



The mirror-tiled facade of MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum.

## CHIANG MAI'S

# CREATIVE

# ROOST

BANGKOK MAY STILL RULE THE ARTISTIC ROOST IN THAILAND, BUT THE COUNTRY'S LAID-BACK SECOND CITY IS FAST CATCHING UP THANKS TO COLLABORATIVE CREATIVE PROJECTS, A NEW MUSEUM, AND A GROWING ROSTER OF RESIDENT ARTISTS.

BY **SIMON N. OSTHEIMER**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JEREMY SAMUELSON**



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PERCHED ABOVE THE MUDDY BANKS OF THE PING RIVER IS StudiOK, the home base for Chiang Mai artist Navin Rawanchaikul. An austere, warehouse-style building of concrete and steel, it is a purposely blank canvas for some of the most colorful and inventive contemporary artwork Thailand has known. The studio itself is only a couple of years old, but Rawanchaikul has a long established reputation, having been one of the first to attend the Faculty of Fine Arts program at Chiang Mai University under the tutelage of the late, great sculptor and installation artist Montien Boonma.

“What we were doing at university back in the early ’90s was totally new for Thailand,” recalls Rawanchaikul, an artist of Punjabi-Indian descent known for playful works that explore issues of cultural identity. “Far away from Bangkok, we didn’t have a fixed structure or style, and Montien Boonma showed us a new path. He had just spent time in Paris on a scholarship, and brought back with him ideas about how we could create new Thai art and use local materials in a contemporary way.”

Chiang Mai has a long, storied history of traditional craftsmanship; the onetime capital of northern Thailand’s Lanna Kingdom, its artisans are famed for their abilities in wood, pottery, paper, and jewelry. But there had been no contemporary art to speak of before the arrival of Bangkok-born Boonma in 1988. “As a group of ambitious students, we launched an experimental project called the Chiang Mai Social Installation, in which we treated the entire city as an exhibition space,” Rawanchaikul tells me. In its first year, the alternative festival—which incorporated art installations, performances, talks, and participatory events—was held at temples, where the monks proved supportive. Later editions spread to shopping malls, streets, and other public spaces. “We saw it as the best way to

reach the most people.”

Fast-forward 20 years, and Chiang Mai is now home to a shiny new contemporary art museum that is drawing crowds of its own. Instantly recognizable thanks to its shimmering facade of mirrored tiles—similar to those that adorn the city’s temples—MAIIAM is a family-owned venue driven by well-known Thai art collector Eric Bunnag Booth. “We’d been collecting modern art for more than 25 years,” he tells me, “but it was mostly just sitting in storage.” The family had also been considering how to honor Booth’s great-grand-aunt Chao Chom Iam, who had been royal consort to the modernizing King Rama V. (The museum’s moniker incorporates her name while also playing on the Thai phrase *mai iam*, or “brand new.”)

“We explored a few possible projects, such as running a school or hospital, but it’s not something we knew how to do,” Booth says. “So we had the idea of opening a museum to showcase our art collection, which would be the first in the country.”

A 3,000-square-meter former warehouse space in the Sankamphaeng crafts district, the MAIIAM houses the family’s permanent collection on its upper level and hosts twice-yearly exhibitions on the ground floor. Currently on show is “Patani Semasa,” which spotlights thoughtful pieces from artists in Thailand’s Muslim-majority deep south.

“Chiang Mai really was the most optimal place [for the family] to open an art museum,” says MAIIAM curator Joyce Chareeprasit,



Funky boutique hotel Artel Nimman sports an upcycle design by Torlarp Larparoensook. Opposite: MAIIAM curator Joyce Chareeprasit.





Clockwise from above: Outside Gallery Seescape; Woo Café & Art Gallery; Marisa Marchitelli. Opposite: Torlarp Larjaroensook with a recent edition of his *Besto Boy and Veena Girl* series.



who has a master's degree in curating and collection from University of the Arts London. "The people here appreciate art, and craftsmanship is part of the fabric of life." Emerging artists still struggle, she concedes, but social media is making it easier for them to find grants and residencies elsewhere in Asia. "It's an exciting time."

Marisa Marchitelli concurs. A Thailand-born video producer and event organizer, she has been a familiar face on the Chiang Mai art scene since she returned to the city from a stint in New York in 2010. "In the short time I've been back here the contemporary art scene has changed tremendously." We're sitting in a chic café in the Nimmanhaemin area, which has blossomed over the last decade into the city's trendiest neighborhood. "It wasn't that long ago that half of this area was still paddy fields, seriously!" she adds. That bucolic countryside imagery may be why many of Thailand's top artists—a growing list that includes Kamin Lertchaiprasert, Mit Jai Inn, and Rirkrit Tiravanija—choose to live here.

"Chiang Mai has long been a base for accomplished Thai artists, but they weren't able to show their work here. The arrival of MAI-IAM has changed the scene completely," Marchitelli continues. "Eric Booth and Disaphol Chansiri with his private DC Collection have been very supportive of young Thai artists, which is essential as the country's art market is so limited. Through their art spaces, they're

bringing international attention to Chiang Mai." She adds that the local branch of the TCDC (Thailand Creative & Design Center) is helping to pair artists with businesses, and events like the annual Nimmanhaemin Art and Design Promenade fair, which showcases inventive homemade fashion and crafts, are doing much to further the scene. Nor does it hurt to have a large creative student population close by.

