

Artist Korakrit Arunanondchai on community, duality in his art, and why he sets his work on fire—literally

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COVER Korakrit Arunanondchai at the opening of *Image, Symbol, Prayer* at Kukje, Seoul (Photo: Chunho An, courtesy of Kukje Gallery)

Korakrit Arunanondchai is one of the most sought-after artists of his generation by institutions and collectors alike. He tells Tatler why he believes in collaboration and empowering the collective

During the pandemic, Korakrit Arunanondchai confirmed a suspicion he'd harboured for some time: he doesn't deal well with isolation. "I can't be alone," the 36-year-old Thai artist admits. "In me is the inherent nature, a desire, to be and work with people." To join a group and be a part of something is very much in, and the main motivation behind, his art.



ABOVE Arunanondchai's studio in Bangkok (Photo: Tom Hoops)

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI



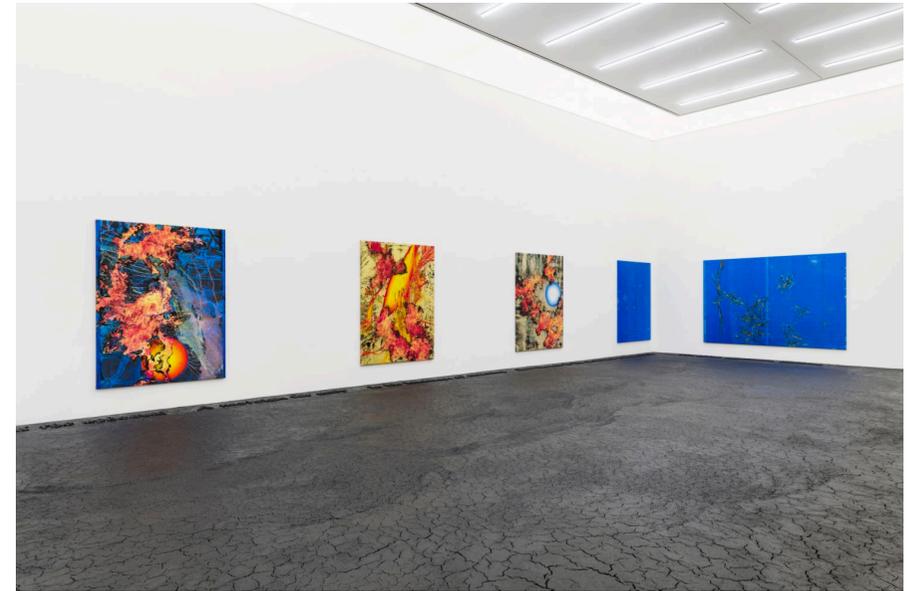
ABOVE A work from Arunandonchai's sky painting series (Photo: Kukje Gallery)

The idea of the collective is ever present in his visualisation of gatherings. Scenes in his films range from denim-clad youth walking the streets of Bangkok to half-naked figures emerging slowly from a lake, then dancing around a fire as if performing a ritual. The latter is from his film *Songs for Living* (2021), which was on display in Seoul in autumn 2022 at Art Sonje as a part of his solo exhibition *Songs for Living/Songs for Dying*. Consisting of two films, the works are the result of the artist's experience during the pandemic and reflect overarching themes across his practice; specifically life cycles, which he evokes by portraying animism, mythological symbols and references, lost histories, obscured memories, and notable mass protests throughout history.

Songs for Dying was the result of the artist contending with the loss of his grandfather in 2020. Clips of the older man's final days in the hospital are interspersed with imagery of ghosts, shamans and Thailand's 2020 mass protests. "It's a very personal, documentary-style work: the most personal I've made so far", says the artist.

Older footage from 2010 of the artist walking along a beach with his grandfather, who was suffering from Alzheimer's, also makes its way into the video, shot a

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ABOVE Arunandonchai's sky paintings surrounding a tar-like floor made from compressed ash (Photo: Kukje Gallery)

year before massive, near-apocalyptic floods consumed Thailand. Taken from the artist's 2012-2555 (2012), which he made for his MFA thesis at New York's Columbia University, the footage is shown in the context of an installation: a replica of a standard Thai funeral, which explores the idea of the world ending in 2012, which translates to year 2555 on the Buddhist calendar. The work was shown at MoMA PS1 in 2014 in New York, where it caught the attention of the international art world.

A recurring theme of fusing the personal and political, reality and fiction into one narrative is consistent throughout the artist's work; through his grandfather's experience of suffering from Alzheimer's, he alludes to the faulty way in which history is constructed and taught. The footage and imagery in his films, which are presented together with personal clips of his family, see the artist trying to "fill in the gap of my [grandfather's] experience, through experiencing memory loss".

Songs for Living (2021) counters *Songs for Dying* and depicts the artist's contemplations of what it means to be alive. The tone of the video is warm—Arunandonchai likens it to being in the womb, about to be born—and stands in stark contrast to the blue-toned *Songs for Dying*. With it, the artist asks a question

which strongly resonates post pandemic: “How does the individual separate [from a group] in the hope of joining the group again?”

