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Bangkok-born artist straddles high and low, East and West in exhibit at Bill Brady/KC

By ALICE THORSON
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Clouds of mist from a fog machine fill the air at the Bill Brady/KC gallery as part of an exhibit of new work by Bangkok-born Korakrit Arunanondchai. Compounding the drama, youthfully dressed mannequins assert a punky theatrical presence in front of nine large, ornately patterned paintings overlaid with splotches of gold.

The key to this array is an 11-minute video that screens continuously in a rear gallery.

Andrew Russeth, editor of the Observer's Gallerist NY blog, described Arunanondchai's presence in New York this spring as "ubiquitous." Since then, the 2012 Columbia master of fine arts grad has showed in Los Angeles before coming to Kansas City.

He's the perfect fit for the Brady gallery, which aims to give "young artists sought after everywhere ... a platform in Kansas City."

Titled "Painting With History in a Room Filled With Men With Funny Names 2," the exhibit follows an eponymous Part 1 at Clearing Gallery in Brooklyn. At Brady, black-and-white hashtag banners posted high on the walls feature short aphorisms. One hangs on the building's exterior: "#lookslikeart #mustbeart."

The touchstone for the sequel at Brady's is the fantastical Wat Rong Khun, or White Temple, in northern Thailand, which the artist visited this summer with his twin brother, Korapat. A slideshow on the Brady website, featuring photographs of the brothers from infancy to adulthood, underlines their closeness.

"We haven't really talked or seen each other in two years," Arunanondchai relates in his artist statement. "Pat (short for Korapat), seems to still be a little melancholic from his past relationship."

Their trip, which culminates in an artistic collaboration, is documented in the video. It's a poignant tale of cultural re-immersion, brotherly love and the redemptive power of art.

In an art world that too often seems jaded, there's a disarming innocence about the entire production. Those "men with funny names" are the artist's Thai buddies, with whom he reunites at the beginning of the video.

Dressed in jeans and smoking cigarettes, their faces daubed with paint, they crowd into the back of a pickup. At one point the group stands on a ledge, dropping denim clothing onto a bonfire. At another, they circle the artist on motorbikes as he engages in a round of pushups and Korapat dances.

These physical exertions provide a kind of ritual preparation for the brothers' visit to the White Temple, a radiant, otherworldly structure incorporating mirrored-glass mosaics and wispy, organic extrusions.

It was designed by Chalermchai Kositpipat, national artist of Thailand. He is clearly a role model for Arunanondchai, who told Interview magazine that his art project's mission is "to uncover more of Thai art history and to find my place within that context."

The brothers dress in white for their visit to the temple, which they follow up with a collaborative painting session in a lush outdoor setting. The artist smears synthetic gold leaf paint on his brother, who assumes a prayer-like stance before pressing his body against large canvases.

The body printing is likely to remind Western viewers of Yves Klein's "Anthropometries," in which the artist used naked female models covered in paint as human brushes. But Arunanondchai cites a specifically Thai inspiration, namely a notorious performance on the TV show "Thailand's Got Talent," when a young woman undressed and covered her upper torso with paint before pressing her breasts against a canvas.

Her actions caused a national uproar; after Korapat's body-painting session, the Arunanondchai brothers exchanged elated high-fives.

Arunanondchai lists his brother's name with his own on the news release for his exhibit at Brady's, where those gold splotches on the large canvases are Korapat's body prints.

Arunanondchai combined them with inkjet prints of ornate details of the White Temple and expanses of sky, then added fragments of the clothing burned during the video. Collaged onto the surfaces, the denim elements contribute an earthly counterpoint to the levitating, disembodied figures in gold, poised between East and West, the spiritual and the profane, pop culture and high art.

Creatively, that's pretty much where Arunanondchai is located, and clearly, it's a wonderful place to be.

On exhibit

Korakrit Arunanondchai, Korapat Arunanondchai: "Painting With History in a Room Filled With Men With Funny Names 2" continues at Bill Brady/KC, 1505 Genessee St., through Oct 19. Hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. For more information, call [816-527-0090](tel:816-527-0090) or go to BillBradyKC.com.

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