

Displacement & Misplacement

Millie Young

Abstract

This research is about the creation of a collection of artwork inspired by the experience of displacement of myself and the misplacement of my art porte folio during the floods in Thailand 2011.

The aim is to demonstrate elephant portraiture derived from the unique experience of camping alongside the elephants and being able to observe at close quarters their personalities and characteristics. It is a commentary of the displacement experience of the elephants, primarily from their present home at Panead Klong Chang; and secondarily the wider commentary of the elephants' presence in the human environment, not their wild natural habitat; giving the suggestion that the displacement is not just from their domesticated home. It will include selected works that were the misplaced artworks initially left at the house when I had to evacuate in a hurry.

The collection's visual theme is the painting technique and medium, which I have developed over the last ten years. The paintings are on canvas or paper and use a limited palette of Titanium White, Paynes Grey, Rose Madder, Charcoal dust and Gold acrylic paint and gold leaf. The ultimate aim is to get a chiaroscuro effect with light and shadow, which is then expanded on with the layers of gold and gold leaf. The effect is that the paintings react to their environment changing as the daylight progresses giving an illusion of life and a living expression that is never static.

The work links to my interest in oral history as a key theme of the work as the exhibition is a record of and response to a very personal event that happened to me and to the millions of people also living between Nakorn Sawan and Bangkok during 2011

Introduction

This research came about as a part of on going studies of elephants in Thai culture. At the end of 2000 the research began with a meeting up with world reknown elephant researcher Richard Lair at the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre (TECC) and Sangduen 'Lek' Chailert of Elephant Nature Park (ENP). Both gave insights into elephants in Thai culture and history which have developed into a series of work about the elephants and mahouts of Thailand. I met my mentor, Richard Lair, in 2000 at the start of my research in Thailand. He introduced me to Khun Prasob, the then manager at the Mahout Training School in Lampang

in 2001. He took me one morning into the jungle that surrounds the center. We went to find Prathida, Princess Sirindhorn's adopted elephant. Within moments of us getting out of the van, the distant silhouette of an elephant could be seen waving her trunk, and twisting and dancing, squeaking, chirping, and rumbling ecstatically. As Khun Prasob got closer the elephant was visibly shaking with excitement, peeing, purring and chirping. She grabbed him with her trunk, and pulled her to him like a long lost relative. As a witness I was humbled, amazed and satisfied. All allegations of the cruelty related to the captive elephant's training and life in Thailand I knew in this instance DID NOT APPLY. This was one very happy elephant. Khun Prasob told me how he had been present at her birth, that there had been difficulties, and that he had been part of Prathida's life for the last 7 or so years. Their bond had grown and was something I could only be a witness to, but because of their bond I too could stand by her side in wonder. In this moment I realized I was insignificant to her and dependent on him. Without the mahout, I was in danger, but with the mahout the whole fascinating world was opened up. Through their symbiotic bond, I could be drawn in to an understanding of what an elephant REALLY is. These mahouts are men whose tradition is over 4000 years old, but who are invisible to many visitors; their culture and knowledge is sidelined, ignored and treated as unimportant by often well meaning foreigners who come with as little knowledge as I had had, in the hope that they can save the elephants. Sadly over the years I have also witnessed the all too often short sightedness of some owners who fail to appreciate their responsibility to those who put their lives second to their elephants, the mahouts. Quite simply I realized that I CANNOT stand so near, see so much, without the mahouts and that they are the key to the elephant's future, especially her in Thailand.

In 2003 I worked with Richard Lair at the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre to record and observe the Thai Elephant Orchestra's musical elephants; I also worked with the painting elephants, helping organizing palettes, mixing color combinations and recording their 'signature' strokes. This research led to selecting works and developing a series of portraits linked with their personal 'signature' paintings for the exhibition 'Clang Chang Swish Bang' at the Booth Natural History Museum, Brighton.

