

Ghostly Aesthetics: Material Culture and the Undead in Thailand

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Art historians in Southeast Asia have primarily concentrated on the study of images, stupas, manuscripts, and murals produced by the elite before the nineteenth century. I will shift focus in this talk and concentrate on vernacular and "magical" art made in the last 150 years. While certain images in Thai Buddhism are lauded for their age or precious materials, most are honored for their connection to certain powerful monks, ghosts, and kings. Many of these highly revered and powerful images are made out of wax or wood, or crudely and mass-produced bronze, plastic copper, resin, or clay. Furthermore, instead of concentrating on the origins of pieces of art, I want to study art as it exists and operates in dynamic ritual activities and highly complex synchronic relationships with other images and with patrons, artists, and visitors. I want to move beyond aesthetic and iconographic analyses of individual objects, and focus on recipients, rituals, and agents, as well as the agency of the "things" themselves. Finally, I argue that images, photographs, murals, amulets, and buildings do not only exist in synchronic relationships, but also diachronic. Along the way, I also aim to introduce the audience to one of the most important ghostly figures in Southeast Asia, Mae Nak, who has inspired a great ritual and aesthetic movement in the region.

Justin McDaniel studies ghosts and manuscripts in Asia. After living and researching in South and Southeast Asia for many years as a translator, archivist, amulet collector, volunteer teacher, and Buddhist monk, he returned to the States and received his PhD from Harvard University's Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies in 2003. His research foci include Lao, Thai, Pali and Sanskrit literature, Southeast Asian Buddhism, Japanese Buddhist architecture, ritual studies, manuscript studies, asceticism, the undead, and general phantasmagoria. His first book is on the history of Buddhist monastic education in Laos and Thailand, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008). It won the Benda Prize from the Association of Asian Studies for the best first book in Southeast Asian Studies. His second book, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) is a study on material culture and ritual in Thai Buddhism. His third and fourth books are on public Buddhist architecture throughout Asia and an anthology of his writing on manuscripts and art over the past 20 years. His recent publications appear in the *Bulletin l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* (*Études thématiques*), *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, *Aséanie*, *Journal of Religion and Film*, *Material Religion*, *Manusya*, *Journal of Burma Studies*, and the *Journal of the Siam Society*, as well as contributions to collected articles on Buddhism and Modernity, Pali literature, Palm-leaf Manuscript research, and liturgical studies. He is the co-editor of the journals *Buddhism Compass* and *Journal of Lao Studies*, and is the former Chair of the Southeast Asian Studies Council and the Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Studies Group of the Association of Asian Studies. He has won several teaching and advising awards. In 2012 he was named a Guggenheim Fellow and is the Undergraduate Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and has been an invited lecturer at over 50 universities worldwide.

Wednesday, January 29

12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue