

## Natee Utarit: Untitled poems of Théodore Rousseau | COBO Social

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Installation View of Untitled Poems of Théodore Rousseau





Natee Utarit, Gigi, 120 x 100 cm., Oil on canvas, 2017

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Natee Utarit, Sebasten, 120 x 100 cm, Oil on canvas, 2017.

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Natee Utarit in Fontainebleau in 2017

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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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*Natee Utarit's show at Tang Contemporary in Bangkok, called Untitled Poems of Théodore Rousseau, opens up a space and allows us to step away from the human drama of the world.*

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Installation View of Untitled Poems of Théodore Rousseau

Do you know any artist nowadays who has the time to put their easel in a forest and devote hours of their time painting the trunk of a tree? Between the many demands of galleries and collectors, vernissages to attend, emails to answer and paperwork to produce for the next residency application, there is hardly time in the art world to even take a walk in the city park. Forget about the “en plein air” romanticism, not in today’s world.

All of these considerations were going on in my mind when I first encountered Natee Utarit’s exhibition *Untitled poems of Théodore*

encountered Natee's earlier exhibition, entitled *poems of Rousseau*, at the last Art Stage Singapore at the beginning of the year. Walking past the realistic depictions of oak trees in a special section of the fair, I could hardly tell it was his work. Those big canvases of earthy colors were a universe away from the work that he is mostly known for, namely his *Altarpieces*, which are canvases full of symbolism, representing human drama.

A conceptual painter at heart, Natee has experimented with many different approaches over his career. His previous production touched on landscape, art history and a number of subjects, and was impeccably realized with a painting technique that is rarely encountered nowadays.







Natee Utarit, Gigi, 120 x 100 cm., Oil on canvas, 2017

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I glanced at the work in the exhibition with nothing more than fleeting curiosity, as it felt like Henry David Thoreau was trying to have a conversation with me at a Nicky Minaji concert. It was simply impossible.

But was that really down to the setting of the fair or was it me who wasn't ready for that work?

What occurred between then and the exhibition's presentation at Tang Contemporary in Bangkok (which is taking place on 4-28 October 2018) was for me a fundamental Italian summer, which I spent on the Mediterranean sea rather than in the depth of a French



forest like Natee. That experience enabled me to look at the artist's new series with a new understanding. Suddenly, I knew by experience what he was talking about, beyond the peculiar form that he represented in his paintings.

In the Forest of Fontainebleau, Natee remarried the world. He stepped away for a while from the human drama that is inherent in every social interaction and accessed a much slower, much quieter world, where he was not continuously bombarded by images and input from contemporary society. This allowed Natee to focus on the smaller folds of reality. It is similar to when you concentrate on subtle variations in your breathing while meditating. If you get to apply that same heightened attention to reality, everything around you transforms and takes the form of childlike wonder at the simplest things, like the sky, a sprinkle of light and the color of moss.

In this framework, the exhibition provides us with a doorway to this other reality, a space of depth rather than width, of slowing down rather than speeding up, a world of being rather than doing, and forgetting time rather than frantically trying to be on time. Natee's work calls on us to overturn our usual way of existing in the world.

**When did you first come in contact with Théodore Rousseau's work, and what is about him that was particularly meaningful for you?**

My earliest encounter with Théodore Rousseau's works was when I studied at university. The artists associated with Barbizon School are of particular interest to me as they play a vital role in building a solid foundation for the ensuing proliferation of Impressionistic landscape art that has had a formative influence on aspiring art students in my country.

I am interested in landscape painting and always use it as an artistic means to convey my ideas and perspectives. I completely fell under the spell of Théodore Rousseau's landscape artwork as a result of his endeavors to accentuate the genuine inspiration that is expressed in landscape painting, and successfully translate it into an assortment of memorable objets d'art over a turbulent period, during which time the role of art criticism was increasingly reshaping the landscape of art history.

When it comes to landscape painting and its rich history, frequent references to Théodore Rousseau's pieces are an integral part of my dialogue. I fell back on the essence of his works for the historical context of landscape art which I referenced in my pieces from 2000 to 2002.

**Why did you decide to use Rousseau's experience as a mediator between you and the direct experience of nature?**

11. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 1991, 86, 1001-1011.

I have always looked up to Théodore Rousseau. As I said, I am fascinated that he held up well under pressure in an era when barbed critiques were the norm. At that time, landscape art in France was challenged by art criticism based on the tenets of the art critic André Félibien, who suggested that the sole purpose of landscape painting was to be a backdrop. He said it merely had decorative value and was a far cry from historical painting.

However, Théodore Rousseau proved art circles wrong by defending landscape art and stating that it could be an ideal vehicle for artists to express their inner thoughts and exceptional viewpoints. He put it in the same league as other genres of painting. He showed the courage of his convictions by swimming against the tide, which bolstered morale and provided inspiration for future artists, as shown by the flourishing progress of Impressionism in subsequent years. This has had a profound impact on me.

