



CLEARING

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Stepping into Korakrit Arunanondchai's exhibition "Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3," one had the sensation of entering the set of a music video, an elaborately contrived nightclub, an "imagineered" theme park gone off the rails, a temple decked out in polychrome ritual paraphernalia—or indeed some synthesis of all of these. In other words: a spectacularized Gesamtkunstwerk.

Filling two spaces—one associated with the body and one with the spirit—linked by a darkened corridor, the exhibition, curated by Julien Fronsacq, was billed as the epilogue to a series of videos and installations that Arunanondchai has been making since 2012. These constitute the bildungsroman of a Thai denim painter, an autobiographical surrogate for the artist. The exhibition title plays on a reciprocal experience of otherness for audiences confronting aesthetic traditions different from their own, and a desire to fuse identities extended to the exhibition's formal properties. Horror vacui overwhelmed the large gallery devoted to the body, which was filled with scorched and bleached denim canvases, fake palm trees, and a legion of mannequins and sculptural deities, all doused in haphazardly splattered paint and subtended by an enormous drop cloth. Seductively pulsating music suffused the scene as voices purred in French, Thai, and English—the sound track to the 2015 video that shared its name with the exhibition, which played in the adjacent space consecrated by the artist to the spirit. In it, a wide-ranging epistolary dialogue unfolds between the denim painter and Chantri, a personification of the audience, voiced by Arunanondchai's mother. At one point Chantri imagines the artist creating a work that might make sense of the inconsistencies of the world.



View of "Korakrit Arunanondchai," 2015.
Photo: Aurélien Mole.

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Claude Lévi-Strauss observed that mythic thought serves to resolve contradictions within a given culture; the contemporary mythology constructed by Arunanondchai stylishly aspires to reconcile competing cultural traditions and histories, producing connections that might otherwise seem unlikely, such as between Yves Klein's "Anthropometries," 1960, and Duangjai Jansaunoi, a go-go dancer who created controversy by utilizing her topless torso to apply paint to canvas on the reality show Thailand's Got Talent. Likewise, the video's narrators justify the preponderance of Manchester United uniforms in the work as figures of an "invisible bond . . . like a religion," answering the need to root for a single—global—team. But the jerseys' red and yellow also correspond to the opposing factions of Thailand's recent political crisis, suggesting the capacity for such supposedly universal symbols to retain local significations.

The artist's syncretism risked surpassing the human altogether. One hardly knew where to look amid the swarming club lights and flickering flat-screens. This confusion was echoed by the preponderance of visual devices—notably trompe l'oeil and mise en abyme—that collapsed the spaces of representation and action. The potential to incorporate almost any piece of cultural data was expressed as a figure-ground condition in the installation dedicated to the body, which was also a monumental painting. Only with the mechanical eyes of the ubiquitous drones that are depicted in and produce the artist's videos can the painting be seen in its entirety. The camera-mounted drone comes to appear as a totem, hypostasizing a networked, collective consciousness. Modernist painting's allover field was here transformed into a figure of computational aesthetics.

Yet the human remains provisionally at the forefront of this picture, as its object if not its beholder. The border of a fountain at the center of the body described the contours of a schematic figure directed skyward—its iconography lifted from Jansaunoi's infamous painting. Arunanondchai's work affirms the new technologies and new comforts of semio-capitalism even as it strives to hold on to something from the past. The video's swings in register from unifying rap anthems to discourses almost melodramatic and melancholic felt surprisingly familiar, even if at times somewhat absurd. The story of Arunanondchai's denim painter addressed anxieties shared by many. After all, the problems answered through myth are real ones. Perhaps in Arunanondchai's fantasy of a frictionless collectivity capable of organizing cultural memory through empathy we might read the means through which differences are relentlessly exploited in the present.