

Rama IX Art Museum *Abstract* Foundation

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Absolute Abstract
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Absolute Abstract

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at Tadu Contemporary Art, Bangkok

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ที่หอศิลป์ตาดู, กรุงเทพฯ

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

An art exhibition by

Yanawit Kunchaethong

Thaiwijit Puangkasemsomboon

Nipan Oranniwesna

Sansern Milindasuta

Sermuk Thiensoonthorn

นิทรรศการผลงานศิลปะโดย

ญาณวิทย์ กุญแจทอง

ไทธิจิต พึ่งเกษมสมบูรณ์

นิพนธ์ โอพารนิเวศน์

สรวลเสรี มลิณทสุต

เสริมสุข เขียวสุนทร

Acknowledgments

It is my personal opinion that this exhibition includes some of the most exciting works by a number of enthusiastic, young artists who I believe will be an important part of our vibrant art scene in Thailand for many years to come. My special thanks to them for honouring Tadu by participating in this exhibition.

We are also very fortunate to have Acharn Prayura Uluchada (Nor Na Paknam) sharing his knowledge and insight with us in the accompanying essay. His contribution to the art community has indeed been a valuable asset.

This show would not have been possible without the tremendous effort put in by our Gallery Director, Khanitha Boonpan and the staff, plus the help of Sutee and Luckana Kunavichayanont. I thank them for their continuing support and dedication.

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Wanit Mekdhanasarn

Museum Foundation

The Dawn of Modern Art in Thailand

Nor Na Paknam

Towards the end of World War II an important change occurred in Thailand. This change was the dawning of a new age of appreciation and understanding of art which has since developed into a strong modern art culture where Thai artists create works drawing on international art theory and practice and their own unique history.

The evolution of modern art in Thailand has progressed continuously since the time of King Rama IV and King Rama V. This progress is revealed by both documentary and physical evidence such as the painting at Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall by a European painter and paintings at Borom Phiman Mansion within the Grand Palace, both of these works were created during the reign of King Rama V. Other artists have continued this tradition with mural paintings such as those in the main hall of Wat Rachathiwat depicting the story of Vessandara Jataka using fresco technique with clear light and shade as in European wall-painting. Also, during the reign of King Rama VI, widely known Thai painter Phraya Anusachitrakorn executed his works using oil-color technique.

Until the period of King Rama VII, such changes to both the technique and skill of mural paintings along Buddhism halls continued while similar changes occurred in the realm of applied art such as paintings of Likay folk performance and theater settings. The modern way of painting affected even the traditional Thai paintings in the foyer of Wat Sri Rattana Satsadaram. These mural paintings predominantly used the original Thai painting technique of tempura and gold leaf but the supporting elements of hills, clouds, skies, trees and water in some rooms were painted using modern techniques. Palace figures in some paintings showed perspective and light and shade as Likay theatre settings. Progressive development is noticeable if we bring the mural paintings from the main hall of Wat Phra Kao Wang Na which were created during the King Rama IV period to be compared with the mural paintings at Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram drawn during the reign of King Rama VII.

Late in the reign of King Rama IV, a painter of Wat Rat Burana-painted murals at Wat BowonNiwet and Wat Borommaniwat using glue-mixed tempera and his trees, seas, mountains and general buildings all have excellent perspective. The group sharing the same artistic frontier with Khrua In Khong have shown their skills in many places such as the main halls of: Wat Maha Phrugtharam, Wat Kanmatuyaram, Wat Pathum Wanaram, Wat Sommanat Saram and notably Wat Thongsala-gnarm. All these works capture and reveal the gradually increasing intellect and technical skill of this group of painters. Obviously, such a tide of popularity in modern art techniques cannot be blocked. This aesthetic evolution has progressed silently and profoundly, having value even in the present day.

The work of another group of artists whose work is more stylized can be viewed in the murals of Wat Phra Kaeo. The path of this group parallels that of the painters of scenery and palace settings of Likay theatre, of which the value decreases day by day.

