

INTERCULTURAL JOURNEY —

The Art of Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

Rathsaran Sireekan

Cover photo: *Medication for the Soul* (after D. Hirst)

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Published 2014 by
Thavibu Gallery Co., Ltd.
JTC Jewelry Trade Center, Suite 433
919/1 Silom Road, Bangkok 10500, Thailand
Tel. 66 (0)2 266 5454, Fax. 66 (0)2 266 5455
Email. info@thavibu.com, www.thavibu.com

ISBN 978-616-91815-1-4
Author: Rathsaran Sireekan
Language editor: Ralph Kiggell
Layout by Wanee Tipchindaichai, Copydesk, Thailand
Printing by Amarin Printing and Publishing PLC.
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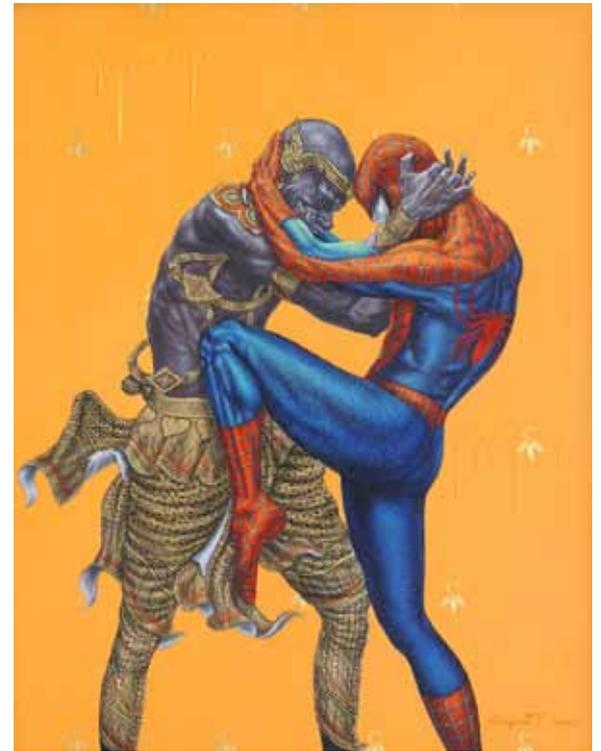
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TATSANASOMBOON AND INTERCULTURALITY

For nearly two decades, the name 'Jirapat Tatsanasomboon' has been associated, especially in Southeast Asian exhibition venues, with curious amalgams and, at times, clashes between Thai and Western cultural elements.

Although cross-cultural assimilation and appropriation can be traced in the emergence of almost every culture, as is the case in Siam¹ during the Rattanakosin era (1782–present) when the renowned Khrua In Khong (active 1850s–60s) began the integration of Western artistic styles into traditional Siamese art, yet Tatsanasomboon's repertoire stands out and occupies a unique place in Thai art. Even judged in relation to the neo-traditionalist artists² before him, Tatsanasomboon's *oeuvre* has pushed the boundary set by his precursors.

Deliberately challenging artistically, East with West, and politically, West with East, Tatsanasomboon does more than just yoke cross-cultural visuals together. Rather, his art transcends the mere decorative to reveal a rich field of intercultural encounter, confrontation, reaction and interaction between a Thai subjectivity and the visitation of the West. With the prefix 'inter' denoting an in-between space and connoting a sense of dialogue, the term 'intercultural' with which this monograph proposes to look at Tatsanasomboon's work, enables us to see the artist's work beyond the usual power relations in the development discourse where the East simply draws on and reproduces the 'expertise' of the West. As a matter of fact, Tatsanasomboon's art is full of push and pull, give and take. The effect is a fresh rereading, an establishment of the intercultural East–West artistic continuum or even the impetus for a revived interest in the arguably aesthetically exhausted Western canons. (For a further discussion of this, see 'The Middle Phase: Pop Art, Intercultural Appropriation and Figurative Realism' below.)



Thai Boxing (2), 2006,
acrylic on canvas, 70 x 90 cm

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- 1 The term 'Siam' refers to 'Thailand' before 1939. The name was changed under the first premiership of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1938–44).
 - 2 Such as Panya Vijinthanasarn – whose unconventional mural paintings at Wat Buddhapadipa in London's Wimbeldon arm the yakshas and garudas with guns and rocket launchers – and Chalermchai Kositpipat – whose murals at Wat Rong Khun see spaceships and characters from blockbuster films and cartoon movies such as the Matrix, Batman, Gundam and Kang Fu Panda, floating around, fighting below the meditating Buddha.

Tatsanasomboon's engagement with this Thai–Western interaction is not only replete with dialogical dynamism, the visually charged intercultural paintings are also conspicuously political. The fact that his art pivots on Thai–Western, not Thai–Chinese or Thai–Russian, relations and that in Tatsanasomboon's world the West predominantly means the United States, points to a certain period in international relations, and highlights the politics of Thai–US relations. In paintings such as *Thai Boxing (2)* (2006); *Visitor I*, (2004); *Visitor III* (which shows Spiderman breaking through a piece of Thai cloth), (2004); *Batman Draped in Thai Silk* (2002); and *Batman Draped in Thai Silk (2)* (2004), he places Western and Thai characters and/or motifs 'wrestling' together, or even sexually caressing, as in *Lovers (1)* (2006); *Pink Panther Strikes Again (after J. Koons)* (2007); and *Kiss* (2008). Through these juxtapositions, the artist explores power relations between the hegemonic West, especially the US, and its friend 'Small Thailand' against the backdrop of the Cold War. (For a further discussion of this, see 'The Early-Middle Phase: Intercultural Confrontation' below.)

Tatsanasomboon's engagement with Thai–Western interaction becomes less confrontational in paintings such as *The Dream (after H. Rousseau)* (2006); *Hanuman is Upset (after P. Mondrian)* (2005); *Jealousy* (2008); *Love Conquers All* (2008); and *I Will Survive! (after F. Botero)* (2011) which takes as its subject Thailand's disastrous floods in that year. The less-combative composition of these works adopts intercultural appropriation and intertextuality, taking the narrative of a painting or a literary work to develop an intertwining relationship where one text shapes the meaning of another.



Hanuman is Upset! (after P. Mondrian),
2005, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



The Dream (after H. Rousseau), 2006,
acrylic on canvas, 119 x 88 cm

When Thailand's post-2006-coup political crisis escalated into tumultuous violence on the streets of Bangkok in 2009, with the fragmentation of Thai society, Tatsanasomboon, like other contemporary Thai artists, was consumed, and still is, by their repercussions. Remarkably, however, the artist remains committed to his intercultural poetics, finding new ground to investigate this chronic, ever-pressing, national socio-political crisis. Tatsanasomboon ingeniously conflates Thai and Western iconography to explore class, integrity and abuse of power, which, while referring to the current crisis, prove universally relevant. (For a further discussion of this, see the sub-sections 'Intercultural Appropriation and Political Figurative Realism' of 'The Middle Phase: Pop Art, Intercultural Appropriation and Figurative Realism' and the stylistic analysis of 'The Mature Phase: Psychological Figurative Realism'.)

I Will Survive! (after F. Botero), 2011,
acrylic on canvas, 100 x 130 cm



Tatsanasomboon's artistic styles have evolved in four stages: the Early Phase (Apocalypse), the Early-Middle Phase (Intercultural Confrontation), the Middle Phase (Pop Art, Intercultural Appropriation and Figurative Realism) and the Mature Phase (Psychological Figurative Realism).

The artist's Early Phase reveals how the urge for interculturality took shape. Whereas his Early and Early-Middle phases are strongly antagonistic towards the West (as with the work of veteran Thai political artist Vasan Sitthiket), the Middle Phase becomes less angry, the composition of the works less confrontational. First, these works employ appropriation, which, as this monograph argues, is inspired by Pop Art; second, this leads to a curious use of intertextuality – all of which enriches Tatsanasomboon's intercultural repertoire to allow his mature psychological phase to evolve.

THE USE OF THE *RAMAKIEN* IN TATSANASOMBOON'S WORK

Conspicuous in all the four phases, and in his *oeuvre* as a whole, is the artist's consistent and committed use of the Thai national epic *Ramakien* – be it the *Ramakien* characters, in the Early, Early-Middle and Middle phases, or characters and narrative, in the Mature Phase.

The Ramakien ('The Glory of Rama') is the Thai appropriation of the seminal Indian *Ramayana* epic, which is attributed to the sage Valmiki. The Hindu sage's version of the Rama story asserted an enormous influence on the entire Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia for centuries. It is believed that the *Ramayana* was brought to Southeast Asia and Siam by Tamil scholars and merchants trading with ancient Khmer kingdoms such as Funan and Angkor.

Although distinctions apply between the Hindu version (*Ramayana*) and the Theravada Buddhist version (*Dasaratha Jataka* and *Phra Lak/Phra Lam*) of the Rama story, the *Ramakien* of Siam/Thailand, a predominantly Theravada Buddhist kingdom, interestingly takes the narrative structure of the Hindu *Ramayana*. However, one finds the Buddhist philosophy subtly interfused throughout this Hindu narrative. The *Ramakien* was principally composed by King Rama I³, the first king of the present Chakri dynasty, as part of the effort to reconstruct religious and cultural life in the new capital of Siam after the kingdom of Ayutthaya was sacked by the Burmese in 1767. This version is not an account of a previous life of the Buddha as the Theravada Buddhist versions usually are.⁴ The Siamese *Ramakien* is indeed permeated with Hindu gods who dominate the scene: Shiva, the Creator, in the background, and Vishnu, who at Shiva's command incarnates as Rama to rescue the world from the threat of cosmic and social disorder. Though thriving within this Hindu narrative structure, the Siamese *Ramakien* is permeated with Buddhist notions of transitoriness and karmic cause and effect. Moreover, in the *Ramakien*'s epilogue, the Buddhist King Rama I himself urges his readers to be mindful of impermanence (*anitchang/anicca*) – an important element in Buddhism. Furthermore, at the time when the *Ramakien* text was being conceived, Thai Buddhists were keenly appropriating Hindu cultural elements into their 'Buddhism': for example, Shiva and Vishnu were incorporated among the deities who inhabit the realms of the three worlds in the Buddhist cosmology.⁵ With this textual and historical fact, the *Ramakien* can also be considered a masterpiece of appropriation. Such a characteristic for the master text we are dealing with poses an interesting relationship to the artist at hand. Is Tatsanasomboon's fascination with the *Ramakien* perhaps subconscious, or mere coincidence given that his intercultural poetics heavily draw on adaptation and assimilation?

3 According to Srisurang Poolthupya, Fellow of the Academy of Art, the Royal Institute, Thailand, The Rama I *Ramakien* is most important because it is the only version that tells the complete Rama story. The Rama II *Ramakien* is generally used for stage because the dramatic and exciting episodes were written especially for Khon (masked dance drama) performances. The Rama VI *Ramakien* has some episodes very close to the Valmiki *Ramayana*: for example, Vibhishana in this version is a brave warrior whereas in the Rama I and II versions he is an astrologer, medicine man and coward. He becomes a comic figure when he acts cowardly, being scared of his powerful brothers and nephew. Poolthupya, Srisurang: 'The Influence of the *Ramayana* on Thai Culture: Kingship, Literature, Fine Arts and Performing Arts', presented at the 2nd International Ramayana Conference, University of Northern Illinois, July 2005.

4 Richman, Paula (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1991.

5 Ibid.

The artist rationalised his enchantment with the *Ramakien*, referring to well-known characters from the national epic, such as Hanuman, Ravana and Rama, who surrounded him in his father's billboard workshop in Samut Prakarn, south of Bangkok. In the larger picture, however, the *Ramakien* has remained a perennial narrative on which power relations under divine kingship in Siamese/Thai society have been based since the 13th century, if not earlier.

