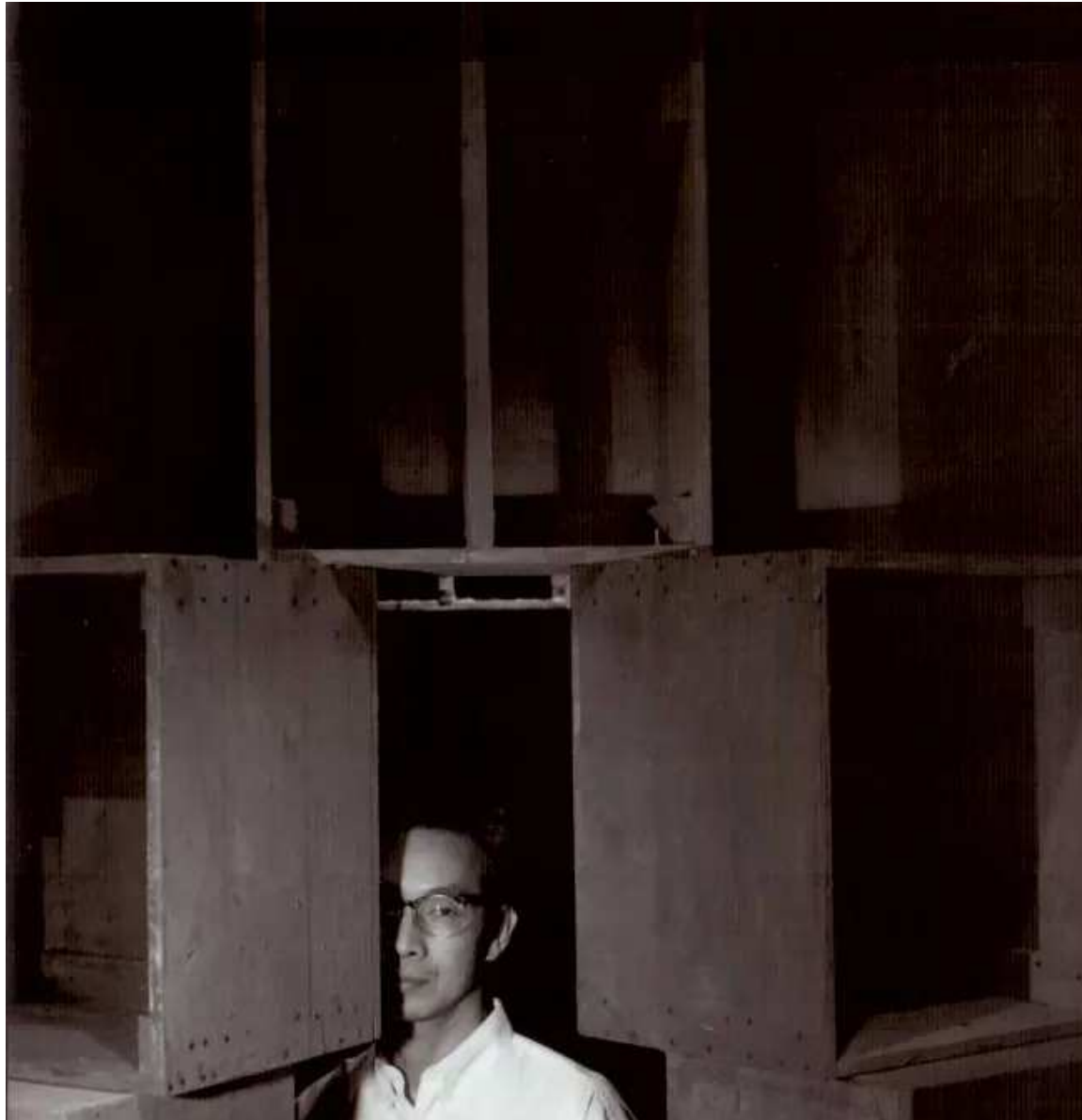


5 Thai Artists that Connect Us to Spirituality | COBO Social

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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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Thai contemporary artists express spirituality in many different forms, allowing us to find depth and meaning in a society that is driven by shallow needs.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artists

While we know that today's art world is prey to economic forces, there is a counter-balancing element that we can't ignore because it gives both meaning and value to our existence. This is spirituality.

