

The Bangkok University Art Gallery

Nipan and Ark



Established in 1996, The Bangkok University Art Gallery (B.U.A.G.) is one of several art galleries which are participating in and contributing toward a growing sophistication in Bangkok's emerging contemporary art scene of increasingly complex visual languages.



Nipan Oranniwesna, artist



Ark Fongsmut, curator

The director of B.U.A.G. is the amiable **Nipan Oranniwesna**, who has been an artist for more than a decade. Born in Bangkok, Nipan received 1st Class Honours in Graphic Arts from the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Bangkok; and is also a graduate of Japan's Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. He has been involved in many group

exhibitions and solo shows, among which are 'Birthplace' (1997, Bangkok); 'Thai Spirit' (Edmonton, Canada); 'Reminiscence of Earth' (1996, Yokohama, Japan); and '11 Deutsche Internationale Grafix – Triennale' (Frechen, Germany). Nipan is also Art Instructor at the School of Fine and Applied Arts, Bangkok University in Bangkok; as is BUAG curator **Ark Fongsmut**. Ark is a graduate of both Political Science (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok) and Fine Art Administration and Curatorship (University of London, London). The SPAFA team visited the director and curator at the gallery office on a recent weekday afternoon.

What is the purpose of the university art gallery?

Nipan: It is used to educate and expose the university students to contemporary art, and to involve the wider community outside the university in participating. The art space is open to all Thai artists, and Southeast Asian students; professional artists, especially young ones are approached to hold exhibitions at our gallery; and we are

seriously seeking more collaborations with other institutes, such as the Alliance Francaise.

Can you describe some of the activities?

Nipan: We are happy with the number of students attending the gallery during shows (publicity for the events are made through posters, classes and flyers). We work as a group here, and the board is supportive of us. Programmes are planned one year in advance, so that we can present proposals to the board for approval. We produce 5 exhibitions every year, each lasting about 5 weeks, and University art lecturers help us as curators. Our forum for students is the major show of the year; now we are starting to organise more forums for students and public participation. Our staff consists of one director, one project co-ordinator and one curator – Ark – who lectures too.

How are your exhibitions arranged with the artists; what criteria for selection, legal implications, for examples?

Nipan: Through private connections, and people we know in the media, etc., it is not difficult to identify an artist in Thailand whom we would invite to do a show in our gallery. We negotiate easily with the artists; produce the catalogue for them; and made flexible arrangement with regard to putting the show on. No fees are charged; neither are insurance for the art pieces ever been a problem. As we



operate on a non-profit basis, the art works exhibited are not for sale.

Ark: We have to give credit to the artists, especially Thai artists who have been generous by showing their works at our gallery as a way of contributing to an educational institute rather than making commercial gains.

What are some of the difficulties in running the gallery?

Ark: We are supported basically by the university, with a very limited budget which does not allow for certain type of shows that cost a lot of money to organise. Apart from the money problem, if we overcome the difficulty of maintaining continuity and stability, we will be well.

Nipan: We have connections, friends in the art community, so no problems there ... in terms of non-financial support.

What are your objectives/goals for the gallery, and future plans?

Nipan: We are focussed on using the space (gallery) here for our main activities, for the audience we have attracted, and the next step beyond that will be, we hope, engaging in more collaborations with other institutes organisations, and become more involved in community-based projects.

Ark: We are planning more shows on art that is concerned about the family. The subject matter is not kind of provocative, but it will compel people to be concerned about what is going on within the family.



Nipan : "We are starting to organize forums for public participation."

Future programme? What will the gallery represent - abstract work, figurative, conceptual, etc?

Nipan: If we can, for the future, I want to try a show for an artist who works on media art.

Ark: It is not easy to implement a programme based on a theme because we invite very diverse artists, and their works vary. For the group show, yes, we have a basic theme; for example, the Loei* project which brought together 6 young artists from the School of Fine and Applied Arts of our university. It is

an attempt to provide them experiences shared with villagers (in 3 villages of Loei, northern Thailand) and develop a shift of interest from object to relationship in their perspectives and artistic expression.

away from that, and create contemporary art from, about, and within a rural environment. I also think that we can afford more innovation, even kitsch art because at least it is something different.

Are you mainly supporting only Thai artists?

Ark: Well, not just Thai artists. Each year, we do try to invite one or two foreign artists to exhibit their work at the gallery. Our current show is 'Colourium' by Ralph Kiggell, British artist who uses tropical light colours in woodblock prints.

Can you share some of your thoughts on the status of contemporary art in Thailand?

Ark: Too much contemporary art is oriented toward urban subjects. I feel we need to move



Ark : "I believe we have more freedom"

What about an opinion on the state of the National Gallery?

Nipan: Give up!!! (laughing loudly) (Ark expresses similar emotion, only stronger without words but two hands up raised!!)

Ark: We need better management, policy direction, and professionals to be involved. There are quite a lot of bureaucratic constraints that affect the National Gallery, and even if they privatised it, I'm not sure the shackles will be off because of our country background as a very bureaucratic polity. Too many different directors have made matters worse; I think a continuity of someone in charge over a great length of time will be helpful.





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What differences are there between university galleries and commercial ones?

