

THE DESIRES OF NONTHOK

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

Curator: Rathsaran Sireekan

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon 2013

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Solo Exhibition by

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

2 February – 2 March, 2013

Curator: Rathsaran Sireekan



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, **THE DESIRES OF NONTHOK**, by the Thai artist Jirapat Tatsanasomboon. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 2 February – 2 March 2013.

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon is well known as an artist who uses iconography from the traditional Thai narrative *Ramakien* (similar to the Indian *Ramayana*) and juxtaposes it with Western icons to show East-vs-West and Modern-vs-Traditional interactions. In the past, he often inserted readily identifiable Thai iconography as a commentary on Thai society and re-interpreted the celebrated master paintings. His heroes have been depicted in a distinctive Thai setting and are often seen interacting with traditional Thai heroes and mythical figures.

In the current exhibition he continues to address East vs West and Modernity vs Tradition, but the new series features a more integrated approach of the characters. The main character is *Nonthok*, who is a figure in the *Ramakien* story. The artist uses the narrative of Nonthok's life story, which is well known in Thailand, to address and comment on social and political issues that can be viewed both in a Thai context, and also in a wider global setting since many of the political issues are prevalent in many other countries, and therefore tend to repeat themselves.

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon is 42 years old and an internationally recognized artist. He holds a Master's in Fine Art from Silpakorn University, Bangkok, and has taken part in many international exhibitions, including recently at the Beijing Olympics (2008) and the ArtScience Museum's show: 'Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal' in Singapore.

I take this opportunity to thank Jirapat Tatsanasomboon for his collaboration, Rath saran Sireekan for his work as curator and Ralph Kiggell as language editor.

THE DESIRES OF NONTHOK

Rathsaran Sireekan

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- V. From the personal to the political: explication of the artworks

I. A new phase of intercultural experimentation

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon is a long-standing intercultural artist who has enjoyed manoeuvring visual elements of Thai and Western culture on his canvases ever since his years at Chiang Mai University.

Of all Tatsanasomboon's works that confront Thai mythical characters with ones from Western canonical and popular culture, *Hanuman Rebels* (2008) was particularly praised by Steven Pettifor. According to Pettifor, this work has a 'deeper connectivity between the two opposing elements' of Piet Mondrian's 20th-century linear abstraction and Hanuman, Rama's apelike humanoid sidekick in the Thai *Ramakien* epic.



Hanuman Rebels!, 2008

Acrylic on canvas

129 x 147 cm

It is this poetic of 'deeper connectivity' that successfully transforms the two different sign systems, usually found clashing in Tatsanasomboon's repertoire, into one seamless intercultural symbiosis. The unified intertextual organism owes its existence to the unprecedented form of subtle energy that the mischievous Hanuman struggles to free himself from within Mondrian's suffocating grid composition.

In *The Desires of Nonthok*, Tatsanasomboon's latest artistic endeavour, one cannot miss the trajectory towards this 'deeper connectivity' and the seamless intertextual symbiosis it produces. Instead of mixing Thai and Western visual elements together merely for aesthetic effect as before, the current series takes a more specific narrative engagement and focuses on the psychology of a single subject who has 'real flesh and blood'. It is an allegory that refers to 'something that has really happened and still happens today in society'. The emphasis on the flesh and blood of the subject also explains why the artist foregoes the traditional Thai headdresses that permeated his previous intercultural executions, making the current series more universal than ever.

These creative developments significantly add psychological and cultural depth to this new exciting series, giving it something very close to allegorical psychological realism. They also explain the artist's choice of portraiture as the theme for this collection.

II. From the periphery to the centre—towards a greater social justice?

The *Ramakien* is the Thai national appropriation of the seminal Indian *Ramayana* epic that dominates South and Southeast Asian cultures. Though a less popular character in the Siamese Grand Narrative and—compared to Hanuman, Phra Ram (Rama), Thotsakan (Rawana), and Sita—minor and subservient, Nonthok *is*, in fact, *believed* to have been the origin of the entire conflict propelling the Thai national epic.

