



TANG CHANG

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IS PAINTED

WITH POETRY IS

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MAY 8 TO AUGUST 5, 2018



TANG CHANG
ABSTRACTING THE LINE
RETRIEVING THE IMAGE

ORIANNA CACCHIONE

Do you know what's so excellent about that singular moment of *ekaggata*? I am freed of the great artists, whether Western or Eastern. I forget even the noise of the roaming ice cream peddler who comes by every day. I forget even the contact of my own two feet on the ground, because I feel so profoundly rooted.¹

Police come vendor runs run run run
Run run run run run run run run
Run run run run run run run run
Run run run run run run run run²

Tang Chang (1934–1990) was one of the first abstract painters to work in Thailand.³ Self-trained, his earliest works were realistic portraits, drawn in charcoal, of the Thai monarchy and commoners. Then, in 1958, came an intractable change in his practice: he began to reject figurative images in order to experiment with abstraction. The earliest of these works, an untitled canvas (fig. 1), depicts a cityscape in



Fig. 1 *Untitled*, 1958, oil on canvas, 44 ⁹/₁₀ × 28 ³/₄ in (114 × 73 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.
opposite: Tang Chang with a selection of paintings originally installed in his house around 1970.

short, obsessively repeated lines, the outlined buildings towering on top of each other. The ground behind them is covered in abstract strokes of red, yellow, and black. Within two years of making this work, his style would loosen and become fully nonrepresentational. He relinquished the control of brushes and instead relied on his hands, fingers, and arms to make sprawling, curving lines on the canvas. The resulting works are at once gestural and calligraphic. He relied heavily on his practice of Buddhist meditation for their production. He paced around his canvases, meditating as he mixed the paint, until he reached a point of single-minded concentration, *ekaggata*. At this moment, everything surrounding him slipped away—the weight of the histories of art in Thailand, as well as those in the East and the West, even the noise of the ice cream vendors on the street. One of the first of these paintings, *Untitled* (1960, fig. 2), captures the explosive force of his actions—wide, muddied marks of black paint trailed by thin, circling lines made with his fingers. The clawed imprints are visible on the painting's verso.

Chang was also a poet, and is considered the founder of a new style of Thai poetry, one that eschewed erudite prose in favor of a simple vernacular. As opposed to his paintings, the poems are composed, methodical, exacting, and directly pinned to the world around him—the fields outside his house, daily life, society, people, the government, vendors on the street running from the police (fig. 3). Repeated words form different patterns and shapes on the page in what are aptly described as “poem-drawings.” In 1968, he published his first book of poetry (fig. 4); words repeat over and over again into lines, the lines into blocks. Others employ specific and planned spacing between each word, creating rhythms and images on the page. Despite the typed conformity and



Fig. 2 *Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, $36\frac{2}{5} \times 78\frac{3}{10}$ in (92.5×199 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

rule, Chang's earliest poems were most often written on small sheets of paper, capturing moments in time. As his practice developed, these blocks of text began to take on more elaborate shapes. Far from abstract, the orderly poems portray in graphic imagery rapid changes within Thai society.

Despite the apparent contrast between the composed imagery of his poetry and the meditative action of his paintings, Chang linked the two mediums in his writings and interviews. He professed to not knowing what poetry was until a friend told him his repetitive writing was poetry.⁴ Yet in his journals he observed: “The painting that is painted with poetry is profoundly beautiful!”⁵ Later he displayed them side by side in a small private museum he founded in his house in the 1980s. These seemingly divergent practices converged in Chang's prolific drawings and works on paper, and led to his most radical innovations in style and his discovery of the slippages between different art forms. Beginning in 1958, Chang drew daily, making thousands of frenetic sketches. His earliest works on paper were fully abstract and predate his gestural “action” canvases by two years. Other drawings demonstrate his obsessive energy, repeating small gestures in space to make larger shapes and patterns, a method that would eventually characterize his poems.

Yet all three of Chang’s practices—painting, poetry, and drawing—use his study of Buddhism and Chinese philosophy (he was the son of Chinese immigrants) to respond to the swift modernization of Thailand that occurred throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As these different art forms overlapped and informed each other, he simultaneously abstracted the calligraphic line through intense, energetic gestures and recuperated it into poetic form; in turn, gestural actions became images, and images drifted into abstractions. Chang’s works are not purely formal innovations; they are assertive statements against the orthodoxy of modern Thai art, contemporary Thai politics and societal change. This fluidity between line and image allowed him to develop one of the most unique and profoundly critical artistic voices of his generation of artists working in Thailand, not only distinguishing his practice from modern Thai art, but also finding resonance with international art movements—Abstract Expressionism, Gutai, and Concrete Poetry.

ACTION AND TEXT

In the late 1980s, Chang retrospectively explained that his gestural abstractions emanated from a form of Buddhist mediation. While he had little formal education beyond a few years at a temple school and no artistic training, he studied Buddhism throughout his life. He explained that his paintings arose from practicing *dhama*, the teachings of the Buddha:

I place a stretched canvas in front of me and begin meditating not through mindful breathing, but through the act of mixing paint. This activity cultivates mindfulness, cultivates wisdom, and cultivates concentration. In this mindfulness, I forget everything . . . I let everything go, reaching a point of *ekaggata* (single-minded concentration).

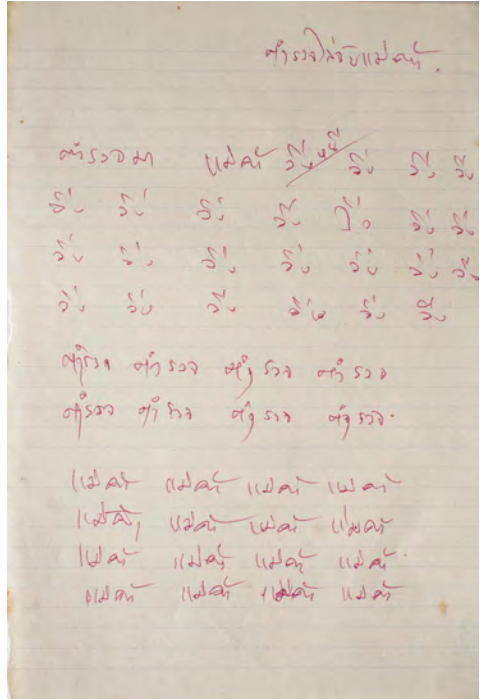


Fig. 3 “Police Chasing Vendor,” 1969, poem-drawing.
 Translation: ตำรวจมา Police come / แม้ค้าวิ่งหนี Vendor runs / วิ่ง Run / ตำรวจ Police / แม้ค้า Vendor

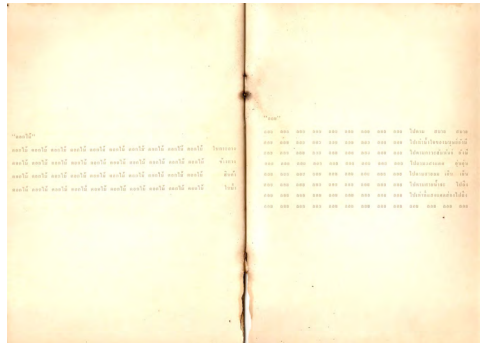


Fig. 4 Tang Chang’s first book of poetry, *The Black Cover Book*, published in 1968.

