

[Sign in](#) | [Register](#) | [Subscribe](#)[NEWS](#) [PREVIEWS](#) [OPINION](#) [FEATURES](#) [REVIEW](#) [SEARCH](#)**POWER 100**

Peter Friedl
As the Austrian artist unveils a new work at Doumenta 14 in Athens, Raimar Stange considers the artist's constant staging, re-staging and de-staging of history
 By Raimar Stange

Cowboys vs. social sculptors
Sam Korman on negotiating the legacy of Beuys's 'social sculpture' in North America today
 By Sam Korman

Let's Get Cynical!
The American artists reinventing 'enlightened false consciousness'
 By Chris Fite-Wassilak

Future Greats: Sandra Mujinga
Selected by Kiki Mazzucchelli. From the January & February issue
 By Kiki Mazzucchelli

Intimacy and Anonymity
What is Do Ho Suh revealing – and hiding – in the spaces he creates?
 By Mark Rappolt

FEATURE

Chiang Mai

Adeline Chia checks out the city's grassroots art scene

By Adeline Chia

Facade of Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum, designed by Allzone, Bangkok, and inspired by mi...



ynamic, hectic Bangkok, with its network of private galleries and public

institutions, is often seen as the nexus of Thailand's art scene, but the recent opening of Thailand's first private museum, Maiiam Museum of Contemporary Art, in Chiang Mai, has drawn attention to the quieter, wetter city up north. Never mind that the museum's location isn't even in the city centre, but half an hour's drive away, in the Sankampaeng district, which is better known for therapeutic hot springs than contemporary art; or that little information about the new arrival was out there until a press release that came only a few weeks before the official opening on 3 July: hundreds still scrambled for an invite and flocked to its opening party.

There are two major shows in the 3,000sqm premises, which is fronted by a disco-ball facade that refracts the busy roadside traffic of trucks and tuk-tuks into slivers of colour. The first exhibition is semipermanent, showing the collection of contemporary Thai art owned by a genteel family comprising the late Patsri Bunnag, her son Eric Bunnag Booth and her French husband, Jean-Michel Beurdeley, who have decided to share their collection with the wider public. Bunnag was from an aristocratic Thai-Persian family whose ancestors played important roles in Siamese politics and public life. Her son is the assistant managing director of Jim Thompson – The Thai Silk Company, a historic Thai textiles firm. He is also a trustee of the nonprofit James HW Thompson Foundation, which among several things oversees the Jim Thompson Art Center in Bangkok, an important contemporary art space. About 70 works from the Bunnag family collection, amassed over 30 years, are on show on Maiiam's second floor. They include works from pioneers such as Montien Boonma, Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, as well as the top rung of the country's contemporary practitioners, such as [Rirkrit Tiravanija](#), Pinaree Sanpitak and [Navin Rawanchaikul](#).

The second show – buzzier – is the first major Thai retrospective of video installations and short films by the Palme d'Or-winning director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who is based in Chiang Mai. Lauded abroad, the international arthouse film hero and artist has been historically averse to showing in his home country due to censorship. His previous feature films, such as *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), had cuts; the former for explicit sex, and the latter for scenes of 'improper' conduct by monks, such as playing with a Frisbee and guitar. Little surprise that he has point-blank refused to submit his latest work, *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), to the censor board, which resulted in the film having no domestic release. It has been warmly received overseas. In England, Weerasethakul is also having a moment: Tate Modern is showing his eight-channel video installation *Primitive* (2009) in the Tanks' display, and also honoured him with an all-night miniretrospective showing of his films. Back in Chiang Mai, his latest exhibition, *The Serenity of Madness*, is a full-scale career survey and a glorious homecoming, and it has accordingly provoked the kind of hyperventilation that only the return of a glamorous prodigal son can excite (see the exhibition review [here](#)). The exhibition features early experimental shorts from his student days in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, scripts, video diaries, as well as newer, ghostly hologrammic video installations projected on glass screens. In Maiiam, his show is advertised with a much-Instagrammed two-storey-high vinyl poster of a man wearing a demon's mask, one of the key stills in *Primitive*, some aspects of which appear in his most famous film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). The show is put together by his longtime friend Gridthiya 'Jeab' Gaweewong, who is one of Thailand's most influential curators and the museum's consultant. And Weerasethakul devotees take note: *The Serenity of Madness* is travelling to Hong Kong's Para Site next.

The combination of a reticent A-lister's retrospective and the open-door showcase of an

THE COMBINATION OF A RETICENT A-LISTER'S

expensive private collection has galvanised the local art scene. “This museum has a huge impact in Thailand, not just Chiang Mai. It is the first museum with a permanent showcase of Thai contemporary art,” says art dealer Lyla Phimanrat. She owns Lyla Gallery in Chiang Mai, which closed in July due to landlord disputes, though she plans to reopen the gallery in Bangkok next year. In Thailand, private initiative trumps government involvement in the arts, and Maiiam is the most glamorous and significant example of the former. Its cofounder Jean-Michel Beurdeley says the family spent a seven-figure sum in US dollars on acquiring and renovating the warehouse in which it is housed. “If we can break even, we will be the happiest people in the world,” he says. The museum charges a 150-baht entry fee (about £3).

