainly...they [contemporary artists] talk about themselves. The situation is very different than in Vasan and [Manit’s] generation,” says artist Wit Pimkanchanapong.<sup>18</sup>

Tracing the development of Thai art in recent years is not an easy task. Established artists, the generation of the 1950s and 60s, are internationally acclaimed and recognised for their sophisticated and often socially engaged works. They have remarkably set the canon of Thai contemporary art. Perhaps it is now time for art historians, critics and curators alike to focus on the models of the younger generation, those born in the 1970s and 80s, to describe new tendencies detached from the lessons of their seniors. Only by genuinely observing their practice and learning about their social and personal priorities can we value the artistic contribution of the younger generation and ease their works into wider cultural exchanges through institutions and alternative art platforms.

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<sup>18</sup> From the writer’s interview with Wit Pimkanchanapong, February 2, 2011.

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