

Khao Mo: Mythical Escapism

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ABSTRACT

"Khao Mo - (*Mythical Escapism*)" originated from the exhibition, "Resort: An Art Exhibition for Landscape of Rest at BACC. "Khao Mo" tries to transfer human belief and expression from the past through the present. When the time passes, the unifying ideal of nature and religion gradually becomes the identity of idea and expression.

Keywords: *Khao Mo, mythical escapism, journey, faith, belief, sanctuary, mirror, reflect, resort, rest, reamless*

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

"Khao Mo - *Mythical Escapism*" originated from the author's participation in the exhibition, "Resort: An Art Exhibition for Landscape of Rest," held October 4th to November 24th, 2013 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). The curator invited artists, architects, landscape architects and creative thinkers to take part in the exhibition entitled "Landscape of Rest".

The word "resort" generates thoughts about going on a vacation and spending time in the midst of nature. The relaxing atmosphere leads to the question, "What does taking a rest mean?" When invited by the curator to take part in this exhibition, the *Khao Mo* or a rockery, which is the replica of a hill or mountain built in an ancient Thai park, came to mind. It was a way in which human beings brought recreated nature close to themselves instead of taking a journey to look for nature outside the town. The *Khao Mo* is a component of a belief combining nature and religion,

suggesting an interesting overlap between abstract and concrete entities.

In studying the past, during the time when townships and major building began to be developed, a realization was made that human beings had tried to recreate nature. They tried to bring it close to them through building a place where they could relax and escape from the chaos of life. Their gardens were arranged in a way that depicted a miniature mountain and forest. Not only were these gardens a place of relaxation but the spaces also performed a symbolic function. In Buddhist and Brahman beliefs, the miniature mountain suggests the concept of the "Sumeru Mountain," a sacred place and the abode of deities. Thus it is like having a replica of the divine abode built and where the deities could take up residence and, in return, provide protection. This clearly reflects past unity of belief.

Thailand was influenced by just such a belief and the function of the *Khao Mo* has been adjusted throughout time. In the past, it was originally used as a venue where ceremonies for members of the royal family were held. With changes in the nature

of the country, the people's way of life and their way of thinking, the *Khao Mo* was turned into a hobby for aristocrats during their spare-time—creating a miniature *Khao Mo* to decorate their miniature garden arranged on a tray. It was considered as a way of physically relaxing and training the mind.

It can be seen that the *Khao Mo* in the past, no matter what form it took, was part of people's physical relaxation and their spiritual nourishment. The question remains—what is the connection between the *Khao Mo* and people's method of relaxation in the current environment? This is the question that has led to the interpretation of this exhibit, "*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*".

In 2013, Thailand went through much political confusion and turmoil. People were divided into groups and adhered firmly to their own views in the arguments and discussion. It was not possible to clearly state which view was right or wrong, black or white. There were only opinions and in assessing them, the surroundings and personal backgrounds

had to be taken in consideration. This sort of environment was one of the things that prompted a concrete interpretation of "*Khao Mo - Mythical Escapism*". It was a way to give space to people to enable them, as individuals, to stop, reflect on their thoughts and question their own beliefs.

RESEARCH AND HISTORY

The Legend of Khao Mo - The Myth

Khao Mo – meaning “small hill”, a replicated mountain; *mo* is derived from *t'mo*, the root of which is the Cambodian word for stone. It is a form of Thai art that originated during the time of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. It is often used as a decorative feature of temples and royal gardens. The journal of a traveler who arrived with a French diplomatic delegation during the reign of King NaraiMaharat described the beauty of *Khao Mo* on the grounds of the royal residences thus:



Figure 1:
Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism) at “Resort: An Art Exhibition for Landscape of Rest,” held from October 4th to November 24th, 2013 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC).

"The court of the royal personage is vast and glitters like gold all over... At the four corners of the walled area are clear pools of water. One of the corner pools is the leisurely bathing place of the monarch, beneath a pavilion that shields it from view. To the north are a model mountain, fountains, and rich evergreen bushes. The flowers in these bushes produce sweet fragrances that permeate the entire enclosure [...]"

The construction of *Khao Mo* gained popularity during the reigns of King Rama V and King Rama VI. It saw a decline in the reign of King Rama VII, during the First World War, which coincided with the time of the Great Depression worldwide, and the 1932 Siamese Revolution. The art form almost disappeared and was preserved by various families who still appreciated it and practiced it.

