

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a black, strapless, floor-length dress, is kneeling on a light-colored floor. She is leaning forward, reaching her hands towards a small, dark, rectangular object lying on the floor in front of her. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Anthropos

Bangkok

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

Navigating Human Depth in Thai and Singapore
Contemporary Art.



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Navigating Human Depth
in Thai and Singapore Contemporary Art

Innovative and thought-provoking group exhibitions

featuring ten emerging artists from Thailand and Singapore:

Kamolpan Chotvichai (Th), Genevieve Chua (Sg), Tada Hengsapkul (Th), Jeremy Hiah (Sg),

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat (Th), Ana Prvacki (Sg), Sufian Hamri @ TR853-1 (Sg),

Tawan Wattuya (Th), Jason Wee (Sg) and Prasert Yodkaew (Th)

Curated by Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

1-30 June 2013

Numthong Gallery



Anthropos: Frailty of Humanity

"Of all creatures that breathe and move upon the earth,
nothing is bred that is weaker than man."

Homer, *The Odyssey*

In the Greek epic poem *Odysseus*, the human myth, survives a long journey of perils, falling into traps and escaping ambushes by fighting his own fears and weaknesses. Whether the hero or the wicked, the faithful lover or the sordid traitor, the allegorical characters described in the poem are first and foremost human bodies full of dilemmas and emotional contradictions. They are mythological figures; nonetheless their behavior shows the frailty of humanity.

Borrowing the Greek word for 'man' and 'human body', Anthropos aims to define the inner multiplicity of the body by probing the human nature as a space where physical and psychological boundaries converge. In Anthropos the body as a collective volume becomes the key to uncover the recesses of human depth while questioning the significance of the body to social conditioning.

Time and time again, human beings seek the safety of an enclosed environment—society, community or family—where basic needs can be met and fulfilled. At the same

time, humanity challenges these public constructions, striving to express itself outside the conventional parameters of society. The body is the organic entity that reconciles these private and public spaces, interacting with other bodies in a gravitational swirl.

In mediating opposite yet complementary spaces, how does the body respond to social obligations and voyeuristic expectations? How does it conciliate contrasting social forces such as acceptance and exclusion? How does the human psyche adjust to the tyranny of identity?

To address these questions, ten artists from Thailand and Singapore have come together for the first time in Anthropos-Bangkok. Appropriating the body as a visual and intellectual motif, the works—from photography, painting and graffiti to video and mixed-media installation—display a common thread that is the artists' interest in collective social concerns, by tackling themes of cultural belonging, social rituals and the body as archetype of aesthetic perfection.

Artists **Jeremy Hiah** (b. 1972), **Tawan Wattuya** (b. 1973) and **Sufian Hamri @ TR853-1** (reads TraseOne - b. 1980) discuss

urban practices and social rituals through the mediums of photography, oil painting and graffiti.

The photographic series *Paradise Terrorize* by Jeremy Hiah makes fun of manmade tragedies such as wars and human aggression in general, by portraying half-naked men performing what looks like a tribal dance, perhaps a ritual to exorcise demons or prepare for combat. Crucial to the work's full expression is the use of the menacing-looking balaclava—a close-fitting, knitted hood—in spite of the overall surreal atmosphere that camouflages the aggressive undertone of the series. Wearing a "mask", in *Paradise Terrorize*, becomes the commodity through which to hide the self. Hiah's choice of associating the balaclava mask with the tribal notion of gathering as depicted in the photographs is an unequivocal reminder that we are all part of a ritual. Whether prescribed by tradition, religion or society, it is ultimately up to us to remove the masks and disclose our true selves.⁽¹⁾

Tawan Wattuya's oil canvases illustrate a similar quality. In the Anthropos series Wattuya relates to the body—a familiar subject matter in his practice—as a physical entity in relation to social or individual predicaments.

