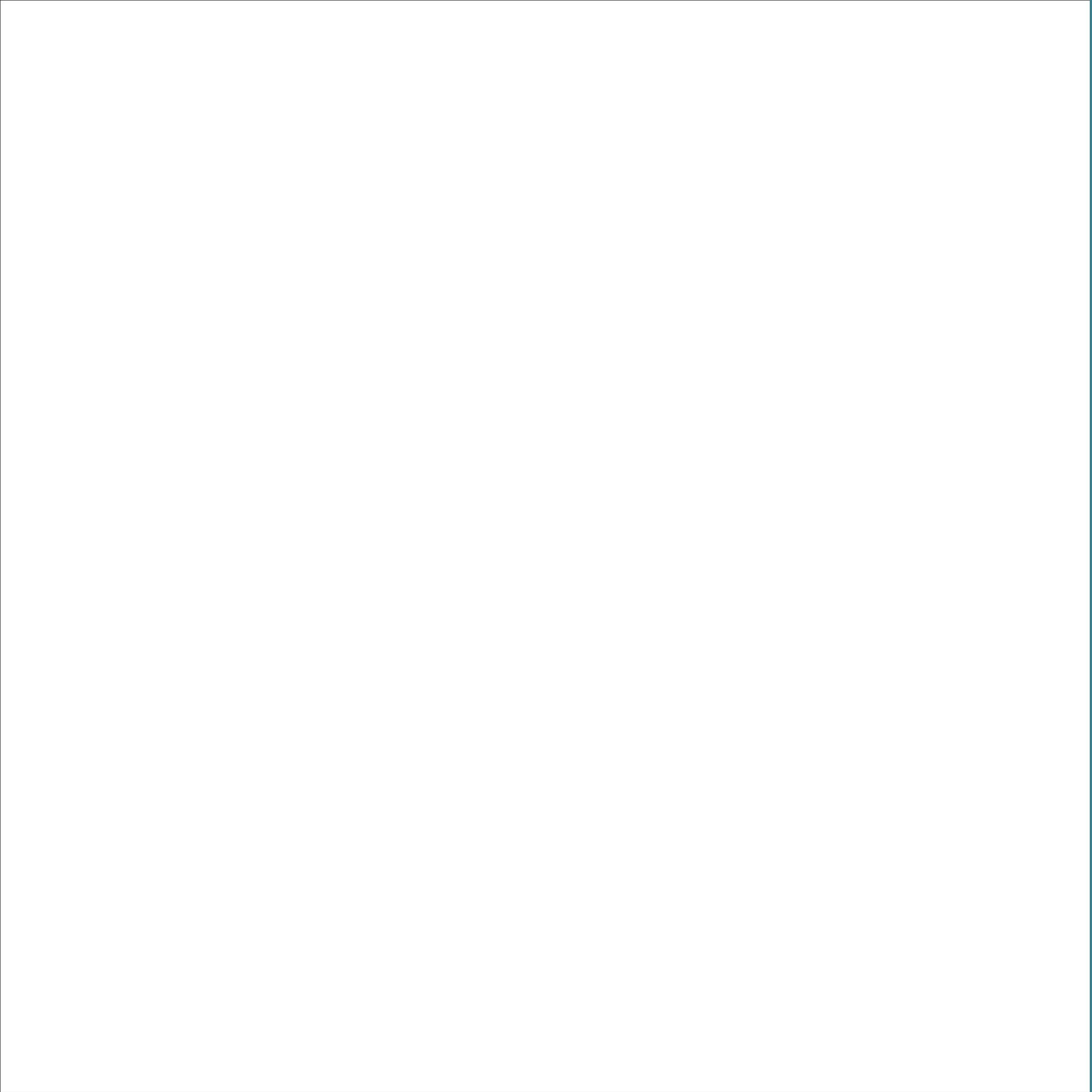




JIRAPAT TATSANASOMBOON

LOVE and LUST

STEVEN PETTIFOR



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg
Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition **LOVE and LUST** by the Thai artist Jirapat Tatsanasomboon. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok on 13 September - 5 October 2008.

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon has over the last few years created a series of paintings focusing on the interactions between East - West and Modern - Traditional in humorous and attractive ways using characters from the traditional Thai story of Ramakien (Ramayana), Lanna style persons, and western symbols such as superheroes and icons from movies and the art world.

The text has been written by Steven Pettifor, the Thailand editor of Asian Art News Magazine (Hong Kong).

I take this opportunity to thank Jirapat Tatsanasomboon for his collaboration, and Steven Pettifor for his contribution.

CULTURAL CONFRONTATION

Jirapat Tasanasomboon's Pop-style paintings resonate with Thai youth culture, where appropriation and reinvention are readily assimilated. Emanating from a country that wantonly devours all things Western yet is vehemently protective of its own traditional cultural heritage, Tatsanasomboon's art wittily conveys the dilemmas embroiling contemporary urban Thais, including the indeterminable affects that rapid modernisation is bringing upon his countrymen.

