



Title

Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld

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Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld

by Sarah Bolwell • 24.11.2021

It is difficult to compose a history of contemporary Asian art in accordance with Western art-historical methods. In South East Asian cultures, particularly in Thailand, narratives often rely not so much on empirical evidence, but rather on oral histories and Hindu-Buddhist ideology.¹ Contemporary art in Thailand is the complex product of transcultural influences amassed over centuries; nonetheless, in recent years there has been a drive to plot its arc. This has largely been spurred on by the Western market – by commercial art galleries eager to expand their roster of clients, but museums and public galleries have also played a role, keen to bring greater diversity to their artistic programming. The book under review falls somewhere in the middle. It respects the spirit of non-Western art in an era of globalisation while at the same time paying homage to a Thai artist who has long evaded commodification: Mit Jai Inn (b.1960).

Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld was published in conjunction with a monographic exhibition of the same title at Ikon, Birmingham (closed 21st November). It investigates Mit's predominantly conceptual style of art and documents his life – from a trainee Buddhist monk to a radical art student in Bangkok, to exhibiting at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2019. It is the first English language publication dedicated to the artist and comprises three essays, all of which acknowledge and engage with the oral historical tradition that inflects Mit's practice: 'Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld' by the exhibition's curator, Melanie Pocock; '*Eukabeuk*, Tha Phae collage, and red ants: remembering who you are' by the academic Simon Soon; and 'Surface depth' by Brian Curtin.² There is also an interview between Mit and the Thai curator Gridthiya Gaweewong. Although the book is not an exhibition catalogue per se – there is no complete list of works – it serves as a useful introduction to contemporary art in Thailand through the life and work of this intriguing artist.

Pocock's essay provides the social and historical context for Mit's development as an artist. He was born in Sankampaeng in Northern Thailand and from 1970 to 1976 he trained as a novice monk at Djittabhawan Buddhist College, Pattaya – a city on Thailand's east Gulf coast, about eighty miles south of Bangkok. During this early period in his life he undertook focused study and absorbed Buddhist principles, learning to live with very little. Against the backdrop of a turbulent political situation in Thailand, Pocock tracks Mit's teenage exposure to leftist ideals while he

attained his high school diploma and began a fine art course at Silpakorn University. Mit often destroyed or gave away his work from art school but some photographs survive; they recall the photomontages of the German Dada artist Hannah Höch **FIG.1** **FIG.2**. Indeed, Mit travelled to Kassel for documenta 8 in 1987. He stayed in Germany for a year before enrolling at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, where he met the sculptor Franz West (1947–2012). They bonded over a shared interest in relational aesthetics and a socialist approach to artmaking, and after graduation Mit joined West's studio as an assistant. The similarities between the two artists are evident in their output but, as Pocock highlights, Mit came to West's studio with his own ideas. He was not simply a prodigy of the Austrian; their ideas influenced one another's art practices.

Vienna Apartments (1991), his graduate work from art school, comprised over one thousand sculptures – some were found objects, others he crafted, but all were painted in an array of bright pastel colours. Visitors were invited to take works away, on the condition that for one day the following month they would open their home for members of the public to view it **FIG.3**. A room in the exhibition at Ikon echoed this idea, inviting visitors to choose from two different types of work to take away: either a small sculpture made of twisted wires coated in papier mâché, painted in Day-Glo and dipped in glitter **FIG.4**; or a sheet of thickly painted A4-sized canvas with vertical incisions, allowing the work to be bent, moved and folded **FIG.5**. The fact that these paintings behave like sculptures and the sculptures are painted attests to Mit's subversive but also playful attitude to artmaking. They incorporate the Buddhist notion of *sangha*, which Mit interprets as 'the community that includes Buddha himself, the teachings, and the practitioners of those teachings' (p.92). The artist returned to Thailand in 1992 and invoked *sangha* in his work in an attempt to reconnect the artistic scene with the community. He created happenings and performances, and founded Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI) – a public arts festival that took place in the 1990s **FIG.6**. Mit's beautiful and joyful objects belie the important role he has played in projecting the diversity of Thai artistic sensibility.



Fig. 1 *Untitled*, by Mit Jai Inn. 1983. Photograph, 61 by 51 cm. (© the artist; courtesy Kamin Lertchaiprasert).

