

19 January 2023

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## Cannes film festival award-winning artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul on sleep as resistance, the power of the in-between

By Aaina Bhargava | Jan 19, 2023



**COVER** Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Photo: courtesy of the artist and Kiang Malingue)



**Best known for winning the palm d'or and Cannes jury prize at the Cannes film festival for his films *Uncle Boonmee* and *Memoria*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul tells Tatler about his new Hong Kong exhibition**

**A**pichatpong Weerasethakul is obsessed with sleep, despite the fact he struggles to get very much of it. “There is nothing quite like sleep,” says the acclaimed Thai filmmaker and artist. “It’s a place where you can just be in this state or narrative, and that’s when you open up to all kinds of connections and possibilities.”

He is of course talking about dreams, and the surreal world that results when our subconscious takes over. But he also savours the process of waking up: “Every time I do manage to sleep, and then wake up to birds and nature, my world is somewhere in between dream and reality,” he says. “The light isn’t quite right, I’m not fully conditioned yet or bound by reality.”

Weerasethakul’s films also inhabit this semiconscious twilight zone, a state free from inhibitions where dreams and reality coexist. Take, for example, *Blue* (2018) and *On Blue* (2022), the latter of which showed during his solo exhibition, *A Planet of Silence*, in Hong Kong’s Kiang Malingue gallery. *Blue* centres around a female character whose inability to sleep sets her surroundings on fire, while *On Blue* reflects on the idea that we might have been sleeping throughout the pandemic, and now it’s time to wake up. The advent of the pandemic and its unforeseen consequences created a similar state of existence where we don’t feel fully awake because reality seemed so surreal. The film depicts this transitional state through the character slowly awakening, and by capturing the light and colour change from night’s blue to dawn’s orangey-yellow.

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**ABOVE** Tilda Swinton in *Memoria*, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Photo: ©Kick the Machine Films.)

A defining aspect of Weerasethakul’s directorship is the distinct feel of his films: they are slow-paced with minimal dialogue; feature long shots of natural scenery and wandering through jungles; and surreal, sometimes supernatural events occur, all combining to create the director’s otherworldly, ethereal vision. His films are meant to provide an experience rather than entertain—he doesn’t even mind if viewers dose off while watching. “Perhaps when they wake up in between [scenes], they’ll see it from a fresh perspective,” he says, again alluding to the idea of inspiration striking during semi-consciousness.

A never-before-seen scene from his award-winning film *Memoria*, which received the Jury Prize at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival (and which was also on view as part of *A Planet of Silence*), shows the main character, Jessica, played by actress Tilda Swinton, sleeping. Whereas the film traced Jessica’s journey to uncover the cause of a recurring sound only she could hear, the exhibited scene, *Durmiente* (2021), sees her finally finding resolution in sleep. The video is one half of a diptych; the other half is a film titled *Async* (2021), meaning first light, a collaboration between Weerasethakul and the composer Ryuichi Sakamoto. This work again traces the transition of night into day, and dreams into wakefulness, in an attempt to capture a fleeting moment.



**ABOVE** Installation view of Weerasethakul's *Memoria Jessica* (2022) at Kiang Malingue (Photo: courtesy of Kiang Malingue)

In another diptych, *Memoria Jessica* (2022), Weerasethakul reveals more unseen footage of Swinton's character sleeping, and includes a photograph of overlapping circles. The circles represent a circular consciousness: a recurring theme throughout the artist's work, defined by him as a state of being achieved when one is in tandem with nature's cycle. It is a state that is achieved when someone operates from an unconditioned, subconscious place which allows for forging connections organically, without an agenda. "When we sleep, our bodies and minds become uninhibited," says Weerasethakul, "which enables us to dream, and facilitates correlation."

