

## The Odyssey of Elephant: Contemporary Images and Representation

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### Abstract

The Odyssey of Elephants: Contemporary Images and Representation examines how we see and bring animal images into “our ” environment. We “re-create” superficial information about animals, such as elephants and other endangered species, to entertain and to educate ourselves. We also “re-create” their nature and the animals habitat. The information that we know about them is projected in the world through media and technology.

### Introduction

This research is aimed at creating a body of work that communicates, in digital and video imagery, key issues around the representation of elephants. To develop this work I will investigate the changing role of the elephant in Thai culture both in historic and contemporary terms and explore the impact of imported ideas on the process of change. A signifi-

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cant corollary interest in this research is the problem of representation and simulation in contemporary life and the impact it has on perception. My art work is a fabricated simulation created from material images. The animal images are transformed into illusions and explore how humans experience nature through simulation. In this way I engage with different kinds of representation for their specific forms and effects.

Therefore considers the role of the elephant in Thailand. The use of the physicality of the elephant forms a key narrative that underpins the development of the nation through times of warfare, through to industrialization and engagement with the West. Symbolically the role of the elephant is no less important and its significance can be traced through cultural practices and beliefs that span centuries. The symbolic significance though has started to shift in emphasis and is reflective of a changed society. Today the domestic elephant has another distinctive role, symbolically and physically, to serve the global community in terms of tourism and conservation.

A broader perspective is taken in the next chapter to position this research within the traditions of the West stemming from ancient Egypt, Greek and Roman times. Much of this is necessarily focused on the value of ivory and the huge demand for it as a signifier of social status. Such was the demand in the Roman Empire during the 2nd to the 4th centuries that the subspecies of African elephant in the Northern Africa became extinct. The literature of Medieval Western Europe indicates that images of elephants were based on their growing presence in legends and myths. The manuscript writers and illuminators seem never to have seen the ani-

mals because elephants were believed to be extinct from Northern Africa and only live in India. In the Western countries in the 19th century while the colonialism explored the ivory trade in South Africa. The African elephant had served the Western industrial revolution as raw material, highly valued, and a symbol of luxury. The concept of Noah's Ark has profoundly influenced modern zoos to keep the animals that survived from the environmental destruction in a safe place. The symbol of nature has been constructed in a compact little space. The actual animal in the enclosure lives in there and is waiting for humans to visit and experience nature.

The role of mass media in global society, through technology the reputation of elephants, previously limited to smaller audiences, can inform people around the world. The media would be able to turn an elephant into celebrity at anytime; people love to know everything about the animal. News, television programs and film are able to form our perception about the natural environment. Films often present the most beautiful and impressive scenery in nature.

The concepts of simulation and image representation in contemporary society are also discussed in this research. The issue explores the complexity of this social phenomenon and explains how we view, live in, and experience the world of fabricated simulation. Humans reproduce nature in order to meet the demands of the mass audience. Fabricated environments such as zoos and aquariums provide artificial material for viewers to experience nature without ever having to experience the real forest.

The Odyssey of Elephants explores how we construct and respond to simulation in different forms and how we view animals symbolically. Through my works I aim to express the animals' situation, the relationship between elephants and humans and the resulting cultural artefacts. The research project presents the way that humans look at animals through fabricated material in order to experience and understand nature. By using digital and video images, I re-create the reality of the relationship between humans and elephants and transform it into symbolic messages.

### **Objectives:**

(1) To Explore the changing role of the elephant in Thai culture — historic and modern.

(2) To demonstrate the impact of imported ideas in the process of change and their impact on the role of the elephant.

(3) To explore the problem of representation and simulation in contemporary life and the impact it has on perception.

(4) To create a body of artwork which communicates in digital and video images, an expressive commentary on this change.

### **The Representation of Elephants in Eastern Culture Thai Domesticated Elephants**

The Asian elephant is, of course, part of the animal kingdom limited by nature, but it is also a wonderful symbol of power, charisma and status. Asian elephants have participated in Thai culture and played an important role for a very long time. In Thailand, this animal, now domesticated, is considered as a very important animal and a symbol of the nation. Elephants

hold a revered place in Thai society, because of their symbolic importance to monarchs, religion, and the nation as a whole. This complexity both in physical and symbolic terms is key to my research into contemporary representation and therefore it is necessary here to explore the historical background and significance to the current understanding of the elephant.