Rawana's Desire (after G. O'Keeffe), 2010

Acrylic on canvas
120 x 145 cm



Very interestingly, however, Tatsanasomboon, in *The Desires of Nonthok*, re-reads this Grand Narrative and asks if Nonthok is really the only culprit as often thought—a seemingly ‘self-evident’, uninvestigated fact that has passed from one Thai generation to another. The re-reading can be regarded as a criticism of the general Thai public’s epistemology—how we take in information simply because it has been passed **down**; and pedagogy—how we Thai, living in a hierarchical society, brainwash ourselves and live with the passed-down version of ‘truth’ in order to survive.

Tatsanasomboon’s subversive questioning of ‘who done it’—or ‘who actually screwed it up’ to the point where we were left with the great literary work of the *Ramakien*—significantly and timely so pivots on issues of class, integrity, use and abuse of power.

With this ‘artistic intervention’—engaging society to rethink and posing provocative questions through art—the character of Nonthok is reinstated from the periphery to the centre of the narrative, allowing as it does so important issues of class and abuse of power to inform not only contemporary Thai culture and its socio-politics, but also other modern societies in general, and to be reinvestigated. This makes the Nonthok series as universally relevant to all political entities as it is specifically relevant to the current Thai political crisis.

One familiar with Tatsanasomboon’s previous works will note how, in this new collection, his rendition of Thai characteristics has changed; for instance, Nonthok is more universally represented here without the usual traditional headdress.

By shedding light on the peripheral and moving it to the foreground as well as allowing the silenced voice to be heard, this artistic series becomes both relevant to and stands out in the international community of contemporary art and culture. Here, the will to interrogate, negotiate and, in many cases, destabilise the Grand Narrative—where ‘absolute’ truth is inscribed, upheld, propagated and reproduced—still reigns justly.

Interestingly, however, this re-reading does not take sides solely with the underprivileged. The re-investigation turns out to be sufficiently objective. It criticises the privileged, but also the underprivileged in the, now, centre of the narrative, revealing where Nonthok, the peripheral-turned-major character, has gone astray, blundered and eventually taken himself to the abyss.

Tatsanasomboon’s reinterpretation of the Nonthok sub-plot of *Ramakien* recalls postmodern narrative style—a famous example of which is the contemporary English playwright Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where two minor characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* are brought to the centre stage and reveal how they die, offstage, an unheroic death.

III. The story of 'Phra Narai (Vishnu) subduing Nonthok'—the genesis of the *Ramakien*

Nonthok is an asura who serves Phra¹ Isuan (Shiva) at the foot of the stairs leading to the paradise of Mount Krailas. His duty is to wash the feet of the devas before they can make their flight and seek an audience with Phra Isuan.

Upon receiving the asura's service, these devas tease and indiscriminately harass Nonthok in numerous degrading ways. They slap his head and pull his hair until he becomes completely bald. Whenever the bald asura sees his own reflection in the water, he sheds tears. Distressed by his helplessness, and without power to fight back, Nonthok finally decides to mount the Krailas and seek an audience with Phra Isuan.

The asura asks Phra Isuan for a lethal diamond finger, which when pointed can bring down and kill enemy. Nonthok says he has served the supreme god for as long as ten million years without reward. Acknowledging this, Phra Isuan grants the asura's wish.

Unaware of Phra Isuan's granting of Nonthok's wish, the devas come to receive the service as usual and continue their habitual harassments. Now well-equipped, Nonthok is emboldened. Enraged, he sweeps his diamond finger over the surrounding devas who drop dead like a big flock of dying birds in the blink of an eye.

Informed of the disastrous incident, Phra Isuan furiously calls for Phra Narai (Vishnu) to subdue the insolent asura. In no time, Phra Narai transforms himself into an exquisite Naang Absorn, a nymph-like divinity, to seduce the asura. Captivated by her beauty and grace, Nonthok begins to flirt with the angelic creature. The breast-clad Phra Narai sees it is time to bait the mousetrap and invites the asura to dance with him.

As Naang Absorn leads the dance, Nonthok seems more and more intoxicated. Suddenly, as they reach the 'naga muan hang' (the tail-recoiling serpent) posture in the dance, Nonthok directs his index finger on himself and unwittingly breaks his own legs. He falls to the floor. At this point, Phra Narai discards his immaculate disguise and, revealing himself to the fallen Nonthok, stamps his foot on the defeated asura's chest, ready to put an end to the matter.

1 'Phra' is the title of a deva, a god or a goddess who is ontologically superior to man. The devas reside in the supra-mundane realm: paradise. Note that an asura is not necessarily ontologically inferior to a deva. An asura can also be a deva. An asuradeva like Phra Pilarp is also a kind of deva. Nonthok is subservient because he is simply born into the lower class of the asura clan.

Foreseeing his impending death, Nonthok rebukes the god for having more hands than he does (Phra Narai manifests with four hands), hence he has a greater capability. He sneers that the god is not brave enough to fight face to face for fear of Nonthok's lethal diamond finger. Phra Narai retorts he will have Nonthok reborn as a mighty ten-faced asura with as many as twenty arms, to be known as Thotsakan (Rawana). He himself will be reincarnated as a mere man with two bare hands, to be known as Phra Ram (Rama), but with enough will to bring the defiant asura down. As Phra Narai finishes his prophecy, he beheads the insolent Nonthok with his trident.

IV. An intercultural iconography

'I love witnessing the strong reaction viewers have upon encountering the juxtapositions of Thai and Western elements.'

Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

The Desire of Nonthok proffers a very interesting intercultural iconography. But to one's surprise, when Tatsanasomboon imports Western elements onto his canvases in this series, **the images we see owe their symbolism and allegorical meanings to the governing dichotomy of Western/Thai, which is to say that the Western elements are privileged as a benchmark—ideals to desire or achieve—while the Thai registers are depicted as either inferior or as if measuring themselves against superior Western values.**

Post-colonial critics may find this governing binary problematic as it invites the question of whether it reinforces cultural imperialism. The artist addresses this concern, and interestingly sheds light on Thai culture as a whole:

'I was trying to find something people in general associate with the notion of "perfection" and "luxury" and I don't think we can escape the fact that it is these Western visual elements that represent these ideas in our culture. Even if you fall back on the Thai court fashion and design, say, from the reign of King Rama V, those cultural elements are still derivative and drawn on the West.'

Tatsanasomboon's response unveils the ongoing dominance of the West in geopolitics. The artist's choice of **the culturally imperialistic binary of Western/Thai is deliberate and meant to demonstrate the current hegemony.**



Forbidden Fruit (Rama vs Obama), 2009

Acrylic on canvas

150 x 115 cm

If we consider the artist's previous criticism of Thai xenomania, where Thai people in general feel obliged to equip themselves with the latest Western brands and gadgets so as to be recognised as 'respectable,' 'affluent' and 'successful,' Nonthok's fetish for Western cultural sign systems in this series can also be read along that line. In *Nonthok de Lis*, for example, Nonthok is depicted as cladding himself in a majestic red cloth with a yellow 'fleur-de-lis' motif—the emblem of the French monarch since King Clovis (George Ferguson). In *Desire for Divinity*, the artist is measuring Nonthok up against the one-eye-opened Mel Gibson in *The Passion of Christ*. In *Desires Ingrained* and *To Be What You Are Not*, Western decorative motifs of rank run superfluously over Nonthok's body. *Nonthok Warhol* portrays the asura's desire to be recognised as important enough to be put under the famous Andy Warhol signature camouflage. **In these examples, signs from Western culture are used to elevate the status of their bearer.**

On the contrary, in *The Worthless Crown* and *Nonthok as Mona Lisa*, Nonthok's attempt to elevate his status by the use of a Western sign system—including reference to the especially popular Renaissance tradition of portraiture as a 'status kit'—is held up to ridicule. Here, the artist makes violent juxtaposition of aristocratic patterns and tradition with the depiction of a *nok ieng* (common myna). This bird is usually found on the back of buffaloes which, in Thai culture, are associated with stupidity, as in the saying 'stupid as a buffalo'. Putting this ordinary bird on the head of an aristocratically clad Nonthok reduces him to the level of a buffalo, a dull-witted animal.

Also relevant to the current series' status as an iconography is the question of who holds the key to deciphering these intercultural signs. While masters of semiotics say reading an image is an open process with multiple possible meanings, a more traditional approach is advocated by Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), whereby the art historian (and the artist) is entitled to fix the 'real meaning' of a given image. Such an approach may suit the current series better as each Western sign here carries its own specific meaning or refers to a specific tradition in its own cultural context—all of which answers to the governing dichotomies of Western/Thai and civilized/uncivilized.

