



DISPARITY

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

Curator: Rathsaran Sireekan

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

DISPARITY

Solo Exhibition by

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

24 October – 21 November, 2015

Curator: Rathsaran Sireekan



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, DISPARITY, by the Thai artist Jirapat Tatsanasomboon. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 24 October – 21 November 2015.

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon is well known as an artist who uses iconography from the traditional Thai narrative *Ramakien* (derived from the Indian *Ramayana*) and juxtaposes it with Western icons to show East-vs-West and Modern-vs-Traditional interactions. In the past, he often inserted readily identifiable Thai iconography as a commentary on Thai society and re-interpreted the celebrated master paintings. His heroes have been depicted in a distinctive Thai setting and are often seen interacting with traditional Thai heroes and mythical figures.

In a new series of work, Jirapat Tatsanasomboon comes back with a new *Ramakien* Pop series. This time, he delves deep into the contrastive characters of two well-known figures in the Thai appropriation and expansion of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Pitting *Nonthok* against *Hanuman*—the former permanently awkward and the latter endlessly suave—Jirapat is, once again, referencing the current Thai political affairs. While one side—with his unquestionable allegiance to Rama and the favourable turn of the tide—always come across impressively, the other ends up a perpetual wrongdoer. The artist's choice to attend to these two well-known *Ramakien* figures as stock rather than round characters, in this series, points to the superficiality and unsustainability of the current political situation.

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon, 44, is the only Thai artist included in the recent book by the international publisher Thames & Hudson – *100 Painters of Tomorrow*. Thus, he has been vetted by international curators as one of the most promising artists of his generation.

Jirapat holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Silpakorn University. Apart from Thai exhibitions he has also been widely exhibited - in Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, the USA, India, Argentina, Monaco and China (Olympics, 2008). His paintings were displayed at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore in 2012 in the exhibition Andy Warhol: *15 Minutes Eternal*. His works regularly sell at international auctions.

I take this opportunity to thank Jirapat Tatsanasomboon for his collaboration and Rathsararn Sireekan for his work as curator.

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DISPARITY

Rathsaran Sireekan

London/Bangkok

In practising his intercultural art, Jirapat Tatsanasomboon has remained committed to the use of the *Ramakien*—the Thai appropriation and expansion of the Indian epic *Ramayana*—as a pivotal element in his work. However, based on this commitment, he keeps finding innovative ways to make use of this grand narrative which underpins the power structure in the Siamese/Thai society.¹

Jirapat's artistic practice ranges from merely using figures from the *Ramakien* in his early works to engaging with the Thai epic's narrative depth in his mid-career executions and attending to the psychology of a peripheral character in the *Ramakien* called 'Nonthok' in his mature phase. This psychological exploration of the narrative enables him to problematise existing power relations in the Thai society and question the source of the socio-political conflict-turned-crisis which has recently been suppressed by another coup d'état followed by another military government.

In this new series of work which marks a complete two decades of his artistic career, Jirapat revisits the narrative of the *Ramakien*, however not without a critical intervention into it. Approaching the Thai epic from a new angle, he brings to attention the uncanny parallel between how the *Ramakien*'s narrative trajectory and contemporary Thai politics similarly constitute the meaning of 'difference'—between what is good and what is bad — based on flat characterisation.

In *Disparity*, Jirapat extracts from the variety of Hanuman's characters and centres on his role as 'Soldier of the King'. As opposed to this, Nonthok is brought back once again in Jirapat's visual narrative as a member of the working class who, upon an acquisition of power, has transgressed class boundary, threatening the *deva* clan.² Based on the *Ramakien*'s flat characterisation, Hanuman, the Soldier of the King, is, on one hand, treated as *unconditionally* suave. Nonthok—represented in the narrative as a bad example of how an ignorant person misuses his newly-acquired power—is, on the other hand, advocated as a *perpetual* wrongdoer. Pitting Hanuman against Nonthok, while one side—with his unquestionable allegiance to Rama and the favourable turn of the tide—always come across impressively, the other is projected as a perennial offender to the legal and moral system.

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Pivoting on this stark dichotomisation of the *Ramakien* narrative which has underpinned power relations in the Siamese/Thai society, Jirapat not only weaves a visual narrative highly resonant with the current political situation in Thailand, but bravely asks if such a reductive 'disparity' which buttresses the Thai politics is responsibly conceived. His critique of this coarsely-derived knowledge and conception of 'difference'—what is good as opposed to what is bad — points to the superficiality and unsustainability of the current political situation on which the artist remarked 'the violence of [unjust] suppression only awaits eruption'.

