

APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

THE SERENITY OF MADNESS

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: *The Serenity of Madness* is a selective survey of the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the internationally acclaimed artist and independent filmmaker based in Chiang Mai. This exhibition presents more than 20 works following Weerasethakul's practice from his first experimental films to his most recent work, ranging across media from short films to video art, video diaries, prints and archival material.

For the past two decades, Weerasethakul's reflexive and non-linear work has explored themes of faith, memory and rebirth, often drawing upon narrative traditions of his native Isaan region. His stories reflect diverse literary and cinematic genres including science fiction, adventure and myth, as well as the tradition of American experimental film. In both his narrative films and experimental projects, personal memories are interwoven with the ephemeral and the supernatural, evoking the fluidity and distortions of history.

In his first solo exhibition in Manila, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's use of tradition and modernity reveals the filmmaker's cinematic language of contrast and texture, propelled and inspired by a myriad of influences that digs deep into the personal, national, cultural, historical and mythical context of the artist. The lyrical language that subsumes his work is marked by spirituality and the supernatural, and at the same time the political conflict that overshadows his region and country; these influences convey the internal logic of the filmmaker's peculiar narrative that dissolves conventional ideas of beginning or end, and instead creates a constellation of stories and images that leave us with the imprint of a graceful experience with one of the fiercest imaginations in contemporary art and cinema today.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: The Serenity of Madness is a traveling exhibition curated by Eridhiya Gawewong and produced by Independent Curators International (ICI), New York. The exhibition and tour are made possible, in part, with the generous support from Mallarmé Contemporary Art Museum, Chiang Mai, the ICI Board of Trustees and ICI's International Forum. The presentation at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila has been organized in collaboration with Joselina Cruz. Additional support has been provided by the Royal Thai Embassy, National Book Store, Craftpoint Brewing Company, Premier Wine & Spirits, Inc., and Pacific Paint (Boysen) Philippines, Inc.



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Ghost Teen*, 2009. Vinyl print. Courtesy of the artist.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Apichatpong Weerasethakul was born in 1970, Bangkok but grew up in the northeastern Thai city of Kohn Kaen. He studied architecture there before graduating in film from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1997, and currently lives and works in Chiang Mai. With Gritthiya Gawewong, he ran the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival from 1999 to 2008. In 2005 he was recognized with the prestigious Silpathorn award conferred by the Thai Ministry of Culture, and he has twice been honoured by the French Ministry of Culture and Communications under the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Order of Arts and Letters), as a Knight of the order in 2008, and an Officer in 2011. He was a recipient of the Yanghyun Prize, South Korea (2014) and the Fukuoka Prize, Japan (2013). His film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, won the *Palme d'Or* at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival in 2010. He has participated in numerous international exhibitions

including *DOCUMENTA 13* in Kassel, Germany (2012), and the biennales of Sharjah (2013), Liverpool (2006), Busan (2004) and Istanbul (2001). He has been the subject of solo presentations by esteemed institutions including Haus der Kunst, Munich, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and Hangar Bicocca in Milan. In 2016, a retrospective of his films was screened at Tate Britain in London. His feature films include: *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015), *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), *Tropical Malady* (2004), *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* (2003), *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000).



Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Photo by Chai Sirris.



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Invisibility*, 2016. 2-channel synchronised video installation.

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EXHIBITION RUN
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Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Emerald (Morakot)
2007
Cinema version and single-screen installation
Digital Dolby 5.1 / Colour





01
Ghost Teen
 2009
 from the *Primitive Project*
 Vinyl print
 3900 x 3200mm



03
Haiku
 2009
 Single-channel video installation, HD Digital
 Stereo (Shown here in silent) / Color
 1:58 mins

Weerasethakul has produced a number of shorts, feature films, and video installations. Over the years he has also made numerous video sketches and studies called "video diaries" with a portable digital camera he carries with him on a daily basis. Some of the videos featured here have later influenced his more narrative films such as *Tropical Malady* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall Past Lives*. In this video diary, Weerasethakul documents the set of *Primitive Project* in Nabua, particularly the scene when teenagers are hypnotized and sleep inside a time-machine.



