

Navigating Multiple Perspectives: DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus at MAIIAM

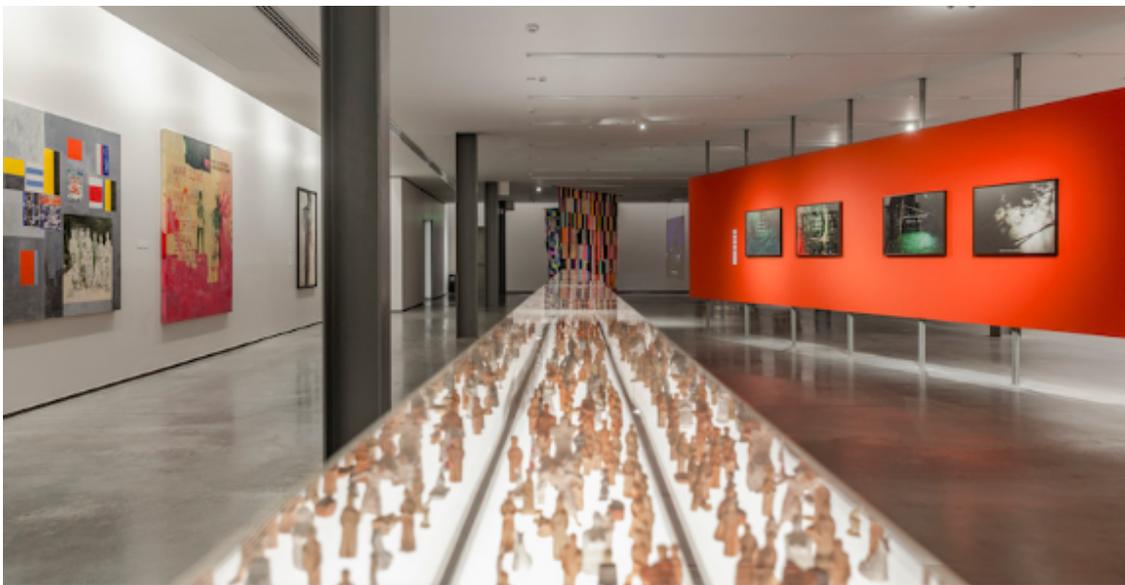
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Installation View of DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Musuem

