

ARTS

Thai artists bring creativity to fight against pollution

Northern Thailand's 'Art for Air 2' extravaganza paints sobering picture of life without clean air



Artist and “Art for Air” founder Kamin Lertchaiprasert speaks at the “Air That We Breathe” talk organized by Studio 88 Artist Residency and Dream Space Gallery on March 12. (Courtesy of Studio 88 Artist Residency)

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CHIANG MAI, Thailand -- When it comes to air pollution in the north of Thailand, there are plenty of canaries in the proverbial coal mine.

Red flags indicating the seriousness of this perennial problem -- which flares up during the increasingly unpredictable open burning season -- include a rising incidence of pulmonary cancers in the young and fit. Residents and visitors to the city known as the "Rose of the North" can also point to the daily evidence of their own senses: directly felt or observable phenomena such as haze-shrouded buildings, itchy eyes and the dense grey dome of particulate matter that engulfs inbound planes when they begin to descend.

One Saturday in mid-March, however -- a day when Chiang Mai topped the worldwide city air pollution rankings published by the Swiss technology company IQAir -- yet another warning signal could be found in the city's many galleries and art spaces: Only during a crisis could its diverse art community put on such a united front.

At Dream Space Gallery, I found walls covered in agitprop graffiti and cartoonish depictions of mythical figures, all confronting the air pollution issue with a mixture of hostility and humor. Then I made my way to a group exhibition entitled "Ego-nomic: Life in a Plastosphere." Here, I found a series of conceptual installations and research-led forays into damaged ecosystems -- and came away with a more sober, holistic sense of an issue bound up with wider sociopolitical and environmental themes, from greenwashing to land ownership and river pollution.

Then, at Gallery Seescape, I encountered anger and frustration directed at myopic policymakers as well as art.

"We want this problem to be heard louder and louder, and in every way possible," said Som Supaparinya, an artist who documents social and ecological changes across rural Southeast Asia. "We are trying to make the government not just listen but do something."



Top: On display at "Art for Air 2" exhibition "Panic World," Arnont Nongyao's sound installation "Weirdo -- The Last Music"

Box" is "a reminder of the messages that humans must hear before it's too late." (Photo by Karin Mongkonphan)
Bottom: Dream Space Gallery's exhibition "Dream Law" -- a reference to the ongoing civil-society campaign for clean air legislation -- included graffiti walls where the public could use spray cans to vent their anger on the issue. (Photo by Chayakorn Sottikul).

All this activity falls under the broad banner of "Art for Air 2," an awareness-raising air pollution art extravaganza that runs until October. Staged in 2021, the first edition was a carefully curated event staged mostly in civic spaces, including the city's arts and cultural center and public square. Funds raised at an auction by the Breathe Council -- a civil-society clean air pressure group -- were used to commission works by artists both established and emerging.

Standouts among the hundreds of artworks included a sculpture of a palm civet that, after being displaced by forest fires, became a local cause celebre. The instigator of "Art for Air," Chiang Mai-based conceptual artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert, contributed a life-size sculpture of a charred and masked Greta Thunberg holding up a sign reading: "Our house is on fire."

Edition two, in contrast, is a more sporadic, decentralized affair that is putting the onus on gallerists. With funds limited, organizers have turned "Art for Air" into an open-access platform to which art venues can peg environment-themed exhibitions. Several galleries in Bangkok have stepped up, but uptake has been greatest in Chiang Mai, where 16 exhibitions of various types and durations recently opened.



Top: Chiang Mai artist Som Supaparinya speaks at Gallery Seescape during an “Art for Air 2” tour. (Photo by Chayakorn

Sottikul). Bottom: For the inaugural “Art for Air” in 2021, founder Kamin contributed “We breathe in the same air,” a public sculpture combining the carved trunk of a salvaged jackfruit tree with a life-size bronze cast of Swedish environmental activist-icon Greta Thunberg. (Photo courtesy of Art for Air)

Here the artist's contributions are nothing if not eclectic -- veering from striking sculptures cobbled together out of found materials to understated multimedia projects that reward slow viewing, and from high-tech renderings of smoldering landscapes to charcoal sketches of damaged lungs -- but perhaps not as revelatory or transformative as those familiar with, or directly affected by, the topic may hope to find.

In recent years, artists around the world have begun using the tools of science and technology to give them a seerlike capacity to reveal truths and threats concerning environmental and social justice, mankind's hubris and the looming yet avoidable death spiral of the Anthropocene (an emerging term for the geological era defined by human impacts).

In 2021, for example, Forensic Architecture -- a U.K.-based research group whose investigations alongside charities and civil society institutions are shown in art galleries as well as courtrooms -- probed allegations that the Indonesian palm oil conglomerate Korindo was involved in illegal forest fires in Indonesia's Papua province.