Rama, in the Hindu *Ramayana* and the Siamese/Thai *Ramakien*, is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Associating kingship with this divine genealogy, Siamese/Thai kings include 'Rama' as part of their name. The ruler of the Siamese kingdom of Sukhothai, in the late 13th century, adopted the name Ramkhamhaeng ('Rama the Mighty'). Two prominent kings of the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767) also included 'Rama' as part of their names: King Ramadhipati I and King Ramadhipati II ('Rama the Ruler'), and King Ramesvar ('Rama the Great'). The sixth king of the current Chakri dynasty commenced the tradition of referring to himself as 'Rama'. The five kings before him were, thus, posthumously named as Rama I, Rama II, Rama III, Rama IV and Rama V. The kings after King Rama VI also adopted this tradition. The present King Bhumibol is called King Rama IX.⁶ The name of the current dynasty 'Chakri' refers to the celestial weaponry of Vishnu whose human incarnation is Rama. Etymologically, the name is derived from a combination of the discus (*chakra*) and the trident (*trisula*).

In the *Ramakien*, while Rama represents the force of virtue (*dharma*), Ravana is associated with the force of evil. The victory of the former over the latter symbolises the supremacy of virtue over vice, the binary of which provides moral lessons and examples to devoted courtiers and loyal subjects of Siam.⁷ Literary works of the Ayutthaya court make frequent references to the Rama story, more often than not to glorify the mightiness and righteousness of the divine kingship. In *Lilit Yuan Phai* ('Defeat of the Yuan'), for example, King Ramadhipati II's victory over the Yuan people is compared to Rama's mighty and virtuous subjugation of Ravana⁸, the 'ten-headed' demon king, who is known for the will to disturb social and cosmic order. ('Ravana' in Sanskrit literally means 'inflicting tears'.) This glorification based on the dichotomy of good and evil echoes the widely accepted belief that the Indian *Ramayana* was composed to celebrate the victory of the white and fine Aryan over the dark-skinned Dravidian, a similar dichotomisation which we can find in Tatsanasomboon's design of the intercultural relationship of Thailand with the West in the Early and Early-Middle phase as well as the reduction of the *Ramakien* subplot of 'Phra Narai (Vishnu) Subduing Nonthok' into the aristocracy/working-class binary in the Mature Phase.

The *Ramakien* was not only used to help sustain and promote divine kingship in the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya period, but was also recognised and reenacted at the beginning of the new Rattanakosin era (1782–present) when King Rama I commissioned the painting of a complete episode of the *Ramakien* in murals along the galleries surrounding the Royal Temple of the Emerald Buddha. In conjunction with this, King Rama I mandated performances of episodes from the *Ramakien* during celebrations pertaining to the Emerald Buddha, the Siamese icon. The combination of visual record and ritual performance is explained by Paula Richman as the incorporation of the 'Glory of Rama' 'into the Buddhist ideal of royal power and authority manifested in the Emerald Buddha on the one hand and in the reigning (Rama) dynasty on the other.'⁹

6 Poolthupya, 2005.

7 'Rama is also the symbol of good kingship, of sacred power of the king whom everyone must obey, serve and show absolute loyalty. The absolute devotion and loyalty of Rama's brothers and generals are stressed, so is Sita's faithfulness in spite of her long stay in Lanka'. (Ibid.)

8 Ibid.

9 Richman, c.1991.

It is with this centuries-long tradition – the one using the *Ramakien* to signify and sustain divine kingship – that Tatsanasomboon, in his Mature Phase, would like to have a dialogue; that is, to question the Grand Narrative whose *raison d'être* has buttressed power relations in Siamese/Thai society. Tatsanasomboon's latest series *The Desires of Nonthok* appropriates the genesis of the *Ramakien* to problematise existing power relations in Thai society and question the source of the current socio-political conflict-turned-crisis.

This monograph in general applies the Indian version of names, rather than the Thai ones, because, first, the Thai *Ramakien* draws its narrative structure and list of characters from the Indian *Ramayana* and, second, the Indian version of these characters' names is more widely known internationally. However, the character of Nonthok, which is the principal character in Tatsanasomboon's series *The Desires of Nonthok*, appears to be unique to the *Ramakien* and with no equivalent in the *Ramayana*. This monograph, therefore, uses the Thai names from the *Ramakien* when discussing *The Desires of Nonthok*. The following is a list of some Indian–Thai equivalents:¹⁰

<i>Ramayana</i> (Indian)	<i>Ramakien</i> (Thai)
Rama, avatar of Vishnu/Narayan(a)	Phra Ram, avatar of Witsanu/ Phra Narai
Shiva or Isavara	Phra Isuan/Siwa
Brahma – together with Vishnu and Shiva, forms the Hindu Trinity	Phra Phrom
Sita, incarnation of Lakshmi – consort of Vishnu/Narayan(a)	Naang Sida, incarnation of Phra Laksami – consort of Witsanu/Phra Narai
Hanuman – King of the apes and general of Rama's army	Hanuman
Ravana – King of the <i>yakshas</i>	Thotsakan
Kumbhakarna ¹¹ – Ravana's brother	Kumphakan
Maiyarap – King of the Underworld, embodied as a donkey	Maiyarap
Vibhishana ¹² – an estranged brother of Ravana and Kumbhakarna	Phiphek
Abasara (female spirit)	Naang Absorn

10 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramakien>

11 Due to the power of clairvoyance given him by Brahma, Kumbhakarna foresees the loss of Ravana if the ten-faced *yaksha* is to continue waging war against Rama. Yet as Ravana's brother and an upholder of warrior ethics, he performs his duty and battles against the *devas*, despite the knowledge of his impending loss and death.

12 Vibhishana was expelled from Lanka where Ravana is king because he advised Ravana to return Sita to Rama; Vibhishana later joins Rama as his astrologer and provides valuable information to Rama for the defeat of Ravana.

THE EARLY PHASE: THE APOCALYPSE – AMERICAN ‘INVASION’ AND THE ARTIST AS AN ANGRY YOUNG MAN (mid to late 1990s)

Tatsanasomboon’s intercultural artistic engagement emerged in the mid-1990s, during his bachelor’s years at Chiang Mai University, when it was fiercely debated whether Hollywood should be allowed to use Thailand’s former capital Ayutthaya, a UNESCO World Heritage site, as a filming location for the action blockbuster *Mortal Combat* (1995). To the rage of local conservatives and the artist, permission was granted by the Film Board, the Public Relations Department and the Fine Arts Department on the grounds of economic benefits, which diverted criticisms of inappropriateness and fear of damage during production.

Feeling more politically involved than ever, Tatsanasomboon was prompted by this American ‘invasion’ to reflect on how, in his everyday life, influxes of dominant foreign cultures – mainly American, but also Japanese – came pouring in to threaten the old Thai way of life he was familiar with.

Foreign cultures had become part of our lives: from the way we eat; the way we dress; the new technologies and gadgets we are excited about; it was the time when the computer first entered my life.

The excitement these new changes evoked is easily imagined, and the young artist’s anxiety is well projected in the dense, suffocating and visually incongruous composition of *Contradiction* (1995), his first intercultural work.

This cultural disorientation came with a paradoxical desire by the young artist to be ‘modern’, to feel relevant to the times. The battleground between Thai tradition and American and Japanese cultural imperialism inspired him to take a new direction; shedding the old realism-bound skin, he found new subjects in American- and Japanese-influenced media.

[Coincidentally with the Hollywood debate] I began to feel that painting realistic work was outdated and suddenly I became interested in the American and Japanese superheroes that appeared in the media, and which became my new subject matter.

Driven by the sense of being invaded, his Early Phase canvases of the late 1990s are filled with American and Japanese superheroes encroaching the realm of Thai Tradition, symbolised by the trespass of Siamese palace walls as featured in *Foreign Intervention* (1996) and *Tradition Giving Way to Modernity* (1997).



**Foreign
Intervention**, 1996,
acrylic on canvas,
200 x 140 cm

**Tradition Giving
Way to Modernity,**
1997, acrylic on
canvas, 250 x 190 cm



The young artist's sense of antagonism towards foreign cultural infiltration culminated in his depictions of apocalyptic battles between American/Japanese invaders and guardians of the Thai Tradition as depicted in *Armageddon* (1997), *Crisis* (1997), and *East vs West* (1998). Despite being painted in 2000, *Apocalypse* – in mixed-media wooden board – still employs the early stylistics of the intercultural apocalypse.

Paradoxically in the apocalypse series, while exteriorising his rage at witnessing the 'violation' of his country by the West, the young artist revels in its youth culture, apparently amusing himself in wild fantasy and a real love for popular American and Japanese cartoon heroes – Batman, Ultraman and Woody (the pullstring cowboy doll from *Toy Story*), to name a few – who ferociously invade the sacred territory of the Thai Tradition. This love–hate relationship, although not so manifest in his Middle and Mature phases, underlies the whole corpus of his works.

The Thai Tradition, in turn, is depicted as being rigorously protected by characters from the *Ramakien*. In these early apocalypse paintings, prominent characters from the national epic, like Rama, Ravana and Hanuman, join forces to guard against the American-led invasion. In this early period, Tatsanasomboon notably dispenses with the *Ramakien* narrative and reconciles archrivals Rama and Ravana to collaborate in saving the country from foreign invasion.

Although the artist has no intention of subsuming Japan under the rubric of the West in his paintings, the canvas is always a truthful mirror that reflects the reality of the age in which it is executed. That American and Japanese superheroes come together as a team in Tatsanasomboon's painting must reflect some affiliation between Japan and the West, which, predominantly here, is the United States.

Superheroes are known to appear against the backdrop of the Cold War where they functioned as a Capitalist propaganda tool against the spread of Communism. Like the US, Japan – not a Communist state – uses superheroes for this cultural-political purpose. Furthermore, Japan's economic miracle, technological progress and boom in international trade – which made it possible for its cultural influence to be felt by a then-young artist in Thailand – was a result of the postwar US military presence in Japan, and the containment of Communism during the Cold War, when the country received aid, assistance and special procurement.¹³

Tatsanasomboon's early intercultural poetics were immediately recognised when his graduation thesis painting *Foreign Intervention* (1996) was awarded the Grand prize of Panasonic Contemporary Art in the 3rd Panasonic Contemporary Painting Exhibition (1997).¹⁴ Dubbing the work 'controversial', the judges hailed him for his bravery in challenging the long-standing artistic tradition of 'pure' Thai art. The work fueled numerous criticisms, was scorned by traditionalists as a 'sacrilege', and condemned to be only short lived. Yet Tatsanasomboon has proven them wrong; his intercultural poetics and repertoire have matured their themes in the artist's later phases.

13 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_post-war-economic_miracle

In World War II, Japan's invasion of Thailand prompted an armistice allowing Imperial Japan to use the country as an operations base to attack neighbouring countries. The armistice ended Churchill's hopes of forging an alliance with Thailand – an antagonistic identification redeemed by the Free Thai Movement or 'Seri Thai' led by Seni Pramoj, the Thai ambassador to Washington DC. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_invasion_of_Thailand)

14 A collaborative effort between the Fine Arts Department of Silpakorn University and Panasonic Corporation, which has funded many cultural activities world wide. The competition has taken place since 1995 and offers young promising artists an opportunity to showcase their art to the general public and promote an understanding of contemporary art.



East vs West, 1998,
acrylic on canvas,
250 x 190 cm



Apocalypse, 2000,
mixed media on
wooden board, 200 x
184 x 6 cm

THE EARLY-MIDDLE PHASE: INTERCULTURAL CONFRONTATION (early 2000s)

Tatsanasomboon's Early-Middle Phase began with his completion of a Master's of Fine Arts at Silpakorn University in 1999. His canvases of the early 2000s still resonate with animosity toward the West. But now the artist has moved from the dense, suffocating compositions of the apocalypse, where dozens of intercultural subjects wage war against each other in close proximity, to a streamlined dichotomisation of one-to-one confrontations between Thai Tradition and the West. It must be emphasised that in Tatsanasomboon's Early and Early-Middle phases, the West for him is essentially American:

I see the US as the representative of the West. It is the Superpower in many ways: it creates world-renowned superheroes, Hollywood films; it's simply the centre of everything.

