



## CLOSE TO HOME

One of Thailand's most well-travelled artists, ARIN RUNGJANG is also one of its most rooted, writes MAX CROSBIE-JONES

In the classic essay *Shooting an Elephant*, George Orwell describes an episode in which, while serving as an Imperial policeman in British-ruled Burma, he aimed a rifle at a rampaging elephant and pulled the trigger. In it he recounts, in typically unsparing detail, the “devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd” and the elephant’s slow and painful demise, as he became “suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old” and then “sagged flabbily to his knees.” And then, once the elephant has finally breathed its last, comes the essay’s real killer blow: Orwell’s admission that he had shot it “solely to avoid looking a fool” among the bloodthirsty locals.

Written back in 1936, this story is one of the best-known evocations of British imperialism – and the corrupting power relationships at the heart of it – ever committed to paper. However, a work on show at the current 12th Shanghai Biennale is reviving this dusty old story and its raw commentary upon the oppressor and oppressed for a new audience. In a gallery deep in the city’s vast Power Station of Art, visitors encounter a recreation of this episode – faded black and white footage of a pachyderm playing dead.

Other video screens, meanwhile, show a Myanmar man of Bangladeshi descent reading Surah Yasin, a chapter of the Quran, and others still are text-based, merge the testimony of two different but clearly somehow interconnected men. This is history in motion, but not of the documentary sort that most of us are used to. Anyone watching these three vignettes – the minimal video elements that comprise Thai artist Arin Rungjang’s *Shooting an Elephant and The Leader* – must draw their own conclusions.

Speaking on a hot, smoggy January afternoon at his home, deep in Bangkok’s northern suburbs, a casually dressed and calmly spoken Arin Rungjang is in the mood for talking about his latest work. And he is full of details: the man in the video was born in Mawlamyine, the city where Orwell worked; he is stateless; he was trafficked from



Arin Rungjang's *Shooting an Elephant and The Leader* video installation

(SHANGHAI BIENNALE, SHANGHAI GALLERY)

Myanmar into Thailand. However, as with so much of Arin’s work, I’m struck by the sense that this work’s power probably lies less in all the minutiae than in the relations between them. Orwell’s tale is, as he puts it, “a story that burdens another” and the whole project about “different layers in the same place.”

For some years now, the art world has been framing Arin and his practice using the cold, dispassionate lexicon of the academic. He is interested in “lesser-known aspects of Thai history and their intersection with the present”, his works “revisit master-narratives through the agency of small events”, and so forth. And while neither of these statements rings false, he sees his process differently – as deeply personal, imbued with the warmth and frailty of human experience and connections. His relationship with *Shooting an Elephant*, a story he first read when he was younger, is a case in point. “Back then it was just a story about a guy killing an elephant. I didn’t see the whole context. I was too

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young to understand,” he admits. Years passed, his career took flight, and then a chance meeting with the man from Mawlamyine suddenly drew him back to it. “The whole project happened because of him. I wanted to understand why he didn’t have Myanmar citizenship, why there are so many Bangladeshis living in Mawlamyine... all these questions then led me back to Orwell’s memories.”

Finding other personal traces in Arin’s work is not difficult. While his early career was shaped by more formal concerns, namely an interest

in relational aesthetics and challenging the confines of the white cube gallery space, the incursion of elements of his own life – particularly the recollections and correspondence of family members, loved ones and friends – can be traced back around a decade, to works such as *Russamee Rungjang*, a video from 2009 in which his mother stares out wistfully from a high floor at the Dusit Thani, the now defunct luxury Bangkok hotel where she once worked as a cleaner, and reminisces about Arin’s late father.



246247596248914102516... *And Then There Were None*, Arin Rungjang's work for documenta 14 (2017)



Arin Rungjang's *Shooting an Elephant and The Leader* video installation

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In more expansive projects, typically created for international residencies or biennales, elements gleaned from Arin's personal life – some banal, some life-shattering – bisect or appear side by side with sociohistorical, CSI-like treatments of wider collective histories. A good example is his contribution to the 2013 Venice Biennale, *Golden Teardrop*, a multilayered video work that broaches themes of colonial-era migration, trade and war, but begins prosaically, with footage of his Japanese friend cooking up a batch of *thong yod*, the Thai egg yolk dessert of Portuguese origin.