Tatsanasomboon is certainly not unique in his cross cultural fusion of artistic styles; artists have long been influenced by art from other nations or cultures. In Europe Pablo Picasso expressed a fascination with African primitivism, Paul Gauguin was seduced by Polynesian arts, and Van Gogh along with many 19th century European artists was interested in Japanese woodblock prints. In many such instances, such as with the European infatuation with Japonisme, interest was born out of better access to, or an opening of, that particular country's borders.

An example in contemporary Asian terms, China's recent elevation on the international art stage has been forged on increased trade and a supposed softening of its ideological stance. The cultural barometers of such change, one only has to look to artists like Ai Wei Wei, the Luo Brothers, or Wang Guangyi, for their interpretations upon the pervasiveness of Western-style consumerism, or to Wang Xingwei or Shi Xinning for Chinese perspectives on Western art.

For Thailand, artisans have long assimilated cultural influence from the dominant Asian civilisations of the ancient Khmers, India, and China. But it was in the early 20th century, when the Siamese royal court returned from their European sojourns that trends in Western art practice began filtering through to Thai artists. A close adherence to Western artistic schools or genres followed throughout the 20th century, and today it is still common for more conventional artists to affiliate themselves to a preferred style such as surrealism, impressionism or abstraction.

I want You....!, 2008 ►
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 130 cm

Jirapat Fatsunamborn 2008



I Want YOU....!

Born in 1971 in the central province of Samut Prakarn, Tatsanasomboon completed his Masters Degree from Silapakorn University in 1999, and has since participated in several domestic art shows. Internationally he has exhibited in Korea, as well as the 2006 exhibition *Tradition and Modernity in South East Asian Art* held at New York's Galerie l'Indochine. He was also selected as one of two Thai artists for the exhibition *Vision of East Asia 2008* during the Beijing Olympic Games. Tatsanasomboon first arrived upon his core theme of East-Western dichotomy while still a student in the mid-nineties. The impressionable young student was sucked into the controversy that had built over the location filming of scenes from the Hollywood action flick *Mortal Combat* (1995) that were being shot on and around the historic ruins of the former Thai capital of Ayutthaya. Local critics laid claim that the filming was harming the UNESCO world heritage site, although permission had been granted by the Film Board, the Public Relations, and the Fine Arts departments.

Similar to the outcry over the subsequent 1999 filming of *The Beach* on the island of Ko Phi Phi, location filming at some of Thailand's key tourist destinations reinforced the mood of a country that was desperate to preserve what it perceived to be the tenets of its nationhood. Yet the exploitation of such historic and natural resources was driven largely by the authorities wish to enhance Thailand's image on the international stage, and further drive tourism.

Compounded by the Asian economic crisis of 1997, which again was largely attributed to aggressive monetary interference by Western speculators, like many of his fellow Thais, Tatsanasomboon questioned the pervasive and potentially destructive influence of Western culture and capitalism upon his country.

"Personally I felt that Westernisation was all about material possession and consumption, it is true that the West brings in a lot of good things to Thailand, but it has also reduced many of our country's attributes to tourist spots. I see the East as somewhere more intangible," explains Tatsanasomboon.

As with many of his artistic peers such as socio-political firebrand Vasan Sitthiket and Pop appropriator Anan Pratchayanan, the West became a convenient visual scapegoat during the mid-to-late nineties. Failing to see the larger picture, Thai artists who addressed such themes largely dismissed the obvious desire by much of the populace to fervently embrace such economic and cultural imports.

"I am not condemning the West for diluting Thai culture but when Western imports arrive in Thailand, people feel they have to embrace these new products or pop trends otherwise they will be looked down upon by their neighbours as being uncivilised," Tatsanasomboon reiterates.

However, today's cultural and consumerist absorptions are just as likely to come from regional economic heavyweights such as Japan, Korea, China, and India, as they do from America and Europe. Yet, such regional influence is accepted as being Asian and is readily consumed with little protestation. This hasn't escaped Tatsanasomboon's attention though, "I have attempted to incorporate Japanese motifs into my art but it didn't feel right. The dichotomy of East and West is more profound and more visually potent."

