

# Weerasethakul

## honored by international film community

Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's independent feature film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, and represents Thailand in the Best Foreign Film competition for the 2011 Academy Awards.

The film features a main character who is contemplating his life – and past lives – as he nears the end of his current existence. The audience sees ghosts, memories and apparitions as Boonmee sees them in his mind's eye.

Weerasethakul works outside the Thai studio system, and makes extremely personal films that toy with traditional dramatic plot structure. His films have been described as exploring the boundary between documentary and fiction. He is currently writing the script for his next feature, while producing two Thai films for other directors. His previous films *Tropical Malady* and *Blissfully Yours* also earned recognition at earlier editions of Cannes. In a recent conversation, he revealed the thought process behind his films.

### How did you become interested in filmmaking?

I grew up in the small town of Khon Kaen (in northeastern Thailand), and there was nothing much there except for the hospital, the theater and school. It's changing a lot now, but 30 years ago that was my world. I spent a lot of time in the theater, and that was the era of (Steven) Spielberg and all these Hollywood sci-fi films. *Indiana Jones* was very captivating to a kid. I didn't know filmmaking could be a profession, but I knew that I was into that world. When I chose a course of study, I thought film was

impossible, so I picked my second love, architecture. I studied that for five years. Then I moved to study art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and that is where I encountered experimental films and world cinema. That totally changed my way of looking at movies.

### How did your time at Art Institute affect you?

Mostly, I learned the freedom of cinema. Their film department was very pure and separate from the video department. They taught a physical approach to filmmaking that is very pure and organic. The teachers were very open about the fact that film can be anything, and it can be private and personal. I was in love with the work of experimental filmmakers like Stan Brakhage and Bruce Baillie. Baillie is like a magician, the way he controls color and movement. I was really hooked. The Art Institute also had a film center where I saw films from all over the world, including Taiwan and the Philippines, something I hadn't found in Thailand.

### How would you describe the look of *Uncle Boonmee*?

The film is a tribute to old Thai films and television from 30 years ago. I told my collaborators to shoot from the memories that we grew up with. Most of those old films and TV programs were done on 16mm film. That's one reason we chose

to shoot film on this project. The movie has six reels and there is a different concept for each one. One is to simulate the television studio. Another is more documentary-like. Another is like a costume drama with saturated color.

### Are there other reasons why your movies are shot on film?

In this case, Super 16 is not super clear like 35mm, and not as harsh as video. Technology is changing fast, but for now, I cannot replace film. I sometimes use video for my artwork installations. But my movies are about memories. I think memory is not so immediate. It's something that takes time. It's very cinematic for me when I'm recalling something or making a tribute to something. When you think about your first date, you think of him or her in a very cinematic way. Time is not real; there are close-ups, and sometimes the way he or she moves is in slow motion. It's natural and it's about light.

