

Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories

An international symposium

Hosted by the Power Institute, University of Sydney, Australia

11 to 13 October 2017



Phaptawan Suwannakudt, *Wat Tha Suthawat Angthong* (detail), 1994. Photograph by: Aroon Permpoonsophon

Studies focused on gender in Southeast Asian societies have emerged, in recent decades, in approximate concurrence with the development of regionally focused Southeast Asian art histories. The founding premise of this international symposium is that there has to date been insufficient intersection between these two fields.

As the first symposium of its kind, *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories* aims to establish the parameters of current research, and to develop inter-disciplinary and transnational frameworks for future studies in the field. Bringing together a range of scholars working on the pre-modern, modern and contemporary, we seek to consider what new perspectives and methodological approaches are brought to the fore in art history through studies that are attentive to gender, or how we might reassess art historical narratives through the lens of gender.

Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories is convened by Yvonne Low, Roger Nelson, Clare Veal and Stephen Whiteman. This event is generously supported by the Asian Studies Association of Australia, the Power Institute, the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre, the School of Literature, Art and Media and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney.

Key details

Times and dates

Symposium: 11–13 October 2017

Keynote: 6.00pm, Wednesday 11 October, with journal launch reception beforehand at 5.00pm

Symposium: 9.00am to 5.30pm, Thursday 12 October, followed by a book launch reception

Masterclass and workshops: 9.00am to 5.30pm, Friday 13 October

Venue:

Woolley Common Room

Level 4, John Woolley Building A20

Camperdown Campus

The University of Sydney

Program

Day 1: Wednesday 11 October 2017

5.00pm – 6.00pm

Journal Launch

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, Vol. 1, No. 2 (National University of Singapore Press)

Launched by Prof Emeritus John Clark and Dr Yvonne Low (introduced by Dr Stephen Whiteman).

6.00pm – 7.30pm

Power Keynote Lecture

“Figuring the Buddha”

Prof Ashley Thompson

Introduced by Dr Roger Nelson

Q & A moderated by Dr Stephen Whiteman, Lecturer, Department of Art History & Film Studies, University of Sydney

Day 2: Thursday 12 October 2017

9.00am – 9.30am

Registration and Morning Tea

9.30am – 10.00am

Welcoming Remarks

Dr Stephen Whiteman

Opening Remarks

Dr Clare Veal, Lecturer, MA Asian Art Histories, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

10.00am – 12.00pm

Panel 1: Writing women into Southeast Asian Art Histories

Chair: Dr Sue Ingham, Independent Scholar, Sydney

Correcting, Interrogating: A proposal for a feminist framework for Indonesian visual arts

Dr Wulan Dirgantoro

Recovering the Nation's Woman (Artists): Mia Bustam and Lai Foong Moi

Dr Yvonne Low

Art on the Back Burner: Gender as the elephant in the room of SEA art histories

Assistant Prof Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez

Women and Tradition in Balinese Art History

Dr Siobhan Campbell

12.00pm – 1.00pm

Lunch

1.00pm – 2.30pm

Panel 2: Picturing Gender in Texts, Paintings, Films and Photographs

Chair: Dr Matt Cox, Curator, Asian Art, Art Gallery of NSW

Chang Saetang's Self-Portraits and the inversion of barami

Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol

Picturing Femininity: Portraits of the early modern Siamese women

Dr Eksuda Singhalampong

Women as Passengers, Men as Drivers? On Urban Movement in Post-Independence "Cambodian Arts"

Dr Roger Nelson

2.30pm – 3.00pm

Afternoon Tea

3.00pm – 4.30pm

Panel 3: Politics of the Feminine in Visual Culture

Chair: Dr Michelle Antoinette, Lecturer, Monash Art, Design & Architecture, Monash University

Exploring the Feminine in Angkor's Visual Imagery

Dr Soumya James

Crafting the Indigenous: Paz Abad Santos and the feminine arts

Tina Le

The Essay Film as Feminist Cinema in Southeast Asia: Nguyen Trinh Thi and Anocha Sunichakornpong

