

Exhibition Guide

Mit Jai Inn: *Dreamworld*

15 September — 21 November 2021

Second Floor Galleries

"When I paint, it's not only with my eyes, but with all of my senses: touch, smell, movement. The whole entity." Mit Jai Inn

Ikon presents the first major solo exhibition in Europe by artist Mit Jai Inn (b.1960, Chiang Mai). A leading figure of contemporary art in Thailand, Mit is known for his colourful artworks that merge painting and sculpture. *Dreamworld* features recent and new works made for Ikon, which embody his vision of art "as a utopian dream within everyday life" and collective hopes for a brighter future.

For Mit, painting is both intensely physical and deeply meditative. Often working at night, on rolls of unstretched canvas, he uses his hands, fingers and palette knives to dab, slap and pull colours across the surface, blending them intuitively. The thick consistency of his paint is derived from a mixture of oils, gypsum powder, colour pigments and acrylic, often loosened with linseed oil. In time, circular patches and specks of colour are built up, creating a natural rhythm, pattern and language. By compressing, cutting, curving and criss-crossing the canvas, he constructs geometric forms that either stand alone or hang from the gallery's architecture.

Mit's art spans a variety of forms which he has developed over the past 35 years. Having studied fine art at Silpakorn University (1982–1986), he later enrolled on the Master's programme at University of Applied Arts Vienna (1987). In Vienna, Mit absorbed a culture of psychoanalysis, with specific interests in dreams and esoteric enquiry, social architecture and reform. There he met Franz West (1947–2012) who invited him to work as his studio assistant, developing a series of manipulable constructions that could be taken, worn and used by viewers. This informed Mit's own idea of art as a free form of distribution that can counter the controlled dynamics of capitalist economies. For many years, he eschewed opportunities for exhibitions, preferring to work anonymously with artists and communities as part of Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI), established on his return to Thailand in 1992.

A republican and activist, Mit's work often conveys his resistance to the Thai monarchy and military rule. Since 2020, popular protests in Thailand have called for political reform and for King Maha Vajiralongkorn to step down. Though punishable by imprisonment, thousands of people, including Mit, continue to campaign at their own risk, galvanised by the possibility of change. At times, colours in Mit's works such as red, blue, yellow and silver reference Thai politics and his Indigenous heritage. Their defiance of traditional formats of painting convey his rebellious spirit.

This exhibition is supported by Birmingham School of Art and Centre for Chinese Visual Arts, Birmingham City University. It is accompanied by a comprehensive monograph on Mit's life and work, published by Ikon and ArtAsiaPacific Foundation.

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1. Midlands Dwelling (2021)
Oil, colour pigment and glue on canvas
310 x 837 x 670 cm
Acrylic on canvas on metal
(1)–(4) 418 x 3 x 3 cm (approx.); (5) 61 x 232 x 77 cm

Visitors are invited to walk into *Midlands Dwelling*, an installation of canvas covering the floor and three walls of the gallery. Layers of paint evoke the climate of his outdoor studio in Chiang Mai, where high levels of humidity keep his paints sticky and viscous. A set of tall, welded sculptures, partially covered in canvas and paint, rest between the wall and the floor. Made during Mit's residency at the Birmingham School of Art in August 2021, these ambiguous objects can be interpreted as staffs, totems or large primitive tools.



The dim lighting conjures the feeling of being in prehistoric habitation, imagining the moment when early humans first enacted their dreams as drawings. It also reflects his nomadism, as a descendent of the Yong, an Indigenous people from the North of Thailand, who would often move according to climate changes and in pursuit of work, living on locations temporarily. *Midlands Dwelling* has been Mit's makeshift studio, a site for socialising and action, but also for peace and solitude.



2. #dreammantra (2021)
Oil on canvas; acrylic and glue on canvas, metal
Various dimensions

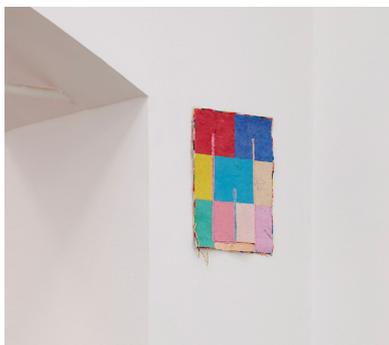
#dreammantra invites viewers to take one of the double-sided canvases or wired sculptures for the purpose of communal exchange. The pledge is to follow, according to the viewer's interpretation, a series of dictums. These recall works of written instructions by conceptual artists like Bruce Nauman and Lawrence Weiner and spiritual notions of gift-giving in Buddhist practice.