### Can you elaborate?

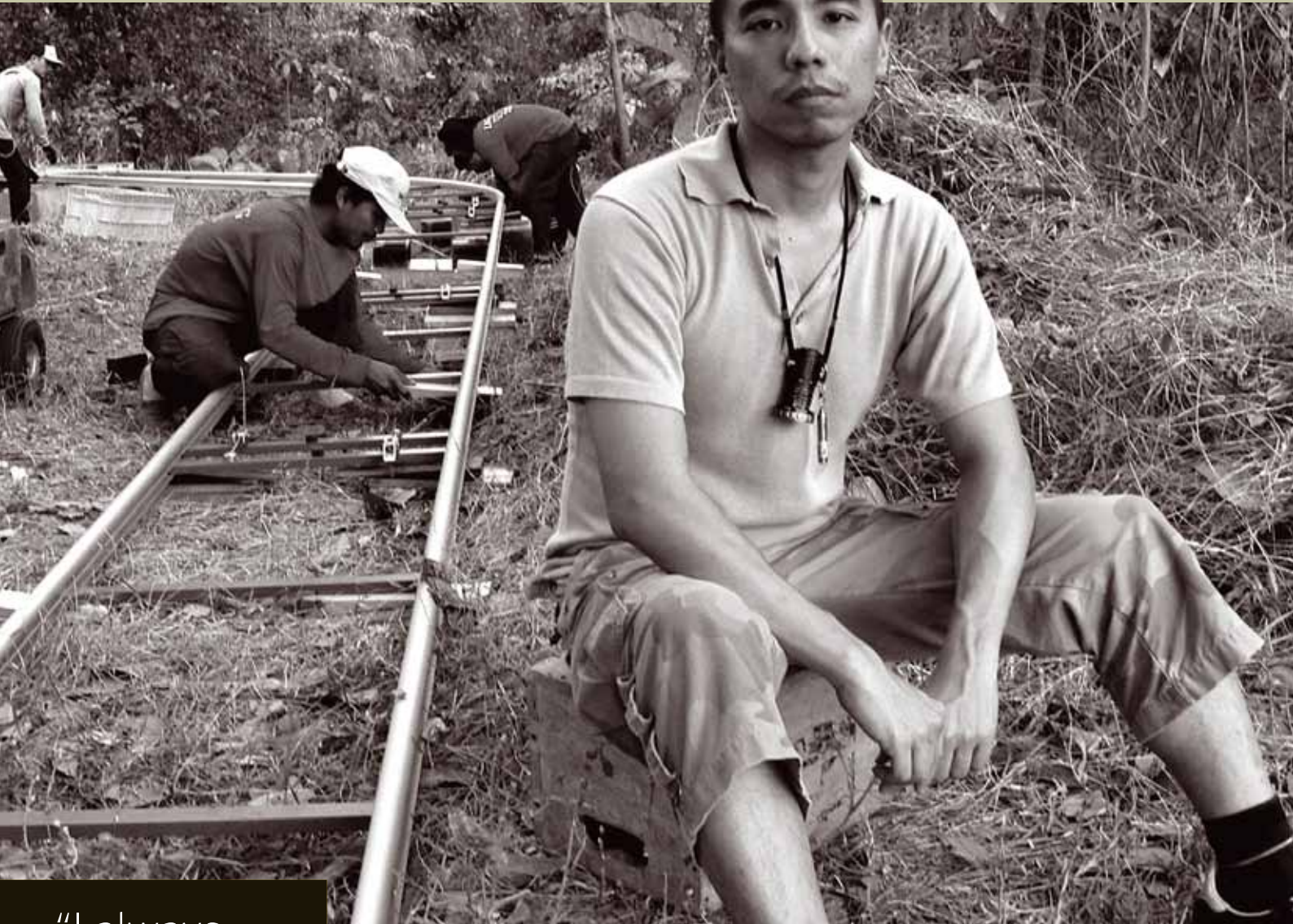
In a way, I am addicted to the workflow of film. You don't see what you will get right away. When I work with video for the visual arts, I work very quickly and I have many choices. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed by the choices. With film, I have time to think. It's a more precise way of working. I always say that film is really an extension of my



point of view, of my eyes. For me, film is closest to my visual sense. It sounds strange, but in the evening when I look at the landscape, I can see grain, like film grain. There is some kind of magic in film, like alchemy. You play with your director of photography, mixing light, and you look forward with excitement to seeing the results. I enjoy that very much.

### Your film *Mysterious Object at Noon* was done in black-and-white. What was the thought process behind that decision?

I wanted to keep the production very flexible. It took three years to make. When I had money, I would shoot. It's a journey from one place to another, and black-and-white provided me with continuity. I was fascinated with black-and-white film stock. My next film, *Blissfully Yours*, took place in the jungle and I became



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obsessed with nature, all the different shades of green there and how the temperature affected color. So we shot that film in 35mm in color. Today, I am still finding new aspects of colors and their reaction to film.

**Cinema is called an international language that allows us to communicate across cultures. Do you agree with this idea?**

I always work from a personal point of view and my films are very private. There is a kind of interaction or feedback from various audiences, but I think that many audiences find my work impenetrable because of the personal references. On the other hand, there is a big chunk of the audience who just let themselves float and associate their own experiences with my vision. So I think my kind of films divides audiences – in a good way. I think a film should be like a person. It has

to have a personality. You cannot please everyone. You have your own character. So I try to achieve that. In Thai film and music, we have had so many influences from the west, from Hollywood in the 1960s and '70s. So I believe my references can be shared with the west as well.

**Are you comfortable with the label "experimental filmmaker?"**

Labels make me uncomfortable. When I studied in Chicago, there was a big division between the experimental camp and the narrative camp. I was interested in approaching film as a frame-by-frame illusion. I tried films like that in Thailand, but I felt that they didn't fit in with the environment or the way I live there. So my films have narrative structures, and are full of storytelling styles and myths that I cannot express through the

pure experimental film. So I guess it has become something like 'experimental narrative.'

**What did the honor at Cannes mean for you and your career?**

It's like I've been to Mars. I can say I am proud to get this recognition. Somehow I'm really aware that what I do is very private and personal. Cannes doesn't change the way I think about cinema. The fact that I will be able to continue doing this work is really an honor. Honestly, just a few years back, I doubted that filmmaking could be a stable career. And now I can say, that yes, I am a filmmaker. So it gives me confidence.