

Ruangsak Anuwatwimon: The Truth of Perspective. | COBO Social

Thai artist Ruangsak Anuwatwimon feels compelled to fight for environmental awareness. His poetic installations take on this cause, revealing the brutality of humans towards the Earth, buried under a beautiful surface.

Text: Naima Morelli

Images: Courtesy of the Artist



Ruangsak Anuwatwimon

“I don’t have a team, I work by project,” explains Thai artist Ruangsak Anuwatwimon. “I know how to find people. I don’t go only to the art world, I go to biologists and laboratories as well. And in this way, I learned a lot beyond art. I became familiar with the actual issues I want to talk about.”

We met Ruangsak in Bangkok, a lively city whose skies have been greyed by the peak of the air pollution crisis. It seemed that Bangkok was somehow anticipating the importance of the conversation, the importance of having an artist like Ruangsak on the frontlines of environmental protest.

Arriving at his *Monstrous Phenomenon* exhibition at 1PROJECTS gallery and finally removing the N95 masks felt like the end of a long pilgrimage. Maybe it was the hope that even if we did not find answers in this conversation, we would be able to at least find a way to make sense of the dire situation and the anguish of knowing that the simple act of breathing was poisonous – and this can only get worse around the world.



Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, *Monstrous Phenomenon*

Ruangsak is an artist whose personal curiosity meets artistic commitment. His art makes the viewer question the shortcomings of science and looks at the relationship between humans and nature with a different lens. His practice is located between conceptual art and installation. His poetic sculptures are often made from the ashes of the Earth’s fauna and flora. Reflecting on the ethics and morality of humans, the artist has travelled to different countries to research the cultural and natural ecology of each place.

Can you tell us what led you to tackle environmental issues through art?

As a child, I wasn't particularly interested in art, except for trying to impress people by making dragon or crocodile sculptures in clay. My main interest back then was science; it made me realize how many things were out of my control. Science also transmitted to me a sense of beauty. However, I wasn't interested in applied science. I wanted to tackle the more theoretical point of view. That's when the shift to art happened.

Did you explore other mediums before getting to the conceptual process that you work with today?

I did my fair share of experiments with painting. I know that if you have enough skill, you can change the idea of a visual form. However, you cannot change the truth of the perspective with painting. Art for me began when I started to bring physical objects to the gallery. There was a real change of perspective in that.

Since the beginning, you have exhibited mostly abroad and only had shows in Thailand later on. Why do you think things have unfolded in this way for you?

When I started there was both conceptual and environmental art in Thailand, only I didn't know about it. I took it for granted that people abroad would be more interested in my work than Thais would. I started in Belgium with the Ash Heart Project, then a friend convinced me that I could share my work in Thailand as well.



Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, The Ash Heart Project

For the Ash Heart project, you collected the ashes of 270 species. What challenges did you face in realizing such a huge piece of research?

Originally, I tried to get 365 species, one for each day of the year, but at the time, I couldn't reach the number. I had only 4 months to collect them all for the show. The first species that I got was a type of tree that has long vines and timber, but people chopped it down because it interrupted the lines of electric wires. So, the concept of this work is that every human activity affects another species.

For the project, I didn't kill any animal or plant myself, I just collected them. Because of this concept, the project should have taken even more time, but I got my network of friends to help with the research. Sometimes, they sent me a species, but it rotted quickly. Also, the burning process was demanding and depended on the kind of animal. If it was just a small animal, I could burn it myself. But sometimes the ashes weren't enough for a sculpture, so I had to get more somehow.



Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, Anthropocene, 2018

For the 2018 Taipei Biennale, you presented the installation *Anthropocene*, a term used to describe the way in which human activity on Earth has become so significant it has shaped a new geological epoch. How did you illustrate this idea in the work?

Over the years, by researching biology and different issues, I always felt a certain reference to history. This pushed me to become very political in a way, because the destruction of the environment has become a political issue. There is often a destructive approach towards the environment in politics, both in Thailand and elsewhere, which is connected to human greed and development.

I wanted to denounce the brutality of these political decisions and to put them in a good-looking artwork. The idea is quite simple, to make something look colorful, like a cake, but make it from actual polluted material. I collected twenty delicately colored overlapping mounds of polluted soil from sites across Taiwan, along with ten kilograms of dirt gathered from each different location. This seemingly beautiful and vibrant terrain is actually a map of toxic land in Taiwan. The contrast shows how we are the cause of the disasters unfolding in this universe and are still holding on to our dreams of a wonderful life.



