



# THE BOLD AND THE BRAVE

While Thailand's male artists occupy many different camps, something unites them: raw passion. **Max Crosbie-Jones** meets four uncompromising male artists, each either bold in technique, bold in conviction or bold in concept

**DEDICATING YOUR LIFE TO THE ARTISTIC PATH. PUTTING YOUR SELF OUT THERE. STICKING IT OUT DESPITE THE REJECTIONS AND SETBACKS. MAKE NO MISTAKE: BEING AN ARTIST IS A LOFTY, EVEN MACHO ENTERPRISE, WHATEVER YOUR MEDIUM OR YOUR SEX.**

But there's another form of artistic toughness than mere perseverance. While plenty of artists working in Thailand today are content with painting pleasant landscapes or pastoral scenes—the kind of work that presents Thailand in an ennobling light and might easily sell—others are a little bit braver: reach deep into the fibre of their being, or take a deep and penetrating look at the world around them, or try to further technique with an obsessive's zeal.

For proof of this look no further than the following male artists, all based in Bangkok. None of them can be accused of taking the easy route. A couple of them articulate socio-political themes in their work, albeit using radically different mediums. Another is a painter whose sublimated desires and fears manifest in mad outpourings of inky fury. Another is using chisels, blowtorches and bottles of acid to revitalise deeply unfashionable abstract art. Uniting them all, though, is clarity of purpose—a desire to make the art that feels right for them—and an urgent and idiosyncratic style.

## KRIANGKRAI KONGKHANUN

There is a dissonance—an intriguing one—between Kriangkrai Kongkhanun and his art. And this tension boils down to this: his work is ferocious—he isn't.

In his ink-splattered acrylic paintings and drawings, anthropomorphic creatures and many-eyed ghouls battle with monstrous creatures of the imagination. Fanged ghouls with contorted limbs buzz around skies filled with ominous red flowers and bloody clouds. They are wild, brutal and not of this earthly plane. Kriangkrai, on the other hand, is as down-to-earth as artists come. Far from being what you might imagine—a tormented

**MY KIND OF HELL**  
(Opposite)  
Kriangkrai Kongkhanun touches up one of his Chinese ink and paint-based works; (below) Kriangkrai's Spiritual Disease (2009) woodcut series depicts inner turmoil with phantasmagoric abandon





misanthropist with a furrowed brow—he's a mild-mannered character, albeit one well aware of the schism between him from his art. "A lot of my friends say my art doesn't seem to reflect me," he admits.

He trained in woodcut printing at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang before completing his master's at Silpakorn University. After this came a one-year scholarship in Florence, where he studied marble sculpture and spent his weekends traversing Italy by train in search of its many illustrious museums. But his interest in fire-and-brimstone netherworlds came earlier, when just a child. "Like many kids, people would tell me I would go to hell if I do something bad," he says. Often, he was taught pictorially, as so many Thai children are, about good and evil. "When I was young I studied with monks and they always taught us using

pictures because they're easy to understand." His works draw heavily from this Thai tradition of *pisanakam*, and one old Buddhist scroll in particular, the Tribhumi Praruang.

As well as the didactic fear mongering of old Buddhist teachings, his work also brings to mind surreal medieval tableaux by the likes of Hieronymus Bosch. Nods to popular culture can also be discerned. For example, the ghouls in *Spiritual Disease*, a series of woodcuts from 2009, look not dissimilar to No-Face, an emotionless semi-human character from Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 classic *Spirited Away*. He is also a big fan of comic books and the gloriously opulent, jewel-like paintings of Indian artist Raqib Shaw.

Ultimately his pictures are, at their jaundiced heart, depictions of moral abysses. As a fan of his work puts it succinctly on his Facebook page, his work "expresses the monster battles of lust, anger, greed and exploitation which are living in and creating despair in us all." Despite his cool, ebullient exterior, Kriangkrai says these battles are buried deep within himself and that, through his work, he both channels and confronts them. "I feel that bad feelings are not good kept inside and must be kicked out," he explains.

However, having focussed on fey, menacing, light-starved depictions of hell, he is currently changing direction. "I want to develop more towards acrylic paintings with a lot of colour," he says. Heaven is also now on his radar...his kind of heaven. "I want to explore the heaven in which we're still thinking about earthly delights and bad things." Clearly, that dissonance isn't going to disappear anytime soon.