RETROSPECTIVE AND THE OPEN-DOOR SHOWCASE OF AN EXPENSIVE PRIVATE COLLECTION HAS GALVANISED THE LOCAL ART SCENE

Thailand has no national collection of contemporary art, and most of the country’s most important artworks are in private hands – in the holdings of banks and local and regional collectors, as well as overseas museums. Besides Maiiam, the only domestic public space to see a permanent show of Thai art is the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bangkok, which as Thai artists note isn’t really contemporary but more modern in focus. In Phimanrat’s characterisation, “It’s all neo-Buddhist, neo-Thai stuff.”

Why choose Chiang Mai as the location for such an important museum? Beurdeley points out that the city, Thailand’s second largest, has a rich and long cultural heritage. The palindromic Maiiam means ‘brand new’ in Thai, and also refers to Chiang Mai’s name, which means ‘new city’. And yet Chiang Mai is actually old – older indeed than Bangkok, which rose up during the eighteenth century. Chiang Mai was built in 1296 as the capital city of the Lanna Kingdom, an ancient empire that covered most of what we now know as northern Thailand. Historic moats and walls surrounding this old capital still survive in the city. After centuries of fighting, the Lanna Kingdom was dissolved and condensed into a 20,000sqkm area centred around Chiang Mai. It was only in 1932 that the Chiang Mai area became a province of Siam, which became known as Thailand in 1949.



Gallery Seescape exhibition space, Chiang Mai

More than that, Chiang Mai, cooler in climate, rich in artistry dating back to the temples, textiles and woodworking of the ancient Lanna years, cheaper to live (and play) in, is also home to many Thai artists, who, according to *Serenity of Madness* curator Gaweewong, are also “the most interesting ones”. Proud Chiang Mai-ers include Weerasethakul, who settled here from Khon Kaen in Northeast Thailand. Others are Rawanchaikul, whose Bollywood billboard-influenced works explore his Thai-Indian identity; New York-based relational aesthetics king Tiravanija, probably best known for converting a gallery into a kitchen and giving away rice and Thai curry for free (*Untitled (Free)*, 1993); and Lertchaiprasert, an established artist and art teacher who creates Buddhist-inflected sculpture and painting in a repetitive, ritualistic mode. He is next in line for the solo treatment in Maiiam.

What Chiang Mai has lacked, Gaweewong adds, is an institution, and Maiiam is the answer. “That’s why Maiiam is important. It’s a place for them [Chiang Mai artists] to show at home before they go abroad.”

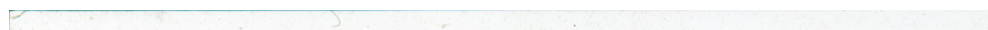
The city itself is filled with artist studios and small galleries, many of which are hybrid hipster hangouts with cutesy cafés and shops attached. A landmark is the six-year-old Gallery Seescape, owned by artist Torlarp Larpjaroensook. His gallery, situated in the fashionable Nimman neighbourhood, sells his own work and shows local and international artists, and includes a shop and café. Last year he also opened Hern Gallery, which focuses on more affordable and accessible pieces aimed at the new collector.

Disaphol Chansiri, a Bangkok-based law professor and one of Thailand’s most important private collectors, finds Chiang Mai’s art scene “very interesting, very charming”, despite its lack of big-name galleries. “When I go, I visit the student shows, artist studios and local galleries. You won’t be able to find these works in Bangkok. Personally I love it.” Most

“WHEN I GO, I VISIT THE STUDENT SHOWS, ARTIST STUDIOS AND LOCAL GALLERIES. YOU WON’T BE ABLE TO FIND THESE WORKS IN BANGKOK”

of the art students come from Chiang Mai University’s fine arts faculty, and the university also has its own art museum. The current show is a retrospective of painter Udomsak Krisanamis, who is known for dense, abstract canvases that recall twinkling cityscapes at night, and mixed-media collages that utilise anything from Thai noodles to bubble wrap. Based in New York during the 1990s, the Bangkok-born artist had attained a degree of international recognition, and this is yet another homecoming show, as it is the artist’s first exhibition in Thailand in ten years.

Chansiri, who has been collecting for 20 years, owns two private boutique art spaces in Bangkok and Chiang Mai to showcase parts of his collection; these are open by appointment only. The Chiang Mai space, called DC Collection Chiang Mai, is housed in a former royal residence – the most recent show was of work by Rawanchaikul. Recently Chansiri has bought up some shop-houses in front of his current property, and is in discussions to turn the ground-floor area of these houses, where the ceilings are high, into a sculpture space.