In the past, the convention was that *Khao Mo* existed only in royal palaces, the mansions of lofty



Figure 2:
Sanctuary inside *Khao Mo* (Mythical Escapism) at "Resort: An Art Exhibition for Landscape of Rest," held from October 4th to November 24th, 2013 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC.)

personages, and important temples. Among the royal temples that King Rama III restored, none was greater than Wat Phra Chettuphon Wimon Mangkhlaram Ratchaworamahawihan (Wat Pho). When the King commissioned the demolition of the Chinese and European style structures in the royal park known as SuanKhwa (“Right Garden” – located in the western side of the palace), which belonged to his father, he also ordered the demolition of the model mountain within the garden. His Majesty ordered between 200 and 1,000 people to transport the large rocks used to build the model mountain and use them to adorn the interiors of various royal temples. But as Wat Phra Chettuphon was situated closer to the royal palace than other temples, it received many of the rocks, which were used to build *Khao Mo* around the area surrounding the walls of the temple. The evidence appears in one part of Khlong Dan Rueang Patisangkhorn Wat Phra Chettuphon, a poem about the restoration of the temple as follows:

*“[His Majesty] Ordered the deconstruction
of the mountain*

Which his royal father had constructed

*In the pleasure garden of the crown of
Ayutthaya*

Some said a hundred could drag [the rocks]

*Perhaps two, three, four hundred could
drag [them]*

A thousand would move them somewhat

Built many different places

Around the area built touching the palace”

*(Reference :Wat Pho (Travelling Guide,
RumpaipanKeawsuriya and others)*

From “Architecture of Wat Pho (concept and design architecture of Wat Pho)” (Peerapat Samran), the origins of *Khao Mo* building come from the traditions and beliefs of India and China, which came to Thailand. The Indians and Chinese shared a belief that the tall mountains and deep forests were sacred lands, the dwelling place of angels and gods.

Because of this belief, those who had secure financial power in India favoured the building of miniature mountains in their homes in order to ask

for the protection of angels. The Chinese preferred to build mountains in the shape of lions, elephants, or other large animals and to dig a pond in the front, which was considered perfection according to Feng Shui. The two beliefs spread into Thailand with the spread of the two great civilizations. The Indian and Chinese beliefs synthesized into the Thai *Khao Mo*, with its own identity and charm.

As Prince Chula Chakrabongse wrote in his book, Kerd Wang Parusk whose title in English is *Lords of Life* that in the beginning, only monarchs could build *khaomo* because the construction required a large plot of land and it demonstrated the power and prestige of the builder. Therefore the art form only existed in the palaces and some other sites that the monarch ordered built. The following quote is from that book:

*“[...] The large grounds of Paruskavan
Palace at the time was an excellent place
for a boy to play. Although naturally the
ground was flat like the rest of Bangkok,
it had three ‘mountains’, which were, of
course, fabricated. Those ‘mountains’ had
many other ideal amusements for children:
large, almost dark caves, fountains and
waterfalls, and the garden had wide canals
that stretched along the whole perimeter of
the palace. Moreover, there were two large
pools in the garden [...]”*

The construction of *Khao Mo* spread among members of the royal family and to their subordinates, the noblemen of high distinction. Later, as society changed, with more people and more equality, the building of *khaomo* became popular in the form of vessels, making the art form more accessible to the general public. (Figure 3)

KHAO MO AND BELIEFS

Khao Phra Sumeru, or *Sumeru* mountain, is a mountain referred to in both Buddhism and Brahmanism. Both the Chinese and Indians believed that it was a sacred land (Liang Suelang, *Khaomo and the invaluable origins of Thai artwork*, 1995). The further one goes up *Sumeru* mountain, the more one finds oneself in the territory of those who are without suffering.

