



THAI
FILMMAKER
APICHATPONG
WEERASETHAKUL
MIXES YOUTH,
POLITICS AND MYTH

For the sake of simplicity, everyone fondly calls Apichatpong Weerasethakul "Joe". However, the Thai artist's complex work is miles away from his ironically everyday nickname. He is one of the most interesting directors to have emerged this decade, seamlessly making the crossover from art to narrative cinema.

Last autumn, the artist spent two months in a village called Nabua in the north-east of Thailand, a place that has seen violent conflict between communist farmers and the reigning totalitarian regime for two decades. This backdrop forms part of the layered history behind *Primitive*, Weerasethakul's installation of short films about the area – its mythology, its youth and its political history. "This project is quite different from my other work," he explains. "Usually my projects are about my memories, my partners, my friends and my family. This is someone else's memory. I was very interested in that because the land has such an intense history."

Primitive is layered on screens around the viewer – consisting of layer upon mysterious layer of fiction, non-fiction, time and history. Much of the work is shot late at night or at dusk, which for the director is the time when ghosts and spirits manifest.

The work was created at the end of 2008, when Thailand's political situation was highly volatile. It includes recreations of the history with local teens, documentary footage, surreal photographs of a floating wooden spaceship and strange, ghostly images that touch on local mythology. All of the boys featured are the descendents of the communist farmers. "During that time the army occupied the village and most of the men fled into the jungle," says Weerasethakul. "Only women and children were left. For me, it's a kind of statement to only feature the men. They've been released. They are in their own land. They are not being chased from home."

Weerasethakul fell into making art installations accidentally, after a friend in Bangkok put his work on show, and he says his art practice gave him the opportunity to "open some narrative and not tell anything, giving the audience the freedom to interpret." He has now been making films for almost 15 years – most notably the cult horror film *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Syndromes And A Century* (2006). He originally studied film at the Art Institute of Chicago, taking a course in experimental filmmaking and studying innovative American filmmakers like Maya Deren. "This inspiration, coupled with my memories of my country, transmuted and transformed what I wanted to express in Thailand," the director explains. "I have a lot of, not complaints, but questions when I make films. Questions like, 'What are you trying to say?' Art people don't ask that question." Francesca Gavin

Primitive is at FACT 25 Sept – 29 Nov, 88 Wood St, Liverpool fact.co.uk

Primitive also forms part of the Abandon Normal Devices art festival, Liverpool, 23 – 27 September andfestiva.org.uk / animateprojects.org

Left (from top): *Primitive*, 2009; *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*, 2009. Images courtesy of Kick The Machine Films. Photography Chaisiri Jiwangsan