

Third Realm

October 10–December 22, 2019

Apichatpong Weerasethakul
The Field, 2009

MoCP Museum of
Contemporary
Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

Birdhead
Cao Fei
Heman Chong
Comfortable Collective
FX Harsono
Sutee Kunavichayanon
Surasi Kusolwong
Jompert Kuswidananto
Lu Yang
Gary Ross Pastrana
Paola Pivi
Sun Xun
Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Xijing Men
Yang Zhenzhong
Zhou Xiaohu

Third Realm

Ritual and the FarEastFarWest Collection

The FarEastFarWest collection was born in the mid-2000s, a decade after I had started the non-profit BizArt Art Center in Shanghai to support groundbreaking work by both local and international artists. During this period, the contemporary art world in China—as well as other regions throughout Asia—was emerging at a heightened velocity, while buying and selling was at an all-time high, spurred on by auction houses, galleries, and even artists themselves. This climate, both on a local and global scale, created an ecosystem that seemed to devalue artistic creation. Recognizing that nontraditional media in China was underappreciated, Eric Guichard and I, both long-term residents of Shanghai, sought to develop a corrective to the situation by creating FarEastFarWest, a project-based approach to commissioning new work designed to empower local artists to broach complex subjects through providing a curatorial—rather than market-driven—pathway to building a collection and supporting creative output. As foreigners ourselves, we collaborated with artists from all over the world who were prone to engage aspects of Asian culture that we found relevant. The results were often non-objectified works of art that incorporated an element of performance or durative action—a stark contrast to the work that was most popular and profitable at the time. Today, the FarEastFarWest collection is on extended loan to the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago and presented in exhibitions internationally.

Many of the works produced for FarEastFarWest incorporate a time-based component, an element of performance or durative action. The exhibition *Third Realm* features the work of sixteen artists' projects from the collection produced between 2004 and 2019. Time-based actions and rituality are fundamentally intertwined, and in religion, particularly Buddhism, it is often the process of an action that inscribes it with sacredness. Likewise, in process-driven art, the practice of the action is, in turn, what suggests meaning. However, while this exhibition's title has Buddhist implications, I am particularly interested in reading works from the FarEastFarWest collection as ritual acts in the broadest sense, revisiting works that use ritual to investigate the liminal spaces—between past and present, local and global, secular and sacred—to uncover the third realms that lie between.



The tension between secular and sacred ritual is made apparent in the works by Paola Pivi and Lu Yang. **Paola Pivi** (Italy, b. 1971) compiles a photographic archive of Tibetan Buddhist *tulkus*, the recognized reincarnation of previous Buddhist masters. By placing these photographs within the museum context, Pivi suggests that the gallery itself can become a sacred space. **Lu Yang** (China, b. 1984), on the other hand, is more interested in conflating the secular world of science with religion; her pop culture–influenced videos present animated Tibetan Buddhist deities using the latest technology in brain mapping.





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FX Harsano, Comfortable Collective, Zhou Xiaohu, and Gary Ross Pastrana all examine the rituality of performance—and the performativity of ritual. **Zhou Xiaohu** (China, b. 1960) is interested in the various ways that performance can take on religious undertones. Using absurdist humor, *Crazy English Camp* (2010) explores the phenomenon of Li Yang, the founder of Crazy English, whose methods of teaching the language includes shouting slogans from a pulpit in a high-energy recitation; Zhou's video emphasizes the spectacle of these presentations, and the associated fanaticism that borders on religious frenzy. **Comfortable Collective** (Jin Shan, China, b. 1977; Maya Kramer, USA, b. 1977; and Li Mu, China, b. 1974) is similarly concerned with critiquing institutions and group mentality, documenting a performance that slyly calls into question the display of national identity in a gallery context.



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While Comfortable Collective and Zhou Xiaohu use performance to examine group behavior, FX Harsano and Gary Ross Pastrana are more interested in using actions to reflect on the self. In *Writing in the Rain* (2011), **FX Harsono** (Indonesia, b. 1949) explores his identity as an ethnically Chinese Indonesian by writing his name in Chinese characters in the rain. This meditative act highlights the delicate nature of identity. **Gary Ross Pastrana** (Philippines, b. 1977) conducts an examination of selfhood using his own blood—which he literally forges with metal—in a work that explores the materiality of the body.



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Other works observe the ritual of everyday life, particularly artist collectives **Birdhead** (Song Tao, China, b. 1979, and Ji Weiyu, China, b. 1980) and **Xijing Men** (Ozawa Tsuyoshi, Japan, b. 1965; Chen Shaoxiong, China, 1962–2016; and Gim Hong-sok, Korea, b. 1964). Taking diaristic snapshots that range from self-portraits to glimpses of a shifting urban landscape, Birdhead’s photographs attempt to document their city and their lives—fragment by fragment. Much of their artistic practice involves a conceptual approach, using a variety of images to represent the lives of urban Chinese youth during the early 2000s. The artistic action of documentation becomes, by extension, a ritualized act. Taking a more satirical approach, Xijing Men present a fictitious city that revels in the absurd, creating a set of rules of city life to satirize Chinese social and bureaucratic customs. Singapore-based conceptual artist **Heman Chong** (Singapore, b. 1977) similarly upends social norms. In his *Monument to the People We’ve Conveniently Forgotten (I hate you)* (2008), a million solid black business cards are scattered throughout the gallery. While business cards represent the rules and rituals that define capitalist exchange, the emphasis on the cards as physical objects on the ground points to the hollowness of ritual gestures. **Yang Zhenzhong** (China, b. 1968) highlights the empty ritual of photography itself; while his portraits of laughing subjects suggest an authentic reaction to an off-camera person or scene, they are actually staged actors photographed alone in a studio.



