Rising out of the earth as time gone by turning into dust dispersal with the wind.

ชวัญจิรา จินดาณรง
Khwananchira Chindamanee
Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to the people who helped me make a dream come true—friends, mentors, cohort, family. I could not have done it alone and wish to share my profound gratitude.

Thai text appears throughout this thesis. Knowledge of Thai is not necessary to enjoy its full benefit. But if you do know Thai, good on you! Bilinguals and polyglots are cool.

อย่าไปบกับวิถีใหม่กับ
เพราะมันเป็นสิ่งสมบูรณ์
เพราะวิถีมันไม่มีอะไร
มันเป็นแห่ง
การเปลี่ยนแปลงของธรรมชาติ
จงทำหน้าที่ให้ได้โดยไม่มีความทุกข์
ให้สวยงามและเป็นประโยชน์
เพราะทุกสิ่งทุกอย่างเราต้อง
คืนให้กลับสู่ธรรมชาติตั้งเติม
แม้แต่ร่างกายที่เราสร้างขึ้น
-พุทธทาสภิกขุ
Abstract

I am an artist printmaker fascinated by the theme of impermanence as manifested through the cycle of birth, aging and death. Death is not the end of the cycle, however. Death begets transformation, via decay, of one form into another or perhaps others.

During my time at RISD, I received a scholarship to study Japanese paper making in Iowa. The experience was transformative for both my printing and soft sculpture. Later, I learned about mycelium, and began incorporating this living element into my work.

This thesis reflects on my primary source of artistic inspiration, the *hup taem* murals of rural Thailand. It reviews art I made while at RISD from 2021–2023, and previews my thesis project, *The Temple Is a Landscape* print installation that combines all these inspirations.
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Thesis Project
Introduction

Impermanence and transformation are the inevitable life forces that guide and inspire me.

Impermanence is the cycle of existence from birth to aging to death. Birth occurs when a being is realized. Aging comes with the passage of time and the inevitable decrepitude of the birthed form. Death results in the body’s decomposition. The corporeal body which once was transformed into new and varied forms of life. My understanding of the continual cycle of transformation is rooted in my Southeast Asian childhood. The Thai traditional way of life I grew up in is the foundation of my body and soul, both my material physical and ethereal spiritual self.

As I grow older and live life, I visualize my collective experiences as fine particles of dust, drifting downward, settling quietly. This helps me to clarify my thought process and leads me to new inspirations. Becoming American, the birth of my children, attending grad school—all are transformative experiences that lead to inspiration which is the foundation of new experiences.

For the past five years, my work has been inspired by hup taem murals. Hup taem (roughly meaning “painted picture”) is a vanishing style of temple mural found in the Isan region of northeast Thailand. Largely gone now, the remaining murals are at the end of their life cycle. The murals are inexorably deteriorating in the harsh tropical environment, the pictures fading, the stucco they are painted upon crumbling bit by bit off the temple walls onto the ground below to settle into piles of dust, eventually dispersed by wind and rain. In this way, most of the murals have already returned to the earth, incorporated now into something else.

My work does not strive to preserve extant hup taem murals. Given the inevitability of transformation, preservation is folly. My work strives to preserve the memory of hup taem, the conceptuality of hup taem. Indeed, it is the very decay and disrepair of the remaining murals which inform my creativity. Without the decay of hup taem, my work to continue the memory of hup taem would not exist.
การทดลองแสวงหาความไม่เท่าเทียมในแบบของเข้าพเจ้าเองที่แสดงออกในงานศิลปะของตัวเอง วัฏจักรแห่งชีวิต ตั้งแต่เกิด แก่ เสีย ไม่ได้มาจากช่วงเวลา 'a-ha' แต่อย่างใด แต่เป็นการสั่งสมกลั่นกรองและตกผลึกทางความคิดและประสบการณ์ตั้งแต่วัยเด็กของเราที่อยู่กับวัฒนธรรมเอเซียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้หรือวัฒนธรรมศิลปะที่เราได้รับมาด้านล่างสมัยอยู่ในร่างกายและจิตวิญญาณของเรา เราศึกษาประสบการณ์ของเราเป็นอนุภาคผืนละเอียดที่ลอยลงมาและตกผลึกอย่างเงียบ ๆ สิ่งนี้ทำให้เหมือนกับกระบวนการทางความคิดตกตะกอนตกผลึกที่ชัดเจนขึ้นและนำไปสู่แรงบันดาลใจใหม่ ๆ ดังนั้นเมื่อเราได้เรียนรู้ศิลปะเรื่องสุปัตติ (แปลคร่าว ๆ จากภาษาอีสานว่า "ภาพวาดหรือภาพเขียน") จิตรกรรมฝาผนังวัดในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทยที่กำลังจะหายไป ใกล้สิ้นสุดวงจรชีวิต จิตรกรรมฝาผนังจะเสื่อมสภาพ หลุดลอก และจากหายไป ตามกาลเวลาส่วนใหญ่กำลังจะกลับคืนสู่พื้นดินอย่างสมบูรณ์งานของเราเหมือนภาพสะท้อนทางความคิดเพื่อที่พยายามสร้างความทรงจำของสุปัตติ วิธีนี้เราเชื่อว่าอย่างน้อยจะช่วยสะกดใจให้คนที่ดูงานของเราเข้าใจความไม่เทียบของวัตถุเราเชื่อว่าการสร้างทฤษฎีและชื่อทฤษฎีของภาพจิตกรรมฝาผนังที่เหลืออยู่นั้นสามารถสร้างคัยภาพในการสร้างแรงบันดาลใจในการสร้างสรรค์สิ่งใหม่ ๆ
Regarding Hup Taem