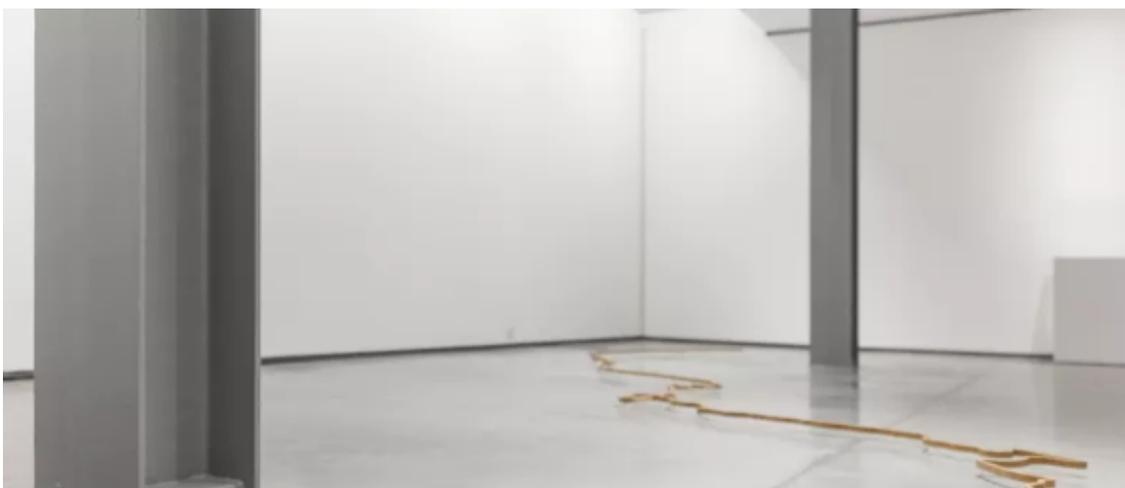


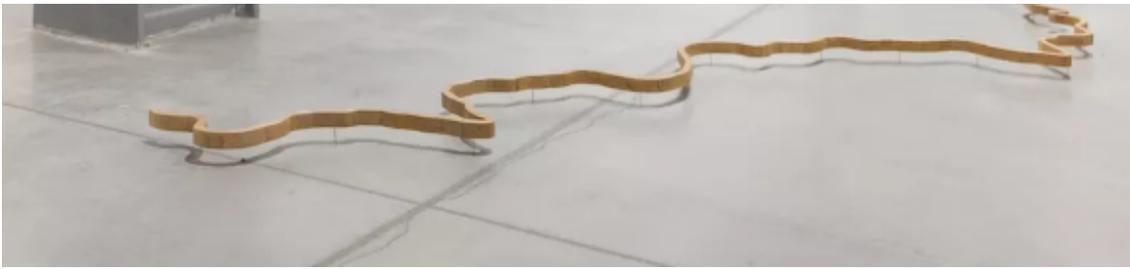


Installation shot at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Musuem



Nipan Oranniwesna, Signal



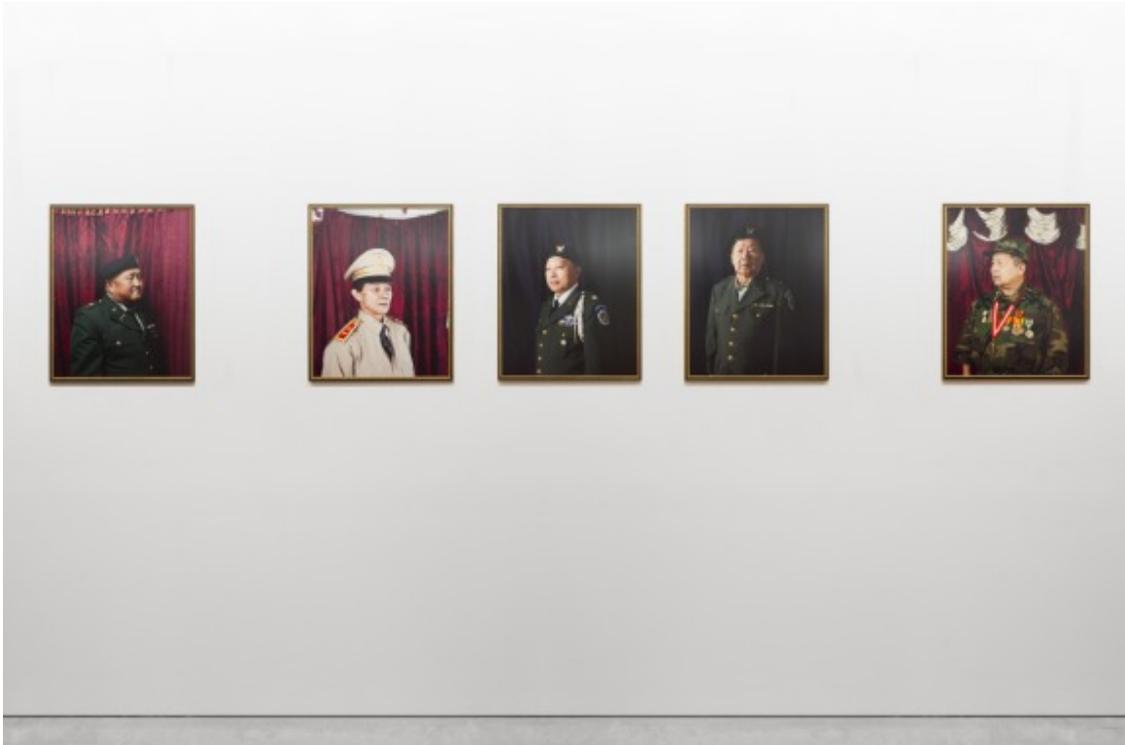


Nipan Oranniwesna, 2041



Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, Fabric





Pao Houa Her, Hmong Veterans, Attention series, 2012-2014. Archival digital inkjet print, hand-painted archival glaze, 127 × 101.6 cm



