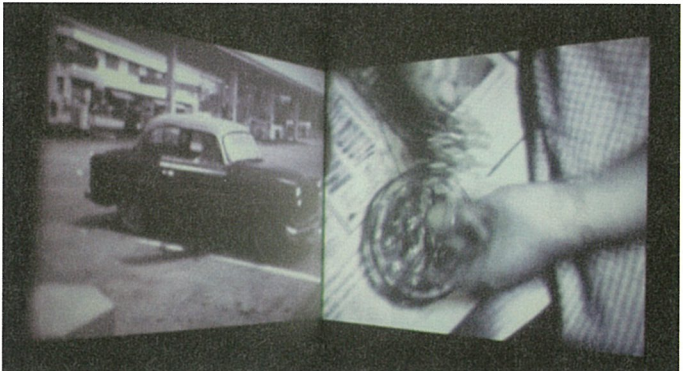


# “Memory and Disappearance: Recent Thai Art”

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BY LAURENCE A. RICKELS Momena Art, Brooklyn NY October 24 • December 1, 2003



The Jim Thompson House is the foremost cultural institution in Bangkok for the presentation and preservation of Thai art, design, and architecture. Thompson was a trained architect before switching, for the occasion of WWII, to an international I-Spy career, in the course of which he first caught sight of Bangkok, where he eventually relocated after retiring from the CIA. Then, in 1967, he disappeared in the jungles of Malaysia. The house that Thompson built has a unified design that incorporates six traditional Thai teak dwellings that were purchased and transported to their new location and composition from various parts of Thailand. In the style of Americans composing castles in the States out of European architectural elements, no doubt each component part corresponds to a fragmenting gap that was left behind in its original setting.

Jim Thompson has become a password of sorts, a point of entry for Americans to make contact with the locals on a visit to Bangkok. Michael Cohen, curator of the show “Memory and Disappearance: Recent Thai Art,” commented on Thompson’s trajectory, disappearance and all, as opener in conversation with two Thai artists. Each responded, however, that missingness, whether or not politically motivated, belongs to the formation of everyday life in Thailand. (Even in his disappearing act, then, Thompson was still going native.)

The show presents work by four Thai artists, three from Bangkok, one residing in New York. The latter, Satoru Chayavichitslip, opens the exhibition with his recreation of traditional Thai “spirit houses,” shelters for displaced spirits set up in homes or places of business to insure prosperity. Chayavichitslip, however, mixes into the traditional flowers and figurines that fill the niches back in Thailand, skulls and bone fragments that refer to death at the same time as they cite heavy metal album covers. The increased morbidity that the artist adds to the Thai custom of sheltering the missing is thus on location in one of our own death cults, another displaced, commercialized, demonized subculture where youth gets wasted on/in youth. Next we encounter a sprawling interactive sculpture/installation by Sutee Kunavichayanont. It is a deflated prostrate full-sized white elephant (or its body bag). Viewers are encouraged to help re-inflate—reanimate—the inert form via the air pumps standing by, their lifelines (the color of fresh blood) plugged into the sunken body. The elephant is the most prized symbol of Thailand itself (even the map of the country is said to resemble an elephant’s head and trunk). Elephants were used as engines of war and to extract and transport teak logs. But elephants were valued not only for their strength but also for their gentleness, intelligence, and ability or rather need to mourn.

In a series of photographs Manit Sriwanichpoom follows “pink man” (his and our ambivalent delegate) to witness the setting (location and decline) of historical monuments that must be made to fit the diorama attention span of tourism. Then in a video that has the look of a biker road movie, Prapon Joe Kumjim juxtaposes his record of certain Thai traditions that will soon reach the vanishing point with an attempted reconstruction of destroyed documents from his own past. All four artists present a variety of relations or responses to the trauma of loss and disappearance. Offered to a culture that is apparently less well versed in the rites of—and the right to—commemoration, the show might have been titled “Siamese Twin Towers.”

(TOP TO BOTTOM) SUTEE KUNAVICHAYANONT, THE WHITE ELEPHANT, 1999, LATEX RUBBER, AIR BALLOON, HOSE. PRAPON JOE KUMJIM, ROAD COOKING, 1999-2002, TWO-CHANNEL PROJECTION, 8MM FILM TO DVD TRANSFER, TWO DVDS. MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM, PINK MAN ON TOUR # 1 (AMAZING PAGODA), 1998, C-PRINT. COURTESY MOMENTA ART, BROOKLYN.