The Thai painters who went to study Renaissance Art in Europe during the reign of King Rama V, revealed their oil painting skill through the execution of giant portraits, notably the portraits of members of the royal family adorning the walls of many palaces. Phra Soralaklilhit was assured his artistic skill matched that of western artists. His masterpiece of the figure of Venus, though a duplication of the work by Venetian painter Titian, shows the depth of his training.

The giant European impressionist painting featuring a mounted rider which was hung in the first floor lobby of the Department of Fine Arts 40 years ago is an example of the skill of the artists at that time. I have not since entered that building, when I later questioned staff about the location of the painting they said that much of the painting had been damaged. It had been removed and its location was unknown. I was unable to trace the painting further and therefore unable to establish the painters name. I believe it would have a value of more than one million baht, which is not insignificant. I wonder how it disappeared.

A significant number of imported European paintings purchased during the time of King Rama V are still on display at many palaces. An inspection and registration of these works should be undertaken to ensure that there will be no more of these disappearances, which would be most unfortunate.

Another well-known Thai painter who trained and worked throughout Europe is *Khun Patiphakphimlikit* - father of author *Jor Traipin* and a lecturer at Poh Chang College. Colleagues have talked of his paintings in the Impressionist style, with *Fua Haribhitak* particularly captivated by his oil paintings. Impressionist Art was an important gateway to the development of modern art in Thailand, inspiring Thai painters for more than 70 years.

A historical event for development within the Thai art circle was a painting exhibition held at the Japanese Cultural Center during World War II. The exhibition featured works in oil, watercolor, chalk and poster-color. The top award went to the painter of a water-color landscape.

There was another exhibition held by an artists group whose members were both painters and writers. This exhibition was after the big flood year, almost the end of World War II. This exhibition was held on the upper floor lobby of the Chalem Krung Theater and featured the work of many important artists; *Chamras Khietkong*, *Sanit Disatapundhu*, *Chalerm Nakiraks* and *Wannasit Pukavanat*. Beijing City of Past Memory a huge watercolor by *Sod Kumarohij* was included along with the important watercolor set of former Prime Minister *M.L. Seni Pramoj*, paintings of *Fua Haribhitak's* from his time in India, the refined drawings of *Wechakorn*, tempera work from *Boonyang Saensomrad* and watercolors by *Prem Saiwongse* and *Vijit Supayothin* also featured in the exhibition.

The public showed a real interest in this exhibition but it was unfortunate that the shows held by the *Chakrawat Sinlapin Group* (League of Artists) were mounted without critical screening of the works. As a result 50% of the works entered were by applied artists. These paintings were technique oriented, commercial art featuring poster-color paintings

on black paper of the swan-figure barge or female dancers with the focus on an attractive glittering effect, charcoal and chalk-color pictures duplicating the subjects of photos and the watercolor with pen drawing of *Nishiyo Yokota*. Most of these works were skill oriented, focusing on the dexterity of the artist. This combination of styles in the one exhibition led to the public, who were not familiar with fine art, to be infatuated by the technique-based orientation of commercial art. The radiance of the great watercolor by *M.L. Seni* was overshadowed by glittering works of female dancers.

Although the exhibitions of *Chakrawat Sinlapin Group* were not true to the principal of fine art exhibitions, due to the lack of selecting qualified works, their exhibitions initiated the public's interest in fine art to a certain degree. The final exhibition of the group must have been during the last year of World War II, people were depressed and their expression blocked by the war and the following suffering.

Professor Silpa Bhirasri realized the negative effect which a lack of adequate categorizing and screening of works would have on the development of a general appreciation of fine art. To promote the real value of fine art he held a painting and sculpture exhibition using Silpakorn University as its venue. The exhibition screening committee screened and divided the works into categories - sculpture, painting, photography and young children and youth art. The winners were awarded gold, silver or bronze medals and received cash awards and certificates.

This exhibition, initiated by the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture grabbed the public's attention. The screening process had eliminated so many works that they filled half a room, this artistic purity attracted the attention of many universities and their students thronged to the exhibition. Due to the dedicated effort of the top national art education institute this National Art Exhibition, as it was now called, became regarded as the premier art exhibition which would lead to the raising of the standard of fine art throughout the country. The education which the public received from following the yearly exhibition raised the level of art appreciation by guiding the viewers in their critique and analysis of the works.