The belief in the relationship between the height of *Sumeru* mountain, which is a physical characteristic,

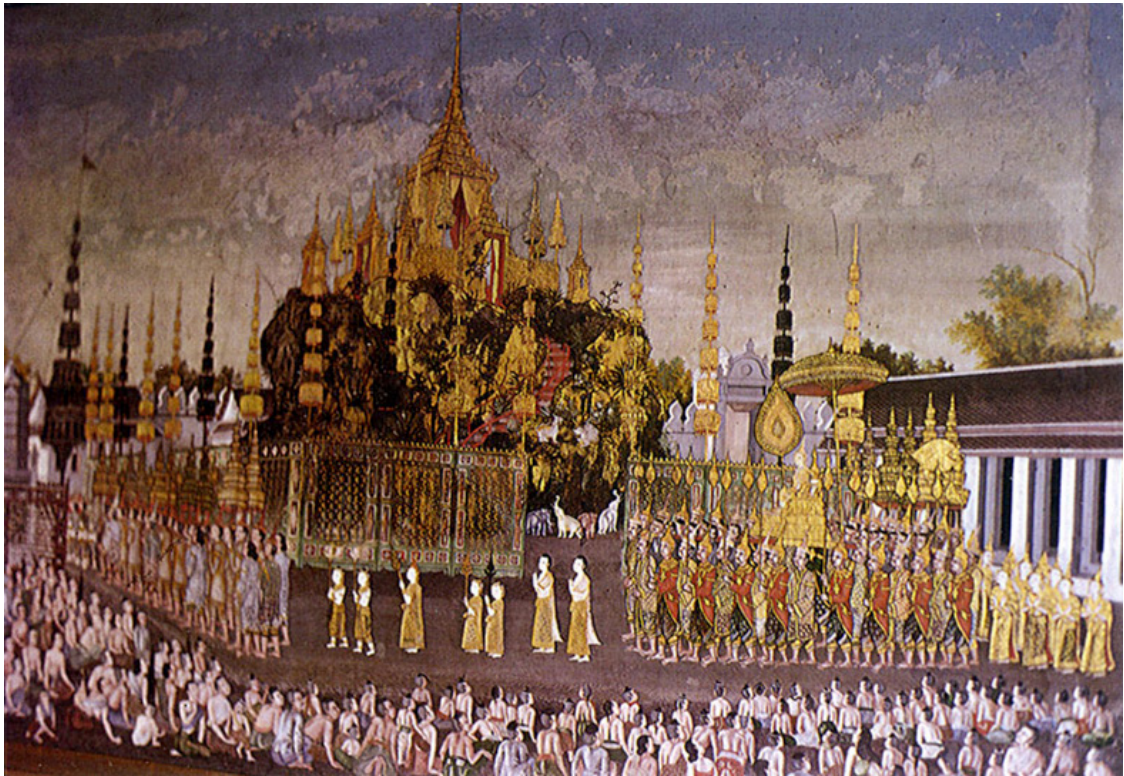


Figure 3:
The moral show *Khao-Krai-Las* that used in the royal tonsure ceremony, celebrated in the grand palace, in the reign of King Rama V. (Image from: <http://www.laksanathai.com>)

with the need to be free of suffering, or the state of contentment, which is an abstraction, synthesized as *Khao Mo*. The name symbolizing the land of paradise; the sacred land filled with happiness. When *Khao Mo* blended with the indigenous beliefs and culture particular to any area, it became *Khao Mo* with the added uniqueness of that area. For example, in China, when blended with the belief in *Feng Shui*, *Khao Mo* would incorporate the element of water. But the meaning remained the same: the boundaries of paradise and the perimeter of happiness.

The relationship between *Khao Mo* and Sumeru mountain in Thailand began to alter when the groups of people who could access *Khao Mo* changed. *Khao Mo* changed its function and meaning, but it remained within the definitions of paradise and happiness. In the past, Sumeru mountain and Mount Krailas were represented in royal ceremonies in the grand Palace during the early and mid Rattanakosin periods, accessible only to members of the royal lineage. *Khao Mo* was a direct symbol

of those mountains in both the physical and abstract senses. When the noble class began to gain access, *Khao Mo* began to symbolize “an area filled with happiness” rather than Sumeru mountain as was the case in the Grand Palace. (Figure 4)

PROCESS AND THE MAKING

The research process and the study of history have helped to illuminate ideas about the importance of the *Khao Mo* in both the abstract and concrete sense. The reproduction of nature, together with the ideal assumption of the *Khao Mo*, enables us to interpret the essential meaning of the *Khao Mo* as “the Mountain of a Belief,” which reflects the belief of people in the past when most of them shared a single religion. It was when right or wrong and black or white were judged within the same framework. This is different from today when technology has become advanced, society has changed and people have become individualistic. Now, people tend



Figure 4:
In Chinese garden, mountains are represented by the use of rocks. The sacred nature of mountains in China has been considered in relation to paradise. (Image from: <http://landsofwisdom.com>)

to have their own ideas, beliefs and perspective, causing differences in opinions which spring from each individual background.