V. From the personal to the political: explication of the artworks

'The personal is the political'

Cynthia Enloe

'At first, I didn't intend it to be so political.'

Tatsanasomboon

Although Tatsanasomboon was, first and foremost, drawn to Nonthok purely for the interesting psychology of his character—describing it as 'full of desires and entirely human'—as he delved deeper into this subplot, he confessed he was unable to ignore the strong political implications of the Nonthok narrative.

As much as the Indian *Ramayana* itself was arguably composed to celebrate the victory of the white and fine Aryan over the dark-skinned Dravidian, Tatsanasomboon reduces the social context which informs the Thai *Ramakien* epic and its subplot of 'Phra Narai subduing Nonthok' to the aristocracy/working class dichotomy: Nonthok, who was born a lower-class asura, serves Phra Isuan and his deva class on the paradise of Mount Krailas.

The subservient Nonthok feels alienated, but not because he was born debased. Class difference does not necessarily lead to inferiority complex, humiliation, oppression and, eventually, rebellion.

Filling in the narrative, Tatsanasomboon asks what if the governing class of devas were to have a higher integrity, exercising their power more carefully, and not harassing and humiliating their servant. Would the asura be so unhappy that he ascends Mount Krailas, asks for the deadly weapon and almost wipes out the deva class in the blink of an eye? Would it be more just had Phra Isuan called for a proper and fair trial before asking Phra Narai to subdue the asura? These gaps in the Grand Narrative that informs Thai culture and socio-politics reflect the usually glossed-over social injustice legitimised by '**aristocratic license**'. According to Tatsanasomboon,

'The violence central to the subplot of "Phra Narai subduing Nonthok" would not have taken place had the devas not harassed Nonthok. In fact, Nonthok is just a helpless working-class element, abused by a ruling class that shows no mercy or sympathy. But when the subservient asura rebels and fights back, reminding them of his rights, the deva class shows an outburst of 'righteous' anger and abuses their superior power to subdue him.'

The artist's view of the aristocracy as the actual catalyst of the lower class's alienation is manifest in his highly sympathetic depiction of Nonthok as someone absolutely destitute in the economy of love and never desired, who thus yearns to be valuable enough to be sought after; hence the appropriate ribbon-and-gift metaphor in *Take Me, Please!*

Tatsanasomboon's re-reading of the Ramakien subplot is relevant to today's society, either Thai or elsewhere in the world:

*'What happens to Nonthok is something that has really happened and still happens in today's society. Class-driven injustice still prevails: **people belonging to the same class only listen to one another.** The lower class is still made scapegoats; people still die; there are still martyrs out there who have to sacrifice their lives to prolong the existence of the ruling class.'*

However, as objective as he is, the artist is not one-sided; he is fair enough to also criticise the lower class's abuse of power when their turn comes to possess it. Upon being bestowed the diamond finger, if, in turn, Nonthok had properly used the power given to him only to protect himself from being harassed, there would have been no such violence. Hence, very likely the artist's message: for a peaceful society to prevail, class difference is not necessarily a crime, if each class respects the other and upholds its integrity. **This makes the current series also attractive to those wanting to see the human rights issues dealt with on canvas.**

It is as if Tatsanasomboon wants to remind us about any acquisition of power. Either by specific allocation or democratization, power must be used constructively for self-sustainment, self-protection and, perhaps, inclusive development; it should not be used for retaliation or destruction of the enemy. The collection at hand delivers a universally relevant moral lesson.

The criticism of Nonthok as an ill-principled, self-glorifying insolent social climber who abuses his power, however, ushers the series more closely to the Thai context. Here, it strongly resonates in the narrative the military used in ousting Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. *Mourning Thailand* and *Embracing Death*, the two most political pieces in the current series, demonstrate the artist's well-balanced treatment of the two opposing camps and classes in Thai politics.