As with the apocalypse series, these confrontational compositions from 2003 and 2004 still employ characters from the *Ramakien* to represent the quintessence of Thai Tradition. The encroaching Capitalist side, however, has lost the Japanese popular cartoon characters to the more emphatic presence of American superheroes. The artist explains this loss in an interview with Steven Pettifor:

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.¹⁵

Besides the artist's explanation, the greater potency of the America-as-the-West-vs-Thai dichotomy may also stem from the two countries' historic Cold War contact during the 1960s and 1970s, when the US came as a 'Great Friend' to 'rescue' 'Small Thailand' from the spread of Communism¹⁶, instilling its Capitalist ideology as it did so.

This monograph's contextualizing of Tatsanasomboon's Early and Early-Middle phases as Cold War legacy corresponds to the artist's understanding that the birth of American superheroes coincides with the US unease at the Soviet Union's development and accumulation of nuclear weapons in the fierce competition to be the world's superpower.

These American superheroes are the US tool for their Capitalist propaganda against so-called 'evil Communism'.

Moreover, as for Tatsanasomboon, the dichotomisation of American superheroes with Thai *Ramakien* characters in the Early-Middle Phase is in fact a battle between Western Capitalism/materialism and the idealism of a more tradition-oriented East:

¹⁵ Pettifor, Steven, *Love and Lust: Jirapat Tatsanasomboon*, Exhibition Catalogue, Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery, 2008.

¹⁶ Feangfu, Janit. *(Ir)resistibly modern: the construction of modern Thai identities in Thai literature during the Cold War era, 1958-1976*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, 2011.

As for me, the Ramakien characters, such as Rama, Hanuman, and Ravana, are the Thai heroes. They represent our ancestors' pursuit for idealism, which privileges the purity of mind over matter.

There follows a substantial series of Thai and American heroes in life-and-death struggles. Intercultural duels include those between *Ramakien* characters and Stars-and-Stripes-clad heroes in works such as: *Uncle Sam vs Thotsakan*; *Captain America vs Gumpagan*; *Captain America vs Arkat Talai*. Combats also include *Superman vs Gumpagan*; *Superman vs Phipek*; *Batman vs Phratou*; *Dr. Strange vs Naga*; *Green Goblin vs Maiyarap*; *Thai boxing (2)*; *Thai boxing (3)*; *Visitor (I)*; *Visitor (III)*.



Uncle Sam vs Thotsakan, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 60 cm



Green Robin vs Maiyarap, 2004,
acrylic on canvas, 150 x 155 cm

Follow Me and I'll take you to civilisation; Superman vs Phipek and Wonderwoman vs Chomphupan are among a few of Tatsanasomboon's paintings that give a clear verdict on who wins in these East–West confrontations:

In the end, the West which represents Capitalism and materialism triumphs because in the present time the greed and obsession for money and material possessions crush any will to nurture peace and cultivate a greater quality of mind. In modern Thailand, especially in big cities where trade and business thrive, the struggle for survival and competition among individuals kills 'nam-jai-Thai' [kindness and thoughtfulness].

As with the Early Phase, this phase makes no use of narrative depth from either the *Ramakien* or any popular American cartoons in portraying intercultural confrontation.

However, one significant painting of this confrontational nature, though created in the Middle Phase, the late 2000s, draws on the poetics of dichotomisation while exploring a narrative depth more characteristic of the following phase. *Leave me alone!* (2007) typifies Tatsanasomboon's hostility to the intrusion of the West, epitomised by the US. The iconic work brilliantly appropriates the hierarchical relationship between God and man portrayed in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. It references US–Thailand power relations, not only to the time of painting – a legacy of the Early Phase above – but also, as this monograph argues, to the Cold War period when anti-Communist rhetoric enabled the US to 'invade' and 'rescue' its friend 'Small Thailand'. This 'American Era'¹⁷ (late 1950s–early 1970s) provides an interesting context to Tatsanasomboon's Middle Phase, where confrontation is key.



Leave Me Alone!, 2007,
acrylic on canvas,
120 x 90 cm

In Leave Me Alone!, a transitional work, the artist selects and appropriates the most emblematic choreography of the ever-brave and -defiant Hanuman from the *Ramakien* masked dance performance, known as *khon*, to construct a new iconography of US–Thai power relations. Tatsanasomboon’s offering of Hanuman’s middle finger to the saving hand of the almighty Superman, a synecdoche for God-like America, enacts the artist’s insolent refusal for his country to be ‘rescued’ by America, ‘the Great Friend’, in this particular historical context.

The confrontations central to Tatsanasomboon’s works from the early 2000s, the Early-Middle Phase, also find potent remnants in the late 2000s, the Middle Phase, in paintings such as *I Want YOU...!* (2008), *Rama vs Obama* (2009), or even later in the early 2010s, the Mature Phase, such as *Aspiration* (2012). These recurrences suggest a persisting incongruity between Western and Thai subjectivity, however, with the artist’s realisation that American and Western imperialism have to be dealt with more subtly.



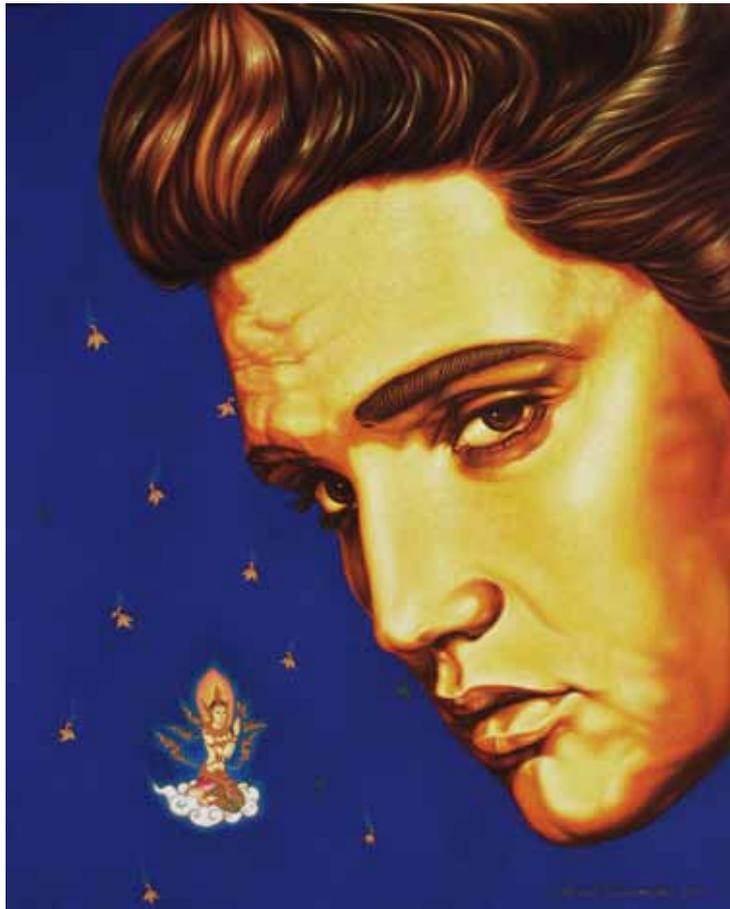
Rama vs Obama, 2009,
acrylic on canvas,
150 x 115 cm

I Want YOU...!, 2008,
acrylic on canvas,
120 x 130 cm

THE MIDDLE PHASE: POP ART, INTERCULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND FIGURATIVE REALISM (late 2000s)

Tatsanasomboon's Early and Early-Middle phases juxtapose *Ramakien* characters with popular American—and Japanese in the Early Phase—cartoon characters. Whereas the former are traditionally depicted with great national pride most often in sacred places, such as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the latter more commonly appear on every Thai household's television screens.

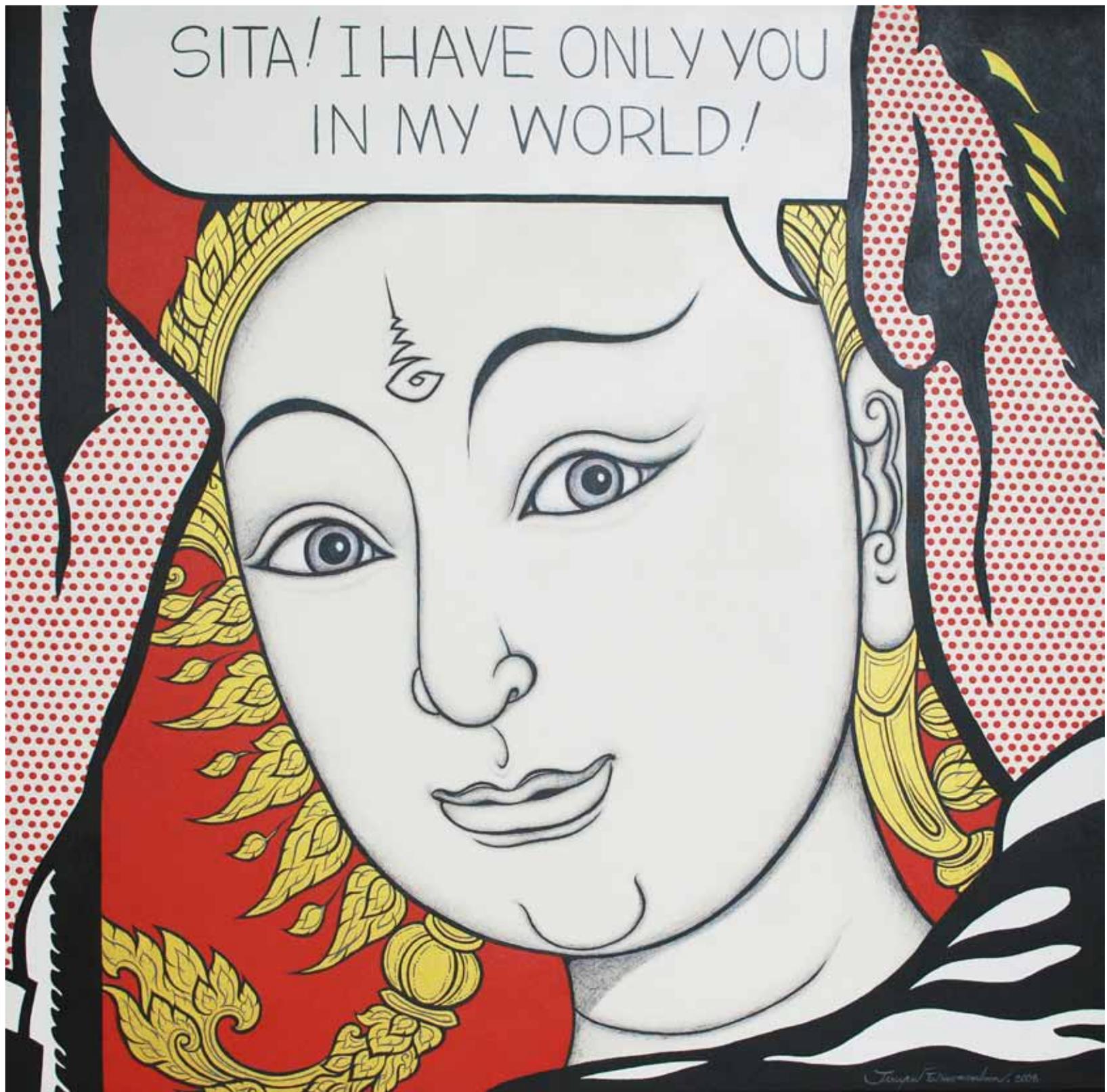
Such striking contrasts suggest that Tatsanasomboon's Early and Early-Middle works might draw inspiration from or bear affinities with Pop Art, which is confirmed by references in his Middle Phase to Warhol's Pop icons, such as *Miss You, Elvis* (2006) and, to a lesser extent, Roy Fox Lichtenstein Ben-Day dots and speech balloons in *Rain or Shine (after R. Lichtenstein)* (2010), and *Sita! I have only you in my world!* (2008).



Miss You, Elvis, 2006,
acrylic on canvas,
85 x 105 cm

**Sita! I have only you
in my world!**
[after R. Lichtenstein],
2008, acrylic on
canvas, 120 x 120 cm

Closing the gap between the sacred and the popular is one of the most salient traits of Pop Art (flourishing in the US and the UK in the 1960s), and the most influential figure of this movement is Andy Warhol, whose poetics of de-sanctification and appropriation strongly resonate throughout Tatsanasomboon's Middle Phase repertoire.