Depictions of orgies, bodily rituals and portraits in his canvases acquire a strong plasticity combined with sensual and ghostly innuendos. The tactile element of the paintings adds to the meaning of the works; the texture, evoked by thick contrasting lumps of oil, conjures the tension within Thai contemporary society. In a hierarchical organization where uniformity is prized and conflict is disapproved, these images transcend the socially acceptable. Wattuya inspects Thai society around him with a cynical eye, exploring intimate and collective spaces through a gestural composition that sets his figures free.

Freedom is paramount to all human expressions: speech, choice, intellectual and physical freedom, are ethical principles to define the relationship between the body and its space.

Artist TraseOne explores this relation through the inclusion of Parkour iconography in his graffiti practice. Parkour is an increasingly popular social discipline where by practitioners aim to move quickly and efficiently through their urban surroundings. At the core of this non-competitive practice is to "see the environment in a new way", to emphasize the potential of our surroundings.⁽²⁾

The site-specific graffiti installation by TraseOne tackles the gallery space with this attitude. His painted figures interact with the gallery space, reclaiming mental and physical freedom. While on the one hand Parkour, as a participatory, traveling ritual, negotiates physical and emotional obstacles, on the other it pushes the boundaries of social interaction including the notion of space in time.

The physical affinity to one's own space, that is, the sense of cultural belonging, is investigated by artists **Piyarat Piyapongwiwat** (b. 1977) and **Tada Hengsapkul** (b. 1987) in their video and photography works.

The mass migration of the Issan population to the urban areas in Thailand is outstanding. Issan farmers abandon their fields to work as laborers in Bangkok and other cities. Some become construction workers, some sex workers. Some, still, mount an incredible spectacle of Issan music, or Morlam music, for their fellow migrating lot to keep their spirits up and traditions alive.⁽³⁾

The video work *Liminal Zone* by Piyapongwiwat is about identity and affiliation to one's own ground. It talks about the power of collective identification through a unifying

experience of trance, a liminal zone in which the past is in the present. The extraordinarily active participation in these mass gatherings perpetuates the social ritual. This time the participants' inner selves sip through the cracks of consciousness. They use no mask, summoned as they are by their emotional state.

Memory, emotion and human intervention are called upon by Hengsapkul's new photographic essay. As many youngsters he, too, left Issan to study and start a profession in Bangkok. Still, the closeness to his hometown is pervasive in his work. Considered the young Apichatpong of photography⁽⁴⁾, these images resonate with memory and nostalgia yet the candid-shot style confers freshness to the work. Void of any human presence, which is only inferred, the photographs survive as visual testament to manmade "progress". A recurrent plague in rural Thailand, the land is often expropriated and converted to new infrastructures, causing an intellectual and physical disconnection between the natives and their surroundings. Traces of their culture are wiped out. Like a man without a face, they lose their identity, leaving the debris to populate the new landscape.

The idea of the body as archetype of aesthetic perfection is challenged by artists **Jason Wee** (b. 1978), **Prasert Yodkaew** (b. 1986) and **Genevieve Chua** (b. 1984) in watercolor, mixed-media installation and screenprint, respectively.

The ongoing watercolor series *Self-Portrait* by Jason Wee defies the very essence of the Greek 'anthropos'. The word, as mentioned earlier, refers to the human body, represented by the Greek standard as a unity of beauty and proportion. The magnificence of Doryphoros, for instance, has set, for centuries, the canon of beauty and harmony.⁽⁶⁾ Muscular and well-proportioned as it is, the sculpture achieves absolute perfection. And perfection is what Wee is out daring in his watercolors. As a master crafting new shapes, the artist looks at unnatural forms, marginal histories that are rejected by conformist standards. In a way similar to Wattuya's oils, Wee delves into the socially unaccepted. Yet in his monumental watercolors the organic forms acquire significant beauty, not due to their resemblance to the human body but rather to their divergence and otherness.

Surreal embodiments are also part of Prasert Yodkaew's visual vocabulary of fantastical creatures, three-dimensional models and mythological figures.

The anthropomorphic installation *The Last Travel* explores the body as a spatial cultural entity, that is, the place of the human being in religious beliefs and mythologies.

