The Bouquet and the Wreath at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum (Chiang Mai, 26 July 2025–25 March 2026)



Figure 1: ***The Bouquet and the Wreath*** **exhibition poster © MAIIAM**

The MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์ศิลปะร่วมสมัยใหม่เอี่ยม) opened in 2016 in a renovated warehouse in San Kamphaeng,[1] just outside Chiang Mai, with the aim of making a major collection of Thai and regional contemporary art accessible to the public. Rooted in a collection assembled over more than three decades by Jean Michel Beurdeley, his late wife, Patrsi Bunnag (ภัทรศรี บุนนาค; 1941–2015), and Eric Bunnag Booth (เอริค บุนนาค บูทซ์), the museum presents works from its permanent collection alongside a changing program of temporary exhibitions. Named after Chao Chom Iam Bunnag (เจ้าจอมเอี่ยม บุนนาค; 1873–1952), a royal consort of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), MAIIAM

[1] The museum occupies a former warehouse transformed by the Bangkok-based architectural practice "all(zone)", led by Rachaporn Choochuey (รชาพร ชูช่วย; b. 1970).

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has played an important role over the last decade in promoting and preserving contemporary art in Thailand, while fostering dialogues between established artists and new curatorial perspectives.

It was therefore particularly fitting that the museum hosted *The Bouquet and the Wreath*, an exhibition surveying 45 years of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's (อารยา ราษฎร์จำเริญสุข; b. 1957) artistic practice, co-curated by Roger Nelson and Kittima Chareeprasit (กิตติมา จารี-ประสิทธิ์). The exhibition was presented across two overlapping venues, each displaying a distinct selection of works: one in Chiang Mai, under review here, and the other in Dubai.[2] This review focuses exclusively on the exhibition at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum **[Figure 1]**. Although Chiang Mai might appear an unexpected location for an artist of such international stature, the city is deeply intertwined with Araya's trajectory. She lived, worked, and taught for almost four decades there and, as Eric Bunnag Booth notes, developed a long-standing relationship with Jean Michel Beurdeley, co-founder of MAIIAM, who "has been supporting Araya's practice and collecting her work for over three decades" (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 19).

As the exhibition catalog was not published until March 2026, the museum provided short explanatory texts in Thai and English beneath the title of each work throughout the exhibition period. Developed through discussions between the curators and the artist, these texts provided essential interpretive guidance and, together with the subsequently published catalog (Nelson & Kittima 2026), constitute the principal textual references for this review. Their direct accessibility within the gallery space, rather than through the QR codes increasingly common in contemporary exhibitions, was particularly commendable.

Framing the viewer's expectations, the introductory wall text explains that the exhibition deliberately avoids a chronological structure, instead juxtaposing works from different periods across Araya's 45-year-long practice. This approach encourages a dynamic engagement with the artist's recurring concerns and thematic continuities. As the catalog further emphasizes, neither section of the exhibition seeks to provide a complete or definitive account of Araya's œuvre; rather, the curators embrace the open-ended, multifaceted, and difficult-to-categorize nature of her work (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 25), thereby rejecting any claim to exhaustiveness or classificatory closure. This approach echoes earlier critical readings of Araya's practice, including that of Australian curator and art historian Clare Veal, who has argued that the artist's work resists straightforward categorization, whether through the lens of feminist art or within the framework of Thai female artistic production (Clark, Veal & Su 2014: 56). Taken together, these perspectives point to a broader refusal of linear and classificatory interpretations, a position that becomes materially legible in the spatial organization of the exhibition.

Upon entering the atrium of MAIIAM, one encounters Araya's large-scale

[2] The Dubai exhibition was presented at the Jameel Arts Centre from 6 November 2025 to 12 April 2026. See: https://jameelartscentre.org/whats-on/araya-rasdjarmrearnsook-the-bouquet-and-the-wreath/ (accessed 20 July 2026).