ANDY WARHOL'S POETICS OF POP

Integral to the work of Warhol are depictions of Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne, James Dean, Mickey Mouse and Superman. Warhol employs these Pop icons to discuss the American cult of celebrity and its cultural and social implications. We shall see below how Tatsanasomboon makes use of these famous faces in his inter-cultural paintings.

Another kind of 'celebrity', the Renaissance masterpieces, are also an important subject of Warhol's Pop Art. His reinterpretations of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Annunciation*, Paolo Uccello's *St. George and the Dragon* and Piero Della Francesca's *Madonna del Duca da Montefeltro in Details of Renaissance Paintings* series (1984), for instance, de-sacralise the Western classical masterpieces. In this Renaissance series, Warhol turns the sacred irreplaceability of these masterpieces into multiple screenprints – the re-production process of which he conceptualises as a metaphor for American Capitalism, mass production, industry, abundance and its simultaneous and contradictory desire for innovation and uniformity.¹⁸

The *Renaissance* screenprint series also shows Warhol's use of 'dismembering'. By cutting up these masterpieces, Warhol focused on one part to reduce the image's original chromatic complexity, to allow contours, the essential, to emerge. His elimination of the temporal distance that once elevated these masterpieces ultimately turned them into 'Pop' art.¹⁹

'Camouflage' is another major means by which Warhol de-sanctifies and questions the iconic status of images. Camouflage conjures a sense of leisure, as of leisure clothing, and, at the same time, ambiguity. Two significant Western icons to which Warhol applies this subversive technique are Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in *Camouflage The Last Supper* (1986) and the Statue of Liberty in *Statue of Liberty* (1986). The latter work is more about questioning than de-sanctifying as such: while the camouflage expresses the subject's mystery and ambiguity, it also casts doubt on this supreme icon of democracy, questioning if national interests could sometimes have hidden meanings.²⁰

Central to Warhol's Pop Art ethics, besides reproduction, appropriation, dismembering and camouflage, is the engagement he makes through figurativeness with the reality he lives by – using the Statue of Liberty as a reference to US democracy, for instance. This figurative realism is a significant trait of the poetics of Pop Art as a movement.²¹

Tatsanasomboon's important works from his Middle Phase (2006–10) show a strong presence of the governing characteristics Warhol employs in rendering his art 'Pop': the use of Pop icons; the technique of de-sanctifying by reproduction, appropriation, dismembering and camouflage; and the construction of new subversive meanings by means of figurative realism.

18 Feldman, Frayda and Schellmann, Jorg, *Andy Warhol Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné 1962–1987*, Mosel Verlag, 1997.

19 *Andy Warhol: Life, Death and Beauty*, Exhibition guide (French). Mons (Belgium): Beaux-arts Mons (BAM), October 2013.

20 Ibid.

21 Britt, David (ed.), *Modern Art: Impressionism to Post-Modernism*, Thames and Hudson, 2007.

POP ICONS

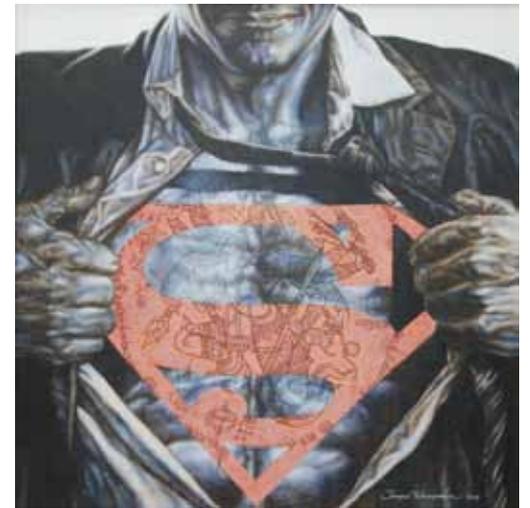
The *Belief* series

Tatsanasomboon's *Belief* series (2006–9) juxtaposes Western Pop icons with different forms of Thai amulets: including lingams in *Belief (Thai Amulet)* (2007); fabric amulets in *Belief [Elvis Presley]* (2006), *Belief (Ghost Rider)* (2007), and *Belief (Charlie Chaplin)* (2009); clay tablets in *Belief (John Wayne)* (2007); and tattoos in *Belief (Superman)* (2009).

Belief [John Wayne], 2007,
acrylic on canvas,
132 x 86 cm (2 panels)



Belief [Superman], 2009,
 acrylic on canvas,
 129 x 129 cm



Belief [Ghost Rider], 2007,
 acrylic on canvas,
 197 x 140 cm



The Thai artist's motive of bringing these two sets of culturally different icons together stems from his childhood fascination with the Hollywood stars:

When I was young, I watched these old Hollywood movies and wondered why these movie stars are still much talked about at present although they are already gone. I have always been fascinated by their eternal fame and perpetual charm.

It is the desire for this immortality and perpetual charm which makes Pop icons and Thai amulets converge. In the Thai popular culture, the ancient Khmer script and the lingams are believed not only to ward off any imminent danger and keep the bearer immortal, but also to equip him or her with charisma as well as luck in commerce. The multiple semantic possibilities embedded in these symbolisms make Tatsanasomboon's intercultural iconography in this series challengingly rich. For example, Charlie Chaplin stationed in the middle of the ancient script in *Belief (Charlie Chaplin)* can be seen as an emblem of both charisma and commercial success. Likewise, not only perpetual charm and sexuality but also the Hollywood star's commercial success pervades *Belief (Thai Amulet)* in which Tatsanasomboon confronts the seductive Marilyn Monroe with a sensuous Thai lingam. The tattoo of the figure of Hanuman, the Superman of Asia, on the chest of his Western counterpart in *Belief (Superman)*, may also be considered both a symbol of invincibility and, at once, potent sexuality (one cannot deny this highly charged element in the narrative surrounding the identity of both characters).

The effect of such intercultural conflation/juxtaposition in this series leads to subversion at both ends of the cultural spectrums of Thailand and the West. On the one hand, Tatsanasomboon's comparison of the Hollywood movie stars with Thai objects of veneration connotes the God-like status of such American film stars as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin and John Wayne who are fervently worshipped by their international fans.

Tatsanasomboon's intercultural juxtaposition in this thought-provoking series can also point to a great tension and competition between American cultural imperialism and the old Thai mode of worship which is losing ground



Belief [Charlie Chaplin], 2009, acrylic on canvas, 127 x 158 cm

against and being replaced by the American cult of celebrity – a strong resonance of the artist’s continuing anxiety at the American ‘invasion’ thoroughly felt in the early creative phases.

At the other end of the cultural spectrum, juxtaposing American Pop icons with Thai objects of veneration can be considered a sacrilege rather than an adoption of Warhol’s poetics of secularisation. In turning these sacred objects ‘Pop’ by collocating John Wayne with a Buddhist clay tablet, Tatsanasomboon is criticising commercialism and blind faith in the popular version of Buddhism practised in Thailand, which is heavily tinged with sexual motifs of worship. This is best illustrated by *Belief (Thai Amulet)* (2007) where drips of paint, in this case, serve as sperm oozing from the phallus motif to reinforce the notion of the carnal impulse of veneration. However, in Thailand, talismans such as lingams, fabric amulets, clay tablets and tattoos are generally acquired to draw luck and prosperity to the bearer as well as to protect him against potential danger.



Belief [Thai Amulet],
2007, acrylic on canvas,
151 x 101 cm

Like Warhol, Tatsanasomboon makes use of Pop icons in his *Belief* series to ultimately question the *status quo* of our beliefs, be it the cult of American celebrity – in which the Thai craze for American Pop icons is projected and called into question – or one’s religious faith. Tatsanasomboon’s criticism of the commercial version of Buddhism practised in modern Thailand can also be found in *Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst)* (2010) below.

REPRODUCTION AND INTERCULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Demonstrative examples of Tatsanasomboon's embrace of Warhol's poetics of reproduction and appropriation are *Puff! (after A. Warhol)* (2010) and *This is Me! (after A. Warhol)* (2010). Both works were part of *Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal*, an exhibition in Singapore in 2012 that showed Warhol's enduring influence on the work of several Southeast Asian artists. *This is Me! (after A. Warhol)* is especially outstanding because, while painted in acrylic, this Thai appropriation of Warhol deliberately embodies the form of screenprints.



This is Me! (after A. Warhol), 2010,
acrylic on canvas,
150 x 150 cm



PUFF! (after A. Warhol), 2010,
acrylic on canvas,
120 x 130 cm

Apart from inserting traditional Thai elements into Warhol's multiplication of Mickey Mouse as a mean of appropriation, Tatsanasomboon's use of paint drips – which, according to Steven Pettifor's interview of the artist, functions as 'a device to notify the viewer that an artist's hand has been employed and the work is an original and not a print' – significantly ushers us back to the debate of whether or not screenprints, in Warhol's legacy, should really be taken as an embodiment of mass production and conformity as the American artist usually declared, given the fact that he himself was actually very meticulous about the production method of each print. (The *Camouflage Self-Portrait* series [1986] is a good metaphor for Warhol being a camouflage himself: declaring one thing, meaning another, as an act of doubleness.)

Tatsanasomboon's *This is Me! (after A. Warhol)* shows a keen awareness of the argument that 'Warhol transformed our understanding of the print into something quite different from what we believed it to be: in his hands it became unique, even unreproducible...The truth is that Andy Warhol never practiced the art of uniformity; his was an art of endless permutation.'²² The Thai artist is, obviously, well aware of the debate and therefore, not only adopts the poetics of reproduction, but also contributes to this very debate by using the paint drips to emphasise that, although reproduction as used by Warhol is a metaphor for Capitalist modes of production and consumption, it is still possible to find invention and originality in the technique of appropriation.

The dilemma between conformity and invention, and uniformity and permutation, forms an important paradox central not only to Tatsanasomboon's but also Warhol's creative process:

*I ask myself how to find a fragile equilibrium between the 'theft' of an explicit reference and the 'creativity' that consists of finding inspiration in somebody else's work.*²³

This dilemma, as we shall see, also reverberates throughout Tatsanasomboon's poetics of appropriation and intertextuality.

22 Feldman and Schellmann, 1997.

23 An unofficial translation of the exhibition guide *Andy Warhol: Life, Death and Beauty*, Mons (Belgium), Beaux-arts Mons (BAM), October 2013: 'Je me suis demande comment trouver le fragile equilibre entre le "vol" d'une reference explicite et la "creativite" qui consiste a trouver l'inspiration dans le travail d'un autre.'

INTERCULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND FIGURATIVE REALISM

Although most of the following works do not immediately demonstrate direct references to Pop Art, their fundamental reliance on the technique of appropriation and figurative realism (using metaphors as a reference to or criticism of the contemporary reality) together with that of reproduction, in the case of *Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst)* (2010), can arguably be viewed as a continuum of Warhol's influence.

Although this important work by Tatsanasomboon directly references the British artist Damien Hirst and his spot paintings, it is hard to miss the strong presence, or legacy, of Warhol's poetics of reproduction in this series of works by Hirst that depicts rows of multicoloured spots, though randomly chosen, stationed in a simple grid format.



Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst), 2010, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm

Deceptively identical to the rest of their series, each of Warhol's screenprints and Hirst's spot paintings is, however, never the same. Even more surprisingly, this deceptive mechanic conformity shared by both artists is intentional, imbuing their works with a sense of irony. While Warhol blatantly and daringly makes his screenprints a metaphor for American consumerism and mass production, Hirst ensures 'any physical evidence of human intervention [in these spot paintings]... was removed, until the works appeared to have been constructed mechanically, or "by a person trying to paint like a machine"²⁴ – 'a scientific approach to painting in a similar way to the drug companies' scientific approach to life. Art doesn't purport to have all the answers; the drug companies do. Hence the title of the series, *The Pharmaceutical Paintings*... Art is like medicine, it can heal.²⁵

If read in light of Warhol's poetics of reproduction, I want to propose that Hirst's multiplied 'drugs' has a commercial undertone. Tatsanasomboon ingeniously captures this combined 'cure and commercial' subtext in Hirst's spot paintings and uses it as a *metaphor* to criticise the conspicuous element of commercialism in the popular version of Buddhism practised in Thailand (see also the *Belief* series). In *Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst)*, Tatsanasomboon astutely turns these reproduced multicoloured 'medicines' into multiplications of meditating Buddha statues to connote the culture of reproducing sacred objects for, arguably, commercial purposes by religious establishments in Thailand. Here, countless Buddha statues and clay tablets, among other amulets and talismans, are (re)produced for sale to 'allow Buddhists a chance to make merit', so the popular Thai Buddhist discourse goes, and, ultimately, cure their sick souls. Hence an unmistakable sense of irony in the title of this work.