This point is the culmination, oneness. And it is here that I bring to bear my training in Chinese kung fu. This means that when I begin a work, I have strength and the power of wisdom. When I'm cultivating mindfulness, I'm gathering these things together. From many things, one thing is composed.⁶

In Chang's abstract works, the paint captures the oneness or *ekaggata* cultivated through his meditation. In *Untitled* (1965, plate 1), the blurred handprints and thick strokes of black paint made with his forearms index the energy and force of his expressive actions. By seeking *ekaggata* through painting, Chang actively withdrew from society and current norms of art making. This withdrawal would anticipate his eventual rejection of the status quo of the Bangkok art scene. Throughout the 1960s, Chang actively participated in gallery exhibitions, yet he refused to sell his abstract paintings. Later he organized exhibitions at his house, which allowed him to bypass the galleries' emphasis on the market and develop an alternative means of exhibiting his work; he cultivated a community of like-minded artists and poets instead of patrons. In both

his paintings and his later reclusiveness, he disavowed the institutions built to support modern Thai art. Instead Chang's artistic practice embodied the monastic tradition of Thai Forest Buddhism, where retreating to the forest in walking meditation became a critical denouncement of society and the mainstream practice of Buddhism in Thailand.⁷

At the same time, these abstract paintings allude to calligraphic writing; each of Chang's gestures can be seen as expanding the bodily movements made when tracing calligraphy into larger and larger scales, with ever-greater non-representational elements (see fig. 5). Indeed, even before Chang ventured into abstract painting, he experimented with abstraction with ink and pen on small sheets of paper, mimicking the fast, curved lines of calligraphic writing, in particular Chinese calligraphy (fig. 6). Chang could read Chinese literature and poetry, so well, in fact, that he translated multiple volumes of Chinese literature and philosophy into Thai. Yet, it is unclear if he could write Chinese characters. Despite the "Chinese-ness" of these works, the strokes captured on the loose-leaf pages are not actually characters; they only evoke



Fig. 5 *Untitled*, 1969, oil on canvas, 96 ⁹/₁₀ × 82 in (246 × 208 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

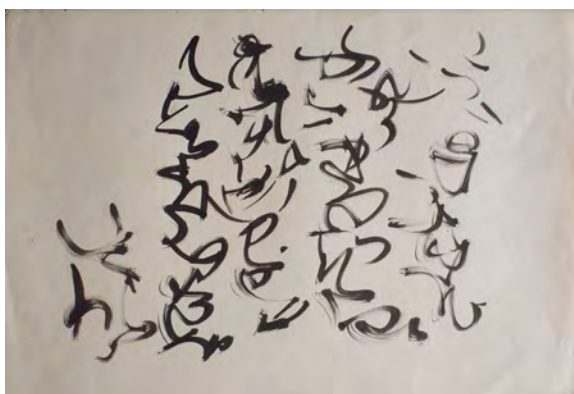


Fig. 6 *Untitled*, 1958, ink on paper, 10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ in (26.7 × 38.5 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

them. This evocation can also be seen as further connecting his work to critical practices in China, where calligraphy is variously used for poetry, prose, and political slogans. By evacuating any possible linguistic meaning from the character-like strokes, Chang transformed these lines into images on the page. In his later works on paper, he repeats similarly character-like lines and strokes on the page (plates 2, 3 and 4), depicting rows of fragmented and grouped strokes that were created with the same meditative practice he used in his paintings. Many of the lines pull back into orderly rows (see plate 4). These small connected strokes resonate with the structure of his poems and imitate transitional paintings he made as he moved away from the gestural abstract style he had become known for in the 1960s (see fig. 7 and plate 5).

STROKE AND IMAGE

In many of Chang's earliest works on paper, he experimented with how to use repeated strokes to make shapes on the page, which would become a distinguishing characteristic of his poetry in the late 1960s. He rendered small, roughly closed circles into dense fields and patterns (see fig. 8). Within a single work, he might experiment with how to combine different types of exacting, controlled lines and strokes into distinct planes or fields. In *Untitled* (1960, plate 6) the strokes are individuated into small, curved lines and pointed, tight marks that allude to both Thai script and Chinese characters.⁸ They are arranged into orderly rows and columns or rounded fields that dissipate or darken. In other works, for example *Untitled* (1960, plate 7), the strokes are looser, and converge into free-form scribbled lines that likewise cover indistinct planes. Eventually the lines would coalesce into simple words written in Thai, often the word for person, *khon* (see



Fig. 7 *Untitled*, 1969, oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 40 1/2 in (98 x 103 cm). Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, through prior purchase of the Mary and Leigh Block Fund, 2017.259.

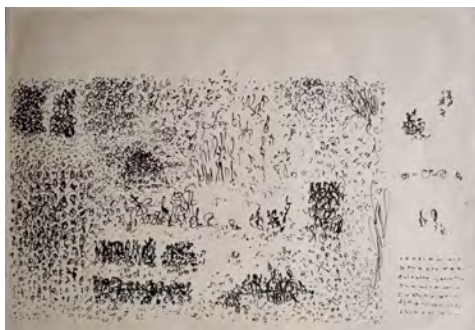


Fig. 8 *Untitled*, 1960, ink on paper, 10 1/2 x 15 3/16 in (26.5 x 38.5 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

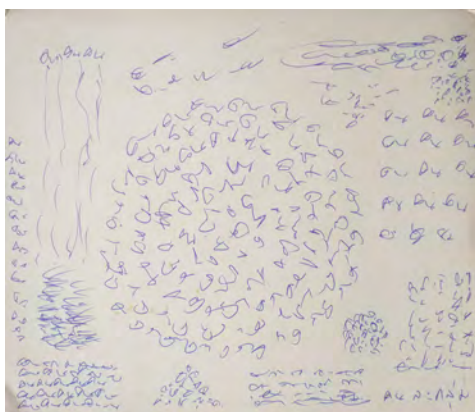


Fig. 9 "Different Groups of People," undated, poem-drawing. Translation: คน Person

fig. 9), becoming poetry. In his poem-drawings, words and lines are translated into figurative images, recuperating representational forms into his practice.

