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Nguyen Thi Chau Giang,  
Duong Thuy Duong, Nge Lay

# MYTHS

Curator: Shireen Naziree



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Thavibu Gallery, 16 June – 14 July, 2012

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Silom Galleria, Suite 308  
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Tel. 66 (0)2 266 5454, Fax. 66 (0)2 266 5455  
Email. [info@thavibu.com](mailto:info@thavibu.com), [www.thavibu.com](http://www.thavibu.com)

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# FOREWORD

**Jørn Middelborg**

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition MYTHS by the five female artists Angkana Kongpetch and Rattana Salee from Thailand; Nguyen Thi Chau Giang and Duong Thuy Duong from Vietnam; and Nge Lay from Myanmar.

The exhibition takes place in Bangkok on 16 June – 14 July, 2012, and features oil paintings, silk paintings, sculpture and photography with a focus on the myths pertaining to women and their roles in Southeast Asia.

The myths surrounding Southeast Asian women are manifold. The characterization of the Southeast Asian woman has been embedded in its cultural history and has typically been determined by their physical beauty. Though Southeast Asian history celebrates “feminine reason and beauty”, the notion of gender was built around a public sphere of feudalism despite the fact that learned and powerful women did exist. The artists in this exhibition want foremost to show women’s talents, their resilience and their place in contemporary society. The artists explore the contradictions that Southeast Asian women endure within their advancing contemporary social environment. Well versed in feminist theories that impact contemporary society, they resist infiltrating their works with the seduction of poetic

embellishments and circumvent romantic narratives often associated with female Asian artists.

The common cultural values of these Southeast Asian countries continue to unite their societies, though their political histories have carved out different paths that are today visible through various levels of socio-economic progress. Thailand is regarded as one of Southeast Asia’s most developed and economically stable countries where women are regarded on equal status as men. Vietnam, through its socialist-capitalist practices introduced through *Doi Moi* in 1986, has emerged as a rapidly growing economy. The contributions by women throughout the wars there and into contemporary society have been significant. And Myanmar, once the most prosperous Southeast Asian economy, is now one of the poorest in the world where women continue to be shrouded despite their contributions to both the economic and political environment.

I take this opportunity to thank the artists for their contribution. I also want to thank the independent curator and art historian Shireen Naziree for curating the exhibition and for writing the accompanying essay. And a final thanks to Pham Long for helping with translation and to Ralph Kiggell for checking the language in this catalogue.

# MYTHS

Shireen Naziree

Contemporary art supplies its audience with a manner of debating issues that are in the forefront of popular imagination, with politics, sexuality and gender being the most prominent. The art that has developed in Vietnam and Thailand over the past decades and the current emergence of art from Myanmar have profoundly impacted Southeast Asian visual arts. Though the genuineness and essential originality of this art lie in the region's cultural history, it is its pluralism that challenges social and even moral norms. This pluralism is deeply rooted in the contemporary psyche through its commitment to the mass culture of conurbations that are the products of economic and technological developments. This has also brought about a plurality of attitudes that has resulted in a revolutionised manner within which subject matter and its presentation is being articulated. And it is no accident that within this context, it is women who are amongst the most significant emerging Southeast Asian artists.

Though history has celebrated feminine reason and beauty, the notions of gender in older forms of public life were clearly built around the public sphere of male activity and the traditional characterization of the female aesthetic was principally determined as an extension of their domestic roles. Painting, sculpture and architecture were disciplines that generally excluded women. Powerful women did exist, despite the liabilities of feudalism, but our knowledge of the customs of women in earlier histories are shadowed,

and traditionally they have been associated with crafts, particularly textiles.

Patriarchal and in many cases strongly traditional cultures often proved resistant to Western-style feminism. With the emergence of Southeast Asian economies in the late 1980s, women of the region had already gained sound academic currency that had been shaped by education, political and social concerns. However, when it came to gender within art contexts, hierarchical systems of evaluation and classification proved markedly conservative. Though the representation of women artists was growing, discussion of political and nationalist concerns continued to eclipse issues of gender.

"In the male-orientated society of Bangkok, women have been for too long transformed into objects of fantasy, of otherness, for men"<sup>1</sup>. Yet few Thai women artists dare confront pressing issues like sexual abuse, AIDS, women's rights, misogamy and misogyny<sup>2</sup>. By the 1990s, parallel to the expansion in number and frequency of women's participation in large-scale global exhibition was the emergence of a growing presence of women artists from Southeast Asia. Though on a wider spectrum, discussion of political and nationalistic concerns continued to eclipse issues of gender and class, artworks by women artists focusing on explorations of feminine sexuality started to filter through the prism of the Southeast Asian myth.

