

Navin Rawanchaikul

Navin Rawanchaikul born in Chiang Mai in 1971. His practice is built around explorations of the transient nature of identity in a globalised work, drawing much of the material from his own experience. Rawinchaikul often produces work under the banner of Navin Production Co., Ltd., his production company founded in 1994. He initiated in 1995 his landmark project Navin Gallery Bangkok, in which an ordinary Bangkok taxicab was transformed into a mobile art gallery. Its success prompted several versions of the Taxi Gallery around the world including Sydney, London, Bonn and New York. Navin Production is known for its team of artists, photographers, painters, designers, illustrators and ‘advisor’s, who assist him to realise often lavish interventions into public spaces, print media, film and galleries. Rawanchaikul has exhibited extensively both locally and internationally. He was the Thai representative at the 54th Venice Biennale 2011 with *Paradiso di Navin* and in 2010 awarded the national Silapathorn citation from the Thai Ministry of Culture in the respected field of Visual Arts. He divides his time between his family in Fukuoka and Chiang Mai.

Negotiating the many selves of Navin Rawanchaikul

Christine Clark and Bronwyn Mahoney

Navin Rawanchaikul has largely lived his life as the ‘other’, first through birth and then choice. Born of Hindu Punjabi parentage in the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, from very early in life he has been aware of and negotiated his position as insider/outsider, as a ‘khaek’, within his own society. A position, even further augmented since the notion of home has been divided between Chiang Mai and Fukuoka where his wife and daughter reside. The ambiguity of identity — Thai, Indian or Japanese — has been accentuated on numerous occasions during his near two-decade career by the curatorial fixation to label artists by nation. Yet, in Rawanchaikul’s case straddling a number of worlds and being culturally ‘other’ has been advantageous. It has provided a particular acuity in artistic observation coupled with a seemingly unquenchable thirst for investigative storytelling around culture, history and identity. It may also explain his ease of manner when negotiating disparate communities and the ensuing participatory interventions, along with his uncanny ability to become immersed in elaborate autobiographical narratives about identity that merge social history with fantastical worlds.

Within these varied epic narratives Rawanchaikul invariably plays the lead. The self underpins all the imaginative, seemingly eccentric, exploratory journeys with autobiography and self-representation ever obvious and self-realisation continually explored. In recent years the idea of self has been extended and often incorporates familial representation; his wife and daughter and at times ancestors from the Punjab provide counterpoints and further layers to the narratives. Even though this all-consuming focus on one’s self may at first seem self-obsessive, paradoxically,

accessibility and community inclusivity remain central to his practice. Rawanchaikul uses the self, positioned within these parodied autobiographical narratives, to humour and entertain but ultimately to engage people with his enquiry and at times to bring them together. His focus remains steadfastly on the local; fuelled by a curiosity in his own and other various communities' negotiations between local circumstances and trends of globalisation.

Most of his narratives are seeded by personal incidents and evolve around a journeying of discovery, around his identity in some shape or form, although the audiences he targets are just as likely to be stall owners in a Chiang Mai market and taxi drivers in Bangkok, as the art world itself. By continually asking the fundamental question 'who am I?' he explores and exploits his own image to inspire meaningful dialogues on the nature of art and society. He looks at others as a way, in part, of seeing himself more clearly and inversely, to selfhood for larger enquiry.

Boundaries — or lack thereof — are paramount to Rawanchaikul's negotiations. At times they are intentionally blurred and on other occasion the artifices of borders are contested. The distinction is indeed hazy between his 'real' life experiences and artistic adventures. The public's preconception about what constitutes contemporary art is also continually challenged; probing and pushing the imagined boundaries of art his practice, aside from more traditional expressions, incorporates community events, billboards, films, comics, games and merchandise. The concept of art is further challenged as he creates a large proportion of recent work under the banner of the Navin Production Co., Ltd.

National boundaries and the notion of fixed national identities also offer Rawanchaikul rich material, as evidenced in the exhibited work. The central sculptural piece, from the Mission Navinland series, 2011, along with a painted billboard of 2006 and media work of 2007 from the Navins of Bollywood series all use the lure and lubricity of humor yet speak candidly about cultural hybridity, history and (be)longing. Rawanchaikul has star billing in both the Navin of Bollywood painting, reminiscent of billboard movie posters and executed by a group of Mumbai's last surviving movie painters, and the media work, a highly entertaining Bollywood

spoof. The media work's backstory begins:

Late one night, drinking alone in his Chiang Mai studio, Navin Rawanchaikul, a lonesome son of diaspora and the product of a globalised world finds a mysterious letter with the phone number of a person who shares his name, Navin. The call he then makes sets him off on a Bollywood adventure that may change his life forever ...

The work goes on to tell the story of Navin travelling to India where he meets another Navin who opens his eyes to Rawanchaikul's true purpose — to bring all of the Navins of the world together.

Rawanchaikul's concentrated focus on identity, the modes that make up our perceptions and presentations of ourselves also manifest in the 2011 Mission Navinland sculpture. It depicts the artist and daughter goosestepping, seemingly gaily, equipped with all their necessary travel accoutrements, namely a quintessential Japanese school satchel, Navinland flag and passport. Although Rawanchaikul's customary use of humor is ever-present, the work is nevertheless laced with great poignancy and intimacy. The goosetstep may initially seem merely absurd but even modest reflection evokes images of marching Indian and Pakistani border guards, who continue to patrol the land that was once the homeland of Rawanchaikul's ancestors. The sculpture's juxtaposition against a stark black wall further accentuates this symbolism, suggestive of this much-contested no-man's land. The accompanying hand-written letter to his daughter Mari, a companion piece to the Mission Navinland sculpture, clearly articulates the introspective and personally sensitive nature of this recent series.

Rawinchaikul's multidisciplinary work eloquently uses personal experience to speak not only about self but also about all others. It ultimately speaks about our names, our histories, our families, our cultures. It playfully delves into who Navin Rawinchaikul actually is, to but in effect who we all are in a time of increased cultural hybridity in the globalised world.

1 Kheak is the Thai word for stranger or guest. A slang and somewhat derogatory term, it usually denotes Indian migrants.