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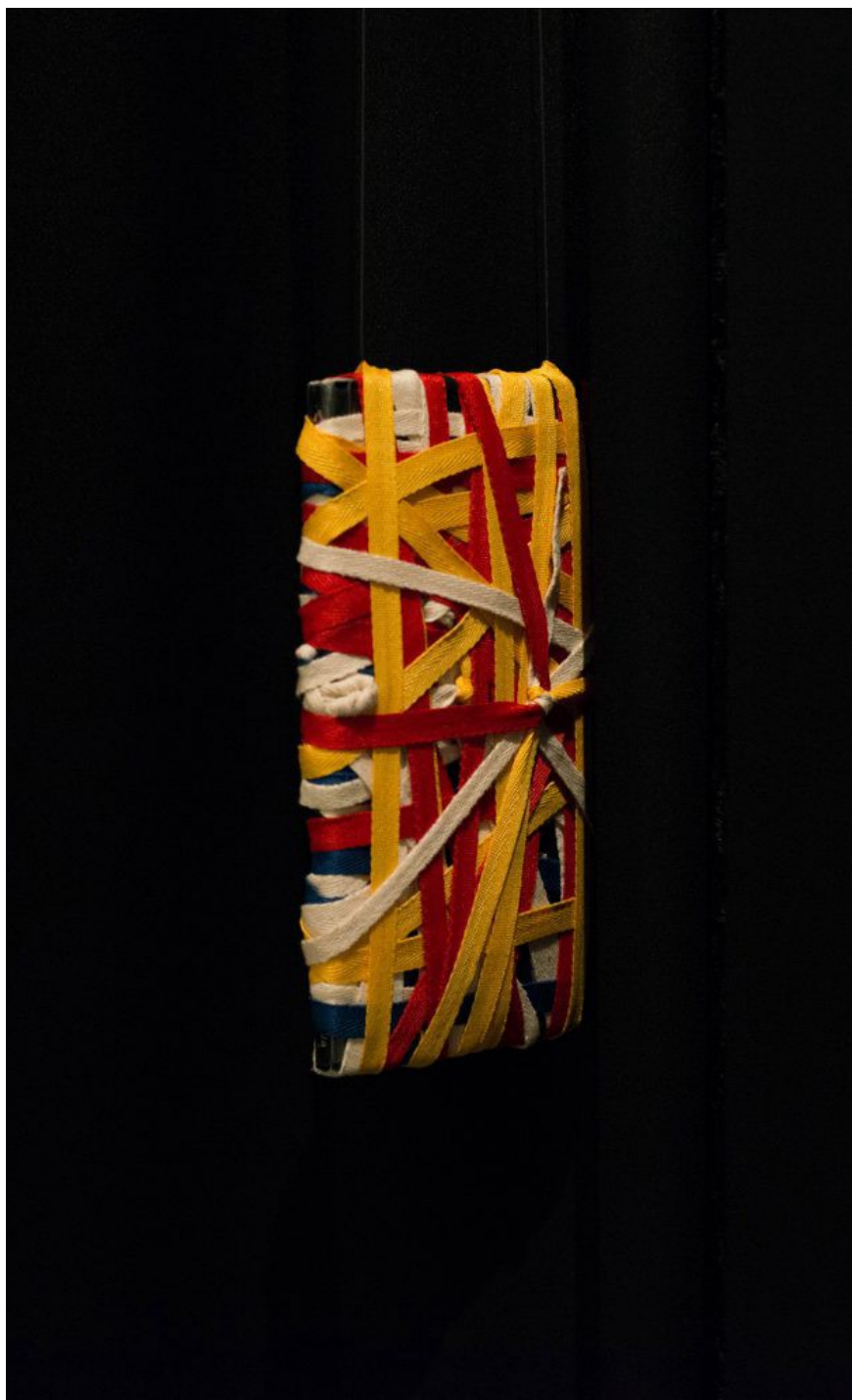


Yee I Lann, "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate: Ibu or the Beast", 2016. Giclee print on Hahnemuhle photograph paper, 61 x 205cm, courtesy of the artist and Sa Sa Bassac

On Attachments and Unknowns: A Group Exhibition in Cambodia Probes Social Issues Across South East Asia

Bringing together thirteen of the region's most exciting artists, the latest exhibition at Sa Sa Bassac (Cambodia's leading contemporary art gallery) pokes and prods at power dynamics at play around the region.

