

## VETAL'S SUITES: A Peek into Chatchai Puipia's Unconscious World

Chatchai Puipia is certainly no stranger to the Thai art scene. Indeed, he was among the first generation of Thai artists to become well-known internationally as the age of globalization dawned. Puipia emerged in the late 1980s as a young and talented artist and the winner of multiple national competitions funded by both the public and private sectors. These prestigious awards brought him to the attention of regional exhibitions and international art festivals, among them the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial and the Queensland Triennial. His works have been collected both privately and institutionally around the region.

Early in his career, Puipia started to redefine contemporary Thai painting, employing abstract and figurative styles and later turning to self-portraits, sometimes mixed with texts commenting on the social, economic, and political transformation of Thailand in the 1990s. But over the next decade, the glory he had enjoyed in his heyday was no longer exciting nor satisfying. He gradually withdrew from his socio-political commentary, choosing to isolate himself from the art world and finding his way back to his studio. His later works were more personal. His social disengagement perhaps derived from the polarization of local politics in the mid-2000s. Or maybe his personal life and the social world were so chaotic that he chose to withdraw from the latter.

For Vetel Suite, Puipia invented the fictional character Vetel, a single Epicurean who enjoys a luxurious bohemian lifestyle. Inspired by the history of the Vietnam War, Vetel Suite is a theatrical installation through which Puipia explores an unknown personal history about his Vietnamese grandfather who might have been involved in espionage, and who migrated to Sakon Nakhon in the 1930s. The artist reconnected with his cousins

living in Sakon Nakhon, Vietnam, and Paris and became interested in this part of his family history. Vetal's character, tastes, and his way of living were constructed based on a combination of himself, how he imagined his grandfather, his vague memories, unconsciousness and dreams. This exhibition, which he has carefully crafted, invites us to take a peek at his personal world of artists, art patrons, living rooms, library and personal collections in his private suites. The theatrical space is set up as if it were part of a scene in a surrealist movie, with Puipia taking on multiple roles as the director, the protagonist, and the observer. The nod towards surveillance suggests his skeptical attitude toward the art world, in which he has alternately participated and withdrawn.

Where has Puipia been over the last two decades? An invitation to join the artist's own funeral was sent to many in the art community by Puipia in 2000. Today, Puipia has decided to exhibit his works again to the public. He has spent most of his time working in his studio where he feels most comfortable with himself, building houses, decorating, collecting antiques, and taking care of his family. In creating this exhibition, he has found a way of constantly challenging himself by playing with conceiving and creating new characters and making an exhibition design. In working with the reproduction of his personal objects, the artist refers to modern art history, namely Max Ernst's reproduction of lost works. He started the replica of his personal items by working with Conservation Without Frontiers, the Bangkok-based French Conservation organization, reproducing them by making bronze sculptures of his selected equipment, artifacts, collections, and the everyday objects he uses in his studio. This process served to help him "freeze" the memory of his art making, archiving these pieces in his private museum in order to learn and understand his personal history and to share his private and unconscious world with the public once again.

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