In the past elephants were a key to military success – both in mass battles, and in the elephant fight. Today, however, with the rapid pace of change in society, and the rapid decrease of the Thai elephant population, the strong bond between the Thai people and elephants has started to crumble. The earliest record detailing the significance of elephants is a Sukhothai stone inscription (Sukhothai period, 1238-1438). According to the inscription, King Ramkhamhang the Great (1277-1298) duelled with his enemy while riding on an elephant back. The elephants were heavily armoured vehicles on the battlefield and played a significant role in the victory over Khun Sam Chon (King of Chod). Elephants also had very important roles to play during peacetime. The king would occasionally ride through the city for ceremonial events on his decorated white elephant. The inscription on the stone tells us that, On the day of the new moon and on that full moon the King caparisoned the white elephant, called Ruchasri, with straps and tassels and, naturally, with gold for its ... right tusks. King Ramkhamhang mounted it and rode it to worship Phra ... at Aranyik and then back.

The same stone records the fact that there was an important trade in Elephants. The inscription includes information about people in the cities trading freely in elephants, horses, silver and gold. In both battlefield and

in peace, elephants, as illustrated by this Sukhothai stone were symbols of power and wealth and that this singular position accorded to an animal invested them with charisma that has been part of their status ever since.

## The Representation of Elephants in the West, The Historical Viewpoint

The role and symbolism of Elephants in the East was historically quite distinct from that of the West. Although this is now changing as global concerns have bridged the differences and found common concerns in conservation issues, it is appropriate here to consider some particular representations and characterisations of elephants in Western art and thought. Elephants have a unique reputation unlike any other animals that humans have ever encountered. As Eric Scigliano writes: Many animals were credited with one or another good quality, but only elephants were brave, gentle, compassionate, patient, temperate, loyal, reverent, regal, immortal, unforgetting, clever, wise, and auspicious, though occasionally stupid gullible, and as in real life, unpredictably violent.

Throughout modern human history elephants have been associated with human culture, right from the beginning. They earn their names from the impressiveness of their powerful physiques, and most importantly, admiration for their intelligent brain. They have abilities to adapt and learn to live alongside man. Throughout history, as Iain Douglas-Hamilton explains, "African and Asian elephants gradually adapted to every new phase of technology." During the Stone Age the animals were hunted mainly for their meat. Both the American mastodon and the woolly mammoth in Eu-

rope became extinct during the Iron Age. Their cousins, the African and Asia elephants survived into the modern age in spite of all hunting strategies used to overcome these huge animals. These two species have been through everything the human hunters could use to bring them down, from spears and poison-tipped arrows, to snares and pits into which they were driven. It was not the meat the hunters went after but their tusks. Then later, from the 15th century on, powerful rifles, proved to be the most efficient means of harvesting ivory.

### **Representation: Media and Technology, The Role of media**

Stories about elephants have always attracted media attention due to the fact that the general public loves these charming creatures. Their celebrity status comes naturally with their size and capabilities. Many stories are light-hearted and feature as end stories on news programs, however, there are also the serious one that deal with controversial issues. Some stories are sad or even tragic, and frequently lead to the topic of conservation. The conservation movement has become more mainstream since CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) took action and placed a ban on the international trade of African elephants in 1990 because the elephant was threatened with extinction. Mainstream conservation and media have closely monitored activities in the elephant camps around Thailand. This is when symbolic reputation becomes significance because in the public eye mistreating elephants is unacceptable. In the tourism industry, feed back from the public is crucial and is a very sensitive issue. The industries rely on their good reputation therefore they tend to eliminate any activity that appears to be too

offensive to their audiences. Today most of domesticated elephants in Thailand are working in elephant camps around the country. They are heading to a brighter future because their welfare and living condition have been taken care of. The media has influenced people's perception and set up ideas and attitudes toward animals. Any wrongful doing to an animal is watched and reported on a global scale. The media brings issues out to the open and attracts public attention and criticism around the world. People also learn and experience the representation of zoo animals through the media and entertainment. The animated film, *Madagascar* demonstrates the complex relationship among zoo animals, people and the society. The movie also explores the situations and possibilities of human imagination.

