



Artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert by his eerily realistic model of a woman at Maiiam Museum.

Bohemian Rhapsody

Long a laid-back center for creative types, Chiang Mai's art world is on the cusp of stardom. **Diana Hubbell** stops by new galleries, and chats with the artists reshaping this free-spirited enclave. PHOTOGRAPHED BY **CEDRIC ARNOLD**

IT'S TUESDAY NIGHT, BUT THE BAR IS PACKED and a scruffy boho bunch clutching Thai whiskey-and-sodas spills into the street. Though there's no real stage at Northgate Jazz Co-Op, the crowd makes room for the musicians, who are jamming in full swing. Pharadon "Por" Phonamnuai, a saxophonist and one of the owners, stops to mingle before diving back into the fray. In between solos, he bellows, "Does anybody want to join in?"

People do. A young Shanghainese woman who's been in town all of six hours starts riffing bebop, followed by a Thai university student with a boyish bob and 80s-style bottle-rim glasses who barely looks old enough to be in a bar. She sidles up, flashes her braces in a shy smile, then lifts the mic stand clean off the floor and lets loose a thundering alto a la Ella Fitzgerald. The whole room roars in approval.

"We're musicians, but we wanted to create a space for all the arts," Paul Sugars, one of the other co-owners, tells me during a break. Both this and their other joint, Thapae East—an industrial venue decked out in the requisite exposed brick that hosts exhibitions, installations and all sorts of performance pieces—serve as de facto centers for Chiang Mai's creative community. "Art

for art's sake" often rings hollow, but the old Lanna capital has an allure that has little to do with commerce, since the local market for art is still trailing behind regional creative hubs Hong Kong and Singapore. This is one of the rare places where offbeat projects, free from the whims of deep-pocketed collectors, encourage artists to produce work simply for the sheer madcap joy of it. Lured by the prospect of finding like-minded individuals, international names have been passing through or setting up studios here for years.

Slowly but surely, though, the scene is evolving, with a spate of openings including the ambitious Hern Gallery and the arrival last summer of Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum. Many of these newcomers boast sleeker designs in keeping with their polished, profitable brethren abroad. In fact, there are so many art spaces that the city launched its first

gallery night earlier this year and now prints maps to help visitors suss out the best ones. Though the number of local collectors remains low and government funding all but nonexistent, interest from outsiders is high enough that boutique hotels, like the new Art Mai, are seeking to capitalize on the travelers checking out the creative scene. Chiang Mai's dreamers may still dwell on the fringe, but the rest of the world is starting to take notice, and those living within are hoping the community can maintain its avant-garde vibe. With any luck, the long incubation period prior to commercial success will preserve that weird soul, even as the art movement grows up and looks to sell its work to a larger global audience.

"Chiang Mai's a big hub for creative people from all over. I know a lot of foreign artists who come here just to work," says Chumpol "Tua" Taksapornchai, a painter who runs Matoom Art Space. Soft spoken, with long hair and a bunch of piercings, he's made himself a fixture in town by organizing exhibitions for others and helping to launch the popular Shambhala in Your Heart Festival. Virtually all of his work sells to collectors abroad, but the

Bangkok native has no intention of leaving his northern home. "I travel to Tokyo, Hong Kong, even Europe to sell most of my pieces, but I come back here to paint," Tua says. "It's like a village up here and I've always felt welcome. It's hard to explain, but there's this sense that in Chiang Mai anything you want to create, you can."

That can-do ethos manifests best in artist-run projects where people from different disciplines push one another to take their ideas to their logical—or, more often, gleefully illogical—extremes. To find out more, I head out to nearby Doi Saket via a tuk-tuk, a two-hour-long ride on a bumpy local bus, and finally a motorbike, to a lush patch of land well off any sort of grid that hosts ComPeung, the first independent artist residency in Thailand. Over the last decade, Pisithpong "Ong" Siraphisut has hosted roughly 120 artists from all over the globe in structures he built himself using mud and recycled bags of pet food. The meter-thick walls, decorated with murals inside and out, swallow mobile phone signals whole.

