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# EAST IS WEST

ARTIST APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S  
LAST FILM OUTRAGED THE THAI GOVERNMENT  
BUT HE'S NOT ABOUT TO SHY AWAY FROM THE  
TOUGH TOPICS OF THE DAY

"Joe" is the moniker that Thai filmmaker, screenwriter, and artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul adopted to facilitate his communication with heavy-tongued westerners. But the generic handle is also an apt representation of Weerasethakul's ability to jump across cultures and hemispheres, as well as the boundaries between art, cinema, memory, and magic.

Weerasethakul's lyrical approach to Thailand's raw political issues evokes an empathy for his subjects that supersedes historical particulars. Despite the realities he addresses, Weerasethakul imparts a gentle, seductive flow to his stories, weaving between dreams, nightmares, and investigations into the universal truths of personal and cultural trauma.

From the outset, the 30-year-old Bangkok-born artist shunned Thailand's strict studio system and conventional film structure by employing nonprofessionals, and formed his Kick the Machine production company to support his own endeavors and the fledgling experimental film scene in Thailand.

After being honored with the "Un Certain Regard" Prize at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, Weerasethakul was awarded the Jury Prize at Cannes in 2004 for *Tropical Malady*, an exquisitely crafted interconnected story of a romance between two young men and the chilling mystery of a soldier's ghost.

But international recognition did not warm Thailand's conservative government to their artistic star's liberal depiction of his sexual identity. Stretching the tight limits of the Thai government's comfort-level further secured Weerasethakul's standing as a creative pioneer.



Yet perhaps the most innovative aspect of his work is his blurring of boundaries between art and film. The phantasmagorical content and dreamlike imagery in his work place it firmly in the context of art-house cinema, but he has also exhibited his films as installations in top international galleries. "I do not see the difference between the work I make for a gallery and the films I screen in cinemas," he explains.

Instead of telling the powerfully poetic story of his latest work *Morakot* (*Emerald*) in its full-feature format, Weerasethakul trimmed the story to just ten minutes and presented it at last year's Art Basel. *Morakot* is an updated retelling of Danish writer Karl Gjellerup's 1906 Buddhist novel *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, in which two people are reborn as stars and proceed to recount their individual histories to each other. In Weerasethakul's version, three actors occupy

a derelict Bangkok hotel and tell the stories of their lives.

Memory, time, and historical wounds take different dimensions in *PRIMITIVE*, which premieres as a multiscreen installation in Munich's Haus der Kunst next month. In *PRIMITIVE*, as in *Morakot*, Weerasethakul films young people at a place of profound historical pain. But instead of his regular roster of actors, he films the male descendants of the farmers from the traumatized north Thailand village of Nabua. With his own expansive, rule-breaking style, Weerasethakul ties together the past and present—while forging a cinematic vision for the future. **Ana Finel Honigman**

Film still from *Unknown Forces*, 2007

**Artwork Apichatpong Weerasethakul**

Courtesy SCAI, Tokyo