Installation View of Jakkai Siributr's work





Nontawat Numbenchapol , Mr SHADOW

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Naima Morelli discusses the show DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus at MAIIAM in Chiang Mai with the curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani, as well as the importance of tackling geopolitical change in Southeast Asia from a variety of angles.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of MAIIAM





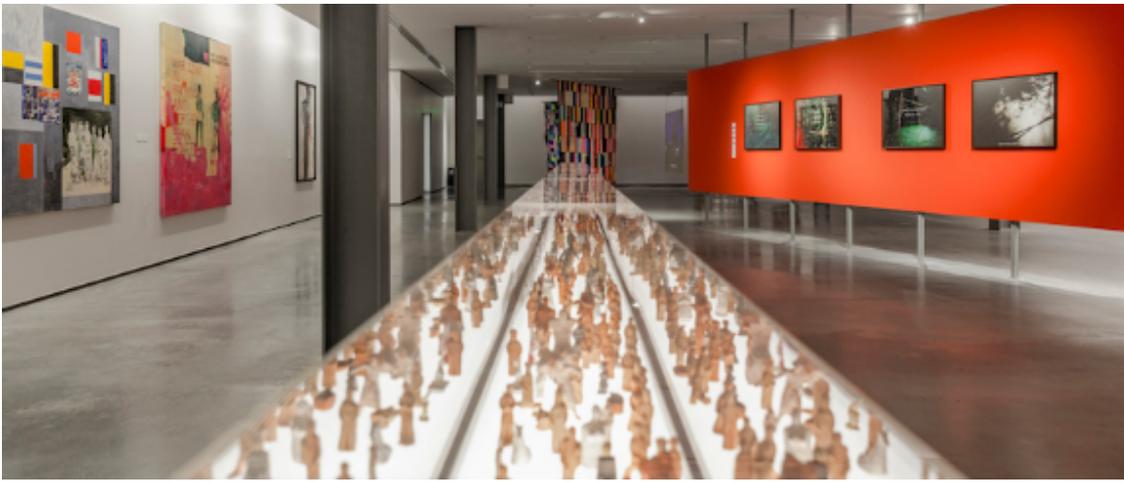
Installation View of *DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus* at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum

“This is not a show to survey diasporic art in Southeast Asia,” says the curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani about the show *DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus* at MAIIAM in Chiang Mai. “This is a show that wants to talk about the diaspora in Southeast Asia through the medium of contemporary art.” This is no subtle distinction. We are using art as a catalyst as we walk around the large space of the Chiang Mai private museum, and our reflections and thinking wraps and unfolds in a slower and deeper rhythm than we are used to in an era of fast-paced news.

DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus questions a confined sense of identity that is represented by borders or the idea of nation states. In the show, we see a balance of artists who have experienced the diaspora and carried out research into this topic. What emerges is a multitude of experiences where personal narratives become inextricably intermingled with the wider regional narratives, as this is almost always inevitable for contemporary Southeast Asian artists.

“The fact that socio-political themes are often found in the work of artists from Southeast Asia is no truism,” says Loredana. “It is, indeed, a very important point which is worth highlighting. The fragmentation that started with colonialism and its arbitrary establishment of borders has made Southeast Asia quite peculiar. Consequentially, it gives way to the dynamics of independence and conflict.” Given the complexity of the geopolitical scenario in this part of the world, Loredana decided to take the Vietnam War as the starting point for the timeline that is considered in the exhibition.





Installation shot at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum

Loredana has an emotional connection with the theme of the diaspora. “I’m neither an exile nor a refugee, but I have been living far from my native country, Italy, for more than 20 years now.” Moreover, she has been tackling the theme of displacement in Southeast Asia since 2016. This has been done through her work as a curator in shows like *Breaking and Reconstructing the Circle: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia* in London, which referred to the idea of breaking the circle of life and trying to retrace it, and *INTERLACE* in New York, which was done with three Cambodian diaspora artists. These reflections led her to create a soon to be published anthology that collects ten essays by academics, oriented towards the diasporic subjectivity of the artists and their visual narrative.