Chang’s poems became highly politicized, cynical reflections on changes in Thai society as the country rapidly modernized under the military rule of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkram. Beginning in 1969, Chang would repeat the Thai word, *kha*—“kill”—over and over again (plate 8). In other poems (fig. 10), blocks of people (*khon*) would kill (*kha*) other blocks of people. Other poems sought to make sense of the political system in Thailand (plate 9). Still others reflected on class distinctions, identifying poverty amongst the frenzied economic development and emerging middle class that characterized the era (fig. 11). These poems were repetitive, made year after year, a

constant reminder of the inhumanity of society and abuses of power.

Chang’s poetry is closely intertwined with his practice of Buddhism in that, when read, the poems become chants or incantations. For example, in the poem “Different Groups of People” (fig. 9) he wrote the Thai word *khon* (person, individual) into different squares and circles on the page. When read aloud, the seemingly endless repetition of a single syllable becomes a chant, suggesting a meditative state—*khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon, khon*—folding Chang’s practice back into the abstract. Writing thus becomes a site of transcendence, overcoming the political reality of daily life. In Chang’s practice, the process as opposed to the finished object opened a space

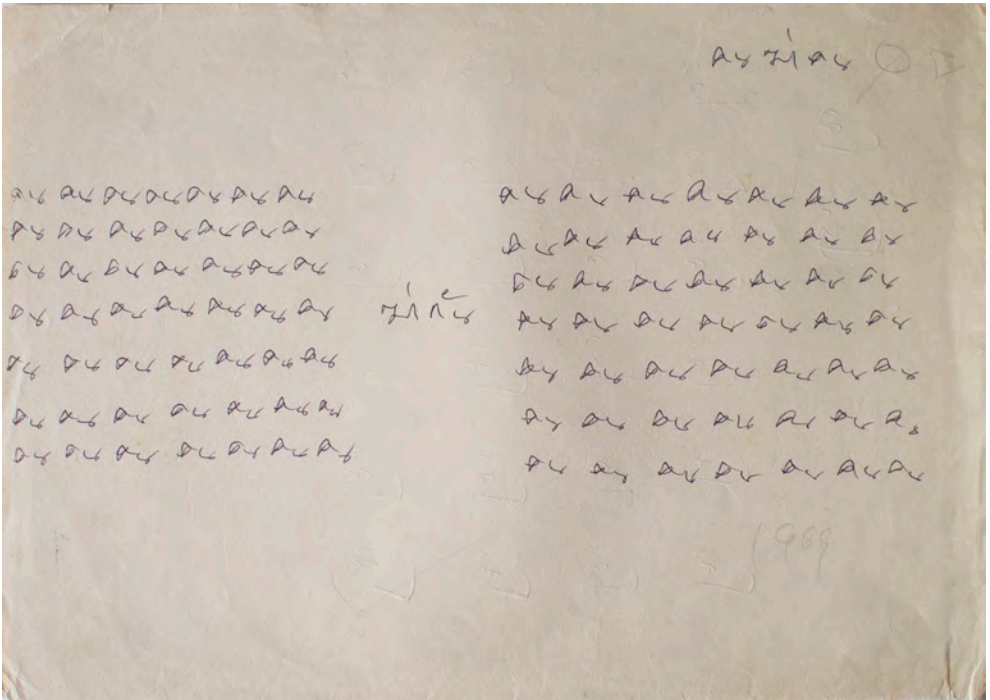


Fig. 10 “Person Killing Person,” 1969, poem-drawing. Translation: คน Person / ฆ่ากัน Kill each other / คน Person

to address daily trauma. As a result he used both practices—painting and poetry—to respond in different ways to the political conditions in Thailand.

In 1973 Chang temporarily stopped painting following the violent suppression of the Thai student movement. One of the last works he made before this period, *Untitled* (sometimes called *14 October, 1973*, fig. 12), is a self-portrait. He sits on a stool, his eyes blinded and hands cut off. Strokes of paint evoking his character-like drawings drip like blood in the background. He made this painting after one of his sons went missing during the events of October 14, 1973, when the government violently suppressed student and farmer protesters who demanded a new constitution be written and ratified. At least 77 protesters were killed and more than 850 were injured. One of Chang's sons was caught up in the protests, arrested, and released after seven days. Chang later recounted that the painting depicts his sense of helplessness and blindness, not knowing what happened to his son.⁹

In the years immediately following this event, Chang retreated from painting and also from writing his poem-drawings. During this time, he focused entirely on writing pages of free verse poetry and translating Chinese texts into Thai.¹⁰ One of these books was Lu Xun's *Story of Ah-Q*, a political rallying cry written in vernacular Chinese in the turbulent 1920s. When Chang resumed painting, the works became more representational—landscapes and self-portraits. His works on paper then began manifesting broader, darker black strokes, made with the same energetic fury he used for his early paintings (see plates 10 and 11). For these sketches, he worked quickly with a broad brush, making frenzied strokes that often fell off the edges of the paper. His son or wife would stand nearby, ready to whisk the page away once

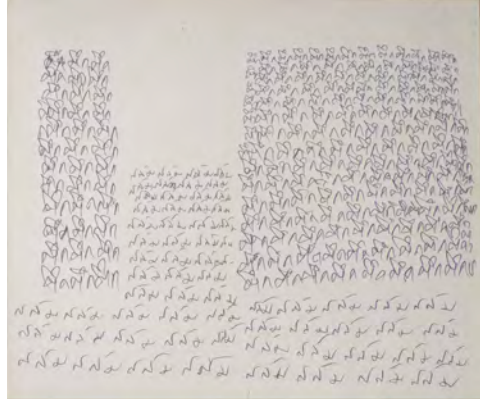


Fig. 11 "Untitled," undated, poem-drawing.
Translation: ตึก Building / สลัม Slum

he finished so he could continue without interruption. The next day, he would review his output and burn the sheets he didn't like.¹¹

CODA

Chang adamantly remained on the fringes of Thai art and its attendant institutions, even if by the late 1960s, he was a fixture in the booming Bangkok art scene. His paintings stood out against the orthodoxy of modern art in Thailand and, in particular, the dominance of a single art school, Silpakorn University.¹² Exhibitions in Bangkok overwhelmingly showed works by Silpakorn faculty and alumni.¹³ Despite several invitations to lecture at Silpakorn, he remained outside Thailand's formal academic system.¹⁴ He was never named a "national artist" by the Culture Ministry, a designation that would have brought with it a monthly pension and a provision for funerary biography.¹⁵ Once he began working in abstraction, he did not even sell his paintings or drawings; he claimed his practice was "therapeutic," not "for financial gain."¹⁶ He did not participate in the National Exhibitions because he didn't think his work would be accepted; instead, he organized his own



Fig. 12 *Untitled (14 October)*, 1973, oil on canvas, 80 ⁷/₈ × 96 ²/₅ in (205 × 245 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.



