

UNKNOWN FORCES: APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL



April 18–June 17, 2007

REDCAT



UNKNOWN FORCES, 2007 HD/HDV, 4-channel video, courtesy the artist

Working outside the Thai studio system for over a decade, Apichatpong Weerasethakul has developed an international reputation for his sensual and equally mystifying shorts, features, and installations. Since 1999, he has actively promoted and distributed experimental and independent films through his company Kick the Machine. For *UNKNOWN FORCES*, Weerasethakul reflects upon the confounding task of living and working amidst the uncanny cocktail of politics, monarchy, and religion that currently preoccupies his country. On the occasion of his first solo exhibition in the United States, the artist discusses his childhood, art practice, and work—all the while pondering a host of local, and not so local, concerns particular to our times.

RYAN INOUE: As part of your practice, you often incorporate real incidents and experiences from actors' lives. In a recent interview about *SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY* (2006), you reveal that one of the actresses (who has a masters in psychology) scripted the interview scenes that open both halves of the film. Can you speak about your approach to casting and elaborate on how the casts' personal backgrounds and histories help to inform your work?

APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL: I do the casting myself, sometimes printing out flyers and distributing them on the street. I met my *Tropical Malady* actor when I was actor-scouting in front of a discothèque. So making a film takes a bit of time because I do most of the process myself. It is actually more interesting than the finished film. I am a shy person, so making film is a way for me to be able to meet people—actors, set designer, costume designer, policeman, financier, musician, photographer, lawyer, (curator), whoever...Then there's location scouting! The process covers so wide a scope of life. I would like to present some of these lives in my films. The psychology-degree actress is one of the examples. I wish I could integrate more, though. When I had a role of a dentist in a script and we had a casting, one of the applicants was a jewelry designer. Wow, a jewelry designer is more interesting than a dead dentist on paper. So we often have people come in and tell us what they do rather than have them go through a script and be someone else.

I often write down what I experience. Part of the reason is because I forget things so easily, and get impressed with things easily. Most of the situations in the films come from little notes here and there. Or I just ask anyone I can get a

hold of and ask what I should do. I am consulting a fortune teller now for what the next film should be. She told me the main character (light skin, wide forehead), the locations (university, sports stadium, empty temple, mountain), and the elements (the moon and the water).



Apichatpong Weerasethakul

RI: The backdrops of much of your work accentuate feelings of aloneness and isolation from others. Films like *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Worldly Desires* (2005) traverse remote recesses of distant, even enchanted jungles. In *FAITH* (2006), you leave earth entirely in search of greater solitude in outer space. You seem interested in or at least drawn to obscure or enigmatic sites that have been left relatively unexplored, untouched, unimagined...

AW: That's what I got from the movies. When you are in a dark theater, your mind drifts and travels. In my hometown when I was growing up, there was nothing. The movie theater was a sanctuary where I was mostly addicted to spectacular and disaster films. Now, as a filmmaker, I am trying to search for similar feelings of wonder, of dreams. It's quite a personal and isolated experience. *Tropical Malady* is more about a journey into one's mind rather than a real jungle. Or sometimes it is a feeling of "watching" movies.

RI: Can you speak about your use of old tales and mythologies in your work? What significance do they hold for you?

AW: It's in the air. Thailand's atmosphere is unique. It might be hard to understand for foreigners. I actually feel a presence of the spirits when I am at home. When I am abroad, the dimensions change. I think I just present what I live. And when you believe in something, it's no longer a fiction.

RI: There's usually a rupture about halfway through your feature films. Often, the opening scene of the second "half" closely parallels that of the first, as if returning to a shared beginning or place of origin. What is the significance of this return, this duality?

AW: It's this contrast in Thai society I guess. The landscape is changing fast, but the beliefs are the same. There are these push and pull tensions of moving forward and backward.

RI: In what ways do you see the landscape changing?

AW: We still inhabit an extremely laid-back manner. Since the past, we have changed rules to fit to our disorganized nature. The politicians rewrite or work around the laws to benefit themselves. Our country is heading in an improvisational route, for better or for worse.



FAITH, 2006, HD, 2-channel video, TRT: 11 minutes, courtesy the artist

Thailand is one of the most make-believe countries in the world, especially about freedom. Major businesses are owned by a handful of people, like in the old days. People just pretend to enjoy freedom, whereas the debts grow. I would say we haven't changed much from the past when the peasants submitted to the lords. I am not sure whether I enjoy living in this environment. But there are lots of energies to keep one curious.



UNKNOWN FORCES, 2007 HD/HDV, 4-channel video, courtesy the artist

RI: What kind of films do you remember watching in your hometown theater?

AW: Epic (historical, mostly about Thai-Burma war) and disaster (earthquake and other natural disasters, thai-style), and monsters, animals (crocodile, snake-head lady...).