The human body is essential to human myths and beliefs. Think of Achilles' heel and Adam's rib, for instance, or mythological body parts, for example, the Cyclop's eye.⁽⁷⁾ It is not far-fetched to see Yodkaew's fantastical installations focus on the human body as the center of a cosmic language. The Biblical reference in *The Last Travel* reminds us of the peculiar body-centered nature of Christian religion where everything is achieved through the vehicle of the body—from Eve's apple, the virgin birth of Jesus, to the crucifixion and resurrection.

The miracle of life invariably repeats itself, reproduction being the biological process by which organisms are created. The human body as one such organism is called upon by Genevieve Chua's screen print—a continuation of her series *Birthing Ground Not A Sound*.⁽⁷⁾ Through the eloquent choice of the ultrasound image, Chua uses the analogy of the womb to experiment with the idea of the human body as a presence that is only conceptually inferred in the visual rendering of the work.

Fear, the overarching element in all her production, finds its ultimate expression as primal distress, a sort of anxiety for the life before life. The hypnotic orange frames, equally demarcating the canvas, set the perimeter of the lives to be, human or otherwise, drawing the viewer's attention to a void, yet a space full of fragments, pulsating with life, if one decides to believe so.

Kamolpan Chotvichai (b. 1986) and Ana Prvacki (b. 1976) in photography and video, respectively, celebrate the body as 'persona', subverting conventional social relations and self-identity.

Paper-cutting has been embraced by numerous countries as decorative practice for festivals and religious ceremonies. Kamolpan Chotvichai develops her own paper-cutting technique. She seeks neither beauty nor harmony; rather, she deconstructs the image—her own physical and metaphysical self—into painfully beautiful thin strips of photographic paper.

Her multilayered practice consists of using her own body, capturing limbs and other parts, and then stripping the images to pieces. Applying the Buddhist doctrine of *Anatta*—

the notion of '*no self*' or '*illusion of the self*'—Chotvichai aims at destroying her own image and at the same time transforming the two-dimensional photography into a sculpture to unveil the emptiness of the body literally pulled apart by desires and tensions.

Finally, the video projection *Do It Yourself Chivalry* by artist Ana Prvacki, the first work to greet the visitor in the gallery, is the last to be discussed in this essay, for its unique ability to start and end the exhibition, encompassing all the nuances, depths and recesses of the human nature investigated in *Anthropos*.

Prvacki's long practice in performance scrutinizes the turbulences of social relations in the everyday scenario. Apparently insignificant events morph into devices of performative and interactive narratives based on the inconvenient subject of etiquette and hospitality. Can etiquette—from the Greek word 'ethics' for a costume of proper behavior—be disputed in society? The way human bodies interact in any society defines the moral and social codes we should follow. Yet, does following these protocols make us good people? By exploring embarrassing social circumstances, determined by the human inability to cope

with unexpected situations, Prvacki makes us rethink how social and individual spaces merge in a ground of common acceptance.⁽⁸⁾

If in *Anthropos* the body as collective entity becomes the key to uncover the recesses of human depth, then the significance of the body to social conditioning becomes paramount to narrowing the divergence between its public and private identity.

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani
May 2013

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani has a Master's degree in Asian Art Histories. She writes for several universities' journals, art magazines and symposium publications, and works extensively as independent curator for commercial and institutional places in Singapore and Bangkok. Her academic and curatorial focus and continuous research revolve mostly around contemporary art in Thailand.

NOTE 1 For more on masks as icons and indexes of identities see also Donald Pollock, "Masks and the Semiotics of Identity," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, 3 (1995).

NOTE 2 Lieven Ameel and Sirpa Tani, "Everyday aesthetics in action: Parkour Eyes and the beauty of concrete walls," *Emotion, Space and Society* 5, 3 (2012).

NOTE 3 Mass migration from rural to urban areas has increased in the past few years as a result of Thailand's rapid economic ascent. Many Thai artists have responded to this phenomenon with works reflecting a sense of nostalgia and longing for bucolic values. See also Steven Pettifor, "Down on the farm," *Asian Art News* 21, 2 (2011).

