



**UPON REACHING THE SECOND STOREY OF THIS** traditional wooden house, I notice that the walls flare outwards slightly. Then it hits me that the structure's unshuttered windows are the frame for a picture-perfect view of flooded rice fields, a temple's golden spire and distant mountains. Later, down on the veranda, we tuck in to sticky rice pudding bursting with longan, sweet corn and tender coconut and a plate of freshly sliced jackfruit. The cook, Sombat, serenades us with the sweet melodies of traditional Lanna mountain music while gently strumming his guitar. Against this backdrop, just about the last thing I would've expected to see is a giant bamboo butterfly on metal wires hovering next to an even larger graffiti-covered canvas.

I'm 25km north of Chiang Mai at Ne'-Na Contemporary Art Space's newly opened artist residence in Mae Rim. My host, Shukit Panmongkol, is an art teacher and curator who founded his first residency programme for international artists at the Monfai Cultural Centre in Chiang Mai in 1998. The new site, with its large, Lanna-style main house, three Karen hilltribe-style stilt houses and natural surrounds provides an abundance of space and plenty of inspiration for visiting artists looking to create and exhibit large-scale installations like the bamboo butterfly. A visiting Australian artist produced the piece after working alongside local builders to master the techniques of handling this decidedly low-tech material. This is exactly the type of creative collaboration Shukit seeks to foster by bringing international artists into contact with Northern Thailand's traditional culture.



There have always been artists in Chiang Mai; for centuries, the ancient Kingdom of Lanna was the cradle of craftsmen, artisans and musicians. That said, the arts in this vibrant city are anything but stuck in the past. Chiang Mai is a hotbed of contemporary artistic expression, thanks in part to the fine arts programme at Chiang Mai University, which was founded 30 years ago and is the only programme of its kind in Northern Thailand. "Chiang Mai is a multicultural city with good infrastructure, a mild climate and a diverse range of ethnic minorities," Shukit says. These factors, along with a continuous stream of passionate young students and a lower cost of living than Bangkok, make Chiang Mai an attractive place for Thai artists to settle. Increasingly, international artists are also being drawn into the community's embrace.



**CHIANG MAI IS FAMED FOR ITS TRADITIONAL CRAFTS, BUT CUTTING-EDGE CONTEMPORARY ART IS NOW FLOURISHING IN THE LAND OF A MILLION RICE FIELDS**

**Words** Arveen Joyce





## *The ancient Kingdom of Lanna was the cradle of craftsmen for centuries, but Chiang Mai is now a hotbed of contemporary artistic expression*

Like Shukit, other artists and curators have founded residency programmes here in the hopes of fostering collaborations between artists from overseas and members of the dynamic local art scene. Located in a modern and inviting facility in the heart of an artists' enclave in a quiet suburb south of Chiang Mai, Rumpeung Loudspeaker Community Art Space is one such programme that has recently opened its doors to residents from abroad. The trickle of a garden wall fountain greets visitors as they approach the glass-and-whitewashed structure, which combines natural and industrial design elements. Rumpeung's residency programme is co-directed by Supachai Sartsara, a Thai painter and professor of fine art, and

British artist and curator Katie Hawker. Supachai, clad in a baseball cap and T-shirt, shows me around the complex he began building three years ago, which comprises a residence, artists' studio and exhibition space.

Katie is a soft-spoken brunette with flashing blue eyes and a passion for collaborative arts. Chiang Mai's unique artistic energy drew her here two years ago and she hopes other artists will be similarly inspired. The artists generally stay for a month and have all of their meals and other needs taken care of, the aim being – in her words – to give them the “freedom, space and time to focus on their practice and absorb new concepts and inspiration.” Katie's hope is that the collaborative efforts spawned at Rumpeung will create momentum that lasts long after the residents move on.