I was also a regular visitor at Elephant Nature Park, in Mae Taeng, a sanctuary for elderly and disabled elephants, there I was able to observe and explore individual elephants' personalities in their semi-free life at the park. More recently I have been studying the bull elephants at the Royal Elephant Kraal Ayutthaya, where they are an intrinsic part of the rituals and ceremonies of Thai history, as well as part on the tourist circuit; they regularly reenact Thai historical events demonstrating the admirable experience of the Kuay / Gui mahouts from Surin mahouts of a 4000 year mutual history with elephants.

The purpose of moving to live in Thailand had two undisclosed wishes:

a) to continue to teach animation

b) to live near to elephants to enable continued to research and observation about elephants in Thai Culture and their future in conservation and environmental terms.

Both wishes have been granted. However every wish comes at a cost and in order to live by elephants in Ayutthaya and to teach animation in Salaya, there are 100 kilometres distance to cross each day. But in 2011 the stakes were raised very much higher when all was sent into turmoil at the beginning of “Displacement and Misplacement”.

On October 4th the 100 year old stilted wooden Thai house on the Lopburi River in Ayutthaya flooded to 31/2 metres depth, however it only stands 2 1/2 metres high on stilts designed to withstand the annual flooding; but along with most of the central plains of Thailand that year the annual flooding was far from normal. I was out of the country and returned on October 7th to find the water had already come over a metre into the house, in amongst the ephemera of all household belongings, was the art portefolio with over 20 years of artwork. In my absence attempts to put as much as possible up high were made by Jo and her family... unknowing of what was contained within. On the day of my return I went straight to the house and in the panic and fear of the still rising water the portefolio was overlooked, left behind...misplaced.

A few days later I contacted Jo who rowed to my house and retrieved it and kept it at their house, a bamboo house at Baan Chang. They remained living there in the metre space in the roof and on top throughout the 3 month displacement with their two children, their dog, my dog, some chickens, all their worldly goods and my art porte folio. Their kindness came to symbolise for me much of what is so good in Thai culture. Strength, loyalty and kindness. The experience opened the realisation that life is brief, each day is precious and should be shared.

Initially displacement took me away from Ayutthaya, through the metre deep waters to Salaya back to work. Staying at a colleague's house, but ten days later the waters caught up, the University closed and it was necessary to move. So I was for 3 months homeless, a semi-refugee, displaced by the environment and eventually left with no choice but to live in a tent at the camp-site at Wat Phu Khao Thong alongside thousands of Ayutthaya's residents, cows, goats, chicken and 70 of the elephants from the Royal Kraal. Displaced.



This then was the source of inspiration for the exhibition ‘Displacement and Misplacement’ , formed of elephant portraits past and present as a direct result from that experience. The selected works are from the misplaced artworks. The new works are images derived from living alongside the 70 elephants where I was in a position to sketch, study and photograph them at close quarters. Creating these became a coping mechanism and a means of therapy, whilst literally stuck in a vacuum of time and space. Later when the waters receded and I was back in home, painting came easily and quickly, helping to unravel the madness that had been experienced. When you are in a heightened emotionally stressed situation normality becomes a deviant of it’s previous existence, the madness it self becomes normalised; and when normal circumstances return, the mind and body hesitate to follow. Art fills this void eases the transistion.

My life in Thailand, my experience with elephants and elephant people and that extraordinary experience from the flood have taught me much about what is important in life. And one thing is paramount; you cannot work alone and be effective. I have witnessed both good and bad in these experiences and seen the best and worst in people and situations. At times I felt I should give up, the obstacles seeming too enormous to overcome. But if I am to remain true to my beliefs I must share what I have learned.

The children are our future and they need to know what is important in life and that they are part of the change we need to see in the world. Issues of environment, conservation, sustainability are not just an add on to make us feel good in the here and now, they are the only road to a future for the planet and we can only do this together.

Both the elephants and I have returned to our respective homes by the river in Ayutthaya.