If taken to a deeper level of semantics offered by Hirst's naming of his sub-series *Controlled Substances Paintings*, under the *Pharmaceutical Paintings* series, the multicoloured religious 'pills' in Tatsanasomboon's *Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst)* can be understood as toxic or even lethal. Take as an example, Mercuric Thiocyanate, the controlled chemical compound that Hirst chose as the name of one of his spot paintings. The name suggesting danger if consumed imbues the immaculate surface of these therapeutic multicoloured pills with a deathly undertone. Changing these toxic pills into meditating Buddha statues in his *Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst)*, Tatsanasomboon is being very critical about the religion of his country.

Tatsanasomboon's intercultural appropriation here gives new subversive meaning which connects Warhol's print series and Hirst's spot paintings: the commercial and the cure. *Medication for the Soul (after D. Hirst)* is a good example of an intercultural work of art not only bridging the East–West divide, but also filling the gap and enhancing the meaning of canonical works in the history of Western art.

The semantic possibility of this important painting is further expanded when Tatsanasomboon participated in the Singaporean edition of *Elephant Parade* (2011) – the largest international open air art exhibition dedicated to the preservation of the Asian elephants worldwide²⁶. Elephants have been exploited by mankind for industrial and commercial purposes. In the past hundred years, Asian elephant's populations have decreased from 250,000

24 Hirst, Damien, cited in Hirst, Damien, and Burn, Gordon, 'On the Way to Work', Faber and Faber, 2001.

25 Hirst, Damien, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*, London, 1997 (italics mine).

26 Former editions of the *Elephant Parade* took place in Rotterdam, Antwerp, Amsterdam and London. The mission of the Asian Elephant Foundation, the organiser, is to become the world's largest financial support organisation for Asian elephants. After being exhibited in the streets of Singapore, these full-sized elephant artworks produced by both local (Singaporean) and international artists were auctioned at Sotheby's and Christie's. Part of all proceeds went to the Asian Elephant Foundation and Wildlife Reserves Singapore Conservation Fund.

to 35,000. If the current trends continue, the Asian elephant will become extinct in the wild by 2050. The irony in Tatsanasomboon's *Medication for the Soul* (after D. Hirst) investigated above cannot be missed in the artist's transfer of this controversial pattern onto the surface of his elephant sculpture, especially if the sacred status of the animal in the Siamese/Thai culture is taken into account.²⁷



Medication for the Soul,
2011, fiber glass,
146 x 166 x 88 cm

The following intercultural works have Ravana as their principle subject. Known for his ten faces and might as well as for his role in the *Ramakien* as one of Rama's archrivals, Ravana in the following works is used by the artist as the figure of authority, representing greed for power and lust. *Ravana the Playboy* (2008) is another important work

²⁷ Three variants of the Siamese national flags from 1817 to 1917 bear the figure of the elephant.

in this phase not only because it was a finalist in the Sovereign Art Foundation's Asian Art Prize in Hong Kong, but also because it takes issues with the debate whether reproduction, in Warhol's screenprint legacy, pertains to conformity or creativity. As with *This is Me! (after A. Warhol)*, Tatsanasomboon contributes to the same debate by employing paint drips in this painting to suggest the presence of the artist's hand and the ensuing sense of originality. By means of intercultural appropriation, which confirms reproduction can lend a creative effect, the artist relies on the *figurative meaning* of the rabbit head, created and popularized by *Playboy* magazine, to reinforce a less-talked-about facet of Ravana's character – as a womaniser – compared to his better-known status as *Rama's* archrival. The tuxedo bow tie added to the rabbit head aptly echoes the sophistication of Ravana as a *yaksha* of noble birth.

Another ingenious intercultural appropriation to enhance Ravana's amorous disposition is *Ravana's Desire (after G. O'Keeffe)* (2010), in which Tatsanasomboon draws on Georgia O'Keeffe's signature sexually charged abstract forms to evoke Ravana's lust towards Sita. Insinuating delicate ridges of the female reproductive organ, the sensuous petals deepen the degree of Ravana's lust for Sita – the motive of abduction which propels the conflict and progression of the *Ramakien's* narrative and which is almost lost in contemporary Thai society where Western media prevails. *Ravana's Desire (after G. O'Keeffe)* is a good example of how Tatsanasomboon's intercultural appropriation practiced in the Middle Phase points to a possibility for East and West to collaborate in fruitful co-operation.



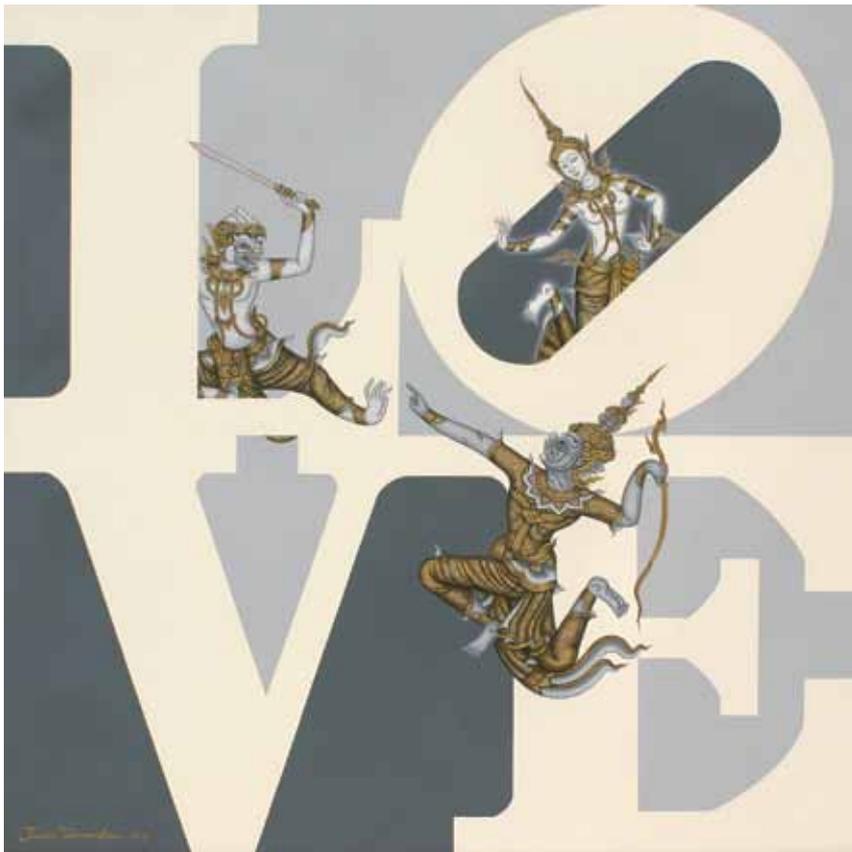
Ravana's Desire
(after G. O'Keeffe),
2010,
acrylic on canvas,
120 x 145 cm

Ravana the Playboy,
2008, acrylic on canvas,
120 x 150 cm



LOVE AND LUST SERIES

One of the important attributes distinguishing the Middle Phase from the Early and Early-Middle phases, in which interculturality feeds more into the works' aesthetic/exotic appeal, is the engagement with narrative depth, especially of the *Ramakien*. Although executed in 2008, before *Ravana's Desire (after G. O'Keeffe)*, the *Love and Lust* series depicts the dramatic consequences of Ravana's lust for Sita – the subject of *Ravana's Desire (after G. O'Keeffe)*. *Fighting Over the Maiden (1)* (2008), for instance, features the battle between Rama's and Ravana's aide, Hanuman and Maiyarap, respectively, as a result of Ravana's abduction of Rama's wife, Sita. Focusing on 'love' and 'lust' – the key catalysts for this epic battle between the *devas* and the *yakshas* – Tatsanasomboon looks into the Western history of art and aptly picks and appropriates Robert Indiana's iconic Pop Art image of 'LOVE' to give the *Ramakien* a greater contemporaneity. The intercultural appropriation here not only enhances the universality of love and lust as two most human emotions underlying both the narrative of the *Ramakien* and the production of Indiana's iconic series. It also significantly calls into question the possibility of reviving an interest in the Thai national epic without relying on the very Western cultural imperialism which threatens to render it obsolete in the first place. This paradox recalls Steven Pettifor's apt observation of Thailand as 'a country that wantonly devours all things Western yet is vehemently protective of its own traditional heritage'.



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

DISMEMBERING, CAMOUFLAGING AND POLITICAL FIGURATIVE REALISM

If *This is Me!* (after A. Warhol) and *Ravana the Playboy*, both of which embody screenprint format, reveal Tatsanasomboon's adoption and contribution to Warhol's poetics of appropriated reproduction, the Thai artist's *Camouflage* (after A. Warhol) (2010) epitomises Thai intercultural appropriation of Warhol's Pop Art poetics, encapsulating, as it does so, the entire spectrum of techniques including reproduction, appropriation, dismembering, camouflage and the use of image in a figurative sense to engage with the artist's contemporary reality.

In *Camouflage* (after A. Warhol), Tatsanasomboon picks a *yaksha*, a sacred character in traditional Thai art, as his subject. In a manner similar to Warhol's treatment of Renaissance masterpieces in *Details of Renaissance Paintings* series (1984), the Thai artist dismembers the *yaksha*, cutting it up and giving us the incomplete cropped headdress of a *yaksha*: a sacrilege in the eyes of the conservatives. He then reduces the original rich chromatic complexity – usually used to depict this type of *Ramakien* character – as Warhol did with the *Renaissance* series.



**Camouflage (after
A. Warhol), 2010,
acrylic on canvas,
129 x 129 cm**

Now the most important process: camouflaging. As much as the Statue of Liberty is the supreme icon for American democracy, the *yaksha* in contemporary Thai culture, especially in the media, is a potent symbol for the Thai military – the quintessence of Thai politics in a more realistic, rather than ideal, sense of the word. Thus, if Warhol's use of camouflaging in *Statue of Liberty* (1986) is meant to cast doubt on the Statue of Liberty as a representation of American democracy, thereby questioning if national interests could hold any insidious intent, Tatsanasomboon's camouflaging of a figurative *yaksha* head asks the same question to the coup-driven Thai military-political culture.

With subversion at the heart of his art, it may not be an exaggeration to call Warhol a 'deconstructionist'. Because the American artist could not allow camouflage, his essential tool for subversion, to become another self-evident establishment, he further experimented with camouflage itself, replacing its quintessential earth tones with many other colour schemes in the 1987 *Camouflage* series. One of these subversive new chromatic schemes is in red, blue and white.



**Mourning
Thailand**, 2012,
acrylic on canvas,
100 x 130 cm

Tatsanasomboon sees a further opportunity to appropriate this new colour scheme in a painting executed later in his mature period: *Mourning Thailand*, (2012). In this painting, the Thai artist, once again, appropriates Warhol's red-blue-and-white camouflage and places it in the Thai political context where the red, white and blue stripes represent, respectively, the Thai nation, Buddhist religion and monarchy: the Thai tri-colour flag. By turning the Thai national flag into a camouflage, is Tatsanasomboon asking the same question Warhol did with the Statue of Liberty?

