

# NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

How Chiang Mai became home to one of Asia's most thriving contemporary art communities. By **Monruedee Jansuttipan**



VICHIT GALLERY & STUDIO



For a city dubbed the country's art capital, Chiang Mai has long lacked galleries befitting its reputation. That is about to change, thanks to places like **Mai Iam**. Looking at it from the outside, you'd never guess that the non-descript warehouse in Sankhampaeng district, a 30-minute drive east from Chiang Mai center, is about to be transformed into the biggest contemporary art museum in the North; a space which aims to foster a new generation of talented artists in what has become one of the most thriving modern art scenes in all of Asia.

Mai Iam is only one of a number of ventures cultivating a legacy of progressive creativity in the ancient Lanna Kingdom. On the other side of town, amid a landscape of vast rice fields in San Pa Tong, you'll also discover a small group of wooden houses. These are the eco-artist residences of Rirkrit Tiravanija, the award-winning Thai artist and Noughties poster child for the Relational Aesthetics movement; and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, whose work has been exhibited at the Guugenheim New York and the Venice Biennale.

Together, they formed **The Land Foundation** as an open space for agriculture as well as a residence for artists from around the world who want to recede from places they know to live among farming communities. The latest addition, designed by Frankfurt-based architects Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller, successfully raised funds of more than 81,000 euros through Kickstarter last year—nearly double the original 45,000 euros pledge goal.

Rirkrit isn't the only internationally acclaimed artist to come out of Chiang Mai. Cannes film festival-winning artist-director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, filmmaker and videographer Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Silapathorn Award-winning artist Navin Rawanchaikul and pioneering Thai contemporary artist Mit Jai Inn all choose to make the area the base of their work.

Chiang Mai's flourishing contemporary art scene did not arise by accident. It can be traced back more than two decades to when, in 1992, a group of young artists including Mit Jai Inn created the **Chiang Mai Social Installation Project (CMSI)**. Their initiative was a revolt against traditional methods of displaying art pieces in galleries, instead taking their work into open spaces in an effort to create deeper connections with society.

"We tried to create a new attitude, character and vision toward both life and society," says the Chiang Mai-born artist. "We aimed to show that artists aren't the center of the arts anymore. There was no integration between art and society back then. We just felt the urge to change the eulogizing of beauty."



The outcome was artwork installed across the city, from toilet walls to cemeteries to markets, creating a chain reaction among young artists inspired by their moves. One of those people was Torlarp Larpjaroensook, a passionate art student from Ayutthaya who moved to study at Chiang Mai University and hasn't left since. He opened **Gallery Seescape** as a permanent experimental art space, which he ran for seven years before establishing **Hern Gallery**, another contemporary art space for local and international artists.

"If artists are seeds, then Chiang Mai provides the perfect soil and climate for them to grow," he says. "Chiang Mai allows us to live without the pressures of a big city. It's also filled with like-minded people who are willing to nurture artists. I have many friends from different professions who all love art no matter what they do."

Jim Thompson's international marketing director, Eric Booth, an avid Thai contemporary art collector and the owner of Mai Iam, also emphasizes how the culture of Chiang Mai is perfect for cultivating an art scene with integrity.

"Chiang Mai's art scene has grown quickly in recent years but it's not driven by money like in Singapore, where the government throws hundreds of millions of dollars at collecting Southeast Asian art," explains Booth. "That's a great idea, but here, it's more organic. People create it by themselves. No one got money from the government to invest and say, 'Let's turn Chiang Mai into a cultural

city.' No. All this has happened because of artists, gallery owners, collectors and other people who live here."

Booth, who is funding Mai Iam himself, also points out that to make Chiang Mai's reputation for the arts stronger, the city needs to communicate with collectors who are interested in purchasing works.

Chiang Mai-based international contemporary artist Sutthirat Supaparinya is one of a number of people trying to show the caliber of Chiang Mai art to a wider audience. She and her friends have co-founded **Chiang Mai Art Conversation (CAC)**, which just released the first-ever Chiang Mai Art Map, a well-curated list of the most interesting galleries in town; places like **Vichit Studio** in the Sankhampaeng district, **Lyla Gallery** on Thapae Road, **C.A.P Studio (Chiang Mai Art On Paper)** in the Nimmanhaemin area, **Documentary Arts Asia (DAA)** and **DC Collection** in the old town, and the unfinished factory-like structure of **Thapae East**, the city's latest space dedicated to all form of arts—installation, music, poetry.

"We feel that other leading art cities aren't just about how many artists are living there, but how that culture is synchronized with other creative industries," she explains. "Chiang Mai has a lot of art events but has never been serious about archiving before, so now we are beginning to monitor every art event and map them out so that people can follow what's happening easily through our website and Facebook." Sutthirat's efforts resulted in Chiang Mai's first ever Galleries Night Chiang Mai, held in January.

