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The Guardian

Apichatpong Weerasethakul

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## ‘Overwhelming and sublime’: the primal power of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s cinematic art



‘You almost lose awareness that you’re actually viewing art’: A Conversation with the Sun (Afterimage) was made by Weerasethakul in collaboration with Rueangrith Suntisuk and Pornpan Arayaveerasid. Photograph: Zan Wimberley

The Cannes-winning film-maker’s latest work, created specially for Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art, is a tribute to his obsession with the magic of light and shadow

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**A**s a child, while other kids were playing with toys, [Apichatpong Weerasethakul](#) was content with a flashlight. “That was enough: the shadows on the wall or the blanket,” he says. “I chose to work in cinema because of that feeling of taking me back to childhood, that freedom and curiosity.”

This primal fascination with light and shadow has fuelled a career spanning three decades, across experimental features and video works, feted by the likes of the Cannes film festival and London’s Tate Modern.

It has also produced some of contemporary cinema's most captivating and puzzling imagery - from the talking animals of his 2004 psychological drama *Tropical Malady* to the ghosts and human-catfish sex in his hallucinatory 2010 Palme d'Or winner [Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives](#).

His latest film, 2021's [Memoria](#), starring Tilda Swinton as a woman haunted by a rumbling boom only she can hear, features a startling image of an alien spacecraft rising out of the Colombian jungle.

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The most remarkable thing about these images is their matter-of-fact presentation. Weerasethakul depicts the fantastical in the same realist style he observes everyday life and his characters react to strangeness with zen acceptance. As with the logic of dreams, incomprehensible scenes make perfect emotional sense.

This dream-like sensuality is strongly felt in his new work: *A Conversation with the Sun (Afterimage)*, a monumental video installation at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art. In the vast darkness of the museum's Macgregor gallery, a random assortment of clips featuring quotidian imagery - palm fronds against the sky, a harbourside at night, Weerasethakul's friends, including Swinton - play across a large screen while a curtain of floating white fabric moves slowly up and down in front of it. The cumulative effect of these image shards, layered and dissociated from narrative context, is the sensation of swimming through a sea of jumbled memories or dreams.



📷 Apichatpong Weerasethakul says his work 'plays with the audience's awareness of illusion, of the material, of the space'. Photograph: Chayaporn Maneesutham



As with all his work, Weerasethakul is reluctant to affix meaning - not only for viewers but also himself.

“Over the years, I’m unconsciously drawn to certain objects or circular motifs, like sleep and dream,” he says. “I wasn’t really conscious about this until scholars and critics wrote about it. I was like, ‘Oh, am I like that?’ I intentionally try not to analyse or think about the work because I prefer something very spontaneous and organic.”

A Conversation with the Sun (Afterimage), conceived with longtime collaborators Rueangrith Suntisuk and Pornpan Arayaveerasid, draws primarily on Weerasethakul’s 10-year-deep trove of video diaries, shot on a lo-res pocket camera that Weerasethakul calls his “particular eyes”. The camera’s sensitivity to light transformed what he saw; scenes of a wagging dog or a long walk through a garden often become overexposed or disintegrate into grainy irresolution. Intercut with Weerasethakul’s personal archive is Suntisuk and Arayaveerasid’s footage of Indonesian caves - a potent symbol: the site of humans’ first storytelling endeavours, in wall paintings and tales told around the flickering flames of communal fires.

The movement of the curtain within the installation draws viewers’ attention to the delicacy of the images; it also calls attention to the projector beams, bringing us into keener awareness that light is a vessel for memory and illusion, and also an impermanent and changeable force.

“His work gets us close to appreciating the things that as humans we do respond to - basic things like light, nature - in a way that you almost lose awareness that you’re actually viewing art,” says the work’s curator, Jane Devery. “It gets very close to the experience of being in front of something overwhelming and sublime in nature. I think that’s what people respond to, and I certainly do.”



📷 Mindful, active watching is Weerasethakul's goal. Photograph: Zan Wimberley

Weerasethakul, sometimes referred to as a proponent of slow cinema, is known for his glacial pacing and wide, static frames. The elongated sense of time and lush compositions force the viewer to pay close attention to details we typically overlook - and, in the process, discover surprising marvels.

A shift in the quality of light reveals the arrival of the ghost, or a complete transformation of identity. You may become entranced by the meditative thud of rainfall and a slow trek through an ancient cemetery, or you may fidget, waiting for answers to emerge, aware that you're a restless body experiencing a complex illusion created by an artist.

This kind of mindful, active watching is Weerasethakul's goal: "[My work] plays with the audience's awareness of illusion, of the material, of the space, too," he says. "Even in my feature films, there are many moments where I like the audience to be aware that you are sitting with other people in the cave - a modern cave! It's not like classic cinema where you lose yourself."



📷 Tilda Swinton in Weerasethakul's enigmatic 2021 film Memoria

In *Afterimage*, this sense of agency is heightened: there is freedom to move around the dance of the drape, to chase a compelling spectre before it vanishes. The randomised images act as a Rorschach test of sorts, tapping into the profound mystery of our memories. Why does a particular shade of green remind us of childhood, or a hike we took one spring? Or why do I find the image of circular scribbles on notepaper, imposed over a slowly encroaching flame, profoundly unsettling?

Each person, with their own unique wells of memory, will have a different experience in this collective space; Weerasethakul invites us to craft our own personal poetry.

This sense of freedom is crucial to Weerasethakul, whose film career has been dogged by Thailand's censorship board from the get-go, with his 2002 romance *Blissfully Yours* edited to remove graphic sex scenes. His visual arts practice has given him a way to work more freely.



“It’s getting harder and harder to make personal cinema,” he says. “And when you are uncompromising, you have to wait years and years for funding. In between that time, this kind of practice has become very natural, like breathing.”

Afterimage, the first installation Weerasethakul has created specifically for Australian audiences, offers an opportunity to experience one of the most distinctive imaginations in cinema.

“I would just encourage people to see it for a long time,” Weerasethakul says. “Sit on the floor, walk around. Because the work will not be the same.”

● *A Conversation with the Sun (Afterimage): Apichatpong Weerasethakul in collaboration with Rueangrith Suntisuk and Pornpan Arayaveerasid is showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, until 15 February 2026*