At the age of nine, Mit joined the Djittabhawan Buddhist College in Pattaya, where he trained as a novice monk until his mid-teenage years. There, he learned the value and discipline of meditation and living with minimal means. He was a regular recipient of alms, the practice in Buddhist cultures whereby people pay their respects to monks through offerings of clothes and food. It is possible that this tradition inspired Mit's consideration of his artworks as gifts and his willingness to freely hand his work over to the care of others.



Once viewers perform the pledge, a polaroid photograph is taken of their chosen work and taped in the room in its place. Viewers are invited to write their social media handles on the caption (e.g. @ikongallery) and post photographs and videos of their object on these platforms. Only one person or household is allowed to complete the ritual at a time.



3. *Dream Works* (1999–2021)*

Oil on canvas

Each 40 x 30 cm

The title of the exhibition is inspired by *Dream Works* (1999–), an ongoing series of small works that Mit started at the end of the last century. Each painted canvas contains internal slits that allow it to be curved, looped, hung or placed on the ground. Intended to express the fear and excitement felt by people on the eve of a new millennium, they embody his vision of art as a utopian dream.

**Dream Works* are also displayed in Ikon's reception.



4. *Untitled (Scroll)* (2021)

Oil on canvas

(1) 149.5 (height) x 67 (diameter) cm

(2) 149 (height) x 65 (diameter) cm

Part of the series *Scrolls* (1987–), this pair of sculptures is made of six layers of canvas which, once painted, solidify into structures that stand on their own. Each is an inversion of the other, with spots and parallel lines painted respectively. Within these works we see diverse references to traditions of scroll painting and the formal and phenomenological aspects of minimalism.

5. *Loops* (2019)

Oil on canvas

Each 300 x 20 cm (approx.)



6. *Patch Work 2* (2019)

Oil on canvas

244 x 150.5 x 18 cm

Around the same time as *Dream Works*, Mit started making *Patch Works* (1992–), paintings comprising grids of interlocking colours arranged in large blocks, with slits that cause sections to droop and fold. While previous *Patch Works* combined grid-based units into quilt-like forms, the new work evolves into a large scale, wall-based weaving. Its weft of variegated ribbons is anchored by bold selvages, while its warp is snagged and looped into an anarchic composition that recalls legible forms such as musical scores or algorithms.



7. *Dream Tunnel* (2021)

Oil on canvas

542 x 153 x 804 cm

Dream Tunnel is a formal development of two ongoing series, *Wall Works* (1986–) and *Screens* (1994–). *Wall Works* are brightly coloured, unframed paintings used to intervene in public and private spaces, including roads, galleries and apartments. With *Screens*, we see two-sided canvases slit to create buoyant ribbon panels. Hanging like warp looms without weights, these breathable filters are intended to act as navigational devices, “cleansing, stagnant or wounded energies.”

Dream Tunnel creates a room within a room. Through it, we can see art historical references to action and colour field painting, abstraction and postmodernism. The use of silver paint alludes to the traditional role of the Tai Khun (a Northern Thai ethnic group) as silversmiths in the Thai royal court. The reflective minerals increase the dazzling effect of their combined colours and give them their “magic” glow. This encourages us to look outwards, beyond the confines of our everyday experience; towards the transcendental events behind our daily dramas.



8. *Aquarius Nerves* (2021)

