

# THAI ART SCENE'S RENAISSANCE MOMENT

PRIVATE COLLECTORS ARE BUILDING GIANT SHOWCASES ACROSS THE LAND, DRAWING THE GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT TO A BOOM IN LOCAL CONTEMPORARY ART

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THAILAND IS undergoing a mini renaissance in the arts with at least five new private museums set to open in the next two years.



At least two of them harbour international ambition. Icon Siam Museum will forever change the landscape of the Chao Phraya River while TCC Group's One Bangkok will build an epic cultural complex into its \$3.5-billion commercial development on the site of the old Suan Lum Night Bazaar.

The others are stand-alone contemporary art museums with collections of not just Thai but also well-known international artists.

"I'm following these developments with much interest. A museum has multiple roles in the art system: collection, exhibition, education. Museums preserve important things, they show them to people, and they generate knowledge about them," said David Teh, an expert in Thai contemporary art at the National University of Singapore. Private museums may not be for everyone but they're an important part of the landscape – especially in places where public institutions are weak, he added.

The new wave of museums is still very much driven by individuals and their pas-

sions, as in the old days. Visit the headquarters of Siam Commercial Bank, Tisco Pcl or Asia Plus Securities and you see colourful evidence that chief executives are often passionate contemporary art collectors.

But the most complete collection in scale and renown is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, owned by telecom tycoon Boonchai Bencharongkul.

The Bt800-million showcase was the Kingdom's first international-standard museum when it opened in 2012. The 20,000square-metre museum sits isolated on Vibhavadi Road displaying over 400 modern artworks from Boonchai's personal collection, including masterpieces by the late Thawan Duchanee and national artists Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijinthanarn.

Next year will bring two more "extrovert" museums to the capital, with international artists taking centre stage.

In mid-2019, Petch Osathanugrah, president of Bangkok University, plans to unveil the multimillion-baht Sansab Museum of Contemporary Art on Ramkamhaeng Road, which is also accessible by boat via the San Saep Canal, for which the museum is named.

Petch is picking up the baton from his late father Surat Osathanugrah, one of Thailand's leading private art collectors.

The 10,000sqm ultra-modern Sansab building is designed by Pitupong Chaowakul of Supermachine. It comes with a 2,500sqm rooftop devoted to exhibiting art.

Alongside over 400 artworks from Petch's personal collection will be pieces by international artists including Damien Hirst, Frank Stella, Francesco Clemente and local heavyweights like the late Montien Boonma, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Udomsak Krisanamis, Arin Rungjang and the emerging Kawita Vatanajyankur.

The other significant undertaking is Icon Siam, the Bt50-billion mixed-use residential and commercial complex on the Chao Phraya River. It will boast an 8,000sqm "world-class" private museum space, displaying artworks from Thailand and around the globe. A few years further down the road, One Bangkok will take off on Rama IV Road, incorporating a cultural complex with music hall and other spaces for art in its vision of a green and cultured highrise neighbourhood in the city's heart.

Art and cultural facilities at Icon Siam and One Bangkok emulate the undertakings at Mori Center I Rippongi District of Tokyo and those around New York's Central Park. "They provide an oasis for the concrete jungle of a modern city," said Apinan Poshyananda, former Culture Ministry permanent secretary, now assisting One Bangkok with its cultural and art plans.

Apinan is also spearheading Bangkok's first city-wide "Biennale" next year. The four months of art activities promise to be "sensational".

The buzz of Bangkok's contemporary art scene has been growing for some time, thanks to the improving economy. The capital is home to almost 100 commercial galleries, alternative spaces, artists' studios and, of course, the cityowned Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

Not to be outdone, the northern city of Chiang Mai is busy cementing its status as a

cultural hub. The city and its northerly neighbour Chiang Rai are already home to many leading Thai contemporary artists.

Chiang Mai boasts two private art museums plus artist-studios that have popped up in their dozens around town, while next year will see another two private collections opened to the public.

The talk of the town currently is the privately owned Mia Iam Contemporary Art Museum, with collections featuring some of the country's biggest names.

Located in San Khampang, 15 minutes' drive from the city and the airport, Mia Iam opened last year and has quickly become a landmark and hot tourist destination.

Eric Bunnag Booth and his stepfather Jean Michel Beurdeley oversee the 3,000-sqm showcase of more than 600 works that they and Eric's late mother Patsri Bunnag collected over the past 25 years.

"The idea is to have a permanent collection of Thai art on display at all times," Eric, who also runs the Jim Thompson business, said.

"Mai Iam means 'brand new'," said Eric, "and in our case it refers to Chiang Mai – 'New City' – and to my great-grandmother's aunt, Chao Chom Iam, to whom the museum is dedicated. The dialogue between old and new interest us very much and you encounter it all the time in Chiang Mai."

