

Art in America

NOVEMBER 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Korakrit Arunanondchai:
Letters to Chantri #1: The lady at the door/The gift that keeps on giving, 2014, film, run times vary; at the Mistake Room.

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI The Mistake Room

A young woman dressed in all white ushered me ceremoniously into a small screening room. A subtitled video began playing on a flat-screen television, opening with a voice speaking in Thai over ethereal, hopeful music: “My name is Korakrit. I was an artist, now I’m an orb.” Two white-clad figures walk toward a glowing stupa, signaling themes of transcendence and transformation.

This was the intriguing prelude to *Letters to Chantri #1: The lady at the door/The gift that keeps on giving*, an “immersive experience” created by New York-based Korakrit Arunanondchai at the Mistake Room, a nonprofit exhibition space in industrial downtown Los Angeles. The 27-year-old artist had his first solo museum show at New York’s MoMA PS1 earlier this year, in which he presented video works alongside expressionistic paintings on burned-denim canvases. At the Mistake Room, he orchestrated a large-scale environment that included paintings, sculptures and video.

The white-dressed guide asked viewers to follow her from the screening room into the next gallery, at the back of which stood a disconcerting army of 100 mannequins dressed just like her. Two large mirrors, splattered and smeared with paint, flanked a fountain with a plaster hand sticking out of it that proffered a bar of glycerin soap.

The video narrative continued in a wall-size projection. Here, the performance artist known as boychild plays the role of Arunanondchai, wearing the artist’s signature paint-covered denim attire and a wig to mimic his shoulder-length bleached hair. Arunanondchai himself continues to narrate in Thai. In slow motion, boychild walks through a haze of youthful revelry, full of smoke and pulsating music. A fellow partygoer whispers in her

ear, and suddenly she is jolted into an awareness of something amiss, though what that is not divulged. The party scene cuts to boychild at a park, staring longingly at an amorous couple on the grass. In a moment foreshadowing the artist’s fate of becoming an orb, animated soap bubbles populate the screen.

Now boychild sits slump-shouldered in the artist’s studio, staring at a group of burned-denim paintings. There is a knock at the door, and the camera zooms in on boychild’s hand as it turns the handle. The door opens to the same white-dressed woman who was serving as our guide at the Mistake Room. Onscreen, with sunshine at her back and a toothpaste-ad smile, she offers boychild redemption in the form of a bar of soap. What exactly needs to be washed away remains unclear: Is it Arunanondchai’s career thus far, the artist seeking to move forward into a new chapter? Or is it art-world practices, sullied by money and opportunism, from which presumably Arunanondchai is free at the nonprofit Mistake Room?

The transformation begins as boychild washes the paint off her hands. Discarding the wig and denim for a white ensemble, she is welcomed by a clapping crowd, dressed in white and presumably also cleansed. The closing shot features a hand presenting a bar of soap, and the statement: “Everyone is welcome.”

The guide, now revealed to be the “lady at the door” referenced in the title, handed me a bar of soap and pointed me to the exit. I was left with more questions than answers, but what is certain is that Arunanondchai created an intoxicating experience, and perhaps a masterful marketing ploy, as viewers were left wondering what he will come up with next, in the wake of his metaphoric rebirth.

—Jennifer S. Li