#### SOICHIRO SHIMIZU

"Compared to all the young kids making contemporary art, I'm a dinosaur," says Soichiro Shimizu while walking around YenakArt Villa, one of the local galleries where he's recently been reviving his career after a long hiatus. If this is true, then he's a dinosaur taking old modes of two-dimensional

expression to some fresh and exciting places.

Seen up close and side on, the Bangkok-based Japanese artist's large-scale works take on a topographic quality. You can see the cracks and crevasses of distant planets or moons in his techno-organic surfaces. Stand back, though, and they become something else entirely. You're reminded of viscous liquids, wormholes being traversed at light speed, among other natural phenomena.

Harking back to the manly abstract expressionists of the mid-20th century, his engraved works are incredibly labour intensive, the result of chemical serendipity and much sweat and grit. "Method-wise, it's just plywood engraving that I turn into a sort of metal using a technique called thermal spraying," he says modestly. This process entails melting and spraying steel, zinc or copper onto the surface while donning a Darth Vader-like mask in a well-ventilated room. Later, he scars his surfaces by torching them with a flame or oxidising them using acid. Other works—smaller, gestural paintings—entail him doing sweeping "yoga movements on canvas," sanding down the paint, then repeating the process. His work has been called a "fusion of action and meditation, toughness and delicacy." But does he actually find any of this relaxing? "Is it part of my therapy? Is that what you're asking?" he responds jokingly. "No; at my age, 50, this is very hard work. Every day I wake up with muscle ache."

Shimizu's love of abstract painting began when he was a teenager. Back then, he would spend 10 hours a day training to become a world-class water polo player and his evenings lying back in a dormitory bunk bed decorated with postcards of work by Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella, among other era-defining American painters. Later, while living in London during the 90s, he toyed with conceptual art, a decision he now



regrets. "I was not happy with myself as an artist," he admits. "I should have gone back to what I was doing originally."

Today Shimizu, having found his way back to abstraction and gained a measure of success from it (he has a two-month solo show on at Palazzo Collicola in Spoleto, Italy on now), is dabbling in the digital realm too. Before he begins carving like a man possessed, he scans hand drawings and manipulates them in his computer to create complex vector maps. And recently he created his first computer-based series, *Re-Look*, which consisted of digital manipulations of discarded photos by some of Thailand's best known photographers, including Manit Sriwanichpoom and Benya Hegenbarth. To convince them to give him their junk box detritus, Shimizu met them face-to-face. "I wanted to emphasise that this project came from my admiration," he explains, "not to say 'Look what I can do: I can take your trash and turn it into my art.'" The resulting images—warped, twisted, symmetrical fractal-scapes that thrill the eye—seem like portents of the virtual reality future, or maybe snapshots from an android's dreams. Not bad for a dinosaur.

#### PRAPAT JIWARANGSAN

At the last Hotel Art Fair, held at Bangkok's Ad Lib Hotel back in June, most of the art was of the living room-friendly variety. There was a glut of salubrious watercolours, portraits and graphic prints for sale. And then there was Prapat Jiwangsan's contribution. On a table in the middle of the hotel room hosted by Nova Contemporary gallery was a pile of thousands of tiny bits of paper, each one about quarter the size of a postage stamp. It was an interactive work. Visitors could sift through it with their hands, pick out pieces at random using a forefinger and even view them under a magnifying glass. On peeking through it, faces came into focus—men, women, politicians, civil servants. The viewer was left wondering who each of these people is or was, and, partly due to the stark black-and-white tone, what happened to them.

Concerning the individual and their fractious relationship with the state, Prapat's work does this—makes us think. "I'm not saying all Thai artists should tackle politics," he says, speaking cuttingly about the local art scene, "but they should do something that reflects his or her spirituality or brain. Art should engage the intellect of people." His career to date has done this with

**TWO ANGRY MEN** (From far left) Soichiro Shimizu keeps action painting alive; the opening of his recent YenakArt Villa show; an image from the series *Re-Look*; Prapat Jiwangsan





## SURFACE TRAUMA

In the recent exhibition *Asylum Seeker | The Pond and the Fireflies*, Prapat Jivarangsan explored migrant issues and his own ennui with a nature metaphor



a rare and unyielding force, although the pared down and often sly conceptual nature of his works demands concentration. *Non-chronological History* (2013-2014), for example, consisted of nothing more than a slide projector that beamed prominent names from Thai political history on a wall. Each one was stripped of its rank or title. It was a simple yet effective comment on human hierarchies and Thai history's tendency to repeat itself.