These exhibitions continued to be well patronized for some years and had the welcome effect of developing in the public a wider understanding of art.

Pocket books covering international art gained widespread acceptance and were imported by many bookstores during this time. These informative books covered a wide range of art theory, detailing the national arts of many countries - China, India, France, Italy, Spain, Britain and The United States. They covered the European art movements, British scenery paintings and the portraiture of many countries. This influx of literature aided the understanding of art among the Bangkok public. Many intellectuals began listening to and collecting western classical music in the years following World War II. These works came in long-play format and were only available at a few shops in the Weong Nakorn Kasem shop-house area. Several classical music shops emerged along Charoen Krung Road such as at the shop at the end of Oriental Lane and another adjacent to the Central Post Office.

Taking their lead from the public, the Department of Fine Arts opened a performance venue close by the National Museum where classical music could be enjoyed. There was a coffee shop in the Rachathiwat area and one in the restaurant area at Wong Wian Kek, these restaurants - and many others - were meeting places for people with an artistic bent. Classical music was provided for the enjoyment of their patrons while the air was full of conversations about performances, art, classical music and opera.

In the years of 1947, 1948 and 1949, major Bangkok movie houses such as the Odien and another in the Pattanakarn area - both of which are now demolished - brought many movies to be screened such as *Gone With The Wind*, *Red Shoes* and *Rebecca* and film versions of Europe's literary classics. People in those days seemed to appreciate only high-class art. Conversations of the students focused on literature works such as *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, the elder and *Camille* by Alexandre Dumas, the younger, and the short stories of Maugham, O'Henry, Steinbeck and Chekhov. Top literature works such as *War and*

Peace and Romeo and Juliet were available in translation alongside local works such as See Phaendin, Phaendin Kong Rao of Dok Mai Sod. Chao Krung magazine and Kradueng Thong magazine from Panitchakarn Silom Publishing House regularly contained articles and comment on classical literature and movies.

Bangkok began the new decade after the war with everyone's attention on the classical arts, there was an explosion of popularity across all fields. Even the annual stage performances at Chulalongkorn University featured the classic play Salome and the writings of Omar Khayyam. The first class of technical cadets of the Cadet School at Ratchadamnoen Avenue staged Tristan and Isolde with the Royal Thai Air Force band playing music by Richard Wagner as accompaniment throughout the performance. It was an age of artistic glamour, in contrast to the depression during the previous decade due to World War II.

Investigation of the background and development of artistic taste during the late war and post-war periods reveals this change of age, which happened without pretense. The change was forced by the people stepping into the new Buddhism decade and the development of modern art in Thailand has continued strongly since that time.

Abstraction : A Life Essence

The 2540th Buddhism year began with the opening of the Golden Jubilee Exhibition at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center tracing the development of Thai modern art through five decades. This was followed by an exhibition of the abstract paintings of Pricha Arjunta and the modern paintings and colorful prints of Chavalit Soemprungsuk, both mounted at the National Gallery.

Another group of modern artists now present their works to the public, works which show the same level of innovation as *Pricha Arjunta* and *Chavalit Soemprungsuk* brought to their exhibition. These works are developed from the diverse range of abstract styles which followed the age of Impressionism. Expressionism, Fauvism, Nabis, Surrealism, Non-Figurative Art, Futurism, Pure Abstract Art, all these forms are continually developing.

The works of **Sermsuk Thiensoonthorn** are abstract, created with oil, acrylic, crayon, charcoal. They reveal brushing skill with the use of clean color and contain refined visual rhythms and tempo. Her works are characterized by a sudden movement of quick brush strokes followed by the creation of a visual atmosphere through the considered arrangement of supplementary colors. This is reminiscent of the color masters during the late 19th and early 20th century, a style which has lasted long after the color and visual revolution of the Impressionists.

Skillful brushing and drawing combined with bright color use give **Thaiwijit Puangkasemsomboon's** works an elegance, revealing the instinct of a painter who has a keen eye for balancing the manners and accents of color flows. He could also be described as a painter with excellent phrase, morale and perfect spirit. The serene and bright paintings by *Thaiwijit* in the set titled *Mindscape* - which, by general definition, are abstract - are painted using a new kind of acrylic paint, similar to oil color, with a quick brushing style. The works stimulate the viewer's emotions to a level where they can perceive a movement of mind, the subconscious and the conscious.

