

ZODIAC IN THE HOUSE OF ELEMENT

Exhibition Text by Ellen Adams

Although curator ubatsat spent years contemplating a group exhibition based on the four elements, his initial interest in creativity and the four elements was sparked over a decade ago. He shares a story of an encounter with an older classmate who, despite the remarkably delicate nature of his ceramics, was often considered an eccentric. ubatsat approached this classmate one evening and asked what inspired him to throw such impressively thin pots, considering that they could break so easily. In response, his classmate looked up to the stars, took a deep breath, and answered, “In the end, all elements will break and separate.” His classmate reaffirmed his search for balance while also acknowledging its precarious and temporary means.

In the collective exhibition ZODIAC IN THE HOUSE OF ELEMENT at Pongnoi Community Art Space, each artist interprets the theme of the four elements differently, yet several threads draw their artworks close together. Whether through medicinal practice or spiritual searching, artists highlight the ever-present need to find equilibrium as the wheel of life rolls on. We must balance our elements if we wish to survive, to continue, to thrive, and—perhaps the forefront concern underlying these artworks—to understand ourselves in this lifetime and in this moment.

The titles and creators of the artworks were intentionally withheld in the exhibit’s curation; such a decision suggests that the questions and the answers the artists offer go beyond the individual. Reckoning back to the eccentric classmate’s all-encompassing explanation, this collective meditation on the four elements attempts to find a delicate balance even as the time for separation approaches.

ARTWORKS: NOURISHMENT, COMMUNITY, NATURE

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors are immediately greeted by an herbal aroma. In one corner, loveiscomingsoon placed a pot of boiling Thai herbs, the kind traditionally used to help a woman balance her elements after giving birth. The presence of such a medicine in a mixed and public place, however, invites a wider definition of both birth and the replenishment needed after bringing a new incarnation into this world. In another room, Anusorn Tanyapalit presents a collection of rocks, a bottle with the word “water” trapped inside, and a handful of incense sticks on a wide bed of sand. The artist reminds us of spiritual nourishment that sustains us when we lack a necessary element or feel worn down like rocks into sand. Artist Sirapat Deesawadee fuses modern living to spiritual cosmology. He combines the man-made material of plastic with small black stones of the earth, then illuminates both from behind with a colorful strobe of LED lights, highlighting the nourishment he enjoys in both natural scenery and nightclub atmosphere.

From a small TV screen installed on the ground, Anurak Tanyapalit poignantly depicts the full cycle of a nourished life. His video shows a round cluster of trees at the foot of a towering hospital. He contrasts the official, sterile space of medicine—where people are born and die around the clock—with the seemingly chaotic but coherent sounds and movement of a flock of birds perched in the trees. As night falls, the flock explodes out, moving in swift, organized motion as if drawn by a magnet. Above the TV set, a canvas is splattered with the birds’ droppings, a reminder of the ultimate finality of our sustenance and lives. Whether it be the duration of digestion or the length of a lifetime, the means to stay alive ultimately passes through, leaving both a mark and a silence behind. Beside the video and canvas, Shinya Akutakawa presents his installation of a video below a cracked-open helmet. Born in a special pig year of the Japanese zodiac, a year known for unusual aggression, the artist warns us of the strength of our foundational cosmic natures despite attempts at balance and safety.

Other artists remind us that our elements exist in a larger community. Surajate Tongchua installed a wheel of crispy, dried chrysanthemums, then offered them as a tea during

the exhibition's second gathering as a participatory artwork and act to calm the fire element in those who partake. Similarly, Filipino artist Eric Ramos Guerero built a public fire pit to bring visitors together through the element of fire. Visitors' bodies were further nourished through shared meals celebrated throughout the exhibition, including the opening meal of "Finnish Khao Soi Finland" cooked by experimental chef Antto Melasniemi. To complement visual and experiential artworks, many musicians joined the exhibition to perform songs related to the elements and Buddhist cosmology, most notably Pry's music exploring the struggle to find balance through Buddhism and creativity.

Hong Kong-born Ali Van's artwork fostered collaboration in the very movement of its making. She contributed a poem on the outer wall of the gallery, depicting her own handwriting, but transferred onto the concrete surface through the hand of the curator, who meticulously copied both her script and words. Pichaya Ngamcharoen invited the viewer to experience the progression of her travels, presenting the Pongnoi community with a table of the intimate and shifting elements—clothes, underwear, bags—that carry her through her journeys. At times the table was full; at times, empty, as the artist continued her explorations and interactions.

Some artworks considered the question of our elemental compositions by presenting its absence. Cola Sunshine's screen print shows a farmer whose shadow forms the outline of a businessman. The farmer displays empty buckets, void of rice, his nutritional and financial sustenance stolen by the institutional exploitation that, like a shadow, he cannot escape. Rather than identifying a culprit, Kati Minihappy asks us to identify ourselves. The gender-variant artist's participatory installation includes a bedroom vanity, including a white marker and the Thai words, "Make eye contact and say what it is." We are invited to label ourselves as one thing through sight, rather than the shifting elements that form our existence.

Focusing on the physical aspect of nature, Thitiporn K. combines science with the soul, printing thematically linked song lyrics over meticulously drawn crystals of periodic table elements, each of which is associated with one of the four cosmological elements. Boat Flower Child installed several rocks and a wide sheet of sandpaper, giving the viewer the chance to experience the physical transformation of the earth element under humans' pressure, time and force. Curator Ubatsat covered twelve tamarind seeds in black, then painted each with a miniature zodiac animal in white. Tamarind, a homeopathic treatment for the artist's own cosmological composition, here reminds us of both the individual and the endlessly universal cycle that influences bodies, lives and generations. Halls Desaputra takes an academic approach to depicting the plants and herbs most common to Thai traditional medicine, a collection of petite watercolors that are both botanical studies and guideposts for a balanced being.

During the installation of the final addition to the exhibition, we are again reminded of the elements of fire, water, wind and earth that flow so variously through the exhibition and the wider world. Jessica Segall's installation of an audio file, played through a frozen speaker, consists of recorded interviews of local people in snowy Alaska. The recordings were to be played through a large block of ice that would eventually melt. Ubatsat left the gallery on a tremendously hot day in search for this last icy ingredient, but ultimately returned empty-handed. He wiped his brow, then said, "The ice blocks are all sold out. Everyone wants ice because of the heat."

In the search for ice blocks and relief on the hottest of days, or in the longer, quieter quest to understand ourselves in this moment in time, the power of the four elements extends far beyond the gallery walls and the scope of an artist's imagination. Whether water or fire, earth or air, the artworks presented and questions explored in *ZODIAC IN THE HOUSE OF ELEMENT* give much to consider about the many ways we find balance, community and meaning in the elements we all call our own.

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