

Text/
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Portals to Presence



Gongkan’s surreal and meditative artworks are an invitation to teleport back to your true self.

GONGKAN



A single event can change the course of your life. For Kantapon Metheekul, better known as Gongkan, his career was forever altered one night while staring at the ceiling of his New York apartment. After leaving his job as an art director, the then-25-year-old uprooted his life in Bangkok, his hometown, to the Big Apple in pursuit of his calling in art. Facing bouts of depression, he imagined the sudden appearance of a black hole. He thought if only he could go into it, an escape to a better, and perhaps, more accepting, world. Channelling these existential thoughts, Gongkan took to the gritty city streets to create murals on walls and shipping containers. Using flat graphic strokes, he depicted human figures venturing in and out of portals in search of a place of refuge. “I didn’t have any money or connections and the people around me were all working very hard for their dreams,” Gongkan reflected. “I felt this work was not just for me but for everyone fighting for a dream in New York.” A decade later,

his aspirations have become reality. Whether it’d be through paintings, sculptures or interactive installations, the creative’s introspective *Teleport Art* has appeared in a slew of solo and group exhibitions in Paris, Seoul, Los Angeles, Bangkok, Macau, and China as well as international art fairs like Art Basel Hong Kong and Taipei Dangdai. Co-signed by Tim Cook, his more recent works juxtapose his surrealist black portals with fields, skies and florals. A genderless child also appears as the main subject. “The child can be me or anyone,” Gongkan shared. “When people see the child, I wish they can relate.” The placement of the black hole on the heart marks another development in the Thai artist’s work. According to him, this shift reflects a personal growth. “My past work was about freedom,” he admitted. “At the time, I was very young. I thought: I want to go somewhere that I will be accepted and be more happy. Growing up, I realised that teleporting back to yourself is more important.” And by

embarking on a journey back to the self, Gongkan is proof that you can only soar higher. Last year, the artist continued to expand his activities beyond the world of fine art. Apart from a collaboration with Casetify, the artist also explored the virtual plane with his first NFT collection, *Galactic Konquest*. However, what remains most important to him is using his creativity to positively impact others. “I think that if you have good energy, you can spread it to those around you and send love to many people,” Gongkan reflected. “This is the most important thing.”

MANIFESTO: You're in Hong Kong for Art Basel. What's the experience been like?

GONGKAN: I love the weather in Hong Kong during the winter. Also, the food and the vibes [of the city]. The art scene is very good, there are so many good galleries and I think both the government and society support art very much.

M Was there a formative moment that sparked your passion for visual arts?

G I've loved art since I was very young. At school, I did very well in art but not in other classes like math or science. (*Laughs*) I also loved to watch Japanese anime and draw monsters with powers like Pokémon and Digimon.

M You worked in advertising before going into art. What led you to follow this alternate path?

G After two years in the advertising industry, I realised that I didn't want to use my creativity to sell products. I wanted to use my creativity for myself and to express myself. I quit my job, and at the time, I was 25 years old. It was a good time to move to another city so I decided to go to New York.

M What did you learn from your time in New York?

G How to believe in myself and that I can do it. Also, how to do something that isn't in my comfort zone. Before New York, I just drew on paper and canvas. At first, no gallery accepted my work because I'm not connected with them. I'm from Thailand, they'd rather have local artists. So I thought, what should I do to show my art? I decided

to do something public with street art. I painted on walls and buildings... something I never did before.

M In a variation of your signature *Teleport Art*, you replaced the black hole with a mirror. Why?

G While the black hole allows you to go anywhere, the mirror is inspired by water and its reflection. When you look at a mirror, all you can see is a reflection but you can't imagine what's on the other side...

M What world do you envision when you personally look through the black hole?

G The black is magical, so it's not fixed. For me, it's different all the time too depending on the situation, context and my mental state.

M You're incorporating more text elements into your work. For example in your paintings, *The Pain Shall Pass* and *Peaceful Mode... On*. Why?

G The first time I didn't feel brave enough to put any words because I felt that it wasn't fine art. Now, I think that art has no rules. So I think it depends on what I want to show to the people. If I think the word is helpful for them, I just put it in my work. I don't need to fix myself to justify paintings. I can write. I can do 3D. I can do anything if it is good for the work.

M At the end of 2023, you released your first NFT collection *Galactic Konquest*. How did you approach creating your NFTs differently than your typical art?

G NFT is very different from the art world. NFT is like my playground. It's very fun. For it, I created a science novel. The premise is: if the world cannot survive, you need to find a new world through a teleportation machine. It's something crazy with no barriers.

M That's quite interesting. You mentioned that as a kid you were drawn to sci-fi like monsters and animations...

G Yes, and when I was young, I used to tell stories to my younger brother based on my drawings!



M And, what's the next thing we can anticipate from your NFT?

G The next chapter is about humans fusing with aliens to make a new species!

M You recently also created a painting with Thai illustrator and artist Suntur. Tell us more about the collaboration.

G We've known each other for 15 years. We studied in the same university and lived together in New York. We've supported each other for a long time. The interesting thing about the collaboration is that even though we are very good friends, when you work with someone, you need to respect each other's styles. Him and I respect each other a lot and I'm happy that our styles blend in a good way.

M What excites you most about the Thai art scene?

G I think it is growing a lot. 10 years ago, teenagers couldn't imagine wanting to be an artist and surviving. Now it is different. There are a lot more

opportunities, galleries and support. Before my generation, collectors would only collect Thai antiques. Now, contemporary art is getting more important. My generation is the first to make art in Thailand boom.

M What is something that you'd like to see more of?

G We still need to support each other more. People in Thailand still think work from other places is better. Sometimes, collectors will say that Japanese, Korean or Western art is cooler than Thai. If we appreciate each other more and give more opportunities to local artists and the new generation, the art scene will grow.

M Tell us about your next solo exhibition in China. What can we expect?

G My next show is in Changsha, Hunan, with paintings, sculptures and interactive art. The concept is based on the idea that people always say that you need to follow your heart. But I think you shouldn't follow your heart too much without reason or judgment.

Also, that everything is life. If you're happy, it's normal. If you're sad, it's normal also. Bad things come, bad things go. Happiness too. Happiness comes, happiness goes. Life is like this. Nothing is stuck with you forever. It's all about being present.

M Apart from your art, how else do you process your internal thoughts and emotions?

G I meditate. It's a great way to focus on yourself. From it, I know how to forgive myself and how to forgive people who hurt me.

M Let's go back 10 years. What advice would you give to your former self?

G No advice. (*Laughs*) Because if I didn't get stressed then, I wouldn't be where I am now. I really understood myself at the time too, I know what I needed. But if I have to give advice, maybe it would be, you need to take care of yourself more.

www.instagram.com/gongkan_