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<sup>1</sup> Apinan Poshyananda: *Contemporary Art of Thailand, TRADITION and CHANGE*, p. 104

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

In Thailand, Kanya Charoensupkul (b. 1947) and Araya Rasdjarmreansook (b. 1957) are of an earlier generation of artists whose artworks subverted the direct representation of women as object and spectacle. Pinaree Santipak (b. 1961) is one of Thailand's most internationally recognised artists. Her exploration of the female form has manifested in intimate interpretations of the feminine psyche in contemporary Thai society. Her use of fragile materials such as glass and silk threads attest to the sensitive and poetic concerning feminism.

**Pinaree Sanpitak**



Though Vietnamese modern painting emerged in the late nineteenth century and was further nurtured under French Colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century, it was largely dominated by male artists. However the late 1980s witnessed fundamental and prolific changes in Vietnam and a new generation of artists would subsequently emerge. The older generation included women artists, such as

Kim Bach (b. 1938) and Hoang Minh Hang (b. 1946). Kim Bach is the most prominent woman artist of that generation maturing at the heart of Vietnam's socialist realism school. Dinh Y Nhi (b. 1967) is amongst Vietnam's most internationally recognised artists. Her representations of women in the contemporary Vietnamese context are explicit and defiant. One of the very few women specialising in lacquer painting, a genre dominated by male artists, is Cong Kim Hoa (b. 1962), whose semi-abstract, layered and textured lacquer paintings are synonymous with the vibrant energy of Hanoi.



**Dinh Y Nhi**

Despite being closed off to much of the world over the past decades, Myanmar has had an eclectic art scene particularly visible in the capital Yangon. Both Chaw Ei Thein (b. 1969) and Phyu Mon (b. 1960) are amongst Myanmar's most internationally recognised artists. A pioneer in digital art, Phyu Mon is highly regarded as a performance artist as well as for her positioning of women in Myanmar's patriarchal culture. New York-based conceptual artist, Chaw Ei Thein's participation at the 2008 Singapore Biennale addressed issues relative to Myanmar's socio-political environment at the time.



Phyu Mon

The growing visibility of art by women artists has reinforced contemporary tendencies toward building subject matter and identities through processes of fluidity that have ultimately shaped a wide range of sophisticated and often critical art practices. Many of these practices are rooted in a concern with issues of sexuality and identity — shared by many artists universally. It is tempting to assume that the so-called internationalism that has embraced the work of these women artists has produced an equal playing field, one in which gender issues are considered of secondary importance, if not irrelevant altogether. But even a cursory review suggests a far more complex picture,

despite the growing visibility and influence of prominent women such as Aung San Suu Kyi, the political icon and leader of the opposition in Myanmar, and Yingluck Shinawatra, the prime minister of Thailand. Locating a space of representation that is not restricted by gender as a primary concept has become imperative for a new generation of women artists. The desire to give voice and opinion to the status of women has played a considerable role in the practices of artists who wish to assert their cultures within the space of the international art world through a recognised international visual language that traces its roots to European Modernism.





Aung San Suu Kyi by Myint Swe (a male artist)

The artistic voice in “Myths” articulates the viewpoints of a new generation of Southeast Asian women, women who are free to express opinions on the status of women in their respective societies from varied viewpoints that they deem to be relevant to their world. And through such articulations one may dispel the characterization of the Southeast Asian woman embedded in its cultural history whether in the iconic form of Apsaras, the mythical nymphs that appear in many fables, or in the romantic imagery of “delicate” Vietnamese women in flowing *ao dais*. Though Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar have been bound by a common history and though they may share common social and cultural values, their political histories carved out distinctively different paths that are today most visible through varied socio-economic and political environments.

“Myths” is an ongoing investigation into the cultural contexts of the social politics that form the basis of the art by these women artists. Their narrative strategies use multiple voices that fuse fact and fiction and the re-telling of history and biography to deconstruct patriarchal-based cultural forms. One of the points of connection between the current investigation into sexual and cultural differences is most visible through the narrative structures employed by these artists, within which they explore female experiences and subjectivity.

Place, memory and identity feature strongly in the works of Nguyen Thi Chau Giang, Duong Thuy Duong from Vietnam, Nge Lay from Myanmar, and Rattana Salee and Angkana Kongpetch from Thailand.