I join Ong, along with a visiting couple of installation artists from San Francisco and a British photographer living in Sweden, for bowls of vegetarian *khao soi*, northern Thailand's beloved noodles in yellow curry. As we wander the grounds after lunch, he tells me, "I found this land 10 years ago and just fell in love with it. Personally, I feel like this is my ongoing art project." Thousands of trees, all saplings and all planted by Ong and his wife, grow wild, their trunks spindly and roots deep. Remnants of past installations linger decaying in the thickets and clearings. We pass a Thai-style



FROM LEFT: Find handmade crafts sourced from neighboring hill tribes at Rare Earth Tribal Art; tea for two at the serene Hotel des Artistes Ping Silhouette; food vendors and shop stalls ripe for the browsing at Chang Puak North Gate Market.



FROM LEFT: Torlarp Larjaroensook, artist and gallery-owner, with his work at Gallery Seescape; make time to reflect at Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum; northern Thai specialties are on the menu at Art Mai hotel.

spirit house painted in lurid hues, a luxury condo for birds, a dilapidated pagoda where an Australian woman conducted a marriage ceremony for herself and a puppet dubbed “Ideal Husband,” and a massive, wire-mesh framework covered in vines spelling the word $\Upsilon E S$. One of the San Franciscans is on her hands and knees, reshaping the landscape piece by piece with a spade. She waves a dusty glove as we pass.

“Being independent gives us some freedom,” Ong says. “Since the community has never relied on government funds, artists are able push boundaries with fewer fears of censorship or deadlines. We’re more interested in the process than the final products. We really encourage artists to try out new things. We want them to know: ‘this is a playground for you.’”

That playful side is also what initially drew Sutthirat “Som” Supaparinya. A svelte, composed woman dressed smartly in monochromatic tones, she greets me with quiet warmth at the new Asian Culture Station off of humming Nimmanhaemin Road. “It’s a supportive environment and it’s easy to meet the more successful artists who work here, even if they mainly sell their works abroad or in Bangkok,” she tells me in the sparse, white room lined with shelves of coffee table tomes. “Here, there are so many community and artist-run spaces where people can try to do different kinds of projects outside of the frame of selling things. It’s a place that gives you greater freedom to produce something you want to do.”

Part of Som’s ambition is to give the artists who come here more outlets for financial sustainability without sacrificing that freedom.

From this space, she and the other founders of Chiang Mai Art Conversation (CAC) organize exhibitions, lectures, symposiums, writing workshops, and other events to spread awareness about the city’s cultural landscape. Last year, in collaboration with The Jim Thompson Art Center, CAC printed the first-ever “art map,” which lists galleries, salons, artist residences and museums. The free brochure is in its second print edition and gearing up for a third. “In the past, artists mostly needed to create a temporary space for their projects,” she says. “Now there are more opportunities for them to show their work than there were 10 years ago.”

The biggest opportunity at the moment is the Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum, the passion project of Eric Bunnag Booth, the international marketing director for Jim Thompson, and Jean Michel Beurdeley, his stepfather. Set in a 3,000-square-meter warehouse refurbished by architectural firm Allzone, the building boasts rotating exhibitions, as well as an impressive selection of works by Thai artists from the family’s private collection. Its splashy debut in July >>

marked the arrival of Chiang Mai's first showcase of this caliber and has the potential to lure more art aficionados to the area. When I arrive, Kamin Lertchaiprasert, the artist whose lifetime retrospective is currently on display, shakes my hand at the door. A part-time professor for at Chiang Mai University and one of the cofounders of The Land Foundation, which supports the local art community and some of the more alternative lifestyles that go with it, he's one of the region's best-known and most prolific visionaries.

"Chiang Mai's art scene already has many alternative elements, but this is not just another artist-run project. It's more professional," Kamin tells me. That added level of organization and funding manifests in carefully curated exhibits showing a range of work that smaller galleries could never hope to display. "[Eric] is based in Bangkok, but when he decided to build a museum, he chose Chiang Mai because of the community here."

