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Selected Press |

**KAWITA  
VATANAJYANKUR**

**The New York Times**  
The Art of Being  
Bombarded by Watermelons

[https://  
www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/arts/design/  
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Courtesy of the artist

By **Daniel McDermon**

Sept. 13, 2017



In her 2015 video, “The Scale 2,” above, the artist Kawita Vatanajyankur hangs suspended from ropes, eyes closed and arms outstretched, supporting two wide, flat baskets. A neon green background blazes out at the viewer, and dried rice begins to fall into the baskets. The trickle becomes a torrent; grains ricochet off her face as her arms sway under the load.

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The downpour intensifies for two increasingly uncomfortable minutes before fading out. Throughout, her expression remains unchanged.

“It’s quite violent,” she said. “You see the strains, the injuries, and all of that.”

Ms. Vatanajyankur, 30, who lives and works in Bangkok, has been creating these alluring, acerbic [videos](#) since 2012, turning her body into a variety of simple tools and machines. In “The Dustpan,” from 2014, her body is a broom and her hair, the bristles. In 2012’s “Wet Rag,” we watch from above as another woman uses the artist to scrub a floor.

Her performances evoke the kind of physical labor that has traditionally fallen to women in Thailand, linking their subjugation with backbreaking work. This is perhaps most clear in “The Scale,” from 2015, below.

We watch as she holds a yoga-like pose on her neck and shoulders, her feet aloft and supporting a plastic basket. Chunks of watermelon — 60 pounds’ worth — rain down, crashing and splashing on her, but Ms. Vatanajyankur is unfazed. The performance is startling, amusing and appalling all at once.

The vivid colors, Ms. Vatanajyankur said in a recent interview, are inspired by the striking designs that make consumer products stand out on a supermarket shelf. “You see those beautiful

packages,” she said, and you don’t think for a moment about the labor that’s behind them.

She has had solo exhibitions in Thailand, Australia and Japan, and is included this month in “[Stamina](#),” a two-person exhibition (with the artist Liza Buzytsky) curated by Alexandra Fanning at Secret Dungeon, a Bushwick project space.



Courtesy of the artist

Creating these works takes time. Ms. Vatanajyankur spends anywhere from two weeks to two months working out the details and choreographing each performance. For the watermelon piece, she said, “I had to practice a lot.”

During the performance, though, she aims to lose her sense of self and “really become a part of the working tools or machines.” Getting to that point requires a great deal of meditation, she said.



A still image from Ms. Vatanajyankur's "The Dustpan" (2014). Courtesy of the artist

Ms. Vatanajyankur's work has inspired very different reactions. In Thailand, the response has often focused on gender equality, "female strength and endurance," she said.

But in Japan, she said, "it was a completely different story."

Viewers there sought her out, sharing feelings of inadequacy in their jobs, a sense of shame in being unable to meet expectations of perfection. "It was like a confession, almost," she said. "Two people came to me and cried."



Courtesy of the artist

Other videos, like "The Carrying Pole," above, suggest torments worthy of Dante or ancient mythology. And some audiences have asked whether she had a political aim, or if she meant to criticize abusive interrogation tactics like waterboarding in these endurance works.

That was not her intention, Ms. Vatanajyankur said. But “these layers are also quite interesting to me.”

Some works escalate those kinds of bodily violations. In a 2013 work, “[Poured](#),” she appears serene as an improbable amount of water gushes from a funnel into her mouth. For a new work, “Big Fish,” she hangs suspended from an oversized hook.



A still from “Poured” (2013). Courtesy of the artist

These tableaux may present an extremist vision of labor and its depredations upon the body, but Ms. Vatanajyankur offers another interpretation: “It’s almost impossible to transform yourself into a machine or a working tool, because we are human and we have our own limits.”

But, she added, “Our bodies and our minds have an amazing ability to adjust.”

Stamina: Liza Buzytsky and Kawita Vatanajyankur

Through Oct. 22 at Secret Dungeon in Brooklyn; [secretdungeonproject.com](http://secretdungeonproject.com).

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# Venice of the East? Bangkok's inaugural biennale showcases challenging Thai art

Published 25th October 2018

Written by  
Marianna Cerini, CNN

Contemporary art in Thailand has rarely enjoyed support from outside the private sector. And while the public infrastructure required to promote artists or assist galleries is nascent, the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB) shows that the creative industries are able to rally the resources required to host a broad-ranging program of events.

The biennale, which opened this past weekend, isn't centered around one venue but, rather, spills out across temples, abandoned buildings, malls and public squares. The events' organizers are private companies and individuals instead of state officials or national institutions -- though this is often the case for art biennales.



Artworks and installations are being housed at public and private spaces around Bangkok. Credit: Bangkok Art Biennale

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/arts/design/kawita-vatanajankur-artist.html>

Centered around the theme "Beyond Bliss," the program features dozens of artists across 20 venues. Among the latter are a number of major religious sites and tourist destinations along the Chao Phraya River, including the temple complexes of Wat Pho, Wat Prayurawongsawat and Wat Arun.