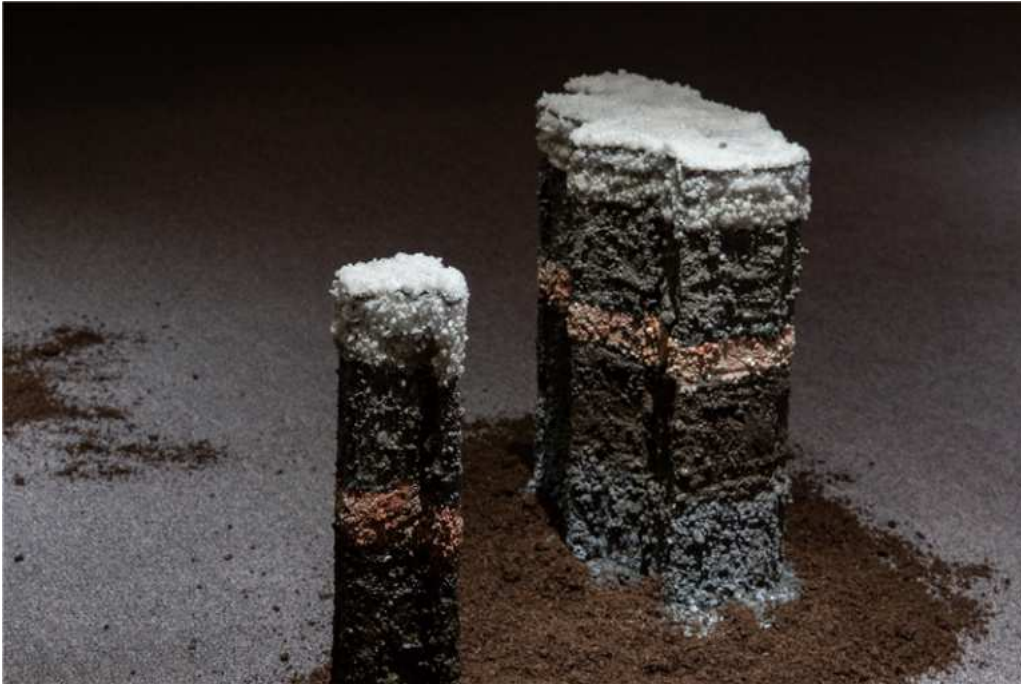
Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, 3 Monstrous Phenomenon

Maybe you can tell me a little bit about this new show *Monstrous Phenomenon*.

What I'm presenting for this particular exhibition is part of a story; it is perhaps too early to tell the story completely. The project is generated from a piece of research in Fukushima. I have friends, who allowed me to go there. My research was based on the feelings of people living in the area. I found out they have an inner conflict within themselves, as they are aware of the consequences of the radiation; in fact, they are not even allowed to live there. However, they don't want to move out because their whole family is there. Life is still going on in a normal way, and they are all pretending that it's all normal.

When you visit, you should also act like you are not concerned about food, about the air, about what you know. You should act this way out of respect, my friend said. So this work investigates the impact of human intervention on

Fukushima's environment and inhabitants, the causes and effects. There are some places, like Taiwan, where they have many highly polluted and toxic areas, but people just don't know about it. But it's different in Fukushima, people know, but try to forget about it. They try to live in a deadly situation.



Ruangsak Anuwatwimon, Anthropocene, 2018

Doing this kind of work makes you really aware of all those different environmental issues and disasters going on that are affecting the planet. Scientists can perhaps maintain a professional detachment from the issue, but as an artist, how do you deal with the emotional side of the matter?

This is a special question. I always ask myself why I keep doing this kind of work. Maybe it comes from my own personal issues. I come from Thailand. This country has a lot of things that are hidden. We need to have channels to access those hidden issues. So I need to ask myself what I can do in this situation. I know that making art doesn't help directly, you have to be a journalist or a scientist. But journalists often sensationalize in order to sell the story and scientists often work for the government. So, what can art do in this scenario? What I do is try to access hidden, relevant information and share it, and then I can discover more from there. It's like a movie: ask, get some answers, and ask more questions to other people to get more answers. So I have to collage a story together. But, on the other hand, you cannot show all of the information in art. But again, I have the work, which is physically made out of the issue that I'm talking about. And I have the imagination of the people. What I'm doing is working with these two factors.

About the Artist

RUANGSAK ANUWATWIMON, born in 1975, is a Thai contemporary artist based in Bangkok. Ruangsak links art, science and nature. He is interested in a regeneration of the sculpture concept. His poetic and conceptual pieces often made of ashes of different animals reflects on the protagonist relationship humans have with our natural world. The artist employs diverse mediums to express his ideas and challenge the perimeters of what constitutes an artwork. His conceptual projects explore social, cultural, and moral grounds of human societies. He takes up residencies in different countries to research about the cultural and natural ecology of each place, collecting specimens to contribute to his satirical “utopian human”. His works have been shown in Ver Gallery, Cartel Artspace, Bangkok Art & Cultural Centre, Whitespace Gallery in Bangkok, at the Verbeke Foudation (Belgium), LaSalle College of Art (Singapore), He participated in “Secret Archipelago”, a joint exhibition organised by the Singapore National Heritage Board and the Palais De Tokyo in Paris where his works were shown.

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.

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