Figure 2: *Dog's Palatial Castle* (2025) by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, and *Cold War: The Mysterious* (2019–2022) by Thasnai Sethaseree © Sébastien Tayac

wooden manor house. Titled *Dog's Palatial Castle* (2025), its juxtaposition with *Cold War: The Mysterious* (2019–2022), an artwork by the artist Thasnai Sethaseree (ทัศนัย เศรษฐเสรี; b. 1968) creates friction between an intimate, domestic structure and a work charged with broader historical and political resonance **[Figure 2]**.

Considered in isolation, the building evokes architectural forms reminiscent of Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (1925), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), or The Addams Family mansion. Yet this familiarity is destabilized by two walls covered in portraits of dogs. In fact, the structure transposes Araya's *Castle* (1989), an intaglio print, into architectural scale, extending its logic into space. Inside, it contains *Three Female Scapes* (2002), a three-channel video showing a deceased woman in gilded frames, alongside *Sweet Naïve Buoyancy: Tata* (2025), a resin sculpture of an aged dog. As curators Nelson & Kittima note in the caption, Araya evokes a "close meeting" between the three works—newly born, ageing, and deceased—thus articulating a subtle thread through time.

The dialogue between these works exemplifies the exhibition's non-chronological structure, allowing past and newly developed pieces to coexist within a shared interpretative field. Rather than merely illustrating this principle, it gives it concrete form, bringing different temporalities into co-presence instead of presenting them sequentially. This produces a sense of temporal disorientation, perceptible as the visitor moves through the exhibition, where chronological markers are continually reconfigured in favor of a relational mode of reading. This experience is also reflected in the catalogue's own understanding of the exhibition structure, which the curators characterize not as cyclical or linear but as akin to the garden surrounding Araya's home and studio—a space of simultaneous, unpredictable movements where eighteen dogs coexist in a state of constant activity (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 34).

As visitors move through the galleries, two dominant impressions emerge. On the one hand, dog figures seem ubiquitous, appearing not only in the paintings that



Figure 3: Dog in the exhibition space, MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum © Sébastien Tayac

cover the walls of *Dog's Palatial Castle* but also in the many sculptures dispersed throughout and beyond the exhibition spaces, accompanying visitors throughout their journey **[Figure 3]**. This recurrence also traverses the videos and photographs, to the point that the exhibition could almost be perceived as organized around this animal figure. Progressing through space, the resin sculptures, initially perceived as inert objects, gradually acquire a heightened presence: Despite an awareness of their materiality, one can imagine the sounds and movements associated with these animals and can feel their lively presence lingering in the space.

On the other hand, although silence largely governs the exhibition, it is intermittently punctuated by the artist's voice in her video installations. Soft and almost whisper-like, this voice unfolds with a quiet intensity, lending the exhibition a haunting sonic dimension. This tonal quality is particularly evident in the transition between the two ground-floor galleries: in the first, a dispersed ensemble of video projections drawn from archival materials extends across walls, floors, and ceilings, accompanied by the artist's voice. The following gallery shifts into a more reflective register, marked by a cold stillness and a sense of suspension, perceptible in the installations *Three Narcissuses* (1993) and *Isolated Hands Asking for Help* (1992) **[Figure 4]**.

Within this configuration, the exhibition reveals formal continuities in Araya's practice by establishing a dialogue with the museum's permanent collection. The plaster heads visible in *Three Narcissuses* (1993), presented in the temporary exhibition, later reappear in *Isolated Moral Female Object, In a Relationship with a Male Bird I* (1995) and *II* (1995) **[Figure 5]**, works from the museum's permanent collection. These correspondences foreground a recurring strategy in Araya's early 1990s production, characterized by the reuse of fragmented plaster body parts across different works. More broadly, these processes of repetition and recomposition suggest a form of bodily standardization that evokes the conformity



Figure 4: *Three Narcissuses* (1993), foreground, and *Isolated Hands Asking for Help* (1992), background © Sébastien Tayac



Figure 5: ***Isolated Moral Female Object, In a Relationship with a Male Bird I*** **(1995) and** ***II*** **(1995) © Sébastien Tayac**

historically forced upon women within a deeply patriarchal Thai society.