As this monograph has so far demonstrated, Tatsanasomboon's intercultural art produced in the Middle Phase is not simply 'mixing' Western and Thai elements together as usually understood: it draws on many levels of intercultural appropriation from merely visual to technical and conceptual. Moving away from the jarring East-West confrontations prominent in the Early and Early-Middle phases, most of the interculturality in the Middle Phase speaks for continuum between the West and Thailand, rather than disparity – a semantic reinforcement rather than a hostile incongruity – despite a minority of works whose interculturality effectively points to subversion. While *The Transformation of Sita (after S. Botticelli)*, (2006), challenges the Western notion of ideal beauty, *Leave me alone* defies Western metaphysics altogether.



The Transformation of Sita
(after S. Botticelli),
2006, acrylic on canvas,
130 x 100 cm

INTERCULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND POLITICAL FIGURATIVE REALISM

The bloody mayhem in Bangkok in 2009, a result of unresolved political conflict in post-2006-coup Thailand, has driven many artists to create works that question and comment on the event. Tatsanasomboon is no exception. Since this historically significant violence, the artist has moved towards a theme addressing, yet not limited to, the unprecedented polarisation of the country. However, what distinguishes him from other artists is his commitment to the poetics of intercultural appropriation and figurative realism, which in this context has been thoroughly and astutely politicised.

As much as the subject matter of *Ravana's Desire* (after G. O'Keeffe) is responsible for the epic battles featured in the *Love and Lust* series, *Black and White* (after K. Walker) (2010) foreshadows Tatsanasomboon's full-length problematisation of class issue in *The Desires of Nonthok* series (2012), executed in the psychological Mature Phase (see next section). Establishing a link between the two enables us to see that class issue had already entered and fertilised the artist's mind from the Middle Phase.



Black and White (after K. Walker),
2010, acrylic on canvas,
150 x 120 cm

In *Black and White (after K. Walker)*, Tatsanasomboon appropriates Kara Walker's silhouette technique – the craft which the Black American artist adopts to address the historical legacy of slavery in the American South – and parallels it with the Thai stigmatisation of black as the colour of the inferior class as opposed to white, the colour associated with the upper class.²⁸ This chromatic binary fuels the narrative of the Siamese vernacular play *Sangthong*, composed by King Rama II, on which this important intercultural painting by Tatsanasomboon is based. The dichotomy between the black and white silhouettes is brought into play to convey the figurative semantics of the conflict between the ruling and the subservient working class – the noble and the savage, the high and the low, the intelligent and the ignorant – the binary which is popularly believed fuel the post-2006-coup political crisis in Thailand.

In this Thai appropriation of Walker's racially charged repertoire, the lady in white silhouette clad in luxury evening dress is gracefully offering a rose, instead of a garland as in the original narrative of *Sangthong*, to the figure of 'Ngo' – the main character of the Thai vernacular play whose figuration is based on the indigenous Mani (Negrito), a people in southern Thailand who are marginalised from Thai mainstream culture and society. On the right, the robust woman in black silhouette is on fierce guard, preparing to wield her heavy-duty broom – a synecdoche for the working class.

At the centre of the painting, the figure of 'Ngo', in opulent *khon* dance-performance attire, is key to the meaning of this complex intercultural iconography. Possessing the magic power to transform himself from a poor, dark, ugly and uncivilised indigenous body into a rich, white, charming and civilised aristocrat, the central figure of 'Ngo' is a metaphor, especially in the context of post-2006-coup Thailand, for a transition; he represents the possibility of transformation, of social mobility, ambivalence, even doubleness. Tatsanasomboon astutely makes use of the 'garland toss' scene of the vernacular play, here substituted by a rose (a more international symbol of friendship or flirtation), to suggest that this precarious state of Thailand's future – with 'Ngo' courted by the white upper-class shadow – is inclined to favour the rich. But interestingly which group of the rich the artist is referring to?

The hovering grey silhouette on the left, behind the white upper-class shadow, is a deva, while on the right, behind the black silhouette, is a *yaksha*. This class division informs the subject matter of *The Desires of Nonthok* series. Given its multi-layered complexity, *Black and White (after K. Walker)* is arguably one of Tatsanasomboon's best intercultural iconographies to date.

Another painting that shows Tatsanasomboon's understanding of iconic Western art is *The Guardian of Siam (after K. Haring)*, painted in 2010 after the 2009 political violence in Bangkok. Here, the artist appropriates Keith Haring's signature bold lines, vivid colours and active figures, which usually convey an emphatic message of life and unity. Tatsanasomboon cleverly uses these colourful embodiments of life and harmony, instead, for discordance based on their differences in colour – something that deeply divides post-2006-coup Thai society like never before.

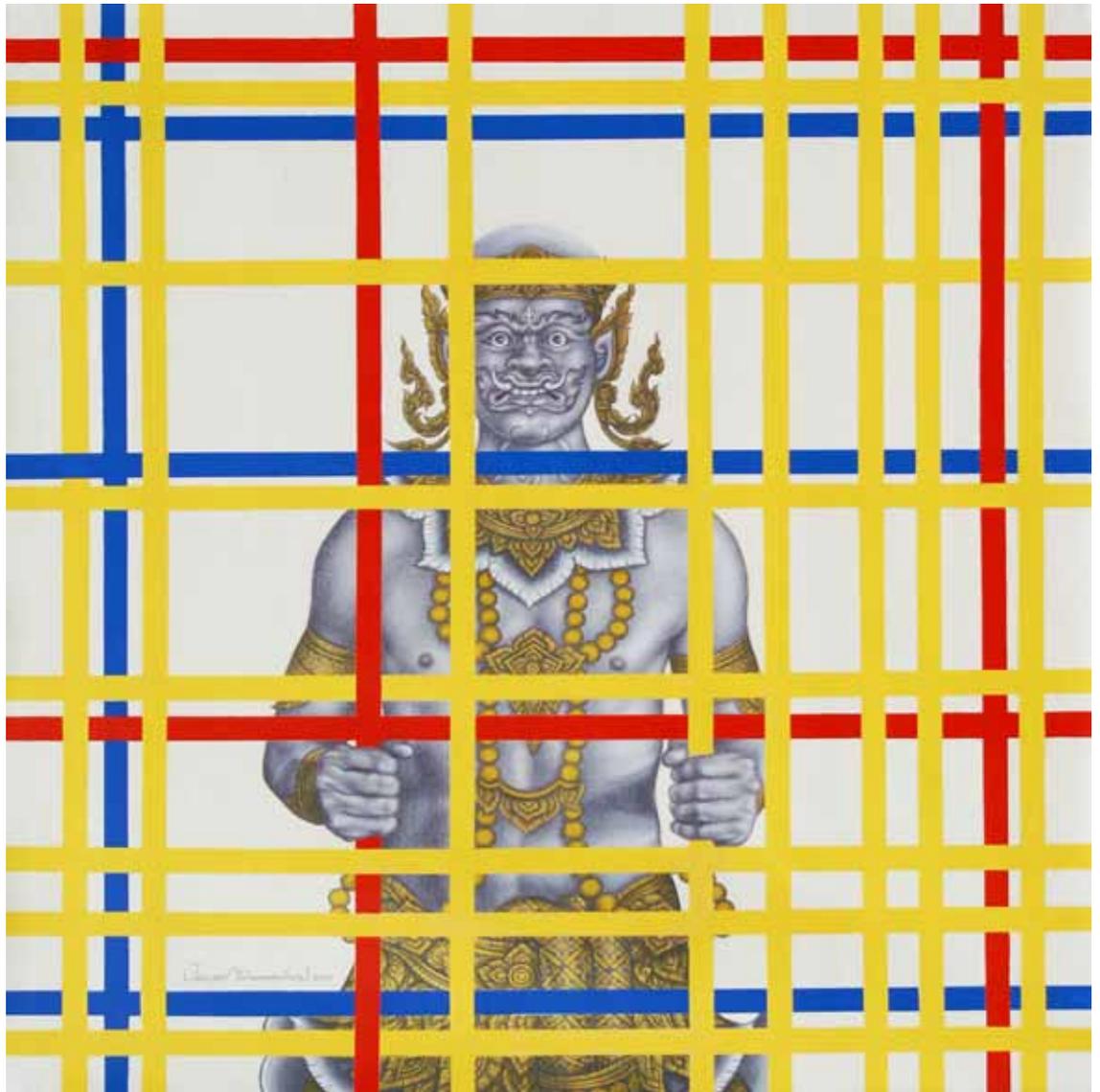
28 The *Guardian* report 'Unilever says sorry for Thai skin colour ad' dated 28 October 2013 confirms this stereotype widely circulated in Thailand: 'Many believed the inference to be that darker-skinned students were less intelligent than their lighter-skinned colleagues in a country where fairer skin has long been equated with higher class, as a whiter complexion suggests a life not spent toiling on a farm.' (italics mine)

According to Thai socio-political context, the red colour represents supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, who is an active practitioner of neoliberalism and populism, while the yellow colour represents the conservatives and royalists. Blue is a small fraction of opportunists, in time of conflict and violence, belonging to a politician. The white bodies may represent non-partisans. Tatsanasomboon depicts these multicoloured figures swarming calamitously at the feet of the sacred Guardian of Siam, a deity highly revered and known locally as 'Phra Siam Thevathirat', who sheds tears at the national fragmentation, which culminated in the 2009 bloody riots.



The Guardian of Siam
(after K. Haring), 2010,
acrylic on canvas,
100 x 130 cm

Break Free (after P. Mondrian), 2010,
acrylic on canvas,
120 x 120 cm



Although the depiction of yaksha in other Tatsanasomboon paintings refers to the role of the military in Thai politics, especially its military coup culture, the figure of the *yaksha* Kumbhakarna in *Break Free (after P. Mondrian)* embodies, according to the artist, ambition and the desire to break free from conservative Thai tradition. Tatsanasomboon aptly appropriates Piet Mondrian's grid composition as prison bars. Although Kumbhakarna, Ravana's brother, is a special character in the *Ramakien* and *Ramayana*, and represents warrior ethics,²⁹ Tatsanasomboon does not intend to explore any narrative and psychological depth in this painting.

²⁹ With the power of clairvoyance given to him by Brahma, Kumbhakarna foresees the loss of Ravana if the ten-faced *yaksha* continues to wage war against Rama. Yet as Ravana's brother and an upholder of warrior ethics, he performs his duty and battles against the *devas* despite the knowledge of his impending loss and death.

THE MATURE PHASE: INTERCULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FIGURATIVE REALISM (early 2010s)

Tatsanasomboon's engagement and criticism of Thailand's contemporary socio-political reality in the Middle Phase, as we have seen, is achieved through intercultural metaphors: the repetition of pharmaceutical Buddha statues, after Hirst, as a metaphor for modern commercial Buddhism; the camouflaged *yaksha's* head, after Warhol, as a metaphor for insidious Thai military involvement in politics; the black and white silhouettes, after Walker, as a metaphor for class stratification and conflict in post-2006-coup Thai society. The Mature Phase, marked by the artist's latest important series *The Desires of Nonthok* (2012), succeeds to the same critical goal, specifically pivoting, however, on issues of class and the use of political power. Tatsanasomboon plunges even deeper into the psychology of a minor character in the *Ramakien*, Nonthok, extending his use of the overall narrative of the *Ramakien* in the Middle Phase series *Love and Lust* (2008).



Mirror of Illusion, 2012,
acrylic on canvas,
129 x 129

FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE – TOWARDS A GREATER SOCIAL JUSTICE?

The *Ramakien* is the Thai national appropriation of the seminal Indian *Ramayana* epic which pervades South and Southeast Asian cultures. Though less popular in the Siamese Grand Narrative than Hanuman, Phra Ram (Rama), Thotsakan (Ravana), and Sita, such a minor and subservient character as Nonthok is, in fact, believed to be the origin of the entire conflict propelling the epic. In *The Desires of Nonthok*, however, Tatsanasomboon re-reads this Grand Narrative and asks if Nonthok is really the only culprit as often thought – the seemingly self-evident, yet uninvestigated, fact passed down from one Thai generation to another.

The re-reading can be regarded as a criticism of, first, the Thai public's epistemology: how we take in information because it is passed down to us; and, second, pedagogy: how in a hierarchical society we Thai are taught to brainwash ourselves to live with the version of 'truth' passed down from above to survive.

