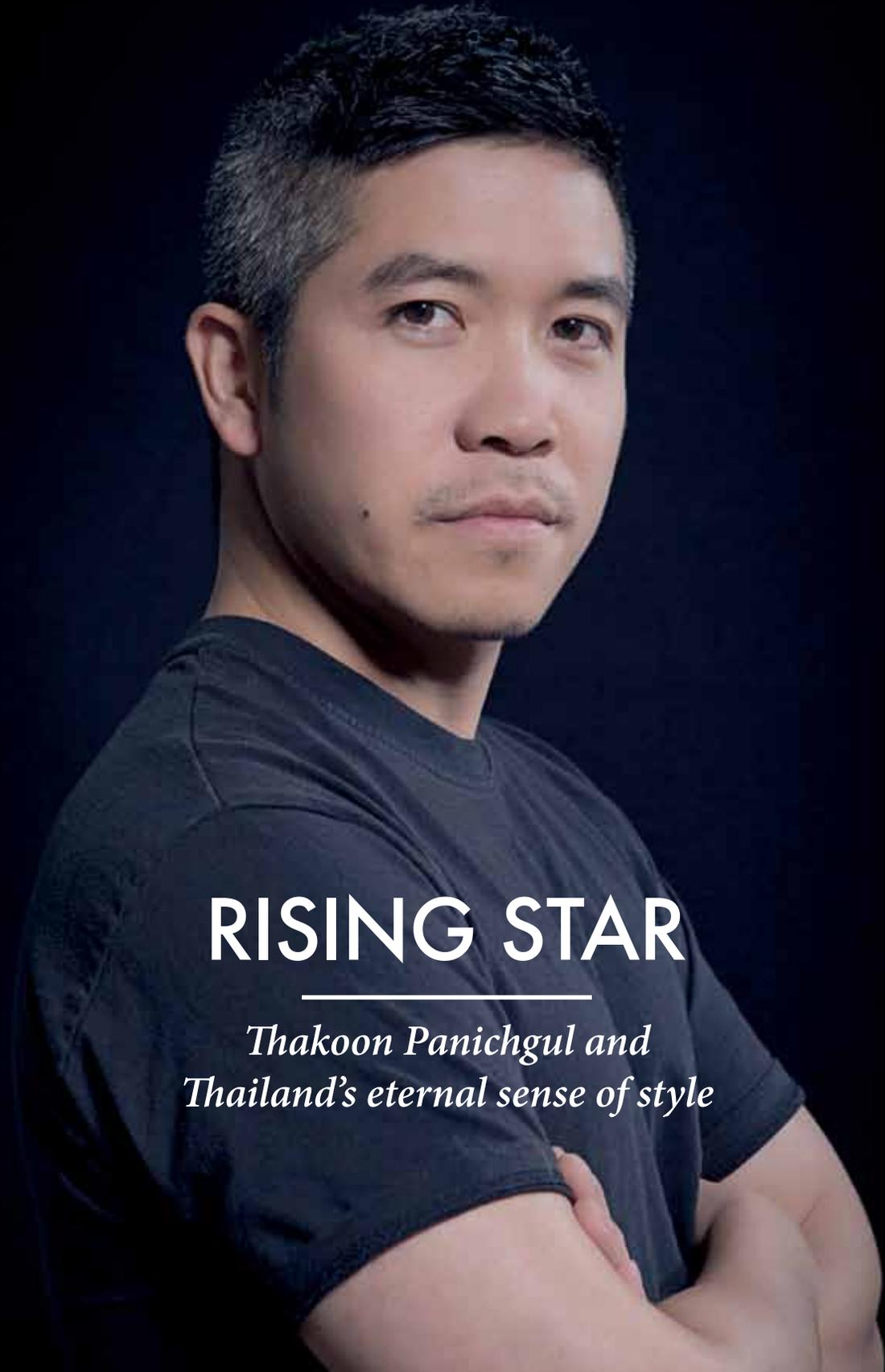


surface ^{asia}

DESIGN / FASHION / ARCHITECTURE / ART / CULTURE

19



RISING STAR

*Thakoon Panichgul and
Thailand's eternal sense of style*

MIGHTY MACHINES

Armed with a can-do attitude and a daringly playful approach, Thai studio Supermachine injects a dose of whimsy into big and small projects alike.

WORDS ADELE CHONG



Public lamps made from transparent plastic bears, portable islands, a marketplace in the form of a spinning UFO – it's admittedly hard to know where to begin where Pitupong Chaowakul's work is concerned. Known as Jack to acquaintances and clients alike, the spirited young Chaowakul fronts Supermachine Studio, one of Thailand's most buzzed-about design firms. To categorize him as a practicing architect would be putting it rather plainly for anyone who has had the pleasure of encountering Supermachine's provocative designs, realized or not.

Manned by its founder and a handful of like-minded local creatives, Chaowakul's Bangkok-based studio launched in 2009 to critical acclaim. Stirring up the Thai design scene, Supermachine's success hinges on its own brand of playful pragmatism as well as its versatility as a practice. The outfit takes on a varied array of projects that encompass both commercial endeavors like shopping malls and research-based initiatives that afford its designers the space and context to experiment. "Personally, I wouldn't call us stylish, chic or



any of those stereotypical designer words," says Chaowakul. "We work like a small group of guerrilla fighters. That's why we named the studio Supermachine – it's a machine that runs on good teamwork and attitudes."

The studio's modus operandi centers on what Chaowakul describes as "combining low-fi technologies with multiplication." Essentially, this references the curious way in which much of Supermachine's output reinterprets the relationship between tactile objects and mechanical systems; in the work, methodical processes are deliberately thrown out of whack, their unerring, high-tech mechanisms replaced with makeshift components that give way to offbeat, Goonies-style results. Chaowakul explains that his love of unorthodox approaches and gadgetry was forged early on, well before his time as a graduate student at the renowned Berlage Institute for Architecture in Rotterdam and his stint at the futuristic Dutch firm Nox Architects. "As a kid, I drew giant robots with my dad," he says. "I didn't know that I wanted to be an architect then. For a long time, I wanted to be a scientist and invent things but I found out later that architects could be inventors, too."

Indeed, there is something of an eternal child in Chaowakul that unabashedly delights in perpetuating an element of play in the projects he and his small team are tasked with, be it the set design for Thailand's annual Big Mountain Music Festival (a gigantic smoke-snorting cow's head emerged as a backdrop for the 2010 edition of the event) or the award-winning interiors for Saatchi & Saatchi's Bangkok office, a visually arresting space that gives rise to an electric feeling of movement, color and potential. With both projects, one is encouraged to move beyond the mere act of looking. There is no such thing as standing in the sidelines with Supermachine's designs: one is inevitably drawn in to become a willing participant.

Chaowakul is notably averse to conventional ideas of perfection in architecture or design, and it shows. He has opted instead to place his faith in the power of the unexpected as well his own intuition. As a consequence, both his architectural and pedagogical efforts—Chaowakul makes it a point to maintain a balance between regular teaching gigs and his studio work—continue to resonate with the boundless ideals of younger designers, and remind us that yes, architecture can be loads of fun. supermachine.wordpress.com

(CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) A stage at Thailand's Big Mountain Music Festival takes on the semblance of a smoke-snorting cow's head; The eye-catching façade of the TUKCOM MALL in Bangkok features aluminum composite panels placed according to random algorithm; Made from 1,344 Khmar bands, a makeshift marketplace at the 2012 edition of the aforementioned music festival bore the effect of a spinning UFO.