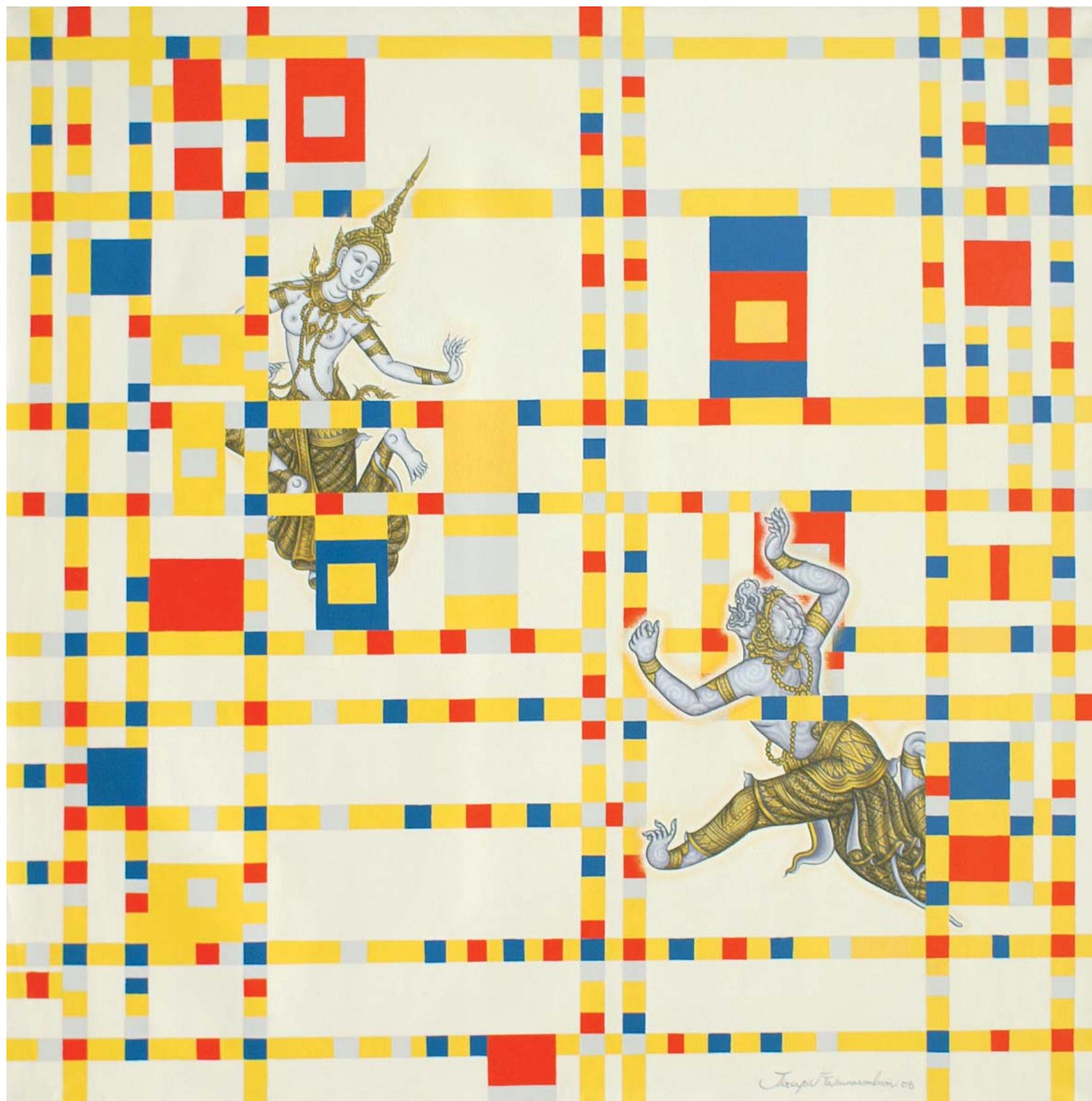
In fact Tatsanasomboon is like many Thais in that he is also emphatic to certain Western cultural fraternisation, particularly enjoying the genre of Hollywood action movies the very like of *Mortal Combat*. However, he also claims to be passionate about the great mythological narratives of the *Ramakien*, which is the Thai version of the Indian Hindu epic the *Ramanyana*.



▲ **Jealousy**, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 172 cm



Jiraporn Tansomborn, 2008



Adapted from Indian poet Valmiki's 2,000 year-old classic, the *Ramakien* is probably Thailand's best known literary work. The virtuous odyssey centres upon the relationship between King Rama and his wife Sita, with the best known written interpretation of the saga attributed to King Chakri's (Rama I) 18th century version. Aside from the poetic words, the tale has also been immortalised through elaborately costumed court dance performances known as *khon*, as well as the series of intricate mural paintings adorning the cloisters of Bangkok's Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

Keen to fuse such differing manners of story telling, Tatsanasomboon began drafting his earliest compositions in his jarring of continental polemics. Previously in the early 1990s Tatsanasomboon's painting style had been inconsistent as he attempted to find a personal voice. His compositions were somewhat heavy handed in his metaphors to gender relationships, when in 1995 he painted *Contradiction*, his first attempt at what would become a uniform style. A congested montage of overlapping mythological Thai and American pop caricatures, the excess of the initial experimentation would gradually refine into the more focused painterly interactions of present.

His main pictorial construction evolves round a simple yet effective confrontation or juxtaposition of two opposing subjects, which he typically layers with an implied narrative. Early manifestations of this dichotomy were besieged by an allegiance of American comic book heroes. Tatsanasomboon began his Pop parodies at a time when Hollywood was also resuscitating cartoon strip characters for a continuing slew of big screen adaptations that have included Batman, Spiderman, the X-Men, the Hulk, and Superman.

