

Periphery of the Night

Apichatpong
Weerasethakul

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Contemporani

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Barcelona



Apichatpong Weerasethakul's work is placed in the blurred limits between night and day, wakefulness and sleep, life and death. Little wonder, then, that he offered thanks to all the spirits and ghosts in Thailand when accepting the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2010. He grew up in Isan, a rural, forest-bound region of northeast Thailand, where he studied architecture before going on to do an MA in Fine Arts in Chicago. The jungle of his childhood, suffused with folk legends and still bearing the scars of its violent past, coupled with the findings of his personal, discerning exploration of American experimental filmmaking, forms the backdrop to his own artistic practice, a calm journey to the heart of darkness —be it in nature, culture or the unconscious— in search of an alternative half-light. *Periphery of the Night* is the latest chapter in this adventure.

Intertwining ancient animist beliefs and the latest advances in neuroscience, his projects reveal that time isn't linear and that images aren't flat. We find ourselves standing before the "open window onto the world" that 15th-century polymath Leon Battista Alberti used to describe Renaissance painting and which André Bazin applied to film in the 1970s; but from the periphery things start to look blurred: the frame and perspective become multiple, overlapping distortions. Times have changed, and today's world is neither static nor uniform; in the absence of any continuous flux linking past and present, what we have now is something more akin to a network of moving, interacting relationships. For Apichatpong Weerasethakul, film is the most organic way of showing this changing reality that plays home to different temporalities in different lifeforms, both human and nonhuman —visible or invisible forces conjured up by his camera.

Capturing both the innocence of early cinema and the multiple perspectives of postmodern intertextuality, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's rich, finely crafted images, albeit with a serious edge, are accompanied by a sophisticated soundscape to create highly nuanced scenes full of minimal, almost silent details. In contrast to the densely packed images and sound, the wispy, but no less deeply layered, narrative is woven from a kaleidoscope of stories, memories, legends and songs linked to the people and places he films. Although nothing much ever happens in them, his films' intimate, empathetic atmosphere comes straight from this open-armed approach, which draws out the secret or strange side to things and brings them closer to us, making them more accessible or familiar, without ever losing their enigmatic, or even disturbing, nature.

The tightly bound physical relationship between nature and its beings is keenly felt in cinemas and exhibition spaces showing his work. Since 2000, in addition to some fifty shorts, he has made seven feature films and,

in parallel, created a series of installations in which the projection apparatus both contaminates and is itself contaminated by the space and audience. Here, all our senses are primed by one or more transparent, ethereal screens that appear to melt into their surroundings. Time too seems to have acquired the same elastic properties, stretched out through long takes and slow movements, aided and abetted by a resounding, enveloping soundscape. This hospitality captures the collective dimension of his filmmaking, understood as a space for meetings and exchange between the supernatural world, which precedes and transcends the human world, and the multiple layers of real life, the site where reality and imagination, history and myth, identity and culture emerge and entwine.

