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In The New Siam

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 "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 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," 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 adventuresome, 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-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, 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 Soulflower represents East Indian as well as Thai artists, while Conference of Birds focuses on politically and socially 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 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, 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 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 304a 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 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.

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 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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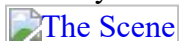
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[Lizzi Bougatsos, Good Hair, 2010](#)

Mixed Media. Courtesy (recently on view at) James Fuentes LLC, New York.

For her most recent show, artist and Gang Gang Dance singer Lizzi



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