Fig. 13 Image of Tang Chang outside of his house and private museum, Poet Tang Chang's Institute of Modern Art, 1985.

exhibitions at his house (fig. 13), inviting friends, artists, and poets to attend.

Despite his perennial outsider status, Chang's practice developed synchronously with modern and contemporary art in Thailand. In the 1960s, artists throughout Thailand began experimenting with abstraction. However, Chang's paintings were visually distinct from the works of more mainstream artists. The abstract paintings made by other artists were more controlled, composed, and geometric compared to Chang's canvases. Chang's paintings further stood against new trends in modern Thai art, which attempted to modernize or abstract Buddhist iconography. Buddhism underpinned the method of Chang's practice, as opposed to its content. His retreat in the 1970s in response to political events similarly paralleled the general suppression of the vibrant 1960s gallery and exhibition scene in Bangkok. David Teh, one of the few scholars to study Chang's work, explains that its significance lies not in its contribution to the development of modern art in Thailand, but rather in its contemporaneity with international art movements.¹⁷

While Chang's work was outside of the mainstream of modern Thai art, both his painting and poetry resonated with contemporaneous styles of art around the world.¹⁸ Frequently referred to as "action paintings,"¹⁹ Chang's paintings captured his frenetic energy and more closely resonated with the concurrent development of gestural abstraction in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Most often, his paintings are compared to American Abstract Expressionism and Japanese Gutai. Yet there is no evidence that Chang had any knowledge of these international art movements. Likewise, even though his poem-drawings have a visual affinity with the Concrete Poetry that developed in Latin

America in the 1950s, Chang had not seen examples of those practices either.

Chang didn't seem concerned to connect to or participate in international art movements; he self-consciously positioned himself on the outside, the margins, both in Thailand and abroad. Speaking of his practice, he explained: "No matter what great artists exist out there, I pay no heed. Because I forget, because I let everything go . . . I am freed from the great artists, whether Western or Eastern."²⁰ However, his lifelong interest in Chinese literature and philosophy betrays another kind of cosmopolitanism that impacted his practice. Focusing on his Sino-Thai transnational connection suggests the existence of alternative paths of circulation that informed the development of abstraction globally, which are far different from the well-trod narratives of gestural abstraction emanating from the United States and Europe to the rest of the world.

Tracing alternative creative sources for Chang's abstractions and poetry, which have such apparent affinities to international art forms, evidences the importance of making new connections and resonances beyond the clichéd terms of center and periphery. Despite his work's resemblance to American Abstract Expressionism and Japanese Gutai, Chang's painting and poetry suggest entirely different routes of exchange—for instance, the dissemination of Buddhism from India through East and Southeast Asia, or Middle Eastern calligraphic abstraction. Such alternative routes can reveal new points of comparison and paths of divergence, new constellations of art practices that have little to do with the unidirectionality of the international development of abstraction that currently dominates art historical narratives. These new connections begin to form the foundation of an alternative history of abstraction.



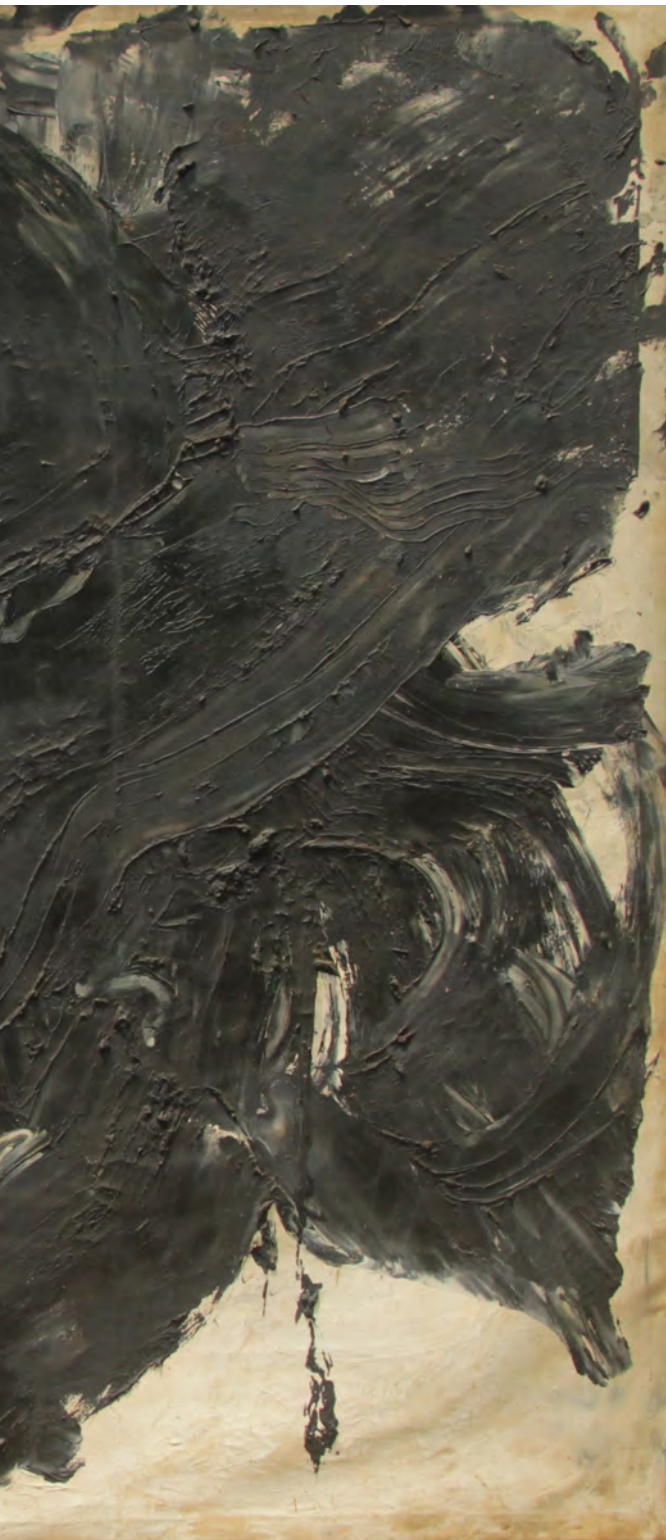


Plate 1 *Untitled*, 1965, oil on canvas,
83 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 94 $\frac{1}{2}$ in (212.5 × 240 cm).
Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago,
Gift of Thip Sae-tang, 2017.260.





opposite

Plate 2 *Untitled*, 1971, ink on paper,
 10 ⁷/₈ × 12 ⁷/₈ in (27.7 × 32.7 cm).
 Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

