

ART AS A VEHICLE FOR NATIONALISM, IDENTITY, AND MODERNISATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY THAILAND

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Abstract: This article extends from the curatorial research underpinning the collaborative exhibition *Time is the Substance I Am Made Of*, developed in partnership with contemporary Thai artist SIRAWIT CHATU. The exhibition's feature a triptych, a diptych, and a single-panel acrylic painting, the project explores the reinterpretation of 19th-century Thai historical motifs through a contemporary context. With the practice-based research and visual analysis, the study investigates how art functioned as a critical medium in the construction of Thai nationalism, identity, and modernisation during the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The methodology integrates historical inquiry, iconographic analysis, contemporary theoretical perspectives on the concept of time, and curatorial practice, focusing particularly on the adoption of *siwilai*, a Thai transliteration of "civilise" as a framework through which the monarchy negotiated modernity and sovereignty in response to colonial pressures. By examining the strategic assimilation of Western aesthetics, cultural institutions, and artistic conventions, the research reveals how Thai rulers strategically mobilised visual culture to project a modern national image while preserving cultural specificity, evident in initiatives; the establishment of national museums and the adoption of both traditional fresco techniques and Western oil painting. Case studies include the work of Khrua In Khong, a monastic painter whose innovative integration of Western mural painting techniques, particularly in his use of perspective, depth, and volume into Thai murals, exemplifies this hybridity. The resulting artworks reframe historical narratives in dialogue with contemporary Thai identity and cultural memory. The project demonstrates that curatorial practice can generate new interpretative frameworks for understanding art's agency in national formation and its resonance in present-day socio-political discourse.

Keyword: national formation, national identity, Thai art, political history, curatorial practice

Introduction

The formation of the Thai nation has increasingly become a subject of discussion within the field of artistic practice, particularly among Thai artists working outside Bangkok. These practices have contributed to the growing discourse on decentralisation within the Bangkok art scene, challenging canonical histories and foregrounding alternative narratives. Central to these debates are questions such as: What constitutes 'Thainess'? What falls outside of it? (Phueksom, 2018) These inquiries inevitably return to the broader historical context of colonial pressures exerted by neighbouring countries, British Burma, British Malaya, and the French protectorate in Laos.

The article extends from curatorial research underpinning the collaborative exhibition *Time is the Substance I Am Made Of*, developed in partnership with contemporary Thai artist SIRAWIT CHATU. The exhibition featured a triptych, a diptych, and a single-panel acrylic painting, situating curatorial practice within the context of Thai national identity and formation. Through the positioning

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of historical Thai imagery in a contemporary art space, the project sought to provoke dialogue between past and present cultural narratives. In doing so, it raised questions about how history can be examined, understood, and presented beyond the confines of official histories or textbooks.



Figure 1: Time is the Substance I Am Made Of, 2025, exhibition view. Photographed by Chomtawan Kleuntanom

The 19th century holds particular significance as a moment of so-called modernisation in Thailand. Central to this transformation was the concept of *siwilai*, a Thai transliteration of “civilise” which became a framework through which the monarchy negotiated modernity and sovereignty in response to colonial threats. By examining the strategic assimilation of Western aesthetics, cultural institutions, and artistic conventions, the research demonstrates how Thai rulers mobilised visual culture as a tool to project a modern national image while simultaneously preserving cultural specificity (Thongchai, 2017).

The curatorial research is informed by the historical studies of Davisakd Puaksom and Thongchai Winichakul, both of whom specialise in the formation of the Thai nation and critically interrogate the ways history has been constructed and taught within Thai education. Building upon these scholarly inquiries, the research engages with case studies situated in the historical and political contexts of the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Central to the investigation is the concept of *siwilai*, examined through multiple dimensions: the Buddhist reformation under Rama IV and its negotiation of compatibility between Buddhism and Western scientific knowledge; King Chulalongkorn’s European tours as a diplomatic performative demonstrations of Siam’s civilisation; the establishment of the first national museums; and Siam’s participation in international expositions through the presentation of the Thai Pavilion.

