

nova

If I can make one wish...

Saroot Supasuthivech

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For his solo show *If I can make one wish...*, Saroot Supasuthivech constructs a sequence of videos, dividing a two-channel work into four screens across the gallery space. Centred around the River Kwai, this body of work forms an imaginary memorial for the labourers who died building the Burma Railway during the Japanese occupation of Thailand in World War II.

The thread launches in French, reciting the beginning of Pierre Boulle's *Le Pont de La Rivière Kwai*. Tranquil scenes follow: a train chugs along, tourists trek through a cave, thin curtains billow in a dimly lit bedroom. These quiet images are then halted by a rendering of a rocky opening, cut by distorted drilling sounds and flashes of electric blue. As the scene peels away, we seem to revert to calmness, immersed in the surroundings of a forest, a manicured cemetery lawn, and a church exterior. Through such eerie stillness, Supasuthivech alludes to abandoned voids of forgotten violence. As the train crosses the screen, what we do not see are the hundred thousands of workers who died building the railway beneath it. We do not see the prisoners of war who once sought refuge in the cave of Thamkra Sae, nor do we see the deteriorating body of a labourer in the vacant bed, or the fact that the lush greenery surrounds Hellfire Pass, where prisoners of war and labourers completed the most arduous rock-cutting segment of the railway's construction.

The next video, projected onto a large standing wall in the middle of the main room, depicts a scene from River Kwai Bridge Week, a festival held by the Thai government annually to commemorate the sacrificed lives. Visitors are invited to sit on a set of stadium steps, as if witnessing the festivities first-hand. Inverted slow-motion clips alternate between monochrome and fluorescent blue, with the gallery room flashing in correspondence. Like sinister apparitions, the rapt viewers, including children and the elderly, watch a theatrical re-enactment of exploitation and murder. Actors in military dress carry rifles, others posing as half-naked workers heaving building material. Even a killing is performed on stage, but the audience bursts into applause when the cast bows. An overlay of fireworks bloom across the video like dark inkblots, melting into final images of empty stadium chairs. In these videos, Supasuthivech interrogates the omission and even celebration of tragedy, questioning the institutional refusal to confront both death and history.

Alighting from their seats, visitors then advance to the small viewing room, now enveloped by blue walls and carpeting. The third video unfolds two tales of loss, and is accompanied by a resin sculpture of a graveside flower. As funerary bells ring in the background, we circumvent a 3D rendering of a Chinese soldier monument by River Kwai, and a nine year old girl recounts the rites of a Taoist funeral: mourning relatives drop coins into a bowl, then walk across a bridge to send off the spirit of the deceased. At the end of the ceremony, the girl's mother tells her that they will not cry today, and we are left with the inexplicable ambiguities of grief. The second story is of romantic heartbreak: Supasuthivech personifies a Japanese memorial pillar into a jilted lover. She pens an aching farewell: I'm sorry that I cannot send you flowers, she laments. Blue rain pours over the column as extracted fragments of it hover in mid-air. I am waiting for the day we will meet again, she writes.

Drawing from a range of languages and cultural sites under one locale, Supasuthivech exposes the devastating multitude of lives affected by the railway's construction. Yet, he asserts something universal and unifying in this loss, suggesting that these crossing energies all ultimately intersect in the same spiritual and emotional reality. Circling to the final video, displayed on a small screen behind the erected wall, viewers return to the quiet emptiness of the beginning. The artist zooms into bouquets and letters deserted at a cemetery, pulling us into the silent solitude of bereavement. Yet, he gives us glimpses into the lingering remains of the spirit. Flickers of light slowly seep up the petals of left roses and offering orchards. He draws us back into the unoccupied bedroom, where orbs of luminosity shine on the sheets, beaming and darting through the window. We return to Thamkra Sae too, its bouldered ceilings now illuminated by a soft and shifting flood of fluorescent blue. We are engulfed by the echoes of the colour's intrinsic and overlapping meanings: blue subtly conveys sadness, represents trust in the name of unity, and slowly unveils the serenity of truth.

Text by Colette Auyang

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River Kwai: This Memorial Service was Held in the Memory of the Deceased, 2022

Videos Installation, Digital video with audio, and Resin with marble sculpture

Edition of 3 +2AP

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