

Korakrit Arunanondchai

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA

This was probably the closest you'll ever come to being trapped in a cave with an androgynous paint-covered performer; multiple Thai demigods; a tribe of silent, dust-covered screen worshippers; a Southeast Asian Christian cult; and military relics from the Cold War. Seemingly populated by a cast of hundreds, Korakrit Arunanondchai's mesmerizing three-channel film installation *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5*, 2018, runs only about thirty-one minutes but feels epic. Accompanied by a haunting soundtrack of words and music designed by Aaron David Ross, and with lush camerawork by the artist and his longtime collaborator Alex Gvojcic (among others), these moving images would be seductively hypnotic even without their wide-ranging, fragmented narratives and profoundly existential themes.

In a corner of the darkened gallery was a cluttered "garden" composed of shells, artificial foliage, and green laser lights that featured a peacefully dormant, half-buried masked figure. Prominent among the artist's themes is mortality, to which the entire left-hand screen was devoted. Here, we saw recent footage of the artist's elderly grandmother, suffering from dementia and being cared for in the hospital by her husband. Of special interest to Arunanondchai is the potentially unequal power exchange between helpless care receivers—whether the dying grandmother on the left-hand screen, or the pet rabbits, refugees, and religious devotees who appeared on the central screen—and their ambiguously benevolent caregivers, whether spouse, surgeon, shaman, choirmaster, colonizer, or king. The theme of "following" recurs, observed in born-again believers listening intently to a sermonizing healer, or Communist soldiers inspired by painted-billboard heroes. Sometimes this idea of following is made literal, as when Arunanondchai places his camera squarely behind the shoulders of a slow-moving, gray-haired person advancing tentatively on a walker, or behind those of a young man striding into some unexplained night ritual that again revolves around a partially buried body. We revisit the international saga of those twelve young boys who followed their soccer coach into a treacherous Thai cave. Their much-publicized, real-time rescue rapidly descended into a world-stage public relations stunt—a power grab masked as a caregiving operation performed by the Thai emergency services, the US military, British professional divers,

traditional spirit mediums, and even Elon Musk, whose rejected donation of a mini submarine prompted him to attack a diver with libelous “pedo” accusations. Together, the would-be rescuers formed a highly suspect, sacred and profane crew.

Arunanondchai is intent on provoking a transformation of today’s youth from manipulated screen dependents into a spiritually awakened and emotionally connected collectivity. On the right-hand screen was an intensely sensual performance by another longtime collaborator, boychild—an object of desire and simultaneously a powerful, unencumbered physical force dominating the entire screen. Arunanondchai’s contemporary vision accepts homogenized global tastes (karaoke pop music, club culture, denim, iPhones) as accompanying a liberated, gender-fluid society of loving, enlightened individuals who have regained the favor of the old gods. Death is everywhere, but biological birth is absent. In Arunanondchai’s cosmos we choose our birth when joining whatever tribe most appeals: evangelical Christians, Manchester United fans, nightclubbers, art-world aficionados, teen dance contestants, ad infinitum. Premodern avatars such as the Naga spirit gods provide the only timeless continuity; they look after their followers but must be respected—other seemingly kindhearted providers dominating the needy. For all its futurist promise and technological wizardry (including the artist’s magical on-screen manipulation of green laser lights, turning Arunanondchai into a kind of Promethean fire god), this work suggests that art can offer spiritual solace, unearthly beauty, and social ideals: in short, its go-to subjects since the dawn of time. Arunanondchai’s gift is his ability to make art’s most ancient, soulful purpose look technologically current, surprisingly desirable, and urgent.

—*Gilda Williams*