# FIVE FEMALE ARTISTS



**Nguyen Thi Chau Giang**, *I Am A Dragon*, 2012, Pigments on silk, 77 x 115 cm (2 panels, front view and back view)



Nguyen Thi Chau Giang lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Her work centres on the lives of the women she has encountered. Through various interventions, she seeks to personalise objects and make references to the lives of women affected by the rapid economic and social change in Vietnam. Giang's silk paintings address the line between present and past as well as feminine and masculine. Though silk painting was refined, developed and taught as a fine art by the French at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine as early as the 1920s, not many contemporary artists have been drawn to the medium.

Rather than drawing on older notions of art history, Giang instead employs innovative techniques that take silk painting into unconventional territories. She draws on the intense delicacy of silk, which in her mind represents a retreat to the resilience and beauty of the Vietnamese woman.

At the same time, such a model of artistic transition speaks of an earlier time in Vietnam when human values were the core of community. A generation later, Vietnam is shaped differently as is women's perception of their relationship with society as a whole in which they inhabit the same time and socio-economic

space as men. Yet while traditional values may no longer be their epicentre, Vietnamese women's singular mystique is their innate strength, which Giang portrays through her latest body of works.

Here the leading metaphor of her work is the dragon, a symbol that derives from Vietnamese tradition. According to ancient folklore, Vietnamese people are descendents of a union between a

dragon and a nymph. As the dragon represents majesty, prosperity and power, Giang's works reference both the long history of women's work and aesthetic beauty in relation to community and nation. Giang's awareness of Vietnam's traditions and contemporary women's resistance to established boundaries appears to confirm the stereotypical desire for Vietnamese feminism to appear "exotic" and untouched by globalisation.



►  
**Nguyen Thi Chau Giang,....The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo, 2012,**  
Pigments on silk,  
67 x 116 cm

►  
**Nguyen Thi Chau Giang, In The Cage, 2009,**  
Pigments on silk, 77 x 116 cm





◀  
**Duong Thuy Duong**  
 Seen By Others (4),  
 2009, Oil on canvas  
 120 x 160 cm

◀  
**Duong Thuy Duong**  
 Seen By Others (3),  
 2009, Oil on canvas  
 120 x 160 cm

Duong Thuy Duong belongs to a generation of Vietnamese artists who were in a sense liberated from tradition by a previous generation of artists drawn to Western modernism but who embraced forms of cultural hybridity in their work. Duong, who has studied in Germany and now lives and works in Berlin, was born in Hanoi where she had her initial art education.

To engage with Duong's *oeuvre* is to explore a web of incessant exchanges and connections so rich with

coherence and life they appear to be without boundaries. Her works do not necessarily function as a means of understanding a singular work but are an expansion of her artistic practice: they resist hierarchies and demarcations. As Duong says, "Painting has become a vital element in my life; such is the reality and the dreams that create the process of my struggle for the integration of everything." And it is through her paintings that we can trace her connections.

Duong's artistic production for "Myths" is both personal and observant, while highly focussed. Through her two paintings "Seen by Others (3)" and "Seen by Others (4)", it is possible to understand that the strength she gains as a Vietnamese woman living abroad provides the trajectory of experiences that permeates the core of her intellectual concerns. Through these two paintings she makes visible the sensorially embedded frailty of the attempt by humankind to constantly chase dreams and desires, regardless of the lives and possibilities offered by the feelings of others. However Duong's paintings also belong in the realm of reality as she recognises the transplantation of

external values, influenced obviously by interaction with other cultural modes. Breaking with her earlier self-expressionism, her "Photoshop" paintings deal with a broader transformation of values that currently afflict contemporary Vietnamese women. Taking formal Vietnamese cultural values as her basis, Duong uses these two paintings to deconstruct the perception of an elegant conventional utopia, turning it into a negative realm and creating a dialogue between generations. She mixes socio-political origins and personal politics in the hope that the viewer makes his or her own connections with her work. In this sense, it is the juxtapositions that enhance the scope of her understanding and opinions.

▶  
**Duong Thuy Duong**  
Photoshop (1), 2011,  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 162 cm



▶  
**Duong Thuy Duong**  
Photoshop (2), 2011,  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 162 cm





▲  
**Angkana Kongpetch**  
 Genesis, 2012, Acrylic on  
 canvas, 90 x 120 cm

▶  
**Angkana Kongpetch**  
 My Name is Lilith And I Was  
 Called A Demon After I left His  
 Son, 2012 , Acrylic on canvas  
 90 x 120 cm



Angkana Kongpetch's work "My name is Lilith and I was called a Demon after I left his son" makes reference to the fable of Lilith and Eve. Working with a narrative that is familiar yet unrecognized, Angkana isolates her subject in an implied gesture or a reality that "humans create myths and reality in the same space." The 29-year-old Bangkok-based artist has employed a narrative that could be interpreted as a pose of confidence and she imbues this and other canvases with bright colours that lend them an austere power.