Dr May Adadol Ingawanij

4.30pm – 5.00pm

Closing Remarks

Dr Catriona Moore, Chair of Department, Department of Art History & Film Studies,
University of Sydney

5.00pm – 6.30pm

Book Launch

Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences, by Wulan Dirgantoro (Amsterdam University Press)

Launched by Prof Ashley Thompson (introduced by Prof Mark Ledbury)

Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences is the first in-depth study of the works Indonesian women artists and the feminist strategies they employ within the contemporary art world. Using feminist readings to examine the works of Indonesian women artists, this book illuminates the sociocultural contexts in which they have worked, and offers a nuanced understanding of local feminisms in the nation.

Day 3: Friday 13 October 2017

Venue: Woolley Common Room

9.00am – 9.30am

Registration and Morning Tea

9.30am – 12.00pm

Masterclass

Led by Prof Ashley Thompson

For symposium participants and invited guests only.

12.00pm – 1.00pm

Lunch

1.00pm – 3.00pm

Workshop I

Gender and Research Methodologies in Southeast Asia

For symposium participants and invited guests only.

3.30pm – 4.00pm

Afternoon Tea

4.00pm – 5.30pm

Workshop II

Gender and the Writing of Southeast Asian Art History

For symposium participants and invited guests only.

6.30pm

Conference Dinner

For symposium participants only.

Abstracts

Keynote Lecture by Prof Ashley Thompson

Figuring the Buddha

Ashley Thompson

Hiram W Woodward Chair in Southeast Asian Art

SOAS University of London

Siddhartha Gotama is, to begin with, a model of sovereign monarchical power, but also, and inseparably, of heteronormative masculine privilege: a princely power and privilege that is represented by the Buddhist canon in patriarchal, phallocratic and starkly gendered terms: wife, child, harem, prostitutes, and of course kingdom, are his to dispose of as he wishes. So far so unremarkable. The drama really only begins with an apparent departure from this cozy norm: in a supremely ambivalent gesture, the future Buddha leaves behind the many subaltern women who literally define his princely existence to seek a new transcendent state. Is this a protofeminist act or simply another in the apparently limitless reinventions of phallocentrism? Women are, to begin with, so many foils - the condition of possibility - for this model man to surpass himself in obtaining perfection.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the 'Historical Buddha's' project might be said to be predicated on a generalized sublimation whereby the energy of (masculine) sexual desire is blocked and yet retained, and redirected to other nonsexual, or otherwise sexual, ends. We know where this leads: sublimation for Freud does not represent a radical break with what went before. Quite to the contrary in fact: Freud's little boy represses his sexual desire for his mother only under a capital threat, and only to conform more completely to patriarchal norms. Of course Siddhartha was not born in fin-de-siècle Vienna and the cultural presuppositions involved in this model of sexual development, notably a certain understanding of the nuclear family and parenting modes, have been amply debated and critiqued already in the West and certainly cannot be said to apply universally. And yet... it is difficult not to see some very familiar and hardly enlightened structures being repeated in the Buddha's story, including a particularly leaden representation of gendered roles: as objects of desire and desiring subjects women comprise the material spurring men to the intellectual exploits born of resistance.

Once the Buddha becomes Enlightened, however, his historical subjectivity, experienced and exposed as an artifice, is transformed and subsumed into the manifestation of a cosmic order: in the place of his self comes the paradoxical concept of the non-self. Thus, in the body of the Buddha, the ultimate realization of masculine domination meets its own deconstruction: the Buddha can be variously characterized, in textual, visual and ritual terms, as hyper-masculine, effeminate, feminine or beyond binary. The figure of the Buddha becomes a site for exploration of the societal norms from which it has sprung. But even here we can imagine the echo of an old feminist exasperation: just when a powerful critique of phallocratic power becomes possible and promises a reconfiguration and redistribution of the relations between power and gender, subjectivity itself is hollowed out, in effect cancelling any possible feminist boon from the manoeuvre.