Korindo denies the allegations, but evidence recently exhibited at Stockholm's Stiftelsen Tensta Konsthall contemporary art center, alongside other investigations, led to the company being stripped of its responsible forest management certification by the Forest Stewardship Council, an international nongovernmental organization that promotes better management of the world's forests.

No such shining example of what has been dubbed "investigative aesthetics" is showcased here, however, which is a shame. The practices of, say, Thai agribusinesses -- a commonly cited culprit in the haze blame-game on account of their contracts with small-scale farmers -- surely warrant an investigation marshaling satellite imagery, heat maps and other forms of technology to uncover the true extent of their culpability.





Top: A series of 30 charcoal drawings by Chatchawan Tanaisri focused on the health effects of inhaled particulate matter on the human body. (Courtesy of Jing Jai Gallery). Bottom: Ruangsak Anuwatwimon's multimedia contribution to Jing Jai Gallery's exhibition "Ego-nomic: Life in a Plasticsphere" is a nature-centered condition report on the pollution afflicting Mae Kha canal, one of Chiang Mai's most important waterways. (Photo by Max Crosbie-Jones).

What "Art for Air 2" does offer is fresh perspectives and intriguing vantage points, a glut of artworks that offer a piquant kind of collective catharsis and frame the issue in particular, rather than abstract, terms -- sometimes with anarchic humor, sometimes with irony-tinged beauty, sometimes with applied science.

"Home Stay," a circular stencil painting by artist-activist Ubatsat, for example, is a representation of how temperatures have changed over the past 300 years: a color gradient chart serving, first and foremost, as a warning sign. But it is also one of several artworks alluding to the "datafication" of air and the environment: an aestheticization of the app data, the color-coded charts and maps, that inform Chiang Mai residents' daily harm-reduction behavior (or lack of it) and their grasp of the wider climate crisis.

Som's exhibition, "Sweet Corn Bitter Air," pairs documentary photos -- images of cornfield waste and aerial shots of Chiang Mai at night -- with an "imaginary light theater." Inside this interactive installation, hard corn kernels layered across the floor crunch underfoot, while head torches dangling from the ceiling can be used to light patterns of reflective colored dots on the walls.

According to Som, these yellow, orange and white dots are a map of star constellations viewable from Chiang Mai and the city's streetlights on March 10. She wants viewers to leave thinking about how the poor visibility caused by air pollution may be correlated with Thailand's surge in corn farming.





Top: Som Supaparinya's interactive exhibition "Sweet Corn, Bitter Air" includes an "imaginary light theater" that replicates Chiang Mai's streetlights and night sky on March 10. (Photo by Karin Mongkonphan) Bottom: Tawatchai Puntusawasdi's "Blurred," left, is a tongue-in-cheek visual acuity test, while Ubatsat's "Home stay," right, is a simple warning sign derived from long-range climate data. (Photo by Karin Mongkonphan)

There is even outsider art that approaches the subject tangentially. At Pai-Fah, a ramshackle noodle shop, the owner has created a garden of quirky animal sculptures made from rubbish hand-picked from Thai beaches -- waste that, if it doesn't wash away into the ocean, is often buried or burned.

Cumulatively, such works build a tangible, nuanced picture of air pollution, not as a monolithic phenomenon of incomprehensible proportions, but as a lived issue that acutely intersects with and impacts the Thai context -- its ecosystems, economies and non-human, as well as human, inhabitants.

That said, Kamin hopes the event gives people a universal appreciation of the issue, too. "We cannot just solve the problem by saying this is my river. This is my Chiang Mai pollution. No. You cannot think that way," he told Nikkei Asia in an interview. "You have to think in terms of oneness."

His 30-year art career has been deeply informed by Eastern mysticism and Buddhism, and his take on -- and contributions to -- "Art for Air 2" are no different. In his video work at Jing Jai Gallery, a cartoon avatar of an elderly Thunberg says that a greater "meta-awareness" of our "inherent compassion" could guide Thailand -- and humanity at large -- toward a solution to the climate crisis.





Top: Pai-Fah noodle shop owner Charoensuk Peungkasemsomboon creates animal-shaped sculptures and wacky dioramas out of salvaged beach litter in his spare time. (Photo by Max Crosbie-Jones). Bottom: An image from Theerapat Pawaprom's series "Replacement of Clouds." The amateur artist -- a noodle shop worker by profession -- has contributed two sets of photo montages that vividly portray the fraught relationship between people's livelihoods and the ongoing air pollution problem. (Courtesy of Theerapat Pawaprom).

At an afternoon of talks on March 12, Kamin was no less Zen. "How can we artists inspire policymakers? I believe we can create a ripple effect among others. Spread *metta* (loving-kindness). Don't forget the power we're given. It is not just about the lines, strokes and beauty we create. Art can make us understand each other more," he said.

These are noble aims. Yet listening to other speakers at "Art for Air 2" I sensed that art has its work cut out -- that "oneness" and understanding remain elusive.

