



## Apichatpong Weerasethakul / MATRIX 247

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Apichatpong Weerasethakul once explained that his work should evoke delirium, a feverish state of shifting consciousness. The 2007 video installation *Morakot (Emerald)* is indeed a space of fragmentary narratives and elusive imagery, enabling slippage between the physical and fantastical.

The installation is named for Bangkok's Morakot Hotel. In the 1980s, hotels like the Morakot hosted visiting businessmen, political refugees from bordering countries, and tourists alike. After the Thai economy collapsed in the late 1990s, the hotels were abandoned; the buildings left behind house only memories, phantoms of previous guests. In *Morakot*, the camera is a specter, gliding through the spaces of the hotel like an ethereal predator. The video slowly moves along the Morakot's empty corridors and into abandoned rooms, capturing the natural light as it streams through the windows and illuminates dust and feathers drifting in the air. Progressively, more and more digitized motes are added until a mesmerizing constellation reanimates the derelict hotel.

Weerasethakul differentiates between his films, which he considers to be like time machines, and video installations, which he likens to spaceships that transport us into new atmospheric environments. In the *Morakot* installation, a low-hanging green lamp illuminates the space between the gallery floor and the edge of the screen, creating a focal point and a meditative portal into the space of the single-channel video. The images are accompanied by three ghostly voices—identified by the artist as those of Tong, Goh, and Jen—that echo within the rooms of the hotel and, by extension, the gallery itself. We hear them laugh together and speak of faraway places—places permeated with violence, but also with the croaking of frogs and the strains of country music. Jen recalls: "There's this tree called Parichart. Hidden in the mountains far away. If you smell its flower, you will remember your past lives. You will know who you were in many lives." Like Weerasethakul's other works, *Morakot* is suspended in the space between past and present, reality and fantasy, natural and manmade.

The artist's initial inspiration for *Morakot* was the experimental Buddhist novel about death and rebirth, *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (1906), by Danish author Karl Gjellerup. In the book, the *Kamanita*'s protagonists, reborn as stars, tell one another tales over centuries until they reach nirvana. However, rather than illustrating the novel directly, Weerasethakul took a cinema vérité approach, asking his crew and cast of nonprofessional actors to infuse the script with their own village legends and personal stories. The actors who play Tong, Goh, and Jen appear frequently in Weerasethakul's films, and their stories resonate beyond *Morakot*, intertwining with other cinematic narratives as well as their own lives. Here, recounting dreams, memories, and regrets, they are ephemeral echoes of their cinematic and actual selves.

In *Morakot*, as in his other work, Weerasethakul makes the viewer aware of how cinematic technique mediates and manipulates the tentative narratives unfolding onscreen. His first feature-length film, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), is

narrated by a wide variety of people throughout Thailand, their various stories weaving together like a Surrealist “exquisite corpse,” with one person building on the previous episode without knowing what has come before. An account told by a food vendor about being sold by her father to a relative turns into a tale of a crippled boy and his teacher who then is transformed into an alien. Through these twists and turns, we witness firsthand the beauty and tragedy of real-time mythmaking and begin to understand the sensuous complexity of narratives constructed amid political upheaval and poverty. Weerasethakul’s cinematic experiments reference the self-reflexive films of Stan Brakhage and Maya Deren even while their storylines are firmly rooted in Thai cultural reality.

*Morakot* is haunted by the same fugitive memories of violence and exile that have given shape to over a decade of Weerasethakul’s films. “I dreamt of Kanchanaburi,” Tong recalls, “The soldiers dragged me out of bed and let the dogs chase us. All I could see were small green lights in the distance. So I floated that way. Turns out they were squid boats.” Weerasethakul’s films and video installations are vehicles for communicating unconventional experiences and unofficial views, using trances and dream-like scenarios to exhume stories of political dissidence, poverty, sexuality, and sickness that are repressed in officially sanctioned accounts of contemporary Thailand. (His feature-length film *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) was banned in the country.)

The gallery’s dim green light, the gentle voices suspended in time, the whirling particles together suggest the sensation of falling in and out of consciousness. Even the rooms, walls and windows of the hotel begin to take on an ambiguous presence, becoming a labyrinthine construction that echoes the narrators’ tangle of recollection, fact, and fantasy. As in the *Pilgrim Kamanita*, *Morakot* seems to seek nirvana through storytelling.

**Dena Beard**

Assistant Curator

Apichatpong Weerasethakul (born 1970) has directed several features and dozens of short films, including *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, winner of the 2010 Palme d'Or prize at Cannes; *Tropical Malady*, winner of a 2004 Cannes jury prize; and *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), which premiered at the 63rd Venice Film Festival. Trained as a visual artist at the Art Institute of Chicago, Weerasethakul returned to his native Thailand in 1999. His installation projects have been featured at the Sculpture Center and New Museum in New York and REDCAT in Los Angeles and in the 2001 Istanbul Biennial, the 55th Carnegie International, and, most recently, at Documenta (13) in Kassel, Germany.

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FRONT Apichatpong Weerasethakul: still from *Morakot (Emerald)*, 2007; single-channel video projection; color, sound, 10:50 min., looped; museum purchase: