



On display at O.K. Store, the *OK Family* (2015) billboard painting places Navin's father, Suwan, at the centre of the Rawanchaikul family. It also references the communities it has passed through and resettled in.

# HOME TRUTHS

*Navin Rawanchaikul's Chiang Mai retrospective is a must-see celebration of a colourful career, but behind the self-possession lurks a mid-career artist's nagging self-doubt.*

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES

Navin Rawanchaikul is covered in sweat. We all are. "It's 42 degrees outside!" bleats someone, as a droplet hurtles down my chin and cascades on to the floorboards of O.K. Store, his father's fabric shop and the former family home. Standing here, in an airless room in the pell-mell heart of Chiang Mai's Worawot Market, the heat is unforgiving, but Navin, a white hand towel for patting himself dry hung round his neck, looks oddly energised. More than okay. Happy.

In recent months, this Indian-Thai artist and the team at his art-studio company, Navin Production, have been preparing for one of the biggest shows of his career: a super-charged retrospective spanning three venues, one of which is this sweltering '70s shophouse. Old works have been brought out of storage, crated in, dusted off; new ones in a range of media created. Handwritten letters, a key but easily missed part of his practice, have been penned; video interviews of Chiang Mai's last remaining rickshaw drivers, one of whom used to drive Navin to and from elementary school, have been shot and edited; and new paintings – vast billboard-sized ones and smaller ones – completed.

A motley crew that includes Navin's family, former collaborators and friends as well as players from the Thai art-world – artists, collectors and media – are here today to see what he's come up with. And so far, reactions are good. "I'm still absorbing it all," says Nalin Advani as his daughter stares into a somber monochrome painting of Navin as a child. "In a sense it's very typical Navin...expansive, but the scale is bigger than anything I've seen so far."



His parents' bedroom, located just above the O.K. Store. Site-specific new paintings occupy the walls and wardrobes.

Others I meet during the opening call "A Tale of Two Homes," as the show is titled, "nostalgic," "personal," "sentimental" – and in hushed tones that make it clear they mean that as a compliment. And some say nothing at all, just quietly amble between rooms, taking it all in – the paintings hidden in wardrobes or hung next to piles of family detritus; the heart-shaped arrangement of rose and jasmine flowers on an old bed; the O.K. playground, complete with see-saw, up on the rooftop; the projector beaming old family photos in the hallway.

Me: I'm struck by the many poignant references to his wife and daughter. Both appear in paintings and sound installations, but aren't here in person. They live in Fukuo-ka, Japan, he explains, as he does much of the year, and can't be here today. I am also drawn to the dust. Thirty years of it covers the floors, and from it Navin's team have created ghostly sketches of found or missing keepsakes – a walking stick, and also a hi-fi his sister "gave to the recycling man," much to his chagrin.

Rarely has the fabric of family life – one family's life – been so intimately unspooled for all to see.

I wonder outside and find Navin's father sitting beneath a canopy erected in the busy street. Along with guests here for the opening, he is sitting enjoying a tub of O.K. Store ice cream while watching "I'm Not OK," a knowingly camp music video in which Navin sings a catchy 1960s pop inflected number alongside local band Harmonica Sunrise. As people walk past looking puzzled, wondering if a Bollywood star isn't in town, a half-smirk flashes on his face as he spots himself making a cameo. He's old and frail now, and this show – with all its site-specific trimmings – is a surprise 80th birthday present for him, as well as some other things: a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Navin Production, and also, in mid-career artist terms, a line in the sand. "I'm not sure, but I think he enjoyed himself," says Navin later on, once his dad has left and the evening's festivities begun.

**B**orn in Chiang Mai in 1971 to parents of Hindu-Punjabi origin, Navin has long been one of the frontrunners of Thailand's underperforming art scene. It's not just the fact that he trained at Chiang Mai University under the late Montien Boonma – the influential installation artist. It's also that Navin's multicultural upbringing as the son of Indian diaspora – and the angst stemming from it – has taken contemporary Thai art to exciting new places.

Bubbling under the lurid and ebullient, Indo-Thai Pop surface of his work is a genuine tension, a seriousness of theme that speaks to people. "I grew up unhappy," he once told an interviewer. "I just wanted to be a Thai." As a youngster he was constantly being reminded that he wasn't Thai and never would be: of his different skin, of his different heritage, of his just being *different*. He was fluent in Thai, of course, but that didn't stop the kids at school from calling him "*khaek*," a pejorative word for people of Indian descent.

In the early pages of comic book *Who is Navin?* (one of the few in his back catalogue that doesn't spin us a magical realist yarn), his late mother reassures him, saying "Don't worry little Navin, believe in yourself and don't forget who you are." Much of his work is an attempt to bridge that sense of dislocation, a dislocation he says was later heightened by his moving to Japan and having a daughter who also felt she didn't quite fit in.

His big break internationally came in the mid-nineties, when he devised a novel form of presenting art: taxi galleries. In Bangkok, Vienna, London, New York and about half a dozen other cities, these exuberantly painted cabs roamed the city, surprising passengers who hailed them with rotating exhibitions. Later, there came a quixotic quest to find other Navins, a name that has its linguistic roots in Sanskrit, and is therefore fairly common in South and Southeast Asia. This global search powered comic books, billboards and music videos that teemed with wit, self-mythologising

and alter-egos, and climaxed with the founding of Navinland – a borderless state for fellow Navins – at the 2011 Venice Biennale. These and other projects were Navin's whimsical way of taking art out of the cloistered gallery and bringing the general public into the fold.