"I was born on a houseboat," starts Torlarp Larjaroensook, the artist-owner behind Gallery Seescape in the Nimman university district. Raised on the waterways of Ayutthaya, the former capital of an ancient Thai kingdom, his parents made a living fishing and harvesting riverweeds, which they sold in the local markets. They were also carpenters, a skill they passed onto their young son. "It was a fun childhood," he says. "We didn't have much but I got to play in the river, and learned how to make my own toys—people called me a 'little inventor.'" His interest in art led him to study at the College of Fine Arts in Bangkok. "The school was right next to the Chao Phraya, and I lived in a small village by the water next to a local market. I felt right at home."

Drawn by the cheaper cost of living, after graduation he moved to Chiang Mai where he sustained himself with odd jobs, making props for movies, dioramas for the city's museums, and small craft items to sell to tourists at the night market. And he continued to develop his art, melding traditional oil paintings with functioning objects such as speakers you could connect to your iPod. Today, one of his most recognizable creations is a figurative series called *Besto Boy and Veena Girl*, which takes its name from the run-of-the-mill Besto brand light switch. Larjaroensook explains, "Whenever I saw these switches on lamp cables, I kept seeing a face. So I decided that the head deserved a body." The result is molded-plastic male and female forms with Besto switches for heads and working light bulbs standing in for genitalia and breasts.

"The objects I use are cheap and unfashionable," says Larjaroensook, "but the quality is good." He gestures around the restaurant at Gallery Seescape, which he opened in 2008, pointing out the broken floor tiles that cover the tabletops, the Grecian-style balcony columns that hold up the tables, and the old metal fences that serve as seats. "They might not be beautiful at this time, but they once were. In fact, every object can be beautiful, and it doesn't have to be expensive to look rich. Artists can help with this, using aesthetics to make new patterns, and close the gap between the aspirations and ideals of normal and upper-class people."

Nevertheless, over 10 years, 80 exhibitions and events, and commercial projects such as his upcycle design for an artsy dorm turned boutique hotel called Artel Nimman, he has still struggled to make ends meet. "I almost quit being an artist three times. I had no money and asked myself 'Why? For what?' But now I see more people appreciating art, and a new generation of artists connecting. Think



## THE CHIANG MAI ART MAP NOT ONLY PROVIDES DETAILS ON THE CITY'S GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS, BUT ALSO LISTS ART-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS, BARS, AND CAFÉS

of art in Chiang Mai like a seed: When you plant a tree, you must choose a good location. If you have a proper environment the tree will grow strong and tall and thrive. We have all that, but we still need support to grow.”

Providing such support is the *raison d'être* for the Chiang Mai Art Conversation (CAC), an artist-led collective that runs an online artists' database and produces the annual Chiang Mai Art Map. The first publication of its kind, the map not only provides details on the city's galleries and museums, but also lists art-friendly bars, restaurants, and cafés such as Woo, a beautiful multi-purpose lifestyle venue near the Ping River that promotes local talents in its upstairs exhibition space.

“It's not easy for young artists to make their mark,” says artist Sutthirat “Som” Supaparinya, one of the CAC's co-founders. “We were thinking, what can we do to make art more visible in this city? Maybe organize an arts festival? But then we thought that wouldn't be helpful long-term—it'd just pop up and be gone. That's when we hit upon setting up a database.”

After starting off with a Facebook page, the group followed every local artist they could find online, then shared information on their events, grants, residencies, news, and art competitions, rapidly becoming the hub for the city's creative community. “Then we wanted to set up an interactive website where artists could share details of their work. Everyone was excited and wanted to make it happen—



until we asked for money,” Supaparinya laughs. Still, they finally managed to launch the website in 2013, followed by the first printed edition of the Chiang Mai Art Map two years later.

“We've found that the map has really helped. Places that only a few people knew about have now become public knowledge. I've seen more than a few people walking from gallery to gallery with the map in their hand.” It also made the CAC a logical partner when the Japan Foundation Asia Center, a cultural promotional arm of the Japanese government, was looking to establish a presence in Chiang Mai. That in turn led to the opening of the Asian Culture Station on a small alleyway off Nimmanhaemin Road. With sister branches in Yangon and Ho Chi Minh City, the minimalist space serves as co-working office, design library, and artist resource center.

As Larpjaroensook told me, if you have a proper environment a tree will grow strong and tall and thrive. It feels very much that Chiang Mai's art scene has reached this point. All the ingredients are there—the seed, the nourishment, the support. Now, it has only one way to go: up. ●

Right: Inside Navin Rawanchaikul's StudiOK. Below: Chiang Mai Art Conversation co-founder Sutthirat “Som” Supaparinya at the Asian Culture Station. Opposite: Navin Rawanchaikul at his gallery.



### THE DETAILS

#### Where to Stay

##### Art Mai Gallery Hotel

Rooms designed by seven different Thai artists (albeit none from Chiang Mai) make this downtown bolthole stand out. 21 Soi 3, Nimmanhaemin Rd.; 66-53/894-888; artmaigalleryhotel.com; doubles from US\$110.

##### X2 Chiang Mai Riverside Resort

The newest property in town sits on the banks of the Ping River, with just 30 suites and a rooftop pool flanked by dramatic cabanas. 369/1 Charoenraj Rd.; 66-53/931-999; x2resorts.com; doubles from US\$205.

#### Address Book

**Asian Culture Station**  
28/11 Nimmanhaemin Rd.; 66-53/222-324; asianculturestation.cac-art.info.

**DC Collection**  
66/89-855-0868 (by appointment only).

**Gallery Seescape**  
22/1 Nimmanhaemin Rd.; 66/93-831-9394; galleryseescape.co.

**MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum**  
Sankamphaeng; 66/81-386-6899; maiiam.com.

**StudiOK**  
66/81-111-9621; fb.com/navinproduction (by appointment only).

**Woo Café & Art Gallery**  
80 Charoenrat Rd.; 66/52-003-717; woochiangmai.com.