

Review

## The hacienda must be built

### Melbourne-based animation artist Arlo Mountford highlights the interconnectedness of modern culture

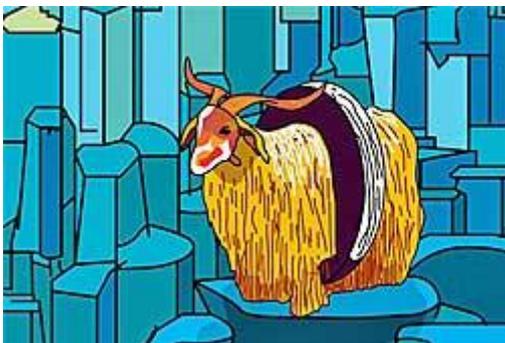
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'There are no answers to the questions raised by art: Art is the question, not the answer,' says Australian animation artist Arlo Mountford at the opening night of his first international solo show at Chulalongkorn University's Art Centre.



Mountford's "The Hacienda Must be Built" takes a tangential trajectory through the canon of Western art from the dawn of modernism to the present, lacing two animated pieces and a short film with a stream of references paying homage to some of the last century's most important artists.

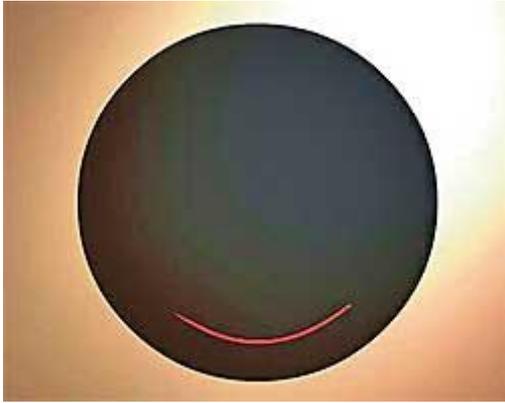
Despite Thai audiences being less culturally exposed to the foreign historical content of art figures and images - and so being less prepared to decipher the nuances and subtleties of Mountford's allusions - the show is well worth a visit.



Indeed, Mountford's animations open a point of entry for the uninitiated into the vast and multifaceted world of art, a visual vortex picking up the viewers and whirling them away into lands and dreams populated by some of imagination's greatest miners.

Some might ask what is original about an artist regurgitating the work of others? Well, Mounford is something of an "artist's artist", finding his inspiration in others' work and transmogrifying it into something new.

We need look no further than most prominent deejays for a parallel in the world of music, or Quentin Tarantino in film, or any of the postmodern authors in literature - all of whom have produced pastiches out of the creations of others and in doing so renewed the work's relevance and breathed new life into it.



Most works of art or literature regardless of the progenitor or genre can be enjoyed and understood at varying levels depending on the receiver; Mounford's output likewise can be appreciated from a range of perspectives.

The artist's approach is humoristic, taking what is a serious field of human endeavour and respectfully trying to have some fun with it - which certainly makes the subject matter more approachable for a general audience.

The most comical of the three pieces on show in Bangkok is STAND UP (2007), the title possibly a reference to stand-up comedy or any one of the numerous other conceivable subtexts or connotations. In it Mounford takes on the virtual persona of a black dot reciting through a red mouth what could be an inventory of pithy quotes uttered over the last 100 years by artists who thought they'd found the ultimate answer to the question of art.



Proclamations such as: "Art is not for the people the people are for the Art," "Art negotiates aesthetics" and "Art will change the world" are interspersed with canned laughter. Of course, these are not accurate quotes of famous artists - and whether

the original manifestos being parodied were actually answers to anything is entirely debateable.

Mountford is, however, well versed in his art history and virtually nobody except a modern art historian would be able to spot every citation. Perhaps the densest of the three pieces would be the show's other animated offering, *Return to Point* (2006).

In it is a digitalised version of Marcel Duchamp's famous *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), which changed art forever, as well as a homage to Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji* series (1826 to 1833), with which many in Thailand will already be familiar and which was influential at the beginning of the modern period, particularly with the impressionists.

*Return to Form: NDINAVIA* (2008) is the only cinematographic piece of the threesome. In it a man dressed in a reindeer suit and a woman costumed as a polar bear wander through the snowy hinterland of the scenic Victorian Alps pondering questions of process and aesthetics. While the absurd situation is packed with allusions, perhaps its strength resides in its painterly cinematography that seems steeped in the techniques of the pre-modern, realist masters of landscape.

This evocative display of moving images is important for two reasons. Firstly, it showcases for Thai audiences the evolving medium of animation art, which some in Thai art and education circles have only just begun to develop.

Secondly, its significance rests on the shoulders of Mountford's "foreign" thematic content, highlighting the interconnectedness of today's global culture. What has influenced Mountford has likewise impacted contemporary Thai art and artists: A history belonging to Thailand as much as it does to the rest of the world.

'The Hacienda Must be Built' is on view until May 30 at The Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University, 7th Floor, Centre of Academic Resources (Central Library). Call 02-218-2965. Visit <http://www.arlomountford.com>. Open Monday to Saturday 9am to 6pm.

## **About the author**

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