

ELMGREEN&DRAGSET Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, USA

November, 2019 | by Grant Johnson

page 1 of 2

ELMGREEN &
DRAGSET
Nasher Sculpture
Center, Dallas, USA

The sculptures of artist-collaborators and former lovers Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset have always reflected upon the company they keep, from the biennial circuit to the art fair jet-set, casting the rarified culture industry in a queer, satirical light. *Death of a Collector*, installed at the Danish and Nordic pavilion during the 2009 Venice Biennale, drowned the figure of a businessman (à la *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950) face-down in a pool. For *Traces of a Never Existing History/Powerless Structures, Fig. 222*, commissioned for the 2001 Istanbul Biennial, the artists half-buried a rectangular gallery in a garden, revealing the words 'Temporary Art' on its façade. The art world's already precarious institutions are ruined in their dystopic tableaux. In their first US survey at the Nasher Sculpture Center, the artists are darkly comic jesters in a royal court, with works spanning their three-decade practice installed alongside the museum's irony-free modernist collection of sculptures by Barbara Hepworth, Richard Serra and others.

The works that introduce the show, however – such as *Modern Moses* (2006), a dummy ATM with a bassinetted baby deposited before it – extend this critique beyond the art world, to queer experience and the minimalist aesthetics of surveillance systems and other forms of social control. Although the many figures on display successfully mimic the human form, they all suffer from rigor mortis: the artists' archetypal portraits of a muscled lifeguard (*Watching*, 2016) and a boy gazing rapturously at a framed gun (*One Day*, 2015) aren't evocative of real personalities or even real bodies, but rather lifeless mannequins, displaced from the shopping mall to the museum. Their uncanny, commercial appearance seems crafted not by human hands but by machine fabrication. These commodified bodies resonate in Dallas, and especially at the Nasher, which stands just blocks from the flagship Neiman Marcus department store, and houses a collection informed in part by its founder's provocative installations of sculpture within the thoroughfares of NorthPark Center, a high-end shopping mall.

Inert though these figures may be, they are softened by sentimentality. For the sole performance work in the exhibition, *Dallas Diaries* (2019), a trio of handsome young men sit in the



galleries and constantly journal. The work, first presented in 2003 at Perrotin as *Paris Diaries*, performs an adolescent vulnerability the adult duo still channel as queer role models.

As in works by Charles Ray and Jeff Koons (whose *Louis XIV*, 1986, appears in a gallery of permanent collection works curated to accompany the show), the polished stainless steel of many of these sculptures reflect the viewer's gaze. As I studied the surface of *He (Silver)* (2013), Copenhagen's landmark *The Little Mermaid* (1913) icon recast as a sad young man rather than an amphibian girl, I saw myself there, refracted through an iridescent rainbow patina: the palette of gay liberation likely left by the oil of admiring hands compelled to touch the work's seductively smooth surface. Though their forms bear few traces of expressive touch, Elmgreen & Dragset's sculptures still tend to wear their hearts on their sleeves – a tenderness that lies just beneath their slick veneer.

Grant Johnson

RIFTS
Bangkok Art & Culture
Centre, Thailand

A geological rift is a fissure in tectonic plates caused by large-scale faulting – but what about an artistic rift? For Chai Janephaphan and Kasamaporn Saengsuratham, guest curators of this succinct journey through Thai art from the mid-1980s to early 2000s – a period when the stultifying mantles of modernism and art-school conservatism were allegedly cast off – a 'rift' is a pliable metaphor.

An extended timeline of key events and an archive of printed matter hint at the role that local art spaces, academics and international art festivals all played in the evolution of the country's contemporary practices and their rising currency on the world stage. Yet, 'Rifts' forgoes any attempt at a comprehensive art-historical genealogy, preferring instead to foreground 13 proto-contemporary artworks and present their creators as local pioneers – rift-makers – of varying strains and magnitudes.

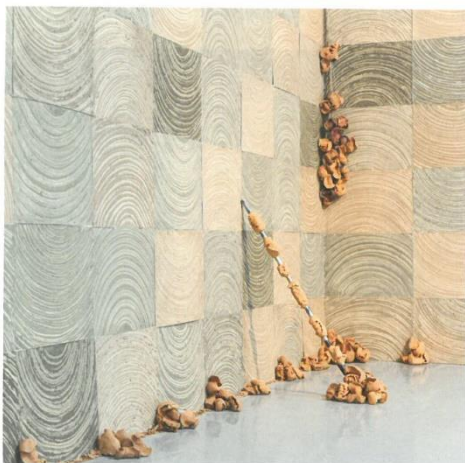
Visitors are welcomed by a fulsome re-creation of Kamol Phaovasadi's declamatory assault against modern art, *Song for the Dead Art Exhibition* (1985), consisting of a wall full of book pages torn from postmodern manifestos and essays, paint-splattered copies of Andy Warhol's 1960s Marilyn Monroe screenprints and an installation of rusty scrap metal. Nearby, exhibition copies of two works by the late installation artist Montien Boonma, including *The Story of Metamorphosis in the Farm* (1989), signpost his career-shaping adoption of unpretentious techniques and found materials. A rift also plays out in real time: shaky footage from the opening of his landmark 1989 exhibition, 'Stories from the Farm', shows Boonma explaining his arte povera-inspired installations – made from rice sacks, chicken coops, straw and buffalo horns – to befuddled men in suits.

Deploying a baker's dozen of bravura works as visual shorthand for a nation's epochal breakthroughs is, at its core, a reductive pursuit. It occludes so much context and omits so many names. However, the work in the opening room is undeniably potent, rich with formal idiosyncrasies and a humble materiality. Pithy wall texts, meanwhile, do a serviceable job of explaining how the period's unruly avant garde fused quotidian routines with Buddhist teachings (Kamin Lertchaiprasert); explored memory and death through video (Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook); challenged the monoculturalism of the neo-traditionalists (Prasong Luemuang); teased out the corporeality of femininity (Pinaree Sanpitak); and theatrically refashioned Thai painting (Chatchai Puipia).