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"We intentionally planned for BAB to be all-encompassing in its scope," the biennale's artistic director, Apinan Poshyananda, told CNN the day before the public opening. "The idea of placing some of the art along the river and within major heritage landmarks was particularly important for us. We wanted to signify a journey, both for the artists and the visitors, and create a parallel with the Grand Canal of Venice: We have the potential to become a valid counterpart to that biennale."

While international names like Marina Abramovic and Yayoi Kusama are likely to draw the biggest crowds, the focus on Southeast Asian -- and particularly Thai -- artists helps differentiate the event from its peers.



An installation by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. Credit: Courtesy Bangkok Art Biennale

"First and foremost, BAB is a platform to put local artists onto the international map, as well as introducing them to Thai people," Poshyananda said. "That's why it matters: The ambition is to flex our cultural muscles, and position Bangkok -- and Thailand (more broadly) -- as a major art player."



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There's a long way to go. Although a number of contemporary Thai artists have attracted international acclaim in recent years (in 2017, illustrator Phannapast Taychamaythakool collaborated with Gucci, while emerging artist Pannaphan Yodmanee won the Benesse Art

Prize), and private galleries have opened in Bangkok and elsewhere in the country, the sector has remained relatively niche.

And if the government's modest budget towards contemporary arts is partly to blame, so is growing state suppression. High-profile acts of censorship, like the [forced removal](#) of political photographs from a Bangkok gallery last year, could pose a threat to the sustainable growth of Thailand's art market.

The state's role in the new biennale has been limited, although organizers say that national and city authorities provided some financial and publicity support, as well as granting venue permissions and facilitating talks with the city's Buddhist monks (who had to approve any artwork placed in their temples). Poshyananda said that the program benefits from its relative independence.

"Not having to 'prove' or owe anything to the government gives us the opportunity to be more daring in our program," Poshyananda said. "This is purely an artistic showcase -- we want the liberty to keep it that way.

"We don't want to tell artists what they can and can't do. And we want to be here again in two years, and two years after that. Relying on a regime that might change doesn't allow for that kind of planning, particularly budget-wise."

One of the biennale's curators, Adele Tan of the National Gallery Singapore, added in a phone interview: "An event like BAB can help people reach across boundaries by tackling ideas they might not have been exposed to otherwise. The funding might be private, but its effect is set to ripple through the public domain more than if we had government money behind it. We've created conversations between artists, visitors and spaces."

## Confronting issues

The biennale's most interesting artworks, installations and site-specific interventions are certainly bold in their subject matter. Many of them address the religious, political and social issues affecting Thailand today, revealing an eagerness to confront the constraints imposed from on high.



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Nino Sarabutra's "What We Will Leave Behind?" is a case in point. The site-specific work sees 125,000 unglazed porcelain skulls covering a walkway around the white bell-shaped stupa of the Wat Prayurawongsawat temple, whose walls are traditionally stacked with the cremated ashes of monks.



Porcelain skulls from Nino Sarabutra's "What We Will Leave Behind?" Credit: Courtesy Nino Sarabutra

The miniature skulls are artistic extensions of their surroundings -- a play on life and death. Visitors are invited to step on and move them as they circle the temple's corridors reflecting on both mortality and the legacy of the everyday.

Elsewhere, mixed works by the Muslimah Collective, a group of four Muslim female artists from southern Thailand, where a violent conflict between insurgents and the Thai military has raged since 2004, are poignant in their use of drawings, textiles and etchings to portray the consequences of violence.



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"The event has put the spotlight on a series of topics that are hardly ever discussed publicly," said curator Luckana Kunavichayanont, the former director of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC), which has dedicated an entire floor to the biennale. "There are exhibits tackling sex work, religious conflict in the south, migrant workers and female labor exploitation."

Kawita Vatanajyankur's project "Performing Textiles," for instance, explores working conditions for Thai women. Through a series of visually captivating video performances, in which she transforms her body into the knitting needle of a spinning wheel or a mop submerged in a bucket of dye, Vatanajyankur addresses the stresses and dangers of working in the textile industry.

"My art aims to create social awareness around urgent issues," she said. "If people come here and take anything from it, maybe that's a way to change the state of things moving forward. That's why BAB is important."



Kawita Vatanajyankur's often humorous videos address the working conditions of Thai women. Credit: Courtesy Kawita Vatanajyankur

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One of the biennale's advisors and the director of the National Gallery Singapore, Eugene Tan, sees the event as marking a new chapter for contemporary Thai art.

"BAB is a significant milestone in the development of art in Thailand and the region, coming at a pertinent time when the arts landscape in Bangkok is witnessing a certain dynamism," he wrote over email.

Whether this will encourage a shift in official attitudes towards art remains to be seen, though Kunavichayanont appears confident. "The number of visitors that BAB is set to attract (and) the window it offers to artists -- all these aspects are set to shake things up, and show authorities the potential contemporary art can have."

*Bangkok Art Biennale runs until Feb. 3, 2019*

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