The research also considers the artistic contributions of Khrua In Khong, a pioneering Thai painter who systematically adopted Western artistic techniques. His introduction of linear perspective, tonal shading, and spatial depth into Thai mural painting exemplifies the hybridity of visual culture in this period and demonstrates how art functioned as a medium through which notions of modernity and civilisation were negotiated.

The curatorial practice underpinning this research was divided into two interrelated components. The first involved exhibition-making, encompassing the study of artistic practices, studio visits, exhibition design, and the consultation of both primary and secondary sources. The second centred on public programs, including curator-led tours and an artist talk, which facilitated broader dialogue and audience engagement.

This methodological framework of curatorial practice generated the following research questions:

- How did art function as a critical tool in constructing Thai nationalism, identity, and modernisation during the reigns of Rama IV and Rama V?
- In what ways can curatorial practice reinterpret historical artworks and visual motifs to speak to contemporary socio-political contexts?
- How can the lens of *siwilai* illuminate the intersections of modernity, sovereignty, and cultural preservation in Thai visual culture?

Historical Context

The concept of Thainess has historically been articulated to notions of barbarism, raising fundamental questions about identity, modernity, and the ability to transform without relinquishing power. The idea of modernisation entered Siam or Thailand in the early 19th century with the arrival of Western nations, commonly referred to by the Thai term “*farang*”, meaning “European.” Within this context, the concept of *siwilai*, a Thai transliteration of “civilise” emerged and gradually spread across cultural and political discourse. By the late 19th century, *siwilai* had become a key criterion through which Siam’s position and superiority were mediated, both internally and in relation to external powers (Thongchai, 2017).

Siam aspired to be recognised as civilised, seeking acceptance by the West as an equal modern nation. However, the representations of *siwilai* did not necessarily reflect a deeper understanding of Europe itself. Rather, they revealed the aspirations of the Siamese elite and their vision of how they wished Siam and by extension, themselves to be perceived.

Thongchai Winichakul conceptualises Thainess as a discourse that seeks to represent heritage, while the media actively constructs reality in accordance with that discourse. Within this framework, Thai civilisation can be understood as emerging from the contact zone between cultures, shaped through processes of transculturation and indigenisation. The result of this dynamic is a hierarchy in which the elite regard themselves as more civilised than the common people, even as they continue to carry with them the perceived “otherness” of their own land (Thongchai, 2017).

Siam's pursuit of civilisation was closely tied to the imperative of maintaining independence. The desire to become civilised reflected a struggle to recalibrate identity in order to secure a higher status within a global order that, from Siam's perspective, was centred on Europe. In this emerging world order, civilisation functioned as the dominant standard for evaluating the qualities of nations and races. To be *siwilai* meant distancing oneself from barbarism, achieved through what Johannes Fabian terms the denial of coevalness (Williams & Thompson, 2019), a temporal separation that positioned "savages" and rural populations as embodiments of backwardness, while the Thai elite were imagined as progressing along the path of civilisation. At the apex of this hierarchy stood the *farang* or Europeans, perceived as the ultimate representatives of modernity. Paradoxically, within this classificatory scheme all groups, savages, peasants, and Europeans alike were simultaneously constructed as forms of otherness against which Siamese identity was negotiated.

Savages (outsider) >> Country folk (outsider) >> Elites (real Thais) >> Europeans (Diagram presented by Thongchai Winichakul from the book 'Thais/others' P.27)

The forces of modernisation in Siam emerged through multiple dimensions, including trade, diplomacy, and economic exchange. However, this research focuses specifically on the role of art and visual culture as instruments of nation-building. During the period when Prince Mongkut, later King Rama IV, entered the monastic life as Phra Vajirananathera, his engagement with Western science and cosmology significantly shaped his outlook. The vision informed his religious reforms, most notably the establishment of the Dhammayuttika Nikaya, a monastic order that emphasised a reinterpretation of the Tripitaka and the meaning of the Triple Gem in ways that aligned with the modern world. The reformed doctrine sought to ensure that Buddhism would not stand in conflict with Western scientific knowledge (Wilairat & Thawatchai, 2016), thereby positioning religion as compatible with, rather than opposed to, the discourse of modernisation.