Like the yBas, these artists were only ever loosely affiliated. But, while their approaches were heterogeneous, an irreverence towards the status quo and an openness – particularly in relation to unorthodox techniques and the everyday – unites them. This binding agent is writ large in the second and final room, where four well-travelled cornerstones of Thailand's socially engaged, concept-driven 1990s – among them, a Rirkrit Tiravanija cook-up arrayed across the floor (*Untitled [2004]*, *jed sian samurai 2019*, 2004/19) – offer a gritty retort to the more ethereal, technique-based works preceding them. Especially illustrative, yet again, is the rare video documentation on display: Manit Sriwanichpoom's luridly garbed Pink Man slowly pushes a matching-hued shopping cart past nonplussed office workers on one side of the room (*Pink Man Begins (episode 1, 2, 3)*, 1997); while giggling passengers enjoy an unplanned trip in Navin Rawanchaikul's roving taxicab gallery on the other (*Navin Gallery Bangkok*, 1995–98).

Experientially, 'Rifts' manages to feel both celebratory and cerebral – albeit ultimately a bit safe. What of the splits (along national, postnational, as well as ideological lines) that have long existed between these cohorts? Where are the non-canonical surprises that might rupture our understanding of that time? Yet, given the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre's history of rambling mega-exhibitions, not to mention the fractures it is experiencing as an institution (its public funding has been squeezed of late and its spotty programming reflects an entrenched managerial malaise), a carefully distilled retrospective that leaves us wanting more is, all things considered, welcome.

Max Crosbie-Jones



This page

Above

Haegue Yang, 2019, exhibition view

Below

Montien Boonma, *Manual Traces in the Paddy Field with Fish Net and Space*, 1991, soil pigment on paper, terra-cotta, fish net and spade, dimensions variable

Opposite page

Eimgreen & Dragset, *Modern Moses*, 2006, carrycot, bedding, wax figure, baby clothes, stainless steel cash machine, dimensions variable



HAEGUE YANG Kukje Gallery, Seoul, Korea

Eerily crackling through an old speaker, backing singers 'ba-pa-ba' to xylophones. A woman touts the coming of the millennium, her voice spinning giddily over thrumming guitars and squelching synths. Playing outside the entrance to Haegue Yang's solo show in Kukje Gallery's K3 exhibition space, Hae-kyung Min's 1982 track 'AD 2000' sounds like a sonic artefact, rough-edged and faded, a far cry from the glitzingly optimistic original.

The exhibition's graphic identity is similarly nostalgic: its title, 'When the Year 2000 Comes', is rendered in a 1980s-style digital font on the invitation card for the opening. Beneath the text, a 1977 watercolour the artist made as a child with her siblings depicts a team of demonic creatures on a ship.

The watercolour hangs in the hallway, introducing Yang's show. Mounted on chicken wire, its characters appear menacing, surrounded by flying elements – flags, planes, bombs. Entering the main exhibition space prompts similar feelings of fear and bewilderment. Fractals of geometric objects span different dimensions: the floor, the ceiling, a mural. Strings of bells dangle from spheres like weapons of torture over bouncy balls on crosses of tape. Revolving projectors protrude from the walls like CCTV cameras, casting shadows through venetian blinds onto the mural. A man in scrubs operates an ergonomic surveillance vehicle beneath cascades of airbrushed greenery, while dry ice spills in through the back door beneath a drone. The effect is alluring: is this a Silicon Valley data scientist's dream of deliverance? A plasmic prospectus for an iHospital?

Outside, a crowd has gathered; Yang is having her picture taken with a queue of fans. 'AD 2000' continues to play faintly: its mishmash of 1970s rock and pop styles pantomiming Japanese and Western inspirations. Lauding an age of 'greater

convenience', Hae-kyung's lyrics are the product of a period in which South Korea's economy was booming even as the ruling military regime tightened its grip on the country in the wake of widespread student pro-democracy protests in 1980. In a press interview, Yang suggests that 'AD 2000' was seeking to promote an image of obedient youth to its listeners: propaganda dressed up as entertainment.

The strips of tape that cover the gallery floor form a grid, bisected by diagonals, which appears to emanate from the sculptures. Modelled after the board used in *Janggi* (Korean chess), the pattern swerves into areas of irregularity as it follows the path of Yang's 'pieces' – hovering, rolling, creeping up the walls. Her *Sol LeWitt Vehicles* (2018) boast a similarly rebellious streak. Aluminium cube frames affixed with blinds, wheels and handles turn the legendary minimalist's 'Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes' (1974) into mobile, interactive devices. If LeWitt went by the principle expressed in his 1967 essay 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' that 'the idea becomes the machine becomes the art', Yang seems to be taking his machine and making it glitch.

Stay longer in the gallery and other voices, sounds, smells emerge. An exhibition handout presents a timeline edited by the artist, twinning the biographies of French novelist Marguerite Duras and Korean composer Isang Yun, who died within a year of each other in the mid-1990s. Titled *A Chronology of Conflated Dispersion* (2019), it chronicles two people navigating the rubble of war, revolution and Western imperialism, side by side, year by year, forming unexpected rhythms between their vastly different journeys. Meanwhile, birds chirrup at each other from a pair of speakers, abstracted from a recording of the third Inter-Korean summit between the leaders of North and South Korea in 2018. And strange mineral smells linger around the objects, at once earthy and medicinal. In this multisensory exquisite corpse, Yang tantalizes us with secret symbols, probing our desire for narrative mastery.

Mimi Chu