Simon Soon's writing focuses on the understanding of 'new', non-Western, social histories of South East Asian art and his piece on Mit is no exception.³ Despite this, Soon's starting point for this essay is the 2011 book *Under Blue Cup* by Rosalind E. Krauss, in which she explores the relationship between aesthetic mediums and memory. As Soon outlines, for Krauss 'the medium is no longer tied to the materials used to create a work of art [. . .] medium defines the formal limits and possibilities inherent to a practice, while rendering the artwork legible and formally coherent' (p.52). Mirroring the format of *Under Blue Cup*, which begins with Krauss detailing a brain aneurysm she experienced in 1999 and her subsequent cognitive rehab, Soon's essay is written in the first person and is structured around the author's recollections of meetings with Mit over the past decade. Positioning 'medium' as a 'form of remembering' (p.53), Soon draws attention to Mit's artistic sensibilities and verbal approach to history-writing, and his

belief that 'once something gets recorded it dies' (p.95). Soon details anecdotes from their encounters and describes the textures and colours of works in studio visits, in the hope of making 'a case for the composite quality and layering power of oral narratives as the medium of Mit's artistic practice' (p.54). Mit is renowned for giving his work away and Soon concludes his essay with a quotation from the artist in relation to a painting he gifted him: 'You can do anything you want with it, it is a social object. You can wear it over you, or roll it up, cut it into tiny pieces, to sell it, frame it [. . .] but try putting it in your living room or your toilet, so that you will live with its energy' (p.63).

Brian Curtin's essay speaks to Mit's use of colour and form. His works of art draw on broad references, from the fabric and cultures of Buddhist Thailand to LED lights and the digital world: 'Occasionally there is a sense, when the colour is hyper-sweet and paint has been thickly applied, of vulgarity, which could be related to notions of consumerist excess' (pp.75–76). Mit has remarked that colour and light provoked a transformative experience for him in a Buddhist temple as a child (p.63). The bright pastels and Day-Glo paints that recur throughout his work allude, therefore, to religion and personal enlightenment. Other colours, Curtin explains, have political signifiers. Mit's use of aluminium enamel, for example, references the silversmithing traditionally practised by his native Yong ethnic group. Historically itinerant, the Yong are craftspeople who came to settle in Northern Thailand, whereupon some chose to make items from silver for the local royalty. The resultant factions within the Yong community, politics of monarchy and, by extension, national class divisions are all suggested by Mit's use of the colour silver. The Yong are also known for their weaving, which Mit honours in a bright multicoloured work composed of woven painted canvas **FIG.7**. For Mit, colour is an aesthetic and sensorial tool to bring together such diverse themes as politics, heritage, class and spirituality. Curtin also usefully peppers his essay with references to some of Mit's important exhibitions, for example, in Bangkok (2016 and 2018–19), Dublin (2018) and Taipei (2018 and 2020–21).⁴

Mit's sculptural approach to the use of paint on canvas is one that invokes multiple senses for the artist as well as his audience. This is to recognise 'how our collective understanding can be influenced by a range of factors [. . .] and what it might mean to critically shape interaction between people and artworks' (p.78). None of this is particularly new in terms of a global modernism, but as Curtin points out, through any number of aesthetic, formal or conceptual elements in Mit's practice, he can be linked to numerous twentieth-century artists in the Western canon – he cites Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg – but such parallels are increasingly unenlightening. Ultimately, it is abstraction that provides the key for successfully conveying a political message – particularly in light of Thailand's *Lèse-majesté* law, which makes

criticism of the monarchy an imprisonable offense – while simultaneously evoking a multitude of reactions from the viewer. Employing abstraction to '[evoke] the ethereal in a politically embattled region', Mit creates his own iconography (p.80).

It would be unfair to criticise this publication on idealistic grounds – that its very existence, with its use of the written word, undermines the theoretical underpinning to Mit's practice. Soon speaks to this paradox: 'historians of art who write on living artists never truly do justice to the stories that constitute an important source of knowledge, since the process of writing ultimately moulds these stories into a textually linear form. Yet stories are never truly linear, especially oral histories' (p.53). However, Mit's work remains conceptual in its de-materialising of the art object through its dissemination, which undermines the art market and imbues the work with the spirit of rebellion. It is not that art is not located in the object, but that its true value is in its proliferation. What is art if not to be shared? Perhaps this publication can be seen as an extension of Mit's practice – a little bit of dreamwork in living rooms up and down the United Kingdom, and maybe even the loo.