For hundreds of years glamorous Buddhist temples in the large cities of Thailand have attracted the devout and the curious from around the globe. These temples, with their glittering architecture and astonishing murals created by skilled artisans in vibrant and expensive colors depict themes of religion, folklore, and mythology. These famous temples have always been sponsored by royalty and extremely rich patrons.

Wat Phra Kaew or Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok, Thailand

Rural areas far from the wealth and resources (and even excesses) of urban centers also have temples with murals, though on a much more modest scale. Out of thousands of rural temples, only about a dozen are host to a rare and rapidly vanishing mural form known as hup taem.

Found in the Isan region of Thailand, hup taem (from the local Isan language with the approximate meaning of “painted pictures”) murals are temple paintings created by untrained rural villagers in the early 20th century. Their hues are expressed in muted earth tones juxtaposed with vibrant indigo blue, colors from readily available dirt and plants. The murals document not only religion, folklore and mythology, but the day-to-day village life of Northeast Thailand in a visionary, narrative style. In other words, hup taem murals are conceptually similar to their urban counterparts, but the murals are expressed in a local vernacular, unconstrained by the edicts,
conventions or dictates of their urban cousins. These are the very traits which have resulted in their current state of neglect and decay.

Sim (Ordination halls) with *hup taem* mural. Photo: Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram

Although *hup taem* murals are found in Thailand, they represent a crossroads of cultural influence, specifically the meeting of Thai, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese cultures. These historical artifacts document a pre-modern lifestyle of which only traces remain. *Hup taem* murals are unique and beautiful, but largely unknown outside of the Isan region and are soon to vanish entirely because centralized temple art in big cities is prioritized for conservation.

My work at RISD is largely devoted to and inspired by the Sinxay and Nariphon stories as told by *hup team* murals. Sinxay is a mythical legend commonly depicted in Buddhist murals in the Isan region. It is the story of three boys who overcome a variety of challenges as they attempt to navigate life’s obstacles. (To give a sense of the scale of the epic Sinxay story, just imagine if I tried to summarize Homer’s *Odyssey* with the previous simple sentence.) Another legend is the story of Nariphon, a mythical fruit resembling young maidens. Nariphon was created by the god Indra to protect his wife and daughters from sexual predators living in the legendary forest of Himaphan. I am drawn to Nariphon as the fruit has a short life span. A week after the fruit forms, if it is not picked, it will drop to the ground, where it will rot and provide sustenance for other forms of life.
*Hup tame* mural from Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram depicting Nariphon.
*Hup tame* mural from Wat Photharam, Maha Sarakham depicting Nariphon.
Sinxay and his two brothers as depicted in restored hup taem mural.
Sinxay and Kinnaree depicted in restored *hup taem* mural. Sinxay explores the theme of overcoming conflict based on difference, as well as the Buddhist concept of the unity of life.

The series Inspired by *hup taem* Mural, Folklore and performing art The traditional beliefs, myths and tales came from northeast of Thailand.
2021 was the coldest winter of my life. I was in Iowa, studying with Professor Nicholas Cladis, a well-known expert in Japanese paper making. Prior to this course, to me paper was pretty much either the stuff that came out of a regular commercial printer or was a premium and expensive product on which I would print. But after this course, my attitude and approach towards paper radically expanded.

While in Iowa I learned paper had much more utility than just printing. Paper can be made as an art or utility form that people generally do not consider. I looked at many samples of paper, for example, garment cloth that is used in everyday life in Japan, Shoji screens whose sliding doors are paper walls and Fu-Go (ふ号兵器), a hydrogen-filled paper balloon the Japanese used during WWII to bomb the USA.