Since travel restrictions eased, the artist has been able to return to his itinerant lifestyle and try to answer that question, living in New York and Bangkok, and opening exhibitions and performances in institutions and galleries around the world. Before the opening of his show at Sonje in August 2022, he staged a performance, Together, at the Aspen Museum of Art in Colorado, then headed off to Stockholm’s Moderna Museet for the opening of a new film, From Dying to Living (2022), created with long-time collaborator Alex Govjic.

In a coffee shop next door to Art Sonje, the artist tells Tatler about his latest exhibition Image, Symbol, Prayer, which showed at Seoul’s Kukje Gallery from December last year. Here again the idea of gathering comes to the fore, specifically through the use of fire.

Arunanondchai’s paintings were, quite literally, on fire. His History and Voids (Sky Paintings) are made up of torn and re-stitched pieces of denim fabric which were bleached, set ablaze and burnt. The artist photographed the fabric as it burnt away, then assembled the remnant ashes and fabric fragments with the photographs to create the final works which were on view at Kukje.

“I’ve been thinking about fire for some time and have been doing this [history painting] series for about ten years now. It’s [fire is] the centre of human gatherings, and brings people together, raising a collective consciousness,” he says, citing examples ranging from the bonfires humans have built since prehistoric times to how fire is used in protests in recent history. Fire represents “a promised change. Every revolution has a promise of a utopia or a better alternative; a promise which unites people.”

The paintings hang above and around a stage made from clay and compressed ash, which is then bound by paint and resin, producing a tar-like appearance. As the audience walks on the stage, it feels as if they are surrounded by flames, rather than being people gathering around a fire. Both the viewing process and the art represent an ubiquitous enquiry in his practice: the nature of death and rebirth, which in turn is reflected in a prayer text embedded around the edges of the stage made up of phrases such as “A nostalgia for unity” and “We create this world through unremembered prayer”.

Materials play a significant role in Arunanondchai’s work; in this case, he sees denim as both representing unity and reflecting the dominance of western



ABOVE Korakrit Arunanondchai (Photo: Tom Hoops)

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI

thoughts and perspectives in the context of globalisation. As the artist explains, “The fabric is a product of globalisation; it unites people through common experiences shared in a post-globalised world; it’s American, but worn by everyone.”

The artist tries to foster this sense of unification and connectivity through initiatives outside of creating and viewing art, especially in his home country. He’s well known for organising and curating Ghost Triennale in Bangkok, an acclaimed experimental art and performance programme which he first launched and curated in 2018. For the most recent edition, Ghost 2565, which opened in October 2022, he assumed the more administrative role of organiser, and enlisted independent curator Christina Li to put the programme together. “I do find a certain amount of joy in organising,” says the artist. “The first one felt more like a party; this time around it was more intense, but way more interesting.”

The show featured several video works from globally established artists including Diane Severin Nguyen, Wu Tsang and Tosh Basco, while renowned artists and filmmakers Rabi Moure and Hito Steryl flew in to give a performance lecture. “We try to make it like a festival rather than an exhibition. There are performances, events, activations constantly happening, not just one-time exhibition openings,” the artist says.

Free workshops are held in classrooms, and artworks are installed in historical buildings staffed by elderly historians who strike up conversations with visitors. “They’re like storytellers; they operate as text,” says Arunanondchai. “Instead of the convention of academic wall text, we have hosts interacting with you; they’re almost like shamans. I don’t want looking at art to feel like you’re going to school.” Initiatives like this reflect Ghost’s local orientation.

His own experience has led him to be critical of the standard modes in which we understand, create and consume contemporary art. “The convention of the museum and the white cube is a very western thing, and art is an extension of western globalisation in the form it appears anywhere in the world. You shouldn’t need a western education to understand art.”

The artist grew up in Bangkok, attending a local Thai school which he says taught very local and “militarised” versions of history. However, his mother was the daughter of a diplomat, and through her influence, he was able to form a more global perspective. Nonetheless, he still suffered a culture shock when he moved to the United States to complete his BFA at Rhode Island School of

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ABOVE Korakrit Arunanondchai at the opening of Image, Symbol, Prayer at Kukje, Seoul (Photo: Chunho An, courtesy of Kukje Gallery)

Design and MFA at Columbia, and had to reassess his relationship with art.

“So much of what you see and learn of contemporary art is based on history and context and texts that are really western,” he says. “If you don’t know what western modernism is, it’s really hard to find an access point. You look at it and are like, ‘What am I supposed to get out of this?’”

Arunanondchai sees Ghost as an opportunity to provide an alternative to what western education has defined the art-viewing to be; an experience that is beyond the solitary act of going to an enclosed white-cube gallery or museum, and that fosters engagement and solicits community participation without sacrificing art’s intellectual appeal. It’s not necessarily about making art easily accessible or understood. “It’s not all easily digestible; like all good art, it’s challenging,” he says. “It’s just about changing the mode through which it’s transmitted.”

Whether the artist’s work is viewed at an event like Ghost or while gathered around a fire, it serves as a proposal for better or alternative futures, “where maybe art enables you to create a new set of relationships that perhaps changes the way you relate to the world—or more precisely, your world.”