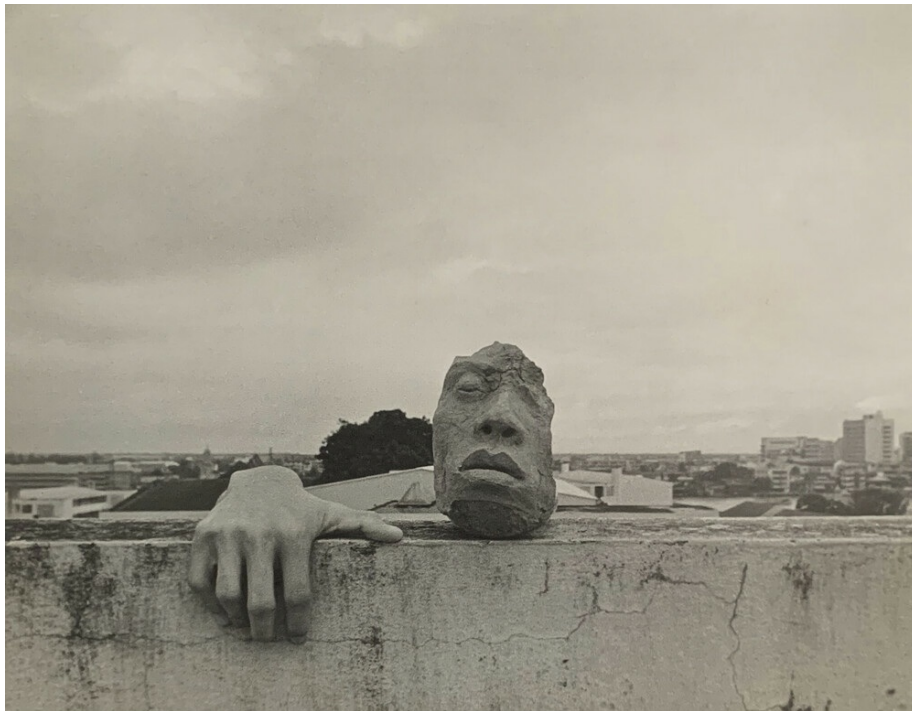


Fig. 2 *Untitled*, by Mit Jai Inn. 1983. Photograph, 51 by 61 cm. (© the artist; courtesy Kamin Lertchaiprasert).



Fig. 3 Exhibition poster for *Vienna Apartments* (front), by Mit Jai Inn. 1991. (© the artist; courtesy Götz Bury).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld* at Ikon, Birmingham, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Ikon, Birmingham; photograph Stuart Whipps).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld* at Ikon, Birmingham, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Ikon, Birmingham; photograph Stuart Whipps).



Fig. 6 *Chiang Mai Social Installation*, showing works by Mit Jai Inn at Tha Phae Gate. 1995–96. (© the artist; courtesy Uthit Atimana and Gridthiya Gaweewong).



Fig. 7 *Patch Work 2*, by Mit Jai Inn. 2019. Oil on canvas, 244 by 150.5 by 18 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Ikon, Birmingham; photograph Stuart Whipps).

About this book



Mit Jai Inn: Dreamworld

Edited by Melanie Pocock

Ikon, Birmingham, and ArtAsiaPacific, Hong Kong, 2021

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Footnotes

- 1** On this, see especially D. Teh: *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, Cambridge MA and London 2017.
- 2** Translations of the essays into Thai are provided at the back of the book, pp.113–131.
- 3** See, for example, S. Soon: 'Images without bodies: Chiang Mai social installation and the art history of cooperative suffering', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 42 (2016), pp.36–47.
- 4** *Wett by Mit Jai Inn*, Gallery Ver, Bangkok (5th March–2nd April 2016); *Field Recordings: Sven Anderson and Mit Jai Inn*, Rua Red, Dublin (5th October–1st December 2018); *Beautiful Futures*, H Gallery, Bangkok (2018–19); *Light, Dark, Other*, TKG⁺, Taipei (27th October–25th November 2018); and *Mit Jai Inn: The King and I*, TKG⁺, Taipei (5th December 2020–30th January 2021).

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