Contrary to what we might think, spirituality is no idle, lofty concept, just for reclusive monks or green-juice drinkers. Indeed, during the last decade, awareness of spiritual values has increased globally. Unlike in the past, this doesn't take the form of organized religion, though it might borrow elements of it. Instead, it is closer to a philosophy that can be practised while we live our everyday lives. All of this shows up in the work of contemporary artists, who are bringing depth to an art system that's moved by the dollar.

In no other realm is this more evident than in Thai contemporary art. When it comes to the Kingdom, contemporary artists have always had a strong urge to talk about spirituality through both personal experience and collective memories. Buddhism, local traditions and Western influences all produce a unique blend in their work.

As the lecturer Ohm Pattanachoti points out in his research, in some cases, Buddhist artistic themes and concepts that belong to the Buddhist philosophy are remixed and incorporated by artists in their own pre-existing work. In other cases, contemporary art represents a direct continuation of Buddhist art. Finally, there is an expression of spirituality in Thailand that goes beyond the country's religious tradition. This is influenced and inspired by Western spiritual art, whether that is abstract art or contemporary photography, which bears testimony to the inner changes within the

individual.

Here at CoBo, we have selected five artists with very different practices and approaches to the idea of spirituality. Their work represents a conduit to a more profound dimension of being.

Kamin Lertchaiprasert: understanding life



Art to Kamin Lertchaiprasert is a way of giving form to his questions about the meaning of life. An avid reader and a Vipassana meditator, his continuous inquiry has led him to study philosophy, religion, science, art, and culture.

However, he is anything but distant from everyday reality and society. In 1998, he co-founded the land project (now the land foundation) with Rirkrit Tiravanija. This involved the conversion of rice fields into a destination for site-specific art and architectural projects, creative residencies, and agricultural and artisanal workshops.

projects, creative residencies, and agricultural and artisanal workshops.

Another example of his concern with the intersection of both the spiritual and the material plane is his famous work, *Sitting (Money)*, which is now in the Guggenheim's collection. Consisting of meditative figures pieced together from decommissioned Bank of Thailand banknotes, it conflates spiritual well-being with material wealth.