Central to this current series is thus the interplay between flat characterisation of the two contrastive characters from the *Ramakien* and Jirapat's own intervention into such static typologies. That is, while some works in the series inscribe Hanuman as a noble character, others posit Nonthok as base and unworthy of love. In contrast to this, other pieces in the series seek to subvert such a flat characterisation, calling into question the one-sidedness of these characters, injecting dynamism and ambiguity into a reductive derivation of 'difference'.

On one hand, works such as *Power and Might (after R. Lichtenstein)*; *I'm a Hero*; *Leave Me Alone! (II) (after Michelangelo)*; *Love Found (after W-A. Bouguereau)* and *Surreal Love (after J. Koons)* confirm Hanuman's military might and his unquestionable loyalty to King Rama, hence our *unconditional* love and admiration for him. On the other hand, *Love Lost* portrays Nonthok as a perennial failure, unworthy of attention and love—someone whom Cupid's arrows cannot even penetrate—a foil character of the ever popular Hanuman.

Against this flat characterisation, *Special Me*, *Love Me Please* and *Lotus in My Mind*, similar to works in *The Desires of Nonthok* series (2012), attend to the psychology of Nonthok. These three works resist the *Ramakien*'s narrative trajectory which seeks to reduce this peripheral character as an unalterably ignoble character unworthy of a fair trial and judgement. Whereas *Lotus in My Mind* portray Nonthok as capable of contemplation and spiritual cultivation, *Special Me* and *Love Me Please* exteriorise Nonthok's desire to be loved and admired—an intervention which creates a level playing field.

Perhaps two most intriguing pieces in the *Disparity* series are *Circle of Life (after D. Hirst)* and *Love Triangle (after R. Indiana)* due to the internal tension between the static and the dynamic which these two works harbour. At a quick glance, *Circle of Life (after D. Hirst)* condones Hanuman's unconditional suavity while *Love Triangle (after R. Indiana)* reiterates Nonthok's position as a perpetual outsider looking in with jealousy. However, against this static characterisation lies hidden Jirapat's astute design of dynamism achieved through his signature mobilisation of intertextuality which characterises his poetics since the beginning of his career in mid 1990s.

¹ See Rathsaran Sireekan, *Intercultural Journey —The Art of Jirapat Tatsanasomboon* (Thavibu Gallery, 2014), 11–13.

² For the background of the story of Nonthok as the genesis of the Thai epic *Ramakien* and its political implications as explored in Jirapat's work, see Sireekan, 50.

Modeled after Damien Hirst's butterfly monochrome paintings, especially *She Loves You* (1997), the meaning of Jirapat's *Circle of Life (after D. Hirst)* pivots on this most recognisable motif which keeps recurring in Hirst's corpus of works. According to Hirst, the appeal of butterflies is generated chiefly by the appearance of life they retain in death.³ Dynamism of life cycle and transience is, therefore, entrenched in the symbolism of butterflies used in Jirapat's *Circle of Life (after D. Hirst)*. It subverts the perennial strength of the Soldier of the King. Hirst's further explanation for the repeated appearance of the motif of butterflies in his work—that "I think rather than be personal you have to find universal triggers: everyone's frightened of glass, everyone's frightened of sharks, everyone loves butterflies."⁴—when read together with the notion of *trompe l'oeil* imbued in this symbolism can lend an undermining effect on the public's unquestionable affection and admiration for Hanuman, the Soldier of the King, the subject of this painting. The subtext engendered from this intertextual motif is that insidiousness lies hidden in what appears to be beautiful and popular.

The eye-deceiving effect is also mobilised in *LOVE Triangle (after R. Indiana)*. A clever expansion of the *Love and Lust* series (2008), this painting is where Jirapat aptly picked and applied the episode of the *Ramakien* called 'The Impersonation of Sita' where illusion is key. The viewers who are familiar with the narrative of the *Ramakien* will recognise that the woman Hanuman is wooing in Robert Indiana's LOVE print is not Sita, the consort of Rama, as it appears. On the contrary, she is Benyagai, Ravana's niece, who has been instructed to disguise as the dead Sita and who can be found in the vicinity of the humanoid camp so that Rama's campaign against Ravana's city of Longka is aborted. Similar to the symbolism of butterflies in *Circle of Life (after D. Hirst)*, the object of love and admiration in this painting is not what it seems. This eye-deceiving effect is further enhanced by the technique of meta-painting (a painting within a painting) — which Jirapat used for the first time since the beginning of his artistic career—to create a distance between art which is signified here as artifice and illusion as opposed to life as reality and veracity. Together with *Circle of Life (after D. Hirst)*, *LOVE Triangle (after R. Indiana)* challenges any easy reduction and derivation of the notion of 'disparity' which underpins love and hatred — the two pivotal emotions in politics anywhere.

