

Exit, Exile, Exodus: Culture at the Margins in Southeast Asia

By Rachel Harrison

For my father, the artist Colin Harrison (d. 2017), who taught me to love and appreciate art as one of the most important driving forces of humanity in a tragic world.

“The lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep.” The lies we tell ourselves... But what if these lies reveal other, sharper truths? What if both lies *and* truths converge in a liminal, dreamlike space at the margins of culture? What if, awakening from sleep, we see new veracities, new spaces, in the exodus from reality? What if, in exile, we begin to belong?

Burmese artist The Maw Naing’s installation *In and Out of Thin Layers*, which frames this exhibition, speaks hauntingly to the recurrent theme of multiple, permeable layers of meaning. Of sense. Like ethereal filters, the translucent sheaths invite the audience to experience their floating, fleeting sincerities of inclusion—and exclusion. They connect one experience of imagination to another; and multiple experiences of imaginations to each other, encompassing the viewer within; or locating her/him without. Outside looking in. Inside looking out.

In and Out of Thin Layers is, in several senses, reminiscent of the ideas explored in Arnika Fuhrmann’s recent book *Ghostly Desires*.¹ The Maw Naing’s pendant cloths induce and echo complex, transcendent longings. But they also invite the visitor to pause; to stop; to meditate; to detach from the everyday “realities” of mundane life. In *Ghostly Desires*, Fuhrmann focuses specifically on queer sexuality and vernacular Buddhism in contemporary Thai cinema, which she analyses in terms of what she refers to as *Buddhist melancholia*: “all those instances in which persons defy doctrinal temporal logics and delay, stall, or refuse detachment: *I want something. I can no longer have it. Yet I persist in my desire.*”² She opens her



Installation view of the 25 mosquito nets of The Maw Naing’s *In and Out of Thin Layers* at MALLAM Contemporary Art Museum.

exploration of affect with a discussion of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's short film *Luminous People* (2007) in which a young man improvises a song about encountering his dead father in a dream, following the funeral. In Theravada Buddhist doctrine, Fuhrmann explains:

...the funereal ceremony performed in *Luminous People* would be intended to initiate the process of detachment from the dead. Rather than engender such a break, however, the ceremony seems to prompt continued attachment to the deceased. The scene therefore elaborates a psychological model in which relations with the love object lost through death may continue indefinitely.³

The “push-me/pull-you” effect of detachment and re-attachment that Fuhrmann articulates here as an underpinning feature of Buddhist melancholic desire reverberates throughout the exhibition *DIASPORA: Exit, Exile, Exodus of Southeast Asia* as an integral framing of its subject matter: Exit; Exile; Exodus. Each term draws emphatically on the prefix ex: ‘out of’; ‘from’; ‘beyond’. And, yet, in this gallery space, the “beyond” revisits and makes its presence felt, like the return of the repressed: Former Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party (1939-1947) Lai Teck emerges from the dead in Ho Tzu Nyen's synchronised video, *The Nameless*; recycled cardboard and cargo boxes form the building blocks

of Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan's fleet of vessels; criminalised exiles are “repatriated” in the series of paintings by Paphonsak La-or; and Svay Sareth's rubber sandals recall the traumatic memories of his life under the Khmer Rouge and in subsequent refugee camps. The pendant structures of The Maw Naing's installation are a gesture of welcome to these *re-appearances from the margins*. As he writes in his artist's statement on the installation, they invite “anyone to try, experience and be introduced to the possibility of a mind journey”—a journey in which it “is hoped that awareness through participation will ensue to know what can really happen”.

What further kind of “mind journeys” does *Exit, Exile, Exodus* encourage us to share?

In Abdul Abdullah's entrancing image *The lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep*—one of the four subtitles in the series *Coming to Terms*—a monkey-faced Apsara with a muscular and tattooed human male torso caresses a monkey child, though, the nurtured animal looks somehow wary and fearful. Abdullah's awkwardly maternal, hybrid parent-creature criss-crosses gendered and cultural boundaries of selfhood, one thing we know is that s/he is Southeast Asian: the Apsara headdress tells us so. Beyond the simple binary oppositions of male/female, father/mother, goddess/human, monkey-man/monkey, high-class culture/lowbrow “savagery” of nature appear the *interstitial identities of the*

borderlands. And it is arguably in these interstitial, hybridised spaces that creativity and imagination reach their apogee. Artistic inventiveness may thrive on the experience of marginality. It may be driven by the pleasures—and vagaries—of the periphery. It is no surprise that one of the most acclaimed Western intellectuals engaged with the region—the late Benedict Anderson—chose to title his memoirs *A Life Beyond Boundaries* (2016). Taking heed of Anderson's most acclaimed work *Imagined Communities, Disturbing Conventions*—a collection of chapters by Thai literary critics and intellectuals that I edited in 2014—explored in particular the significant dynamic of the unconventional, at the margins of the “mainstream”.⁴ It celebrates the artistic need for subversion, and for the critique of conservative aesthetic orders. Its cover image is hand-painted by the brilliant contemporary Thai artist Prakit Kobkijwattana. Prakit's design encases a disturbing image from the Ramayana depicted on the galleries of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok in the silhouette of a seated Buddha. The demon king Totsakan/Ravana molests the exiled Sida/Sita with his multiple, groping hands while Hanuman attempts to save her. As with many in the series of his Buddha-silhouette artworks, Prakit's awkward combination calls into question the deeper meanings of centres and peripheries, and of the troubles that lie within.

