

Leisure JIM THOMPSON FARM HARVESTS AN ART CROP 1B

This year's art crop



ADISAK PHUPA'S 'Playful Isaan' puppet installation dominates a rice field. To the right of the scene are the bufflao of Sittikorn Khawsa-ad's 'Far as Near, Everyday Experience'.

The Jim Thompson Farm's harvest of clever creations is smaller this year – but richer in flavour

PHATARAWADEE PHATARANAWIK
THE NATION ON SUNDAY

The winter wind has a habit of blowing me all the way to the Jim Thompson Farm in Nakhon Ratchasima, but I'm always grateful. The annual farm tours are an education in both organic agriculture and how to make art in a pas-ture.



PHAHOLCHAI Premjai's 'umbrella' is made of straw recycled from the baskets that held silkworm cocoons.



TAKE A break inside a woven 'fishing basket'.



MONTREE MOUGKUM decorated the walkway to an Isaan 'sim nam' -a chapel in the lake.



ARCHITECT RACHAPORN CHOOCHUEY has set up 'Act Naturally' with fabric flowing among the trees in lieu of walls.

It's wonderful to get back to Isaan culture among the traditional architecture that's unique to Korat. The Thompson Farm is like an open-air museum with 3,000 rai to roam. This art museum, of course, also offers a chance to pick your own vegetables.

The flowers spread out as far as you can see, begging to be photographed, and there's live music to enjoy, spicy food and demonstrations of time-honoured skills like carving.

In the midst of all this, the artwork is set out hither and yon for visitors to hunt down and discover in unusual settings, like the edge of a rice paddy or inside an old house or an abandoned silk warehouse.

Along the way you learn the history of silk-making in Thailand, as championed by the long-lost American Jim Thompson. This is one of his old farms.

The theme this year is "Locally Isaan", and you do start to feel like a

local as you ride the tour bus or walk around the site. The guide points out a field of yellowing hemp, which is called *por tueng* and is grown to add minerals to the soil.

Sunflowers vie for camera attention with the pumpkin patch - everyone wants their picture taken perched on monster orange gourd.

In this giant impressionist painting, resident architect Phaholchai Premjai has placed sculpted "umbrellas" made of straw recycled

from the baskets in which the silkworms grew in their cocoons.

I only just noticed Disorn Doungdao's installation "Garden is not a Garden", which was one of my favourite artworks here last year. It's a platform of wood on which weavers once worked their magic, incorporated into bronze and copper elements.

Disorn produced a perennial "temporary aesthetic" that's quite beautiful. He planted flowers around his weaver's dais and, naturally enough, they'll soon be dead, yet the "garden" that contained them will remain. "When the flowers are all gone, my garden will really reveal its beauty," he says. Over the past year, the bronze has oxidised and is now as green as new bamboo.

The old wooden house on the property contains no art like it did last year, but the structure warrants admiration anyway, erected completely without nails.

In fact this year's Art on the Farm event proffers only five pieces this winter, half the number of last year, but as they say, less is more. Absent are the kind of avant-garde conceptual pieces that must have baffled visitors, replaced by more accessible ideas.

The "hunt" begins at the Isaan Village, a 10-rai area that's home to the artist-in-residence and at

least 15 traditional houses waiting to be explored.

In the rice field out front, three buffalo loiter between assignments, keeping an eye on three other buffalo that don't seem to be moving at all. Sittikorn Khawsa-ad built them out of recycled wood and woven bamboo and gave them a coat of clay and cloth. "Far as Near, Everyday Experience" is an impressive monument to the son of Isaan farmers who has never grown rice himself.

"When I visited the Thompson Farm and saw the rice field, I remembered thinking how hard my parents worked," says the 25-year-old Roi Et native. "Those feelings really came through when I was creating this sculpture here in the field, with my feet in the mud and my back to the sun."

His three buffalo seem to be him and his parents. Two are clearly older, their bone structure visible beneath their "skin". He planted rice on their backs in homage to the parents' gift of fertilising their children's knowledge.

Childhood memories also inform "Playful Isaan", an interactive work by Adisak Phupa from Yasothon. He's mounted 100 colourfully dressed puppets on poles along a walkway. You pull their string to make them dance – or in some cases strike a decidedly erotic pose.

For 35-year-old Adisak, a lecturer at Maharakham University, they bring to mind the bawdy puppet shows that occasionally still feature in the annual rocket festivals of the Northeast.

"I loved to play with these puppets when I was young but they're hard to find now," he says. "Then last year I found an old master making them, so I did some research."

The farmers' rocket festivals precede the rainy season and appeal to the spirits for ample downpours. The puppets' lurid behaviour symbolises fertility.

Rachaporn Choochuey and her team from the architecture firm All (zone) have set up a dozen bamboo chairs in the quiet bamboo garden, with multihued see-through fabric flowing between the trees in lieu of walls, typical of the firm's environment-oriented constructions.

This is "Act Naturally", inspired by the Isaan paper garland known as the *mahot* that's used in Buddhist rites. The fabric is the same as that used for wrapping sacred trees. Rachaporn, who was born in Bangkok, is defining a temporary "place" for dining, complete with coloured lights that naturally draw people.

The lake on the property has an Isaan *sim* in the middle, a typically northeastern chapel with a corridor that's lined with paintings of the local lifestyle and the century-old Buddha statues inside, all done by Montree Mougkum of Khon Kaen.

Across the lake, behind a black curtain, is a dark room set up by Songwit Pimpakun. He's recounted the local story called "Sunsipacha" about a hero of the Buddha's time named Sunsilpacha or Sinchai.

Songwit, who hails from Ubon Ratchatani, shares the tale through mixed media and videos while *mor lam* music resonates through the curtains. The characters appear in backlight, bringing the old wisdom from past to present.

SILK AND SCENERY

<< The Jim Thompson Farm is in Nakhon Ratchasima's Pak Thongchai district. It's open daily from 9 to 5 until January 8.

<< Admission is Bt100 (Bt70 for children).

<< Learn more at (02) 762 2566 or

www.JimThompsonFarm.com.