Tatsanasomboon's subversive question of 'Who done it?' or 'Who actually screwed it up?' (to the point where we have such a great literary work as the *Ramakien* to read) significantly pivots on issues of class, integrity and the use and abuse of power. Through 'artistic intervention', by using works of art to engage people to rethink and by posing provocative questions, the character of Nonthok is reinstated from the periphery to the centre of the narrative to allow the reinvestigation of important issues of class and power that inform not only contemporary Thai culture and its socio-politics, but also other modern societies in general. This makes the series as relevant to all political entities as it is to the current Thai political crisis.

One familiar with Tatsanasomboon's previous works will note how, in this new collection, his rendition of Thai characteristics has changed. For instance, Nonthok is more universally represented here without the usual traditional headdress. Shedding light on the peripheral and moving it to the foreground as well as allowing the silenced voice to be heard makes this artistic series relevant and pertinent in the international community of contemporary art and culture. Here, the will to interrogate, negotiate and, in many cases, destabilise, the Grand Narrative, where 'absolute' truth is inscribed, upheld, propagated and reproduced, still reigns with a just cause.

However, this re-reading does not take the side solely of the underprivileged. The reinvestigation turns out to be sufficiently objective. It not only criticises the privileged, but also the underprivileged in the, now, centre of the narrative, revealing where Nonthok, the peripheral-turned-major character, has gone astray, blundered and eventually taken himself to the abyss. Tatsanasomboon's reinterpretation of the Nonthok sub-plot of the *Ramakien* recalls postmodern narrative style, a famous example of which is the contemporary English playwright Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* where two minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are brought to the centre stage and reveal how they die, offstage, an unheroic death.

THE STORY OF 'PHRA NARAI SUBDUING NONTHOK' – THE GENESIS OF THE THAI EPIC *RAMAKIEN*

Nonthok is an *asura* who serves Phra³⁰ Isuan (Shiva) at the foot of the stairs leading to the paradise of Mount Krailas. His duty is to wash the feet of the *devas* before they can make their flight and seek audience with Phra Isuan. Upon receiving the *asura's* service, these *devas* tease and indiscriminately harass Nonthok in numerous degrading ways. They slap his head and pull his hair until he becomes completely bald. Whenever the bald *asura* sees his own reflection in the water, he sheds tears.

Distressed by his lack of power to fight back, Nonthok finally decides to ascend Krailas and seek an audience with Phra Isuan. The *asura* asks Phra Isuan for a lethal diamond finger which, when pointed at enemies, can kill them. Nonthok says he has served the supreme god for as long as ten million years without any reward. Acknowledging that, Phra Isuan grants the *asura's* wish.

Unaware of Phra Isuan's granting of Nonthok's wish, the *devas*, coming to receive the service as usual, continue their habitual harassments. Now well equipped, Nonthok is emboldened and, enraged, he sweeps his diamond finger at the *devas* around him. In the blink of an eye, they drop dead like a big flock of dying birds. Upon being informed of the disastrous incident, Phra Isuan is furious and immediately calls for Phra Narai (Vishnu) to subdue the insolent *asura*. Phra Narai, within no time, transforms himself into an exquisite Naang Absorn, a nymph-like divine creature, to seduce the *asura*.

Captivated by Naang Absorn's divine beauty and grace, it does not take Nonthok long before he begins flirting with the angelic beauty. The breast-clad Phra Narai sees it is time to bait the mousetrap and invites the *asura* to dance with him. As Naang Absorn leads the dance, Nonthok seems more and more intoxicated and suddenly as they reach the 'Naga Muan Hang' (tail-recoiling serpent) posture, Nonthok directs the diamond finger at himself, unwittingly breaking his own legs and collapsing to the ground. Suddenly, Phra Narai discards his immaculate disguise, reveals himself to the fallen Nonthok and stamps on the defeated *asura's* chest, ready to put an end to the matter.

Foreseeing his impending death, Nonthok rebukes the god for having more hands than he does (Phra Narai manifests with four hands), hence his greater capability. The *asura* sneers that the god is not brave enough to fight him face to face for fear of his lethal diamond finger. Phra Narai in turn says he will have Nonthok reborn as a mighty ten-faced *asura* with as many as 20 well-equipped arms, and will be known as Thotsakan (Ravana) while he himself will be reincarnated as a mere man with two bare hands, known as Phra Ram (Rama), but still with the will to bring the defiant *asura* down. As Phra Narai finishes his prophecy, he beheads the insolent Nonthok with his trident.

30 'Phra' is the title of a *deva*, a god or a goddess, who is ontologically superior to man. The *devas* reside in the supra-mundane realm: paradise. Note that an *asura* is not necessarily ontologically inferior to a *deva*. An *asura* can also be a *deva*. An *asura-deva* like Phra Pilarp is also a kind of *deva*. Nonthok is subservient because he is simply born into the lower class of the *asura* clan.

AN INTERCULTURAL ICONOGRAPHY

I love witnessing the viewer's strong reaction when they encounter the juxtapositions of Thai and Western elements.

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

The Desires of Nonthok proffers a very interesting intercultural iconography. When Tatsanasomboon imports Western elements into his canvas in this series, the images owe their symbolism and allegorism to the governing dichotomy of Western/Thai. On the one hand, the Western elements are privileged as a benchmark – something to desire or to achieve; the Thai registers, on the other hand, are depicted as inferior or trying to measure themselves against superior Western values.

Post-colonial critics may find this governing binary problematic as it invites the question whether or not it reinforces cultural imperialism. The artist addresses this concern, giving an interesting explanation that sheds light on Thai culture as a whole:

I was trying to find something that people in general associate with the notion of 'perfection' and 'luxury' and I don't think we can escape the fact that it is these Western visual elements that represent these ideas in our culture. Even if you fall back on Thai court fashion and design, say, from the reign of King Rama V, those cultural elements are still derivative and draw on the West.

Tatsanasomboon's response unveils the ongoing dominance of the West in geopolitics. The artist's choice of the cultural imperialist binary of Western/Thai is deliberate and meant to demonstrate the current hegemony.

Nonthok's fetish for Western cultural sign systems in this series recalls the artist's previous criticism of Thai xenomania, the obligation by Thais to be recognised as 'respectable', 'affluent' and 'successful' by equipping themselves with the latest Western brand names. In *Nonthok de Lis* (2013), for example, Nonthok clads himself in a majestic red cloth with the yellow 'fleur de lis' motif, the emblem of French monarchs since Clovis³¹. In *Inter Divinity* (2012), the artist measures Nonthok against the one-open-eyed Mel Gibson in *The Passion of Christ*. In *Desires Ingrained* (2012) and *To Be What You Are Not* (2012), Western decorative motifs of rank run superfluously over Nonthok's body. *Nonthok Warhol* (2012) portrays the *asura's* desire to be recognised as important enough to bear Warhol's signature camouflage. In these examples, signs from Western culture elevate the status of their bearer.

31 Ferguson, George, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford University Press, 1954.



Nonthok de Lis,
2013,
acrylic on canvas,
100 x 130 cm



Desires Ingrained, 2012,
acrylic on canvas,
100 x 100 cm

On the contrary, in *Nonthok as Mona Lisa* (2012), Nonthok's attempt to elevate his status by the use of Western sign system – including the reference to portraiture as a 'status kit' especially popular during the Renaissance time – is held up to ridicule by juxtaposition of these aristocratic patterns and tradition with a *nok ieng*, the common myna bird that is often seen perched on the back of buffaloes. In Thai culture, there is a saying 'as stupid as a buffalo'. By putting this uncharacteristic bird on the head of an aristocratically clad Nonthok, he is systematically reduced to a buffalo, a dull-witted animal.



Nonthok as Mona Lisa,
2012, acrylic on canvas,
130 x 147 cm

Another important question relevant to the current series' status as iconography is: who holds the key to decipher these intercultural signs. While semioticians say reading an image is an open process with multiple meanings, a more traditional approach advocated by Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), in which the art historian (and the artist) is entitled to fix the 'real meaning' of a given image, may suit the current series better. In this way, each Western sign here carries its own specific meaning or refers to a specific tradition in its own cultural context, all of which answers to the governing dichotomies of Western/Thai and civilised/uncivilised.

FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL

'The personal is political.'
'The personal is international.'
'The international is personal.'

Cynthia Enloe³²

'At first, I didn't intend it to be so political.'

Tatsanasomboon

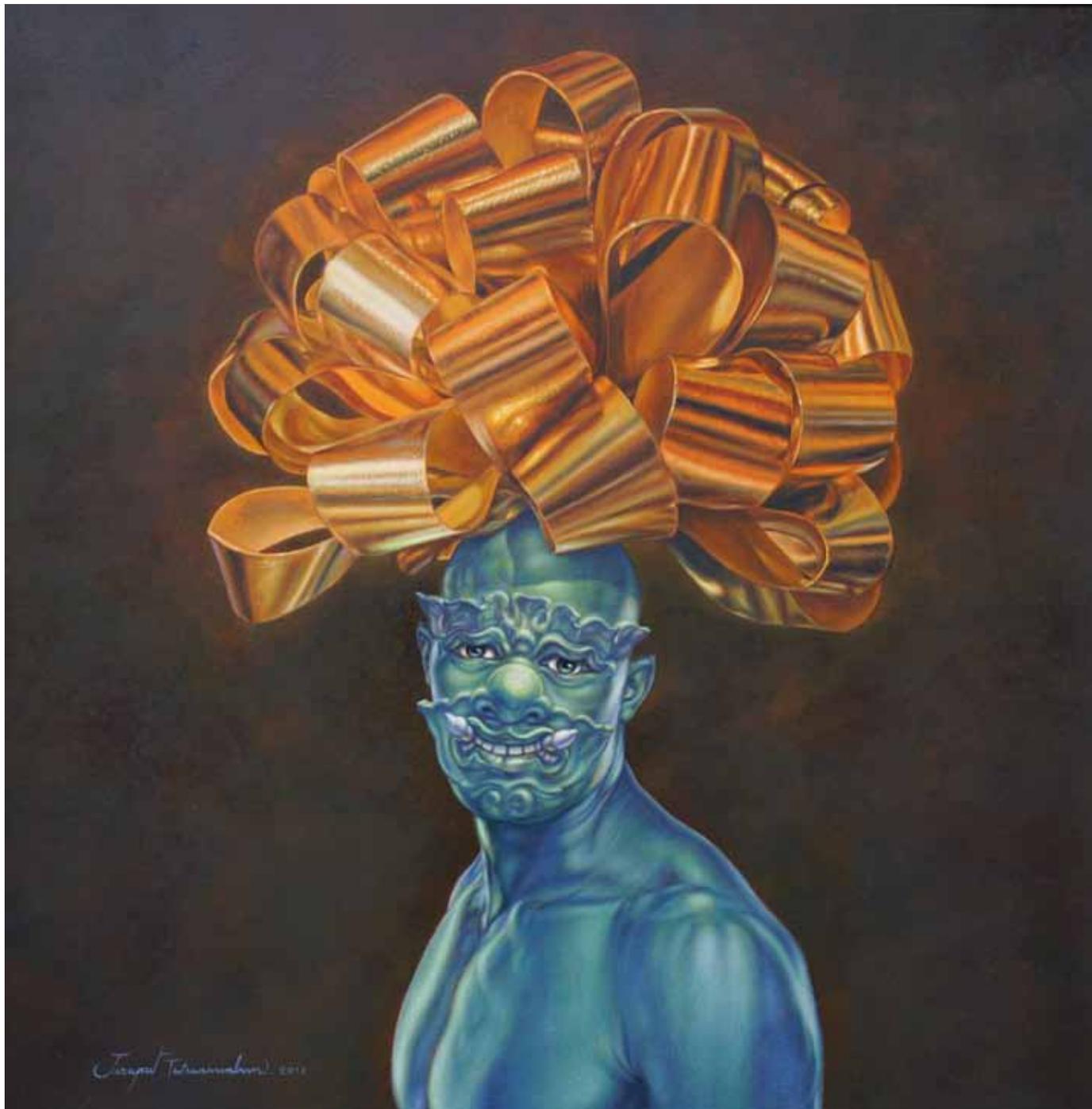
Although Tatsanasomboon was, first and foremost, drawn to the character of Nonthok for its interesting psychology – the state of mind he describes as 'full of desires and entirely human' – yet, as he delved deeper into this subplot of the *Ramakien*, he confessed he could not ignore the narrative's strong political implications.