Contradiction, 1995 ▼
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 180 cm



◀ **Searching for Sita in New York**, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
129 x 129 cm



◀ **Green Goblin
vs Maiyarap,**
2004
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 155 cm



▲ **Captain America vs Gumpagan, 2003**

Acrylic on canvas
60 x 80 cm

Melding traditional figures from Thai mythology against cape-clad crusaders like Wonder-woman, Batman, Superman, and Captain America, Tatsanasomboon used one-on-one bouts as metaphors for the awkward jarring of the East-West axis, traditional and modern, the U.S.A and Thailand.

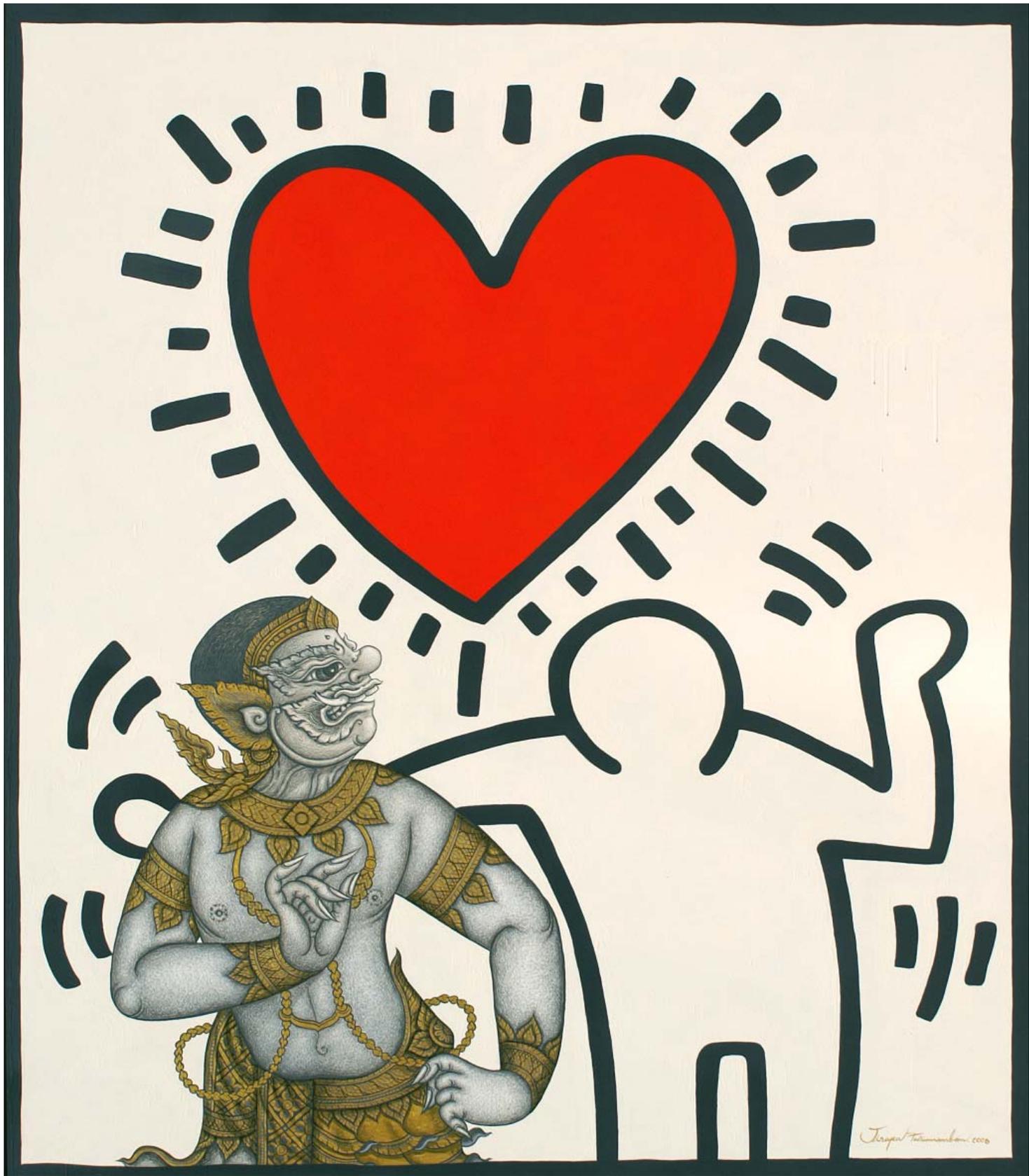
One of the most potent deliveries of this head-to-head confrontation comes in the 2004 *Green Goblin vs Maiyarap*, in which

much of Tatsanasomboon's kitschy humour is surpassed by a darker more brooding atmosphere of intense struggle. A re-visitation in posturing to the earlier 2002 work *Captain America and Arkart Talai*, the more theatrical fisticuff bravado is replaced by what seems an intense life or death battle, in which neither appears the obvious hero. There is no empathy to the goblin's menacing armour and piercing yellow stare as he grapples Maiyarap, king of the underworld.

Ironically, aside from the pulp entertainment of American comic books, the heroic crime fighters that grace popular cartoon strips provide youth with a moral countenance between good and evil. With the mythological tales of the *Ramakien* presented in much the same manner, the artist's objective is to highlight how similar cultural nuances can be misrepresented outside their intended context.

