



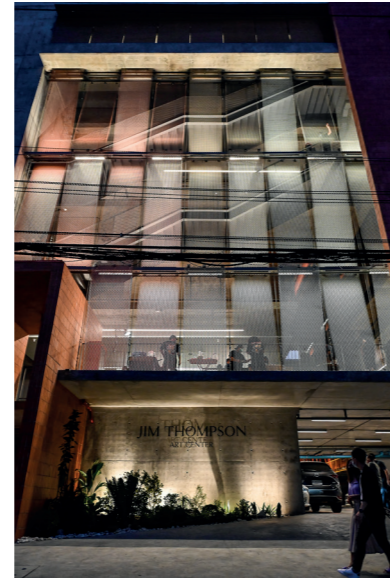
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VERNISSAGE / ART SCENE, THAILAND

# Creative Forces

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In Thailand, privately funded art spaces like Bangkok's Jim Thompson Art Center (JTAC) play a key role in shaping the country's blooming artistic landscape. Future Tense, the centre's first exhibition after its reopening in 2021, showcased multimedia works by 14 artists, including Vacharanont Sinvaravatt (pictured)  
Image by Kornthanat Pipat



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The newly rebuilt JTAC acts as a bridge between local and international artists, curators and collectors  
Images by John Clewley



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This year the Bangkok Art Biennale will feature the works of more than 60 artists including Chinese artist Xu Zhen and American artist Kennedy Yanko  
Xu Zhen, *Hello*, 2018–2019. Image courtesy of the artist and Madeln Company (left)  
Kennedy Yanko, *Gussie*, December 2020. Paint skin, metal, 100 x 61 x 53 cm. Image by Martin Parsekian (right)

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MAIELIE, a new independent art space in Khon Kaen, brings art to a larger audience in northern Thailand with events like the 2021 S.O.E. Our City Old Town festival, which saw contemporary art works installed across the Mueang Kao area  
Image courtesy of S.O.E. Our City Old Town

Text  
Payal Uttam

The newly rebuilt Jim Thompson Art Center (JTAC) in Bangkok is adorned with multicoloured ribbons of metal mesh woven into the building's facade that filter in light and add a sense of drama to the minimalist building. 'It's actually a very cheap material but it doesn't look that way. In Thailand, we're used to making something out of nothing,' says JTAC's artistic director Dr Gridthiya Gaweeewong with a smile. In many senses, her words ring true for the Thai contemporary art scene. Despite lacking in art infrastructure and governmental support, it has emerged as one of Southeast Asia's most exciting art hubs.

In lieu of public museums, privately funded spaces like JTAC, which reopened in late 2021, are continuing to play a major role in the artistic landscape. Gaweeewong describes the centre as a living room of sorts for international artists, curators and collectors coming to Bangkok. 'We've been a kind of bridge between the local and international worlds, but now we also wanted to be more inclusive,' she says. She sees the centre's new building as a classroom too — a space where visitors can learn from film programmes, interdisciplinary performances, lectures and workshops. Alongside showcasing leading contemporary Thai artists in dialogue with international names, their exhibitions also revisit history. The current exhibition, for instance, features little-known prints by avant-garde European war photographer and political activist Germaine Luise Krull, who did a stint in Bangkok after the Second World War.

This October, JTAC will be among the key venues of a new performance and video festival called Ghost:2561 organised by leading Thai multimedia artist Korakrit Arunanondchai, which will take place in venues across the city. 'Today, Thai artists feel there are different arenas where they can show their work where it's not always so elitist,' says Apinan Poshanyanda, chief executive and artistic director of the Bangkok Art Biennale which opens in the same month. 'The Thai art scene is evolving — it's more stimulating now with many more choices than before.'

The biennale aims to integrate contemporary art into the fabric of the city by placing more than 200 works in temples and heritage sites as well as art spaces and other locations. Under the theme Chaos : Calm, the festival will feature more than 60 artists including international heavyweights like Serbian performance artist

Marina Abramović and emerging local talents. Among the most interesting Thai artists on view will be Saratta Cheungsatiansup — aka Uninspired by Current Events — who creates satirical computer graphic works tackling political issues. Poshyananda says that artists like Cheungsatiansup who question the authorities once went underground, but they're now resurfacing. 'Artists here have learned to adapt to government censorship and the continuous disruption in Thai politics with riots and demonstrations. They have to struggle but as a result they've become imaginative and creative.'

While Bangkok continues to be an important art hub, recent years have seen a mushrooming of independent art spaces and artist-led festivals across the country. In 2018 in the north-eastern province of Isan, for instance, art curator and critic Thanom Chapakdee banded together with a group of artists — without informing officials — to launch the Khon Kaen Manifesto, a subversive art festival. The event, which features politically charged installations and performance work, is known for taking place in unexpected venues ranging from a derelict office building to an abandoned nightclub.

In late 2020, prominent Bangkok-based collector Eric Bunnag Booth — whose family founded the MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum, a private art museum in Chiang Mai — opened a new space called MAIELIE in Khon Kaen. 'There's a movement here that's developing quite fast,' says Booth of the region's active art scene. He opened MAIELIE in a bustling urban area with the aim of making art, both from the region and beyond, accessible to a larger audience outside Bangkok.

MAIELIE's current exhibition features Tada Hengsapkul, a Thai artist known for his trenchant images and video works exploring ideas of repression, freedom and the struggle for social agency in Thailand. 'The more horrible the political and social situation in the country, the more artists want to express themselves, especially in the last two or three years,' says Gaweeewong in praise of the explosion of creativity in Thailand as well as the growing appetite for contemporary art. Booth echoes this sentiment, and says he sees momentum gathering. 'Artists are taking this opportunity to talk about their history and culture. Even with the pandemic, no matter if it's good times or bad they're always active and working hard — it's exciting to see what's happening across the country.'