As much as the Indian *Ramayana* itself was arguably composed to celebrate the victory of the white and fine Aryan over the dark-skinned Dravidian, Tatsanasomboon reduces the social context which informs the Thai *Ramakien* epic and its subplot of 'Phra Narai Subduing Nonthok' to the aristocracy/working class dichotomy: Nonthok, who was born a lower class *asura*, serves Phra Isuan and his *deva* class in the paradise of Mount Krailas. The subservient Nonthok feels alienated, however, not because he was born debased. Class difference does not necessarily lead to an inferiority complex, humiliation, oppression and, eventually, rebellion.

Addressing gaps in the narrative, Tatsanasomboon asks: What if the governing class of *devas* were to have had greater integrity, exercised power more carefully, and refrained from harassing and humiliating their servant. Would the *asura* be so unhappy that he ascended Mount Krailas, requested the deadly weapon and almost wiped out the *deva* class in the blink of an eye? Would it have been more just if Phra Isuan had called for a proper and fair trial before asking Phra Narai to subdue the *asura*? These gaps in the Grand Narrative, which informs Thai culture and socio-politics, reflect the usual glossed-over social injustice legitimised by 'aristocratic license'. According to Tatsanasomboon,

The violence central to the subplot of 'Phra Narai Subduing Nonthok' would not have taken place had the devas not harassed Nonthok. As a matter of fact, Nonthok is just a helpless lower-class figure who is abused by a ruling class that shows no sign of mercy or sympathy. But when the subservient asura rebels and fights back, reminding them of his rights, the deva class shows an outburst of 'righteous' anger and abuses their superior power to subdue him.

The artist's argument that the aristocracy is the actual catalyst for the lower-class figure's *alienation* is manifest in his highly sympathetic depiction of Nonthok as someone absolutely destitute in the economy of love, someone who is never desired and who yearns to be valuable enough to be sought after, hence the appropriate ribbon-and-gift metaphor in *Take Me, Please!* (2012).



Take Me, Please!, 2012,
acrylic on canvas,
129 x 129 cm

Tatsanasomboon's re-reading of the *Ramakien* subplot is relevant to contemporary society, in Thailand or elsewhere in the world:

What happens to Nonthok is something that has really happened and still happens in today's society. Class-driven injustice still prevails: people belonging to the same class only listen to one other. The lower class are still made scapegoats; people still die; there are still martyrs out there who have to sacrifice their lives to prolong the existence of the ruling class.

However, as objective as he is, the artist is not one-sided; he is fair enough to also criticise the lower class's abuse of power when their turn comes to possess it. On receiving the diamond finger, if Nonthok had properly used it to only protect himself from harassment, there would have been no such violence. Hence, the artist's message is very likely: for a peaceful society to prevail, class difference is not necessarily a crime if each class respects the other and upholds its integrity. This premise endears the current series to those wishing to see human rights issues dealt with on canvas.

Tatsanasomboon seems to remind us: upon any acquisition of power, either by specific allocation or democratisation, that power must be used constructively for self-sustainment, self-protection and, perhaps, inclusive development; but not for the retaliation or destruction of one's enemy. Such a moral lesson makes the collection at hand universal. Criticism of Nonthok as an ill-principled, self-glorifying, insolent social climber who abuses his power, however, brings the series closer to the Thai context and the narrative of Thaksin Shinawatra's ousting by the military in 2006. *Mourning Thailand* (2012) and *Embracing Death* (2013), the two most political pieces in the current series, demonstrate the artist's well-balanced treatment of the two opposing camps and classes in Thai politics.

Mourning Thailand, which draws on the local metaphor, especially in Thai media, of an asura as the army, pivots on the military's role in holding back Thai politics from progressing as far as the Western prototype. (This is informed by the aforementioned governing binaries of Western/Thai and civilised/uncivilized, and references Warhol's camouflage as a Western benchmark for democratic civilisation.) The political painting is also a criticism of the military's 'chronic support' of the national institutions sustaining the Thai nationhood. The comment is achieved via the use of the three colours of the Thai national flag, where red, white and blue represent national sovereignty, religion and monarchy, respectively.

No less politically engaged, *Embracing Death* prophesies the impending downfall of the new class of power in Thai politics due also to its compromised integrity and abuse of power. Tatsanasomboon depicts a skeleton as a symbol of death tinged with the subtlest red colour, which points to the red-shirt camp of Thaksin Shinawatra. (Despite his reference to the tri-colour Thai flag and the red and yellow in *Nonthok de Lis*, Tatsanasomboon distances himself from other artists employing different colour schemes to explore Thai political discord. Thavorn Ko-udomvit and Rirkrit Tiravanija are two prominent examples among them.)



Embracing Death, 2013,
acrylic on canvas,
130 x 147 cm

Despite the gravity of the artist's critical stance and subject matter, his approach to the flaws of the powerful in some other paintings in the collection is interestingly more lighthearted: a rather fun mocking sentiment that gives the collection a well-balanced study of emotions. These paintings include *Nonthok as Mona Lisa* (2012), *The Excalibur* (2012), *Like* (2012), and *Unlike* (2012) where the post-diamond-finger Nonthok is ridiculed as a false aristocrat, abusive of his power, and unfit to lead or rule.

This comparison between the current series and Thai politics might suggest another parallel between the ridiculed Nonthok and the ousted prime minister. One of the best paintings to accompany such a parallel is *Dark Angel* (2012), which depicts Nonthok's unsuccessful attempt after receiving the diamond finger to place himself in the angelic hierarchy.

In *Desires Ingrained*, Tatsanasomboon uses Western decorative motifs of rank to suggest qualities pertaining to the aristocratic *deva* class. The artist inscribes these class-conscious patterns onto Nonthok's very body to connote how deeply the subservient asura desires to be recognised as a *deva*-like aristocrat. *Aspiration* (2012) and *Mirror of Illusion* (2012) operate on the same level of psychology, where Michelangelo's David is referenced as the epitome of Perfection, which, in the artist's imagination, Nonthok aspires to after acquiring his power. The bigger penis speaks for the vulgarity of the contemporary world where power must be as demonstrative and intrusive as possible, instead of contained with humility. *To Be What You Are Not*, reflecting a similar mindset is, however, treated with a more lighthearted tone, as if Nonthok is heard suavely saying, 'Ain't I look awesome in these jet-set motifs?'

Tatsanasomboon's intercultural poetics are all about challenge. On the one hand, his work defies the long-standing value of 'pure' traditional Thai art against the 'infiltration' of the modern West. *Foreign Intervention* (1996), his first painting to enter a competition, offended traditionalists who criticised it for the mere intention to shock and disorientate, the novelty of which, they said, would soon wear out if repeated. And, indeed, for almost two decades, the artist has thoroughly and diligently continued to practice his intercultural poetics. The effect is, however, the contrary: the unfolding development from one distinct phase to another never ceases to surprise us.

On the other hand, the artist's poetics of interculturality politically challenge the cultural hegemony of the West. While the Early and Early-Middle phases – which are substantially fuelled by the artist's antagonism (and admiration) towards the West – take the form of confrontation, the Middle and Mature phases sublimate and reshape that antagonistic energy into a more cooperative interaction through appropriation and intertextuality.

The question arising from this stylistic change is if the Middle and Mature phases constitute a break or a continuity of the same political agency seen in the Early and Early-Middle phases. In the later phases, appropriation and intertextuality generally create an intercultural continuum, rather than the hostility of the earlier phases. Has the intercultural tension of the unequal West–Thai power relations, seen in the early phases, remained or has it been eliminated in these later phases? Has the paradox of resisting yet embracing Western cultural influence, which informs these phases, persisted or has it ceased in the act of appropriation and intertextuality?

Amidst the trajectory towards a less confrontational and more cooperative approach to interculturality through appropriation and intertextuality, the later repertoire of the Middle and Mature phases still employs confrontational compositions in such works as *I Want You*, (2008) (p. 24), *Rama vs Obama*, (2009) (p. 24) and *Aspiration* (2012). Such haunting remnants of intercultural tension should remind us that the seemingly less confrontational strategies of appropriation and intertextuality, as employed in the later phases are, in fact, no less political than the earlier confrontational ones: they are there to deal with that very intercultural tension arising from the Thai–Western power imbalance seen in the early phases, but in a more subtle form.

Furthermore, as with the confrontational periods, the methods of appropriation and intertextuality, in fact, themselves feed on the paradox of embracing the very cultural influence that was initially resisted; that is, through selecting, discarding and re-contextualising. Based on the intercultural poetics of his Middle and Mature phases, Tatsanasomboon has created a unique system of intercultural iconography and metaphor: pharmaceutical Buddha statues as a metaphor for modern commercial Buddhism (inspired by Hirst); the camouflaged *yaksha's* head as a metaphor for insidious Thai military involvement in the country's politics (inspired by Warhol); black-and-white silhouettes as a metaphor for class stratification and conflict in post-2006-coup Thai society (inspired by Walker), to name but a few.

This unique system of intercultural iconography shows that Tatsanasomboon's intercultural poetics actively intervene in ongoing Thai–West power relations: first, creating, out of the cultural influence it seeks to reject in the first place, new meanings relevant to contemporary Thai society from which the work is produced, and, second, semantically augmenting and aesthetically rejuvenating the Western canons on which it draws. The potential activism of Tatsanasomboon's intercultural poetics significantly demonstrates the politically active role that art can play in negotiating power relations between the East (Thailand) and the West. Such an activism challenges the notion of the East as a mere passive beneficiary in the typical development discourse that underpins East–West relationships. Such an activism empowers the East as an equal partner of the West, which now has to learn and benefit from its counterpart

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon is an award-winning Thai artist whose work pivots on the cultural relations between Thailand and the West. Born in 1971 in Samut Prakarn province, south of Bangkok, Thailand, he completed his bachelor's degree at Chiang Mai University in 1996 with his BA thesis painting *Foreign Intervention* (1996), which was awarded the Grand Prize of Panasonic Contemporary Art in the 3rd Panasonic Contemporary Painting Exhibition in 1997. In 1999, he acquired a master's degree at Silpakorn University; his MA thesis painting *Green Goblin vs Maiyarp* (2004) was also awarded the Grand Prize of Panasonic Contemporary Art in the 4th Panasonic Contemporary Painting Exhibition in 2002. Other awards include the Special Award in the 9th Toshiba Thailand Contemporary Art competition in 1997; Grand Prize in the 13th Toshiba Thailand's Contemporary Art competition in 2001 and Special Prize in the 14th Toshiba Thailand's Contemporary Art competition in 2002. He was also a finalist in the 2010 Sovereign Asian Art Prize competition, Hong Kong. Tatsanasomboon has participated in several international art shows including *Asia Art Now* at the Korean Cultural and Arts Foundation, Seoul, Korea (2003); *Tradition and Modernity in South East Asian Art* at Galerie l'Indochine, New York, USA (2006); Art Singapore 2008, Singapore (2008); *Visions of East Asia* 2008 at the Capital Library, Beijing, for the Olympics, China (2008); The Indian Art Summit, India (2009), Art Monaco, Monaco (2010); and Arteclasica 10, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2010). His paintings were also on display at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore in 2012 in the exhibition *Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal*. In Thailand, he exhibited in the 46th National Art Exhibition, National Gallery, Bangkok (2000); ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition, Bangkok (2003); *Love and Struggle* together with Sudjai Chaiyapan at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok (2004); *A Transformation of Icons* (solo show) at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok (2006); *Love and Lust* (solo show) at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok (2008); *Camouflage* (solo show) at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok (2010) and *The Desires of Nonthok* (solo show) at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok (2013). The artist currently lives in Chiang Mai, a northern city of Thailand.

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ISBN 978-616-91815-1-4