"In no way does our collection represent the whole history of Thai contemporary art, but rather our own point of view, based on our solely emotional response to the works. A work of art exists as a result of the artist's creativity, but also in the emotional response it produces in the viewer," he said.

Mia Iam is also using its international spotlight to illuminate works by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Pinaree Sanpitak, Vasan Sithiket, Chatchai Puipia, Rirkrit, Udomsak and the late Montien.

Gridthiya Gaweewong of the Jim Thompson Art Centre, lauds the museum's founders for choosing Sam Kamphaeng district as the location.

"San Kamphaeng has always been and always will be one of the most important areas for the art-and-crafts tradition of the North. I hope the Mai Iam will become fully integrated with this cultural landscape and bring more exciting creativity and innovation to the community," she said at its opening.

The museum boasts 1,300 square metres of display space, a 35-seat cinema, a workshop for educational programmes, a library, a 60-seat restaurant and, of course, a gift shop.

The original abandoned warehouse has been remodelled by designers allzone into an elegant, gleaming box for contemporary treasures, finished with glittering tiles. The mirror mosaic, found in a Lanna temple, reflects local tradition integrated cleverly with ultra-modern ambition.

Another well-known collector, Disapol Chansiri, is upgrading his Chiang Mai Collection House to a museum to house works by leading local and international contemporary artists.

His trove of works by Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Yoshitomo Nara, Rirkrit, Chatchai and Montien will soon be augmented by a sculpture garden and studio complete with artist-in-residence.

“Right now we’re searching for architects experienced in transforming classical architecture into a modern museum,” Disapol said, adding that the first phase will open next year.

At the same time, a group of northern creatives led by Pornchai Jaima is busy raising funds to construct a new Chiang Mai Art Museum in Mae Oum district, to be run by the artists themselves.

After the big-bang opening of Mai Iam, Eric is now heading down south to Pattani to set up an art community with lecturers and young artists.

In Songkla, artists Klaomard Yipinsoi and Noppadol Khaosamang plan to reopen their space which already houses paintings and sculptures by the late Misiem Yipintsoi and other artists.

The mushrooming of private museums and galleries is much welcomed after a decade of dormancy.

“The boom of private museums and newface collectors is also rousing the local art market. As they plan their museums, they are buying more artwork and building their collections,” said Jirath Rattana Wongjiraikul, director of Gallery Ver.

Among the galleries profiting are Numthong, Ver, H Gallery, Nova Contemporary, 100 Tonson, Number 1 and Seescape and Lyla in Chiang Mai, with knock on benefits for the artists they represent.

“More people are visiting the gallery, both art enthusiasts and potential buyers. There are also more galleries bringing interesting international artists to Bangkok, rejuvenating the scene. It’s important to educate and attract young people to the arts,” said Nova Contemporary gallery’s director Sutima Sucharitakul.

Although the market is growing, commercial galleries alone can’t turn Thailand into an Asian contemporary art hub to match the likes of Hong Kong.

“This is a big challenge when we don’t have full support from the government. I believe it has to be driven by the private sector. The government should lower the tax and duties on buying art as it can be a very useful form of investment. Also we could establish Thailand on the international art map by hosting a biennale. I want to support our artists as much as possible, and if there are international buyers our domestic market will be much stronger,” said Sutima.

Private museum investors are also being urged to focus on exhibition design and education.

Somporn Rodboon, a Chiang Mai-based art historian and veteran curator, hopes to see greater engagement with the public.

“It’s good to see private figures opening their museums to the public. Mai Iam, for instance, has become a new landmark for the city. It also gives art students the chance to see and study rare collections. By prioritising its role to collect, preserve and educate, I

hope to see the museum engage its audience, especially children, and form a link with society,” she said.

In Southeast Asia, private institutions generally do better than government facilities, so the whole arts community tends to welcome them. But the nature of their public role is also up for public debate. “We have to treat them as quasi-public, until government steps up and does its share of the work,” said Singapore-based Australian-Thai Teh, author of the new book “Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary”.

“The best museums, public or private, are the ones that invest in research and hire the best curators. Unfortunately this role is not taken seriously in Thailand, which is why the overall standard of exhibition-making is poor. If the institutions don’t lift their game and start training researchers and curators, the museums will just be trendy studio backdrops, wallpaper for the Instagram army. And contemporary art will just be click-bait.”

Teh hopes private museums can boost contemporary art in Thailand.

“I think Thailand can improve in all of these departments. Collections will gradually improve. But education is the biggest challenge – educating artists and curators, educating the public too – and it all starts with art history. Thailand’s art schools have continued to attract and train capable artists, but they get a rude shock when they go abroad and realise that their peers – fellow students or artists – are all engaged with art history. Most ‘curators’ in Thailand are really just managers or producers. Their work is important, but they can’t be expected to guide a good collection or to make influential shows. You can’t do those things without knowing about art’s histories. Government has a poor track record on these things, so let’s hope the private collectors will lead the way!”