

Korakrit Arunanondchai and the Cult of Bar Soap @ The Mistake Room

By Keith Plocek
08/21/14



You get a not-entirely-pleasant shock when you turn the darkened corner in Korakrit Arunanondchai's installation at The Mistake Room and see the backs of 100 mannequins, all bald and clad in white. After watching the shorter of two videos in *Letters to Chantri #1: The lady at the door/The gift the keeps on giving*, you've learned the Thailand-born, New York-based artist, who used to make paintings by smothering his body in color and slamming it against a canvas, now considers himself clean — and you probably got a distinct cult vibe from all of that — but the ten rows of homogenous figures is still startling, at first sight.

The second video, which features the performer Boychild as a stand-in for Arunanondchai during his purported transformation from paint-dripped artist to purified desert dweller, tells the story further, and the film begins playing after you've been led through the rows of mannequins by a gallery attendant, also clad in white. The installation is a timed experience, about 20 minutes total, and you aren't allowed into the space until everything is made ready.

In the films, which feel like infomercials for the Vevo generation, we hear inspirational tunes and see Boychild washed clean of troubles and welcomed into the group. There's a magic bar of soap that helps along the way, and in the installation's second room, between the phalanx of followers and images projected on the wall, that soap sits in an open hand, lit from above and surrounded by falling water.

There's clearly some dramatic irony happening here, but it's tough to figure where exactly. The way the viewer's experience is controlled from start to finish encourages a particularly positive impression of the installation, and being handed your own bar of soap from a smiling attendant at the end really drives home that feeling of inclusion. You walk away thinking you've experienced something unique, something you want to share.

But what is the feeling exactly? As with any successful religious movement or lifestyle brand, the content of the feeling might not matter as much as the strength of the belief. And perhaps that is the point Arunanondchai is trying to drive home.

The installation Letters to Chantri #1: The lady at the door/The gift the keeps on giving is on view at The Mistake Room through September 13.

<http://bit.ly/1uf1MZN>