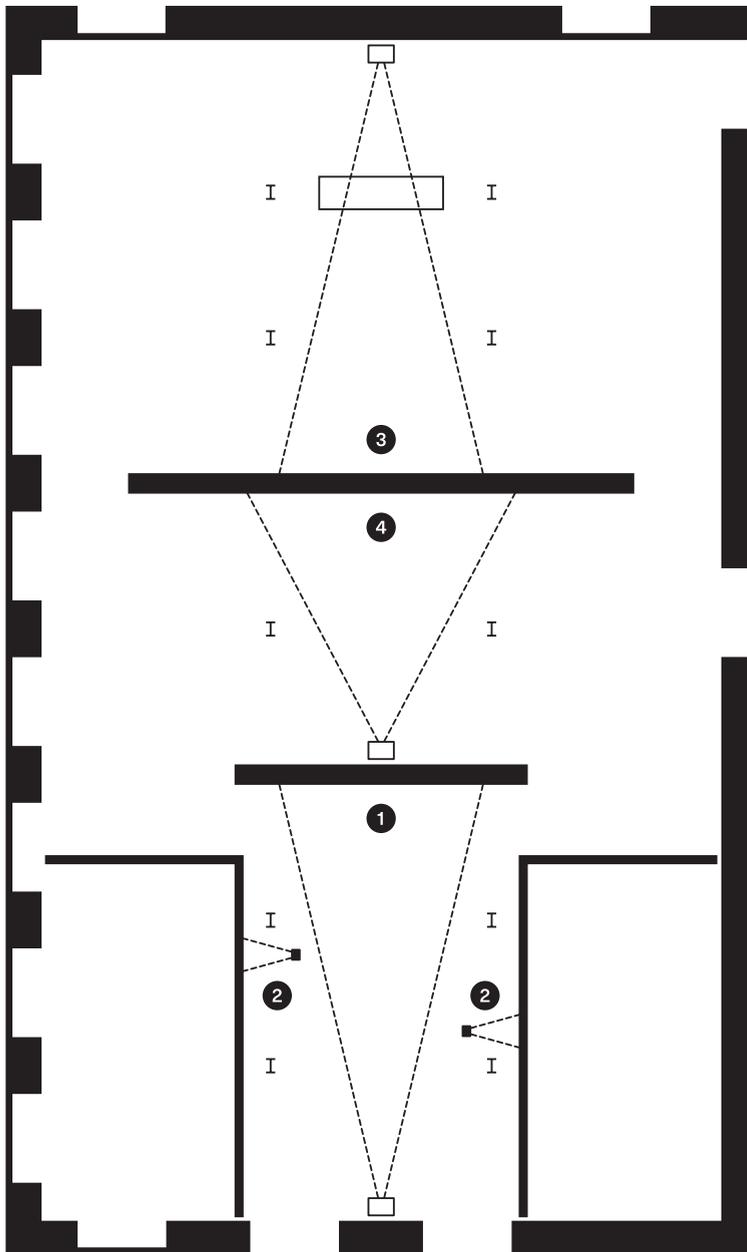
His free-spirited films, with their powerful sensorial and political character, are driven by the same energy that propels young people in Thailand to stand up to government repression by celebrating bodily experience and keeping the past alive —be it a fading ancestral legacy, an often forgotten popular, fantastical kind of filmmaking, or the censored history of Thailand's forests, a hideaway for communist revolutionaries fleeing the army at a time when even the colour red was banned. In this sense, the show starts off as it means to go on, with a *haiku* synthesising his cinematic universe: the memory of his country bleeds into the dreams of a group of teenagers, while the spontaneous relevance of *Ashes* is set against the backdrop of the moulded poetry of *Sakda (Rousseau)*. This duality continues upstairs, where we are immersed in the initiatory power of the night and its interruptions. Flashes and butterflies visit sculptures of the past and present-day concerns in *Fireworks (Archives)* and *Fiction*. The sleepless plays with fire in a mix of reflections and glass between changing scenes that invite us to sharpen our perception (*Blue*) or burn the screen (*Phantoms of Nabua*).

As urged by the name of his production company (Kick the Machine), the idea is to banish the machine and embrace the discovery that the projection lies within us, unknown bodies and shadows which, like new wandering spirits, like the dogs in *The Palace*, begin to inhabit his films. In the same way that intrusions are always welcome on film shoots and in exhibition spaces, interferences and superimpositions that alter and fragment the image can help reveal the filming apparatus. Taking the lid off cinema to show how motion pictures are made lets us focus on the process of filmmaking rather than the finished product, and that means including us: we are the factory of dreams.