This talk will examine the historical unfolding of the Buddha's story as told above in a range of Cambodian contexts, from the Angkorian to the contemporary periods. Statuary and performance art emerge as the privileged media through which opportunities to challenge societal constraints are seized upon. Questions which arise along the way concern gendered

relations between the transcendental-universal and the material-local; deconstructive dimensions of Buddhism; drivers and effects of the domination of the Buddha image in visual cultures; ways of rethinking traditional historiographical periodisation, and in particular of exploring premodern structures in/through/with contemporary cultural forms; relations between the religious and the secular in art and/or religious and secular art; and the grounding of subjectivity in sexuality.

Bio: Ashley Thompson is Hiram W. Woodward Chair in Southeast Asian Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. She is a specialist in Southeast Asian cultural histories, with particular expertise on Cambodia. Thompson is co-founder and editor (with Ang Choulean) of *Udaya*, a tri-lingual journal of Khmer Studies. Her publications include *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (2016); *Angkor: A Manual for the Past, Present and Future* (with E. Prenowitz and Ang Choulean, 2006); *Calling the Souls: A Cambodian Ritual Text* (2005); and *Dance in Cambodia* (with T. Shapiro-Phim, 1999). Thompson was Historical and Linguistic Director for the Khmer language production of Hélène Cixous' epic 'Cambodia' play, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk*, King of Cambodia, first staged in Europe in 2013, by a 32-member Cambodian troupe from Phare Ponleu Selpak (Battambang) directed by Georges Bigot and Delphine Cottu under the aegis of Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, Paris.

Symposium Presentations

Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol | Ph.D. candidate, University of Michigan
“Chang Saetang’s Self-Portraits and the Inversion of *Barami*”

Among the strangest and most memorable paintings in postwar Thai art history is Chang Saetang’s 1973 self-portrait, which figures the artist—grotesque and violently disfigured—as antagonist both to himself and to the viewer. The image’s hostility challenges us to think what it means for an icon to attain force through demonization rather than deification, or through vulgarity rather than decorum. Scholars of modern Thai art and visual culture rarely venture into this foul terrain, for studies of the icon in modernity stress its relation to righteous charismatic power (*barami*), replete with the trappings of accumulated merit (*bun*). The visual representation of *barami* often depends on the concealing of overt masculine vigor and bravado, for it is precisely through this withholding of an ostentatious spectacle of power that *barami* compels through righteousness. Chang, however, inverts this formula, asking what happens when forcefulness is unapologetically foregrounded, and consequently, what alternative understandings of sovereignty and morality might emerge.

Bio: Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol is a Ph.D. candidate in History of Art at the University of Michigan. A specialist in modern and contemporary Asian art, he has published essays and reviews on a wide range of topics from Philippine kinetic sculpture and Japanese conceptual photography to Vietnamese-American video art. He is currently based in Manila and Bangkok, researching a dissertation that considers the history of postwar abstract painting comparatively across Philippine-Spanish and Thai-Chinese diasporic corridors. His projects have been funded by grants from the Tate Research Centre Asia-Pacific, the National Research Council of Thailand, and the American National Committee for the History of Art.

Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez | Assistant Professor, Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines
“Art on the Back Burner: Gender as the Elephant in the Room of SEA Art Histories”

Despite the operative skepticism about the way compensatory art history appears to have reduced the feminist project to merely expanding rather than challenging the canon, the assertion here is that still too scant attention has been paid to studying the critical role that primarily woman artist-organizers have played in shaping narratives of practice. In focusing on their visible though variable degrees of sublimating art practice in deference to less visible tasks like archiving, art education, organizing, and publication, the research also privileges the aspects of circulation and reception as it revisits the shaping of artworlds in stories that have ironically kept such ‘maintenance’ tasks virtually off the record.