Ark: I believe we have more freedom. I don't know how it is if you're in the government or bureaucracy, but from my experiences of working here, it has been quite liberal. First of all, our pioneers/colleagues in the Visual Art Department, who are approximately of our age, have much in common with us in viewpoints. As we are of the same generation, there's a unity that enables us to convince others, those not on our side in the university, to agree and co-operate. It is good to have a free hand to work.

* '476 Kilometres: Villager Voice' was initiated by six young artists from the School of Fine and Applied Arts, Bangkok University, as field work practice in developing a shift of the artist's interest in object to that in relationship (rural ones, in this case). B.U.A.G. organised the project in collaboration with the Dan Sai Police Station of Loei province (northern Thailand), with an unusual exhibition held at the Pong Police Station, in July 2001. The participating artists shared experiences with rural folks in three villages, and created art with influences deriving from interpreting the relating to and relations amongst the villagers. Experiences included, for example, the involvement of rural children in helping transform garbage bins in interactive activities; capturing the atmosphere of the local open-air cinema; or installation works based on the 'fai' (cotton) which used to be an export item of the province.

All photographs by Nipon Sud-Ngam

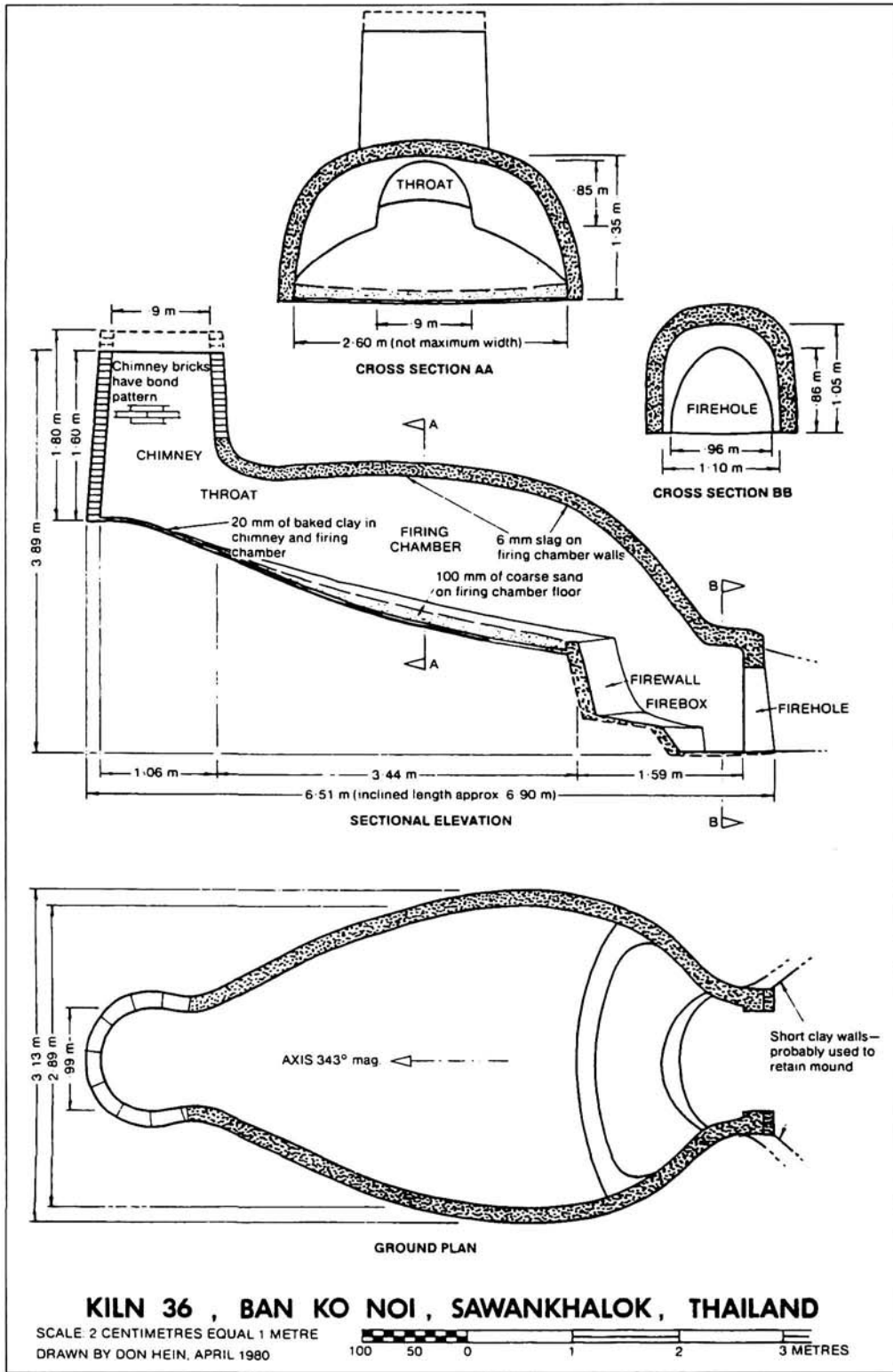


Figure 1: Kiln KN 36 showing transitional built features plan, elevation and cross section from 'Sawankalok laims : a recent discovery', Bulletin of the Art Gallery of South Australia vol 88, 1980