Mourning Thailand, 2012

Acrylic on canvas

100 x 130 cm

Mourning Thailand draws on the local metaphor, especially in the Thai media, of an asura as the army and pivots on the role of the military in restraining Thai politics from progressing as far as the Western prototype (informed by the aforementioned governing binaries of Western/Thai and civilised/uncivilized, and referencing Warhol's camouflage as a Western benchmark for democratic civilization).

No less politically engaged, *Embracing Death* prophecies that the compromised integrity and abuse of power by the new class in Thai politics will result in its downfall. The skeleton represents death, and the tinge of red subtly points to the red-shirt camp of Thaksin Shinawatra. (Despite his references to the colours of the Thai flag and the use of red and yellow in *Nonthok de Lis*, Tatsanasomboon distances himself from other Thai artists who have used color schemes to explore critical discord in Thai politics, such as Thavorn Ko-udomvit and Rirkrit Tiravanija.)

Despite the gravity of the artist's critical stance and subject matter, his approach to the flaws of the powerful in other paintings in the collection is interestingly more lighthearted: a rather fun mocking sentiment that gives the collection a well-balanced range of emotions. These paintings include *The Worthless Crown*, *Nonthok as Mona Lisa*, *The Excalibur*, *Like* and *Unlike* where the post-diamond-finger Nonthok is ridiculed as a false aristocrat and, abusive of his power, unfit to lead or rule. The previous comparison drawn between the current series and Thai politics might suggest another parallel between the ridiculed Nonthok and the ousted prime minister. *Dark Angel*—an unsuccessful attempt towards the angelic ontology, which in the artist's imagination Nonthok tries on himself after the bestowal of his power—is one of the best paintings to accompany such parallel.

In *Desires Ingrained*, Tatsanasomboon uses Western decorative motifs of rank to suggest aristocratic deva class, inscribing these class-conscious patterns onto Nonthok's very body to connote the subservient asura's deep desire to be recognised as a deva-like aristocrat. *Aspiration* and *Mirror of Illusion* operate on the same level of psychology; here the artist references Michelangelo's David as a model of perfection to which Nonthok aspires. The bigger penis speaks for the vulgarity of the contemporary world where power must be as demonstrative and intrusive as possible, instead of well kept with humility. *To Be What You Are Not* reflects a similar mindset, but more lightheartedly suggests we overhear Nonthok saying, 'Ain't I awesome in these hi-so patterns?'

PLATES



Take Me, Please!, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



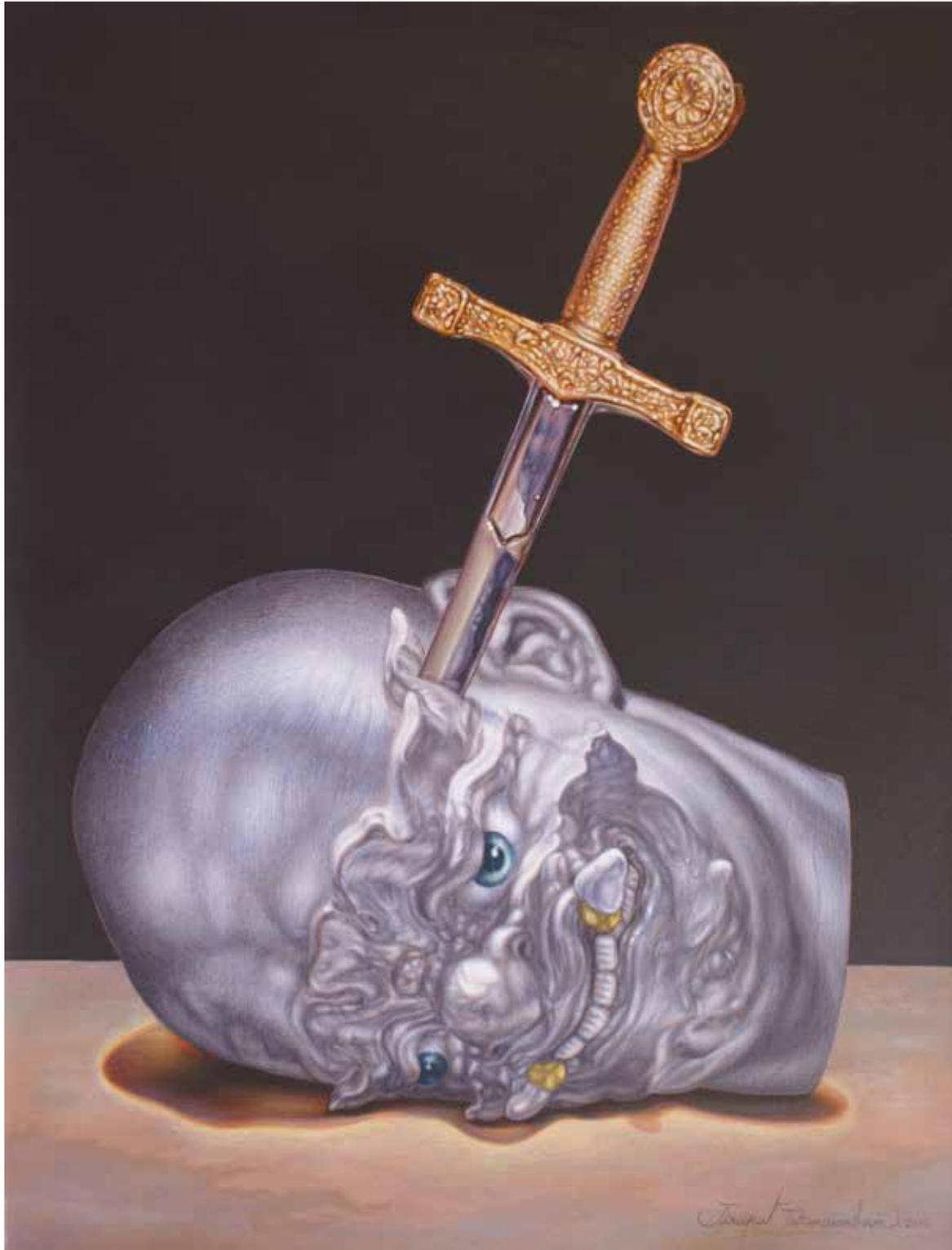
Nonthok de Lis, 2013 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm



