

# Pattana Chuenmana – The belief in the invisible | COBO Social



Pattana Chuenmana, Awaken, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

█ *An eclectic conceptual photographer, Thai artist Pattana Chuenmana*

*creates mysterious, disquieting images which linger in our subconscious.*



Pattana Chuenmana, Awaken, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

**Text: Naima Morelli**

**Images: Courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist.**

When you first encounter the work of Thai artist Pattana Chuenmana, you are confronted by a slightly gloomy sense of mystery. While his medium of choice is photography, the subjects range from abstract to figurative, without any obvious or apparent link.

At the show of his first series, his black and white abstract photographs resemble the painted sketches of the symbolist painters Gustave Moreau and

Odilon Redon, which were printed in black and white in old books. One picture, in particular recalls the familiar Italian landscape of the marble caves of Carrara, or perhaps the high and rocky shores of Cilento.



Pattana Chuenmana, View from my Vintage Car, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

Surprisingly, Pattana photographed neither. The images were none other than the scratched and mangled surfaces of the body of cars after a crash.

At his next exhibition, 'The Overlapping of Beauty and Truth', at Richard Koh Fine Arts, the black and white changed to colour. The prints looked like psychedelic, digital experiments or the interplay of coloured fluids. Of course, Pattana still photographed little details of the wreckages. The kind of minutiae that the passer-by – engulfed by the human tragedy of a car crash – can't take in

It's a paradox, but it is also where the "beauty and truth" of the show's title is to be found. The truth is that beyond dramatic human events, inanimate things still exist. Things don't care. They might even reveal a weird, unsuspected beauty.



Pattana Chuenmana, *The Overlapping of Beauty and Truth*, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

In 2015, at the presentation of Pattana's new series, you approach it with the mindset, accepting that what you see is not actually what is. However, the artist surprises me again with his narrative images. These were recreations of the cover illustrations of pulp novels by Hem Vejakorn, one of Thailand's most influential illustrators and artists.

Hem's visual imaginary was influenced by his rural life in Thailand, when electricity was not widely accessible, and Thai economy was based on agriculture. Thai people relied on torches and lamps and darkness was associated with beliefs and legends. In his series, Pattana translated all this into contemporary life. He discovered that in modern-day Bangkok, the irrational belief in ghosts and demons has now been replaced by a blind belief in science and technology.





Pattana Chuenmana, *The Overlapping of Beauty and Truth*, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

And that's the key to Pattana's diverse body of work. It's the belief in the invisible, into something that is beyond reality as we know it. Something that our science is not able to explain yet. Blind spots, the unknown, this is what is most disquieting in the modern era. We live in cities that are perennially lit, unaccustomed to absolute darkness, absolute silence and even the witnessing of death. And so, death and darkness have been almost removed from our consciousness. And when something hints at their presence, we get chills.

Later, Pattana Chuenmana reveals the invisible and inexplicable are something the artist experienced first-hand, a notion he continuously tries to communicate through his art, which was largely influenced by his childhood.





Pattana Chuenmana, *The Overlapping of Beauty and Truth*, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

“I was born into a family where arts and crafts were highly valued. My grandfather was a sculptor who greatly inspired me. During my studies, I was initially interested in conceptual art. However, when my father bought me a little camera when I was around 15, I started dedicating myself to photography. I took the camera with me everywhere, taking snapshots and pictures, experimenting. I was still a painter at the time, and I initially used those photos as just references for my oils and acrylics.

*When did you then start considering photography an independent medium?*

Shortly afterwards, I realized that photography had a high value in itself. Photography is a medium you can experiment with a lot. I started transferring my interest in abstract painting into my photographs. I found that the abstract in photography is perhaps even more interesting. Because in painting, the abstract consists in the shapes you paint. But in a photo, you need to use something that you have in the real world, and you have to see it as an abstraction.





Pattana Chuenmana, Wave of Nowhere, 2013, Image Courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

*Your first series is called 'Car Crash'. What inspired you to start that series?*

I had a car crash myself and found it a really interesting experience. At the moment of the accident, I felt that everything moved in slow motion. My whole life flashed before my eyes. What I didn't know at the time, is that this was a "life review". This is a phenomenon that occurs during near-death experiences, in which a person rapidly sees much or the totality of their life history. This idea became a big inspiration for my work. I called the first picture from that series, 'View from the Past'.

*In a practical way, how did you work on this series?*

Every time, I encounter a crashed car I stop and take a snapshot of a detail of the car. The picture is just a sketch. Later, I come back with the real camera, which is too big to have on me all the time. The final picture is 120x150cm. If the viewer doesn't know the backstory, he can't tell if the picture is a part of a car or not. Some pictures look like a face, others like a landscape. The first car crash series was from 2013 and it was still in black and white. Then I kept the same subject but switched to colour. I find the colour interesting too; for me, it looks more like travelling in space.



Pattana Chuenmana, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

*When did you decide to start to do more figurative work? Was it with the 'After Hem Vejakorn' series?*

The concept of my latest work is a re-imagination of the illustrations of Hem Vejakorn, a well-known Thai artist and writer who authored and drew illustrations for a book of ghost stories. In those scary images, there is an eerie atmosphere that I wanted to reproduce. I kept the lighting and the composition the same, but I introduced different elements of the contemporaneity. I asked my friends to be actors in order to stage those pictures.

*The different approaches you took across the different series is really interesting. In the first two, you worked with accidents, which are something that by definition are completely out of control. In the second you had complete control of those staged images. This seems to me like two different ways of thinking about art: how did you go from one conception to the other?*



Pattana Chuenmana, Late Night Scamper Hem Vajakorn, Image Courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist







Pattana Chuenmana, *Let it Snow*, 2013, Image Courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

I love all approaches to photography, but in every type of image-making, there is something inspiring. I like to switch the method and the concept for my photographic series. For me, it would be boring to always have the same approach to objects. To keep it interesting, I need to change and evolve. These days I'm working on a new series. It's a return to a more abstract conception and will be about pollution, a major issue in Thailand.



Pattana Chuenmana, Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Arts and the Artist

### **About the Artist**

Pattana Chuenmana (b. 1981, Thailand) lives and works in Bangkok, Thailand. A photographer by training, Pattana's current series of works explores notions of beauty through destruction. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art, from the department of Painting at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand in 2005.

---

**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.