Materials

The selected works are from these works and are the misplaced artworks from my portfolio. These works have never been exhibited in Thailand. They show the development of the drawing and painting techniques from a decade of studies. In order to maintain the theme of the works for the collection the paintings were selected to show the progression of the technique and palette. The style has developed over the year's through an exploration of the light and dark relief of the elephant's skin, using acrylic on canvas or watercolor paper with a limited palette: Titanium White, Paynes Grey and Carmine Red, combined with gold leaf and charcoal dust. The rationale for the new works of art was to develop a specific series in the collection of elephant portraiture derived from the experience of camping alongside the elephants. There I had had the unique experience of being able to observe at close quarters their personalities and characteristics. As the new series of work developed its narrative began to be revealed. The environmental settings of each portrait began a commentary of the displacement experience of the elephants primarily from their present home at Panead Klong Chang and secondarily in the wider juxtaposition of the elephants' presence in the human environment, not the wild natural habitat but a world with human construction, and waste; giving the suggestion that the displacement is perhaps not just from their domesticated home. As the theme took hold I found I was obsessing with the environment with which they (we) were placed. Each painting has evidence of the surrounding human technology, electricity wires, discarded rubbish or lack of adequate food resources - sometimes seen subtly in the backgrounds and sometimes incongruous in their strange juxtaposition within the composition. The issue of elephant conservation in the Thai National and International forums is controversial. With issues of human elephant conflicts over resources and environment, the huge decline in both wild and domestic elephants in Thailand, poaching for the illegal ivory trade and babies captured to feed into the tourist industry, riding elephants and performing animals are all serious issues that need to be addressed in a sensitive and practical ways. There is no doubting the majesty of the animals, and their relationship with humans is unique in the animal world. Their role in Thai cultural and history including war is something of national pride and is a testimony to an incredible synthesis of mutual cooperation and existence, one which is being challenged with the drive toward modernity. The future however needs co-operation among all parties involved, which is slow in coming and the problems are not easily resolved.

The disquiet that I had experienced due to my own displacement was paralleled and amplified by the elephants' experience. As the series of paintings grew this underlying

theme became the focus. The collection is not a claim to any answer of the bigger picture, but it attempts to address the concept of displacement based on a real experience in such a way as to open discussion not throw accusation or glib answers in any direction.

Results

The collection's visual theme is the painting technique and medium choices I have developed over the last ten years. The paintings are on canvas or paper and use a limited palette of Titanium White, Paynes Grey, Charcoal dust and Gold acrylic paint, gold leaf and Carmine red and sometimes Rose Madder. The colour Payne's Grey is named after a British watercolorist and art lecturer, William Payne (1760–1830), who recommended the mixture to students as a more subtle alternative to the grey tones derived from a mix with just black. Payne's Grey has a bluish dark grey color and is made by mixing a blue and a black together, typically ultramarine and bone black. When used straight from the tube, Payne's Grey gives a very dark shadow with a cool hint of colour and when used thinly, the blueness becomes more apparent. In acrylic paint the paint can be applied in both thinly in a water-colour style or thickly like oil paint to give a deep, dark, more textural result.



I have been experimenting to develop a style that plays with the light and dark qualities of the pigment. Developing each painting in layers starting with a completely white textural sketch in thick acrylic paint, and more recently with a gesso mix, to emphasize the composition's highlights, shapes and form.



The application uses a purposely-loose mark-making brush stroke, which leaves some of the canvas without an undercoat. This then allows for differing qualities of the subsequent layers when the Paynes Grey, White and Carmine Red/Rose Madder that are added. Sometimes the addition of charcoal dust into the grey creates a deeper matt black. Whilst on site (at Wat Phu Khao Thong) I even experimented with the addition of the dirt from the earth at the campsite in a few of the paintings.



As an alternative the first application uses a very wet brush stroke with a rough bristles household decorators brush of the Paynes Grey, forming the shadows and light (where there is no paint) in the composition. The loose sketching outlines allow for dribbling and splashes of the Paynes Grey, which gives a more energetic dynamic motion in the image. Then I continue building subsequent layers of paint with white, gesso, and further more controlled

brushwork in the Paynes Grey. The ultimate aim is to get an organic natural texture, with uneven flaws into a chiaroscuro effect with light and shadow, which is then expanded on with the layers of gold and gold leaf. The over all effect is that the paintings when hung react to their environment change as the daylight progresses giving an illusion of life and a living expression that is never static.