Aside from the overt stylistic contrasts of his chosen subjects, their aesthetic distinctions are heightened through the artist's differing application, with the delicately brushed and intricately detailed Eastern classical figures a stark contrast to the bold flat Pop style renderings. Drawing from his country's rich tradition for decorative arts, Jirapat's lavishly adorned icons from the epic *Ramakien* are a deliberate discordant to the bold blocks of colour on the costumed superheroes.

Often his characters are staged floating or suspended within the pictorial space, bringing to mind the simplified backdrops of comic book illustrations. In paintings such as *Captain America vs Gumpagan* (2003), there is a decorative floral motif running behind the foreground altercation, a definite reference to the flat background perspectives from the tradition of Buddhist temple mural art.



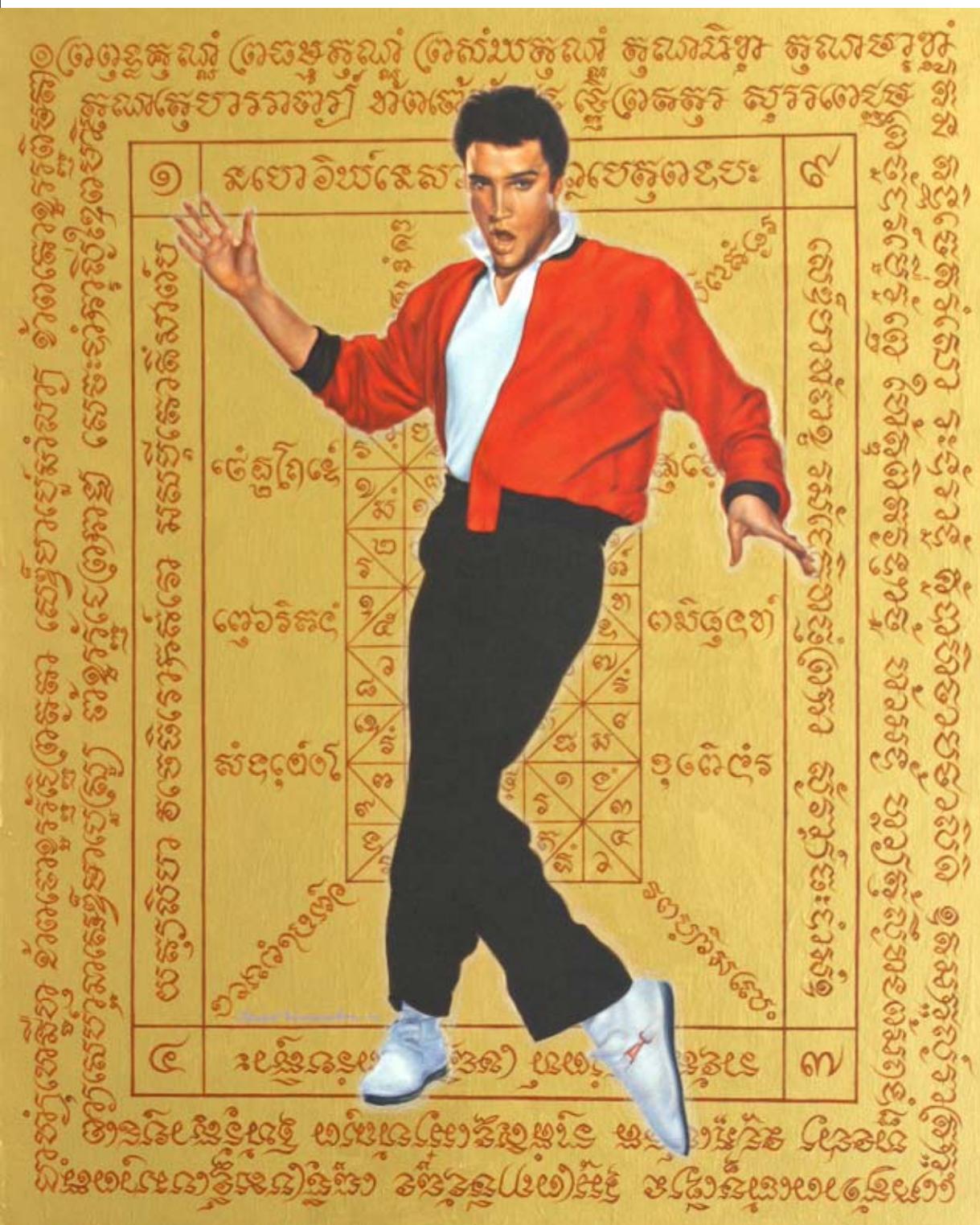
Working a single composition through to its resolution before commencing another work, Tatsanasomboon typically drafts a sketch before he sets about the canvas. Applying acrylic paints which he then softens by layering finite pencil detailing, the artist envisions the final look from the outset, though elements still evolve throughout the process. In the recent 2008 work *Love Conquers All* for example, Tatsanasomboon decided to use a Keith Haring figure hugging one of his traditional mythological characters, but the pairing of a *yaksha* (nature-spirit) in the particular posturing emerged as the picture took shape.

