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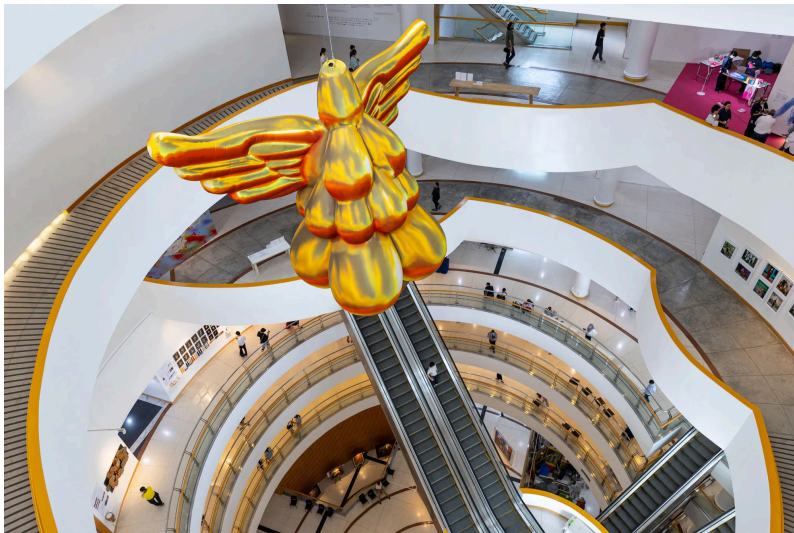
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TIGHTROPE WALKER

On the 4th Bangkok Art Biennale

By Hung Duong

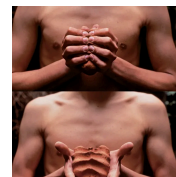
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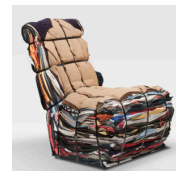
Choi Jeong Hwa, *Breathing*, 2018-2024, waterproof fabric, motor. Installation view, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC), 2024.

I ALIGHTED FROM THE BTS SKYTRAIN at exactly 3 PM. The contrast between the refrigerated air inside the train and the station’s cemented heat quickly evaporated my midday drowsiness and sharpened my awareness: Bangkok, with its cacophonous and seditious logic-in-chaos. As I descended into the rambunctious streets below, street vendors dotted the pavement, selling sliced watermelon, Isan sausages, and lunchboxes. Traces of the

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Bangkok is to walk the tightrope between these equally forceful impulses.

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The [Bangkok Art Biennale \(BAB\)](#) is a somewhat recent addition to the city's flourishing art scene. Scattered across eleven venues, the biennial split itself into two paths: While the River Route followed the Chao Phraya, with its ancient temples and national power seats like the National Museum, the City Route intersected with mazelike train lines to include contemporary art spaces and developments such as the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) and the mint One Bangkok complex. A cartography of Bangkok and its parallel manifestations, BAB and its seventy-six artists strove not only to showcase its breadth of artistic creativity and engagement, but also to paint a complex portrait of its home city as a melting pot for the old and new, the local and the foreign.

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unexpected traffic-induced delays, and more than 240 artworks, Bangkok seemed to capriciously dole out challenges instead of clues. Many times, I had to take a breather and adjust myself to the unique challenges of mental funambulism. Walk with the city, not against it. And onward I continued, feeling the invisible arteries of this city's artistic heart.



View of *Nurture Gaia*, 2024, QSNCC (Queen Sirikit National Convention Center), Bangkok. Foreground: Priyageetha Dia, *Spectre System*, 2024; Background: Mesh: *Prelude to Spectre System*, 2024. Photo: Arina Matvee.

Slowly, the veins became visible as themes emerged. Met with Bangkok's uncharted territories, the artists resorted to fantasy as a means to anchor their works. At Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC)—Thailand's first convention center, its architectural design inspired by the *chitlada* dress patterns favored by the Queen Mother, who modernized the path of Thai weaving craftsmanship—I meandered the endless corridors before burrowing into the equally expansive basement, where speculative video works wove stories that subverted and contemporized dominant historical discourses. Drawing from her ancestral lineage of South Asian indentured labor in colonial Malaya, Priyageetha Dia's mixed-media installation *Spectre System*, 2024, crafted a simulated gaming environment, where the protagonist was forced to navigate a plantation's haunting landscape—riddled with ghostly orbs and eerie murmurs—as they unearthed memories of racial exploitation and dispossession. Similarly, Lisa Reihana conjured an oceanic sci-fi realm in her video *Groundloop*, 2022, to celebrate a fantasy voyage



Pim Sudhikam, *A Conversation with a Potter* (detail), 2024, local clay (hand-built, pit-fired, unfired and 3D printed), PVC. Installation view, One Bangkok. Photo: Arina Matvee.