Arguably even more rewarding in this regard was 246247596248914102516... *And Then There Were None*, his contribution to documenta 14, held in Kassel, Germany in 2017. Again, it was triggered by something private – his late father's journey to Germany in the 1970s, and subsequent beating there, allegedly at the hands of Neo-Nazis (he died not long after). But what he calls his “heavy relationship” with Germany only formed one component of this powerful multimedia installation; also expertly woven in was a recreation of the bas relief sculpture from Bangkok's Democracy Monument, and the memoirs of Prasat Chutin, a Thai diplomat who served as ambassador to Germany in the 1930s and visited Hitler in his final days. Here, Arin probed Thailand's role in World War II, and its stilted democratic progress, but in a disarmingly poetic and non-judgmental manner that hints at regeneration rather than

recriminations.

Born in Bangkok in 1975, Arin grew up in a household of women, and studied at the country's storied bastion of artistic conservatism, Silpakorn University, in the late 1990s. However, he credits his awakening – as a rounded human being, not just an artist or young gay man – to his time spent studying in Paris. “It changed my vision,” he says. “When I started at Silpakorn people said it was very traditional. I was like that too so didn't understand.” Prior to studying abroad, he believed the arrival of the internet, albeit in a primitive, 54k-modem form, had already brought the world into sharper focus. “People in my generation don't have to go abroad to see the world in real HD, I thought, we can just study from the internet.”

But what he found in late 1990s Paris surprised him. He had expected the culture, the galleries, the history, but not to encounter a profound sense of otherness, his not belonging. And while he soaked up the ideas of Nietzsche and Rimbaud, among other influential European philosophers and poets, he never felt a deep connection or sense of ownership. “That life, culture and knowledge was their family, not mine. I would never be a member,” he says. “So I made the decision back then to understand what is happening around me, what is really happening in my own house. During the 1990s people were really crazy about Thainess, but this was different.”

Upon his return to Thailand and subsequent graduation, he enjoyed spells as a fashion designer, magazine columnist (“I quit because I only got 3,500 baht per article”), magazine art director and stylist. With a close friend, he also designed and sold T-shirts, initially on the streets of Bangkok. “They sold very well and so my friend and I opened a shop at JJ. The business was very good.” Throughout this time, there were art exhibitions, some abroad, some at alternative art spaces such as the seminal About Café, in the heart of Bangkok's peeling Chinatown. However, unlike some of his strident artist-activist peers, he never felt there was much to rebel against. “The only institution we considered very powerful back then was the university, but we never fought against the art institution itself. We just had a problem with what it taught,” he says.

Fast forward to early 2019 and Arin's life looks profoundly different. He is, in many respects, the archetypal ‘post-national’ Thai artist – regularly embarking on new projects in foreign lands, a world citizen broadening his horizons while not forgetting his roots or political moorings or what gives his internationally acclaimed work its urgency. When we meet, he is preparing to fly to Berlin, a city he loves for its diverse and open-minded art scene and where he will do yet another residency, and later this year there will be a biennale project in Toronto, a city he knows only from books and

documentaries but is looking forward to discovering for himself. Also coming up this year is Spectrosynthesis 2, a landmark art show exploring LGBT issues at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre for which he already has a plan – another forensic deconstruction of an episode in Thai history. What keeps him returning to his local context, like a restless bat to its damp cave? “It's not really about Thai history, it's about where I live,” he replies, with a slight hint of irritation. “Art critics always try to explain or reduce something, to find some reason, but as a visual artist I just use myself as a human being and work where I live.”

So busy is he that he finds himself in the rare situation of having to turn some offers down. But having said that, Arin reveals that not everyone he meets warms to his ambivalent approach to history, the manner in which his works grapple with shards – archival research and first-person testimony, facts and hearsay – and toggles, serenely and noncommittally, between them. “Some historians are comfortable with the way I persuade, but others I've met feel uncomfortable because there's no concrete structure driving my historical research,” he says. “However, as a visual artist I just pick up elements that we perceive and avoid using history to reach firm academic conclusions or lessons. Novels, movies, theatre: these forms all transform reality into different shapes and propositions. My work does, too.” ■