

frieze

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SHAHRYAR NASHAT LAURE PROUVOST

BRUCE MCLEAN *Strike a Pose!*

The Artist as Anthropologist

Influences: IAIN FORSYTH and JANE POLLARD

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The ~~Room~~ Room

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI

The Mistake Room, Los Angeles

I seem to be in the minority in my cautious enjoyment of Korakrit Arunanondchai's spectacular installation *Letters to Chantri #1: The lady at the door/The gift that keeps on giving* (2014) (made in collaboration with transgender artist boychild). Most people I spoke to professed to hating it. Arunanondchai is a divisive figure, as is any young artist who rises rapidly to international prominence on waves of hyperbole and who enjoys the rewards of a buoyant market enamoured with large abstract paintings made by people with unusual biographies.

The Bangkok-raised Arunanondchai was a rapper before he moved to the US to study art. In his casually eclectic videos, he often enlists the talents of fellow musicians and performers who contribute to an impression of hip, subcultural collectivity. He is inclined towards fountains, bubbles, sunsets and lush digital harmonics.

My main beef with Arunanondchai to date concerned his repetitious and cynical paintings, in which he mocks fashion while being fashionable and taunts commercialism while marketing his taunts. His series 'Untitled (Muen Kuey)' (2013–ongoing) is based on the work of a performer on *Thailand's Got Talent* who caused a national furore by stripping off on television and painting, Yves-Klein-style, with her naked torso. In Arunanondchai's homages, canvas is swapped for his trademark tie-dyed, bleached denim.

I warmed to *Letters to Chantri #1* ... because the artist appears to repent for his painterly sins. In the short video that welcomed visitors to this '20-minute experience', as *The Mistake Room* described it, Arunanondchai introduces himself: 'My name is Korakrit. I was an artist. Now I'm an orb. I used to cover myself in paint. Now I'm



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proud to say I AM CLEAN.' The video has a compelling, evangelical tone: figures dressed in white walk towards a futuristic, domed temple. 'Here everything is possible and everyone is welcome,' he says in a subtitled Thai voice-over.

At this point, even before they were ushered by a young woman dressed in white into the main gallery space, most of Arunanondchai's detractors were probably asking themselves the same thing: 'Is he for real?' The sincerity of the artist is the most contentious issue in this exhibition, especially given the irony-laden delivery of its message. The perceived lack of sincerity of those earlier paintings is presumably part of what Arunanondchai is atoning for. When we see a shot of his studio crowded with paintings, he laments: 'There's so many of them. But which one is the right one?' Later, the protagonist (played by boychild, wearing a wig) holds his head in his paint-soaked hands and weeps on the studio floor.

These histrionics are played out within a narrative of ecclesiastical submission and spiritual salvation. The dimly lit main gallery was arranged like a church. A congregation of mannequins, dressed in the same white outfits worn by the gallery attendants and actors in the films, stared at the projection on the far wall. Down a central aisle, above a denim dais, a wall of water cascaded around a sculpture of a hand proffering a bar of soap. And, at either side of this altar, large paintings reflected the light of the video.

Except they weren't paintings – not quite. Each was a digital print of a painting from 'Untitled (Muen Kuey)' on mirrored Perspex. Sweeping across them were areas where colours had seemingly been wiped off, exposing the pristine mirror beneath. A painting that disavows itself is still a painting, however; these artefacts hinted that Arunanondchai has probably not made his last bad painting.

Renewal and redemption are major themes in this project, but so are fashion, collective identity and cultish obeisance. Arunanondchai's haters would say that, in his emulation of cheesy religious promotional films (particularly those of the new Buddhist sects currently thriving in Thailand), he is having his cake and eating it, parodying organized spirituality while claiming some of its gravitas and transcendental affect.

Arunanondchai belongs to a generation in which irony is not incompatible with sincerity. Like many young cultural outsiders, he builds his ethical and aesthetic world by trying out bits and pieces of existing paradigms, any of which may be switched for others at any point. Irony makes everything possible, and everyone welcome. Shame, I would guess, has no place in Arunanondchai's world and neither, really, does purity. It was probably not unintentional that the water, tinkling endlessly in the central fountain, never touched the soap.

JONATHAN GRIFFIN



MEL CHIN

New Orleans Museum of Art

Mel Chin is an artist who pays meticulous attention to materials, and who has excelled at agitprop wordplay and 'insertionary' tactics that *détourne* mass media. He's an artist who has recurrently explored the vagaries of being Asian-American while eliding the categorizations of once-triumphant identity politics, who has confronted a host of political-social atrocities in his work while insisting that changing oneself is the highest goal. Chin's multi-tasking makes him something of an enigma. Consistently stretching, questioning or even refusing self-designation as an artist, Chin has often switched hats – most notably in his well-known *Revival Field* (1991–ongoing): installations that tested the ability of hyper-accumulator plants to soak up and transform toxins from poisoned waste sites. With his later *Operation Paydirt* (2006–ongoing), Chin became a full-time negotiator whose art form was navigating the various governmental, scientific, corporate and art bureaucracies concerned. *Revival Field* found its funding, however, as an aesthetic not scientific project, and Chin's design folds the experiment back into a cosmological form: the plants arranged in a circle within a square with intersecting walkways, harking back, as Lucy Lippard has noted, to Heaven and Earth in Chinese mythology. That 'Rematch', the fullest retrospective of his career to date – covering over 40 years of work and including early works such as *Vertical Palette* (1976–85), *Magnolias in the Moonlight* (1976) and *Bird in a Cage* (1976) – was held in New Orleans was also appropriate, as the city has been the location of several of Chin's public site-specific interventions.

Chin's early and still powerfully resonant series of sculptures, 'The Operation of the Sun through the Cult of the Hand' (1987), does not evoke the harmony of the spheres so much as provoke the fragmentary, stabbing attempts at knowledge. Inspired in part by Marcel Duchamp's use of the Chinese alchemical tradition (Duchamp once stated that he was alchemical in the only way still possible, by not calling it such), Chin's arrangement of the planets is intricately personalized. Earth is weighted with the same mass as Chin himself, and the distance of