RI: Can you talk about your interest in pop music and culture and its role in your work?

AW: As you can see, I put everything I like in my films—people, location, music, dialogues, etcetera. I even brought my dogs on the set to film them. They are not so much about the story as about the mixture of these ingredients. So there is no rule regarding putting some songs in. I like a few music labels here and the owner of one generously gave me lots of CDs. I am also thinking about producing a Kick the Machine album where the cast and crew would join in for fun.

RI: I'm interested in your beginnings as a filmmaker and artist. I know you studied architecture as an undergraduate student. When and how did you come to make films and, later, installations? What interests you about each?

AW: I knew I was into movies when I was in high school, at the peak of sci-fi, adventure films like *ET* and *Indiana Jones*. But I wasn't interested in film schools here because they are far away! And also there is this notion in Thailand that you have to graduate from certain universities to be accepted. I boycotted the idea and looked for a university in my hometown.

There was this new architectural facility opening. Since I was also interested in beautiful buildings, I enrolled in that, thinking I could make my own movies later. Anyway, architecture is quite similar to film I guess. Films like Peter Greenaway's are like buildings. I videotaped little things while I was an architecture student. I designed a film studio as my thesis—it was a way to get to know the filmmaking process. Regarding film/video installation, I don't differentiate them. It is just that installation allows me to focus on feelings and abstractions that cannot be presented in a linear, narrative form. But the process of making is similar. I use the same crew and cast most of the time.



Tropical Malady, 2004, 35mm film, TRT: 118 minutes, courtesy the artist

RI: You received your MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and now live and work in Bangkok. Why did you decide to return to Thailand after school?

AW: The experience in Chicago taught me that Thailand has so many untapped resources. I also learned that I can only make films from direct experiences. A big chunk of my life is at home.

RI: Before a film is screened in a Thai theater, the royal anthem plays to honor the King. Why did you make an anthem for the Frieze Art Fair?

AW: We always have rituals for every event, from growing a new crop of rice to enacting a new house. In this case, my anthem simply honors going to a cinema.

RI: The western model of religion adopted by the United States separates church and state. In Thailand, the institution of the monarchy has deep ties to Buddhism. How do you think this affects people's relationship to their national identity and to contemporary culture at large?

AW: The country at its core is quite weak to sail in this global commercialized order. People need a savior, at least spiritually. We believe in accumulating good karma for the ever better next lives. Our identity is defined by our obedience and devotion to goodness. So we blissfully submit to this idea of god-king as our national identity because this monarch echoes the abundance of justice, wealth and happiness of Sukhothai era. So we have a unique contemporary culture where the integrity of the king influences people's lifestyles.



The Anthem, 2006, 35mm film, TRT: 5 minutes, courtesy the artist

RI: When you set out to make *Ghost of Asia* (2005), you invited local children to direct the actor who plays the ghost. Is there a connection between this film and the ones you used to watch as a child?

AW: We never thought about a popular genre. *The Adventure of Iron Pussy* (2004) is more relevant in that regard. For *Ghost of Asia*, we were doing it as a reaction to the tsunami event. We didn't want to focus on the loss and sadness. We just want to see the kids' imagination of what one can do while being alive.

RI: When you were younger, you watched movies about the Thai-Burma conflict. In *Blissfully Yours* (2002), you also address the tensions between these two countries in your own way. How was the conflict portrayed in these older films? How do you feel they differ from your own attempt to grapple with the situation?

AW: For the past films, the grandeur was in the set and the number of killings. For *Blissfully Yours*, there is nothing grand about it except love. And it is the love between a normal young Thai girl and a not quite normal Burmese guy. Let's say I believe in my lifetime, politically, the Thai-Burma relationship will never be consummated.



Blissfully Yours, 2002, 35mm film, TRT: 125 minutes, courtesy the artist

RI: You mentioned that *Tropical Malady* was more a journey into one's mind than a journey into an actual jungle. Can you elaborate on this idea?

AW: I was quite contemplative while shooting the night scenes of that film. I wasn't thinking much about the narrative, of the guy walking in the jungle. I was thinking more about my love experiences. It was a strange feeling because the nighttime makes working like this like a dream, or a nightmare. Again, it is not about narrative, of where he is going. But it is about being lost in the character's mind, as he cannot rely on his vision.

RI: You dedicate *Worldly Desires* (2005) to "the memories of filmmaking in the jungle during the year 2001-2005." While a cast and crew go about shooting a love story against the backdrop of the Thai jungle, another camera records the memorable moments in between takes—the candid conversation between individuals, a young man dancing down a dirt road—which aren't necessarily part of the narrative. What is the relationship between this nostalgia for the jungle and the title of the work?