The top floor builds on ideas introduced on the first floor. Projected onto the documentary laboratory of his *Video Diaries* is the shared imaginary that appears when we sleep. Furtive bedside images of Tilda Swinton

(*Durmiente*) and his partner (*Teem*) place him firmly in a tradition that runs from Andrei Tarkovsky to Víctor Erice, from Andy Warhol to Sophie Calle; in contrast, his act of sending family and friends small cameras to film themselves waking up (*async-first light*) takes him beyond art and authorship. Through this transit of sleepers, which is both withdrawal and surrender, an altered state of consciousness that is also receptive and trusting, Apichatpong Weerasethakul films sleep as a contagious energy that blurs interpersonal limits. “Sleep is one of the few remaining experiences where, knowingly or not, we abandon ourselves to the care of others. As solitary and private as sleep may seem, it is not yet severed from an interhuman tracery of mutual support and trust . . . In the depersonalisation of slumber, the sleeper inhabits a world in common,” writes Jonathan Crary.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is fascinated by the darkness of the night, the cinema or the jungle as an immersive yet also subversive experience. That is why he shakes it, lighting it up with tricks and blinks that invite us to seek out the revolutionary force in everyday details. It is also why he delves into the deepest depths in search of an anonymous, open community where we can dream together. Because if we are to collectively reclaim the night and its images, we must first open up our perception to what lies on the periphery as we envisage other worlds, other ways of building communities.



GROUND FLOOR

1.

Haiku, 2009

Single-channel HD video, colour, stereo, 2 min

During the search for testimonies about Boonmee, a man “who recalls his past lives,” and based on a book given to him by a monk who was a friend of his father’s—which all led to the creation of his film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010)—Apichatpong Weerasethakul criss-crossed the rural regions of northern Thailand. There he discovered the village of Nabua, near the Mekong River, which constitutes his native country’s natural border with Laos. *Primitive Project* (2009), a series of seven videos filmed in situ that would later become a multiscreen installation, was born there.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, said place was used as a Thai army base for driving out Communism. In order to flee from such a scenario of violence and control, many villagers, especially men, sought refuge in the surrounding forests and disappeared, leaving women and children behind. This profoundly modified the social life and organisation of Nabua. Apichatpong Weerasethakul spent several months there meeting and filming the descendants of those rebels, a group of teenagers with whom the artist created a series of performances and videos, unearthing this traumatic memory while also reinventing it. This search focused on reincarnation was thus displaced and broadened in contact with a memory resurfacing, neglected by the national historical narrative.

Within this framework, the adolescents built a circular structure, half way between a spaceship and a time machine, which became a space for them to rest and dream in. These works “are in the realm of action,” assures the filmmaker, for whom fiction is that which appears when in contact with others. “My cinema really isn’t narrative, it’s more environmental,” he adds. *Haiku* is an environment tinted with the history and political climate of his country, two aspects which subtly tinge his cinema. The primary tone here is red, a colour which was prohibited in Thailand for being considered too political.

2.

The Palace, 2007

Single-channel videos, colour, silent, 4 min 3 s

The Palace was produced for the exhibition *Discovering the Other* at the National Palace Museum in Taipei (Taiwan). Apichatpong Weerasethakul was struck by the number of stray dogs one could see roaming the streets there, animals which he relates to spirits. Both here and in Taipei, the exhibition space becomes a time machine, blurring the line between real

animals and invisible entities. Highlighted by an incandescent red hue, the dogs become the place's ghostly guards.

3.

Ashes, 2012

HD digital video, colour, stereo, 20 min 18 s

Ashes was mostly shot on a LomoKino, a small analogue camera with a crank that allows up to 144 frames per film to be captured in a 35 mm film, without sound. When functioning at full capacity, it can only record three to five frames per second, producing the impression of intermittent movement. Oscillating between the city and the countryside, *Ashes* brings together fleeting visions interspersed with blackouts: a man walks his dog among fields and farms; activists protest against Article 112, which refers to the crime of lèse-majesté, used abusively by those in power to persecute anyone who criticises the King of Thailand; a group of friends sharing a meal outdoors... Added digitally, the soundtrack combines echoes of nature, footsteps and fragments of conversations, including the voice of the artist explaining a dream. Now and then, the clicking of the camera's crank predominates. Later, set to a melancholic guitar tune, a bright light spreads across the screen, in which kaleidoscopic visions and a funeral ceremony appear.