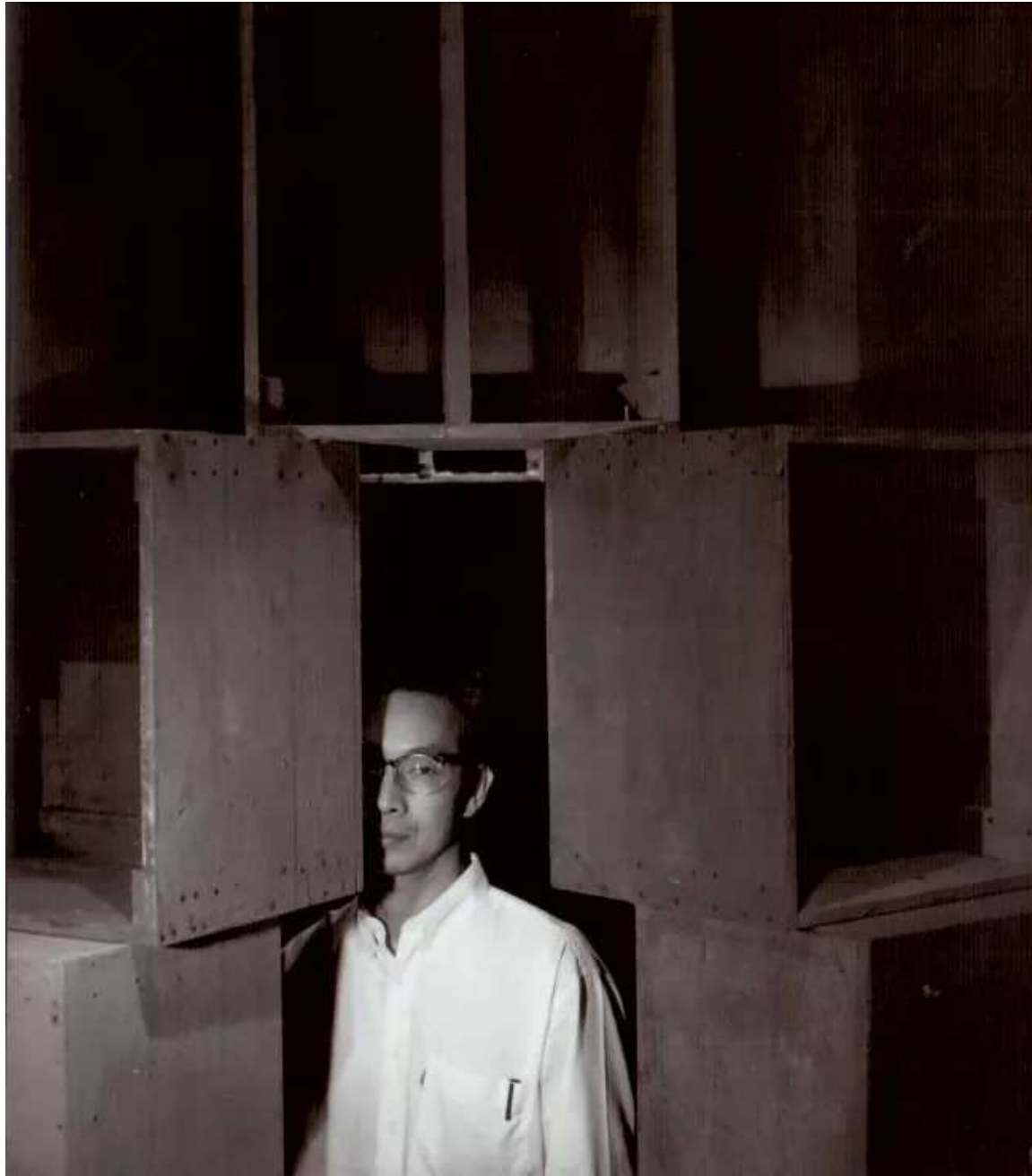
For Kamin, art is a ritualistic practice that aims to achieve a greater understanding of oneself, nature, and the world as a whole. In his 1990 work, *Time and Experience*, the artist created a painting and print every day for a year. He painted by applying paint directly with his hands onto each canvas, wiping the excess onto his feet, which he then used to make the prints.

About the artist:

Kamin Lertchaiprasert was born in Thailand in 1964 and currently lives and works in Chiang Mai. He graduated with a Bachelor in Fine Art (Printmaking) at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, and was awarded the Young Artist of the Year award in 1987 by the same institution. Devoted to his Buddhist beliefs, Kamin views art as a ritualistic and meditative practice that provides a better understanding of the self and wider environment. Kamin established the land foundation with the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, which uses rice fields as sites for art and architectural projects. His recent exhibitions include *The Timeless Present Moment* (2017) at the MAAIM Contemporary Art Museum, Thailand and *Problem-Wisdom: Thai Art in the 1990s* (2017) at the Queensland Art Gallery, Australia.

Montien Boonma: suffering, presence and surrender





The late Montien Boonma (1953–2000) is one of Thailand's best known and most loved artists. He innovated Thai art, using a new conception of sculpture and installation to

artists. He innovated Thai art, using a new conception of sculpture and installation to portray the country's shift from its previous agrarian economy and culture toward industrialization. Over the years, Montien paired his socio-political engagement with a strong spiritual approach.