Now I don’t buy paper, I make the paper I use to print and make art. The potential of paper is endless—how expressive it can be! With my own handmade Kozo fiber paper, I crumple the sheets to suggest the progression of time. To show the process of aging, I show a variety of the transitions of paper. Elements can be added to the paper to change its properties, such as beeswax, persimmon and konnyaku (konjac) to size the paper to increase strength and to resist water. Experimenting with paper, I can create sculptures that look like they are made from clay.
I once overheard someone who came to see my piece saying, “Wow, this is made from Kozo paper? I thought it was a fabric.” Few people realize my sculpture is paper until they are told.

In the spirit of experimentation, I have been creating paper busts and infusing them with mycelium. Given the correct conditions, the mycelium causes the paper busts to erupt in a spectacular bloom of mushrooms. Mycelium is an agent of decay and transformation, renewal and decomposition. I have expanded my prints from two-dimensional wall hangings to three-dimensional sculptural objects. The transition from two dimensions to three has brought my prints off the wall and into a space, making for greater interactivity with the viewer.

Khwan Chindamanee, Dimagination of Nariphon falling and rotten (Dimension + Imagination = Dimagination), 2021, Installation: Silk screen, artist-made paper and pulp, felt, plant, copper.
Bird eye’s view Dimagination of Nariphon falling and rotten
IV & Life Cycle Series

Into the Womb  Aging  Funeral of Her
The Life Cycle series is comprised of three vignettes: *Into the Womb*, *Aging* and *Funeral of Her*. It presents a symbolic birth, aging and funeral of an ordinary human. Like the *hup taem* mural, it eschews obvious narrative. The viewer is rewarded by developing their own interpretations or translations of the vignette. As I work, ideas come to mind and I sketch as many images as I can, then select those that I feel communicate my subject matter the most.

**Into the Womb**

I imagine a stage of life as being inside a womb. I start to think of the seed-like shape of the emergent life, and I follow the seed line. Yet there are no beginnings or endings found in this work. The work can be viewed in any orientation because of the looping round and round of the line. The figures are all connected with the umbilical cord, floating weightless in the space of the womb-like circle. As I developed the image. I was thinking of the Ise katagami stencils cutting technique in Japan. In that art form, the images must be all connected to each other in order to make a stencil. This is appealing as a metaphor that all life is connected. Then I start to loop the lines together to become more Ise katagami like. The figures are tied together with the lines and core and start to sprout into being. This stage of being is the beginning of life.

**Aging**

As I was researching the *hup taem*, I noticed an old lady walking bare chested. I often see this scene depicted in temples in the Isan region in the similar style. I believe the artists were trying to show the way of life and remind us of the impermanence of all things. The female figure in this vignette is getting close to the end of her life, but she simultaneously expresses age and youth, and everything in between. Her foot is rooted in the earth, the place she will return to.
Hup taem mural from Wat Photharam, Maha Sarakham with an old women with walking sticks.
Funeral of Her

My depiction of the dead in my imagination comes from my personal experience and Thai culture. In Thai funeral ceremonies there is a gathering in which we come together for the last time to send the soul to the next place and time. In the funeral we wear the color black as the color of death. In my memories of funerals, we surround the dead body and give a last blessing by pouring water in one hand of the corpse. Sai Sin, a sacred thread blessed by monks, surrounds the body to offer blessings and good fortune in the next life. To the uninitiated eye, sai sin looks like a common string. However, this string is supercharged due to monks chanting over it. Sai sin is used in a variety of rites and is omnipresent in Thai culture. Used in weddings and funerals, given as tokens of friendship, worn to give protection from bad spirits, sai sin at its core represents good karma.

In this installation, I use thread to represent water dipping downward. The body is tied with sai sin and floats in space. We are all connected to those we love and to whom we are attached. The image depicted in Funeral of Her is also created in the Ise katagami stencil-style of printing. The insect iconography on the dead body’s wrap symbolizes the decomposition of the body.
Palimpsest and Parchment

“Palimpsest” is a noun which comes from the Greek meaning “scraped again.” The word refers to a writing surface that is used again after the earlier writing has been erased. This may seem a bit bizarre given our current days of ubiquitous paper, mobile devices, and even Etch A Sketch, but we take these innovations for granted, while not knowing or forgetting that not so long-ago finding surfaces to write on was difficult. Take parchment, for example. Before paper, humans used parchment. Parchment is animal hide and has been used for over two thousand years. Parchment was difficult to make, however, it could be recycled.