Figure 2: Phra Vajirananathera

Image Source: Collection of Historical Pictures of the Reign of King Rama IV

Through the agency of the Dhammayuttika Nikaya, a new aesthetic direction in Buddhist art began to take shape, particularly within the tradition of mural painting. Art was increasingly mobilised to emphasise notions of empirical truth, aligning Buddhist visual culture with the broader discourse of *siwilai* (civilisation). This was produced through the use of metaphor and symbolic representation, designed to make Buddhist teachings more accessible and comprehensible to lay audiences. Within this context, Khrua In Khong, a monastic painter who served Phra Vajirananathera from his ordination until his accession as King Mongkut, played a pivotal role. He systematically adopted and introduced Western techniques of perspective drawing, creating depth and spatial realism that reshaped the visual language of Thai mural painting (Wilairat & Thawatchai, 2016) .

Through the patronage of Phra Vajirananathera (later King Mongkut), Khrua In Khong produced murals that integrated Buddhist parables with Western-style architecture, landscapes, and European figures, particularly in Wat Bowonniwet and Wat Baromniwat. In these works, the Buddha was positioned as a sage whose enlightenment resonated with Western scientific rationality, thereby projecting Buddhism as neither inferior to Christianity nor incompatible with modern science. This visual strategy functioned as a deliberate counter-narrative to the influence of Christian missionaries, asserting Buddhism's intellectual and spiritual parity within the framework of global modernity.



Figure 3: Khrua In Khong, Mural in Wat Borom Niwat, Bangkok, Thailand

The concept of travel for leisure, knowledge, and cultural exposure emerged as a novel activity in Siamese society during the 19th century (Thongchai, 2017). Under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), this practice took on new political and cultural significance. His Majesty advanced reforms through the establishment of modern institutions and the use of diplomacy and strategic royal tours. His journeys to Europe in the 1890s and 1900s (Embassy of Thailand, n.d.), visiting countries such as Denmark, Russia, Germany, France (La tour Eiffel: Notenation, 2022), the United Kingdom, and Italy—functioned simultaneously as performances of civilisation and as opportunities to study

European technologies, governance models, administration, education, infrastructure, and artistic aesthetics.



Figure 4: King Chulalongkorn meets Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg, 1897

Image Source: National Archives of Thailand (NAT)



Figure 5: King Chulalongkorn at a reception at the Siamese Embassy, Ashburn Place, South Kensington, London, 14 August 1897

Image Source: The Illustrated London News, 111(3043)(Aug. 14, 1897): 215.



Figure 6: Concordia Hall Museum (Royal Museum)

Image Source: นิตยสารสกุลไทย

The establishment of the Royal Museum in 1887 (later the National Museum Bangkok) marked a significant moment in Siam's cultural modernisation (Museum Thailand, n.d.). As the first public museum open to all, it displayed a wide range of objects such as stuffed animals, ivory carvings, ores, musical instruments, globes, and model trains, signifying both the breadth of knowledge and the material markers of civilisation (Fine Arts Department, n.d.). On the occasion of the King's birthday, the museum hosted exhibitions in which royals, nobles, monks, and commoners were invited to contribute or create objects, ranging from Siamese artefacts to exotic curiosities. The practice initiated the concept of private collecting among the nobility and also underscored the discourse of *siwilai*, positioning Siam as a society capable of cultivating and preserving culture through institutional display (Thongchai, 2017).

With the expansion of cultural institutions in the late 19th century, the act of compiling knowledge and transforming dispersed discourses into coherent systems increasingly took shape through the organisation of museum exhibitions of Siam, both domestically and abroad. This development led to Siam's official participation in the World's Expositions, beginning with the 1876 Philadelphia Expo in the United States. While the primary objective was commercial, promoting Siamese goods, resources, and crafts, the exhibition also functioned as platforms to project an image of Siamese civilisation (*siwilai*). The kingdom continued to participate in subsequent expositions, including Paris in 1889 and Chicago in 1900, and has remained involved in such global exhibitions into the present (GroundControlTH, n.d.).