The Worthless Crown, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Nonthok As Mona Lisa, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 130 x 147 cm



The Excalibur, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm



Like, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Unlike, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm



Dark Angel, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 150 x 120 cm



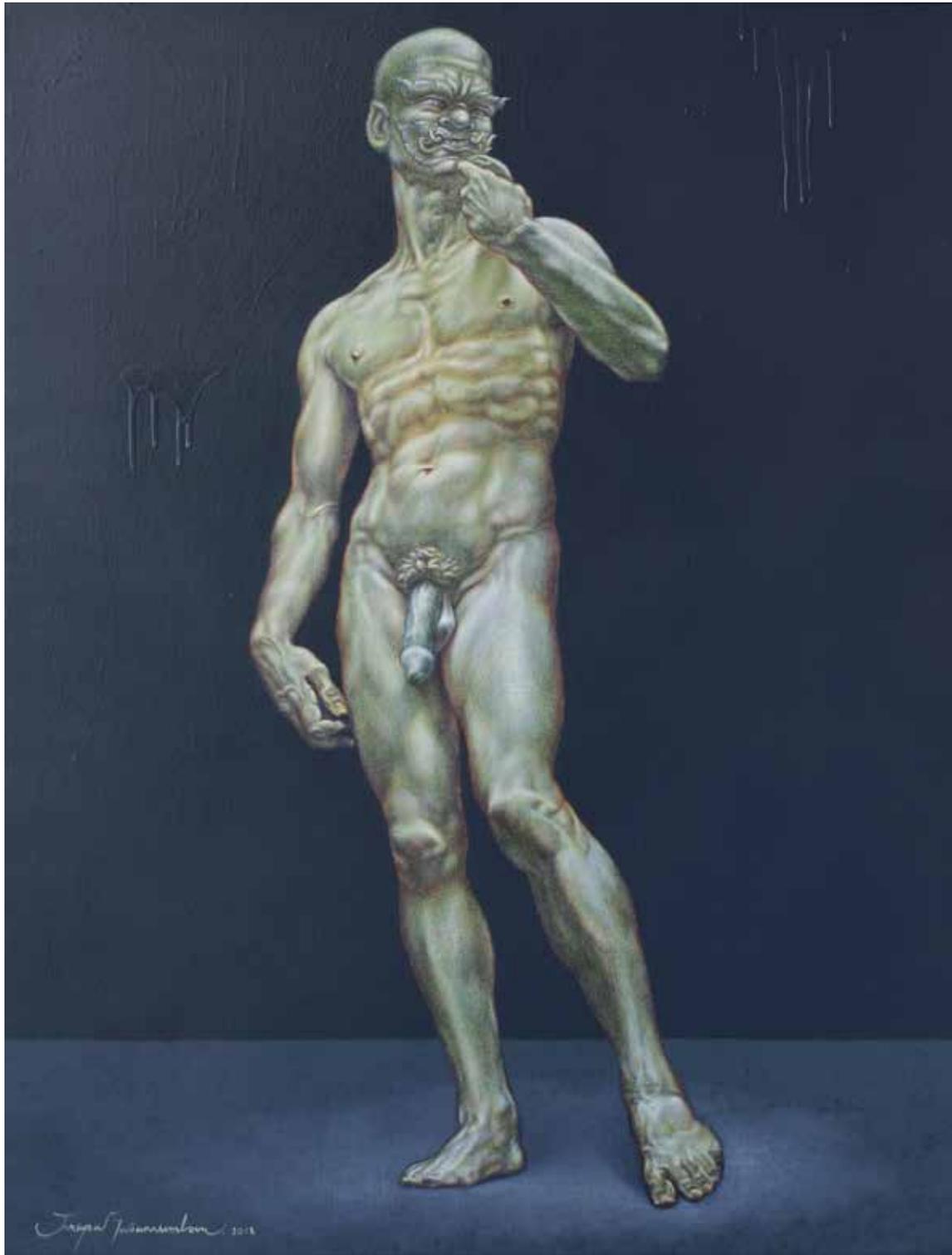
Desires Ingrained, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 100 cm