Using scanning devices, it is possible to discern the original words or images underneath the current writing on parchment. This connects to the life cycle concept, as an animal becomes parchment. The parchment holds a concept, is erased and new meaning is given. However, the scraping of the original image causes the parchment to disintegrate and turn to dust. The dust will transform into something else.

_Underneath the Skin_ is a video representing the cycle of life, utilizing the palimpsest concept. In the video, I printed the image from _Into the Womb_ on the parchment, then scraped the image off. Then I printed _Aging_ onto the parchment and scraped the image off. Next, I printed _Funeral of Her_ on the parchment, and scraped the image off. Then I started the cycle of printing and scraping again. And again. And again…

This repeating action is fast-forwarded on video. The viewer can watch the murals deteriorate, peel off, and fade away. There is little left except for piles of dust on the floor. The parchment has returned to the earth, like we all will.

The dust is collected into an urn and will be featured in my thesis installation. Naturally, this decay and composition refers to and is inspired by _hup taem_ murals.
Video capture 01 *Funeral of Her* printed-on parchment

Image of parchment installation with projection video and sound.
Video capture 02 scraping again

video capture 03 Nothing left of the image but dust
Scraping of the parchment at the 7th time.
Chasuble is a type of religious garment of a simple design existing in many different cultures. It is essentially a long piece of fabric with a hole for the head to pass through. The literal meaning of chasuble is “little house”. The garment is connected to the body in the form of a temple. I cut the bottom of the chasuble to signify decay and transformation. The way the chasuble is cut is reminiscent of sai sin, sacred Thai thread.

Khwan Chidamanee, Dimagination of Nariphon falling and rotten), 2022, Installation: Silk screen, artist-made Kozo paper.
VII ณ Mycelium, My Assistant

Experimentation of growing mushroom on the felt in artist studio, 2023
Soft sculpture made from artist-made Kozo fiber. Experimentation with the different sizing.
Artist-made Kozo paper busts sizing with persimmon stuff with mycelium to erupt in a spectacular bloom of mushrooms.
My Name is Fung: soft sculpture with mushrooms. Artist-made Kozo paper busts sized with konnyaku (konjac) stuffed with mycelium to erupt in a spectacular bloom of mushrooms.
Mycelium is a thread-like fungus that is ubiquitous beneath our feet and covers the planet. Mycelium provides nutrients for living plants and decomposes dead plants. It is the connection between life and death, an agent of transformation. When conditions are right, mycelium fruits into mushrooms. Mycelium is a potent symbol of the cycle of life, of the fact of impermanence. Mushrooms provide sustenance, but like Nariphon, they have a short lifespan. I incorporate mycelium into my art by forming soft sculptures made of my paper. After printing on the paper, I create hollow soft sculpture and fill the inside with mycelium to create conditions for fungal fruiting—living mushrooms—which ultimately results in the decay and transformation of the paper sculpture. This is transition in action.
The Temple Is a Landscape

Miniature mockup of thesis project

My thesis project is a sprawling synthesis combining many of the elements of previous works. Inspired by *hup taem* murals, incorporating printmaking, sculpture, paper, and mycelium, as well as both the vertical and the horizontal, *The Temple Is a Landscape* invites the viewer to immerse in the entire cycle of life. The installation features three six-foot-high lithographic paper sculpture chasubles reenvisioning *Into the Womb*, *Aging*, and *Funeral of Her*. The chasubles will be displayed in a circle along a felt and wire landscape to create a living and transforming environment. The felt is infused with mycelium which will fruit into mushrooms, creating a stunning and vibrant effect. At the same time, the mycelium is busy decomposing and transforming. One chasuble, the one representing death, unravels, its thread wrapping around the whole felt landscape. An urn containing the dust from *Beneath the Skin* will also inhabit the landscape. All of these components assembled together create a contemporary experience of *hup taem* murals, one far removed from its origins in northeast Thailand and transported to present-day Providence, Rhode Island. By connecting with these timeless stories, I feel that I am keeping the stories alive. I know no better way to honor these relics than to relate them to my own creative work. I look forward to every step of the way.

Bird eye’s view of the installation *The Temple Is a Landscape*. 
Perspective change of *The Temple Is a Landscape*.

Detail of installation: *The Temple Is a Landscape*. Oxidation of the copper patina.
Perspective change of *The Temple Is a Landscape.*
Khwanchira Chindamanee, Falling and Rotten, 2021, Fletcher first crit
An example of printed paper formed into soft sculpture depicting Nariphon fruit falling to the forest floor.

Khwanchara Chindamanee, Falling and Rotten, 2021, Photo Gif capture