His readymades kept on exploring local issues and the human condition from the perspective of Buddhist teachings and different traditions of faith. In his works, which were inspired by a visit to Europe, he incorporates Christian symbolism alongside Buddhist symbolism and architecture.

In his life, the artist experienced many tragic events and the question of suffering and hope were central to his work. Herbs and healing practices were present in his artwork as a metaphor of faith, healing, and surrender to the spiritual realm.

An example of this is *Nature's breath: Arokhayasala*, in which fragile lungs replace bells inside the temple structure, representing the human body and its frailty. Breathing here is a reference to the physical link between the inside and outside of the body and the spiritual link between mind and body that is established through mindfulness – the awareness of breathing in and out in the practice of meditation.

About the artist:

Montien Boonma was born in 1953 in Bangkok, Thailand, where he also died in 2000. Originally trained as a painter in Bangkok, Rome, and Paris, he is better known for his sculptures and installations. Exhibitions of Boonma's work have been held around the world, including *Arokhayasala Installasjoner* at Tenersensmuseum in Oslo; *Montien Boonma* at Art Front Gallery in Tokyo; *Montien Boonma* at Beurdeley & Cie in Paris; and *House of Hope, Deitch Projects* in New York.

Prasert Yodkaew: faith in tradition and technology



The work of the young artist Prasert Yodkaew investigates the intersection between traditional Thai beliefs and science and technology. The artist was trained in traditional art and initially pursued pure, flawless traditional aesthetics by drawing and painting for competitions.

He had his breakthrough when he shifted towards the aesthetic lineage that we associate with the Indonesian artist Heri Dono and the early work of Jim Supangkat. Prasert's installations and paintings comprised of mixed media, where the elements of traditional Thai art met the object trouvé. While some of his works can be read as a commentary on contemporary society, we can also find a strong spiritual background that is rooted in the mythological figures of the tradition.

An example of this was found in his 2014/2015 show at Tang Gallery, called *Predetermined*, where traditional Thai beliefs and faith met the promised advances of science and genetic modification in a series of surreal works. He depicts mythological animals in his paintings and sculptures through Himavanta forest stories. In his painting,

Deva 12, he depicts a fallen deva (a divine being, according to Hindu-Buddhist cosmology), with wings made out of a plug, a Chinese spoon, a bidet spray, used toothbrush, plastic fork, an amulet, nuts and bolts, and some wires wrapped roughly in a plastic cover.

About the artist:

Prasert Yodkaew was born in 1987, Thailand. He studied at the College of Fine Arts before taking a Bachelor's and Master's at Silpakorn University. His solo exhibitions have included Predetermined Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand (2015), How to get back to heaven, Tang Contemporary Art, BEIJING, China (2013), Sciencefaith, White Space Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand (2010), Sciencefaith, Project Space Gallery, LUANG PRABANG, Laos (2012). In 2016, he participated in the Bangkok-Quebec exchange programme at Oeildepoisson, Center of production and distribution in current and multidisciplinary art Quebec, Canada.

Kamolpan Chotivichai: sacred beings and spirit objects





In his highly aesthetic photographic self-portraits, Kamolpan Chotvichai addresses issues of identity and gender. On a formal level, the artist challenges the limitations of the two-dimensional image by hand-cutting the photographic prints in an extreme gesture. The resulting ribbons of material, which are similar to frayed cloth, form a dialogue with the black and white bodies depicted in the picture, creating artwork where Francesca Woodman meets Lucio Fontana.

The work is based on her understanding of the Buddhist teaching of obliterating one's

Her work is based on her understanding of the Buddhist teaching of contemplating one's own identity, called anatta (no self). Indeed, all the pictures are faceless, and the cuts represent a further stripping away of her physical form during the process of her relinquishing attachment to her body.