How townspeople in the past relaxed may have been similar to how people currently relax in terms of their wish to have peace, to escape from the disturbances of city life and desiring to be part of the environment. However, some differences may lie in the way of life and the environment itself. In the past, the *Khao Mo* was the reproduction of a natural mountain and of a place believed to be the abode of divine figures. This means that the *Khao Mo* was the replica of an actual physical form and, at the same time, it also portrayed the belief in a physical form.

The interpretation of the meaning of the *Khao Mo* has led to the presentation of the physical form of the “*Khao Mo - Mythical Escapism*”. The structure of an existing mountain in nature has been used

in the same way as the *Khao Mo* in the past, as a communicative symbol to show the physical environment. The “*Khao Mo- Mythical Escapism*” is divided into two parts—the external crust and the internal core, like a volcano with a sanctuary area inside.

The overlapping meaning of the *Khao Mo* in the past, which reflected a unified belief, has changed over time. It has been transferred from the upper class to common people and the emphasis is now on individualism. The “*Khao Mo -Mythical Escapism*” was created at a time when the country was experiencing political conditions where each individual expressed ideas that could not be specified clearly as right or wrong. In the past, the materials that were used to cover the *Khao Mo* consisted of lush green plants and trees to suggest the ambience of a forest and heaven, which reflected the people’s belief in divine figures. These materials have been

adjusted to the change in belief. Today, people try to express their own opinions in order to declare their own self or their own ego. Sometimes, they fail to reflect on what they have expressed.

The “*Khao Mo -Mythical Escapism*” has thus been presented as “the Mountain of a Belief” during a time of current change. It is a way of opening up a space and inviting people to take a rest, to become aware and look at themselves through the reflected images in the environment that surrounds them.

The crust consists of Thai traditional mirror, considered as the cover of the “*Khao Mo - Mythical Escapism*” suggesting a concept and giving the opportunity for people to be aware of it. Normally, Thai traditional mirror will be used to decorate objects in sacred Buddhist places—whether they are ordination halls, *Chedi*, portals or statues in temples. The Thai traditional mirror can reflect real images in the environment and people and allows the “*Khao Mo-Mythical Escapism*” to blend into the environment, leaving only the physical reflections and thoughts. These reflections are the juxtaposition of what really exists and what does not exist simultaneously. Each piece of the mirror is compared to a reflection of each individual and these pieces are assembled into simple boxes that reflect

modern society and emphasize equality. The image of a mountain is reproduced through the boxes being overlaid on one another in a simple way.

Within the mountain, the sanctuary that people have searched for turns out to be a heap of dirt. From the illumination of the mountain image that reflects the environment, they move to the inside area, which is different. The smell of the dirt and the vapour from the earth takes people back to the beginning and the ending where all physical existence, where all things that are reflected outside originated from the earth and then disintegrate and turn to dust. Physical existence turns into non-psychical existence, leaving only a belief framework that has been handed down from one generation to another. This is represented through the negative space of a *Chedi*, which is a way of questioning the existence of a belief.

When people are exposed to the atmosphere of the sanctuary inside, they feel like climbing the mountain and being able to experience the tranquility inside a cave hidden within the mountain. In the sanctuary, they find peace and escape from the chaos outside. It becomes a spiritual sanctuary for them when they interact with “*the Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*”. (Figure 5)