Curated by Sa Sa Bassac Director Erin Gleeson in collaboration with May Adadol Ingawanij and Ben Valentine, *On Attachments and Unknowns* is composed mostly of photographic projects and videos dealing with a wide array of socio-political issues relevant to the artists' diverse cultural perspectives and concerns.



Sutthirat Supaparinya, "Band Item: Angkor: An Essay on Art and Imperialism" (2017) courtesy of the artist and Sa Sa Bassac

I say “mostly” because there is one work in the show which is neither a photograph nor a video, namely, the installation *Band Item: Angkor: An Essay on Art and Imperialism* (2017) by Chiang Mai based artist Sutthirat Supaparinya.

The piece consists of two translations of the eponymous book, with an English copy left open for the public to flip through while a copy

printed in Thai has been bound closed with strips of ribbon and cotton, symbolizing the fact that the book was banned in Thailand from 1976 to 1998.

The issue of censorship in Thailand feels particularly timely, in light of the recent removal of artworks from an exhibition in Bangkok by soldiers from the military government, which seized power in a 2014 coup.



Anocha Mai Suwichakornpong, "By The Time It Gets Dark" (2016), film still, courtesy of the artist and Sa Sa Bassac

It seems safe to assume that the Thai junta would also take issue with Anocha Mai Suwichakornpong's *By The Time It Gets Dark* (2016), a feature length meditation on the 1976 massacre at Bangkok's Thammasat University that left over 100 students dead.

Euphemistically referred to in Thailand as "the incident," the extreme brutality of the Thammasat Massacre—in which police, soldiers, and American funded paramilitaries raped women students, both living and dead—undoubtedly inflicted a huge trauma on the national psyche, a trauma which goes largely unprocessed, probably because it is illegal to discuss in public (I surmise that it may fall under Thailand's strict *lesè majesté* laws, since the late king tacitly authorized the assault).

Suwichakornpong's film might be understood as an attempt to process that trauma and make sense of it, but it purposefully follows a

disjointed and non-linear plot, reflecting the official historical narrative and the collective amnesia that shrouded the incident in mystery during the artist's upbringing.

Not all the works in the exhibition are quite as pointed in their political concerns, but they all share the common theme of lack or concealment, something missing or something secret being alluded to. For instance, for her *Erased Slogans* series (2008-Present) Kiri Dalena edited archival photographs of protests and rallies in Manila, using photoshop to remove the slogans from each and every placard and banner.



Kiri Dalena, "Erased Slogans" (2008-Present), courtesy of the artist and Sa Sa Bassac

We are left uncertain of how to feel about these people since we are unable to discern their political leanings. Instead of immediately classifying and judging these subjects, we are reminded of our common humanity. There is also something eerie about those blank placards though, as if these people's voices have been silenced, their struggles forgotten.

Following a similar logic of erasure, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai altered

The collages Minstrel Kulik and Yee I-Lann enact yet more acts of deletion, concealment, and haunting: Kulik, through the violent act of excising the faces of politicians from Malaysian election campaign materials in *The Gridded Ghost Series* (2016), and I-Lann, with her digitally collaged self portrait as a long haired, faceless ghost, of the

variety reputed to haunt banana trees in Thai, Malay, and Indonesian folklore. Titled *The Banana Tree at the Gate: Ibu or The Beast* (2016), Yee's photomontage references an edict from a 17th century sultan in Southern Borneo who warned his subjects not to plant banana trees at the gates of their homes, lest their land prove too tempting for European colonizers to resist.

There is a piece by Nguyen Trinh Thi that captures the spirit of the show overall. Her *Landscape Series #1* (2013) consists simply of a slide show of found images in which people are pointing at something. However, it is almost always ambiguous just what they are pointing at; they seem to gesture vaguely into the distance, the true subject of each story falling beyond the frame of the photograph. We know there is a story there, and though we get a taste of it (form an attachment, if you will) there are always details which remain, ultimately, unknown.

***On Attachments and Unknowns* takes place at SA SA BASSAC through the 19th of August, 2017, and is tentatively planned to travel internationally to other institutions after that point.**

Participating Artists: Martha Atienza, Kiri Delana, Pao Houa Her, Chia-En Jao, Minstrel Kuk, Emily Phyo, Nguyen Thi Than Mai, Nguyen Trinh Thi, Sutthirat Supaparinya, Anocha Mai Suwichakornpong, Neak Sophal, Erika Tan, Yee I-Lann