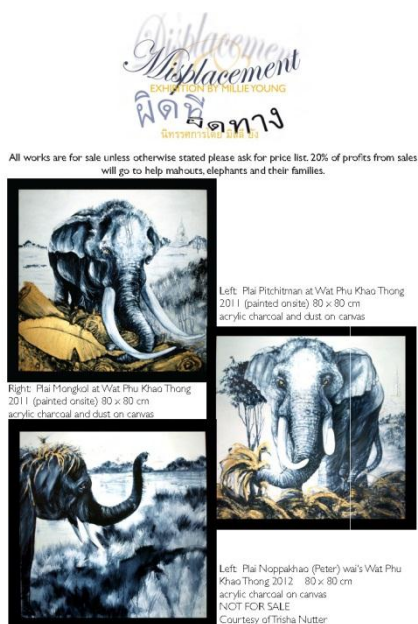
Some of the paintings have been developed with the addition of the Rose Madder and employ more abstract motifs and narratives with in the composition. In “Wild, War and Worship” there are added motifs that fade in and out the image is an homage reference to the Thai traditional fine art that I have enjoyed in many of Ayutthaya’s Wat’s. I am fascinated by the fading paint and bowing walls in some of the ruins, their incompleteness and ageing add history to the lines of the murals. I’m sure some experts may argue mine are a poor representation to the tight intricate patterns that are beyond my skill.



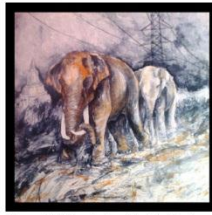
The aim is not to replicate but to create an impression, as seen through my eyes, of the deep seated traditions and culture that surround the elephant in Thai Life.

The porte folio of work show the progression of drawing and painting techniques over a decade of studies, some taken from life, others from photograph studies. When I first came to Thailand I realized that like many people I had very little experience of what an elephant really is, yet believed I knew what an elephant was. In my early drawings I noticed that I was drawing what I thought not what I saw. Hence why the study continues to fascinate me, because it is one thing to draw a symbol of what an elephant is, quite another to draw a recognizable particular elephant and then have it identified by it’s mahout. To maintain the theme of the works for the collection the paintings were selected to show some of the progression of the technique and palette.

The Main Catalogue Displacement and

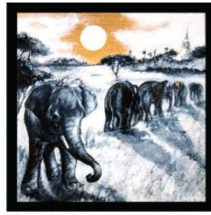


Misplacement



Above: Plai Mongkol and his lady friend
2011 (painted on site)
80 x 80 cm acrylic charcoal on canvas

NOT FOR SALE
Courtesy of Sureporn Rush



Above: Peter and the Old Girls 2011
(painted on site) 80 x 80 cm acrylic charcoal on canvas

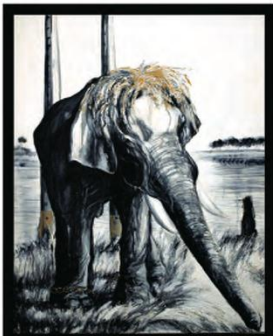
Right: Mae Laylai 2011 (painted on site)
30 x 20 cm pen on paper

Right: Ohm Chakka Wan 2011
(painted on site) 30 x 20 cm pen on paper

Right: Plai Geaw 2011 (painted on site)
30 x 20 cm pen on paper



Above: Plai Pichitman and Jo, Thailand arises from the floods 2012
120 x 150 cm acrylic charcoal and gold leaf on canvas
NOT FOR SALE

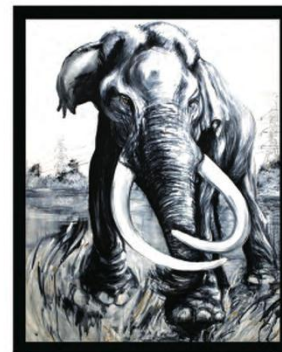


Left: Plai Katchaleritfai's poles
at Wat Phu Khao Thong
2012 100 x 120 cm
acrylic charcoal and gold leaf on
canvas