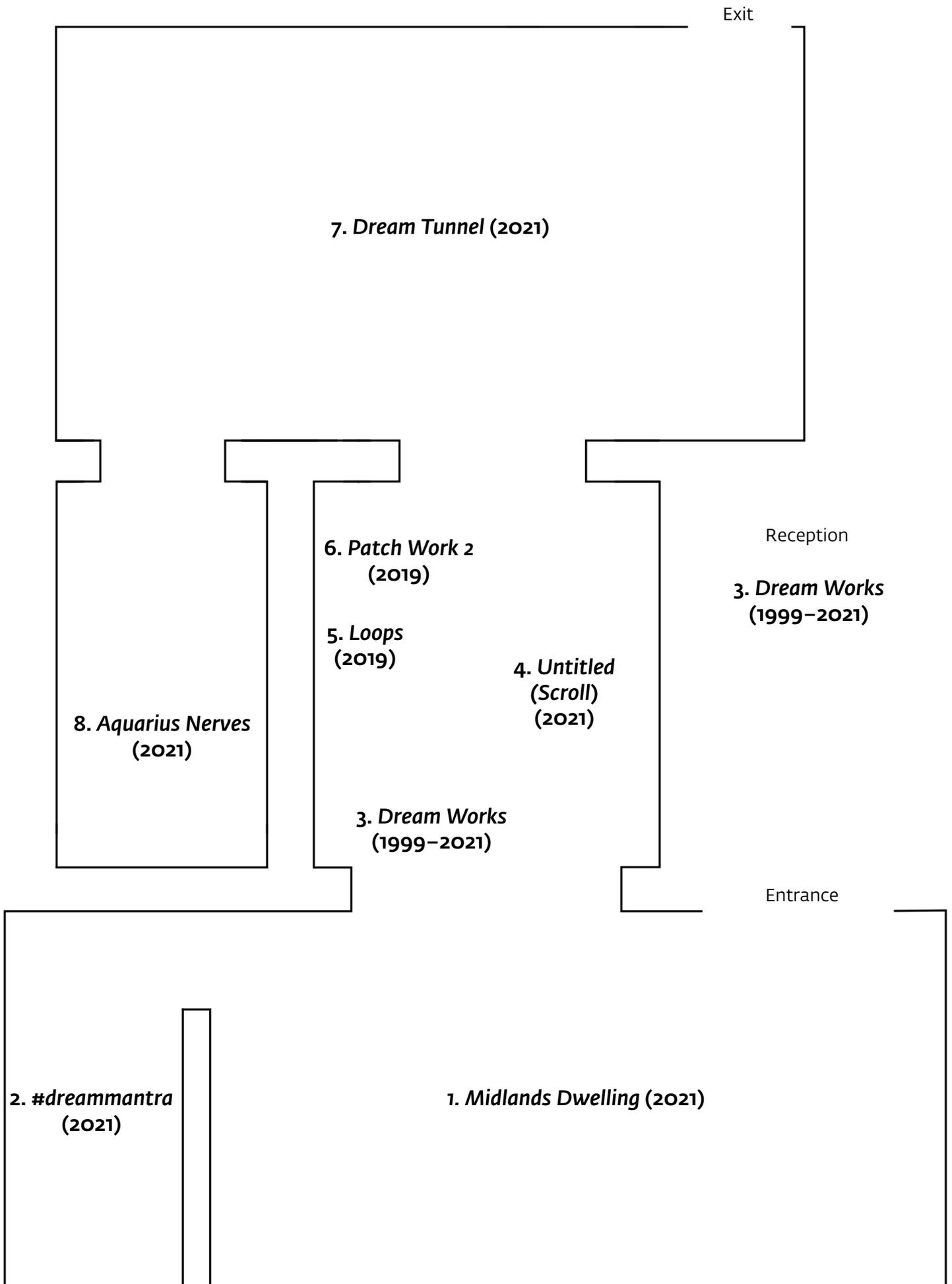
Metal structure, acrylic on canvas on metal, motor, wet paint

194 x 200.5 x 235.5 cm (approx.)

Aquarius Nerves is a new work designed in collaboration with artists Kengo Brown, Dion Kitson and Daniel Salisbury at the Birmingham School of Art. It is also a site-specific work, mirroring the functional aspects of the room (which contains the gallery’s freight lift). Designed to create an automatic painting, the mechanism is periodically activated, nervously springing into action. The distorted twist is an animistic element, reminiscent of the Urna, a spiral or circular dot. Paint drips from the loose threads, creating a hazy band of colour on the canvas.

For Mit, *Aquarius Nerves* touches on a much-anticipated celestial event. On 21 December 2020, the two largest planets in our solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, aligned with the sign of Aquarius for the first time in 400 years. This great conjunction has been linked to major power shifts and changing social orders across the world. For many, this seems like the end of the utopian dream, signalling the failure of this project and a descent into chaos. Within this broken situation, the artist strives to circulate positive energy between humans and the natural world.

Second Floor



Exhibition catalogue



This publication includes full-colour documentation of the exhibition and recent work, alongside projects from the 1980s, when Mit was living in Vienna and working with Franz West. Essays by Ikon Curator Melanie Pocock, art historian Simon Soon, and critic and curator Brian Curtin, as well as an interview with the artist by Gridthiya Gaweewong, Artistic Director, The Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok.

Published by Ikon and ArtAsiaPacific Foundation.

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