Araya offers the visitor seemingly opposing perceptual dimensions that, in fact, cultivate resonance: The insistent presence of an animal associated with fidelity, affective proximity, and moments of joy and insouciance is set against an atmosphere marked by suffering, death, and disappearance. This tension is reflected in the exhibition's title, *The Bouquet and the Wreath*, leveraging contrasting floral forms: the bouquet, linked to celebration and offering, and the wreath, associated with mourning and funerary ritual. Within this framework, Araya mobilizes the bed—particularly in *Dinner with Cancer* (*Rebirth*) (1993/2025) **[Figure 6]** and *Has Girl Lost Her Memory?* (1994/2025)—as a condensed figure through which birth, love, and death are articulated. Situated within a broader art historical trajectory, these works can be read in relation to Georges Lacombe's *L'Existence* (ca. 1894–1896), which configures the bed within an allegorical sequence of life and death, and Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998), in which it functions as a site of exposure, intimacy, and vulnerability. This articulation can also be situated within the opposition between Eros and Thanatos, which Sayan Daengklom (สายัณห์ แดงกลม) proposes as a key framework for analyzing Araya's work. Rather than representing fixed opposites, these forces operate dialectically, allowing death to be reimagined through life and artistic creation (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 112). The bed thus operates as a site where bodily and existential thresholds converge, consistent with Araya's exploration of spaces in which life and death, presence and absence, are negotiated. In this context, the dog emerges as a liminal figure mediating this passage between the living and the dead. This interpretation is further supported by Araya's own reflections in a conversation with Thai artist Kawita Vatanajyankur (กวิตา วัฒนะชยังกูร; b. 1987), first published in the magazine *a day* in the *Meet the Master* series (issue 240, 2020). In her own words, "The purpose of life is beauty. In reality, death can never be beautiful. If it were to be beautiful, I now think it would be in how we live with animals,



Figure 6: ***Dinner with Cancer (Rebirth)*** **(1993/2025) © Sébastien Tayac**



Figures 7a–b: *Prostitute's Room* (1993/2025), two views documenting the work's evolution, 2 August 2025 (a), and 15 March 2026 (b) © Sébastien Tayac

plants and flowers, with kindness and compassion. But it still feels bland, certainly bland" (cited in Nelson & Kittima 2026: 178). These symbolic thresholds extend into more material configurations of bodily and domestic space, where distinctions between human and non-human, as well as between suffering, illness, and death, are continually reconfigured. This articulation prepares the ground for a more direct engagement with bodily materiality in the subsequent works.

This tension between life, death, and transformation finds one of its most striking expressions in *Prostitute's Room* (1993/2025), presented in immediate proximity to the video *The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor* (2003). In the 1993 installation, Araya placed menstrual blood in three small bowls. Its reactivation in 2025, however, introduced a significant shift. As noted in the exhibition catalogue, Araya playfully observes that the "period" invoked by the work—both as menstruation and as a stage in her life—is now long past (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 121). The blood, deposited on the day of the opening, gradually flowed onto the floor and then dried, without any intervention. The work thus transforms over time, incorporating the very effects of its own degradation. Initially, this evolution was accompanied by the emergence of a particularly acrid and persistent odor, almost unbearable, provoking a physical reaction in the viewer. Over the following weeks, however, this olfactory presence diminished, leaving behind a fixed, desiccated trace **[Figures 7a–b].**

The spatial proximity of this work with *The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor* produces a striking effect. While the video is based on a constructed situation and has a certain lightness—the artist feigning pregnancy and recording the reactions of her colleagues from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Chiang Mai University—its reception is profoundly altered by the material conditions generated by *Prostitute's Room*. At the height of the odor's intensity, it became almost impossible to remain in the space long enough to watch the video in its entirety. This unintended configuration introduces

a conflict between the content of the image and the conditions of its perception, transforming a potentially light-hearted work into an experience marked by discomfort, even repulsion. Taken together, these two works articulate different modes of engaging the body—biological, performative, and sensory—while situating the viewer's experience within a register that oscillates between distance and involvement. In this context, *Prostitute's Room* exceeds the status of a static installation and instead unfolds as a process, whose successive phases fully contribute to its meaning.