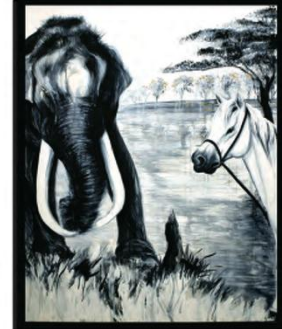


Left: Sedor Boon Lot's climbing
tree
at Wat Phu Khao Thong
2012 100 x 120 cm
acrylic charcoal and gold leaf on
canvas

NOT FOR SALE
Courtesy of Janet Young



Right: Plai Meung's tusks at Wat
Phu Khao Thong
2012 100 x 120 cm
acrylic charcoal and gold leaf on
canvas



Right: Plai Geaw and the horse at
Wat Phu Khao Thong
2012 100 x 120 cm
acrylic charcoal and gold leaf on
canvas



Left: Plai Kotchal's baby and dog at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

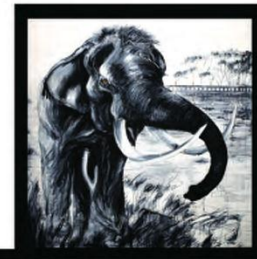


Left: Camp site bathing beauties at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Left: Gossiping Ladies at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

Left: Plai Pitchitman's tusks at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 100 x 100 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Left: Plai Ohm Chakka Wan's bottle at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 100 x 100 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



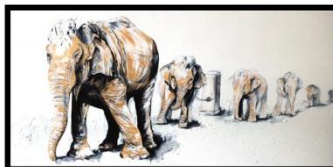
Left: Plai Wang's posts at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 100 x 100 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Above: The sleeping horse at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 100x 40 cm acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Above: Big Feed at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 100x 40 cm acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

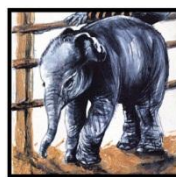


Above: Old Ladies Toilet Queue at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 100x 40 cm acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Left: Feeding Time at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 20 x 20 cm acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

Right: Bathing Time with umbrella at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 20 x 20 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Left: Plai Phu Khao Thong at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 20 x 20 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

Right: Bathing Time under King Naresuan's statue at Wat Phu Khao Thong 2012 20 x 20 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas





Above: Nong Mai and Pumpui's Return 2012 100x 120 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas NOT FOR SALE

This painting was donated to The Elephant Reintroduction Foundation. They celebrated their 10th year on August 12th, 2012 the Queen of Thailand's birthday by establishing the first World Elephant Day. The award winning documentary film 'Return to the Forest' by Pat Sims and Michale "Zo" Clark helped launch the day when it was released worldwide on

www.worlddelephantday.org

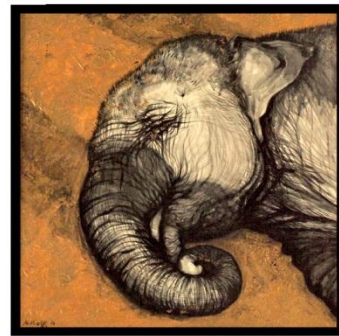
Produced by CanazWest Pictures Inc. and narrated by actor William Shatner, 'Return to the Forest'

Is the story of the work of the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation to save elephants in Thailand, and marks its ten-year anniversary of the successful reintroductions of over 90 elephants back to a natural way of life, away from tourists and other forms of labor such as logging, performing or street-begging. The documentary brings attention to the plight of endangered Asian elephants and the vital role of elephants in the forest ecosystem, and asks us to consider our role in the protection of elephants and their habitat throughout the world.

There will be special screening of the film 'Return to the Forest' with a talk by the filmmakers at the Mini Theatre, Learning Resource Center: Mahidol University Salaya Campus on November 17th at 1 pm. All welcome.



The Elephant Reintroduction Foundation
www.elephantreintroduction.org/
www.worlddelephantday.org



Above: Thong Jaan Sleeping 2006 50 x 50 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

NOT FOR SALE

The next set of works are those that were rescued. These are the misplaced works. While I myself was displaced by the flooding they remained in the wrong place, potentially lost until thankfully Jo and Jong were able to reach the house in a small two man plastic boat. The house was now 3 metres deep on the land side, they could float right over the 2 metre high front gate. There was 6 metres deep of fast moving white-water rapids on the river side! Their efforts will not be forgotten and thankfully nor will these works. There is a mixture of works related to my time spent at Elephant Nature Park and my time living in Ayutthaya including the year living at Baan Chang among the same elephants that I came to be camping with at Wat Phu Khao Thong.