AW: I was thinking I had had enough of the jungle, so I wanted to go there again and do something without much planning. It is like when you want to quit smoking, you just smoke and smoke until your body gives out. Then you throw the cigarettes away. So I smoked the jungle. I tried to capture its allures, tried to understand why it fascinated me, layer it with my favorite pop song to sugarcoat the experience to the max. Incidentally, the work was commissioned by a festival in Korea. I stole a Buddhist book from a hotel there and in it I found the phrase "worldly desires." Obviously I went into the jungle not to shoot the love story, but with the idea of shooting it. It is to cure the desire. But I guess it didn't work.

RI: In your statement about *UNKNOWN FORCES* (2007) you write that the work is "a tribute to our land and our countryman after a political maelstrom of 2006," but you've also called it a comedy. Can you talk about the humor you find in the circumstances surrounding the work?



Tropical Malady, 2004, 35mm film, TRT: 118 minutes, courtesy the artist

AW: In the course of our political history, I feel like the citizens are part of a grand comedy directed by a few businessmen and the soldiers who call themselves politicians. We are famously advertised for our Siamese Smiles while in fact our life's condition has not much to smile about. It might be the drunken smiles to forget the situation. Our condition reminds me of a cartoon where a sleepwalking cat zigzags his way above a high-rise construction site, never to fall to his death. In *UNKNOWN FORCES*, I just focus on the idea of being drunken on happiness on the roads, the artery of the city. It is important that these roads are rocky and are perpetually polluted.

RI: Your show at REDCAT is your first solo exhibition in the United States. What prompted you to make *UNKNOWN FORCES* for this particular location and at this particular moment in time?

AW: I was thinking about narrative forms when I visited CalArts and REDCAT. I wanted to make a comedy because that's what I like about American movies—the best for spectacular or Vaudeville style narratives. Something very simple, direct, and free. Then it evolved when I got back to Thailand, where the politics were becoming heated. It came to the point that I would like to make a political feature about several aspects of living there under threat, but I couldn't, because I could be murdered or jailed. There exist too many taboos. So I drafted this series called *UNKNOWN FORCES*. I wanted to start with the REDCAT installation as a celebration of this concept. For me it still retains a comedic and cynical nature but with a dark core. So I involved people I know, my actors and the music that states this concept of drunkenness—happiness under the sun, the wild wind, the rocky road. It operates like a discotheque—to dance, to forget.



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REDCAT (Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater)

PRODUCTION OF

Kick the Machine Films

APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

Born 1970, Bangkok, Thailand

Lives and works in Bangkok

EDUCATION

MFA, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 1997

BA in Architecture, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand, 1994

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2006

FAITH, Liverpool Biennial

14th Vila do Conde Festival, Solar Cinematic Art Gallery, Vila do Conde, Portugal

Grey Flags, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, New York

La force de l'art, Grand Palais, Paris

2005

9th Baltic Triennial of International Art, Vilnius, Lithuania

Wonderbox, 11th Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement, Geneva

Politics of Fun, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin

2004

Do you believe in reality? Taipei Biennial, Taipei

Slow Rushes, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania

Busan Biennial, Busan, Korea

Mix Max, Artsonje Center, Seoul

2003

Under Construction, Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo

Time After Time: Asia and Our Moment, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

2002

Pause, Project 304, Gwangju Biennale

What? A Tale in Free Images, Bruggemuseum, Belgium

2001

Ecofugal, 7th International Istanbul Biennial

Traversée, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

Tirana Biennale, Albania

Narratives, Intercross Creative Center, Sapporo, Japan

SELECTED AWARDS

2005

Silpatorn Award, Office of Contemporary Arts, Ministry of Culture of Thailand

Special Jury Prize, Singapore International Film Festival, Singapore

Best Film and Special Jury Prize, The xx^o International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, Turin

2004

Prix du Jury, Cannes Film Festival

Grand Prize, Tokyo Filmex

Age d'or Prize, Cine'de'couvertes

Critics Award, São Paulo International Film Festival

2003

The International Critics' Award (FIPRESCI Prize), Buenos Aires Film Festival

Silver Screen Award: Young Cinema Award, Singapore International Film Festival

2002

Prix Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival

Golden Alexander Award, Thessaloniki Film Festival, Thessaloniki, Greece

Grand Prize, Tokyo Filmex



UNKNOWN FORCES is funded in part by the Asian Cultural Council; Camera Corner, Bangkok; North Star World, Bangkok; and Siamlite Film Service, Bangkok.

Additional support provided by the James Thompson Foundation, Bangkok; R23; and Smallroom, Bangkok.

Cover: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *UNKNOWN FORCES*, 2007 HD/HDV, 4-channel video, courtesy the artist



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