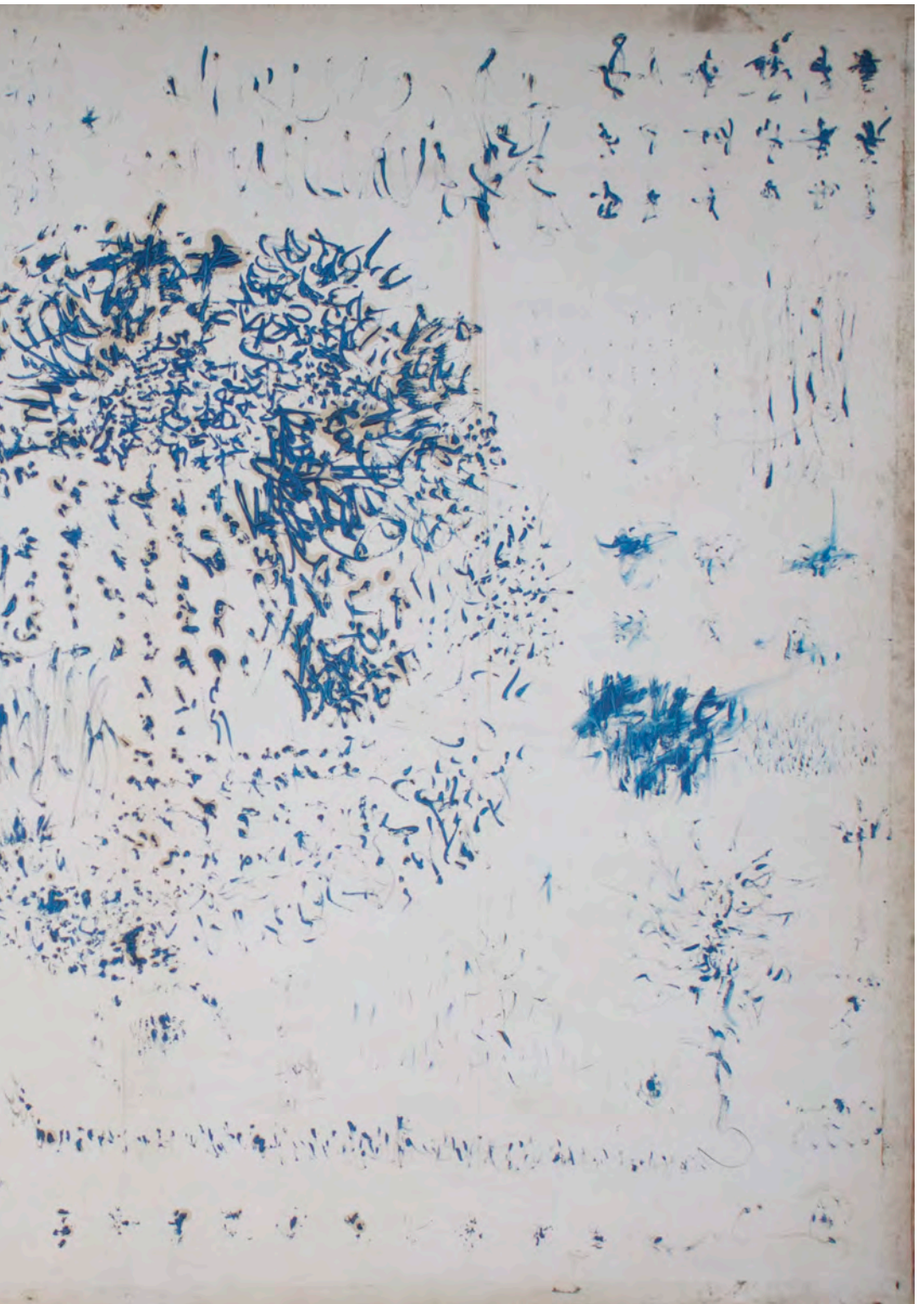
Plate 3 *Untitled*, 1971, ink on paper,
 10 ⁷/₈ × 12 ⁷/₈ in (27.7 × 32.7 cm).
 Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