A drive into the countryside takes me to the artists' residency ComPeung, located 45 minutes north-east of Chiang Mai in the semi-rural town of Doi Saket. ComPeung is run by Ong Siraphisut, a photographer, author, adventure travel enthusiast and eco-warrior with a shy smile and closely cropped hair. We stroll through the homestead past the “super adobe” bungalows he built from recycled materials with the help of high school students. All manner of contemporary art installations left behind by former residents are scattered around the grounds. “The majority of our artists come from big cities in the developed world,” Ong says. “Living close to nature can bring out a different dimension in their work.”



A small animist shrine on a pedestal near the top of the driveway catches my eye. A collaborative piece, the wooden house was painted in bold tones and gold accents by one artist and populated with a colony of tiny robots by a second. Ong says, "The robots have LED lights that blink to signal a change in pressure or temperature -- they monitor the energy of the place." If the robots could be calibrated to monitor the creative energy pulsing through Chiang Mai, their

readings would be off the charts.

As the day winds down, many of Chiang Mai's artists gravitate to the sois surrounding trendy Nimmanhemin Road, a stone's throw from the university. Late-night venues like popular club Warm Up Café, beer hall Dawan-dang and Infinity with its live bands and dancers whose performances are projected on large screens, are just beginning to stir. A mix of local and visiting artists will soon

mob these venues, swaying and grinding to electro-pop and house dance beats, but what I'm seeking is something a bit more low-key. I follow the strum of an acoustic guitar down a dusty back alley and find Shukit and one of Ong's former professors, painter Rungsak Dokbua, at local hangout Sudsan. Every table at this large outdoor-indoor venue is soon filled with artists, students and a few NGO workers blowing off steam after a long week with the help of cold Singha beer and bottles of Thai whisky. After two sets from the guitarist and some

## ARTISTIC CONTACTS

### NE'-NA CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Annex site: 205 Moo 5 T Mae Ram, A Mae Rim  
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[nena-artspace.com](http://nena-artspace.com)

### RUMPEUNG LOUDSPEAKER COMMUNITY ART SPACE

23/8 Rumpueng Village, Soi Wat U-mong  
[katie@surfacearts.co.uk](mailto:katie@surfacearts.co.uk)  
[facebook.com/rumpueng.artspace](https://facebook.com/rumpueng.artspace)

### COMPEUNG VILLAGE OF CREATIVITY

T Cherg-doi, A. Doi Saket  
[compeung@yahoo.com](mailto:compeung@yahoo.com)  
[compeung.org](http://compeung.org)

### SUDSANAN

30 Ratchapua Rd

### BOY BLUES BAR

Kalare Centre at the Night Bazaar  
[boybluesbar.com](http://boybluesbar.com)

### MONFAI CULTURAL CENTRE


6 Soi 7 Khor, Sukasem Rd, T Partan, A Muang



*Chiang Mai  
 feels like the  
 epicentre of  
 an artistic  
 storm*



fortifying Thai fare, Rungsak declares that we're ready for a real jam session and takes us to see his friend, a musician known to his fans as the "Thai Jimi Hendrix".

Boy Blues Bar hardly needs a sign at its new location on a mezzanine near the food hall at Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar. The riffs and jams produced by the lead guitarist, nicknamed Boy, and his band muscle through the market like a siren song. As we ascend the stairs, an Australian blues singer is blanketing the bar in raspy, crushed velvet tones. Set after set, the crowd grows. When we finally tear ourselves away, the audience is showing its appreciation with screams of "Jimi!". Showcasing everything from mountain music to the blues, from art based on centuries-old traditions to quirky modern installations, Chiang Mai feels like the epicentre of an artistic storm arising from the collision of two fronts. The region's rich history of fostering the arts and a growing community of contemporary artists are creating a powerful artistic energy here that you don't need special robot sensors to identify. 