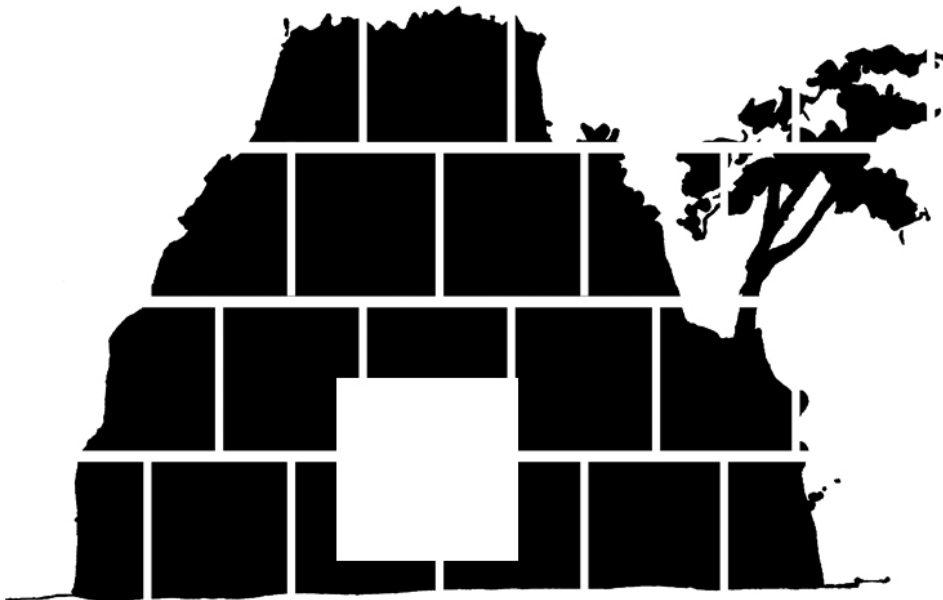


Figure 5:
The Sketch of Khao Mo 2013

THE WORK

Khao Mo, 2013

Mythical Escapism
6.88 x 7.12 x 3.20 metres
Mirror boxes, Soil

City dwellers desire to have time off for rest and relaxation, a moment of escape from everyday life. This is different from the past. To be closer to nature humans have made replicas of natural forms. The concept of Chinese gardens is to replicate the universe in order to create joy and pleasantness. The large stones are clouds in the middle of the garden, representing paradise.

As stated previously the *Khao Mo* is a combination of the physical and abstract beliefs that began as an art form during the Ayutthaya period. The *Khao Mo* is used for enjoyment as well as for ceremonies, especially the royal tonsure ceremony. Those who

enter the ceremony, the location of which includes the model of Mount Krailas for bathing within the Grand Palace, must be princes or princesses of the Chao Fa class only.

The new *Khao Mo* is presented within the original physical framework, but the meaning has been reduced to the beliefs about *Khao Mo* that have altered as times have changed. Audiences are given time to interact with the work. They have the opportunity to explore and find the hidden treasures on the inside via experiences from symbolic objects. They can journey from the past to the present, from the exalted to the public. The inside of *Khao Mo*, which is a sanctuary, actually transpires as emptiness. It is the starting point of not-having and having, which is essentially the root of all things.

The smell of earth, the moisture and vapour that evaporates from the earth, the ordinariness and the emptiness allow the audience time to imagine further. When there is no clarity between right and wrong in the present, the mountain of virtue has a different