### Contemporary context, Postmodern Society

In my research I am concerned with the effect reconstructed images of animals have on our culture and how we use animals to represent cultural and social attitudes. My work engages with the way human understanding and interpretation of elephants is translated in visual form. We value animals according to specific frames of reference mediated through the process of looking. There are important theories and concepts which assist in interrogating this phenomenon, not the least of which is post-modernism. Theories on simulation help us to understand the role of appearances and deal with the nature and role of invented appearances in our society. Issues and problems of representation and simulation, specifically in regard to images of elephants is key to this research.

As Jean Baudrillard asserts in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), “contemporary society is now all simulation.” He adds, Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, ... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belongs to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.

This is a very interesting point. If the distinction between the real and the imaginary no longer exists then simulations can be self-generating, and the importance of the original is brought into question. The created products themselves are accepted as “the original” but one that can be reproduced in infinite quantities. The tourist industry relies on the ready availability of artificial products that are available everywhere at tourist attractions. These products become tokens of the experience and therefore stand in place of the original artefacts from museums, zoos, aquariums, elephant camps, or game reserves. All of these facilities create their own variety of products that are now seen as an integral part of the experience.

This current research is focussed on the representation of elephants and engages with their changing role in Thai culture both in historic and contemporary terms but also deals with representation as simulation and the consequent impact on perception. Svetlana Alpers’ straightforward definition of representation as “the conjunction of the world and its human crafting” is pertinent here as is Margot Lovejoy’s reminder that, “Representation is a complex system which refer to the most significant aspects of art practice.”

## The Odyssey of Elephants, The Medium

I was first introduced to digital photography in 1997, when I was studying Master of Fine Art at the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, USA. Since then I have been exploring digital photography and image manipulation in order to create new forms of meaning and representation. The studio works in my thesis exhibition include digitally manipulated images, digital photographs, and video installations. I use computer programs as tools to produce digitally manipulated images and to generate new meaning by way of images acting as narrative. The new meaning is always associated with the original, pre-existing meaning, for example a photograph that combines images of an elephant, stonework, forest, or a golden pattern retains elemental meaning associated with the individual components. Digital manipulation is an important element in my work because it allows me to combine different images which contain several symbolic meanings together.

I aim to create a new symbolic meaning that at the same time acknowledges its origins. I have always been fascinated by ancient architecture, especially stonework constructions. Stonework is a natural raw material that retains its qualities even when crafted and manipulated by humans to become something else. Since ancient times, stone has been used to build walls and structures and carved into reliefs and sculptures. Therefore, the stonework symbolises human knowledge and technical ability. We are able to transform a natural raw material into an artefact.



Figure 4. Superimpose images of an elephant's skin and ancient stonework.



Figure 5. Rainforest in Otway national Park, Victoria.

As I have demonstrated above, the elephant has a rich and multilayered symbolism drawn from its history and association with man. A parallel enterprise can be seen in the symbolic quality of stonework. By bringing the two together I merge forms from nature even though one is a living being and the other non-living. Although elephants have been tamed and trained to serve human needs for thousands of years, each individual, domesticated elephant has gone through a tough process of discipline and training before it is allowed to live in human society. Its huge body looks like a moving huge rock. It is not possible to distinguish between a domesticated elephant and a wild elephant because their appearance looks very much the same. By combining images of a stone-wall surface and an elephant together, the elephant's skin appears to have cut marks, seams, and the polished surfaces and qualities of stonework on it. Like injury marks or ritual tattoos on the face and body of a warrior, they tell the story

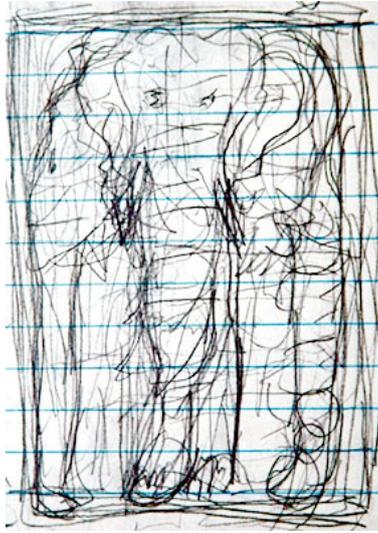


Figure 6. A concept sketch of the three headed elephant.



Plate 1. Living Monument No.1, 2006.  
Digital Image printed on inkjet silk fabric,  
120 x 180cm

of what the elephant has been through (Figure 4). Another important element in my work is the imagery of forests. Some photographs were taken in Thailand and others in Victoria, Australia (Figure 5). Natural forests always have a complex layering of greenery and very rich detail of vegetations. The green vegetation in my work represents fabricated material of captivity or recreation facilities.