Similarly bringing the traditional past to bear on the contemporary moment, Abdul Abdullah's photograph—*The lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep*—encapsulates the constant flows of inspiration that the past imposes on the present across Southeast Asia. The Apsara headdress atop the monkey head



Abdul Abdullah, *Coming to Terms - The lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep*, 2017, archival prints, 100 × 100 cm. Collection of MAMM Contemporary Art Museum.

¹ Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

² Ibid, 4.

³ Ibid, 2.

⁴ Rachel V. Harrison, *Disturbing Conventions: Decentering Thai Literary Cultures* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2014).

doubly evokes the pervasive influence of the Ramayana on the entire region: this mythical tale, hailing from India, is imagined from the bas-reliefs of the temples of Angkor to the lacquered papier-mâché masks of Hanuman worn by present-day dance and theatre performers in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The viewer is reminded of the hybrid and syncretic nature of travelling tales in Southeast Asia, adapted, reimagined, reinvented, in a ceaseless flux across the boundaries of time and space.

In Southeast Asia, perhaps more than many other regions of the world, “culture” has long evolved and developed in multiple, hybridised forms as a result of “external” influences. Seen as a cultural crucible, its location at the intersection between the two major cultural forces of India and China has rendered it open to distinctive waves of Indianisation and Sinicisation. The former brought Hindu, Brahmanical, Buddhist and later Islamic beliefs to the region, while the latter introduced Confucianism and Taoism to Vietnam. It is from this perspective that Anida Yoeu Ali’s *Buddhist Bug* project (2013) can be more fully appreciated. Seeking to map a new spiritual and social landscape through its surreal existence amongst ordinary people and everyday environments, the *Buddhist Bug* explores the hybridised religious and cultural identities that are fundamental to the cultural and religious foundations of Southeast Asia—a region where “displacement” constitutes one of the most vibrant incentives to newly developed forms of belonging.

As academic commentators on the development of religion and culture in Southeast Asia acknowledge, the relative degree of tolerance for difference emerged as a common characteristic of the region.⁵

Prior to his untimely death in 2013, Thai anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa further pointed up the significance of hybridity as a key concept in understanding the evolution of religious belief and practice in Southeast Asia. In his study of Thai Buddhism, Pattana refers to the interaction of Buddhism, Brahmanism, animism, and other beliefs and practices as components that are neither isolated nor static. Rather, “[they] have intensively interacted with the others and evolved together over time, forming a highly plural and hybrid religious system.”⁶ They have converged to “produce new forms of amalgamation and sets of meaning relevant to the present sociocultural and economic situation.”⁷

It is evident that in the case of Southeast Asia, religion and culture are fundamentally characterised by cross-fertilising inter- and intra-regional influences, borne of fluid and ever-evolving cultural identities. As such, Southeast Asia provides an exemplary illustration of Edward Said’s pithy and politically significant observation that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic.”⁸

As Benedict Anderson indicated in *Imagined Communities*, state definitions of national cultures are largely dependent upon claims of a more insular uniformity. They rely upon the recognition of *hard borders* that differentiate the cultural practices on one side of the border from those of the other. Thai filmmaker Nontawat Numbenchapol’s video installation *Green Canvas Doi Army Combat Boots* acknowledges something of the nature of these borders and the way in which they are policed and militarised by agents recruited to a hyper-masculinised sense of national honour. The words of the Shan national anthem, played in one of the four short films in his installation, invoke the potential pleasure of death for the fatherland, shared in the knowledge that “We all bleed red”. The attendant bodies of the soldiers are stiffly disciplined and orderly. In two other, shorter pieces, the pervasive sound of the marching Shan State Army feet ricochets around the brain, prompting our awareness of *territoriality* and of *border control*. And, yet, Nontawat’s young army conscripts also let down their guard: prostrate in the grass, they enjoy a lazy cigarette; or they join a friendly game of football on a makeshift pitch devoid of boundary markers—though their peaceful slumbers can be suddenly, violently arrested by the return call to arms.



