

A Puzzlement Nathan Beard

A Puzzlement is an exhibition of new work by Boorloo (Perth) based Australian-Thai artist Nathan Beard.

Presenting sculpture, installation, photography, and video, *A Puzzlement* is the culmination of a period of research, studying objects with Thai provenance in the collections and archives of the British Museum, Kew Gardens, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The exhibition's title is an explicit reference to a song from the Broadway musical and Hollywood film, *The King and I* – a famously fictionalised account of an English governess in King Mongkut's royal court (1851–68), which has greatly influenced the 'image' of Thailand in Western cultural imagination.

On its North American release in 1956, the musical film *The King and I* became an instant box-office and critical hit, receiving numerous Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations including one for ‘Best Film Promoting International Understanding’.¹ Loosely inspired by the fictionalised diaries of a British governess at the court of Siam (now Thailand), this film remains officially banned in Thailand for its exoticising, denigrating portrayal of the monarch.² Yet such is its enduring influence and popularity with Western audiences that, to this day, the Thai monarch continues to be associated with King Mongkut as played by Russian-born actor Yul Brynner.

The King and I’s highly dramatised, orientalist vision of Siam and its complicated history of reception is a source of inspiration for Nathan Beard’s new work. Situated somewhere between Hollywood-made myth, propaganda, and advertising, Beard lets it stand as a signifier through which to explore a central provocation, ‘what is Thainess?’

In the six months leading up to this exhibition, Beard spent time researching the collections and archives of British colonial institutions with a focus on objects of Thai provenance collected or acquired from the mid-19th to early 20th century, a time that coincides with King Mongkut’s reign. This period also represents a time of strategic reform and modernisation in Thailand, as the kingdom sought to

defend its sovereignty against Europe's active expansion within South-East Asia. In 'A Puzzlement', the musical number from the Hollywood film, King Mongkut reflects on this very dilemma as the monarchy, threatened by British colonialism and exposed to foreign influence, grapples with the choice between tradition and modernisation, 'old' and 'new' Siam.

In *A Puzzlement*, Beard presents us with a set of investigations into the museological archive, and the evolving associations, meanings, and values that things accrue. In a series of five near-collapsing sculptures, Beard toys with objects and archives to displace the stillness of the museum into a lively and melodramatic scene. Spread throughout gallery, their curving and tangled base forms reference the fray of the cartoon fight. On top, a range of objects balance precariously, as though thrown into the air by some kind of force. Replicas of Thai objects held in the archive of the British Museum appear alongside figures featured in Wat Buddhapadipa (the Thai Buddhist temple in Wimbledon), his mother's Buddhist shrine statues from Thailand, and Thai-costumed fast-food figurines from Beard's own family's collection of trinkets, including a Muay Thai Snoopy and Tweety Bird dressed as a Thai dancer.

Some objects have missing features, cracks, and other visible markers of age and use. Others, through a process of 'yassification', have enhanced proportions, forms, and

features.³ All the objects are rendered at a similar scale, in the same gold chrome finish. Beard's playful, sweeping treatment of different objects and influences attacks and collapses long-held hierarchies and binaries of taste and value – between high and low, historical and sentimental, fine art and ornament – to allow for new and different meanings to emerge.

Montage, collage, and other forms of juxtaposition continue across the exhibition. In an installation of four enlarged composite photographs, Beard draws from ethnographic and botanical collections as well as promotional imagery from different productions of *The King and I*. The photo's subjects, as pointed to in their titles, include A.F.G. Kerr, an Irish medical doctor-turned botanist known as the 'founding father' of Thai botany; and the teenage Prince Chulalongkorn, son of King Mongkut, captured by the Scottish travel photographer John Thompson in one of the first images of the Siamese court taken by a Westerner. Also featured is a film production still of King Mongkut and a Broadway playbill portrait of his chief wife Lady Thiang, played by Yul Brynner and Terry Saunders, respectively. Surrounded by fragmented Buddhist statues and fields of orchids, among other recurring motifs that have appeared throughout Beard's work, their faces are masked with ombré patterned blue, red, and purple glass crystals. The specific Swarovski colour shades each contain Siam in their name; an antiquated term for Thailand that has

become idealised and commodified for Western consumption to suggest exotic beauty.

Playing across the exhibition we witness a material flirtation, too. Deep reds and shimmering golds evoke the sumptuous materials of Thailand's richly decorated Buddhist temples and shrines. At one end of the gallery a hand-painted wallpaper features a repetitive lattice pattern and flower motifs painted in gold lines on blue in direct reference to a wall painting seen in a shrine in Nakhon Nayok, the home province of the artist's mother. The particular shades of reds and blues employed in *A Puzzlement* are not incidental but have been selected by Beard based on their colour palettes' Thai namesakes, including 'Siam Red' nail varnish by luxury fashion house Gucci (since discontinued), and 'Thai Sapphire' by the British paint manufacture Little Greene (currently available as part of their 'Colours of England' range).

In a new video work, Beard makes use of found footage and imagery from a range of archival sources, TV and film productions that have staged and constructed the 'image' of Thailand. *The King and I* (1956) features, as do early 20th-century photographs taken by A.F.G. Kerr on his tours of Thailand and now held in the archives of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. Beard's own footage of Nakhon Nayok, shot over the last decade, appears alongside Todd Phillips' *The Hangover Part 2* (2011), Danny Boyle's *The Beach* (2000) and

Jonathan Kaplan's *Brokedown Palace* (1999). Loosely inspired by the opening credits of *Eyewitness*, a 90s BBC nature and science TV series that took place in an imagined CGI science museum, in Beard's version, objects and imagery from both fictional and documentary sources, and representing widely different historical periods, appear onscreen one after another in a hypnotic form of time travel. An original score by Mei Saraswati combines a range of sonic references from both internet and personal sources, acting as a musical guide to the variety of clips that blend together into a composite portrait of Thailand.

Drawing on his dual Australian-Thai identity, Beard's ongoing project of research, appropriation, and quotation of cultural images and objects is driven by a desire to disturb and instil movement and a fluidity in concepts that are often perceived as fixed. In answer to the question, 'what is Thainess?', Beard reveals a complicated, ever-expanding web of relations. Culture does not sit in and of itself, apart from other things – but is porous and precarious, shifting according to the particularities (and peculiarities) of time and place.

1 Palita Chunsangchan, 'The Making of the Cold War Alliance: Hollywood as an American Diplomat and Thailand's Ban of *The King and I* (1956),' *Asia Film*

Archive, 21 July 2022, <https://www.asianfilmarchive.org/the-making-of-the-cold-war-alliance-hollywood-as-an-american-diplomat-and-thailands-ban-of-the-king-and-i-1956/>

- 2 The genealogy of *The King and I* is long-winded. The Hollywood film was based on the 1951 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical play, *The King and I*, itself loosely based on Margaret Landon's *Anna and the King of Siam* (New York: Harper and Row, 1943), which in turn drew on the fictionalised diaries of Anna Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1870 and 1989) and *Siamese Harem Life* (originally published in 1872 as *Romance of the Harem*), (London: Arthur Barker Ltd, 1873).

- 3 To 'yassify' something is to heavily edit the original image with multiple filters until it is airbrushed and 'unrecognisably made up'.
Shane O'Neill, 'What Does It Mean to "Yassify" Anything?', *The New York Times*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/24/style/yassify-bot-meme.html?smid=url-share>

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