

REFLECTIONS ON MODERN ART

Norwegian artist discourses art/Buddhism dichotomy in new exhibition

RATHSARAN SIREKAN

Congratulations to the residents of Khon Kaen and surrounding areas. A European artist is launching his multi-genre exhibition "Reflections" at the Museum of Art and Culture, Khon Kaen University.

Christian Wolther, a 44-year-old versatile Norwegian who is the artist in residence of Khon Kaen University's Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, is currently presenting a generous volume of his work for a two-week exhibition in the hope of expanding the aesthetic repertoire of Northeastern Thais.

"Because it is not usual to have a European artist in residence in Thai universities, I am presenting a wide variety of different aspects of my work, although personally I prefer to work more conceptually in more balanced, pure and tight compositions," said the artist.

The wide array of his artistic expression on display includes his knack for abstract painting, textwork, installations and a recorded vocal performance made especially for this exhibition marking his Khon Kaen residency.

Despite the variety, dominating the "menu" of assorted works, as Wolther dubs it, is his discourse on what "modern art" means in contemporary global society.

"So many things have happened to modern art now; it has been killed off and been reborn so many times within so many different conceptual contexts that almost everything is possible now. Bad art can be good, and soapy or glossy kitch can be a deep philosophical truth because, in the end, the work of art is experienced only in the mind of the viewer."

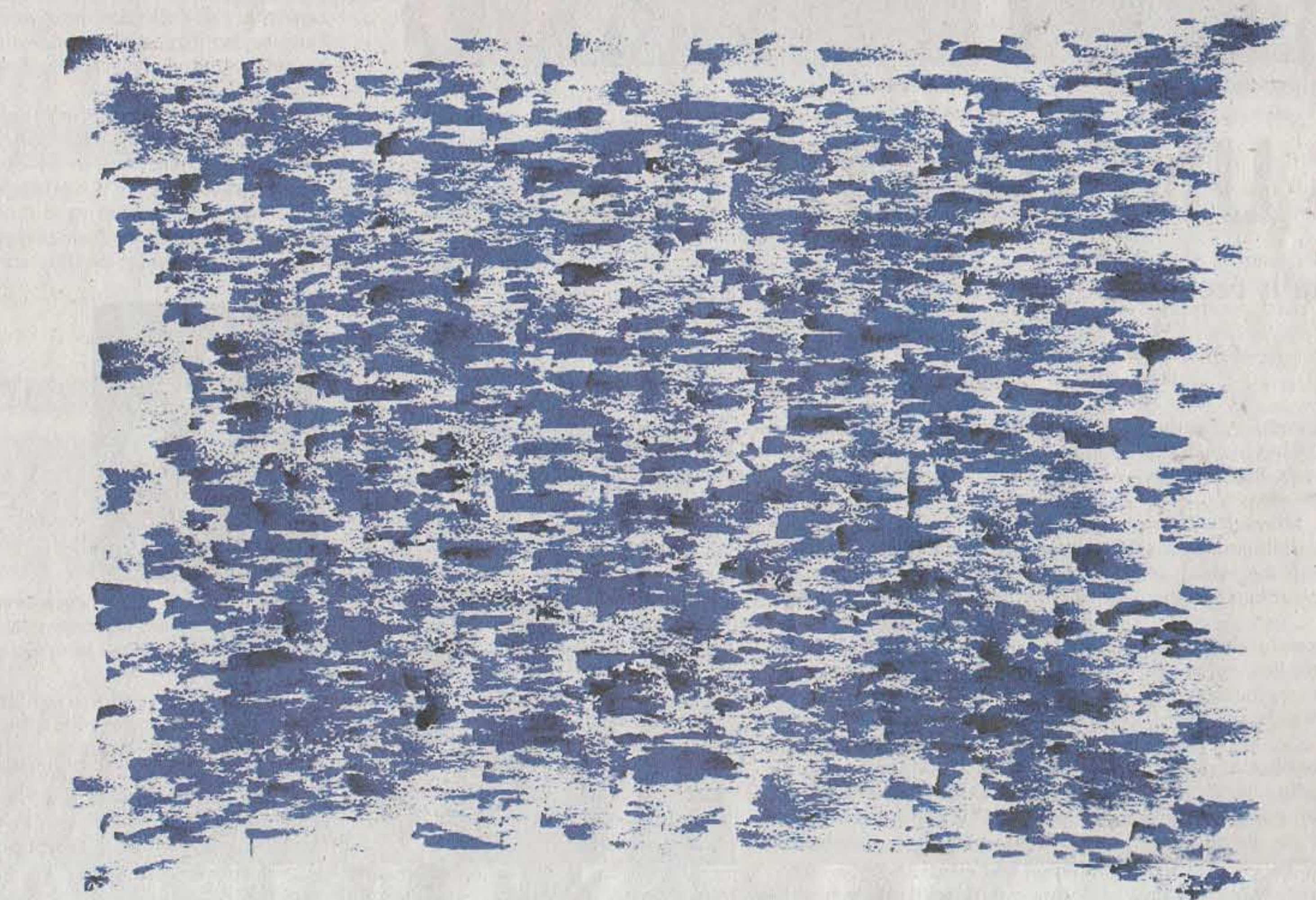
With this said, however, subjectivity alone, according to Wolther, is not enough to truly understand and appreciate modern art.