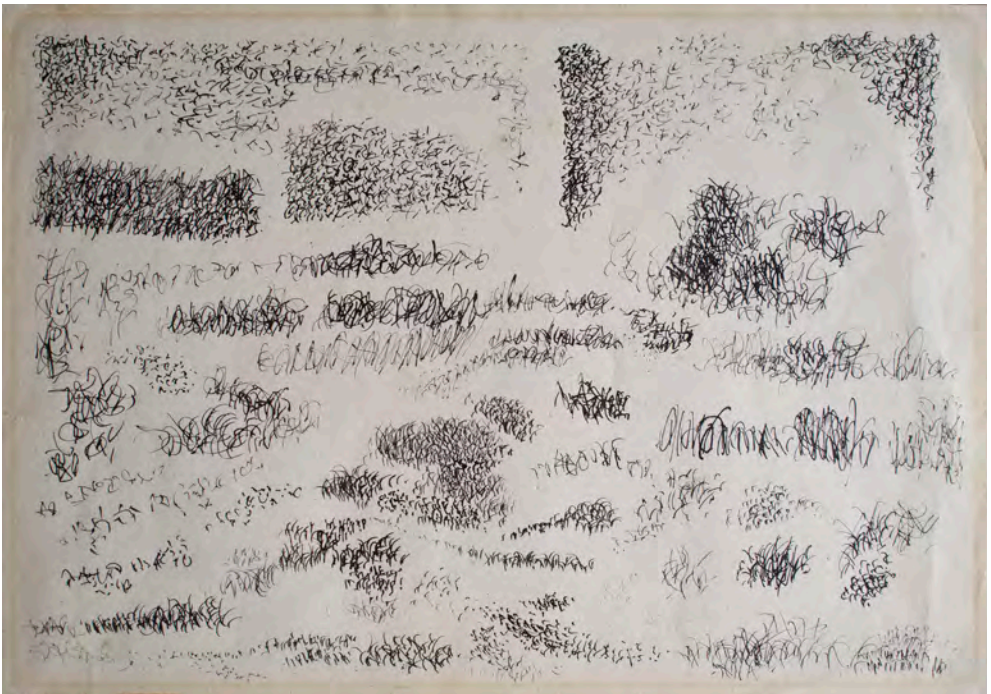
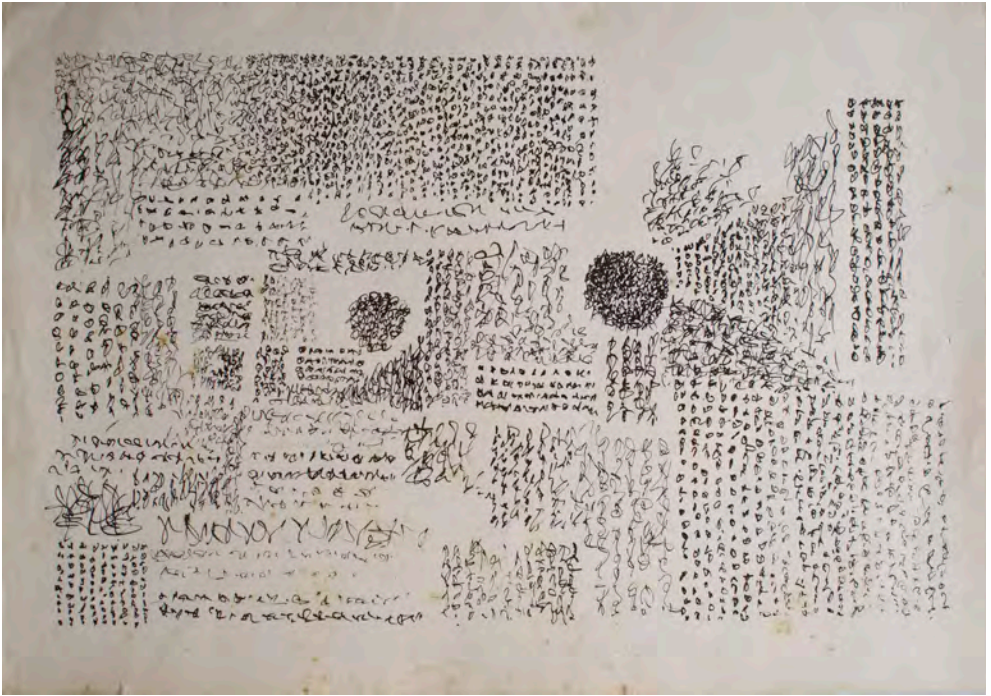
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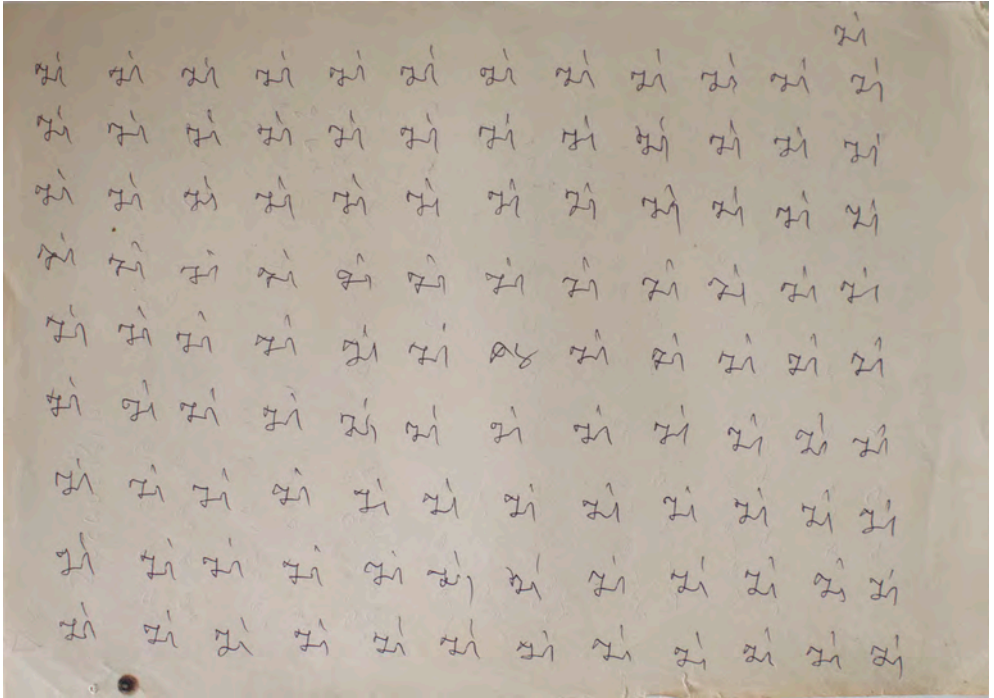
Plate 4 *Untitled*, 1971, ink on paper,
 10 ⁷/₈ × 12 ⁷/₈ in (27.7 × 32.7 cm).
 Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

Plate 5 *Untitled*, c. 1975, oil on canvas,
81 7/8 × 96 7/16 in (208 × 245 cm).
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.









opposite

Plate 6 Untitled, 1960, ink on paper, 10 1/2 x 15 3/16 in (26.7 x 38.5 cm).
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

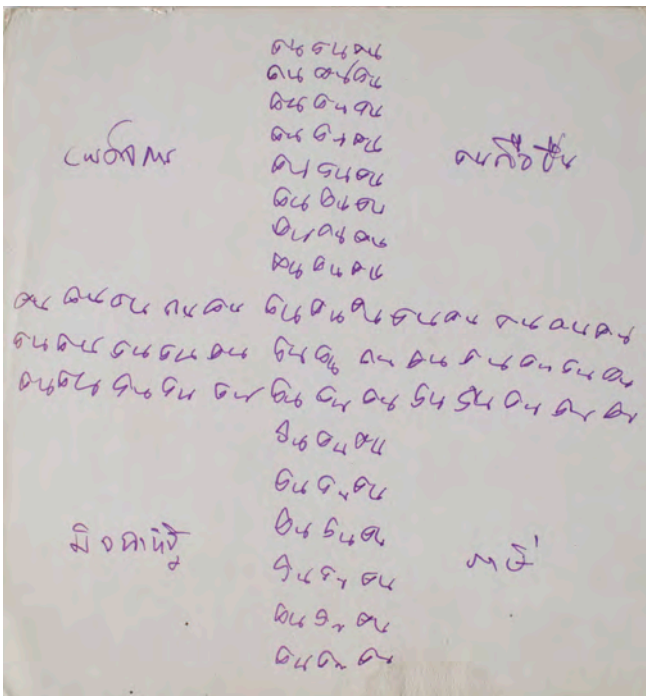


Plate 7 Untitled, 1960, ink on paper, 10 1/2 x 15 3/16 in (26.7 x 38.5 cm).
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

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Plate 8 "Killing," 1969, poem-drawing.
Translation: **ฆ่า** Kill / **คน** Person

Plate 9 "Untitled," undated, poem-drawing.
Translation: **เผด็จการ** Dictatorship / **คนถือปืน** Person holding a gun / **มโนทัศน์** Mistaken notion / **ภาษี** Tax

Plate 10 *Untitled*, 1971, ink on paper,
10 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 12 $\frac{7}{8}$ in (27.7 × 32.7 cm).
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.



Plate 11 *Untitled*, 1971, ink on paper,
10 ⁹/₁₆ × 15 ¹/₄ in (26.8 × 38.8 cm).
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.



Plate 12 *Untitled*, 1965, oil on canvas,
38 ³/₈ × 77 ¹⁵/₁₆ in (97.5 × 198 cm).
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.