The filmmaker has been censored on several occasions, and when interviewed regularly condemns the lack of democracy that prevails in Thailand, especially since the political crisis of 2014 and the military coup. In this repressive climate, his films, filled with statues and silhouettes of soldiers, use the art of 'camouflage' and suggest alternative ways of creating community.

4.

Sakda (Rousseau), 2012

HD video, colour, Dolby SRD, 5 min 30 s

Sakda (Rousseau) comes from a collective project of short films created for the tricentenary of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Not without irony, Apichatpong Weerasethakul transforms his actor, Sakda Kaewbuadee, into a reincarnation of the author of *The Social Contract*. While the reflections from a mirror ball slowly pass across the actor's face, he murmurs a monologue into a microphone. The same words later resonate on the terrace of a hotel on the edge of the Mekong, captured by a sound recording device.

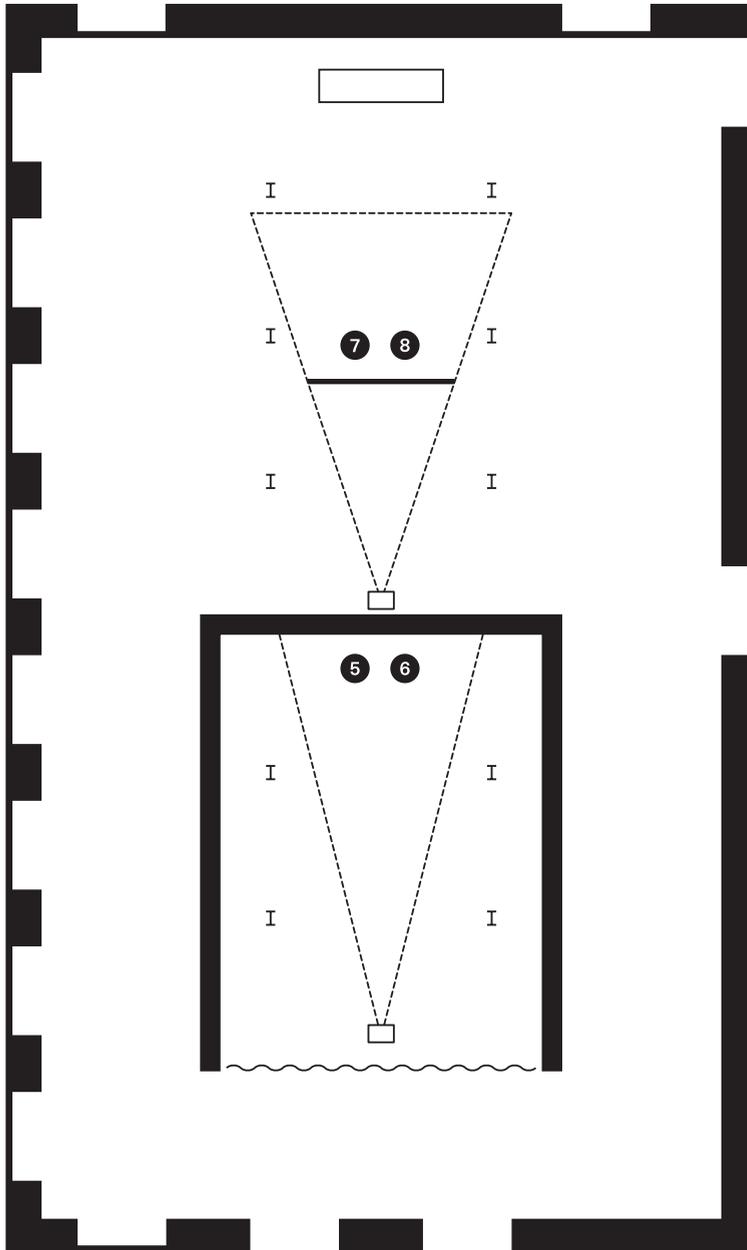
With this video, Apichatpong Weerasethakul transits between different eras and reflects on the longevity of Rousseau's memory and image,

while building bridges between his texts on the relationships between individuals and contemporary Thai society.