Figure 7: Pavilion of Siam, Paris Exposition, 1889

Image Source: The United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division

Contemporary Curatorial Reinterpretation

Time is the Substance I Am Made Of was held at the Fazal Building in collaboration with contemporary Thai artist SIRAWIT CHATU. Both the author and the artist shared an interest in canonical and non-canonical histories, literature, philosophy, and ontology relating to the concept of time, which provided the foundation for the exhibition. The project was structured in two parts: exhibition-making and a public program, and ran from 11 April to 30 April 2025.

With a background in Thai art, SIRAWIT CHATU positions himself as a multidisciplinary artist whose practice navigates the intersections of contemporary philosophy, visual culture, and historical inquiry, anchored by a central interest in creating juxtapositions. His work critically examines the interplay between popular culture and traditional Thai art, revealing how these elements converge, diverge, and transform across time. His practice engages with the ongoing tension between

preservation and transformation, in which cultural forms are simultaneously deconstructed and reconstructed, generating new layers of meaning (Kleuntanom, 2025).

A key focus of his artistic methodology is the concept of replication, a fundamental principle of traditional Thai art historically used as both a pedagogical tool and a means of cultural transmission. While replication in contemporary discourse is often associated with imitation or reproduction, the artist repositions it as an active process of understanding, adaptation, and reinterpretation, challenging assumptions about originality and authenticity while foregrounding the dynamic continuity of cultural knowledge (Kleuntanom, 2025).

Through the study of artistic practices, the exhibition concept was developed collaboratively with the artist. In this process, both the author and SIRAWIT CHATU exchanged perspectives on the concept of time as a contemporary inquiry into history. These dialogues formed the foundation for the exhibition's curatorial framework and informed the first section of the curatorial statement, positioning time as a lens through which historical narratives could be reinterpreted and reimaged. The first paragraph of *Time is the Substance I Am Made Of* curatorial statement, *The Concept of Time*:

Time has long captivated scholars and thinkers across disciplines, from philosophy and ontology to physics and beyond. It exists as both a mysterious and a tangible force—one that shapes human experience yet defies absolute definition. The ongoing discourse surrounding time reflects its duality: an elusive, abstract mystery that continues to challenge our understanding, while simultaneously remaining ever-present and perceptible. To engage with time not merely as a concept, but as an active, shifting presence—one that we move through, measure, and attempt to grasp, yet never fully contain. (Kleuntanom, 2025, p.2)

During the research process, the artist referenced a poem by Jorge Luis Borges that appears in Jean-Luc Godard's noir-sci-fi film *Alphaville*. The intertextual connection inspired the creation of the first painting in the series, which also became the highlight of the exhibition. The work continues the trajectory of the artist's earlier solo exhibition, *SIMULACRA* (2024) at TARS Unlimited, where he explored juxtapositions between sci-fi film quotations and selected elements from Khrua In Khong's replicated works. In this new series, the artist extends this method of juxtaposition, combining larger perspectives within historical Thai imagery to provoke new readings of cultural memory and temporality.

"Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire."

(Borges, 1962)



Figure 8: Exhibition view of SIMULACRA (2024) at TARS Unlimited. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom



Figure 9: Exhibition view of SIMULACRA (2024) at TARS Unlimited. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom



Figure 10: SIRAWIT CHATU, Time is the Substance I Am Made Of, 2025, Acrylic painting, Triptych 2.5 m x 6 m at FAZAL Building. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom

While as a curator of the exhibition, the author emphasised on the curatorial statement in which would be developed into the handout programme to the audiences later on, the chapter of the statement had been outlined into 6 parts:

1. The Concept of Time
2. Land of Siwilai
3. The Old Master and his mysterious paintings
4. SIRAWIT CHATU with past, present and future
5. The Totality of Juxtaposition
6. Conclusion

The first chapter examines *The Concept of Time* within the framework of contemporary philosophy and science, focusing on how different thinkers have interpreted its relationship to history. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel conceived of time as linear, a framework further developed by Alexandre Kojève, who interpreted it as the progressive flow of history unfolding against the backdrop of nature. In contrast, Louis Althusser diverged from this linear conception, emphasising the distinction between time and history. He proposed a synchronic framework, in which multiple temporalities coexist rather than follow a single, continuous trajectory. These contrasting approaches demonstrate how the notion

of time has been subject to shifting interpretations, reflecting broader philosophical debates across periods.