However it is apparent that her work functions in a much deeper intellectual plane. In her colourful and playful paintings one can observe the juxtaposition of diverse elements and references to traditional

Thai painting. Looking closely one can find motifs that suggest she could potentially create countless rearrangements.

Angkana's meticulous painting process deepens the idea that her work can function more as an intellectual project than a sensuous reverie. By articulating, challenging and undermining cultural and political ideologies that perpetuate the silencing of women and the dominance of male authority, her annotations point to the strength of her oeuvre in their acknowledgement of her subject: Lilith's status is the starting point, the point when "women can choose their destiny as their right since the start of human creation."

▶  
**Angkana Kongpetch,**  
Venus, 2011, Brass  
and fiber glass,  
60 x 95 x 41 cm





▲  
**Rattana Salee,**  
*Silence*, 2012  
Epoxy and metal,  
75 x 60 x 110 cm

Rattana Salee, like Angkana Kongpetch, is both a painter and a sculptor. She represents a generation of Thai artists whose manner of dealing with issues is lyrical and intimate, but with an awareness of the changing attitudes toward traditions, critiques of political and social conditions and the deconstruction of gender and sexual differences in a historically patriarchal society.

Rattana's diverse response to gender issues makes generalization difficult. Nevertheless, her work displays a profound concern with the relationship between personal identity and social conditions. Rattana's personal history provides the link throughout her multifaceted practice. A Bangkok native, her attentiveness to cultural identity and the environment is ever present in her art. In her approach to representation, Rattana creates a system that comes closer to her subject than conventional artistic language itself, revealing that art can portray "the real" better than any other language.

Rattana brings qualities from painting, sculpture and architecture into works such as "15/12/2011", "Deep", and a sculpture titled "Silence", which refers to the three-dimensional fullness of everyday life. Rattana takes full advantage of the open-ended possibilities of urbanisation as a concept in her artistic text. She effectively illustrates how, as an artist, she takes control of the contexts of her work and creates nuances of meaning by modulating perceptions of her output. In fact, the material component of her process might only be part of a larger statement. She says, "Thai society has swiftly



▶  
**Rattana Salee**  
Deep, 2012  
Oil on canvas  
140 x 40 cm  
(2 panels)



adapted to modernisation and recognizes the contribution of women to the development of the economic and political environment, yet sadly Thai men continue to regard themselves as the stronger sex.”

This statement fits Rattana’s personal slant as she furthers her enquiries into paint: idea and form melt

into each other and the overall sense of visual and spatial unity echoes the harmony usually reserved for a single piece of work. Synonymous with her sculpture, here is homogeneity of palette. The colours of these works are consistently dense, and grey overtones reside both in her sculpture and her application of paint, reflecting the meeting of intention and its visible tangible signs.

▶  
**Rattana Salee**  
15/12/2011, 2012,  
Oil on canvas ,  
90 x 210 cm  
(3 panels)





Nge Lay, Futuristic Women In Those Days, 2012, Giclee prints on archival paper, 30.48 x 35.56 cm each, Set of 9 images, Edition of 8

The rise of photography and its move from a marginal to a central position in the world of contemporary art is certainly one of its most striking phenomena. With technology, the medium has offered a veracity that more obvious subjective ways could never attain. A striking characteristic of recent Southeast Asian contemporary art is the way photography and new media experimental art have appeared in Myanmar.

The inspiration for Nge Lay's art practice is an interrogation of the meeting of culture and nature, in the broadest sense. Her work is a meditation on women and their negotiation of the space and things around them that reflect a wide-ranging materiality of culture. Generally viewed as a conceptual artist, Nge Lay has sought to stimulate her viewers to cross the line from the common place to the exceptional through her personal experiences in Myanmar.

"Futuristic Women in Those Days" draws attention to the boundaries, limits and hopes of the world Nge Lay moves through. "At a glance, in today's Myanmar society, sexual discrimination in our everyday life and work environment is not as strong as before. However, due to deep-rooted conventions, as well as economic and political imbalances, the role of women has as not yet been recognised despite the fact that an icon such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is more powerful than any male."

Drawing inspiration from the articulations of the broad spectrum of women who work and patronise her neighbourhood market, Nge Lay has juxtaposed images of robotic toys with market produce and the images of these very women, whose common voice is "I feel as if I am a robot, working from dawn to dusk".