02
The Palace (Pipittapan Tee Taipei)
 2008
 5-channel video installation, Digital
 [Selected 3 pieces for the exhibition]
 Silent / Color
 Various Lengths

The Palace (Pipittapan Tee Taipei) is a site-specific project that Weerasethakul originally created in response to the National Palace Museum in Taipei's collection and architecture as part of the exhibition *Discovering the Other*. He explores spiritual elements of the art institution, which is filled with centuries-old ancient objects and artifacts. The artist saw the room in the museum as a witness of time and space.



04
An Evening Shoot
 2009
 HD Digital
 Dolby 5.1 / Color
 10:56 mins

On a particular evening a group of teenagers gather at a house near a rice field, where they dress up as soldiers, supposedly to shoot an unknown movie. Their target is a young man who miraculously returns to life after being shot.



05
TON
 2004
 Single-channel video installation
 Silent / Color
 11:32 mins

For his feature film, *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong asked his colleague Ton to visit the army in the Kaeng Krajan Dam area to study the lives of soldiers and their daily routines. This video documents Ton during his research trip, which later became a reference for the main character in *Tropical Malady*.



06
Nabua
 2009
 Single-channel video installation, HD Digital
 Dolby 5.1 / Color
 9:11 mins

Nabua was produced as part of the multi-platform *Primitive Project*, created during the production of the artist's feature film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives*. Nabua is a village located in northeast Thailand, a poignant site for Thailand's Cold War history during the 1960s. This period marked the first time the military fought against comrade farmers. The fighting reached such a high degree of violence that the farmers decided to migrate into the forests to join the Communist Party and the resistance.



08
Fireworks (Archives)
 2014
 Single-channel video installation, HD Digital
 Dolby 5.1 / Color
 6:40 mins

Fireworks (Archives) chronicles the animal sculptures at the Kaewku temple, Nong Khai, a town on the border of Laos and Thailand. The founder of this temple, Lungpu Bunleua, built statues based on fantasy, folk tales, and political myths which unpacked his belief in several Buddhist teachings referring to life, love, legends and reincarnation. Unfairly treated due to accusations of being a communist during the cold war period, the vernacular sculptures he produced is seen by Apichatpong as a mode of resistance to the oppression he received from the ruling center. *Fireworks (Archives)* invites us to experience walking through the temple grounds alongside the actors in a very intimate way. This piece was first exhibited at kurimanzutto in Mexico City and is the first in a new series titled *Fireworks*.



09
Fireworks Sketch (Frog)
 2014
 Single-channel video installation, Digital
 Sound / Color
 1:50 mins



10
Invisibility
 2016
 2-channel synchronised video installation
 Silent video but use live sound from the shutters
 Color
 12:29 mins

Invisibility displays Apichatpong's continued interest in the issue of perception and memory. The installation takes a thread from his recent pieces, *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) and *Fever Room* (2015-2016), both of which feature the same actors. Here he takes them deeper into an imaginary world and ponders the future of shared consciousness. The videos depict a landscape where the protagonists are confined to a room, along with the viewers. With no way out they infiltrate each other's dreams.

Invisibility mirrors the troubled state of Thailand's politics. It proposes a decayed vision of the future where one needs to constantly evade reality. The viewing experience shifts between seeing and not-seeing, fact and fiction, space and void.



11
Father
 2014
 Single-channel video installation, SD Digital
 Silent / Color
 14:07 mins

The original footage in *Father* was shot in 2003 by Weerasethakul's brother when their father was undergoing kidney dialysis. Forever stuck in his memory, the artist reuses the footage here as well as in a prominent scene in his feature film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.



12
Ashes
 2012
 HD Digital
 Shot with Lomokino, 35 mm still films
 Stereo / Color
 20:18 mins

In collaboration with Lomo, an Austrian camera company, and Mubi, a global film website, Weerasethakul was invited to make a work to launch the new Lomokino, a portable motion picture camera. *Ashes* juxtaposes the intimacy of his daily routine with the destruction of memories and his observations of the dark side of Thailand's social realities.