At the same time, I am an ardent follower of Théodore Rousseau's other kinds of work, which are intensely imbued with a sense of poetic melancholy. In my opinion, attitudes towards the value of art that were prevalent in the 18th century still exist in today's contemporary art world but lurk beneath the surface.





Natee Utarit, Sebasten, 120 x 100 cm, Oil on canvas, 2017.

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**Although you have familiarized yourself with Théodore Rousseau's works, you wrote that your "line of sight is not in the same league as his". Can you explain this difference?**



I gave that opinion because I haven't followed suit. I only interweave the historical contexts of landscape art, his oeuvre and the core of myself as a member of the post-colonial generation in Southeast Asia. I have my own subject matters that are associated with his context. In other words, I borrow his context in order to communicate my own story in similar circumstances.

Although my works have themes that run parallel with his story and works, there is an eventual point of convergence regarding the definition of landscape painting that is different in terms of time and place.

**Can you tell us a bit about the process you use to realize these paintings? I gather it is a combination of working en plein air and working in the studio.**

As to my own working style, I have adopted both an en plein air approach and a studio painting approach for a large-scale art project. I painted small oil paintings in the Forest of Fontainebleau and later created drawings in early summer, 2017. I then came back to work on the oak paintings in mid-autumn and late winter. At seasonal intervals, I returned to my studio in Bangkok to complete other art projects, including my landscape paintings. I have worked incessantly on my creations and used various source materials for art projects at my studio that have ranged from sketches and

photographs to using my abiding memories of places. First and foremost, I am a firm believer in the hands-on experience that is indispensable when you are creating landscape paintings.

**You decided to pay a visit to the Forest of Fontainebleau upon your completion of the *Altarpieces*. What drew you there?**

During the production of the *Altarpieces*, from 2012 to 2016, I developed an unhealthy obsession with the ethereal world to such an extent that I could not maintain a delicate balance of a visualization of pureness. I worked in a studio that was crammed with male and female models, mannequins and what has been called a heightened theatricality. The chaotic mess induced a desperate yearning for unsophisticated and straightforward communication.

To me, the unadulterated perception and aesthetic interaction of the eyes are an essential prerequisite for the job of an artist, especially in modern times when we are bombarded with a myriad of pictures and images. They exist in all forms of media and are passed on and altered to an extent that I feel our definition of 'reality' has been distorted beyond the stretch of our imagination. I have an overwhelmingly strong urge to push a reset button for my artistic integrity as I prefer to create landscape art without a so-called blurry vision.





Natee Utarit in Fontainebleau in 2017

**You wrote that you once had a surprisingly different perspective on Rousseau's works while you were in the middle of the forest and developed a deeper understanding of landscape art. What happened during that visit to the forest and how did it change you?**

I had an enigmatic experience in the Forest of Fontainebleau, which turned into one of my most unforgettable memories. Once you are in close contact with the Barbizon landscape paintings, you form a

mental image of those paintings being overlapped by breathtaking scenery in the Forest on an expedition.

One day, at the crack of dawn in late autumn, I caught a glimpse of what I thought was the same scenery that Théodore Rousseau experienced in the forest. A ray of evening sunlight was glittering on the oak trees and some gilded sparkles showed against a backdrop of dark blue sky. This vista lasted a few minutes before darkness descended.

I remember that I had goosebumps and inexplicably gained a penetrating insight into how things were in particular ways. It was like I had discovered a magical portal enabling me to foster a close relationship with the forest that made an indelible impression on my mind.

**Can you tell us about your daily routines during your residency in France, and how did you readapt back to city life and working in your Bangkok studio after this intense experience?**

A stroll through the verdant forest in search of alluring trees at 6am was a part of my daily routine throughout my one-month residency. I firstly took pictures of the trees to locate where they were, while my wife was cooking breakfast. Then, I went home to prepare my drawing tools and returned to the spots I had marked to embark on my oil paintings. I repeated this routine in the afternoon and made



my way home at 7pm.

As I said, first-hand experience is of paramount importance as we can establish a deeply embedded memory if we can assimilate ourselves with such an experience. I drew on all the source materials in order to guarantee the completion of the creative projects at my studio in Bangkok. I had to make sure that everything I had “brought” from the Forest was put to good use, including the sketch drawings, photographs, videos, and most notably, the images that were mentally imprinted on my mind. I attach greater significance to olfactory and tactile memories. While the work at the studio was keeping me fully occupied, I still had vivid recollections of the moisture in the air and natural sound that echoed throughout the woods. With the passing of time, these explicit memories will certainly be diluted. Therefore, I will need to take a walk down memory lane in the forest when I feel that some of the memories are beginning to fade away.

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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 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.

Asia, Europe and Australia.

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Rousseau

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