Loredana decided to create three curatorial propositions for *DIASPORA*, which have been her guidelines when she has selected artworks and created a narrative around them. “Exit, Exile and Exodus all have the Latin suffix of ‘ex’ in common, which means ‘out of’. I have been looking at the literature on the Diaspora, which started with the postcolonial studies of the 90s. The crucial theme is the exit from the country, the need to maintain a memory of the homeland and the hope of coming back.”

An example of this “Exit” is the 4 channels video-installation *Signal* by the Thai artist Nipan Oranniwesna. Here, we see a Myanmar worker running in circles. He represents a reality that is all around us, which we know but fail to recognise. The artist carried out a lot of research into the migrant workers who cross the border from Myanmar to Thailand without legal papers and start to work there. They contribute to a workforce that has become necessary to Southeast Asia’s economic system.



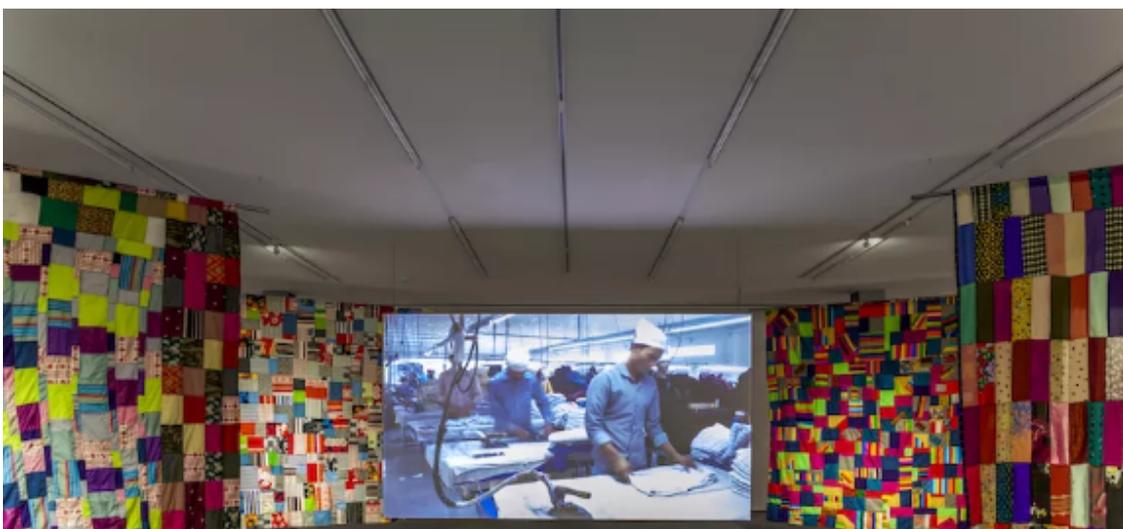


Nipan Oranniwesna, Signal



Nipan Oranniwesna, 2041

Another Thai artist who looked at the exit theme is Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, who created an installation of fabric that is complemented by a video. Over a one-year period, Piyarat researched the illegal migrant work that takes place in garment factories. The piece was realised specifically for the show and acquired by the MAIIAM, along with some of the other works from *DIASPORA*.





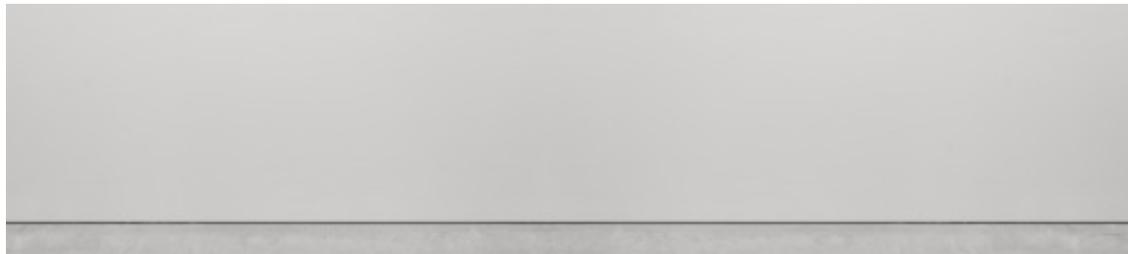
Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, Fabric

