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Korakrit Arunanondchai

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by Hans Ulrich Obrist

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Introducing



Korakrit Arunanondchai

Interview by
Hans Ulrich Obrist

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HANS ULRICH OBRIST What does being an artist mean to you? How did it all start?

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI I grew up in a middle-class Thai family in Bangkok. The first real artwork that I saw was Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) at the Tate Modern in London when I was 16 years old, and then I saw works by Young British Artists at the Saatchi Gallery. Subsequently, I realized that I could actually become an artist. It was the first time I saw art as being useful for society, bringing people together to experience something together. After this trip I went back to Thailand and began to make art seriously before departing to study at Rhode Island School of Design. I pursued a BFA in design there and somehow ended up doing graphic design and printmaking before I just completely switched into making paintings and installations.

HUO Who are the artists who influenced you?

KA My mother is definitely my hero. I like how she embodies Western dogmatism but in the body of a Thai woman with Thai goals and beliefs. And at the end, I aspired to be a teacher because of her—because I think the best possible form of art is teaching; it generates more. Rirkrit Tiravanija is also one of my heroes, at least since I interned with him. James Leary is another one. We've been exchanging ideas over the past few years and I ended up pursuing some of them. He got me into making videos and encouraged me to transition from painting to video.

HUO You grew up with the computer. When were you born?

KA I was born in 1986. I first learned how to paint using Microsoft Paint. I've now come to appreciate the great benefit of being able to press Ctrl+Z and undo past actions in those digital paintings. This has

helped to shape my attitude towards painting, and memory, and all that good stuff.

HUO What were your earliest paintings that you no longer consider to be student works? Where does your catalogue raisonné begin?

Biography

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI (b. 1986, Bangkok) lives and works in Bangkok and New York City. He attended the Bangkok Christian College and received his International Baccalaureate from the New International School of Thailand. He had two solo exhibitions at CLEARING Gallery in New York and Brussels and was featured in the group show "Double Life" at Sculpture Center, New York.

Current & Forthcoming

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI's forthcoming exhibitions include "Digital Expressionism" at Susan Geiss Company, New York, opening 5 September, "Painting with History in a room filled with men with funny names 2" at Bill Brady KC, Kansas City, opening 13 September and a solo presentation with CLEARING at the Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain, Paris, in October.

KA My thesis for my undergraduate degree was probably the beginning. It was a collection of paintings and sculptures I had made throughout that year installed in one tiny room, and a performance within the space. Painting was important to me because I wanted to make art that would work both here and within Thai culture, and I wanted my audience in Thailand to be art students, to be the younger people who could still take something and change it. I think I stopped painting because I feel like a lot of people who are a little bit older than me are making post-conceptual art, but I don't feel like there's many painters in Thailand who I can look at, who have a renewed conception of painting.

HUO And how does performance connect [to your paintings and installations]?

KA After working with Rirkrit during my junior year in college, I was big on thinking that everything was relational aesthetics. But now it seems that when doing an exhibition, one just simply has to take into account every single layer of construction that makes for the experience of the artwork. By this, I mean the space, context, location, time, sound, smell, writing, documentation and so on. So in terms of performance nowadays, I merely think of it as simply the actions done in the space of the exhibition, as the energy from actions can oftentimes activate the space.

Before I was an artist, I was a rapper in Thailand. There's a high you can get from performances, and I think my practice takes me through this journey. At the end I transform through it. When Rirkrit Tiravanija visited my studio at Columbia he wasn't very happy about my work. He told me to go back to Thailand to figure stuff out. Maybe even become a monk. I was really considering it. You know, the year you turn twenty-five [in Thailand] is supposed to be an unlucky year for men, and you either become a monk or vegetarian to balance your bad luck. So I was going to become a monk that summer [between the first and second years of my MFA], but then my grandparents got sick and I decided that it was a bit selfish to go hide in a temple while they were ill, so I went back to spend the whole summer with them and record everything that happened. This was the beginning of my video practice.

HUO A lot of your work that I've seen recently on Instagram has fire in it, no?

KA I made *Untitled (History Paintings)* (2013) by bleaching denim and setting it on fire while someone takes a photo of that performance. The photo is then placed behind the hole where the burn happened, so it's like a picture of history that somehow, while the leftover denim from the



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Untitled (History Painting), 2013

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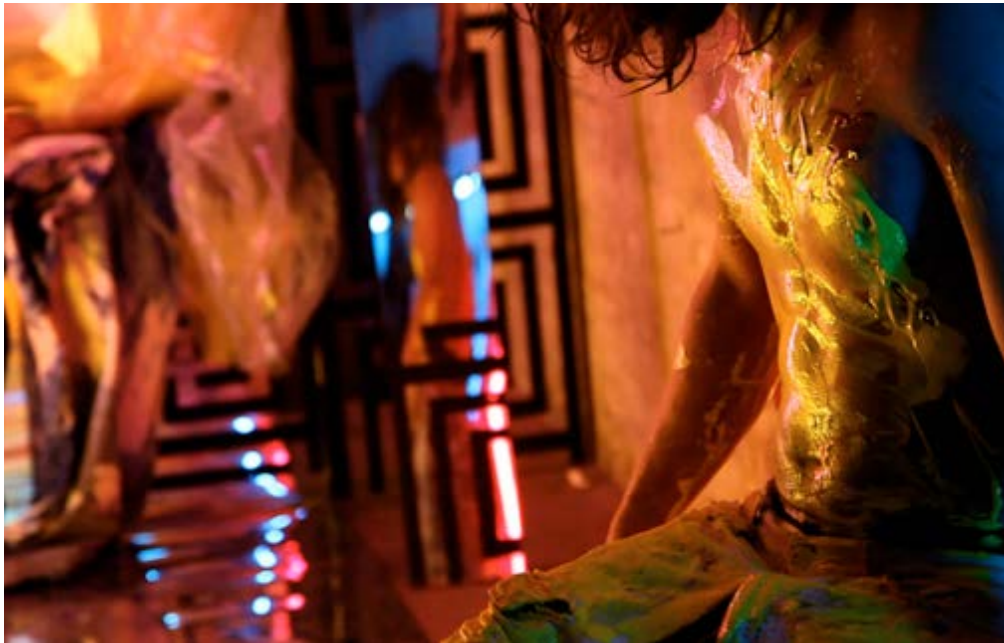