No art-filled taxi cabs feature in this exhibition, sadly, but Navin's skill at elevating his own experiences into grand, quasi-mythical narratives does. Among the treats on show is a video work called *Navins of Bollywood*. Occupying a room on of the second floor of DC Collection – the bucolic venue for satellite exhibition "Tales of Navin" – it is 11 toe-tapping minutes of tabla-driven song-and-dance interspersed with guest turns by a cast of fictional Navins. Watching this furiously edited and very funny travelogue-musical we see what Nicholas Bourriard was getting at when he wrote in *Navin's Sala* that Navin's "fictions attenuate reality and allow us to read it differently."

Navin's draftsmanship, and the skill with which Navin Production has, over the past 20 years, deployed the tropes of Indian visual culture – vivid and intense colours, iconographic saturation, grand panoramas – and appropriated pieces of art history is also in evidence in meticulously hand-painted billboards such as *SUPER(M)ART* (2004). Making these massive works all the more impressive is the contemporary bite of the themes they broach. Instead of merely aping tradition, they are vessels for Navin's complex set of contemporary concerns. *SUPER(M)ART*, for example, squeezes the main players from the provincial Thai art scene into a reimagining of Renaissance painter Paolo Veronese's *The Marriage at Cana*. Its scale, its pomp, its busyness is a form of bitterly ironic commentary – Thailand's art scene is far from grandiose, a minnow in need of a miracle – and it wryly depicts the cliques and the chicanery. For the show, it has been expanded to bring it screaming loudly into the present day.

Recent years have seen Navin



OK Land (2015) surveys the toys and trinkets of Navin's youth and sits, in the old family playroom, above a selection of them.



Painters from the Navin Production team work on the extension of *SUPER(M)ART* (2014-15).

creating fewer of what his longtime collaborator Steven Pettifor calls "elaborate egocentric narratives that blur fact and fantasy." Instead he's been focusing on more earnest community projects in destinations such as Dubai, Philadelphia and remote Japan. For these projects, Navin meets locals, spends time finding out the social history and cultural dynamics that make each community what it is today. Often he gravitates towards the elderly – those with a generational vantage point, but whom society has largely forgotten. Discovering communities in this manner appears to be yet another way of him effacing his own lifelong sense of alienation and dislocation.

Many of the resulting paintings now hang on the walls of studiOK, his new studio set back from Chiang Mai's lethargic Mae Ping River. Interestingly, most are rendered, like the paintings back in the shophouse, in a downcast monochrome. Something has changed. The allusions to globalisation, immigration and post-colonialism are still there, but gone is the retina-popping colour palette pulled straight out of a Technicolor movie. The tone is solemn not tongue-in-cheek. The exuberance and joie de vivre have given way to a brow-furrowed solemnity.

"I'm interested to see what he does next," says a guest at the Saturday night opening party for studiOK. "This feels like the end of something." Indeed, it's hard to shake the impression that Navin is entering a new phase, one that's less concerned with the theatrical obfuscation of fact and fiction – one that's more heartfelt and honestly autobiographical.

After a Buddhist ceremony to bless the new studio building, a Boonma-esque pyre – a rectilinear sculpture of thin wood – is torched beside the river at dusk. After much prodding, it crumbles in a heap, ash drifting up and over the river in a poetic display that leaves onlookers silent.



*Tales of Navin*  
(2014-15) series.

*Four sepulchral new paintings depict the funeral of Navin's former selves. In the first, they unite in an "egomaniacal requiem." And in the last, there is only a red spider lily – Japan's flower of death – glowing radiantly under an ominously moonlit sky.*

Later that night, Navin joins the band for a rendition of "I'm Not OK." It takes no small amount of self-possession for an artist to stage his own retrospective, and even more to get up on stage to sing while clad in a loud *khao par mar* suit, but the lyrics tell a different story – reveal a nagging self-doubt and disquiet. The crowd whoops and Navin jigs, but the words are cut through with the sort of guilt that only families and ageing parents can inspire: "What my heart wants is not easy to find, because my dad needs an heir, a successor to his store to sell his fabrics forevermore. My dad's OK, but I'm not OK, because I want to go my own way."

And again and again the specter of death rears its head. At DC Collection, Boonma's *Charcoal Pagoda with Pots* sits yards from Navin's installation of clear glass bottles, each containing a photograph of an elderly Chiang Mai resident. Most of them have likely passed away since the



Navin and the Chiang Mai-based Harmonica Sunrise band perform as the OK Band.

work was created twenty years ago, giving the title, *There is No Voice*, and the form the bottles resemble, a Buddhist pagoda, a heavy pathos. And at StudiOK, four sepulchral new paintings entitled *Tales of Navin* depict the funeral of Navin's former selves. In one, they unite in an "egomaniacal requiem." In the next, the same neo-classical setting is filled with their effects – the Mao-inspired busts, the comic books, the "Who is Navin?" signs. And in the last, there is only a floating red spider lily – Japan's flower of death – glowing radiantly under an ominously moonlit sky. The message could hardly be clearer: Navin, as we have known him, is no longer. ✕

*"A Tale of Two Homes" runs through July 31st at O.K. Store and studioOK. "Tales of Navin" is on view (by appointment only) at DC Collection until October 31st. See [www.navinproduction.com](http://www.navinproduction.com) for venue addresses.*



*There is No Voice* (1993) and Montien Boonma's *Charcoal Pagoda with Pots* (1994). Framed on either side of these works are two of Navin's letters, one to Montien (2010) and one to his own daughter (2011).