Prapat, 37, trained in ceramics, glassmaking and printmaking in Thailand, but says his true artistic awakening came in 2011, while studying his master's degree at London's Royal College of Art. "Many people there asked me what was happening in Thailand and I couldn't answer because I didn't know the facts about the history of Thailand," he recalls. Soon he was a regular visitor at the Thai embassy's library, which is full of books about his homeland's tumultuous political past. "I went every day," he says. Works from this period, which appeared in a 2012 show at Bangkok's WTF Gallery, included digitally altered pictures based on portraits of prominent English university alumni.

More recently, his work has become more elusive, poetic and auto-ethnographic, although it remains just as headstrong and loaded with socio-political subtext. In his recent show at Jam Factory, he used photography, video and mixed-media installations to draw parallels between the fauna that inhabits the stagnant pond behind his old house in Chiang Mai and asylum

seekers. "Every day during the rainy season I would hear the sound of the insects and animals," he says. "To me that sound is quite strange, as they want to escape but can't." He also submerged photos of local migrant workers he knows in the pond and scraped and smudged their surfaces, a metaphor for the erasure of their true identities—and also something more ineffable. "I wanted to erase the memory of the present in Thailand," he says.

## JAKKAI SIRIBUTR

"I'm not sure how people are going to react," says Jakkai Siributr as he carefully lays another Muslim skullcap out on the table. The acclaimed textile artist, who works out of an atelier at his family's compound in downtown Sukhumvit, is currently working on one of the biggest shows of his career: a solo show at the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre scheduled for next April.

It could, potentially, ruffle some feathers. On the inside top of each skullcap is an embroidered scene of horror inspired by the strife in Thailand's deep south: car bombs going off, grenades exploding, etc. Then there are the flags featuring emblems and symbols from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia and Thailand—the four countries involved in the Rohingya refugee crisis. "I'm thinking about laying them on the floor so that you have to walk around them...like a graveyard," he says. Also due to appear in the show is *78*, an acclaimed installation comprised of 78 kurta tunics, one for each of the Muslim protestors who died in the infamous Tak Bai incident. "I think the Rohingya issue is related to *78*," he replies when asked what ties these works together. "Both these issues stem from a lack of understanding of each other's cultures."

Weaving themes of the moment with craft forms that go back centuries, Jakkai's carefully hand-stitched work is incendiary as well as decorative. But this wasn't always the case. Having trained in textiles at Indiana University,

he started out creating non-figurative works. "Initially I concentrated on the industrial aspect of textiles," he recalls, "because I thought when I got out of school I was going to work at Jim Thompson or something like that." However, after a change of direction in 2008, he hasn't looked back. Shows have tackled everything from the commodification of Buddhism to craven politicians and power-hungry civil servants. Represented by New York's Tyler Rollins and Bangkok's H Gallery, he is now one of Thailand's most singular art provocateurs, albeit one who has now shifted away from



IMAGES: SOCHIRO SHIMIZU PORTRAIT BY PAUL LUKIN; YENAKART VILLA INTERIOR BY PHASIN SUDJAI; JAKKAI SIRIBUTR PORTRAIT BY BENYA HEGENBARTH



politics towards socio-political issues.

A current group show at Chulalongkorn University's Art Centre is proof of his work's thematic as well as physical heft. On the large hanging needle-work *IDP Story Cloth 3* (2016) we see people being herded into police trucks, working in factories and standing outside ramshackle huts ringed by barbed wire. Meanwhile, in the photograph *Bannasan Tribe 2* (2016), Burmese home-helpers in traditional dress stare wistfully into space while sweeping a backyard. "In this show I'm specifically addressing the migrant worker issue here in Thailand," he says.

Like all his work, these are series born of a lot of research, not just of the issues he intends to carefully unpick but also craft techniques. "When I pick a subject or start a series I tend to look at old antique textiles as a reference and go from there," he explains. While his subject matter is diverse, ranging from Buddhist temple fairs to materialism and front-page issues, his means remain simple. "I still use very basic methods: sewing, stitching," he says. "I stay true to textile art as much as I can. But at the same time I'm trying to go as far as I can with it." ❶

## FABRIC OF OUR TIME

(Clockwise from below) Jakkai Siributr in the garden of his family home; details from new embroidery work *IDP Story Cloth 2*; the 2013 exhibition *Plunder* at Singapore's Yavuz Gallery

