

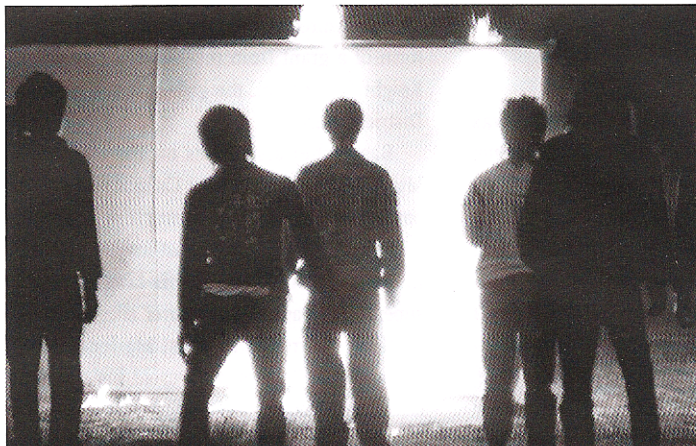
FILM

Apichatpong Weerasethakul

BFI Gallery London 14 May to 4 July

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's short film *Phantoms of Nabua*, 2009, opens with a tropical thunderstorm. Blinding flashes of lightning strike the ground, a crackling neon strip flickers in the heavy rain. As the camera moves backwards, it gradually reveals a freestanding screen; the monsoon turns out to be a cinematic back-projection. Oblivious of the equipment, a group of teenage boys fool around in the dark with a flaming ball. It feels like a spontaneous event, kids playing in a remote and indeterminate Asian country. They shriek and giggle, thrilled by the danger while specks of light cross the air like delirious fireflies. The tension grows with the boys' excitement, and soon the inevitable happens: the freestanding screen bursts into flame and disintegrates into ashes, exposing the dazzling eye of a projector behind. BFI's visitors are trapped in a beam of light, forced to face the filmic apparatus and thus the scene's artificiality. The piece draws to an end on this enormous oculus sending through night images that cannot be materialised.

Phantoms of Nabua is part of 'Primitive', a 'multi-platform' project co-commissioned by Haus der Kunst Munich, FACT Liverpool and Animate Project. It includes a large-scale installation – recently shown at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris – another short, *Letter to Uncle Boonmee*, 2009, a publication (also presented at BFI) and the feature film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Life*, 2010, which earned Weerasethakul the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival this year. This remarkable ensemble was triggered by a book, the story of a man who, while meditating, revisited his previous incarnations, given to Weerasethakul (popularly known as Joe) by the abbot of a temple in the filmmaker's native province of Khon Kaen, northern Thailand.



Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Phantoms of Nabua
2009 film still

According to Joe, this story has a particular significance for the area, a place severely affected by confrontations between governmental forces and communist farmers (or anyone suspected of communist tendencies) between the 1960s and 80s. The first gun battle broke out in 1965 in a rice field in Nabua. The repression was brutal, resulting in countless villagers fleeing to the jungle, and the local population is now eager to forget those troubled times. Using the character of Uncle Boonmee as a catalyst, Weerasethakul attempted, in his words, 'to trace back the memory' of the region. He went looking for Uncle Boonmee or his descendants in a road trip that took him and his crew all over the province. Other, more intimate narratives re-emerged as they progressed: memories of the filmmaker's father, memories of one of the actresses who once escaped domestic violence nearby. These are recorded in the publication as they would be in a diary, thickening the project's already rich substrate. None of them is actually present in *Phantom of Nabua* itself but the film – a vignette from Nabua – is inseparable from Joe's quest, disturbed as it was by uninvited ghosts.

Yet in the end it was the offspring of the deceased, the 'teens' as Joe calls them, that provided a real focus for the project. It is as if the filmmaker realised that embracing the present was an efficient – if indirect – way to tackle the past. 'For me the teens are like the foot of the

tree', he said in a recent public conversation at the BFI. To bond with them, the artist settled in the area for months. He got to know each boy individually, played games, set up scenarios and accumulated hours of rushes that hover 'halfway between documentary and fiction'. Midway through the talk, the filmmaker showed *I'm Still Breathing*, one of the screens in the installation 'Primitive'; the kids run together on a dusty road, shouting and laughing. Then, suddenly, they start throwing smoke grenades, and the run turns from being joyful to being riotous.

This edge – an awkward blending of fun and anger, pleasure and pain – is a trademark of Weerasethakul's production (brilliantly enacted in the romantic drama *Tropical Malady*, 2004), and, in *Phantoms of Nabua*, seems crucially relevant to recent events in Thailand. During his BFI talk, Joe insisted on the fact that he wasn't an activist, 'but', he said, 'the political has entered my personal sphere'. He had made fur fly in Cannes by declaring 'Thailand is a violent country ... controlled by a group of mafia'. Enough of beaches and temples, he said, we have to show the world the reality of our country. And here, in *Phantoms of Nabua*, it is: a flaming cannonball of unhealed traumas. ❧

COLINE MILLIARD is a writer and co-editor of www.cataloguemagazine.com.

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