Presented in a separate space, *The Class* (16 min. 30s) **[Figure 8]**, *The Class II* (21 min), and *The Class III* (26 min) emerged as one of the exhibition's key works. First presented at the Thai Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2005, this widely discussed video triptych belongs to a nine-year-long body of works in which Araya staged encounters between herself and human cadavers, exploring questions of mortality, knowledge, and representation.

Although this triptych has become one of Araya's most recognized works, many viewers have encountered it primarily through widely circulated photographs and the accompanying texts published by the artist herself. The opportunity to experience the work in its complete video form was therefore one of the exhibition's most significant contributions. In the three videos, the artist assumes the role of a teacher in a classroom, alternately writing on a greenboard with chalk and turning to address a group of cadavers covered with white sheets, arranged in



Figure 8: Photograph of the video projection of *The Class* (2005) © Sébastien Tayac

orderly rows as if they were students. She conducts her lesson with complete seriousness, posing questions, developing her ideas, and occasionally pausing as though awaiting a response. Through her questions, explanations, and tone of voice, Araya's delivery creates a striking contrast with the extraordinary circumstances, prompting viewers to find themselves unexpectedly laughing. Yet the awareness that the bodies are real transforms the meaning of that laughter. Beyond what appears on screen, viewers may begin to imagine the physical presence of the room: its silence, its atmosphere, and perhaps even its smell. Through this ironic structure, the triptych reactivates a central concern in Araya's practice: the exploration of mortality, pedagogy, and the ethical questions surrounding the representation of human bodies and death. In doing so, it offers a distinctive approach to mortality, bringing it closer to everyday human experience without ever diminishing its gravity.

The Bouquet and the Wreath concludes with a library section that brings together

a selection of texts by and about the artist and her work. This inclusion foregrounds writing as a continuous dimension of Araya's practice, beyond visual production, resonating with works such as *Writing Has Begun Now* (1992), *Pot Pourri* (2019), and *An Artist Is Trying to Return to Being a Writer* (2017), in which the artist reflects on writing as coextensive with her artistic practice. The installation thus contributes to a discourse on artistic identity understood through its dual visual and literary articulation. More broadly, it underscores a structural principle of Araya's practice: the absence of clear boundaries between activities. Artistic production, writing, and teaching are not discrete domains but intersecting modalities that continually inform one another, producing a practice in which distinctions between social roles and artistic media remain fluid and structurally interconnected.

In this respect, the exhibition ultimately exceeds the framework of a conventional retrospective by bringing into focus the introspective and philosophical dimensions of Araya's work. While many of the works remain deeply connected to social realities, the exhibition demonstrates that poetic, contemplative, and dreamlike modes of experience have long coexisted alongside these concerns. Rather than tracing a linear trajectory from social engagement toward introspection, it reveals the simultaneous presence of these different registers throughout Araya's oeuvre. Instead of resolving the tension between an awareness of the contemporary world and the desire to imagine alternative forms of relating to it, the exhibition allows this ambiguity to remain productive, suggesting that the interplay between external realities and inner experience lies at the heart of Araya's artistic inquiry. Through this openness, the exhibition highlights the continual negotiation between social engagement, reflection, and imagination that defines her work.

Sébastien Tayac
Chiang Mai University
sebastien.t@finearts.cmu.ac.th

Websites

• MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum by all(zone): https://www.allzonedesignall.com/project/maiiam.
• *The Bouquet and the Wreath: A Solo Exhibition by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook.* MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum: https://maiiam.com/en/exhibition/the-bouquet-and-the-wreath-a-solo-exhibition-by-araya-rasdjarmrearnsook (accessed 17 July 2026).

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