Bio: Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez is an Assistant Professor of the Department of Art Studies of the University of the Philippines. Her current research focus encompasses attempts at variable forms of grassroots historiography, the reimagining and activation of contested space, and alternate modalities of exchange among artists navigating the institutional and extra-institutional. Her most recent essays include “Southeast Asia in a Crawl Space: Tempering Curatorial Hubris”, in *Southeast Asia Spaces of the Curatorial*, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore/Sternberg Press, 2017 and “Shelved Lives: The Nineteen-seventies in the Purita Kalaw-Ledesma Trove”, in *The Life and Times of Purita Kalaw Ledesma*, KLF, 2017.

**Eksuda Singhalampong | Lecturer in Art History, Silpakorn University
“Picturing Femininity: Portraits of the Early Modern Siamese Women”**

This paper aims to analyze the constructing of modern femininity through the portraits of woman in Thailand’s patriarchal culture on the eve of modern period. Prior to the mid-19th century, there was a restriction on representing both royal men and women. Women in the Siamese royal court were especially confined to their inhabitance avoiding the public gaze. Imported medium i.e. portraiture eventually liberated this restricted condition of the women of the royal court. The study will explain how portraiture presents and represents the images of femininity and gender roles of Siamese female nobility especially Queen Saovabha, wife of King Chulalongkorn and to explore Siamese modern femininity as opposed to Siamese men’s constructing of masculinity. Female portraits also show cross-cultural fashion associated with modern outdoor activities reminiscent of the feminist ideal of the New Woman. Hence this paper also seeks to understand its mechanism which suggests a form of empowerment Siamese female elites started to establish their position in a changing world.

**May Adadol Ingawanij | Reader and Co-director, Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media, University of Westminster
“The essay film as feminist cinema in Southeast Asia: Nguyen Trinh Thi and Anocha Suwichakornpong”**

The presentation compares the works of moving image artist Nguyen Trinh Thi and experimental filmmaker Anocha Suwichakornpong, and aims to theorise the aesthetics, themes and conditions of emergence of the essay film as a contemporary mode of feminist filmmaking in Southeast Asia. Discussing Trinh Thi’s *Letters from Panduranga* (2015) and *Eleven Men* (2016), and Anocha’s *By the Time It Gets Dark* (2016), it looks at the ways in which these works establish, via the aesthetics of the gestural and of montage, a shared enunciating position that speaks to and of the masculinised violence and paternalistic epistemology of Vietnam and Thailand’s modern history. Trinh Thi and Anocha’s works constitute a mode of film thinking which places in constellation the potential of cinema, hyper-visible image as history, women’s historical experience, and the illegibility of female artistic creation. As aesthetic works they create an opening towards the unknown and the beyond from the localities of their respective practices.

Bio: May Adadol Ingawanij is a moving image theorist and curator based at the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media, University of Westminster. Recent English-language publications include *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (2012), “Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul,” in *Screening Nature* (2013), and “Long Walk to Life: the Films of Lav Diaz,” in *Afterall Journal* (2015). Recent curatorial projects include Lav Diaz: Journeys (London Gallery West, 2017), Southern Collectives (Buenos Aires, BIM, 2016), On Attachments and Unknowns (with Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh, 2017).

Roger Nelson | Postdoctoral Fellow, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
“Women as Passengers, Men as Drivers? On Urban Movement in Post-Independence ‘Cambodian Arts’”

How was urban travel and movement gendered in “Cambodian arts” of the post-independence Sangkum Reastr Niyum (“People’s Socialist Community,” 1955-70) period? This paper addresses the question speculatively, considering diverse media. It focuses on an early 1960s painting of a *cyclo* near the Independence Monument, made by Nhek Dim, which is considered in light of Norodom Sihanouk’s films from the 1960s, as well as contemporaneous Khmer-language novels set in Phnom Penh, several of which featured *cyclo* drivers and their families as protagonists. These various examples suggest that some modes of urban movement were characterised in modern “Cambodian arts” as specifically masculine and male, while others were presented as being available to both men and women.