The second chapter, *Land of Siwilai*, introduces the historical context of Siam's 19th-century transformation toward modernisation. This period marked a significant shift as Siam adopted Western knowledge systems and artistic aesthetics in order to safeguard national sovereignty amidst the pressures of colonial expansion. It was also the beginning of the official formation of the modern nation-state, as the monarchy strategically negotiated its position within a rapidly changing global order. Central to this process was the challenge of situating Siam in relation to the "time" of the world, determining how to align itself with global modernity while maintaining cultural distinctiveness.

The third chapter, *The Old Master and His Mysterious Paintings*, focuses on the practice of Khrua In Khong, whose works under royal patronage introduced Western techniques of perspective drawing into Thai mural painting. His adoption of depth, spatial realism, and the incorporation of European architecture and costume within Buddhist narrative scenes marked a significant shift in the aesthetic language of Thai art, aligning it with the discourse of siwilai.

The fourth chapter, *Sirawit Chatu: Past, Present, and Future*, examines the artist's practice, highlighting his interests in history, philosophy, and visual culture, and how these inform his exploration of juxtaposition as a method of inquiry.

The fifth chapter, *The Totality of Juxtaposition*, presents the exhibition as a whole, introducing the series of artworks consisting of a triptych, a diptych, and a single-panel acrylic painting.

The final chapter concludes by situating the exhibition within the wider context of the MOMENTUM project (Second Edition) at Fazal Unlimited, framing it as part of an ongoing dialogue on contemporary curatorial practice.



Figure 11: Studio visit at the artist's studio during the production of the series and exhibition. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom.

In parallel with the curatorial research and exhibition design, the artist statement was developed alongside the production process, culminating in three works that embodied the conceptual framework of the project.

Time is the Substance I Am Made Of - Artist statement

Sirawit Chatu's triptych, Time is the Substance I Am Made Of, is a profound continuation of the artist's ongoing inquiry into time, identity, and the architecture of history. Drawing its title from a line in Jorge Luis Borges' poetry, famously echoed in Jean-Luc Godard's Alphaville, this work resonates with existential weight. It ventures into the turbulent confluence of historical memory and cultural fabrication, harnessing the imagery of the Chao Phraya River—a lifeline through Bangkok's geography and history—and the reproduced murals of Krua In Khong (ครัวอินโขง), a pivotal figure in 19th-century Thai art.

Created during a period marked by Western colonial incursions and the rapid modernization of Siam, Krua In Khong's murals embody a hybrid cultural aesthetic. They are artifacts of a nation in flux, capturing the negotiation between tradition and modernity. By recontextualizing these historical works within his triptych, Chatu not only revives their visual splendor but reframes them as sites of interrogation—challenging how history, identity, and national narratives are constructed and preserved. The flow of the Chao Phraya River within the artwork serves as a metaphor for temporal fluidity, evoking the ceaseless merging of past and present, reality and mythology.

(SIRAWIT, 2025, p.2)

The Divided Self - Artist statement

SIRAWIT CHATU's diptych, The Divided Self, emerges as an evocative dialogue between cultural memory and speculative futurism, juxtaposing the reproduced 19th-century Thai mural of Krua In Khong's giant lotus with the iconic monolith scene from Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. Both images, though distinct in origin, conjure surreal landscapes that resonate with the uncanny, capturing the sublime forces that shape human understanding across temporal and spatial dimensions.

The lotus, as rendered in Krua In Khong's mural, holds deep symbolic significance in Thai culture. Its ethereal presence in the artwork, towering over groups of onlookers, evokes the Buddhist metaphors of enlightenment and transcendence. The mural's historical context, rooted in a Siam grappling with modernization and colonial influence, positions the lotus as both a cultural anchor and a site of introspection. By reproducing this mural, Chatu reclaims its significance while inviting a reconsideration of its meaning in contemporary times. In stark contrast, Kubrick's monolith, a symbol of alien intelligence and evolutionary leaps, is situated in a barren, otherworldly landscape. Its austere geometry and inscrutable purpose stand as a stark antithesis to the organic vitality of the lotus. Yet, both the lotus and the monolith are catalysts—objects that evoke awe, curiosity, and the sense of encountering something beyond human comprehension.