NOTE 4 No Superego solo show by Tada Hengsapkul at Toot Yung Gallery, Bangkok, 2011, curatorial text

NOTE 5 The Doryphoros ('Spear Bearer' in English) is one of the best-known Greek sculptures by Polykleitos. For more on the Greek canon of beauty, see also E.H. Gombrich, "The Realm of Beauty," in *The Story of Art* (Phaidon Press, 2005).

NOTE 6 Colin Blakemore and Sheila Jennett, eds, *The Oxford Companion to the Body* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

NOTE 7 Birthing Ground Not A Sound solo show at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore, 2012.

NOTE 8 Prvacki further develops the combination of manners and the body as a social presence by "merging Martha Stewart with Marina Abramovic" in her latest solo show *Neutralize Negative Feelings* at UMOCA, Salt Lake City, USA, 2013.

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ARTISTS'
BIOS



Kamolpan Chotvichai - Thailand

Kamolpan Chotvichai was born in 1986 in Bangkok where she currently resides and works. She graduated from Silpakorn University's Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Printmaking) in 2009 and she is currently undertaking her Master's degree.

Based on the Buddha's teaching on anatta (selflessness or egolessness), she challenges the limitations of paper in her artwork through the use of simple tools. One of her repertoires is the application of certain cutting techniques to dissolve her own image that is printed on paper. Chotvichai has participated in numerous exhibits and won multiple prizes and bursaries, including the first prize (printmaking) in the 58th National Exhibition of Art 2012, Thailand. Selected groups exhibitions include Reading Europe at G23 Gallery, Bangkok (2012) and the 2012 International Women Arts exhibition Lights of Women, Gwangju Museum of Art Kum Namro Wing, Metro Gallery, Korea.

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No Self, 2013

Digital C-Print and hand-cut paper, 98 x 53 cm.



Hands, 2013

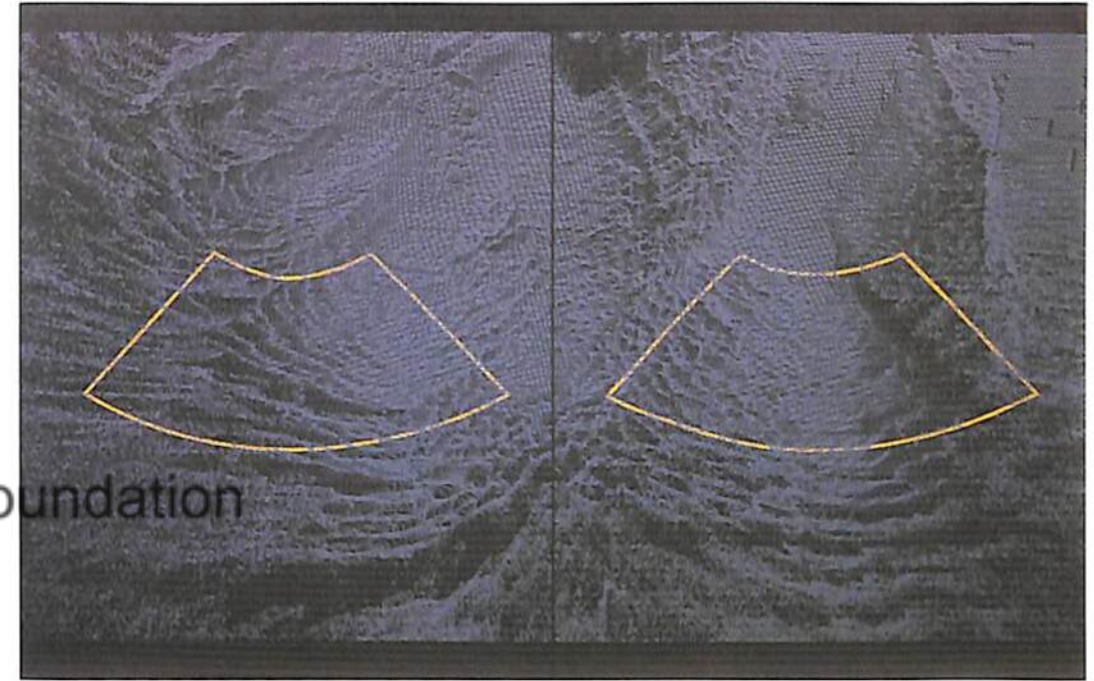
Digital C-Print and hand-cut paper, 110 x 57 cm.