In comparison to the earthen buildings of ComPeung, the modernist white walls and

corridors of Maiiam might come across as too sleek or sterile, were it not for the contents. Kamin's pieces, which begin with a painting he made when he was just 15 years old, span all sorts of media and genres, encompassing everything from traditional oils to hundreds of glazed clay pots to video installations to a grinning golden skull with a walk-in, meditation chamber. On the way out, I almost stumble into the culminating piece, a hyper-realistic fiberglass woman positioned before an abstract bronze work titled *Living Kindness*. I have to stop myself from mumbling, "excuse me" to her glazed, lifeless eyes.

Kamin watches, amused. Though arguably one of Thailand's most successful contemporary artists (his exhibition "Sitting (Money)" was on display at the Guggenheim for two years), he never seems to take himself too seriously. To better interact with visitors, he built a miniature cubic hut resembling a teahouse in the middle of the museum. On Mondays, if he finds someone interesting, he'll invite them in for a chat about art, life, death or anything at all.

As for Chiang Mai's current lack of local buyers, he remains unconcerned, even optimistic. "For me, the market should come after you develop this kind of community. If the market comes first, that's no good—you would lose so many interesting things," he tells me. "Right here, right now, you have no choice. You have to create for your heart, not for your business." The creative freedom beckons, "does anybody want to join in?" People do. ➕

THE DETAILS

HOTELS

Art Mai Gallery Hotel From the lobby adorned with rotating exhibitions to the slick suites sporting works by Thai painters including Jitsing Somboon and Charoon Boonsuan, this clever boutique takes its commitment to creativity seriously. Canvases and easels are on-hand should you be tempted to produce your own masterwork. artmaigalleryhotel.com; doubles from Bt3,200.

Hotel des Artists Ping Silhouette At this serene hideaway nestled on the Ping River, chinoiserie details, antiques and objets d'arte set the mood. Inspired by the area's old merchant trading alleys, the Café des Artists is perfect for an impromptu salon. hotelartists.com/pingsilhouette; doubles from Bt5,500.

RESTAURANT

Cuisine de Garden Endlessly inventive, seasonal tasting menus—think: liquid onsen egg served in the shell and cracked over a warm “nest” with fragrant foraged mushrooms—with just the right wink of molecular-gastro sorcery make this ambitious restaurant worth the drive. fb.com/cuisinedegarden; tasting menus from Bt1,800.

CAFES

Artitude Gallery Cold-pressed juices are named for famous painters—order a Monet Sunrise with pineapple, carrots and passion fruit—at this funky exhibition space wreathed in greenery. fb.com/artitudegallery.

Ristr8to Lab Baristas at this new branch of Chiang Mai's most Instagrammable coffee shop take latte art to new

heights with fiendishly complicated designs on top of custom-crafted blends and single-origin brews. ristr8to-coffee-chiangmai.com.

BARS

Northgate Jazz Co-Op Swing by on a Tuesday night for a free-for-all jam session, where you'll find local artists and musicians swaying to the rhythms until late. fb.com/northgate.jazzcoop.

Thapae East From open mic nights and poetry readings, to live jazz and photography exhibitions, this venue just outside the old town is where Chiang Mai's cool kids gather for culture and craft beers. fb.com/ThapaeEast.

ACTIVITIES

Asian Culture Station asianculturestation.cac-art.info.

ComPeung compeung.org.
Gallery Seescape fb.com/galleryseescape.

Hern Gallery fb.com/herngallery.

Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum maiiam.com.

Matoom Art Space matoomartspace.com.

SHOPS

Cha Chaa Slow Pace Exquisite textiles, which are either designed by the owner or woven by hand in Laos, Thailand, India, China or Afghanistan, are the big draw here. fb.com/chachaaslowpace.

Rare Earth Tribal Art The handmade crafts that the owner painstakingly sources from neighboring hill tribes are a far cry from the tourist trinkets sold in many of the stores. fb.com/rareearthart.