Desire For Divinity, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 100 cm



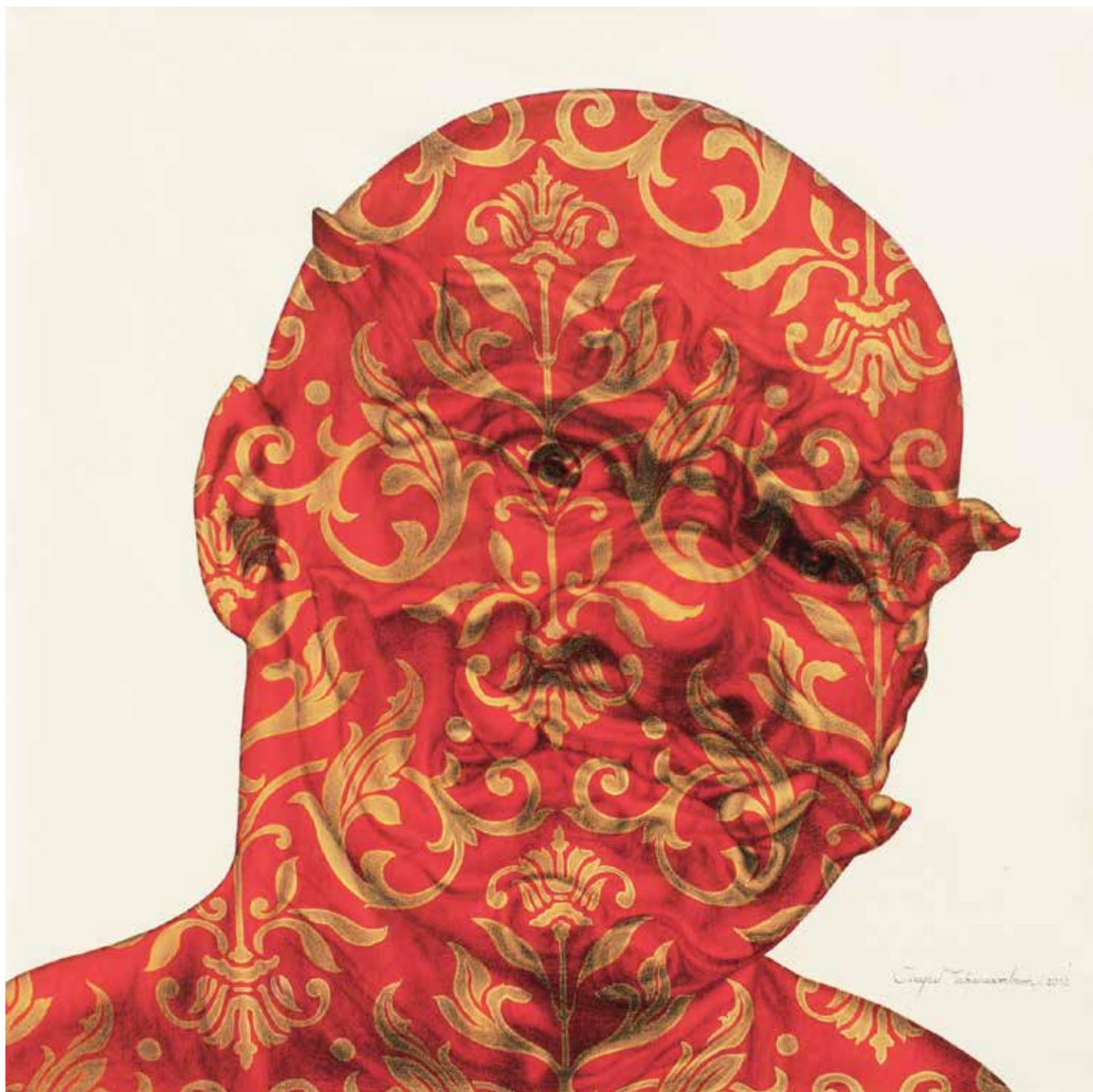
Nonthok Warhol, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Aspiration, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm



Mirror Of Illusion, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



To Be What You Are Not, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 129 x 129 cm



Mourning Thailand, 2012 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm



Embracing Death, 2013 | Acrylic on canvas | 130 x 147 cm

CHRONOLOGY



Jirapat Tatsanasomboon

Born 1971 in Samut Prakarn

1996: Bachelor of Fine Arts from Chiang Mai University

1999: Master of Fine Arts from Silpakorn University, Bangkok

Selected Art Exhibitions

1997: - Art Thesis Exhibition at Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University – Chiang Mai, Thailand
- ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition, Thailand

1998: - The 44th National Art Exhibition, the National Gallery – Bangkok, Thailand

1999: - Art Thesis Exhibition at Silpakorn University – Bangkok, Thailand

2000: - ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition – Bangkok, Thailand
- The 46th National Art Exhibition, the National Gallery – Bangkok, Thailand

2001: - Group Show – with Scopolamine Group – Bangkok, Thailand

- 2001: - Group Show – with Scopolamine Group – Bangkok, Thailand
- 2002: - Award winner in the 4th Panasonic Contemporary Paintings Art Competition – Bangkok, Thailand
- 2003: - ASEAN Art Awards Exhibition – Bangkok, Thailand
- *Asia Art Now* at the Korean Cultural and Arts Foundation - Seoul, **Korea**
- 2004: - *Love and Struggle* together with Sudjai Chaiyapan at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, Thailand
- 2005: - Fundraising Exhibition and Auction for Asian Art Archive – **Hong Kong**
- 2006: - Solo Show: *A Transformation of Icons* at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, Thailand
- *Tradition and Modernity* in South East Asian Art at Galerie l’Indochine – New York, **USA**
- 2008: - *Vision of East Asia 2008* at the Capital Library, Beijing for the Olympics - **China**
- Spiritual Spaces, Thavibu Gallery’s 10th anniversary exhibition – Bangkok, Thailand
- Art Singapore 2008 – Singapore
- Solo Show: *LOVE and LUST* at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2009: - The Indian Art Summit – New Delhi, **India**
- 2010: - Art Monaco – Monaco
- Arteclásica’10 – Buenos Aires, **Argentina**
- Solo Show: *Camouflage* at Thavibu Gallery - Bangkok, Thailand
- 2011: - Group Show – *Dialogues* at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (BACC) – Bangkok, Thailand
- 2012: - In the Exhibition: *Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal* at the ArtScience Museum - **Singapore**
- 2013: - Solo Show: *The Desires of Nonthok* at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, Thailand



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