Bio: Roger Nelson is an art historian and independent curator, and Postdoctoral Fellow at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He received his PhD from the University of Melbourne in 2017, with a thesis titled “Modernity and Contemporaneity in ‘Cambodian Arts’ After Independence.” Roger is co-founding co-editor of Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, a peer-reviewed journal published by National University of Singapore Press. Recent publications include “Locating the Domestic in Vann Molyvann’s National Sports Complex,” in *ABE Journal: Architecture Beyond Europe* (2017), and “Pathways in Performance (in and around Cambodia)?,” in *Stedelijk Studies* (2015).

Soumya James | Independent Scholar, New Haven, CT
“Exploring the feminine in Angkor's visual imagery”

There has been relatively limited scholarship on the feminine in premodern Cambodia, and the meager variety and confined scope of primary sources are cited as contributing factors for this lacuna. Inscriptions, cultural artifacts and archaeological data are the main sources of information for the Angkor period. The only other written source is an account compiled by a Chinese traveler who visited Angkor in the 13th century. Using documentary and visual examples, I explore how the eco-political narrative of Angkor incorporates the feminine in its composition. Khmer inscriptions often employ metaphors to illustrate and convey various aspects of kingliness, economic stature and temporal authority. The feminine may constitute a critical element of this narrative, both in documentary and aesthetic forms. Elucidating the role of the feminine in Angkor’s eco-political and cultural landscape could enrich our understanding of the broad functional context of gender in Southeast Asian art histories.

Bio: Soumya James is an independent Art Historian who studies premodern South and Southeast Asian art. She received her PhD in Art History from Cornell University. Her dissertation focused on the cultural and eco-political significance of the divine feminine at three Angkor period sites. Her research investigates the relationship between landscape and built form,

gender and sexuality, and the art historical links between South and Southeast Asia. She was a Postdoctoral Associate at the Franke Program in Science and the Humanities and a Whitney Fellow, both at Yale University. She is currently working on a book manuscript and planning her next fieldtrip.

Tina Le | PhD candidate, University of Michigan
“Crafting the Indigenous: Paz Abad Santos and the Feminine Arts”

Through close formal analysis of Paz Abad Santos’ large-scale fiber works, the paper converges theories of craft, indigeneity, and feminism in the Philippine art world during the 1970s and 80s. Measuring four feet squared, an example from Santos’ *Infinity Series* consists of knotted abaca ropes that meander across a large stretched square of burlap. Its large size elicits reference to Abstract Expressionist paintings and a penchant towards masculinist identification that seems to contradict Santos’ careful manipulation of fiber and rope—a gesture towards the feminine practices of weaving, stitching, and sewing. Santos’ fiber works emerged during a decade in which indigenous materials were not only popularly used in art from the Philippines, but also in a moment in which female artists were choosing to use alternative materials and craft to make feminist claims within the broader art world.

Bio: Tina Le is a PhD candidate at University of Michigan who specializes in modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art. Her dissertation focuses on conceptual art practices that occurred in the state-sponsored Cultural Center of the Philippines under Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’ authoritarian rule. Her work has been presented at the Art Institute in Chicago, Tate Modern and the Association of Art Historians annual conference among others. She has received University of Michigan’s Judith Becker Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Research in Southeast Asia. Her recent research interests include the role of indigenous art and craft in contemporary Asian art and the intersection between religious visual culture and belonging in Southeast Asian diaspora.

Wulan Dirgantoro | Postdoctoral Fellow, Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices 2016/2017 program, Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin, Germany
“Correcting, Interrogating: A proposal for feminist framework for Indonesian visual arts”

The paper proposes a theoretical framework through which to analyse works by Indonesian women artists. Feminism entered the Indonesian art world lexicon in the 1990s, yet it is not sufficiently theorized which resulted in a limited understanding of its potential. The paper then proposes alternative frameworks through which to re-imagine the Indonesian female body in the works of some of Indonesia’s women artists such as Titarubi, Arahmaiani, and Mella Jaarsma. In formulating these strategies the paper employs what feminist art historian and scholar Griselda Pollock (1999) has termed as ‘active re-reading’, that is to recalibrate visibility in the spaces of representation and to do a creative reading where the power dynamics of culture can be read through its entanglement with various discourses. The paper shall focus on strategies that aim to reveal not only women’s socio-historically forms of writing and visual representation but also the patriarchal structure that surrounds them.

