

Primitive art

Apichatpong Weerasethakul tells **Tony Rayns** about the birth of his new installation

Art rooted in serendipity more often than not drives audiences up the wall; most of us seem to prefer the smack of firm government when it comes to being entertained by someone else's creativity. But the Thai director Apichatpong 'Joe' Weerasethakul has always allowed random factors to shape his work; as 'Tropical Malady' (2004) and 'Syndromes and a Century' (2006) show, he's driven more by impulse and instinct than by the desire to tell a linear story, and he's unusually open to the idea of digressing. Despite this, there's no shortage of people who'll tell you that his movies give them more pleasure than most of the other stuff they sit through. The word "bliss" is often bandied about, and not only because his second feature was called 'Blissfully Yours' (2002).

He said at the time that 'Syndromes' (a film rooted in personal memories and in imagining what his parents were like before they married and had kids) would probably mark a watershed in his work, and recent developments suggest that it has. Soon after its completion he decamped from Bangkok to the northern city of Chiangmai. And then, towards the end of 2008, he wrote a screenplay called 'Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives' which sent him on a research trip through Thailand's huge north-eastern province Isan. He's an Isan native himself, born in the town of Khon Kaen, but this time he wasn't looking for his own roots. The script was inspired by a book about a man who didn't need hypnosis to remember eight previous incarnations, some of them as animals, all of them in Isan; Apichatpong went looking for traces of the real-life Boonmee and did meet his two sons, but his script is entirely fictional.

Isan was the cradle of Thai civilisation and, in the 1960s, a bastion of resistance to the generals who seized power in successive military coups; chronically plagued by drought, it has also been the primary source of migrants to the country's wealthier cities. The region has plenty of cinematic form. The hardships of life in rural Isan were chronicled in one of the greatest Thai films, Wichit Kounavudhi's 'Son of the North-east' ('Luk Isan', 1982), and the two 'underground' movies made in opposition to the generals – 'Tongpan'



Great ball of fire: village football in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 'Primitive'

(1976, by Euthana Mukdasanit and Surachai Jantimathorn) and 'On the Fringe of Society' ('Prachachon Nork', 1981, by Manop Udomdej) – were shot largely in Isan.

Apichatpong's trip around Isan took him to the village of Nabua, near the border with Laos, and that's when the spirit of serendipity kicked in. The Thai military branded Nabua a hotbed of 'communist' rebellion in the 1960s and carried out attacks on the local people in 1965. Many of the adult males were either killed or driven into hiding in the wild. (Ironically, this fulfilled the key premise of a local legend about a ghostly widow who abducted males and left the community manless.) "I had a rough idea of what had happened in Nabua," Apichatpong tells me, "but I learned a lot more from the people there. The full extent of the violence was never reported, and still isn't widely known in the rest of Thailand." Apichatpong found a lot to intrigue him in Nabua, from this semi-suppressed history to the echoes of local mythology, and from the sexual energy of the village's teenage boys to certain echoes of Thailand's current political turmoil. And so he did what any decent surrealist film-maker would have done: he asked the fatherless boys to build a spaceship, and began shooting DV sketches. "I didn't know how it would turn out," he says, "and so I just began accumulating 'mini-movies'. It felt more like joining in a performance than making a film."

What this work led to was a large-scale installation piece called 'Primitive', premiered at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in February and due to arrive (in a different version, tailored to the available space) at

FACT in Liverpool in September. After that it will be seen in Paris, again in a different version. Nobody knows yet how the piece will look in Liverpool, but the bottom line is that 'Primitive' provides a rich environment of complementary and contrasting images, some silent, some with sound. In addition to the many videos, there are two new short films, 'Phantoms of Nabua' and 'A Letter to Uncle Boonmee'. Apichatpong (who trained originally as an architect) has made installations before, but not on this scale: "What I like most about the installation is that it doesn't give you a linear experience. It's more an immersion in these various scenarios, a bit like witnessing multiple lives."

'Primitive' certainly gives the visitor plenty to experience. There's some impressionistic reportage (the planning and building of the spaceship and its subsequent adoption as a red-light den by the kids), there's some history (a boy sings his own song about the massacre in Nabua), there's a hint of drama (boys playing their late fathers, boys playing soldiers), there's music (a running, jumping and raving video for a tune by Modern Dog). Most impressive of all are the images that connote violence and destruction: repeated lightning strikes, boys kicking a blazing football.

The 'Uncle Boonmee' feature, to be shot later this year, will ultimately be part of the 'Primitive' project too, and will probably shape the viewer's sense of the themes and implications of the piece. For now, though, serendipity rules.

■ 'Primitive' opens at FACT in Liverpool on 24 September