Restlessness, a 2015 work that was showcased at *Fragility of the Self* at [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#), depicts a figure sitting in an open squat. A large triangle is chopped into the top of the image that separates the head from the body. The long strips cut into the print are treated like yarn. Woven down to the bottom of the image, they form a curtain that covers the artist's torso. The physical unease of the pose is juxtaposed with the gentle treatment of the photograph itself, which creates a space to contemplate the title.

Chotvichai's photographs are explorations of angst, as well as its causes and cures, as viewed by Buddhism. What started as being the artist's own personal look into Eastern thought, is now open to all viewers and it invites them to move beyond the surface of things and to meditate.

About the artist:

Kamolpan Chotvichai was born in 1986 in Bangkok, where she currently lives. She received her MFA degree at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, and has since been awarded numerous art prizes and scholarships. Kamolpan Chotvichai has participated in numerous exhibitions and won many prizes and bursaries, including first prize (printmaking) in the 58th National Exhibition of Art, Bangkok, 2012. Her most recent solo exhibition was EMPTINESS, Ardel Gallery of Modern Art, Bangkok, 2013. Her group exhibitions include Anthropos Bangkok, Numthong Gallery, 2013; Anthropos: Navigating Human Depth in Thai and Singapore Contemporary Art, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore, 2013; The 4th Contemporary Young Artists Exhibition, Los Angeles, 2013; and The International Women Arts Exhibition Lights of Women, Gwangju Museum of Art Kum Namro Wing, Metro Gallery, Korea, 2012. Chotvichai was invited to participate in ON PAPERS – a group art installation that was part of ON PAPERS – Paper & Nature

ON PAPERS, a paper art workshop that was part of ON PAPERS – Paper & Nature exhibition at Tama Art University Museum, Tokyo.

Tawatchai Puntusawasdi: the Veil of Maya



Tawatchai Puntusawasdi's artwork is all about the Veil of Maya, a word that indicates illusion and refers to things that appear to be present but are not what they seem. His artistic research is concerned with reality, which is constantly changing and, thus, is spiritually unreal. Tawatchai exemplifies this concept in monumental forms that skew and contort familiar objects and forms. His installations represent a challenge to both the conventional notions of perception and an objective understanding of the physical world.

The artist works with ordinary materials, including hardwood, slate, organic fibres and

various types of metal.

Tawatchai's interest in navigation, cartography, astronomy and his historical understandings of the universe are married with his representation of alternative states of being. Although his worldview and method are reminiscent of the Italian artist Eliseo Mattiacci. Tawatchai's works are based on a fundamentally Buddhist worldview.

An example of this is his 2018 sculpture, called *Super Moon*, which is composed of hundreds of numbered pieces of copper bolted together. In this work, the artist refers to the phenomena that occur when a new or full moon has reached its closest possible distance to the Earth in its elliptic orbit (perigee), which makes it appear unusually large when viewed from Earth. The presence of a supermoon has been linked to the occurrence of natural disasters, including storms, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. A lack of evidence to support this theory has created mystery and intrigue. A student of Montien Boonma, Tawatchai tackles philosophical and spiritual questions about uncertainty and transcendence by transforming them into a tangible form.

About the artist:

Tawatchai Puntusawasdi (b. 1971) pursued his art education at Chiang Mai University (BFA) and then Silpakorn University (MFA). Based in Chiang Mai, he produces architectural three-dimensional sculptures in hardwood, slate, organic fibres, and various types of metal. In his Tilted series – ongoing since 2002 – the artist plays with visual perception and physical balance in order to challenge the audience's understanding of volume and space. Tawatchai has exhibited in Japan, the United States, Europe, Australia, Taiwan, and the wider region of Southeast Asia. He has participated in both the Venice and Sydney Biennales and twice been awarded a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.

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.

[#Kamin Lertchaiprasert](#)[#Kamolpan Chotivichai](#)[#Montien Boonma](#)[#Naima Morelli](#)[#Prasert Yodkaew](#)[#Spirituality](#)[#Tawatchai Puntusawasdi](#)[#Thai artist](#)

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