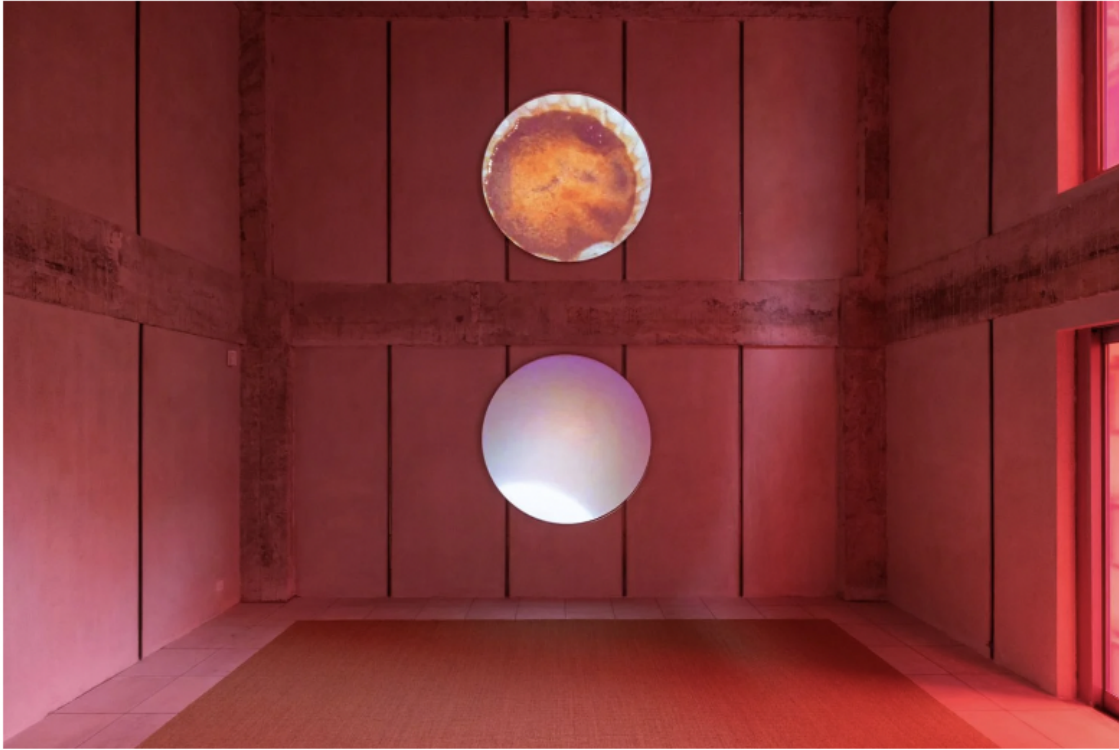
The artist links his fascination with dreams and sleep with his penchant for cinema. "A dream is an uncontrolled narrative," he says. "It's like a black box, like a movie theatre, where anything can happen." When the artist was young, he enjoyed watching movies in the dark, as he associated being in a place without light as a time for experimentation. This translates into his filmmaking because it creates an atmosphere which allows you to approach things from an unknown – literally dark – point of view. "When you make movies, there aren't any rules. There are parameters, yes," he says, citing length and budgets as examples, "but there are still lots of things you can try out." Having the freedom to experiment makes him feel like a child again, which adds to his creativity. "There's an innocent curiosity you have [as a child], a sense of wonder. You don't censor yourself; you're not worried if you're asking dumb questions; you're less conditioned."



**ABOVE** Installation View of Weerasethakul's *For Bruce* (2022) at Kiang Malingue (Photo: courtesy of Kiang Malingue)

Weerasethakul likes to address his existential queries from a place of openness and possibility, as did his friend and mentor, experimental filmmaker Bruce Bailie, who died in 2020. “The way he saw the world through his camera lens was like a child; he was really open. His films are simply an invitation to look, open to interpretation, without any conditions,” says Weerasethakul, attributing Bailie’s style to his growing up during the 1960s and 1970s at the height of hippie culture. “It’s such a big difference from filmmaking and art nowadays [when] you have all this [preconceived] knowledge about what art is or should be—it’s so institutionalised.”

A lack of narrative reflects the aforementioned ambiguity and is evident in *For Bruce* (2022), a video installation included in the Hong Kong exhibition, which pays homage to Bailie in Weerasethakul’s distinct style, shot in the Amazon jungle in Peru the artist was trekking through while recovering from Covid-19. Flickering lights, water flowing underneath a bridge and the artist’s intermittent cough comprise the overlapped footage.



**ABOVE** Installation view of Weerasethakul's *Seeing Circles* (2022) at Kiang Malingue (Photo: courtesy of Kiang Malingue)

Bailie's impact is also evident in the installation *Seeing Circles* (2022), which examines how our perception of time is conditioned through memories. It also reflects the influence philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurthi's teachings have on Weerasethakul, which the artist has been studying for the past five years. The videos that make up the piece were created with a pocket camera which provides a distinct, and perhaps relatively new perspective for viewers, one without any prior condition. Representing a pair of eyes, two circular projections showcase the word "seeing" among other footage including scenes Weerasethakul shot during Thailand's 2020 mass protests.

While Weerasethakul doesn't consider himself or his art to be political (he says it is all personal documentary), many of his works showcase socio-political conflicts and issues in Thailand; for example, the changes in the northeast of the country, where he grew up. He shot one of his best-known films in the region's jungles: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which won the Palme d'Or at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival.



**ABOVE** A still from Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee* (2010) (Photo: courtesy of Kick the Machine Films)

Politics and protests are obscurely evoked in another recent work view on the gallery's topmost level, *The Word Silence Is Not Silence*, which was made for the 2022 Okayama Art Summit. The artist contemplates the multiple interpretations of the word "silence", while also referencing fellow artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's work, which often draws on the use of text. "There are many layers to silence, you can contemplate silence within yourself, or consider if you're being silenced by someone else."

One of Weerasethakul's most powerful ways of fighting against being silenced is sleep. "It's a form of resistance," he says. "It's physically resisting against a consciousness that is so conditioned." He believes it's also a defence against the capitalist mentality, which lauds overworking and overconsumption. "When we're not happy with who we are, we think if buy something, achieve something, we'll be better within a certain time frame—we want to acquire things in order to change." Sleep, however, is the antidote to such discontent, because in order to awaken you need to sleep. "It's a place of resisting, by not resisting."

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