## WHERE TO STAY IN STYLE

The Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi is focused on safeguarding the area's rich culture. The hotel's owner conducted extensive research into local architecture and customs when designing the all-suite hotel. Thai, Lao and Burmese styles, which are intertwined in the history and heritage of the region, are reflected in the magnificent gold accented, carved teak wood lobby, Dheva Spa, library, dining rooms and guest villas. Of course, every modern comfort is available: two large pools, tennis courts, a fitness centre, a lavish breakfast spread and the chance for afternoon cocktails on the veranda only add to the hotel's appeal. But guests shouldn't miss the chance to hop on a bicycle and pedal past rice paddies and century-old banyan trees with stops to take in the incredible collection of antiques and traditional crafts on display on the grounds. A distinct sense of place is what makes a stay at this luxury hotel so delightful. 51/4 Chiang Mai - Sankampaeng Rd, Moo 1, T Tasala A Muang. [mandarinoriental.com](http://mandarinoriental.com)

ผนังบ้านชั้นสองของบ้านไม้แบบพื้นเมือง แลดูจะเอนออกไปเล็กน้อย เมื่อมองผ่านหน้าต่างต่างบ้าน ก็เห็นทุ่งนาเขียวท้วมเต็ม ที่วางอยู่กลางแจ้งคือข้าวเหนียวมูล ลองกอง และขนมฝานเป็นชิ้นบางๆ คุณสมบัติ พอคั่วว ก็เอากีตาร์มาเล่นบรรเลงเพลงพื้นเมืองลานนาซบกลมอยู่ใกล้ๆ สิ่งที่ไม่ได้คาดคิดจะเห็นในบรรยากาศแบบนี้ คือภาพวาดกราฟฟิติ บนผ้าใบผืนใหญ่

สถานศิลปะร่วมสมัย นี้-นะ เพิ่งเปิดขึ้นที่แมริม เชียงใหม่ ได้ไม่นานนัก อาจารย์สอนศิลปะอย่างคุณ ชุกฤต พันธุ์มงคล ผู้จัดตั้งโครงการที่ักพิงสำหรับศิลปินต่างชาติขึ้น ณ บ้านผอนผ้าย ในปีพ.ศ. 2541 เป็นผู้จัดตั้งสถานศิลปะร่วมสมัยแห่งใหม่แห่งนี้ พื้นที่กว้างขวางแห่งนี้ ประกอบด้วยบ้านแบบลานนา และเรือนแบบชาวกระเหรี่ยง รายล้อมด้วยบรรยากาศที่สวยงาม เพื่อให้เหล่าศิลปินที่มาพัก ได้สร้างสรรค์ชิ้นงานใหญ่ๆ ได้อย่างสะดวก และได้ทำงานร่วมกับช่างชาวพื้นบ้าน

อาคารลานนาเก่าแก่แห่งนี้ เป็นแหล่งรวมของช่างฝีมือและศิลปินมาแต่ไหนแต่ไร และไม่ใช้เพียงแต่ในอดีตเท่านั้น เชียงใหม่ทุกวันนี้ ก็เป็นแหล่งรวมของงานศิลปะร่วมสมัย ส่วนหนึ่งก็เพราะหลักสูตรทางศิลปกรรมของมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ ที่จัดตั้งขึ้นเมื่อ 30 ปีก่อน คุณชุกฤตกล่าวไว้ว่า เชียงใหม่เป็นเมืองที่มีวัฒนธรรมหลากหลาย ทั้งยังมีโครงสร้างพื้นฐานที่สำคัญครบครัน อากาศก็ดี และเป็นแหล่งรวมของชนกลุ่มน้อยต่างๆ

ไร่เป็กรบอบเคียงสถาน เชียงใหม่ เป็นสถานที่อีกแห่งหนึ่ง ที่เปิดประตูต้อนรับศิลปินชาวต่างชาติ ลูเชียงใหม่ ที่แห่งนี้ อาคารสีขาวติดกระจก รายล้อมด้วยสวนเขียว ยืนตระหง่าคอยต้อนรับเหล่าศิลปินผู้มาเยือน