"It requires an educated mind, which is a little sad because the people we want to reach with our work don't necessarily have the tools to really understand or appreciate it."

"This means that modern art actually needs the mind of an artist or a professional work of art, in order to be fulfilled as a serious work of art," expounded the Norwegian artist on why modern art usually fails to communicate with the public and what can be done to improve the situation.

Delusions of grandeur, indeed, this may sound like, but that's what the romantics believe and Wolther is definitely one of them. As for the clan, the poet and the artist are the high priests of civilisation whose self-imposed moral obligation, assuming a more refined sensitivity in perception, is to unlock the noble truth hidden in the outside world and bestow on the untrained mind like ours the key to access it.

Another aspect of his work that earns him the title of a romantic is his transcendental poetics on the role of colour in painting.



"Colour itself — when displayed in the right nuance and in the right composition — has all the things an artwork needs to have in order to be perceived as complete or fulfilled.... it can speak of the invisible, the immaterial, the spiritual and the divine and eternal," he said.

Indeed, if there is one coherence between the fundamentals of his creative theory and his work, it is the supple strokes of his abstract painting that create the enigmatic effects of the dynamic serene and the dynamic static — the unique qualities which promise to send the spectator to the spiritual beyond.

Given Wolther's highly non-referential use of colour, a question will surely be raised upon a spectator coming across the artist's textworks which also make up an important part of the exhibition. Indeed, the contradiction is prominent here as, on the one hand, you have these abstract manoeuvres of colours conjuring up the divine "secret of the Universe" and, on the other, you feel let down that these very personal ethereal fumes get bluntly

dissipated by having the artist spell it all out for you in his harsh written words.

"In order to give artworks justice, they must be perceived one by one, by themselves, and never in connection with a different work of art. If someone was to put my textworks together with my paintings, as if they were meant to stay together, I would say that this person has not understood their meaning. Every piece stands by itself, and there is no attempt whatsoever from me to create some kind of correspondence between my paintings and texts. Every piece must be taken for what it is, in itself."

Versatile indeed, not only in terms of the genres of his works, but also of conviction — the accusation the artist refuted, citing his theory of the "temporariness of human concept", hence the specificity of each work created at a particular moment and how the respect for it, he said, "would lead us to towards a better and more sensible world, especially now in this time of globalisation and mixing of cultures."

"If we bear in mind the temporary and imperfect aspect of any concept that we attach ourselves to on our different paths in life — to see that any idea is just an idea, we will positively come to develop an attitude of tolerance."

This familiar caution to attachment and impermanence of things, which may, indeed, be recalled in the Northeastern Thai spectatorship as an interpretation or a variation of Buddhism, is undeniably resounded in this Norwegian artist/poet's textworks — the principle attraction, and many would say flaw, of which is the hypnotic effect of the simplistic repetition of key vocabulary of "letting go", "temporary" and "nothingness", which seem to keep multiplying and swamp the scroll.

With this truth about his textworks — that they either draw on or echo familiar Buddhist concepts — Wolther revealed a very close relationship between his abstract paintings and Buddhism hence unwittingly repatriating the connection between his abstract paintings and textworks which he earlier disavowed.

"In some of my essays on modern art, I say that abstract art is very close to Buddhism ... to meditation, to let go of things, in order to see clearly and in a more phenomenological way. I guess this is because abstract art

welcomes the fact that the impressions of the world are of a quite fluid, and quite temporary in nature, for the human mind and perception."

To anyone's but his surprise, in spite of this very close tie between his work and Buddhism, the Norwegian artist calls it an eternal rift between art and this most flourishing school of Oriental philosophy when asked how far he thinks art — especially his abstract painting whose centrality is the purity of colour — is capable of achieving the extinction of personality, the path towards the noblest "nothingness", given the fact that each specific colour, no matter how pure it is, inevitably conjures up personalities and emotions in the viewers — the effect of which is, of course, differently rendered among individuals.

"Art can never be dharma; I don't want to mix them. There will always be a paradox because art means attachment to something, to something outside or inside ourselves. And Buddhism actually means to let go of these things," said Wolther.

"I would like to be clear about this, because I think that so much of so-called Buddhist art, is a self-contradiction. If you want to be a Buddhist, you should meditate and cultivate your mind and yourself, not create artworks and join the intellectual forum of modern art. It is possible to do both, and I would like to do both, but I do not think that it is possible to both at the same time. To me, art is art, and Buddhism is Buddhism. Art is attachment, and Buddhism is the opposite of attachment."

Whether you find the artist's conceptual groundings appealing or unnecessarily rebellious, "Reflections" seems like a good party to submerge your head in because, after all, modern art is most likely about torturing and whipping you to think.

The only and major flaw Wolther's "menu" might promise, however, is the assurance that there will be so much of a cacophony of conceptual discordances — to which, as the artist's last word might have been, if a deaf ear is turned, would only mean one is not listening well enough to respect diversity within harmony.

Quite a Catch-22, isn't it?

'Reflections' by Christian Wolther is on display at the Museum of Art and Culture in Khon Kaen University until February 28.