

Nipan Oranniwesna, Memories of Progress in Singapore

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Born in 1962 in Bangkok, Thai artist Nipan Oranniwesna has become a familiar name to the Singaporean exhibition-goer, having presented two deeply memorable large-scale commissions on the premises of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Nipan is an artist who has exhibited internationally, and showed at both the Busan Biennale (2008) and the Thai Pavillion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007), in addition to the Singapore Biennale 2013. His detailed research-oriented process of art-making presents his reflections on investigations into locality-bound memories and identities across the region. By oftentimes working across territories and national boundaries, the works by Nipan demonstrate the potential of Southeast Asian contemporary art to foster dialogue and greater inter-cultural understanding.

Hope Brings Us Here, commissioned for the 2013 edition of the Singapore Biennale, 'If the World Changed', was a three-part mixed media installation comprising video and sculpture. Contemplating the proliferation of Thai migrant labour beyond the Kingdom's borders, Nipan embedded historical images of Thai events alongside photographs of the Thai diasporic community at Singapore's Golden Mile Complex within resin 'dewdrops' on the hardwood floor. Visitors were also encouraged to tread across Nipan's hardwood floor to view a two-channel video juxtaposing the Singapore urban landscape against the rural countryside of the Isan province in Thailand. Accompanying these two components was a miniature star – a ubiquitous symbol of progress on numerous crests and flags across the region – which had been moulded by the artist from an amalgam of coins from Singapore and Thailand. *Hope Brings Us Here* questions how one would be able to locate a nationalist identity from abroad, but more importantly, the value of such identities as geopolitical boundaries become

increasingly blurred with the progress of economic globalisation and migration in the region.

The search for better economic futures motivates these migrants, yet concurrently, Singapore's economic and infrastructural development has depended largely on migrant labour as well. In coming to Singapore, they bring with them their own cultural distinctiveness, and in forming their own communities on the island, they also create cultural enclaves that eventually become cultural landmarks for Singaporeans and an indelible aspect of our social history.

2017 saw the return of Nipan Oranniwesna to SAM with him working in his iconic format of floor installations for a new commission, *Another Island*, in the exhibition 'Imaginarium: To the Ends of the Earth'. Yet, while *Another Island* bears a physical resemblance to *Hope Brings Us Here*, the conceptual underpinnings of the work had changed considerably – rather than being an investigation into the Thai diaspora in Singapore, *Another Island* focuses on the expanding urban landscape and receding natural landscape of the republic itself. On the floor, the resin bubbles encapsulate photographs of Singapore's cityscapes and nature reserves drawn from archives and taken by Nipan himself. As visitors move close to the ground inspecting each vignette, they encounter recorded sounds: there, sounds from the environment and from people Nipan spoke to on his research trip, whispering stories of this land, whilst simultaneously evoking memories of place and space in the visitor.



Figure 1. Nipan Oranniwesna, *Hope Brings Us Here*, 2013, at Singapore Biennale 2013 “If the World changed”, 26 October 2013 – 16 February 2014. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum



Figure 2. Nipan Oranniwesna, *Another Island*, 2017, at *Imaginarium: To the Ends of the Earth*, 6 – May 27 August 2017. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Nipan Oranniwesna's practice is represented in the National Collection by his work *Let Us Progress Towards....* Executed in 2009, the delicate set of four hand-pierced paper works is part of a series exploring the ideas of nationalism in relation to the unifying potential of a national anthem. The perforations on the paper form the lyrics to Singapore's national anthem *Majulah Singapura*, in the four official languages of the country, and one can easily imagine the laborious and painstaking process in the making of the work. Thus even though the works of Nipan often exude an air of refined simplicity and tranquillity, to label the processes meditative would be inadequate – the repetitive nature of the tasks in the making of *Let Us Progress Towards...* is more akin to the repeated singing of national anthems by individuals, en masse, regularly as a means of constructing national identities. In this regard, the traces left by Nipan on these sheets of paper can be seen as the confluence point of collective and personal memories.

In the words of Nipan Oranniwesna, his works “spring from personal moments of contemplation and memories, to be expanded in terms of dialogue with other, surrounding, phenomena.” Beyond the examination of archival material, his research process in the making of each work extends into fieldwork where he spends a significant amount of time gathering first-hand experiences of the localities he is interested in. Beyond Singapore itself, Nipan's artistic research has drawn him to numerous countries within the region, including Myanmar and the Philippines. Over the course of each work's presentation, the works continue to take on a greater depth of meaning from the responses elicited by audiences in the territories they are presented in. Rather than merely looking to history alone for answers, Nipan's work positions his viewers within a moment in history for a deeper contemplation of the future in Southeast Asia. □



Figure 3. Nipan Oranniwesna, *Let Us Progress Towards ...*, 2009. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.