In one frame of the installation, Nontawat’s camera captures the image of these young men through a slatted window, suggesting again the significance of broken, interrupted, non-continuous space. In practice (despite the lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep), cultures seep across national dividing lines, frequently riding roughshod over the boundaries of the state that have little respect for their creative dynamism. Aditya Novali’s installation *IDENTIFYING SOUTH EAST ASIA: Borderless Humanity* eloquently reiterates the significance of fluid, ever-shifting borders. Though himself from Indonesia, the theme of his LED installation evokes the concerns shared by Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994). Focusing on the emergence of the Thai nation-state as a constructed “geo-body” of values and practices, Thongchai’s seminal work on the development of Thai nationhood analyses territorial delineation in relation to national belonging. In *Siam Mapped* Thongchai posits that:

Before the late nineteenth century the Siamese understanding of the territory of a state precluded the delineation of boundaries in the modern sense. Overlapping or multiple sovereignties were common, whereby a small state might pay tribute to two or more sovereign overlords and still remain sovereign itself. Areas where no country claimed sovereignty also existed, creating a sort of

Nontawat Numbenchapol,
Green Canvas Doi Army Combat Boots, 2016 - 2017,
4-channel video, colour, sound.
Collection of the Artist.

⁵ See, for example, Anthony Reid, *South East Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450 - 1680: Expansion and Crisis*, Vol. 2 (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1993).

⁶ Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012), 14.

⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), xxv.

buffer corridor. As Europeans moved into the region in the nineteenth century, bringing with them the new geography and technology of mapping, the confrontation between modern and indigenous conceptions of boundary and sovereignty caused misunderstandings in the conduct of diplomatic relations, confusion in surveying and boundary demarcations, and armed military clashes. The Europeans, and later the Siamese rulers, desired a country defined by the new technology of mapping. Ultimately the mapped geo-body replaced the indigenous territory, and a nation emerged.⁹

And in two later works, published in 2000 and relating to a similar subject matter, Thongchai delineated the mechanisms by which the Thai nation-state proceeded to rank its inhabitants according to their imagined “civilizational” levels under the Bangkok elite-centric concept of *siwilai*.¹⁰

Nontawat’s cinematic engagement with the very issues that Thongchai raises—vascillating concepts of boundary and sovereignty; the rural/urban divide and its political ramifications; and of ensuing military clashes—are explored in his acclaimed, feature-length documentary of 2013, *Boundary*. Screened as part of the events accompanying this exhibition, *Boundary* commences—in a seeming nod to Apichatpong’s oeuvre—with an image of travel: a point-of-view shot from the driving seat of a car following a rural road.

The director/narrator’s journey is one in which, by chance, he encounters Aod, a recently discharged military conscript who has returned home to celebrate New Year with his parents in Thailand’s northeast (Isan): “I asked him if I could follow him there,” the English and Thai subtitles both read, over the sound of the car’s continuously turning wheels. “He said it is fine.” Slowly we pass a haystack; a house; a slumped scarecrow in the garden; a smaller road, heading in another direction. “And then during the journey, our conversation began.” “Salao Village, Sisaket Province, Thailand. Forty minutes drive from the Thai-Cambodian border, April 2010.”

Much of *Boundary*’s subsequent narrative is set in this specific border region, with its connection to military skirmishes that ensued there between Thai and Cambodian forces from 2011 onwards. Although keen to draw attention to the wider political context in which this fighting emerged, Nontawat’s principle focus is on the relative “meaninglessness” to the area’s local inhabitants of the physical border that separates the two nation-states. He deploys interviews with villagers on either side to indicate that the *boundaries* between the two are shifting and impermanent, despite the fact that they are politically and militarily contested. Physical boundary markers are testified by interviewees to having been moved. The view offered of one border post reveals a series of makeshift wooden barriers, closing off only half of the road. Incomplete. Permeable. Impermanent.

Nontawat’s cinematography raises questions regarding the nature of boundaries in visually engaging ways. The image of a small boy, suggestive of the childhood Aod recalls, slips in and out of focus as he stares towards the camera. An ensuing sequence depicts young novices bathing playfully in small rocky pools in the river—another reference to the pleasures of liminal, borderline space. In the subsequent military conscription scenes, onlookers gather at the margins of the recruitment hall, staring through the open doors and windows as the power of the State is made felt in the drawing of lots for selection to the army. One young man, “lucky enough to be chosen”, is physically trapped by the encompassing bodily embrace of another soldier. Next, the camera follows, at length, the boundary wall of a Buddhist temple as Aod recounts how he was posted to the predominantly Muslim provinces of the “Deep South” another marginal and marginalised location. The setting switches seamlessly to a settlement in the south.

In each of these sets of images and events, as in many others that feature throughout the film, Nontawat reiterates the significance of boundaries, borderlines, distinctions, divisions—and also...their insignificance. One of *Boundary*’s closing pictures is of a small stone *prasat* with a tree growing out of its top. Nature overcomes the borders and the limits of what Man can her/himself delineate.

In the lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep, we imagine that we are in control of space; of territories; that we control physical, cultural, political, human flows and transitions. The works assembled here in *Exit, Exile, Exodus* reveal to us that nothing is further from the truth. Nor should it be otherwise.

⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998 [1994]), cover description.

¹⁰ See Thongchai Winichakul, “The others within: Travel and ethno-spatial differentiation of Siamese subjects 1885-1910,” in *Civility and savagery: Social identity in the Tai states*, ed. A. Turton (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 38-62; and “The quest for ‘siwilai’: A geographical discourse of civilization thinking in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2000): 528-549.