Montien Boonma, Body Temple, 1996, artwork and performance at Suan Dok Temple / Chiang Mai, Thailand. Courtesy Chiang Mai Social Installation

Besides local galleries, Chiang Mai has an organic though skittish history of nonprofit community projects that have come and gone, led by several senior influencer artists. In the early 1990s, there was the Chiang Mai Social Installation Project, led by Montien Boonma, Uthit Atimana and Mit Jai Inn. With the help of art students at Chiang Mai University (among them most notably Rawanchaikul and Kosit Juntaratip), the group initiated many outdoor projects in unconventional spaces as a response to the lack of proper gallery infrastructure. They held talks, performances and events in temples, in cemeteries and on streets along canals. During the early 2000s, key figures were Lertchaiprasert and Tiravanija. Lertchaiprasert ran the experimental art space Umong Sippadhamma from 2002 to 2005, and for five years, until 2015, he ran the 31st Century Museum of Contemporary Spirit, a gallery featuring his own work and his art collection housed in seven shipping containers. In 2004, together with Tiravanija and Uthit Atimana, he also founded the Land Foundation, a 12,800sqm utopic rural retreat for artists 20 minutes outside of Chiang Mai. When ArtReview visited, the idyllic spot, filled with rice fields, vegetable farms and several ponds, was peaceful and mostly deserted. Small, wall-less houses built by visiting artists and architects form a shabby, mismatched eco-resort, but over the years most of these structures have been overtaken by termites, and only a very intrepid artist would consider serious residence in any of them. Other props of past projects include an undulating steel structure from Philippe Parreno's 11-minute video filmed in Chiang Mai called *The Boy from Mars* (2003), now functioning as a shed, as well as Danish collective SUPERFLEX's Supergas structure, designed to convert cow dung into cooking gas, which broke down after one year. The Land Foundation is still going strong, though: at this year's Art Basel Hong Kong, it organised a fundraiser to support the next ten years of activities. And artists who want to look for inspiration, meditate and/or work with local farming communities are always welcome to apply to stay on the premises. "We almost never say no," says the manager, Sephapong Kirativonokamchon.

Whether the opening of Maiiam will unify Chiang Mai's scattered energies remains to be seen. But it has given some other private collectors an incentive to build their own museums, says Chiang Mai-born-and-bred artist Sutthirat Supaparinya. Together with three other artists, she runs Chiang Mai Art Conversation (CAC), a three-year-old collective that aims to consolidate information about the city's art spaces into a

central database. Besides operating a website, the volunteer-run CAC issued the first Chiang Mai Art Map and coordinated the first gallery crawl, Galleries Night Chiang Mai, in January this year. Supaparinya says that a Thai hotelier wants to build a museum to showcase his print collection, and a Thai-American couple based in Bangkok is constructing a museum in the mountains to feature their Thai and Southeast Asian art collection. Details remain sketchy, and both parties are reticent on contact.



Structures at the Land Foundation, Chiang Mai. Courtesy the Land Foundation

By Supaparinya's count, the number of art spaces, including residency programmes, has grown over the years, despite a few closures, and totals about 60 today. "Even two or three of the hotels have galleries inside now. In Chiang Mai, this never used to happen."

Maiiam may have provided a shot of adrenaline to the private museum scene, but what about its impact on artists? Artist Paphonsak La-or, who is the vice-chairman of the Land Foundation, says the museum's future direction is unclear. "Will it focus on established Thai artists only, or will the younger generation have a chance?" he asks.

Maiiam's other cofounder, Booth, says that beyond the Lertchaiprasert show, there are no plans, although several international curators have approached him during the opening with enquiries. He wants to dedicate the temporary gallery downstairs to Thai and international artists, while the showcase of his private collection upstairs will remain semipermanent. He adds that Maiiam will not hire an in-house curator or programme director, but will work with different parties on a project-by-project basis.

But the mood is definitely sanguine so far. The museum is, without doing much PR, receiving interest from a wide nspectrum of parties. "I just hosted a team from a magazine called *Honeymoon + Travel*," Booth says with a chuckle. Supaparinya says she saw another unexpected visitor: a monk. "He bought a ticket! I was so excited, I had to take a picture."

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: *The Serenity of Madness*, the inaugural exhibition of Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum, Chiang Mai, is on view at Para Site, Hong Kong, through 27 November.

This article was first published in the October 2016 issue of ArtReview, and in the Winter 2016 issue of ArtReview Asia.

RELATED

Subscribe to *ArtReview*, *ArtReview Asia*, artreview.com

October 2016

Featuring Siobhán Hapaska, Wael Shawky, robertlongo, Shadi Habib Allah, art in the Thai city of Chiang Mai and more

Rirkrit Tiravanija

Read the interview with the cover artist of ArtReview Asia's November 2013 Power 100 issue

Rirkrit Tiravanija

Navin Rawanchaikul

The Thai artist's latest work pushes on from issues of branding identity to confront personal emotions, ghosts of the past and the interconnected histories of South , East and Southeast Asia

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: The Serenity of Madness

Adeline Chia reviews the Thai artist's first retrospective in his homeland, in Chiang Mai's Maiiam museum

Feature Adeline Chia Chiang Mai Apichatpong Weerasethakul Rirkrit Tiravanija

Tweet



**SUBSCRIBE | ABOUT US | DISTRIBUTORS | ADVERTISE |
NEWSLETTER | CAREERS | FAQ**

CONTACT

© 2017 ArtReview
Made by Grandad