Born into a farming family in Kanchanaburi, Sakda moved to Bangkok, where he worked various jobs, mostly in construction, until he enlisted in the army in 1998 and served as a soldier for two years. He met Apichatpong Weerasethakul at a nightclub in 2002, and two years later appeared in his feature film *Tropical Malady* (2004). Since then he has acted in numerous Thai films as well as in many of the artist's films.



The Palace, 2007.



5.

Phantoms of Nabua, 2009

Single-channel video, colour, Dolby 5.1, 9 min 45 s

In a nocturnal landscape struck by violent lightning, the contours of a cloth screen onto which a film is being projected emerge, while a group of teenagers play with a ball on fire. An intermittent light source, the ball leaves trails of light on the grass and ends up setting fire to the screen, which burns slowly until the projector lamp appears.

Like *Haiku*, *Phantoms of Nabua* belongs to *Primitive Project*. The title evokes the aforementioned tragic events suffered by the people of Nabua, but the air of destruction contrasts with the playful attitude of the teenagers. The artist describes the videos in this project as “impressions of light and memory”: the different states of light —natural and artificial— serve in these films as signs of a reappearance, an incandescent inscription of the past upon the surface of the image. The ghosts of Nabua, electrified by the play of lightning along with the to-and-fro of a flaming ball, form a dazzling synthesis of this newfound memory, through luminous flares and trails of light. In Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s work, memory is never uniform, and the images thwart any attempt to understand it in a one-dimensional way.

6.

Blue, 2018

HD video, colour, Dolby 5.1, 12 min 16 s

Blue opens with the image of a woman lying on a bed, wrapped in a blue blanket. A reverse shot shows us a series of set backgrounds depicting colourful landscapes, spread out in the dark and illuminated by artificial lighting. On the body of the woman, suffering from insomnia, a flame appears and gradually spreads without her seeming to mind. From one shot to the next, the camera moves and progressively reveals the whole scene: a fire burns in front of a reflective surface, and its image is superimposed onto those of the woman and the landscapes.

Shot over several nights in the heart of the Thai jungle, *Blue*, which was created for 3e Scène, the digital creation programme of the Paris Opera, immerses the viewer in some of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s favourite themes: wakefulness and sleep, oneirism, insomnia, and the evocative power of light.

7.

Fiction, 2018

Single-channel video, glass projection with holo film, colour, silent,
13 min 37 s

At night, attracted by a pair of fluorescent lamps, a myriad of insects flutter around the light, making it oscillate, buzzing around the protagonist's hand as he attempts to write down his dream from the previous night. Oblivious of these disturbances, we see that he rewrites it twice, as though his retelling dissatisfies him and it is a matter of attaining a state of 'awareness' within the dream.

"I read somewhere that the idea of constant time doesn't exist in dreams. If you come across a clock in your dream, you'll see that the hands move erratically, or aren't visible. But last night in my dream, I stared at this clock that displayed the time properly: 3.40 am. I was also aware of its little hand moving second by second: tick, tock, tick, tock.

The dream was a mixture of a horror film and meditation. I was being followed by an alien in an anonymous city. Even though it had big eyes it couldn't really 'see' me, but it sensed me. When my mind drifted off in different directions, the alien would sense my thoughts and appear in front of me. The way to escape was to be mindful and focus on my breath. So throughout the whole dream I was trying to be mindful. I was among a crowd of silhouettes walking uphill. It was a dream about awareness, yet I wasn't aware that I was dreaming."

8.

