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LAST WORD

First Person

Navin Rawanchaikul The internationally celebrated Thai-Indian artist, fresh from a retrospective show and book *Navin's Sala*, leaves his famous mobile taxi galleries behind and prepares for a greater focus on community-based projects.

I'm a mix of cultures. My parents were Indian but I grew up in Chiang Mai.

I felt a lot of tension during my schooling in Chiang Mai. I am a kaek and the kids made jokes about it.

"How can I be a part of Thailand?" I wondered. It raised a lot of questions. I was born here, I grew up here. So what is my identity? What is the meaning of being Thai? What is Thai culture?

This tension turned out to be positive because I now use it in my work. It's the source of what I do. I moved to Japan, which is quite nationalistic and has closely knit communities, and I felt that same tension.

As an outsider, you can see more. Thailand is very welcoming to foreigners, but there's the mockery. Japan is less welcoming. But in the end, you're still an outsider.

I use my life to create art but it's not all about me. It's not just about Indians. It's about the community, the people I work with. It's a basic issue.



People are too concerned with identity. It's important, but it's the source of too many problems.

I can't say if the feeling of belonging to a community is good or bad. As the world gets more global, people feel like they don't belong to anything. That's why people turn to online communities.

On the other hand, I suffered from being rejected by communities that were too tight, both in Thailand and in Japan.

I don't think art can change society, but it can deliver messages. I think art can raise questions, get people thinking about things they hadn't ever reflected upon. I wish art could do more, but I don't think it can. The rest is for politicians.

At one point, I felt burnt out, used by the international art world. It just all felt absurd. They were using my identity.

Most art shows are just about the market. I couldn't see the point in making art anymore.

I asked myself, "How can I be in touch with a wider public?" Art can't change society but how can it influence it? That became my goal, to focus on communities.

I got thrown in jail in China and it made me reflect on my work. I was trying to work with the community, but, as the police pointed out, I was only confusing them. They thought my red Navin Party books were a new sect.

My work is collaborative. I work with different artists and I have five permanent staff at my workshop in Chiang Mai. I see my work as a platform others can extend and refer to.

I don't have a big ego. I'm confident, but the Navin you see in my work is a character, not the real me.

I'm sad my daughter doesn't speak Thai. She's 8. Last month, I got her a Thai passport. I remember feeling sad I spoke Punjabi but not Hindi. But my wife is Japanese and no one speaks Thai at home.

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My daughter has to face the same problems I faced in school. She's asked me not to go to her school. My wife is good with this stuff. You have to understand that she's in this difficult situation.

Nowadays, curators are more important than artists. You have to sell your work. I do, too. I don't mind showing my work in a commercial space, like the showroom for The River. Commercial, non-commercial, it doesn't matter. Everything is commercial.

You have to face reality. When I had my gallery in a taxi, that was commercial. The taxi sells a service. Artists can't live in a cave. They have to know what's going on in their community.

Chalermchai [Kositpipat]—he's popular, but that's OK. I spoke to an art student the other day who said his parents let him study art because they saw that Chalermchai is rich and successful.

Artists have to be a part of the community. Putting a gallery in a taxi was to make art public and to question institutions. Taxis are global, but the inside is always local.

Interview by Gregoire Glachant