Nge Lay has wittily deployed the illusionary deceptiveness of photography to encumber femininity with an object such as a robot. Though at first glance the images seem simply quirky, it is precisely this quality that draws the viewer in, noting her concern at the space between the physical body and material world.

With this in mind, these images also refer to her experiences in Singapore and other developed countries where she felt the lifestyles of women seemed robotic. Nge Lay's carefully constructed tableaux are contemplative, while recognising art's social space. With an enigmatic charm that befits her practice, the prints confound typical perceptions and any easy interpretation of Myanmar feminism, giving rise to reflection. Through her photographs, Nge Lay activates what may be conventionally perceived as a negative space and in doing so draws attention to the role of women in her society to build a better future with love and compassion. "Futuristic Women in Those Days" reminds the viewer that Nge Lay's expressions of hopes for Myanmar are not only about place but also time.

"Feminism is one of the most powerful and universal forces in contemporary art, and one of the most obvious forces of change."<sup>3</sup> This shared territory is filled with vigour, power and activity and has not changed the history of women's contributions to Southeast Asia's visual arts. In addition, the achievements of these five artists, who come from a variety of backgrounds, may be cited as evidence of the qualities that have enabled women to employ a plurality of attitudes that challenge traditional social and even moral norms.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith: *Art Tomorrow*, p. 265 Angkana Kongpetch

# ARTISTS' BIODATA



## Angkana Kongpetch

Born 1982 in Bangkok, Thailand

Angkana Kongpetch graduated from Silpakorn University, Bangkok, with a Master's in Fine Art in 2011. After her graduation, Angkana completed an

exchange programme at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Being both a painter and a sculptor, Angkana had her first solo exhibition, a sculptural installation, *When is Death not Within* at Thavibu Gallery in 2011. Angkana Kongpetch lives and works in Bangkok



## Rattana Salee

Born 1982 in Bangkok, Thailand

Rattana Salee is both a sculptor and a painter who graduated in 2011 from Silpakorn University with a Master's in Fine Art, after which she participated in a programme at the École des

Beaux-Arts in Paris. Thavibu Gallery hosted her first solo exhibition of sculptures called *Shell Shocked* in 2011. Rattana lives and works in Bangkok.



## Nguyen Thi Chau Giang

Born 1975 in Hanoi, Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Chau Giang moved to Ho Chi Minh City with her family when she was eight years old. As a child her artistic talents were not solely confined to the visual arts but also to writing and today she is highly regarded both as a writer and as an artist. Giang is known as one of Vietnam's most profiled mid-career artists. She has participated in several exhibitions in Vietnam as well as abroad. She was twice selected, in 1997 and in 1999, as "One of the Top Ten Young artists of Ho Chi Minh City". After her graduation from the Ho Chi Minh College of Fine Art in 1998, she spent a further four months on an art scholarship in 2001 at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In 2011 she had a solo exhibition *Hidden Flowers* at Thavibu Gallery. Her artworks have been collected by the Singapore Art Museum and the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia.



## **Duong Thuy Duong**

Born 1979 in Hanoi, Vietnam

Duong Thuy Duong graduated from the University of Fine Arts, Hanoi, in 2000, and in 2009 from the University of Fine Arts and Design, Burg Giebichenstein Halle/s, Germany, where she majored in Painting. Thuy Duong has participated in noted exhibitions in Vietnam as well as in Germany. She had two solo exhibitions at the Goethe Institute in Hanoi in 2007 and in 2009. Duong Thuy Duong lives and works in Berlin, Germany.



## **Nge Lay**

Born 1979 in Pyin Oo Lwin, Myanmar

Nge Lay graduated with Bachelor degrees in economics as well as in fine art. She graduated from the National University of Art and Culture in 2003 and in 2004 from the Yangon East University with a Bachelor degree in economics. Nge Lay has been an active participant in many exhibitions in Myanmar since 2002, and since 2009 her photographic works have been included in several notable art projects in Singapore, Korea and Vietnam. In 2011, she had her first solo show in Tokyo, Japan, and in January 2012 she was a finalist in the Sovereign Art Asia Prize in Singapore. Nge Lay is amongst the most promising Southeast Asian conceptual artists.







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Thavibu Gallery

Silom Galleria, # 308

919/1 Silom rd, Bangkok 10500

Tel +662 266 5454

Fax +662 266 5455

Email: [info@thavibu.com](mailto:info@thavibu.com)

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