

Risk-taking artists defy Thai taboos at Bangkok Art Biennale

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Inaugural event tackles often-censored topics such as sex work and Thailand's war-torn south

Standing in a massage parlour in the seedy glow of red strip lighting, Pueng turns to the camera. "I have a dream, to build a new house for my family," she says. "Then I can open a small grocery shop". It is a simple aspiration – the extraordinary aspect of it is that, as one of Thailand's hundreds of thousands of sex workers, she has been given a public platform to speak at all.

Alongside 17 other sex workers from the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, Pueng appears in I Have Dreams, a video made by the artist Chumpon Apisuk and one of 75 works to feature in the inaugural [Bangkok Art Biennale](#), which opened at the weekend and will run until February.

It is "time that people face these women, look at them, listen to them", said Apisuk, who has spent three decades working with women in the sex industry. "For once recognise their humanity and stop pretending they don't exist."

He is not alone in using the biennale to showcase work that defies Thailand's taboos, be they social stigmas or the political restrictions imposed by the military government that [took over in a coup in 2014](#).

The event has attracted some of the art world's biggest names – from the performance artist [Marina Abramović](#) to the Danish installation art duo [Elmgreen & Dragset](#), and the Japanese sculptor [Yayoi Kusama](#) – but it is the Thai artists, curators and the artistic director, Apinan Poshyananda, who have pushed the event to realms many have deemed bold for a country where censorship of the arts often weighs heavy.

Sensitive topics tackled include [the conflict in Thailand's Muslim deep south](#); the friction between the country's Muslim and Buddhist communities; the abuse suffered by migrant workers; the plight of women in Thailand's patriarchal society; the refusal to accept persecuted Rohingya refugees from Myanmar; and the plague of environmental pollution on Thailand's rivers.

"People said to me: 'Why ask for trouble?'"

The driving force behind the biennale is

Poshyananda, who previously worked in the government's Department of Culture but has curated the event with a spirit of defiance. "People said to me: 'Why ask for trouble?'" he said with a smile. "And yes, we chose to take the difficult path. But under the military we've gone through five years of intense scrutiny and it's time to have a breather and be able to freely express ourselves."

He confirmed there had been no government interference thus far, even though the city's two most famous temples – Wat Pho and Wat Arun – are among the biennale's venues, which required government approval.

Censorship of the arts in [Thailand](#) remains arbitrary yet often heavy-handed. Commercial films are all thoroughly vetted by the military government, but monitoring of visual arts is more sporadic. However, many artists admitted to operating in a state of suspended anxiety as a result of incidents such as the seizure from a Bangkok gallery last year of two photographs that touched on a military crackdown that killed 90 people.

Poshyananda and many of the participating artists agreed that one of Thailand's biggest problem in the arts was self-censorship.

"I know that artists here do self-censor because sometimes it is not worth taking the risk," said Jakkai Siributr, one of Thailand's more openly political artists, whose work in the biennale is a series of flags and a film addressing the genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar. "For me, I'll go as far as I can but I've done works that were more critical of the government and chosen to show them in Singapore, not here."

Most of the biennale's more politicised works by Thai artists came from deeply personal experiences. The sculptor Sornchai Phongsa's work, a vast bamboo sculpture displayed outside Bangkok's [Art](#) and Culture Centre, was built in collaboration with illegal migrant workers whom he hired, a comment on his own background. As the child of illegal migrant labourers from Myanmar who had fled ethnic persecution to Thailand before he was born, he had no ID card, no citizenship and no rights – an illegal alien in the only country he had ever known. At 12 years old he began working, lugging heavy bags of fruit for 20 baht (50p) a day.

It is the stories of women who also suffer that are never heard

Keeta Isran, artist with Muslimah Collective

Now one of Thailand's most celebrated young artists, Phongsa said he hoped his biennale work would spotlight the "invisible, hidden migrant workers who build this city yet have no rights and are taken advantage of". As he pointed out, there might be 3.8 million migrant workers in Thailand – some legal, many illegal – but the issue of their rights and citizenship is ignored. "I knew a little girl, four years old, who fell into hot oil when she was in a factory and died and nothing happened because she was born to parents who are migrants," said Phongsa. "There was no justice for her, nobody in the system cares. I want my work to speak up for people like her."

An equally sensitive issue raised by several young artists in the biennale is the "hidden war" that has been raging violently in the southern states of Thailand since 2004, between insurgents and the Thai military, which has cost almost 7,000 lives, 90% of them civilians. The cost of the conflict was confronted head-on by the Muslimah Collective, a group of four Muslim female artists from the region.

"I do not even think it should be an issue to discuss the war in the south because this is the reality of our lives," said one member, Keeta Isran. "And in all the discussion of war and violence, it is the stories of women who also suffer that are never heard, so this art collective, our movement, is about creating work which documents our experiences."

Standing on the banks of Bangkok's Chao Phraya River, where many of the exhibition venues are located, Poshyananda said: "We have taken risks with the biennale but I've been in so much trouble in the past, so risk-taking is part of the excitement."

"We have never stepped in to tell artists what they can and can't do. They make the work, and we show it. If there is any trouble, we will just deal with that when it comes." Interrupted by the loud roar of a passing boat, Poshyananda laughed, adding: "Ah that must be the military, I'm being censored!"

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