Krittai Tanasombatkul, a 27-year-old medical professor fighting late-stage lung cancer, spoke of the urgent need for greater public awareness of the potentially lethal health risks that invisible air pollution poses. "I'm living proof that running in an environment with dirty air can lead to cancer," he said via video link.

Echoing these calls was Panich Intra, a doctor from Thailand's Rajamangala University who runs the RUEE Lab Facebook page in an effort to make the statistics and science surrounding air pollution easier to access and understand.

"Just sitting here, you're breathing about 54 million PM2.5 particles per minute," he told the audience, referring to particulate matter measuring 2.5 micrometers or less, a key indicator of air quality.



A still from Kamin's video work "Bangkok is floating, no garbage," which uses a Socratic dialogue between cartoon avatars of an elderly Greta Thunberg and a talking baby elephant to present Buddhist notions of love, compassion and awareness as philosophical approaches for tackling air pollution and global warming. (Courtesy of Kamin Lertchaiprasert).

Prue Odochao, a vocal member of the Karen ethnic group, also spoke passionately about ideological clashes between the Thai state and the forest-dwelling communities that practice swidden farming (the cutting and burning of trees and other plants to create temporary agricultural plots) and claim to live in harmony with fire.

"We use fire to prevent bigger wildfires. We don't deforest," he said. In his opinion -- which stands in opposition to existing, but spottily enforced, government legislation -- hill tribes have been disrespected and unfairly villainized. "The authorities blame us but don't understand that the way we live doesn't destroy nature."

Artists, he added, "can use the beauty of art to send the message out that our customs are a sacred practice. That the law should understand." Listening to this, I sensed a lack of consensus in the room, let alone the wider movement: Many clean air activists argue that all types of burning, no matter how cultural or sacred it is considered, should stop.

In Bangkok, similarly thorny challenges face Thailand CAN, a "clean air network" lobbying for new, civil society-led legislation. According to one of its co-authors, lawyer Kanongnij Sribuaiaam, the network's proposed "Clean Air Act" -- which has been presented to the Thai parliament but not passed -- uses a bottom-up approach to address the structural and systemic root causes of air pollution that past drafts ignored.



Artists at Studio 88 Artist Residency in Chiang Mai's Doi Saket district present their works during the "Art for Air 2" tour on March 11. (Photo by Chayakorn Sottikul)

"It goes beyond just managing air pollution in the traditional way using the old platform," she said. The proposed legislation's legal innovations include enshrining a right to clean air, introducing principles of co-management between the state and the community, environmental and economic incentives, and measures to mitigate transboundary haze. "We intentionally designed it so that it offers more carrots than sticks."

The draft act has many domestic and international supporters -- from the organizers of "Art for Air" to David R. Boyd, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights and the environment -- but sticking points remain.

"We're battling not only the different perspectives among ourselves on the people side, but also the traditional thinking of the government and business-as-usual side," Kanongnij said. Apathy is another issue. "To overcome it, we're focused on civic education, on spreading knowledge through different styles, different platforms."

Weenarin Lulitanonda, co-founder of Thailand CAN, believes art is one of its most effective tools.

"Art has the ability to go beyond the knowledge of human beings in a way that can touch human emotions," she said. "Right now, there's a very big knowing-doing gap. People understand at a certain level that air pollution is bad for their health, but we think art can encourage them to take the next step and support long-term change."



British photographer Jacob Black explores the forest at Doi Saket as part of the residency program by Studio 88 Artist Residency. (Photo by Kavin Pramesiripaisan)

To get the message out, a video advocacy campaign on Bangkok's Skytrain mass rapid transport network and an exhibition at the Bangkok Art & Culture Center are planned.

"Art for Air 2," meanwhile, is doing its bit -- albeit with limited success. On the weekend of my visit, the organizer's urge to "make noise" and "be heard" was having only a modest effect. Chiang Mai's Sunday night market was heaving with locals and tourists, despite the air quality hitting IQAir's purple, or "very unhealthy," benchmark, yet footfall in the art venues earlier that day was low -- the result of poor publicity perhaps, or symptomatic of gallery-based art's niche appeal.

Whatever the reasons, I found myself wondering if "Art for Air 2" might have a bigger impact if it adopted a more combative, street-based approach.

Still, despite the muted public reception, those involved instinctively feel that it is important to do something. Take Sasiwimon Wongjarin, the founder-director of Studio 88, an artist residency community in nearby Doi Saket district.

"There are people who gave up and think things can't be changed," Sasiwimon said at the opening of "Un'Natural," an exhibition of her residents' air pollution-themed artworks, from experimental black and white photography of parched forests to a dramatic, tentlike installation made from Mylar blankets.

"But if you think that way, you've already lost," she added. "You're just a dead fish going with the flow. Better to be a live fish swimming upstream against the current."

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