3 <http://www.damienhirst.com/she-loves-you>

4 Damien Hirst cited in Damien Hirst: I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One. Always, Forever, Now (Booth-Clibborn Editions, Reduced edition, 2005): 132.

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Love Me Please! 2014 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 100 cm



Lotus in my Mind, 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm

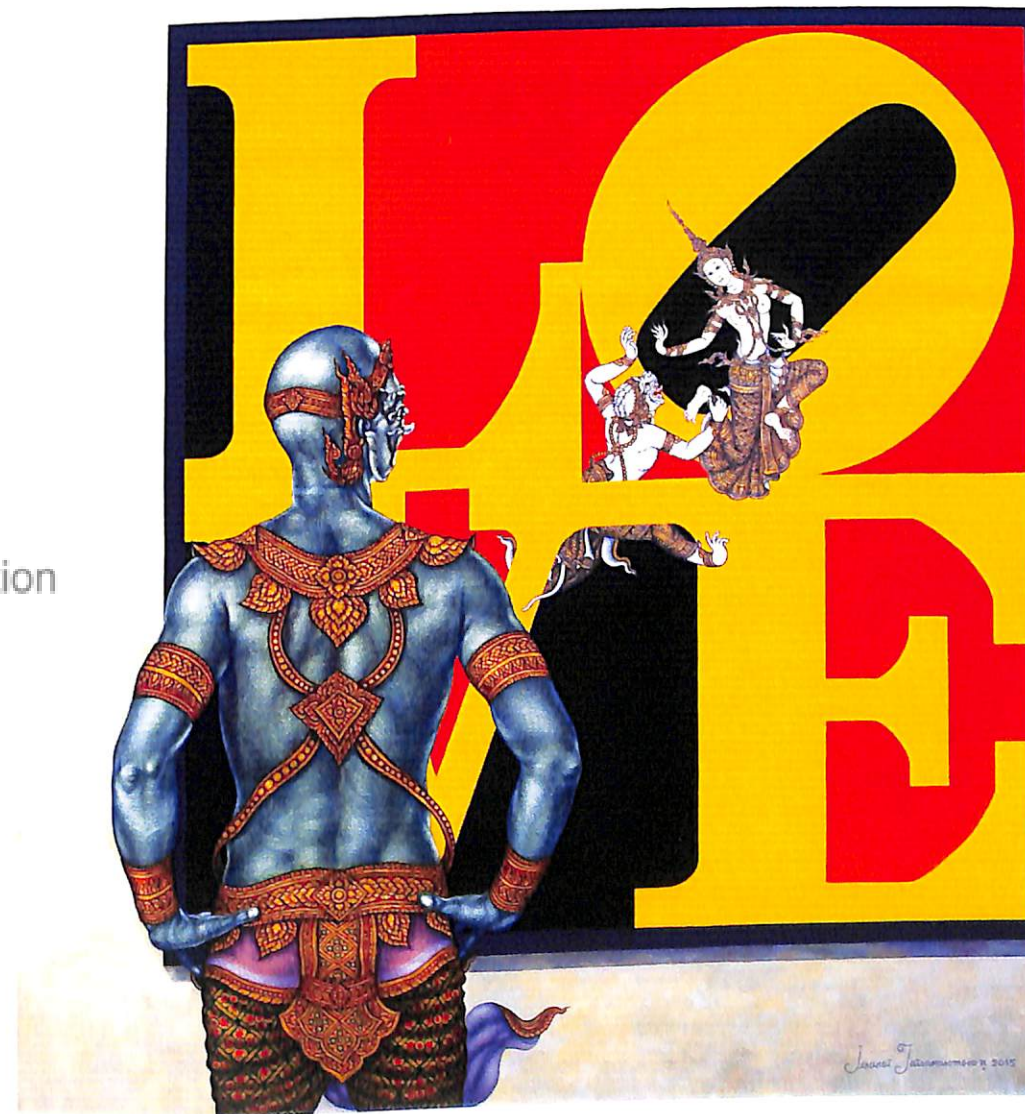
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Love Lost (after R. Sanzio), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 120 x 150 cm



Love Found (after W-A. Bouguereau), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 120 x 150 cm



LOVE Triangle (after R. Indiana), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 147 cm



Circle of Life (after D. Hirst), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



I'm a Hero, 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 130 x 100 cm



Power and Might (after R. Lichtenstein), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm

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My Girl No. 5007 (after P. Picasso), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 120 x 150 cm



Surreal Love (after J. Koons), 2015 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm

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Leave Me Alone! II (after Michelangelo), 2014 | Acrylic on canvas | 130 x 100 cm