Another recurrent pictorial trait is the artist's calculated and selective utilisation of drips of paint, which he typically confines to a small area of the background. With the paintings highly polished veneers, it seems a device to notify the viewer that an artist's hand has been employed and the work is an original and not a print. "There's no metaphor as such but I view the backgrounds like temple ruins, I include the drips to signify imperfection. It also helps fuse the different visual elements together. But in the recent (2008) work *Belief (Thai Amulet)* the drips have become sperm spilling out from the phallus motif," says Tatsanasomboon.

Belief [Thai Amulet], 2008 ▼
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 150 cm



◀ **Love Conquers All, 2008**
Acrylic on canvas
129 x 147 cm



Gradually his compositions have edged away from more blatant juxtapositions of East-West iconography, becoming more subtle as he moves beyond mere superheroes. Moving towards post-modernism in his appropriation of popular legends from American movie history, Tatsanasomboon also pulls from Western modern art referencing. His own ethno-centric adaptations have also expanded beyond mythic allegory to invoke the flat figurative representational art indicative to historic temple murals and vernacular decoration in Thailand.

With Hollywood actors idolised in an almost reverential manner, Tatsanasomboon fashions portraits of fallen screen icons that include John Wayne, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean, which he juxtaposes against associations to Buddhism. In the series *Belief* (2006-present), the artist satirises the cult of celebrity which is consuming Western media in a manner akin to religious worship. In the 2006 painting *Belief (3)* and the 2007 *Belief (4)*, both Elvis Presley and John Wayne assume a god-like stature, with Presley depicted against a traditional prayer tablet to ward off evil spirits, while Wayne is powerfully matched against a clay Buddhist amulet.

▲ **Belief (3) [Elvis Presley], 2006**
Acrylic on canvas
87 x 107 cm

Belief (4) [John Wayne], 2007 ▼
Acrylic on canvas
86 x 132 cm



LOVE AND LUST

In the current exhibition - **Love and Lust** - Tatsanasomboon considers his paintings to be less hostile. The obvious visual battle has been subdued, becoming more passive and blurred in its messaging while also raising the level of sarcasm. Whereas previously Tatsanasomboon appropriated characters from the *Ramakien* primarily for their aesthetic appeal and physical characteristics, in this recent series the artist references specific narratives from the epic tale to explore notions of love and conflict.

In the three paintings *Fighting over the Maiden (1), (2) and (3)* along with *Straying* (all 2008), Tatsanasomboon looks to Robert Indiana's eye popping 1960s screen print *Love* for inspiration. An iconic artwork that has already been widely reinterpreted by other artists including the mid-1980s AIDS logo posters by the Canadian collective General Idea, in Tatsanasomboon's versions he focuses on the relationship between Sita and her husband King Rama, who had to defend her honour after being abducted and held captive by the evil king Totsakan (Ravana).



Fighting Over the Maiden (1), 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Fighting Over the Maiden (2), 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Fighting Over the Maiden (3), 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Straying, 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Lovers (11), 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



The Indiana *Love* reinterpretations are one of the only examples wherein Tatsanasomboon utilises a Western art reference to reinforce, rather than contrast, his Eastern aligned imagery. Previously Tatsanasomboon has quirkily customised paintings by the likes of Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli, Rousseau, Mondrian, along with his two preferred Pop artists Lichtenstein and Warhol, both of whom are repeatedly re-contextualised through his art. In *Love and Lust*, Tatsanasomboon composes further artistic comparatives from the canons of Western art history through the incorporation of iconic artworks by Indiana, as well as Keith Haring, Jeff Koons, and Andy Warhol once again.