Fireworks (Archives), 2014

Single-channel video, glass projection with holo film, colour, Dolby 5.1,
6 min 40 s

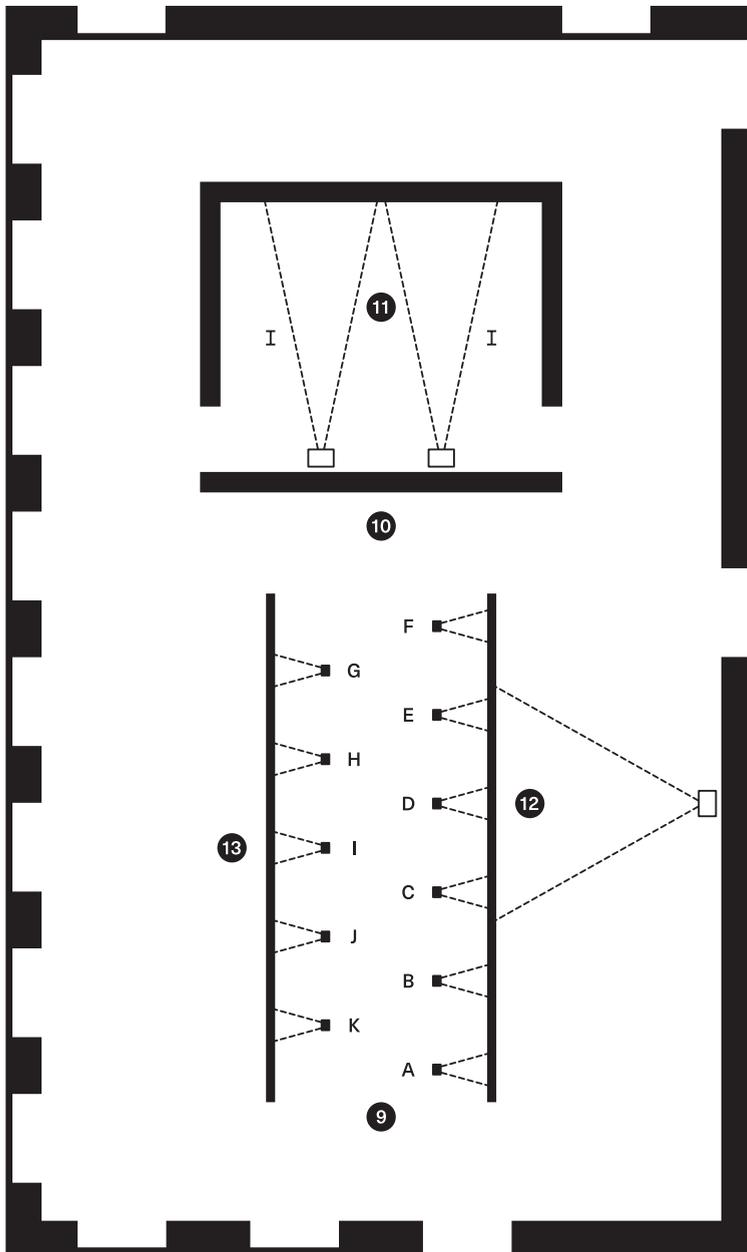
Fireworks (Archives) functions as a hallucinatory memory machine. It explores a key location in the feature film *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015): the Sala Keoku Sculpture Park, a place inhabited by divine animals created by Bunleua Sulilat (1932–1996), an eccentric spiritual leader, through combining elements of buddhism, hinduism and mysticism. His unorthodox vision is clearly represented in the style of the statues: divine figures that merge into animals armed as warriors. In this place, which is not recognised by the State, Apichatpong Weerasethakul sees an expression of resistance, and in these sculptures, the artistic translation of the revolutionary movement that has inspired the region of Isan, long oppressed by the central government's power.

Illuminated by the intermittent flashes from fireworks, the two characters wander around this nocturnal garden, take photos, approaching

one another and disappearing just as they arrived. A handful of photographs show rebels from the region that have been prosecuted and assassinated from the late 1940s to the 1960s.



Fireworks (Archives), 2014.



