

A Skewed Sense of Reality: Interview with Tawatchai Puntusawasdi



Portrait of Tawatchai Puntusawasdi. Image courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of A Sh... Giving at the Bangkok Biennale 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Jian Jun Zhang, Existence (Reunion), 1987

COBO SOCIAL Chinese Abstraction Series



Naima Morelli

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Naima Morelli is an art writer

Distorting forms based on calculated perspectives and mathematics, the works of Chiang Mai-based artist Tawatchai Puntusawasdi hints of a reality beyond the surface appearance. Rooted deeply in traditions of art history, his sculptures and site-specific installations also evoke the artist's Thai heritage and Buddhist sensibilities.

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist

Standing before German painter Hans Holbein's (1497–1543) infamous painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), which is held in the collection of The National Gallery in London, a moment of realization and may strike the unknowing visitor. What appears to be a regular and well executed double portrait of its time waits with a surprise—when viewed from the side, a skull can be seen in the front, centre of the canvas. Skewed when viewed front on, the skull, and thus the artwork, is one of the most famous examples of anamorphosis used in a painting. In that instance, the skull symbol was used to convey a *memento mori*, Latin for “remember that you must die”.



Portrait of Tawatchai Puntusawasdi. Image courtesy of the artist.

In a similar vein, I often arrive at a sense surprise and curiosity when I look at the installations and sculptures of Thai artist Tawatchai Puntusawasdi. Instead of a reminder of mortality, however, the artist is interested in challenging perception, showing us the impermanent and illusory nature of all things.

Working with ordinary materials including hardwood, slate, organic fibers and metal, Puntusawasdi's

sculptures promote a heightened awareness of space. The artist also plays with the effects of different types of materials, brass, hardwood, slate, organic fibers, and their different combinations. These begin to carry an intrinsic metaphysical quality when connected to the planets, cosmos and spirituality in nature, evoking similar atmospheres to the one of Italian artist Eliseo Mattiacci.

While chatting with the artist in a café in Chiang Mai, I found out neither Hans Holbein, nor Eliseo Mattiacci were Puntusawasdi's inspirations. However, he was a student of the late seminal Thai artist Montien Boonma, and he absorbed art modalities from the West during his travels, including an artist residency in the United States early on in his career.

"I first learnt bending objects as a practice in contemporary art when I was in a residency in New York City," he said, "The super tall staircases outside the buildings got me thinking a lot about perspective. One of the first objects I distorted was a kitchen cabinet belonging to my mum."

While mentors can give you a method, it's up to the artist to pursue research through trial and error. Indeed, the way Puntusawasdi arrived at his current body of work was very personal and almost accidental: "When you are in a high-speed train or in a rocket, if you take a picture of the object, the object spreads out," he explained. "We cannot deny the distorted object is true, nor that the photographs are not true. They both exist. I used the same concept for creating work."

Can you describe us your starting point for creating works?

I think a lot about the drawings of kids, their mistaken perspective, and then I look at the reality. When you see the object from a distance, it's always flat, right? You see the chair, you see the paper, and then you see the side view and the front view, and your mind mixes them together. For 15 years I kept on twisting objects, comparing them with the perception of kids. I played around with space and distances. After you have the idea, you need to work with the materials to make it come alive, and you have to make sure all the parts connect to each other perfectly. I started developing more knowledge of mathematics and geometry. I started to study again and my perception changed again based on the theory I learnt. So today the forms of my works are created through mathematical calculations.

It's quite unusual to have artists who like mathematics!

I cannot say that I like mathematics, but it's definitely useful. The only way I can communicate with my assistants and with the factory effectively is through numbers. The rest is imagination, thinking, experiencing and learning. For example, I have understood the importance of the shadow of celestial bodies for scientists that want to measure planets. Uranus for example has a moon, but scientists cannot see it. However, they can prove Uranus has the moon because they can see its shadow on Uranus. They can measure the size of this moon by the shadow it projects. When I realized that, I decided to replicate the shadow as a material object, as a sculpture.



Installation view of A Shadow of Giving at the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

Can you tell me about your work *Shadow of Giving* (2018), exhibited at the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale? It was displayed at the Wat Pho temple.

This is still related to my discovery of the idea of shadow. Wat Pho is really like an amulet, people pray in this temple. So, I did a sculpture inspired by the wall murals inside Wat Pho, dating back to the age of King Rama III. I transformed a two-dimensional mural into a three-dimensional sculpture.

I am also curious about the two works you presented at the last Biennale of Sydney in 2018, called "Super Moon 2:1." Why the title "Super Moon 2:1"?