13
One Water
 2013
 Single-channel video installation, SD Digital
 Stereo (Shown here in silent) / Color
 1:11 mins

Tilda Swinton, a prominent British actress who became a good friend of Apichatpong for a few years, organized a gathering of friends in Maldives. Apichatpong asked Swinton to recall her dreams in front of his camera.



14
Velocity
 2016
 2-channel video installation
 Sound / Color
 3:34 mins, 0:26 mins



15
Emerald (Morakot)
 2007
 Cinema version and single-screen installation
 Digital
 Dolby 5.1 / Colour
 11:50 mins

In *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, a Buddhist novel written in 1906 by the Danish writer Karl Gjellerup, the protagonists are reborn as two stars and take centuries to recite their stories to each other, until they no longer exist.

Morakot is a derelict and defunct hotel in the heart of Bangkok that opened its doors in the 1980's: a time when Thailand shifted gears into accelerated economic industrialization and a time when Cambodians poured into Thai refugee camps after the invasion of Vietnamese forces. It was a hosting time. Later, when the East Asian financial crisis struck in 1997, these reveries collapsed.

Like *Kamanita*, the unchanged *Morakot* is a star burdened with (or fueled by) memories. Apichatpong collaborated with his three regular actors, who recounted their dreams, hometown life, bad moments, and love poems, to re-supply the hotel with new memories.



16
Selected polaroids and photos
 Prints for lightbox

Mysterious Object at Noon
Blissfully Yours
Tropical Malady



17
The Vapor of Melancholy
 2014
 Lightjet Print on Duratrans, Lightbox
 800mm x 1200mm

Produced as part of the video series, *Fireworks (Archives)*, *The Vapor of Melancholy* depicts Weerasethakul's partner in bed, caught exhaling smoke and surrounded by exploding fireworks. A cosmos-like phenomena engulfs his body, concealing an otherwise mundane activity of breathing. This intimate portrait manifests a marriage of intoxication and dream.



18
Primates' Memories
 2014
 Lightjet Print on Duratrans, Lightbox
 1000 mm x 1500 mm

Mr. Electrico (For Ray Bradbury)
 2014
 Lightjet Print on Duratrans, Lightbox
 1000 mm x 1500 mm

This light box series is part of *Fireworks (Archives)* and includes two photographs: *Primates' Memories* and *Mr. Electrico (For Ray Bradbury)*. The flashes of light were captured on camera and then digitally painted, creating fictional topographies. This manipulation was inspired by recent MIT molecular research in which light and color were used to artificially activate a memory. *Primates' Memories* echoes the current color-coded conflict in Thailand's streets where violence and revelry coexist. *Mr. Electrico (For Ray Bradbury)* is drawn from Apichatpong's favorite writer's memory. In 1932, a young Ray Bradbury met with circus performer Mr. Electrico who could endure fifty thousand volts of electricity. The man claimed that Ray was a reincarnation of his friend who died in his arms fourteen years earlier. "Live Forever" the man whispered to Ray and forever became the author's driving force.



19
Archival documents

REFERENCE AND FACSIMILE BOOKS
Bradbury Stories: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales
 Ray Bradbury, 2005
 Paperback publication

The more things change:
The 5th Bangkok Experimental Film Festival
 David Teh, 2008
 Paperback publication

CUJO
 Issue 2, 2009
 Publication
 480 pages

 Et al.

ORIGINAL FILM SCRIPTS
Tropical Malady
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives



20
Film posters
Mysterious Object at Noon
Blissfully Yours
Tropical Malady



Syndromes and a Century
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives
Cemetery of Splendour



21
Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves (Mae Ya Nang)
 1994
 Originally 16mm, re-edited on transfer to digital in 1996
 Mono / B&W
 22:37 mins

This is one of the first experimental films Apichatpong Weerasethakul made while studying filmmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he began to find his own voice and visual expression in the filmmaking process. In this work, the narrative form is broken, sometimes improvised and sometimes rigidly structured, which expresses his interest in mood and ambience rather than in plot. Using footage from his everyday alongside the popular radio drama by Katethip Company, *Mae Ya Nang (The Guardian Goddess of Boats)* as a background, the work explores memory, myth and reincarnation, tropes that continue to appear in his more recent works.

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