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Yang's work hovers between reality and fiction, occupying a space that is neither real nor unreal. Other works in this exhibition evoke these "third realms"—these other, liminal spaces—as a means of exploring national history. In the titular piece *Third Realm* (2011) from **Jompet Kuswidananto** (Indonesia, b. 1976), unembodied figures in nineteenth-century colonial dress are arranged like phantoms in a configuration that suggests a religious rite with the underpinnings of a military exercise. In searching for modern national identity, the artist implies, a colonial past is inescapable, as history and the current moment tensely converge in a ghostly third space that is neither past nor present. **Apichatpong Weerasethakul** (Thailand, b. 1970) and **Sun Xun** (China, b. 1980) also explore the residual effects of past national trauma—Weerasethakul does so through filmed reenactments, while Sun Xun literally draws on old newspapers, his illustrations purposely obscuring the official narratives of history.



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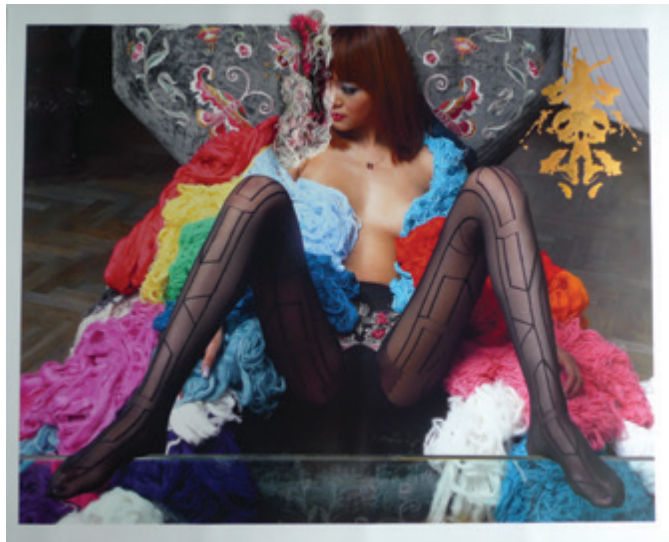


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Cao Fei (China, b. 1978) uses the third space of the digital realm to explore the un-making of the self in the context of national identity. Using *Second Life*, an online game that emerged in the early 2000s, Cao Fei created the fictitious *RMB City* (2008–11), which stands as a critique of China’s rampant consumerism, taking the name itself from the Chinese currency. Her performance of *RMB City Opera* (2010) underscores modern China’s urban development and the related tension between past and present in a rapidly changing country. **Sutee Kunavichayanon** (Thailand, b. 1965) and **Surasi Kusolwong** (Thailand, b. 1965) also examine urban development and globalization—and its inherent threat to local culture—in their case, in their native Thailand.



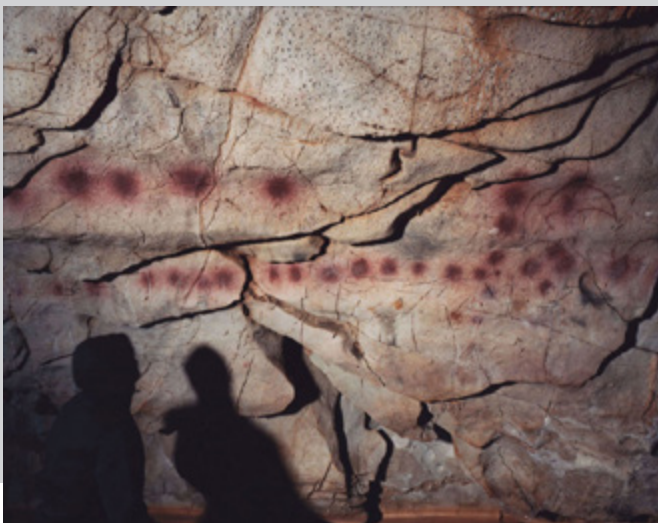
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Many of the works in *Third Realm* are profoundly related to their moment of creation. In some ways, the FarEastFarWest collection reflects a sociopolitical shift during the 2000s, when China's economic prosperity began to command global attention. FarEastFarWest, while rooted in work made in East and Southeast Asia, is defined not necessarily by a geographic region, but by an aesthetic and conceptual sensibility. However, the desire to embody a specific locality while speaking to a more global audience is perhaps a running theme throughout the collection.

FarEastFarWest, as a vehicle free from market pressures, is better equipped to embrace the contradictions that many curators, collectors, and institutions pursue: public yet private, global yet local, permanent yet ephemeral. Created by artists and collectors alike, a collection is the remains of a moment in time. In our role at FarEastFarWest with our day-to-day interactions with artists, we were able to understand artists' visions, desires, and emotional needs. This safe work environment resulted in over eighty new works that are meant to be shown in public institutions. Although some of the artists represented in the collection have become quite famous, the works in the collection resist broad categorization. Individually, many of these artists seek to define their unique realms in the world, using ritual, gesture, and performance to excavate the complexities of their hybrid identities and lives. However, the works collected are rarely simple objects and most of the time are complex narrations where the object in the collection is a symbolic crystallization of a much broader research. In *Third Realm*, I hope to use this edited archive to reinvestigate these emergent themes and thus impart upon the collection a renewed resonance for the current moment.



17.

Also featured in the exhibition is a special intervention by **Domingo Milella** (Italy, b. 1981) displayed outside the museum on Harrison Street at Michigan Avenue. His piece *El Castillo*, Gallery of Discs, Spain 2016 features prehistoric abstract drawings on the stone walls of a cave in Spain, revealing traces of forgotten rituals from the distant past. These rituals define our humanity, both past and present.

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