



## *The Young Artist Seducing the Art World with Haunting Films*

Artsy, August 2019  
(author: Alina Cohen)

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# ARTSY

Like a ghost straddling the realms of the living and dead, **L**Korakrit Arunanondchai mediates his Thai and American identities. His work explores problems that have touched both his native country, and more intimately, his Thai family. The 32-year-old artist is having a big year, across four continents. His newest film, a collaboration with artist Alex Gvojic, titled *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5* (2018), is on view at the Venice Biennale through November.

The three-channel film features news footage of last year's Tham Luang rescue in which divers saved a Thai soccer team from a cave where they'd been trapped for weeks—spliced together with shots of the artist playing a laser harp amidst an eerie ensemble in a forest, a dance by the performance artist boychild, a veterinarian primed to operate on a rabbit, and the artist's grandmother in a hospital bed. Green lights flash throughout different segments, loosely binding the disparate elements.



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“The new piece is about invisible systems,” Arunanondchai said. “Things that feel like ghosts, and occupy certain spaces of superstition. I wanted to acknowledge that as real, even if it’s a story. Storytelling is real. It’s part of reality-making.”

On a rainy May morning in New York, I met Arunanondchai at his Chinatown apartment. The artist donned a floral mesh outfit and sunglasses, his dyed hair flowing in waves. He told me about a calendar he’d made, charting out upcoming shows, which are booked through next September. Then, he narrowed in on one of the recurring metaphors in his work: ghosts.

In October 2018, Arunanondchai organized a Bangkok video and performance festival called Ghost:2561. It included artist Jon Wang’s video about transgender spirit mediums in Burma, which screened at the Jim Thompson House Museum—a space devoted to the eponymous American silk trader and former intelligence officer who worked in Thailand, before mysteriously disappearing in Malaysia in 1967. Leading up to the screening, Arunanondchai told me, “some really unfortunate events happened that some people could interpret as supernatural.” A tree branch fell on a guard; television screens didn’t work. Arunanondchai’s crew performed a common animistic ceremony in the house to ask for permission to show the film. Afterwards, everything functioned just fine.



Korakrit Arunanondchai, *No History in a room filled with people with funny names 5*, 2018. © Korakrit Arunanondchai 2019. Courtesy the artist; Carlos / Ishikawa, London; Clearing, New York; Bangkok City City, Bangkok.

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For *No history*, Arunanondchai conducted research in Thailand about mythology and war. He told me about Thailand's mysterious "black site" prison, established by the American government to torture and interrogate subjects. Though American and Thai officials have denied its existence, it entered the news when Gina Haspel, who may have been connected to the site, became the CIA director in 2018. Arunanondchai recalled a Southeast Asian legend of a ghost that lurked in a forest, making American soldiers sick. For the artist, the spirits who reject standard notions of history and death signify a hidden resistance.

Arunanondchai noted that American soldiers stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War were known to project films in the middle of Thai forests. Locals heard the mysterious noises and images and attributed them to ghosts. After the soldiers left, they gave the technology to Thai monks, who began screening their own films for the benefit of the spirits they believed in

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked Arunanondchai. He coyly threw the question back at me: "Do you believe in ghosts?"

Whether or not Arunanondchai actually believes in the occult, it's served his art practice well. In addition to showing in Ralph Rugoff's "May You Live in Interesting Times" at the Venice Biennale, he's featured in the Whitney Biennial, and in a few months, will show in biennials in Istanbul and Singapore, plus New York's Performa. This international attention evidences curators' confidence in the artist's ability to capture the zeitgeist.

Arunanondchai's multidisciplinary art practice evokes club culture, uniting queer, multicultural, salient ideas with video footage, sometimes made by drones. His titles often include the phrase "no history," nodding to where his interests lie—in myth-making, oral storytelling, and previously untold narratives.

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“We’ve been interested in Krit as someone who’s rethinking how we can experience time-based media,” Whitney Museum curator Jane Panetta told me. She and Rujeko Hockley, who co-organized the Whitney Biennial, agree that Arunanondchai is “expanding the definition of who is an American artist.” He inserts his Thai heritage into his work, while grounding it in his American experience and education.



Korakrit Arunanondchai, *with history in a room filled with people with funny names 4*, 2017. © Korakrit Arunanondchai 2019. Courtesy the artist; Carlos / Ishikawa, London; Clearing, New York; Bangkok City City, Bangkok.

For their show, Panetta and Hockley selected an entry in Arunanondchai’s film cycle, *with history in a room filled with people with funny names 4* (2017). One focus of the piece is Arunanondchai’s grandmother, who suffers from dementia. The artist shows her at home, stacking objects, and in a hospital bed, surrounded by family. This footage is combined with a head-spinning variety of elements: He focuses on a South African safari, a Trump protest, a birthday celebration, and the death of the Thai king. “There’s always a visual storytelling part that feels like a dream sequence or a ritual that all the other experiences nest in or spring from,” Arunanondchai explained.



