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Navin Rawanchaikul's quirky works focus on what is fiction and what is reality. Photo: Oliver Tsang

Navin Rawanchaikul believes an artist's talent should be more important than national identity, writes **Yenni Kwok**

Individual thinker

Sporting a pair of pin-striped pants, a bright red shirt and equally loud blue-red-white checkered jacket, Thai-Indian artist Navin Rawanchaikul looks as quirky and cheerful as his works.

His first exhibition in Hong Kong, titled *Navinscope: Dim Sum Rider*, at the Tang Contemporary Art gallery features hand-painted movie billboards that satirise scenes from Hong Kong films.

However, instead of movie stars, Navin has painted movers and shakers of the Hong Kong art scene: local artists, critics, gallery owners and art collectors. The works with their dozens of figures invite laughter but this isn't the only intention of the 37-year-old.

Beneath the mischievous artistic articulation, Navin – not unlike the court jesters of old – seeks to provoke some serious thoughts.

He says the works are a nod to Hong Kong's position as one of the biggest international art markets as well as to its iconic film industry.

"I recreated the Hong Kong movie scenes using a Thai-Indian painting style," says Navin. "I like to play with the idea: what is fiction and what is reality? It's also asking the question of what does it mean to be a star, because these people are performers in the field of art."

The theme of what's real and what's not prevails in his latest project on the mainland and India which depicts parodies of Cultural Revolution posters with him as "Chairman of the Navin Party" and a 11-minute Bollywood-style music-and-dance video titled *Navins of Bollywood*.

In this fictional story about his journey to his ancestral land to find

some namesakes, the artist eventually meets a spiritual guru who encourages him to unite all Navins in the world under one party.

The short film made its debut at the cultural programme of the World Bank-International Monetary Fund meeting in Singapore in 2006, the same year the artist set up his quixotic political caucus.

"The Navin Party tries to connect Navins around the world," he says, "and at the same time it asks questions about the meaning of national identity."

Founded by a "lonely artist in search of connection and community" (as the eponymous website explains) the two-year-old Navin Party is his reaction to what he sees as the ridiculous obsession of art institutions with youth and national identity.

Some years ago, art collectors and galleries were seeking young German artists from Leipzig, and today it is mainland talent. Who knows what nationality will be sought next? Navin believes the focus should be on the individual rather than national identity, which is more meaningful and less restrictive.

Like many sons and daughters of a diaspora, Navin has a complicated identity: he was born in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand to a family of Hindi-Punjabi textile traders. (In Thailand, the textile business is associated with the Indian community.)

Popping out now and then in his works is a blue-red-white checkered fabric, which is based on the pattern of traditional Thai cloth.

"Thailand is very open," Navin says. "It has not only an Indian community but also a big Chinese

community. I attended Thai schools, went to Indian temples, everything was fine. But I asked myself why we were different from the majority."

Navin's sense of alienation intensified after he started to divide his time between his hometown and Fukuoka where his Japanese wife and daughter live.

"Japan has a very strong idea about nation: this is our group and you are foreigners," says the artist, who speaks Thai, Japanese and a little Punjabi.

"I feel strongly about being a stranger in one place and also another place. This influences my work a lot."

The art world is supposed to be global, but it often uses national identity as a commercialised commodity

Navin Rawanchaikul (above)

But in the globalised world of arts, isn't artistic talent more important than national identity? Yet, sadly, according to Navin, the reality isn't so. "In the art world, you often deal with questions such as how you represent your nation. The art world is supposed to be global, but it often uses national identity as a commercialised commodity."

He admits: "I am also part of this game but I also want to be critical."

Highly influenced by German artist Joseph Beuys' idea that art shouldn't be detached from society,

Navin burst on to the Thai art scene in 1992 co-organising what he called the "Chiang Mai Social Installation".

He and other young artists held installations, performances and talks in temples and cemeteries around the city – although his own installation at a Buddhist temple was destroyed by vandals who believed such use of a religious site was inappropriate.

Three years later, he began a project that propelled his name internationally. In Bangkok, where people spend hours stuck in traffic jams, he set up a mobile art gallery in a taxi – an idea he later took to Birmingham, Bonn, Sydney, Mexico City and other cities. He also recorded his conversations with cab drivers. "Taxi drivers are very good social commentators," he says.

The aim of the taxi project, he says, is to bridge the gap between contemporary art and our daily life by bringing art directly in the community. "Identity is still important. It isn't about nation though but about community."

Navin's questioning of national identity can be provocative. Last year, for an exhibition at Tang Contemporary Art Centre in Beijing, he created paintings and prints modelled on Maoist propaganda posters to celebrate the "9th Congress of the Navin Party".

He also made busts of Chairman Navin and handed out copies of little red books, titled *Quotations from Comrade Navin*, on Tiananmen Square – an act that led to his arrest. (The video of the artist handing out the books is shown in the Hong Kong exhibition.) Mainland police interrogated him for five hours until a Beijing curator explained the artist's hoax. He was released after



"Chairman Navin" busts and little red books. Photo: courtesy of the artist

signing a statement that he would stop distributing the books.

Navin says the Mao-inspired works lampoon an attitude in the international art scene, not mock a certain chapter in Chinese history.

"If you are a Chinese artist and if you want to be successful in the art market, you have to talk about Mao, socialism or make big face paintings," he says.

"I don't mean to say it's good or bad, I simply want to point out it's a trend."

"Is talking about China or talking about Mao reserved for Chinese artists? For me, it'd be interesting to see how non-Chinese artists talk about the history of China."

Tang Contemporary Art, Basement, Hollywood Centre, 223 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan. Inquiries: 2544 9918, 2544 9919. Ends Wed

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