The selections show the development of approaches to painting styles and techniques. Some works are more illustrative and others more abstract. They are a reflection of my experiences with elephants and mahouts in Thailand. There are some paintings that were rescued from the flood that haven't been included, mainly because I wanted to keep a consistency of medium and palette in the collection. Others omitted because I don't feel they are as strong. I hope you enjoy the selections.



Left: Pinky and his mum's strong trunk 2009 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal on paper



Right: Pinky's Play Time 2009 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal on paper



Left: Mother's footsteps 2009 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal on paper



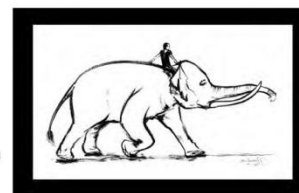
Right: Pinky in step with mum 2009 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal on paper



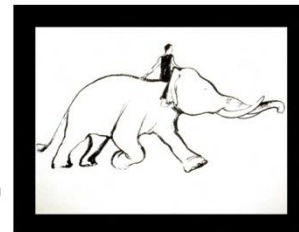
Left: Santa's tail scratch 2009 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal on paper



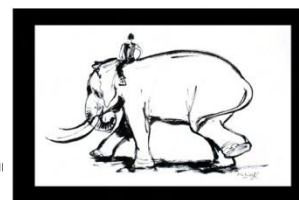
Right: Loonsap 2009 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal on paper



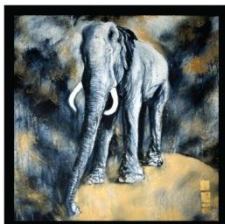
Right: Practicing for the Show I 2009 30 x 20 cm
ink on paper



Right: Practicing for the Show II 2009 30 x 20 cm
ink on paper



Right: Practicing for the Show III 2009 30 x 20 cm
ink on paper



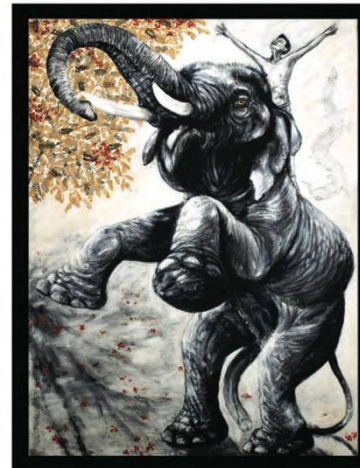
Left: Big Earth 2010 80 x 80 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Left: Big Moon 2010 80 x 80 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Left: Big Sun 2010 80 x 80 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Above: Fon and Plai Katchalertlaa 80x100 cm acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas
NOT FOR SALE



Left: Hope and Boon Lot 2005
30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper

Right: Blind Jokia's eye 2005
30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas



Right: Hope's Smile 2005
30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Left: Kath's Hope 2005
30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper
NOT FOR SALE
Courtesy of Kath Ryan



Right: Lily's Boon Song 2005
30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper

Left: Blind Jokia's banana Leaf 2005
30 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper

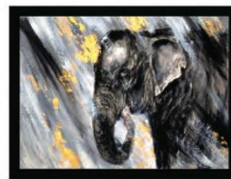




Above: Baby Rush I 2008
20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf
on paper



Above: Baby Rush II 2008
20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf
on paper



Above: Blind Jokia in the Rain 2008
30 x 20 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Above: Max's stride 2008
20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Right: Baby Rush III 2008
20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf
on paper

Below: In the elephant grass I
2008 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Below: In the elephant grass II
2008 20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Below: In the rain 2008
20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Below: In the grass 2008
20 x 30 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on paper



Above: The Elephant in Thai Culture: Wild War Worships 2010
210 x 100 cm
acrylic, charcoal and gold leaf on canvas

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www.ajarncartoon.blogspot.com

(<http://www.mulatta.org/thaieleorchpage.html>)