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Arunanondchai was part of the group of artists who called for the removal of their works from the Whitney Biennial on July 19th, due to Safariland CEO Warren Kanders's role as vice chairman on the Whitney Museum board. Since Kanders resigned on July 25th, the artists issued a new statement asserting that their works may stay on view.



Korakrit Arunanondchai, *No History in a room filled with people with funny names 5*, 2018. © Korakrit Arunanondchai 2019. Courtesy the artist; Carlos / Ishikawa, London; Clearing, New York; Bangkok City City, Bangkok.

At the Venice Biennale, *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5* is showing in a darkened room at the Arsenale. Stuffed rabbits, like the ones that appear in the film at his grandmother's hospital bedside, also rested on the floor of the theater. A nearby installation featured a laser harp and a sculpture of a figure of ambiguous gender, submerged in green light, seashells, and tree branches.

Arunanondchai's uncanny ability to merge otherworldly subject matter with elements of contemporary society is particularly evident in *No history*. The piece can feel daunting in scope. But Arunanondchai captures viewers' attention with a music video quality that persists throughout his film oeuvre. Ghosts—familial, cultural, personal, and sonic—hover at the margins. Arunanondchai lingers just long enough on each segment to keep the audience engaged; the soundtrack features techno beats that hauntingly build.

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It's fitting that Arunanondchai began his career in the music industry, as a teenage rapper of some repute throughout Thailand. When that career didn't take off, he moved to the States to attend the Rhode Island School of Design for his bachelors and received an MFA in 2012 from Columbia University, where he worked with artist Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Yet his origins continue to influence his art practice. For the new film, Arunanondchai told me he opted for the laser harp because playing the instrument feels like making a sculpture. Music, technology, and visual art are perpetually present. Other sounds in the video derive from a tape of his grandparents—he amplified and extracted the background noise, inserting it into the work like a phantom trace of past footage.

For the 2015 work *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3*, Arunanondchai filmed himself and an entourage in a pseudo-rap video. Dressed in torn jeans and a denim jacket with his chest exposed, he sings about “Bangkok, city city,” while images of coconuts, elephants, monkeys, a waterfall, high rises, and a boxing ring flash across the screen. He interspersed his film with samples of found footage, shots of exoticized ideals about Thailand and the realities of urban life in the country.

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Arunanondchai's unique perspective won him rapid success. His work was included in a group show at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, in 2012, the same year Clearing Gallery began representing him. (He now also shows with London's Carlos/Ishikawa and Bangkok's Bangkok CityCity Gallery.) In 2013, artists Bradford Kessler and AA Bronson invited Arunanondchai to participate in their two-day performance exhibition, "Triskaidekaphobia (definition: an extreme fear of the number 13)," at the now-shuttered Lower East Side gallery Parade Ground.

Through the exhibition, Arunanondchai met performance artist boychild. With a stage persona inspired by California drag communities, boychild often dances topless, sometimes coated in paint, baring her trans body. Arunanondchai recalls their connection as "pretty organic." The pair have collaborated ever since.

"Korakrit and boychild were both expressing the spiritual essence of spontaneity that channeled something animalistic yet ghostly at a moment when so much young art was concerned with economic, internet, and corporate aesthetics," Kessler wrote via email. He met Arunanondchai in New York in 2012. In his exhibition, Kessler wanted to channel "sexy shapeshifters and that night time energy" into an exhibition space that felt like a haunted house.

Klaus Biesenbach was another early supporter of Arunanondchai. He gave the artist a solo show at MoMA PS1 in 2014. Arunanondchai set up tie-dyed pillows on which the audience could lounge while watching his film *2012–2555* (2012). A series of paintings, inspired by a *Thailand's Got Talent* performer who made paintings with her bare breasts, served as the backdrop.

Such colorful, experiential elements are one of Arunanondchai's hallmarks and have become more successful over time. Embedded elements of pop culture and the supernatural undermine our conceptions of gender, nationality, reality, and mortality.



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Portraits of Korakrit Arunanondchai by Lelanie Foster for Artsy.

Hockley said that she and Panetta were struck by Arunanondchai's "oscillating between the personal and micro, and the global and the macro, and the question of humanity writ large."

Throughout our conversation, Arunanondchai returned to *No history*, circuitously turning over ideas, looping around its different elements and themes. He said "there's this sort of 'no history,' or the lack of real understanding because there's not enough information around something. And yet it possesses you," he continued, "because there's nothing else to grab onto." •