Bio: Wulan Dirgantoro is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices 2016/2017 program at the Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin Germany. She is the author of “Feminisms and Indonesian Contemporary Art: Defining Experiences” (Amsterdam University Press, 2017) which was based from her PhD dissertation. In addition, she has also contributed to various publications in Southeast Asia, UK and Australia on Indonesian modern and

contemporary art. She is currently working on a research project that examines the legacies of 1965-1966 historical trauma and memory in Indonesian visual arts from 1970s onwards.

Yvonne Low | Sessional Lecturer in Asian Art, Department of Art History and Film Studies, University of Sydney

“Recovering the Nation’s Woman (Artists): Mia Bustam and Lai Foong Moi”

This paper looks at two forgotten histories of women artists – Lai Foong Moi (1931-1995) and Mia Bustam (1921-2011) – in Malaya and Indonesia respectively. It examines the significance of their role and their work in light of visual modernity, women’s emancipatory projects and the rise of postcolonial nationalism. Women gained unprecedented visibility and critical access to the art world during this tumultuous period of decolonization and nation-building, but were equally subjected to the patriarchal structuring of nationalist ideals. Unlike in Malaya, which was built on a multicultural, integrationist framework projected upon a desired progressive ideal, Indonesian nationalism advocated socialism and mobilized traditional references including conservative aristocratic elements to support state ideology and justify women’s proper place in society. This paper recovers the histories of two largely forgotten women artists and re-evaluates the roles they played in the field of modern painting, showing how it subscribed to a patriarchally structured nationalist agenda that kept women’s role distinct from men’s. The objective is to illuminate their position within society and the part they played in national emancipatory projects so as to better assess the politics behind their work, and the ways in which subsequent historiography reproduced their absence in historical narratives.

Bio: Yvonne Low specialises in the modern and contemporary arts of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Her research interests include the cultural politics of art development, women artists and feminist art history, and the colonial histories of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Low has published in books, peer-reviewed journals and exhibition catalogues, and is on the editorial committee of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* and *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art*. She holds a PhD from the University of Sydney, and is currently a Sessional Lecturer in Asian Art at the University’s Power Institute.

Siobhan Campbell | Senior Research Officer, Department of Indonesian Studies, University of Sydney

“Women and Tradition in Balinese Art History”

This presentation deals with the questions of gender and tradition in the art historical narrative of Balinese painting. Focussing on the practice of key artists from Kamasan village in Bali, I will discuss generational change in artistic production and the gendered flows of ideas, the negotiation of hierarchies and the embodied relationship to narrative. After describing the local hierarchies that define ideas about artistic practice, I will look at how women circumvent these hierarchies and their negotiations of the art world, through participation in formal art school training, membership of art collectives, engagement with art collectors/patrons, and exhibitions. The practice of these artists highlights a challenge faced by scholars of Southeast Asian art in defining and categorising ‘traditional’ art. I ask what distinctions or criteria men and women employ in articulating their vision of what it means to describe and categorise themselves as traditional.

Bio: Siobhan Campbell completed her PhD at the University of Sydney in 2013 investigating the painting tradition of Kamasan village in Bali and Balinese responses to museum collections. She continued to research collections of Balinese art as a fellow at the International Institute for

Asian Studies (IIAS) in the Netherlands in 2013 and undertook further fieldwork in Bali with a Postdoctoral Endeavour Fellowship in 2014. Siobhan is currently a lecturer in the Department of Indonesian Studies at Sydney University and is conducting research as part of the ARC Discovery Project 'Shaping Indonesian Contemporary Art: the role of institutions'.