Firstly, I construct most of my ideas by sketching out forms and proportions (Figure 6). When I am ready to work on it, I will search for appropriate images to use. All the images that I digitally recomposed in my works come from thousands of photographs that I have in my stock. They are photographs that I have taken from many places. I have them in both 35mm film and digital files. The quality of the original image is very important because the bigger the file the better the outcome. Two video installations are also a part of this research project. They both reinforce the idea of



Plate 2. Fabricated Enclosure No.1, 2005.

Digital Image printed on photographic paper, 60 x 85cm



Plate 3. Family Heritage, 2007. Digital Im-

age printed on photographic paper, 85 x 60cm.

how humans project fabricated material on the figures of elephants. By layering moving images on top of another, an illusion is created of the animal walking in the fabricated environments.

### The Journey

In Living Monument No. 1, I explore the nature of domesticated elephants and how human culture transforms them (Plate 1). Three elephants are shown standing on a solid stone platform. The stately animals are placed there, having become an integral part of the stone structure. Surrounded by the tropical rain forest, the fig trees grow and wrap around the elephants' trunks and legs, as if they were abandoned in an ancient ruin. The combination of textures of the elephants' skin and stonework reveal the materials and how they are made.

The animals stand closely together in a very limited space. Only their staring eyes and wide spread ears indicate that they are living beings. The



Plate 4. Living Monument No.2 (The Magnificent Power), 2007. Digital Image printed on inkjet silk fabric, 120 x 180cm.



Plate 5 . The Golden Chain, 2006. Digital Image printed on photographic paper, 60 x 85cm

stone structure represents a man-made construction that is clearly cultural, institutional and traditional. It is like a solid rock formation but it is man-made. The viewer should not be able to tell whether the elephants were trapped in there or they were built that way in the first place. Fabricated Enclosure No.1 represents the way humans view animals in captivity through bars, fences and boundaries that are transformed into an invisible enclosure (Plate 2). It is as if Man-made captivity is projected on the animal's skin and the material has become part of the animal's appearance. An elephant is merged with leaves and branches. Its skin is almost blended together within the captive environment.

In Family Heritage, 3 elephants are standing together; two adults and a little calf (Plate 3). They are all made of brickstones, even the young one. From generation to generation, the domesticated elephants continue to



Plate 6. Awakening Wall, 2007. Digital Image printed on inkjet silk fabric, 120 x 180cm



Plate 7. The Living Canvas, 2007, Digital Image printed on inkjet silk fabric, 120 x 180cm.

follow their "human" traditional lifestyle. The little one has to grow up in human society; it will be trained and passed on as family destiny, and possibly will be in captivity for the rest of its life. The brickstones connect the elephants with ancient man-made structure and traditional heritage. Centuries have passed by, but the stones are still there, suggesting the core of our culture continues on. The cultural heritage will always be passed on to the next generation in endless repetition.

Living Monument No.2 (The Magnificent Power) not only represents a domesticated elephant that is placed in human culture, but also represents social values and concerns about the animal (Plate 4). The elephant is merged into the stone structure behind him. Only his impressive white tusks stand out. In Thai tradition, an elephant with long tusks that grow downwards until they touch the ground, is considered with great esteem and is worshipped as an



Plate 8. Take a Walk, 2007, Video Installation. 3.5m x 4m.

auspicious animal. The elephant will be protected and taken care of exclusively by his master or mahout who will ensure that the animal will live as long as possible. The long, precious tusks also have the power of temptation.

The Golden Chain represents the relationship between elephants and human society (Plate 5). The golden continuous pattern is projected on an elephant's face. The animal closes its eye, as if it quietly submits to having the golden pattern engraved on its skin. The golden chain of human tradition and culture wraps around the animal restraining it. This patterned effect seems to be only a thin layer of traditional culture floated on the surface of the skin, however, it has a significant role in maintaining the strong relationship with humans and cultural identity. It does not matter what the chain is made of whether it is solid gold, silver or even silk, or whether indeed the chains are metaphorical or symbolic, if there is meant to be a chain, there will be.