TANG CHANG CHRONOLOGY

1932 The Siamese Revolution ends 700 years of absolute monarchy. A constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system is introduced.

1933 Under Thailand's national Department of Fine Arts, the School of Fine Arts is founded in Bangkok by Corrado Feroci (he later adopted the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri). In 1943, the school's name will change to Silpakorn University.

1934 Tang Chang is born to an ethnically Chinese family in Bangkok.

1937 In an attempt to promote art appreciation in Thailand, the first Constitution Fair art exhibition is held at Saranrom Palace in Bangkok. These annual exhibitions became important national cultural events.

1938 Military defense minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram becomes Prime Minister of Siam. Phibunsongkhram was an admirer of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, and his regime implemented fascist nationalist policies.

1939 As a nationalist exercise, Siam changes its name to Thailand, meaning "Land of the Free." Thailand was the only country in Southeast Asia that had not been colonized. World War II (1939–1945) begins.

1941 In December, Japanese forces land on the coast of Thailand, allowing Imperial Japan to advance towards British-controlled Malay Peninsula, Singapore, and Burma. Thailand joins the Axis powers of World War II.

1942 Thailand officially declares war on the United States and United Kingdom.

1946 King Ananda Mahidol is assassinated, plunging upper levels of government and the monarchy into chaos.

1947 A military coup led by Plaek Phibunsongkhram, who had been ousted from power in 1944 as Japan's defeat in World War II seemed imminent, overthrows the sitting prime minister. The military seizes and holds power until 1973.

1958 Chang makes his earliest abstract paintings. Within two years, he would stop using paintbrushes in favor of using his hands and arms to make abstract "action" paintings that are both gestural and calligraphic.

1960 Chang exhibits his work in *The Thai-Chinese Art Exhibition of Thailand* in Bangkok. Thinking his submissions would be rejected, he refuses to submit works to the National Exhibition of Art.

Dictatorships under Field Marshals Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn lead Bangkok to modernize quickly. Access to universities is expanded for the rising Thai middle class.

1962 Silpa Bhirasri dies, resulting in small changes to the curriculum at Silpakorn University. Before his death, Bhirasri supported the *Young Artists Exhibition* at the Bangkok Art Center, the first non-profit art gallery to open in the city. This exhibition ushers in a new group of young artists who experiment with different forms of abstraction.

1965 The Thai government allows the United States to establish military bases during the Vietnam War

(1955–1975). Thailand subsequently experiences a major economic stimulus and an influx of western culture at all levels of society.

1966 Chang is invited to exhibit his works at the *Contemporary Artists Invitational Show* at Pathumwan Art Gallery in Bangkok, which is billed as the first contemporary art exhibition organized by leading artists in Thailand.

1967 Chang's works are shown in international exhibitions in Singapore and Malaysia, marking the first and only instances his works are exhibited internationally until the 1995 Japan Foundation survey *Asian Modernism*, which toured to Manila and Jakarta.

1968 Chang's interest in creative writing grows even though he knows little about poetry. He self-publishes *Black Cover Book*, a small collection of his own experimental poems that strays from the standard literary styles in Bangkok.

1969 Chang begins to hold exhibitions at his own home. The first show is titled *Tang Chang and Children's Art Exhibition*, while a second exhibition in 1970 would focus specifically on his own paintings and poetry.

1970 An exhibition titled *An Introduction to Tang Chang Poet Artist and Philosopher*, which included Chang's drawings, paintings, poetry, and philosophical writings, is presented at the United States Embassy in Bangkok.

1971 Chang is invited to participate in the scholarly International Congress of Orientalists, where

the Association of Thai Students in Canberra requests permission to publish his avant-garde writings and poetry.

Throughout the early 1970s, Thai peasants and farmers become increasingly frustrated with the lack of land opportunities following a reorganization of regional states. University students help to bring local protests to a national stage.

1973 In October, deadly clashes between student-led protesters and government forces in Bangkok bring about the fall of the military-led government. Elections are held but the resulting governments lack stability. The Bangkok art scene begins to see a new form of art that is aggressive and raw, confronting the horrors of recent violence.

Chang is unable to locate his son following violent political turmoil. He paints *Untitled (14 October)*, a self-portrait that depicts the artist with his eyes plucked out and hands cut off, unable to see or paint the violence that he has witnessed.

1974 Chang withdraws from painting for many years, choosing instead to live in seclusion and to write free-form poems. His isolationist attitudes resonate with many of his contemporaries.

1975 Chang is appointed a member of the Committee on Fine Arts for the publication of an official cultural encyclopedia—a national project initiated by King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

1976 The Thai military stages another coup, regaining control of the government once again. In October, more clashes between

student protesters and military authorities in Bangkok lead to the Thammasat University massacre. Between 46 and 120 protesters are killed, while up to 200 are injured.

1980 Chang displays and recites his concrete poetry at Silpakorn University and Thammasat University. He begins to take frequent short-term teaching positions at a number of universities and returns to making expressionist canvases.

General Prem Tinsulanonda assumes power in Thailand. Throughout the 1980s, the national economy changes from one based on rice exports to export-oriented manufacturing.

1983 General Tinsulanonda gives up his military position and heads a civilian government. He is reelected in 1986.

1985 Chang opens a small museum at his home called the Poet Tang Chang's Institute of Modern Art. The "Institute" serves as an exhibition space and place for Chang's colleagues, friends, students, and art lovers to gather.

1989 While Thailand enjoys a period of relative stability, tumultuous events sweep the globe, including the Tiananmen Square massacre and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

1990 Tang Chang dies at the age of 56 of kidney failure.

1991 The first posthumous exhibition of Chang's work, titled *The Power of Truth*, is mounted in Bangkok.

The Thai military stages another coup, the nation's 17th since 1932.

TANG CHANG CHECKLIST

PAINTINGS

- 1** *White on White*, undated
Oil on canvas
36 ⁷/₁₆ × 31 ¹¹/₁₆ inches (92.5 × 80.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 2** *Untitled*, undated
Oil on canvas
44 ⁷/₈ × 38 ³/₈ inches (114 × 97.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 3** *Untitled*, undated
Oil on canvas
45 ¹/₁₆ × 39 inches (114.5 × 99 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 4** *Untitled*, c. 1963
Oil on canvas
70 ⁷/₈ × 78 ³/₈ inches (180 × 199 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 5** *Untitled*, 1965
Oil on canvas
83 ¹¹/₁₆ × 94 ¹/₂ inches (212.6 × 240 cm)
Collection of the Art Institute
of Chicago, Gift of Thip Sae-tang,
2017.260
- 6** *Untitled*, 1965
Oil on canvas
38 ³/₈ × 77 ¹⁵/₁₆ inches (97.5 × 198 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 7** *Untitled*, c. 1965
Oil on canvas
44 ¹¹/₁₆ × 38 ³/₈ inches
(113.5 × 97.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 8** *Untitled*, 1969
Oil on canvas
38 ¹/₂ × 40 ¹/₂ inches (97.8 × 102.9 cm)
Collection of the Art Institute
of Chicago, through prior purchase
of the Mary and Leigh Block Fund,
2017.259
- 9** *Untitled*, c. 1975
Oil on canvas
81 ⁷/₈ × 96 ⁷/₁₆ inches (208 × 245 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