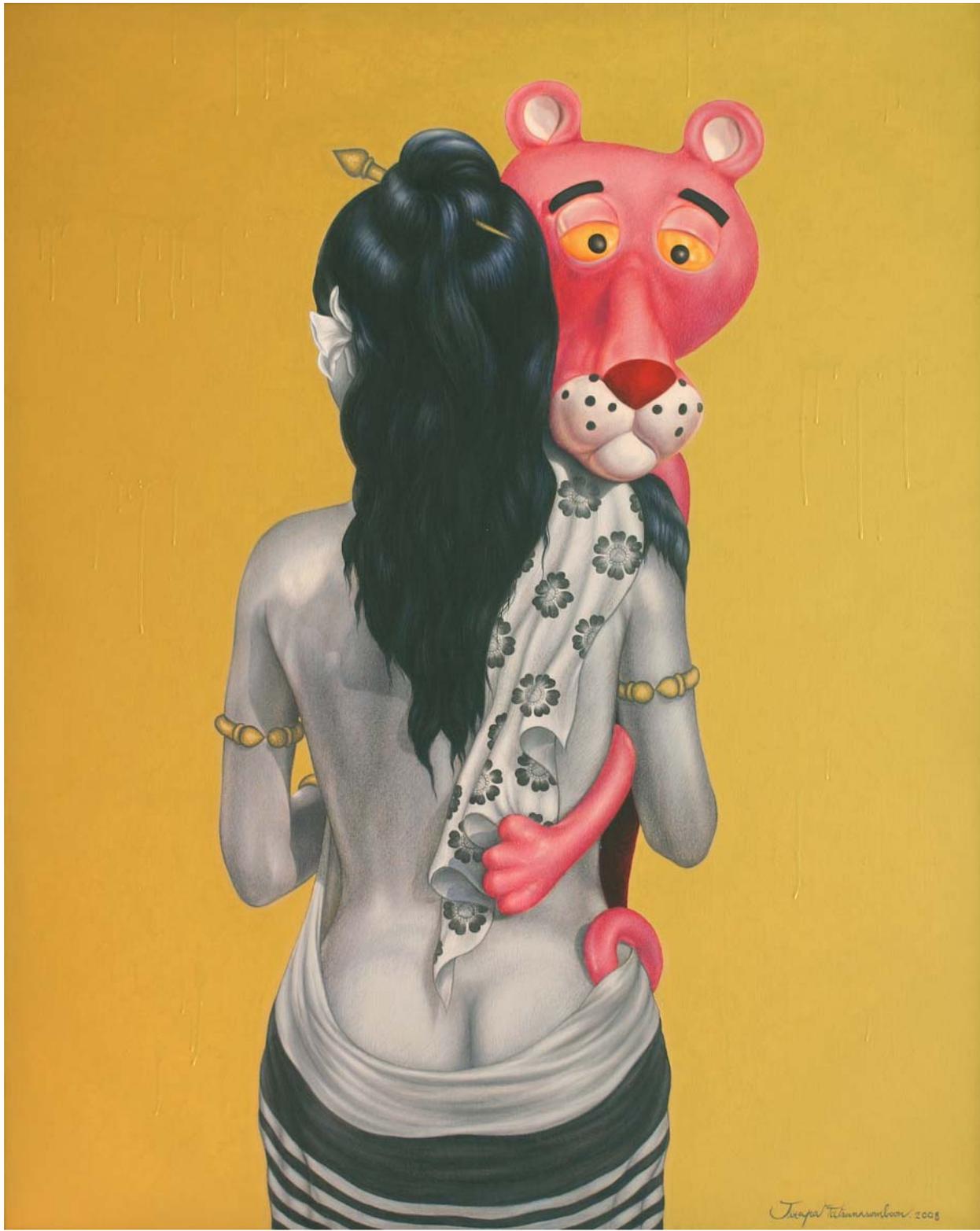
▲ **Hanuman is Upset! [after Mondrian]**, 2005
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 100 cm



The Dream [after Rousseau], 2006 ▶
Acrylic on canvas
88 x 119 cm



▲ **The Transformation of Sita [after Botticelli], 2006**
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 130 cm



The Pink Panther Strikes Again [after J.Koons], 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 120 x 150 cm

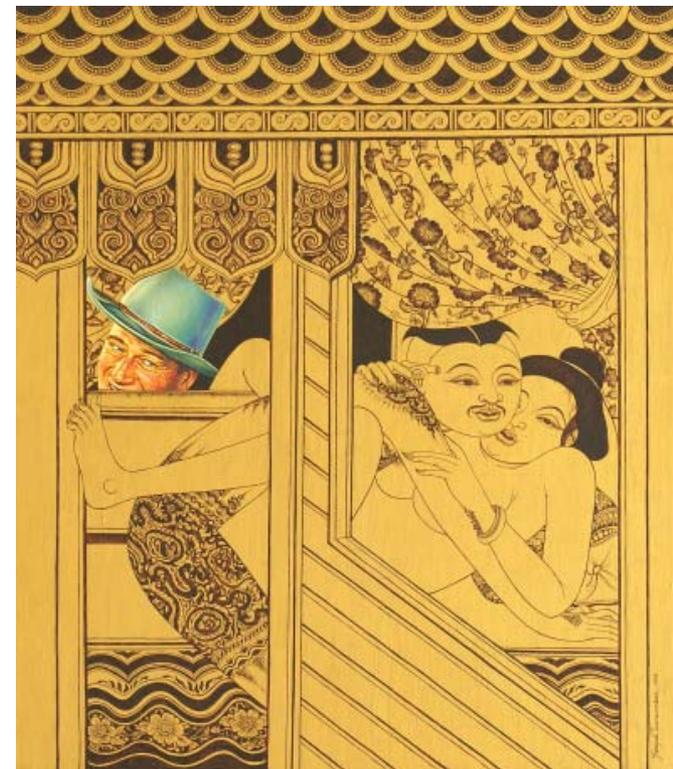
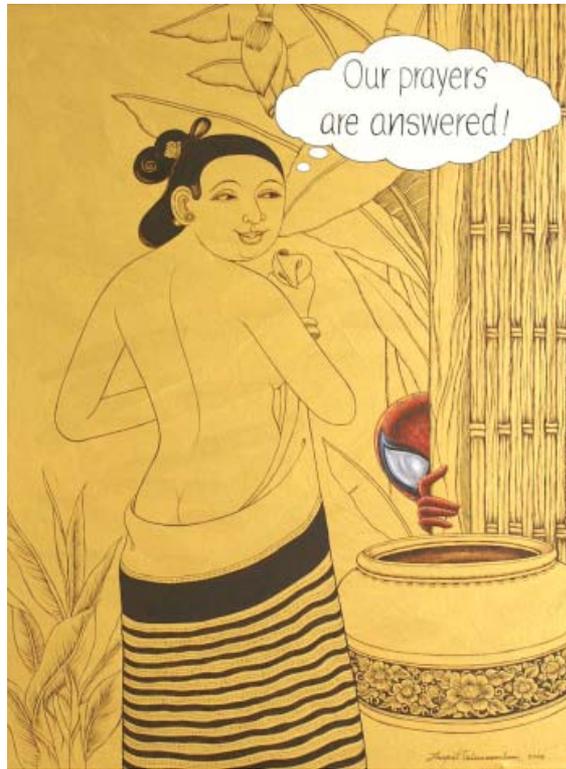