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2556, video still, 2013



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2011, 2011



action makes a new present. This is perhaps my painting analogy to what Ctrl+Z was in Microsoft Paint or Photoshop. You can see that when these paintings get re-photographed as documentation sometimes, it's confusing whether the painting is on fire at the moment or not. It's like an object that gets constantly photographed and circulated around the Internet; these paintings are confusing. Memories are confusing, especially when the memory is of light and gas and heat.

HUO What's the connection between your work and themes like climate change, extinction, Hurricane Sandy?

KA *2012-2555* (2012) originally started as a response to the really bad flood that happened in 2011 in Bangkok in combination with the fear of the end of the world and the year 2012. The video was structured around these "screenings"

that my grandparents and I would have throughout the year. On my end of the narrative, I was building up to this moment when the world was going to end and we were going to go to heaven or hell (as in the Christian belief). Whereas on my grandparents' end they were simply just living. There was also a year's worth of artwork I made, shown in relationship to the transformation of an unused part of the garden in my house into a home for the elderly. I went back to Thailand three times to make this project. I would shoot my grandparents and then show it here in America, and I would shoot that, and then I would show it to them back in Thailand. I like how taking the video back and forth somehow connected me to being here and there.

HUO So you came back to rapping [with this video]?

KA Yeah, it's kind of romantic, but I thought it would be nice to sing a rap song addressing the audience at the end of the video. Here is the chorus:

*Kiss me when i'm young
Love me when i'm gone
Miss me when i'm dead
And keep me in your head
This is the perfect picture
This how dreams are made
Love is in the air
Everything is great*

KA Anyway, after the ending I decided to make this one-video-a-year thing a trilogy. *2012-2555* was like the death, as well as the beginning, and the next one would be *2556* (2013).

HUO And your show at SculptureCenter?

KA I showed *2556* (2013) at SculptureCenter. The installation has two video channels and takes cues from the first installation (*2012-2555*). One of the channels is a re-performance with all the performers from the video in the actual installation. In this video the theme is purgatory, so after death I'm stuck in purgatory. In real life I was at a residency called Skowhegan. I was stuck in this place, and the only reason I was there was to be with these other artists and to figure out what my practice should be. When I started the project there was a Thai woman named Duangjai Jansaonoi who did this body painting performance with her shirt off on *Thailand's Got Talent*. It sparked a big controversy for the show, but also made it very popular. For once, people in the media were questioning what art was and it made me really excited. It was a super famous, on-the-front-page-of-the-news kind of thing. Then it got even more complicated because they discovered that the program organizers had paid her to perform in order to boost their rating and she was actually a go-go dancer in real life.



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In the midst of all this, a very famous Thai modernist painter, Chalermchai Kositpipat, was invited on national television to make his judgment on whether this was art or not. He concluded that it was, in fact, very bad art and supported his logic by an argument stating that, had it been done by a Western master, it would have possessed the beauty and masterfulness that this performance lacked. I was disappointed by this answer and wanted to provide perhaps a different one with my video *2556*. In the beginning of the video, I started out with a text from Silpa Bhirasri, an Italian sculptor who moved to Thailand in the 1930s and was pretty much credited with having started modern art in Thailand. He founded Silpakorn University, the main art academy in Thailand. The text was titled "The Definition of the Artist." I presented this text and the whole *Thailand's Got*

Talent body painting situation to some performers at the residency and together we came up with a series of performances that became the video.

Author

HANS ULRICH OBRIST is Co-director of the Serpentine Gallery, London. Obrist has curated over 250 exhibitions worldwide. His recent publications include *A Brief History of Curating*, *Project Japan: Metabolism*, *Talks with Rem Koolhaas* and *AI Wei Wei Speaks*.

HUO Do you have unrealized projects?

KA My unrealized project right now is the third video in the trilogy, my feature film. It's based on a temple in Thailand called Dhammakaya, which in my opinion is quite similar to a Thai Buddhist version of Scientology. I think of it as a big,

successful, hyper-capitalist lifestyle company. Millions and millions of dollars go into it—like people can literally buy points to go to heaven. The temple looks like a spaceship, and every aspect of this company is very well organized. Last summer they came out with a lecture saying how Steve Jobs died and joined their religion in the afterlife. I am super interested in unpacking the area where Apple and this temple cross in a Venn diagram. I am currently doing research and will be visiting this temple this summer. It's a long-term project and will probably take a few years to produce, but I am very much looking forward to it.

All images courtesy of the artist and CLEARING, New York/Brussels



Painting with history in a room filled with men with funny names, 2013
Photography by Dora Budor