## ESSENTIALS

### Vichit Gallery

17/2 Moo 13, Sankampang,  
053-392-733.  
vichitstudio.com

### Chiang Mai Art Conversation (CAC)

www.cac-art.info

### The Land Foundation

48 Moo 1, Yothathikan Rd.,  
Sanpatong, 083-941-9033.  
www.thelandfoundation.org

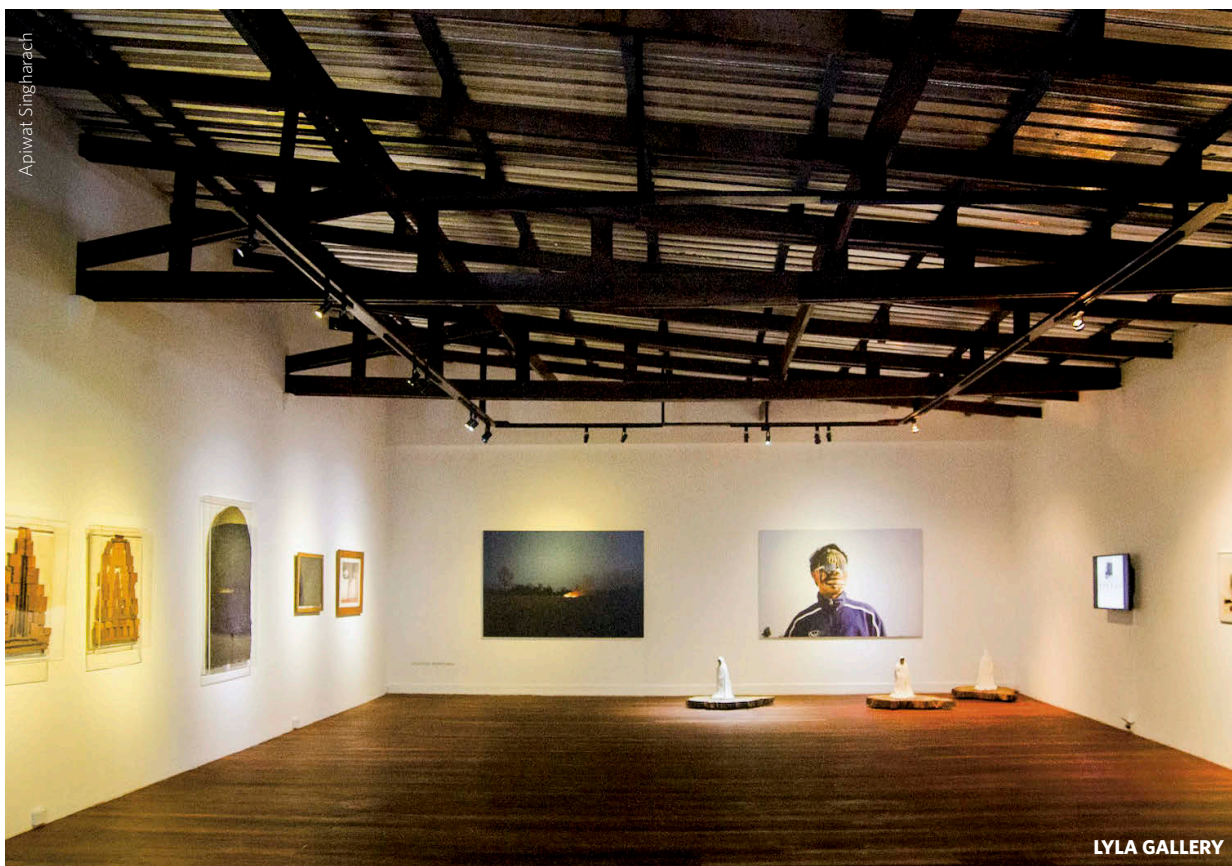
### Gallery Seescape

22/1 Nimmanhemini Soi 17,  
093-831-9394.  
www.fb.com/galleryseescape

### Hern Gallery

1/3 Padad Rd., Chang Klan,  
088-268-3893.  
www.fb.com/herngallery





## ESSENTIALS

**Lyla Gallery**  
2nd Floor, 234 Thapae Rd.,  
Chang Moi, 084-3881488.  
[www.lylagallery.com](http://www.lylagallery.com)

**C.A.P Studio (Chiang Mai Art On Paper)**  
368/13 Nimmanhemini Soi 17,  
Suthep, 087-810-8860.  
[www.chiangmaiartonpaper.com](http://www.chiangmaiartonpaper.com)

**Documentary Arts Asia (DAA)**  
97/3 1 4 Soi 4 (Khai Muk) off  
Hang Dong Rd., 088-138-7470.  
[www.doc-arts.asia](http://www.doc-arts.asia)

**DC Collection**  
104 Maneenopparat Rd.,  
089-855-0868.

**Thapae East**  
88 Thapae Rd. Soi 3,  
091-853- 4101.  
[www.fb.com/ThapaeEast](http://www.fb.com/ThapaeEast)

**H Gallery**  
85 Moo 10, Mae Ram,  
085-021-5508.  
[www.hgallerybkk.com](http://www.hgallerybkk.com)

She also points out that the contemporary art circle is gaining more momentum. As well as Mai Iam, there will be at least three more major contemporary art spaces opening in the Northern city within the next five years. All are driven by the private sector and led by artists and collectors.

In the eyes of an outsider like Irish-born Brian Curtin, the curator of H Gallery in Bangkok and the by-appointment-only H Gallery Chiang Mai, both of which deal in the top end of contemporary Southeast Asian art, Chiang Mai has a character and background that's entirely unique.

"The art scene in Chiang Mai has a sturdy, coherent history of collaborative and experimental work among artists," says Curtin. "Because Chiang Mai has the sensibility of a 'second city,' it is independent-minded and doesn't judge itself by foreign standards."

Torlarp also emphasizes the part Chiang Mai's history plays in shaping contemporary artists, thanks to a 700-year cultural heritage of Lanna craftsmanship: "Native arts are always being picked up, deconstructed and refurbished with new cultures in their own way. It's what makes art unique in every part of the world."

But no matter how many private backers build galleries or whether international collectors gain an eye for Thai contemporary art, Chiang Mai's art scene, say the people who know it best, will always be driven by the artists who choose to make the city their home.

As Mit Jai Inn says, "I just have to look at the quality of new young artists and their drive to know that the art scene in Chiang Mai definitely has a lot more space to grow."