



Korakrit Arunanondchai

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Art Matters | Korakrit Arunanondchai, the Rapping, Body-Painting Free Spirit of the Art World



Helga Traxler for The New York Times

“This summer while I was in Thailand, I made a fake road movie with my twin,” [Korakrit Arunanondchai](#) says. “He plays me and I play him; I play a Manchester United fan and he plays, like, a denim painter. We go on a soul-searching journey together.”

The voyage is still underway; it has become the basis for a diverse body of work on and off screen. In the universe of the 27-year-old artist, stories, people, actions and ideas repeat themselves in a stream of consciousness that feels both personal and mythical. Born and raised in Bangkok, where he was a rapper before studying for his MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Arunanondchai now lives in New York and has become a fixture of the city’s rising generation of artists. With his oversized glasses, floppy hair often twisted into braids and a consistently sunny, winsome vibe, he’s a kind of countercultural sprite — particularly when he’s disrobed and using his body as a paintbrush (he was inspired by a female go-go dancer who became a sensation doing the same on “Thailand’s Got Talent”).

But the way he processes history and serves up compacted, catch-all reflections of it in his work is distinctly millennial. His “Untitled (History Paintings),” which have registered a sharp uptick in value over the last couple months, consist of stretched denim, tie-dyed with bleach, burnt and patched up with photographic renderings of the very flames used to scorch them. Not only are there a lot of visible layers, but each canvas contains performative elements, a fitting touch for an artist who constantly careens from performances to videos to objects. Apart



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from the artist himself and the biographical content an audience can project onto his practice, one of the through-lines of his oeuvre is, in fact, denim. “There was suddenly a global influx of people wearing it, and I like that everyone liked it but it isn’t special, it’s normal and democratic.”

Of course, encoding a painting with live gestures is precisely what the macho masters of Abstract Expressionist painting were famous for. Arunanondchai evokes them in his video “Painting With History in a Room Filled With Men With Funny Names” and its sequel “Painting With History in a Room Filled With Men With Funny Names 2” — which is the movie shot in Thailand with his twin brother. At a performance of the same name, held earlier this month during Art Basel Miami Beach at MoMA PS1’s annual party at the Delano Beach Club, a squadron of dancers dressed as lifeguards banded together to wrest the artist’s supine body from the pool. There were live demonstrations of denim painting and body painting, a rap interlude (“Kiss me when I’m young / Love me when I’m gone / Miss me when I’m dead / And keep me in your head”), smoke, lights and a stirring bit of kinetic theater by the performance artist Boychild.

Next spring, at an exhibition at PS1, Arunanondchai will reprise many of the elements he explored in Miami. “All the pieces I’ve been doing lately I consider almost trailers building up to what will be the complete work,” he says. As with any road movie, getting there is half the fun.