Yanawit Kunchaethong's works reveal an excellence in brushing technique by controlling the accent of dark colors on a white surface and showing the high-contrast of white and black crossing into overlapping colors. This brushing uses the effect of this contrast to launch viewers into seeing the value of the profound phenomenon which is intentionally hidden. In some works he arranges the spaces of white by providing margins between the areas to simply reveal the perfect composition.

Yanawit also creates through other techniques and processes notably his monoprint technique which is reminiscent of textile design, the chiaroscuro and margin work reveal the strength of the background surface. The viewing of these works is akin to listening to a piano sonata, having the effect of focusing the mind.

Sansern Milindasuta, a modern painter, wrote this note for an earlier exhibition programme: *"Abstract really exists, hiding itself in the inside of all matter. Abstraction is beyond emotion, imagination and creativity. It is*

like a life essence, silent, flexible and strong, a perfect universal. Abstraction is a condition of time and a force of both the birth of perfection and of decay. It is accessible only through the faith and abstraction of the viewer."

This statement from the creator of this excellent set of paintings carries the power to inspire the viewer. Sansern produces his paintings in a dark range of color and provides some definition with circular or modern lines reminiscent of the view through a microscope. His expression can be compared to an intense sonata or concerto movement.

Nipan Oranniwesna presents a new style of paintings in the form of graphic art combined with mixed media. Some pieces draw inspiration from the Thai script, in particular the characters "tor tao" and "kor kon". He borrows these designs and works to refine them according to modern art ways.

His lines in some works, both straight and curved parallels, are reminiscent of Japanese Zen stone garden design. Other works are inspired by amplified hand-print figures, which results in a sacred effect. This is somewhat like the art work imitating The Lord Buddha's footprints during the Sukhothai period. The amplified scale of the lines of the footprints bring about the same impression as the decades long Nasda Plain in Peru.

One of his mixed media works was built from placed materials and a rectangular table the position of which created a vertical line in harmony with a convex plate mounted on the wall. The work shows the relative similarity of two figures sharing the same geometric pattern, built from a combination of materials which share a visual similarity and have the ability to influence one another.

A selection of the works made in Land of The Rising Sun comprise of line amplified from human hand prints and dry Japanese gourd. The gourd has its own specific shape resulting from natural creation and yet shares the same condition as the hand-prints having a relation to psycho-analysis and a part of metaphysical thought. When biologists analyse the shape of snail shells or the shells of the ocean crustaceans by splitting the

shells apart, they see the beauty of the internal structure. In the shell of the nautilus we can see Grecian ionic columns, these are clearly sources of inspiration.

Nipan splits the gourd revealing two different figures from the same origin, having the same amazing visual aesthetic. The curved and convex structure of the gourd inspire the artist to explore the new dimension. The relation between space with strange forms, sizes and linings appears to be a symbol or amazing phenomenon of some subject, prolonged in its condition which our mind can measure or moving into the eternal condition.

What is this condition? Jackson Pollock, a prominent American painter, developed an abstract style which attempted to express feelings and subconscious thoughts through the actual act of painting. He worked in three stages the first being driven by inspiration while the following stages related to what had gone before to create relationships between the lines, shapes and colors. In the final stage the aesthetic power emerges from contemplation and immersion in the visual-scape. Nipan's works are similar that they join the brain, heart and instinct of art together to create an artistic phenomenon.

The visual effect of the split gourd is quite powerful. Nipan uses this in one of his works featuring white and brown background, a constructed wall of different angles, the ceiling strung with the monotonous figures of different sized gourds and a white wooden plate on the ground. This work captivates the viewers by its aesthetic power. It has both the element of existence and bordering revealing the ego-centric condition of humankind. Due to the installation technique this work is also surrounded by eternity moving the viewer into a contemplative space.

The picture of a simple gourd, split in two, one side filled with rice grains while the other has only a dry leaf shows the contrast between two conditions - fertility and melancholy - and raises the general issue of comparison.