WORKS ON PAPER

- 1** *Untitled*, 1958
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 2** *Untitled*, 1958
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 3** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 4** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 5** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 6** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 7** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 8** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 9** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 10** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 11** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang
- 12** *Untitled*, 1960
Ink on paper
10 ¹/₂ × 15 ³/₁₆ inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)
Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

13 *Untitled*, 1960

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

14 *Untitled*, 1960

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

15 *Untitled*, 1961

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

16 *Untitled*, 1962

Ink on paper

14 13/16 × 20 7/8 inches (37.7 × 53 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

17 *Untitled*, 1962

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

18 *Untitled*, 1962

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

19 *Untitled*, 1962

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

20 *Untitled*, 1963

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

21 *Untitled*, 1963

Ink on paper

10 1/2 × 15 3/16 inches (26.7 × 38.5 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

22 *Untitled*, 1964

Ink on paper

10 5/8 × 15 5/16 inches (27 × 38.9 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

23 *Untitled*, 1966

Ink on paper

14 3/4 × 20 7/8 inches (37.5 × 53.1 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

24 *Untitled*, 1966

Ink on paper

14 15/16 × 21 inches (37.9 × 53.4 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

25 *Untitled*, 1967

Ink on paper

14 15/16 × 21 inches (37.9 × 53.4 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

26 *Untitled*, 1967

Ink on paper

23 1/16 × 29 15/16 inches (58.5 × 76 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

27 *Untitled*, 1967

Ink on paper

23 1/16 × 29 15/16 inches (58.5 × 76 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

28 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 9/16 × 15 1/4 inches (26.8 × 38.8 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

29 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

30 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

31 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

32 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

33 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

34 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

35 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

36 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 9/16 × 15 1/4 inches (26.8 × 38.8 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

37 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

38 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

39 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

40 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

41 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

42 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

43 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

44 *Untitled*, 1971

Ink on paper

10 7/8 × 12 7/8 inches (27.7 × 32.7 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

45 *Untitled*, 1972

Ink on paper

9 5/8 × 14 3/16 inches (24.5 × 36 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

46 *Untitled*, 1972

Ink on paper

9 5/8 × 14 3/16 inches (24.5 × 36 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

47 *Untitled*, 1972

Ink on paper

9 3/4 × 12 3/16 inches (24.7 × 31 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

48 *Untitled*, 1975

Ink on paper

15 3/8 × 17 5/16 inches (39 × 44 cm)

Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang

ESSAY NOTES

1 Video produced for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) exhibition, *Misfits*, 2017. The video includes excerpts from two TV documentaries: "Cheepajorn Long Tao," produced in the late 1980s by Studio 10 Co. Ltd. (Thailand) and "Pareuhat Sanjorn," produced in 1989 by Communication System Co. Ltd. (Thailand).

2 Excerpt from Chang's poem, "Police Chasing Vendor," (1969).

3 He is sometimes also called Chang Sae-tang. According to Thai tradition and academic style, I will refer to Tang Chang by his given name, Chang, as opposed to his family name, Tang (Sae-tang).

4 Video produced for HKW exhibition, *Misfits*.

5 Tang Chang, journal entry from 1971, translated by Mary Pansanga.

6 Video produced for HKW exhibition, *Misfits*.

7 For more information on the forest and Chang's practice, see Mary Pansanga, "Person Holding a Gun," *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 45 (Spring/Summer 2018).

8 Thai script is derived from the south Indian Pallava alphabet, and includes 44 consonant letters and 15 vowel symbols.

9 John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 152.

10 *Tao* (1973), a translation with introduction to and commentary of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching; Chinese Poetry* (1974), a translation with introduction and commentary of selected classical Chinese poems by various authors; *Ah Q: The Great Literature of Lu Xun* (1975), a translation of Lu Xun's 1922 novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, with illustrations by Chang's son.

11 Conversation with Tang Chang's son, Thip Sae-tang, Bangkok, February 3, 2018.

12 Founded in 1943 by an Italian sculptor, Corrado Feroci, who later changed his name to Silpa Bhirasri, Silpakorn University was Thailand's first art school and part of Thailand's larger national drive to modernize. Following Bhirasri's training, the school's early curriculum emphasized academic realism. The students typically went on to hold teaching positions at Silpakorn and sit on the juries of national art exhibitions and other competitions.

13 The art historian Apinan Poshyananda has identified two types of abstract art that they were developing in Thailand during the 1960s. One focused on abstracting forms observed in the natural world; another was based on pure abstraction, with no referents in life. In 1964, an important exhibition of twelve abstract painters was

held at the Tourist Organization of Thailand, and led to an essay published in *Bangkok World* magazine, which discussed abstract painting in Thailand and whether artists truly understood the style. See, Michael Smithies, "The Bangkok Art Scene in the Early 1960s: A Personal Souvenir," *Journal of the Siam Society*, 66, no. 2 (1978), pp. 146–158.

14 David Teh, "The Preternational," in *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 178. See also David Teh, "Travelling Without Moving: Historicising Thai Contemporary Art," *Third Text*, 26, no. 5 (September 2012), pp. 567–583.

15 "National Artist" is a title bestowed by the Culture Ministry. David Teh, "The Preternational," 178. See also, Clare Veal, "Chang sae Tang: The Material Conditions of the Archive," *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 297 (April 2017), pp. 22–27.

16 Steven Pettifor, "Tang Chang at Open Arts Space," *Asian Art News* (September–October 2001), 92.

17 David Teh, "The Preternational," 180.

18 Here, I am using Reiko Tomii's definition of "connections" and "resonances" to compare and discuss international art practices. Connections are "historically offered as actual interactions and other kinds of links," while resonances are "retrospectively acknowledged in the form of visual or conceptual similarities even where few or faint links existed." See Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 16.

19 Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 136.

20 Video produced for HKW exhibition, *Misfits*.

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Exhibition coordinator, Bangkok: Mary Pansanga
Exhibition design: Michael Raymond Klemchuk
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Cover Image

Untitled, c. 1963, detail, oil on canvas, 70 ⁷/₈ × 78 ³/₈ in
(180 × 199 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

Inside Cover Image

Untitled, 1971, detail, ink on paper, 10 ⁷/₈ × 12 ⁷/₈ in
(27.7 × 32.7 cm). Courtesy of Thip Sae-tang.

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Orianna Cacchione