The theme of exile is a thorny one in Thailand, as there are many people from different social strata who are forced to quickly leave the country after finding themselves chased down by the military regime. Paphonsak La-or presented a series of portraits called *Far from Home*, where the facial traits of 29 Thai political exiles are fused together to reconstruct a series of unrecognisable new portraits that look like mugshots. On the opposite wall of the museum, facing these pictures, are the photographs of Pao Houa Her. She is recognised for her provocative photographs of the Hmong, the indigenous people of Laos who immigrated to the United States following the Vietnam War. In *DIASPORA*, she presented Hmong Vietnam War veterans in full regalia.



Paphonsak La-or, Far from Home





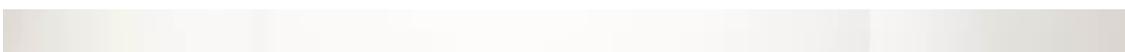
Pao Houa Her, Hmong Veterans, Attention series, 2012-2014. Archival digital inkjet print, hand-painted archival glaze, 127 × 101.6 cm

Current events mean that the Exodus leitmotiv is perhaps the one that is most discussed in the news. In Southeast Asia, this has translated into the great human fluxes that came out of both Vietnam, as a result of the war, and Cambodia, because of the Khmer Rouge. Today, of course, we see this exemplified by the Rohingya refugee crisis. Thai artist Jakkai Siributr narrated the exodus from Myanmar in his tapestries that were sewed by migrants. While these fabric wall hangings have an attractive folk aspect and look naïf at first glance, they reveal a disturbing nature if you observe them more attentively. These hangings, in fact, depict terrible scenes of people in a crowded boat and villages set on fire.



Installation View of Jakkai Siributr's work

We can see that the show isn't really interested in taking political sides, but rather it positions itself as a reflection of what is happening today by presenting contrasting points of view. An example of this is Nontawat Numbenchapol's documentary on the shady side of the Shan army state that looks into the military training of youngsters and drug trafficking. If we juxtapose the video with the work of Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, which tackles his experience as a Shan exile, it is clear there is more than one side to the argument.





Nontawat Numbenchapol , Mr SHADOW

“As a curator and as a viewer, you must learn how to navigate these potentially conflicting spaces,” says Loredana. The fact that the museum is private has helped with the presentation of these themes, which are a bit taboo and usually hidden from the public eye. “Of course, you must be aware of the situation and take it into account when you make certain choices. Censorship, even if it’s not called that, is quite rigid in Thailand, especially around the theme of the military rule and the monarchy.”

Not shying away from these challenging discussions, the show was complemented by a series of screenings and panel discussions. The next of these events will happen on the 19th of May with the launch of the catalogue. We can safely say that the aim of *DIASPORA Exit, Exile, Exodus* is not to suggest solutions, but rather to make us receptive to a variety of narratives that are able to reconcile the opposite viewpoints within ourselves and move us towards a more rounded understanding.

Artists on show: Abdul Abdullah, Aditya Novali, Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, Anida Yoeu Ali, Ho Tzu Nyen, Jakkai Siributr, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Nipan Oranniwesna, Nontawat Numbenchapol, Pao Houa Her, Paphonsak La-or, Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, Prapat Jiwarangsan, Ryan Villamael, Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, Svay Sareth, The Maw Naing.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’ introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

#Abdul Abdullah#Aditya Novali#Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan#Anida Yoeu Ali#Ho Tzu Nyen#Jakkai Siributr#Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba#MAIIAM#Naima Morelli#Nindityo Adipurnomo#Nipan Oranniwesna#Nontawat Numbenchapol#Pao Houa Her#Paphonsak La-or#Piyarat Piyapongwiwat#Prapat Jiwangsan#Ryan Villamael#Sawangwongse Yawngwe#Svay Sareth#The Maw Naing
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