9.

Video Diaries, 2001–2020

11 projectors

For *Periphery of the Night*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul presents a new selection of eleven *Video Diaries*. Often a source of inspiration for his works, this series of videos is the artist's daily journal, containing fragments of his personal life and memories.

A.

Jenjira, Death, 2018

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, silent, 2 min 39 s

Actor Jenjira Pongpas Widner describes a dream in which she discovers her lifeless body in a field.

B.

Fireworks sketch (Frog), 2014

Single-channel video SD, colour, mono, 1 min 54 s

This video is a preparatory sketch for *Fireworks (Archives)*, which explores the animal sculptures of Sala Keoku temple.

C.

Tong, Somchai, 2018

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, silent, 2 min 25 s

Sakda Kaewbuadee, nicknamed Tong, the same actor in *Sakda (Rousseau)*, describes a dream in which he and his friend Somchai find themselves in a room full of a huge collection of books.

D.

Home, 2018

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, silent, 1 min 49 s

Home is a portrait of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's house in Chiang Mai during monsoon season.

E.

Sarit, 2018

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, 2 min

This bas-relief represents Sarit Thanarat, prime minister of Thailand between his coup d'état in 1957 and his death in 1963. Under his authority, the king and the military joined forces to rule the country, political parties were banned, the media was censored and around 1,000 people were jailed. Despite the violent anti-communist repression of his regime and the posthumous discovery of his corruption, his memory continues to be honoured, especially by means of a statue and a large wall that recounts his military deeds in Khon Kaen, the filmmaker's hometown, where he filmed this video.

His figure can be found in several works by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, for whom Thanarat was a product of the North American intervention during the Cold War, and symbolises the persistence of militarism in Thai politics. He is seen as the archetype of all the army generals who have taken power through coups (including the most recent one, in 2014), and represents a certain blindness on the part of the population.

F.

Decameron, 2020

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, silent, 57 s

Decameron was shot in lockdown during the Thai monsoon season, in the spring of 2020. In a dark room, a woman removes insects from a mosquito net in order to cook them. The light she holds in her hand illuminates and intermittently reveals her face, along with the transparent veil of the mosquito net and the insects left outside.

G.

Father, 2001

Single-channel video SD, colour, silent, 14 min 7 s

Weerasethakul's mother and sister-in-law administer dialysis to his father, who suffered from kidney failure in 2003. Remaining etched in his memory, these images were recreated by the artist for a major scene in his feature film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), in which the main character suffers the same illness.

Father echoes many other gestures of care displayed in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films. The medical world, which he experienced closely in the rural hospital where his parents worked, has permeated his work since the beginning. "For me, listening to heartbeats with a stethoscope or using a microscope with an integrated light was already something magical . . . Cinema and medical equipment were the most beautiful inventions of my childhood," assures the artist, who attributes curative virtues to his films: "In my cinema, I'm looking for a remedy to confusion and madness."

H.

Jenjira, Brother Triam, 2018

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, silent, 1 min 43 s

Apichatpong Weerasethakul has worked with the same crew and actors for nearly twenty years. Here Jenjira Pongpas Widner, one of his preferred actors, shares a childhood dream in which her dead brother reappears.

I.

For Monkeys Only, 2014

Single-channel video SD, colour, silent, 1 min 12 s

The sculpture of a monkey is superimposed over a slot machine delivering predictions. *For Monkeys Only* was made during preparations for *Fireworks (Archives)*, at Sala Keoku temple.

J.

Tone, 2004

Single-channel video SD, colour, silent, 11 min 32 s

For his feature film *Tropical Malady* (2004), the director asked his colleague Tone to visit the army based in the region of the Kaeng Krachan Dam, in order to study the lives of the soldiers and their daily habits.

K.

One Water, 2013

Single-channel video, SD digital, colour, silent, 1 min 11 s

Tilda Swinton, British actor and friend of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's, who plays the lead role in his most recent film, *Memoria* (2021), organised Film on the Rocks, a film festival in the Maldives, and invited the artist to take part in the project. During his stay, he asked her to recall her dreams in front of the camera.