Lovers (9), 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 86 x 112 cm



Lovers (10), 2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 120 x 150 cm

► **Our Prayers Are Answered!**, 2006
Acrylic on canvas
78 x 105 cm



▲ **Oops!**, 2005
Acrylic on canvas
86 x 100 cm

The Keith Haring re-visitations are arguably the most whimsical of Tatsa-nasomboon's recent work. Playful in their approach, the artist has created a series of intimate sexual trysts between the trademark Haring silhouette figure and classically styled depictions of Thai women and men. While he has approached similar liaisons between idealised Thai beauties and American screen icons such as John Wayne in the 2005 *Oops!*, Spiderman in *Our Prayers Are Answered!* (2006), and Homer Simpson in the 2007 *Geeezzz!*, these show the Western protagonists as passive voyeurs.

▼ **Geeezzz!!**, 2007
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 120 cm





◀ **Lovers (8)**, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
86 x 112 cm

In the new Haring compositions, Tatsana-somboon depicts the featureless outlined figure embracing and groping willing female subjects who are garbed in indigenous clothing and shown topless as Thai women commonly dressed prior to the adoption of conservative Western dress codes in the 19th century.

It would be convenient to draw an analogy between Western male sex tourists coming to Thailand to exploit the economic desperation of female entertainment workers, however the artist negates any such associations as he explains, "I don't think of anyone as being a predator or pray, the women are smiling in these pictures and relations are consensual. I actually want to show that love is universal and traverses all boundaries."

Kiss, 2008 ▶
Acrylic on canvas
129 x 129 cm



Jaspa/2008

In *Hanuman Rebels!* (2008), which can be considered one of his best paintings to date, the artist has looked for a deeper connectivity between the two opposing elements of the monkey god Hanuman with Piet Mondrian's 20th century linear abstractions. Depicted in soft grey monotone, the wild and playful Hanuman has been caged within the disciplined order and stability of Mondrian's heavy black outlines. Blocks of red, blue and yellow, colour and fracture the deity as if trying to break free from his orderly shackles to form, the wavering black outlines drip from his fingers and toes to indicate the affect the mischievous god has upon Mondrian's crisp order.

In *Love and Lust*, Tatsanasomboon proves that through greater thematic layering he has yet to exhaust his Pop-styled dialogue between East and West.



Hanuman Rebels!, 2008 ▲
Acrylic on canvas
129 x 147 cm
In Art Singapore 2008

CHRONOLOGY



Photo by Chamni Thipmanee

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

Born 1971 in Samut Prakarn

1996: Bachelor of Fine Arts from Chiang Mai University

1999: Master of Fine Arts from Silpakorn University, Bangkok

Selected Art Exhibitions

- 1997: - Art Thesis Exhibition at Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University - Chiang Mai, Thailand
- ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition, Thailand
- 1998: - The 44th National Art Exhibition, the National Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand
- 1999: - Art Thesis Exhibition at Silpakorn University - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2000: - ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition - Bangkok, Thailand
- The 46th National Art Exhibition, the National Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2001: - Group Show - with Scopolamine Group - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2002: - Award winner in the 4th Panasonic Contemporary Paintings Art Competition - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2003: - ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition - Bangkok, Thailand
- *Asia Art Now* at the Korean Cultural and Arts Foundation - Seoul, **Korea**
- 2004: - *Love and Struggle* together with Sudjai Chaiyapan at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2005: - Fundraising Exhibition and Auction for Asian Art Archive - **Hong Kong**
- 2006: - Solo Show: *A Transformation of Icons* at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand
- *Tradition and Modernity in South East Asian Art* at Galerie l'Indochine - New York, **USA**
- 2008: - *Vision of East Asia 2008* at the Capital Library, Beijing for the Olympics - **China**
- *Spiritual Spaces*, Thavibu Gallery's 10th anniversary exhibition - Bangkok, Thailand
- Art Singapore 2008 - **Singapore**
- Solo Show: *LOVE and LUST* at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand



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