A key focus of this research is the specific character of the Thai relationship with elephants. In a metaphorical sense, we project ideological concepts onto the image of the animal; these include traditional, culture and religion. These concepts have become a powerful mechanism for creating an invisible chain around the animals. These reflect complex ideas and symbols of relationships between man and the animal. They also represent symbolic and physical restraint around the elephant

In *Awakening Wall* the brickwork is assembled into an elephant's face. A wide-awake staring eye of an elephant appears on the living brick wall (Plate 6). The texture of animal skin is also still evident on the surface. It seems as if the elephant is looking back at the viewers. The wrinkles on the base of its trunk dominate the left side while the fig roots come from the top and appear to grow over its head, slowly, moving downward to cover the rest of the creature. Just as humans have raised the elephants and manipulated them physically and psychologically, *Awakening Wall* is manipulation of forms that deals with the nature of the domesticated elephant as part man-made and part nature.

Visiting the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre in Lampang province inspired me. I spent much time with the elephants and learned a great deal from this place. The flexibility of the skin was demonstrated for me when the elephant started walking, indicating the enormous muscles and strong skeletal structure inside. I was extremely close to the animal. So that it seemed to me an entire wall of living texture was gently animated all at once with the motion of the legs and other parts of the body.

The video installation *Take a walk* is the combination of two different forms of elephant imagery both still and moving images are used (Plate 8). The work demonstrates a journey of an elephant and how we view an animal in human culture. Starting with a still image of a domesticated elephant, the viewer sees the front view of a huge elephant. He has an exotic and a charismatic look. The animal stares back at the viewer.

The images in this chapter express social commentary on the chang-

ing role of domesticated elephants in Thailand. The images also demonstrate the animals on display in contemporary society. We love to look at them and appreciate the greatest living figures. We manipulate them in a way that provides us animals of almost absolute integrity. The video installations *Take a Walk* and *An Invisible Elephant* reinforce the idea of images projection. We project images of fabricated environment onto the animals in the way that we want to see. We place them in our society and celebrate our triumph over nature. Elephants still continue their journey through the coexistence of cooperation and confrontation between human culture and the animals. This journey probably will never end and we may have to walk with them every step of the way.

## Conclusion

*Gaja-Laksana: The Memorability*, The domesticated elephants in Thailand are the survivors of changes to the role of the domesticated elephant in society. They have been affected by the Western colonization, development and industrialization. These changed roles have not only severely damaged the population but also the elephants' natural habitat. According to the manuscript *Gaja-Laksana*, in the past the elephants lived alongside humans. The classification and identification of the symbolic and physical roles of elephants in line with the hierarchical Thai society meant that elephants had designated roles and were protected. However, today domesticated elephants serve human society primarily as entertainment as part of the mass consumer society. Many elephants have been physically put to work in tourist industries such as elephant camps, zoos, and other recreation facilities.

The *Ultimate Simulacrum*, The ways and means of captivity of wild animals has changed over time. Currently the demand is for captive spaces to look as though they are the natural habitats of the animals. Technology can now make an enclosure so convincingly 'natural' that visitors do not realize there is a barrier between them and the animals. The presence of the wild animals in these enclosures transports the viewer out of the locale of the zoo to the world of the animal in nature. The actual animals in the exhibits therefore become symbols of the connection with real nature.

This connection with nature is handled in another way in the elephant camps in Thailand. The imaginative state is given further play by hiking and trekking with elephants; the entire experience serving as the ultimate gigantic simulation. Tourists find themselves on the back of an elephant; the animals then walk them through their natural habitat. This enterprise, relying on the captivity of the elephants and their submission to the training programs, is still very offensive to some people. However, the tourist industry relies on public sensibility, and therefore has potential to change and develop in the future.

Unfortunately, there are basic elements in the relationship between humans and elephants that have never changed. Thousands of years ago, the kings rode elephants to war and fought on elephants' backs. The animals were also dedicated in religion and used in triumphal processions. Today, Asian domesticated elephants still do similar things but in totally a different social context. They have been used purely for display as a simulation of the

past. They carry people on their back and walk through the environment. The elephants make people's dreams come true, they fulfill the imaginative wishes of tourists who want to get closer to nature and to have an experience on an elephant's back.

My work in general explores the relationship between human culture and the elephant. The images present the experience of the animals in nature through simulations. In the enclosure, the surface of information is cleverly constructed; it contains fabricated material that symbolizes nature. It also contains the actual animals that represent their own species in the wild. The work demonstrates the reality of how we view elephants and engages with the different representations informed by history, tradition and culture

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