10.

Power Boy (Villeurbanne), 2021

Photograph on adhesive

In this photograph one can see a young man sitting on the edge of the Mekong, with his torso wrapped in a garland of multicoloured lights. A poetic image that is also an allusion to the political upheavals caused by the construction of the Xayaburi hydroelectric dam on said river. Many protest movements took a stand against the project, arguing that it threatened the human and environmental balance of the region, and offered no benefit to its inhabitants.

The Mekong marks the border between northeastern Thailand and Laos. The region is charged with the history of the two countries, successive immigration and political struggles. Hence, at the confluence of individual and collective memories, the river represents a demarcation line, a passageway between the dead and the living. This historical dimension sustains the work created in Nabua and Sala Keoku Sculpture Park, two sites very near the Mekong.

11.

Durmiente, 2021

Single-channel HD video, colour, silent, 11 min 3 s

async-first light, 2017

Single-channel HD video, colour, Dolby 5.1, 11 min 3 s

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto

Poem: Arseny Tarkovsky, read by David Sylvian

Durmiente / async-first light is a production by Apichatpong Weerasethakul for the exhibition *Periphery of the Night*. Here, the artist juxtaposes very recent images, shot during the filming of his latest film, *Memoria* (2021), with others filmed over the past few years. *Durmiente* shows Tilda Swinton, the lead actor in *Memoria*, sleeping in a bedroom as the shadows grow longer. *async-first light* is the result of a collaboration with composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, who combined several tracks from his album *async* for the project, and features David reciting the poem “Dreams”, by Arseny Tarkovsky.

In both videos, the sun sets and the characters fall asleep. The alternation of natural and artificial lighting is central to certain scenes, which follow in succession through various sets. Some of the shots were filmed by friends of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, to whom he assigned portable cameras, asking them to film their loved ones while they slept. This double projection belongs to *Memoria Project*, in which the director develops his interest in memory as well as in different light sources, as an attempt to create ties between light, cinema and dreams. “I align myself with a political notion of sleep: as a collective space in which sleepers are active and no longer passive,” he states.

12.

Teem, 2007

Digital videos, colour, silent, 9 min 53 s / 22 min 38 s / 27 min 31 s

These three simultaneous projections show a man sleeping, dozing, and occasionally waking up. It features Teem, an old close friend Apichatpong Weerasethakul's, filmed by the artist using a mobile phone over the course of three days. A few days earlier, when winter was approaching in Thailand, Teem intimated to him that he was preparing to hibernate until the month of February, and Weerasethakul took this opportunity to observe (and sometimes disturb) his morning sleep. Fascinated by the absent and elusive presence of a sleeping person, a recurring figure in his work, here the artist's gaze is charged with tenderness and draws the portrait of a loving intimacy.

13.

Memoria, Nuquí, 2017

Photograph, inkjet print, 63×83.5 cm

After having worked for a long time in Thailand, Apichatpong Weerasethakul embarked on his first major project created in another part of the world: guided by the similarities between the Amazon and Thai jungles, he explored South America and ended up filming in Colombia, fascinated by the topography of a territory where active volcanoes and landslides constantly transform the landscape.

In addition to his latest film, *Memoria Project*, which collects memories—both personal and collective—by means of photographs and videos. This snapshot, which owes its name to Nuquí, a region in the department of Chocó in western Colombia, shows the back of the neck of one of the actors in *Memoria* (2021), Connor Jessup, who suffered an allergic reaction to insect bites. According to the filmmaker, the image brings to mind a constellation or fireworks, and in it coincide beauty and pain, both inextricably linked.



Power Boy (Villeurbanne), 2021.

Opening times

Tuesdays to Saturdays, 12.00 to 20.00

Sundays and Holidays, 11.00 to 15.00

Guided tours. More information at:
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