(SIRAWIT, 2025, p.2)

No one has ever lived in the past. No one will ever live in the future. - Artist statement

The artwork resonates deeply with Walter Benjamin's reflections on history. In his Theses on the Philosophy of History, Benjamin contemplates Paul Klee's Angelus Novus, describing an angel of history caught in the storm of progress—its wings outspread, its gaze fixed upon the wreckage of the past, yet helpless to intervene. This vision aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, which reminds us that time is not a linear path but a continual unfolding of Jetztzeit, or "now-time." Chatu's work embodies this philosophical convergence, inviting viewers to abandon the illusion of chronological sequence and step into the immediacy of the present. This painting proposes an idea that the past is neither a place to return to nor a foundation upon which to stand. Instead, history is an ever-receding mirage, only made legible through the lens of the present moment. Chatu's juxtaposition of text and image reminds us that history is not a relic, nor a prophecy—it is an echo that only becomes audible in the now.

(SIRAWIT, 2025, p.3)



Figure 12: SIRAWIT CHATU, Time is the Substance I Am Made Of, 2025, Acrylic painting, Triptych 2.5 m x 6 m at FAZAL Building. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom



Figure 13: SIRAWIT CHATU, No one has ever lived in the past. No one will ever live in the future, 2025, Acrylic painting, Single panel 1 m x 1.2 m at FAZAL Building. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom



Figure 14: SIRAWIT CHATU, The Divided Self, 2025, Acrylic painting, Diptych 1 m x 2.4 m at FAZAL Building. Photograph by Chomtawan Kleuntanom

The exhibition took place at the Fazal Building, a significant landmark situated near the Grand Palace, the historic center of the Rattanakosin Kingdom, formerly known as Siam. The building's architecture and interior design, which combine Western aesthetics with the urban fabric of Bangkok, made it a fitting site for this exhibition. Its spatial and cultural context reinforced the curatorial decision to situate SIRAWIT CHATU's series within this setting, highlighting the dialogue between historical imagery and contemporary reinterpretation (This is Unlimited, n.d.).

Following its successful grand opening, the exhibition expanded into a series of public programs, including curator-led tours and an artist talk, designed to foster broader dialogue and audience engagement. The artist talk, held at Soho House Bangkok, focused on the concept of time in relation to *siwilai*, examining how representations of Siam in the 19th century can be revisited and reinterpreted within a contemporary context.

Conclusion

Since the concept of *siwilai* rarely appears in the teaching of history within Thai schools, both research and the exhibition sought to broaden the understanding of 19th-century Siam through the roles and collaboration of curator and artist (SIRAWIT CHATU). By employing visual strategies such as paintings and artworks and experiential formats such as exhibition spaces and public talks, the project demonstrates that history can be engaged with from perspectives beyond those prescribed in state-sanctioned textbooks. More than memorisation, history should be approached through critical analysis and reinterpretation, enabling new ways of understanding the processes of national formation. The transformation of Siam through modernisation in the 19th century represents one of the most significant moments in Southeast Asian history, not least because Siam occupies a unique position as the only nation in the region never formally colonised. As such, this history should be discussed more widely, not only as a national narrative but also as part of the broader regional context of Southeast Asian modernity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to SIRAWIT CHATU, my collaborator on this project, for his creativity, insight, and dedication in developing artworks that so thoughtfully engage with the concepts we have explored together. My sincere thanks also go to Ponpavee Por, the project manager, whose tireless efforts in coordination, management, and both practical and emotional support were invaluable to the success of this project. Finally, I would like to thank the This is Unlimited team for the commitment in supporting the production of the artworks and creating the exhibition.

The project was part of the MOMENTUM project (Second Edition) at Fazal Unlimited. Created by This is Unlimited.

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