

**ART REVIEW** ■ SUEBSANG SANGWACHIRAPIBAN

# Skull and cross-examinations

Kamin Lertchaiprasert's collaborative sculpture and video exhibition explores the nature of humanity

**W**hat is the distance between the birth and death of a human being? The question has dogged us for many centuries: what is at stake? Can we measure that distance in years or feelings or memories? And how?

"One capacity of art is to decrease the invisible gap among different people and persuade them to become aware of the value of life," says Kamin Lertchaiprasert, whose latest video arts and sculpture works feature in the exhibition "Non-being By Itself", on at Chulalongkorn University's Art Centre until Sunday.

Since his "Nirat-Thailand" exhibition in 1996, Kamin has combined the two essences of art and human existence in his quest to comprehend life's meaning. He has showcased works which toyed with a mix of secularism and religion, like the "Panha-Panya" (Problem-Wisdom) and "Tummada-Thammachad" (Common-Natural) exhibitions. Last year, Kamin's cryptically titled *Lord Buddha said, "If you see dhamma, you see me"* was part of the "Thai Transience" exhibition Professor Apinan Poshyananda curated at the Singapore Art Museum. In that work, he used Thai banknotes to sculpt papier-mache Buddha statues.

"Non-being By Itself" is an exploration of the value of human beings through art. Kamin explains the works

are an extension of the thought that if we understand the state of "non-being" — meaning nothing can exist without anything else — this triggers awareness of life's worth, our own and others. It is believed that we could inspire others and send out creative energy from experiences of knowledge, love, compassion and social conscience.

Given this, it was almost inevitable that the project would not be a solo show. Kamin invited young artists, cul-

tural workers and students to participate in workshops to share and discuss the conceptual framework and to make short videos. By doing so, the artist implies the idea of mutual inspiration and influence — in art and in life.

During the workshop he said: "The project calls for open space. Everybody can share their independent vision of living."

He emphasises this by asking his colleagues to make short films on "living



Father and I

idols", and 18 short films from the participants have made the exhibition.

In the exhibition space, it is Kamin's gigantic human skull *Before Birth After Death*, sculpted last year in lustrous gold colour, that succeeds in creating a huge impact. Recalling Gustave Courbet's *The Origin Of The World* (1866) — a great realism painting of a nude woman, the vagina displayed prominently and provocatively — Kamin uses similar symbology on the back of the sculpture to show the context of life's origins. The audience can sit inside the sculpture, where soft meditation music plays in a loop. Many Thais stick to the mantra of "birth, old age, sickness and death" as their guiding principle of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the artist's determination questions our understanding of this amidst our more prosperous lifestyle.

In addition, two of Kamin's short films, *Interviewing 21 People* and *We Are All The Same*, offer an interpretation of the source of life's inspiration. *We Are All The Same* focuses on three characters of different status, education level and background — a Brahmin yogi, a mentally disordered man, and himself. In *Interviewing 21 People*, he talks to diverse characters, including a monk, a maid, a musician and a biker. All are asked similar questions on the source of their inspiration. A simple query, but the catalogue of answers gives us constant surprises and reveals the spectrum

of the human mind. Of the pieces by workshop participants, Tanaphon Inthong's *Father And I* tells of young man's relationship with his father through family activities and an arm wrestling bout.

*P'Mew*, created by Norapat Sakatornsup, expresses his curiosity about the title character, a shopkeeper near his university. The simple video shows how an everyday encounter with a stranger can have a touching effect on a person.

Maharakham University lecturer Jedsada Tangtrakulwong shows *A Human*, which narrates the story of Northeast sage and cultural activist Sutan Khotphuwien. Jedsada invited Sutan and his family to join this project as a storyteller. Interestingly, there's not a single image of Sutan in the video — this way viewers have to imagine what's left off the screen.

Other noteworthy creations include *The One Who Motivates Me* by I-na Phuyuthanon and a work by Chitpapat Batprakhon that offers us a story of people living in Thailand's deep South.

In all, the run-time of the videos is than 150 minutes. Add the time you might want to sit and meditate in Kamin's golden skull, and you're advised to spare half a day at the gallery to take in the whole flavour of this inspirational and thoughtful exhibition.

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**"Non-being By Itself" is on show at the Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University until Sunday.**