Fantasy in Bangkok is nurtured in its feminine psyche, despite its facade of patriarchal monuments and masculine high rises. BAB's title, "Nurture Gaia," positioned this feminine energy at the forefront of its artistic nexus. Gaia's earthy-elemental, generative power materialized through the works of Pim Sudhikam, with her pottery installation *A Conversation with a Potter*, 2024, which used clay excavated from underground during the construction of Bangkok subway projects at historical sites. Displaying her numerous pots alongside a skeleton made of PVC pipes (commonly used in underground sewage) at One Bangkok, a new development complex near the famous Lumpini Park, Sudhikham attempted a conversation not only with the site but also with Thai potters from bygone times.

Nonetheless, Gaia's association with the earthly realm also connected her with monsters and death. At the National Gallery, housed in the previous building of the Royal Thai Mint in the historical Phra Nakhon District, we witnessed a more sinister visualization of Gaia's divine femininity through Agnes Arellano's *Project Pleiades*, 2024, featuring cold-cast marble statues of goddesses across cultures. From the blue-skinned *Kali*, the Hindu goddess of destruction, to *Black Magdalene*, the disputed disciple of

Extending this trajectory, Dusit Ajaw's nightmarishly red painting series at BACC blended the various manifestations of Amamata, the first mother in Akha folklore, with her own internal demons that materialized through childhood trauma from the military invasion of her homeland in Myanmar.



Agnes Arellano, *Project Pleiades*, 2024, mixed media. Installation view, National Gallery, Bangkok. Photo: Preecha Pattaraumpornchai.

Not only rooted in mythologies, the feminine drive of BAB also found its expression through the figure of the daring flaneuse, who walks streets that are often hostile toward women while delivering commentaries about the world.

Artist and filmmaker Som Supaparinya transformed a room in the National Gallery into a cinematic space for *The Rivers They Don't See*, 2024, detailing her laborious journey on rivers that run from the Thailand-Myanmar border down to the Gulf of Thailand, to capture the micro-narratives of fishermen whose livelihood is constantly in compromise due to administrative and environmental changes. This courage to venture into potentially dangerous milieus also shone through in Jessica Segall's video installation *(un)common intimacy*, 2018, at Wat Prayoon: Engaging in a gentle dance with large predators in US states that allow private ownership of these animals, Segall interrupted the circuit of control and entertainment to which they are subjected.

Underneath all of Bangkok's characteristics lies the core of its dynamism: It is a city of foreigners, dating back to the

Chinese, Burmese, and eventually European—were granted permission to build their communities in newfound land. Yet, amid the cumbersome discourse of Thai ethnonationalism, this culturally diverse fabric became disrupted by enforced cultural assimilation (read: Thaification) beginning in the twentieth century. The “foreigners” thus became ghosts that sleep in this Thai household’s basement, and yet their bones never ceased to rattle! If you pay attention as you walk around the biennial venues, you will detect their spectral signals, such as Moe Satt’s plaster-cast, empty T-shirts at BACC, ghostly remnants of his performance critique *Body Inside T-shirt*, 2024, on Myanmar’s volatile political prospects. Or in *Artificial Green by Nature Green 4.0*, 2024, where a “ghost in the machine” is programmed to simultaneously paint and erase a large-scale painting of lush green vegetation, created by artist couple Bagus Pandega and Kei Imazu to allude to humanity’s generative and destructive impact on trees in urban environments. Or perhaps Dusadee Huntrakul’s constellation of enigmatic UFO drawings, faux-fossils cast from seashells, and totemlike ceramics that nestled into the display cabinets of the National Museum, camouflaging as artifacts to poke fun at the seamless narrative of nation-building generated by such institutions.



Bagus Pandega and Kei Imazu, *Artificial Green by Nature Green 4.0* (detail), 2024, water-based paint on linen canvas, modular synthesizer, LED screen, PC, palm oil. Installation view, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). Photo: Hung Duong.

fragility and evanescence embedded in human connections. In cities, where life passes us by too quickly, can we stop for a moment to observe, to care, to watch out for one another? I found myself sitting silently at BACC, in front of Singaporean artist Amanda Heng's poignant photo, dated 2014, from her reconstituted series "Always by My Side," of her grandmother's last days, in which her mother placed her grandmother's feet on her shoulders. An act of reverence and intimacy. I slowed down to breathe in the sorrowful helplessness of a pair of hands holding a small bird—a wall-protruding installation named *Still Life*, 2023, by the Danish Norwegian duo Elmgreen & Dragset. And I slunk down near *The Engineers*, 2024, two somber gate-shaped structures inside a monastery in Wat Bowon, made from singed Neem wood by Cole Lu to invoke the cycle of life and death.

Maybe, we all are, or will become, foreigners somewhere, whose fantastic feats and feminine flair stick out like a sore thumb. In this global climate that is becoming increasingly intolerant of things that don't fit in, I hope we can find solace, that small enclave where we can just be. And I hope art will continue to uphold that haven.

The Fourth Bangkok Art Biennale, "Nurture Gaia," is on view through February 25, 2025.



Cole Lu, *The Engineers*, 2024, burnt neem, burnt linen. Installation view, Wat Bowon, Bangkok. Photo: Seni Chunhacha.

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