I first chose the title *Super Moon 2:1* just to name the work something interesting, to make people curious. Then I discovered that supermoon refers to the phenomenon that occurs when a new or a full moon reaches its closest possible distance from the Earth around perigee, appearing unusually large when viewed from Earth. The material of the sculpture is copper. I like this material because, when polished it, the sculpture looks yellow like the moon.



Installation view of Super Moon 2:1 at the Biennale of Sydney 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

As always with art, the audience reads the work based on their experience, making their own associations. How would you like people to approach your work?

I wish the audience would approach my artworks with openness to whatever arises in them. In the beginning when I was starting, my idea was nothing special; I'd just change a line, the axis, increase the width, the length. People always think I'm just bending the object, but my motivation is beyond that. It's about showing what is real. The prime mover for me to do art is, on a deep level, about understanding reality.

About the artist:

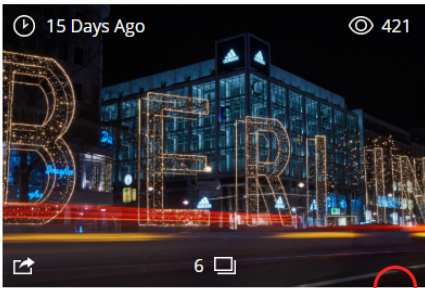
Born in 1971 in Bangkok, Thailand, Tawatchai Puntusawasdi pursued his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Chiang Mai University, and then a Master's degree in the same faculty at Silpakorn University. Based in Chiang Mai, he produces architectural, three-dimensional sculptures in hardwood, slate, organic fibers, and various types of metals. Puntusawasdi has exhibited in Japan, the United States, Europe, Australia, Taiwan, and throughout Southeast Asia. He has participated in both Biennale of Sydney and La Biennale di Venezia and has twice been awarded a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.

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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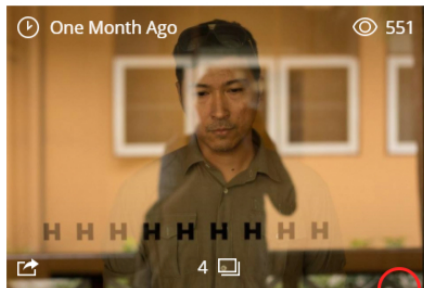


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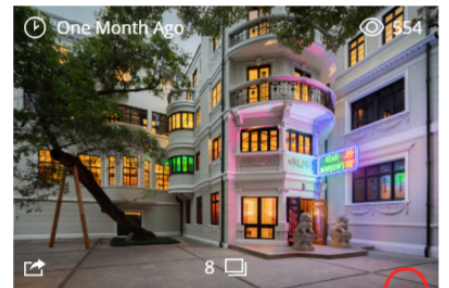


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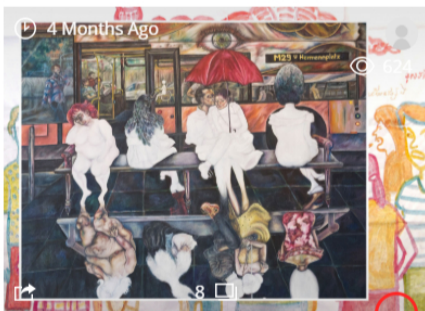


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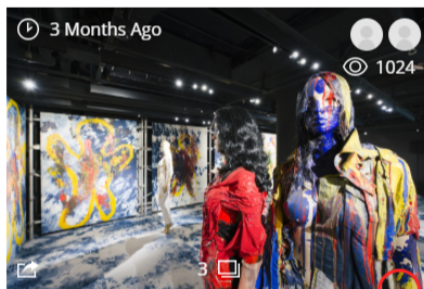


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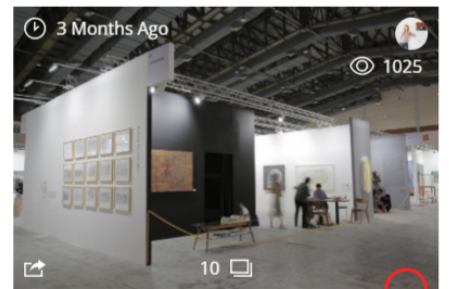


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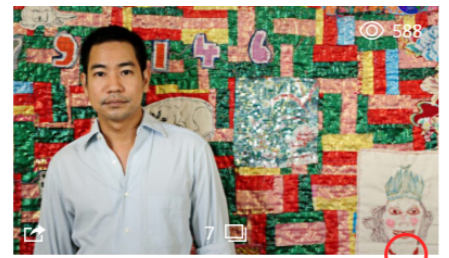
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