Genevieve Chua – Singapore

Genevieve Chua was born in 1984 in Singapore where she currently resides. In her artistic practice Chua researches the fear of the unknown. This process involves the appropriation of Southeast Asian horror towards new narratives. These new stories are often realised as a website, installation or drawing. In 2003/4, the artist received the NAC Georgette Chen Scholarship. Chua's solo exhibitions in Singapore include Birthing Ground Not a Sound at Valentine Willie Fine Art in 2012, Adinandra Belukar at the 2011 Singapore Biennale, Child and Beast at Objectifs in 2011, As Brutal As: A Drawing Show in 2007, Raised As a Pack of Wolves at the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival in 2009, Full Moon and Foxes at The Atelier, National Museum of Singapore, in 2009. Chua also participated in shows such as Future Proof, Singapore (2012); BMW Young Asian Artists Series II, Singapore (2011); Art Project Ideas at Hiroshima MOCA, Japan (2011); Cross-Scape at the Kumho Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2011); Shadow in the Dark, Hong Kong (2011); and CUT09: FIGURE (New Photography from Southeast Asia), Kuala Lumpur/Singapore (2009). She has also developed works at residencies in Singapore Tyler Print Institute, The Banff Centre, Gyeonggi Creation Center, and C-C-C Shizuoka.

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Ultrasound #12, 2013
Acrylic and screenprint with enamel on linen
180 x 118 cm.



Tada Hengsapkul – Thailand

Tada Hengsapkul was born in 1987 in Khorat province, Thailand. He currently resides in Khorat and Bangkok. He obtained his BA in Photography in the vocational Phochang Academy, Bangkok, and has since focused his practice on photography as an immediate and spontaneous medium to capture the reality around him.

His work has been featured in several solo exhibitions including Parade at H Gallery, Bangkok (2013), No Superego at Toot Yung Gallery, Bangkok (2011) and OXYTOSIN at Sorrapong, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand (2010). Some of his group exhibitions include On the Threshold of the Senses - New Art from Southeast Asia at Tally Beck Contemporary, New York (2012); Chongqing Biennale for Young Artists in Chongqing, China (2011); SEX at Toot Yung Gallery, Bangkok (2012); Piquesque at Numthong Gallery at Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, Bangkok (2011); and City of Angels/Identity Crisis at Galerie 59 rue Rivoli, Paris, France (2011).

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Disintegrated Landscape 1, 2013
Digital printing on fine art paper
86 x 70 cm., edition 1/2



Disintegrated Landscape 3, 2013
Digital printing on fine art paper
86 x 70 cm., edition 1/2





Jeremy Hiah – Singapore

Jeremy Hiah was born in 1972 in Singapore where he resides. He has been involved in the arts since 1993. His works mostly deal with social questions, based on his personal experiences and background. As a practicing artist Hiah explores different materials and mediums, including painting, installation, performance, and collaborations with different artists in various fields.

He is an active organizer and member of The Artists Village and Sculpture Society Singapore. He was Vice President of The Artist Village in 2001 and Vice President of Sculpture Society in 2005. Hiah established Your MOTHER Gallery, Singapore, in 2004 and was the artistic director for Fetter-Field Performance Art Event in 2006 and 2012. He is the artistic director of Pulau Ubin Artist-in-Residency Program.

Hiah has exhibited and realized projects internationally, including in Thailand, China, Indonesia and Korea. His latest group exhibition is Mirror of Otherness, for the China-Singapore Video Art Exhibition in 2013.

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Thousand Hand, 2006
Lambda print on paper,
97.8 x 185.14 cm.



Paradise Terrorize Dancers, 2006
Lambda print on canvas, 182.28 x 121.92 cm.