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Cult Cannes star brings ghostly video art to Liverpool

War trauma and science fiction come together in Primitive, Thai film director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's video installation at Fact gallery



Jessica Lack

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Life, but not as we know it ... A still from one of Weerasethakul's video installations.
Photograph: Fact gallery, Liverpool

Soldiers in a derelict house take potshots at a young man walking across a paddy field. He clutches his chest and collapses – but before they have time to reload, the boy is up again. There is no soundtrack: we can see, but not hear, the gun as it jolts backwards. Once again the figure falls, with the same melodramatic twist of the body, but in seconds he rises and continues his journey with an easy nonchalance. This cyclical routine would be harrowing if the soldiers were not so comically impotent. Is he a superhero? The clue lies in another film playing on the opposite wall: a group of farmers are building a spaceship. If this is life, Jim, it is not as we know it.

This is Primitive, a multi-screen installation by the Thai film director Apichatpong Weerasethakul that opened at Liverpool's Fact gallery on 24 September. The work is divided up across three galleries: downstairs is a seven-screen video installation depicting different films of a group of teenage boys playing at soldiers, hanging out, letting off firecrackers and sleeping in a rudimentary spaceship. Upstairs are two movies, one called A Letter to Uncle Boonmee and the other A Music Video: I'm Still Breathing. In its entirety, Primitive makes up a larger narrative about a sleepy farming community in north-east Thailand called Nabua.

The son of doctors, Apichatpong grew up in a hospital compound, and his films are consumed by questions of existentialism, reincarnation and transfiguration. Over his relatively short career he has become the darling of Cannes, having won two awards, the second of which was the prestigious Le Prix de Jury in 2004. This was for his feature *Tropical Malady*, a blissful study of man in conflict with nature, which revolves around a love story between two men, one of whom may not be real.

In person, Apichatpong (the name is pronounced a-pitch-at-pong) looks far younger than his 39 years, and cuts an unassuming figure – somewhat belying his status as a political activist whose work has suffered at the hands of the Thai censorship board. His opposition to the government's homophobic policies, and his impassioned essays on the fragile future of Thai cinema under military dictatorship have earned him a reputation as a troublemaker. *Primitive* focuses on Nabua, where in the 1960s villagers were raped, tortured and murdered by the authorities after being accused of communist sympathies. Last year, Apichatpong spent three months living in the village, documenting the lives of the children and grandchildren of the farmers who had "disappeared" during the Thai army's occupation. The resulting installation is an enigmatic journey through a traumatic past.

One of the most distinguishing aspects of Apichatpong's films is his fragmented narrative – first used in 2000 in his feature *Mysterious Object at Noon*. The technique was modelled on the surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse* (known to us as *Consequences*), as first played by André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Tanguy and Jacques Prévert, in which players draw in turn on a sheet of paper, fold to conceal part of the drawing and pass it on to the next player. The surrealists would play it to pass the time in Parisian cafes, and many of their early examples ended up in the Art Institute in Chicago, where Apichatpong first saw them. It offered the director the freedom to spiral off into different trajectories – as did his interest in Buddhism and his childhood love of science fiction, both of which became signatures in work that often slips between fact and fiction. The themes combine in *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), in which Apichatpong filmed two monks playing with a battery-controlled UFO in a public park. It was one of four scenes that the Thai authorities deemed unacceptable, it being unseemly for monks to engage in something so flippant. Apichatpong is still fighting the ban through his production company, *Kick the Machine*.

Apichatpong's desire to explore life beyond, and his unremitting search for the disembodied, right here on Earth, is reflected in the second part of *Primitive*, which is screened in Fact's upstairs gallery. *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* is based on a story told to the director by a Buddhist monk about an old man who could remember his past lives, whether as an elephant hunter or a wandering ghost. Whenever this man was reincarnated, he always chose to return to the same part of north-east Thailand. Apichatpong's film attempts to seek out this incorporeal being in Nabua, among the paddy fields and the wooden huts. He never succeeds, but imagines the old man to be the shadows and shapes in the surrounding jungle. And in the midst of the landscape, a surprise: we glimpse the same spaceship that we witnessed being built downstairs.

