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Taking the long view

'Soil And Stones, Souls And Songs' is a travelling exhibition with international concerns

- 9 Aug 2017 at 04:00 1,557 viewed [0 comments](#)
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A view of the exhibition. Photo courtesy of Jim Thompson Art Centre

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Internationalism, nationalism, ecological and political woes: Asia is a region as vast as it is diverse, and yet a place of shared worries and ideologies. In the travelling exhibition "Soil And Stones, Souls And Songs", the richness of Asia is contemplated, and as one of the largest travelling exhibitions to visit Bangkok, it transforms as it moves, from one country to another, from one art space to the next -- swelling and shrinking to match room capacity, renewing itself at every stop.

Organised by the San Francisco-and-Paris-based Kadist Foundation and Para Site Hong Kong, this profuse -- at times overwhelming -- show was designed from the very beginning to be nomadic, says Cosmin Costinas -- one of the

exhibition's co-curators who, along with his collaborator Inti Guerrero, travelled to Bangkok last month for the exhibition's Thai opening at the Jim Thompson Arts Centre.

"It was important that we work on themes that would resonate through the different countries hosting the exhibition," he added.

Prior to landing in Bangkok, "SSSS" -- as the curatorial team has dubbed the show -- was presented in Manila and Hong Kong.

As it delves mainly into conflicting ideologies in contemporary Asia, the exhibition -- featuring works by more than 30 artists from various continents -- is a moving representation of the Global South.

By presenting intertwining narratives, crossed trajectories of rapid development and urbanisation, rural exodus, ecological destruction and an enduring communion with nature, curators highlight power relations -- the domination and oppression prevalent in the region.

SSSS may be dense, but it unfolds like a diligently crafted essay. Artworks echo one another and appear as variations of the exhibition's principal themes. Parallels can be drawn over and over, endlessly, throwing the viewer against the walls like a squash ball.

When we think about development and urbanisation in the context of Asia, images that spring to mind are often those of towering skyscrapers, massive building complexes and seas of people.

However, what is shown here, and brilliantly so, is the other end of this process -- the scorched earth, destroyed landscapes, resources exploited on an industrial scale -- forcing us to ask ourselves: "For whose benefit?"

Thai artist Sutthirat Supaparinya's work *When Need Moves The Earth* specifically tackles this question -- showcasing an arm-wrestling confrontation between nature and man's intervention.

Through her video essay, shot in 2014 at the Srinagarind Dam and the Mae Moh lignite mine in northern Thailand, she examines electricity production and its environmental impact.

Both sites are located on seismic grounds, and the additional stress could create man-made earthquakes, the artist explains in her statement.

"Land deployment always has two sides: some people may gain profit, but all of us lose out in a more general sense," Sutthirat wrote.

The exploitation of resources is a prevalent theme in the exhibition, found also in the work of Malaysian artist Simryn Gill.

In *Eyes And Storms* (2012-2013), her aerial views of pits, dams and fracking in Australia -- seen from a distance -- appear as coloured, bluish creases akin to the wounds man inflicts on Earth's surface.

Her more recent photographic series, *Vegetation* (2016), also depicts palm-oil fields in Malaysia as tree cemeteries, depleted of their riches.

Local communities, particularly indigenous communities -- often marginalised in their national context -- take centre stage, through their supposedly deep connection to the land and spiritual attainments.

"The divide between the city and the country is very deep in Thailand," notes Cosmin Costinas, although similar power relations play out in other countries and at the regional scale.

In Manila and Hong Kong, SSSS covered a surface of more than 1,000m². In Bangkok, however, it has been downsized and tailored to fit the smaller Jim Thompson Art Center.

Curators have done an impressive job utilising every inch of available space, including a long, narrow corridor-like storage room.

Mongolian artist Tuguldur Yondonjamts's drawing *Fin Soup And Black Lemon* is appropriately showcased in this hidden room.

Forced to move forward slowly, the viewer approaches the work from the left side, seeing what appears to be a landscape.

Only when you reach the right end of the drawing do you realise that it is in fact a shark -- China, having swallowed the

whole of the Mongolian terrain and its resources.

In the current context, soil and stones aren't mere materials but the building blocks of civilisation, countries, religions and culture.

"At a time of increased mobility and globalisation, a lot of people are thinking of going back to their origins and roots," Costinas adds.

Internationalism and nationalism clash like modernity and ancient beliefs, but they aren't mutually exclusive and currently exist in unison, as seen in Chulayarnnon Siriphol's *Myth Of Modernity*.

A 16-minute video installation, Chulayarnnon's complex train of thought exposes links between religious iconography and Thailand's political polarisation, drawing inspiration from speeches about "good people" and "evil people" often heard in Thailand over the past decade.



When Need Moves The Earth, video installation (2014) by Sutthirat Supaparinya. Photo courtesy of Jim Thompson Art Centre

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