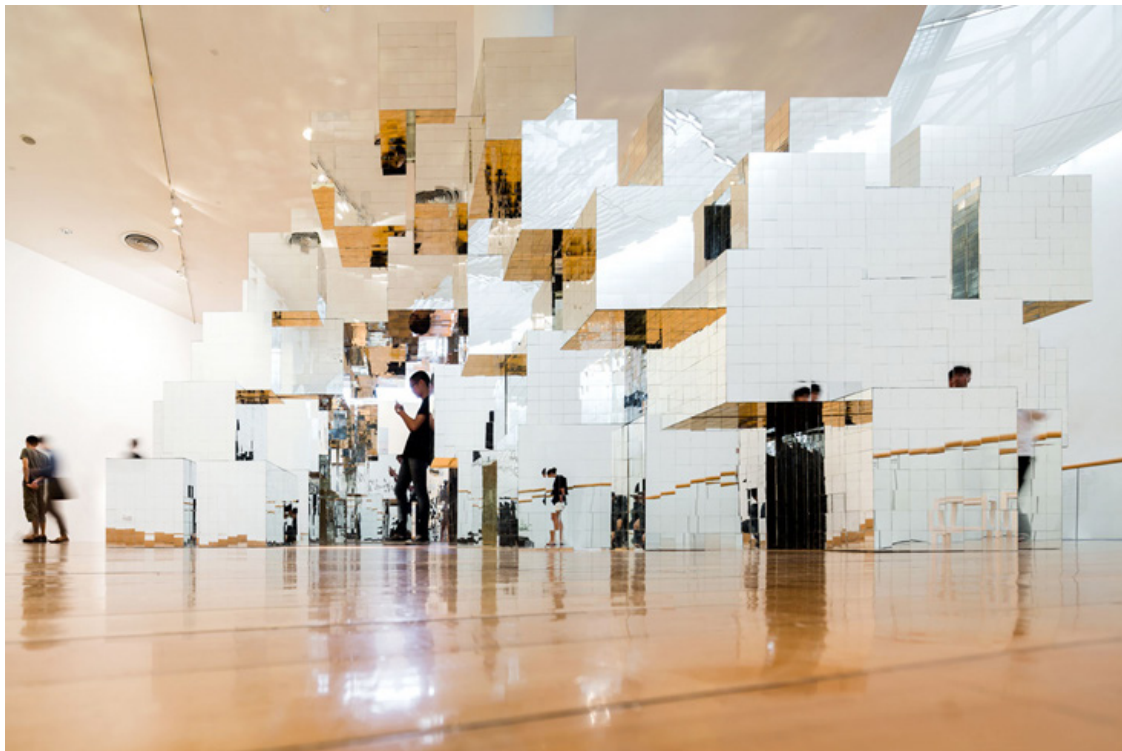


Figure 6:
Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism) at "Resort: An Art Exhibition for Landscape of Rest," held from October 4th to November 24th, 2013 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC).

belief or meaning. Once upon a time, right and wrong had only one truth. What was once black and white is now grey. The world of today has advanced technologically and the changing society has led to more individuality, as well as more self-confidence. But what is the source of that confidence? Where are morality and ethics? What channels does self-confidence have to guide it? This mountain of belief is like the construction of *Khao Mo* for the people (Mythical Escapism). The space is designated for the time of the individual. The opening of the space is dedicated to the reflection of one's personal thoughts and identity via this space of imagination. (Figure 6)

SANCTUARY

Finding the sanctuary, people will discover the unpredictable basic of thing, where the beginning coexists with decaying. The smell and the exhalation of the soil would transport people back to purest state of mind. The nothingness reveals the space and time for people to contemplate. (Figure 7)

FAITH AND BELIEF

In the globalized world the changes in society and the attitudes of people cannot be denied. Equipped with all recent technologies, people have become more individualistic.

From the past, their belief and faith aligned with religion by one principle.

To the present, where the belief has shifted and the truth becomes grey.

But where would the new principle be centered?

The Symbolic object has been used to represent the belief from the history in attempt to paying merit. Its physical form connected to the belief on an abstract level signifying the image of virtue. Since the belief possesses no physical form it only exists in the state of mind. The symbolic we regard as symbol of enlightenment are actually nothingness or only exist in the state of mind. (Figure 8)



Figure 7:
The smell and the exhalation of the soil would transport people back to purest state of mind.

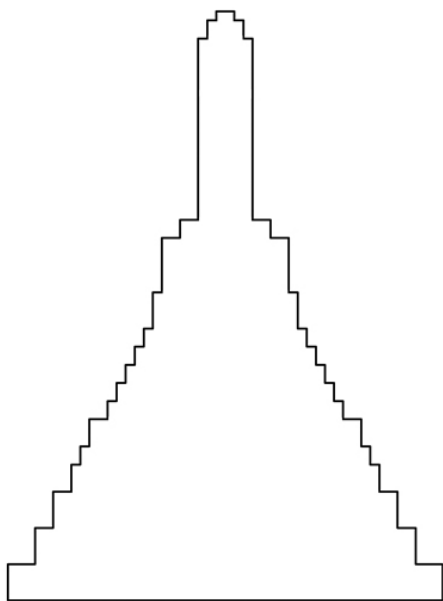


Figure 8:
The Symbolic object has been used to represent the belief from the history in attempt of paying merits.

KHAO MO IN NEW CONTEXT

After its exhibition at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre ended, the “*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*” was exhibited one more time in a different context. The exhibition was moved from inside the building to outside—the natural ambience of lush green trees in Park @ Siam in the grounds of Chulalongkorn University. Thus the “*Khao Mo*” has returned to nature once again.

Park @ Siam was opened as a public park in 2010. It is a green area that links Siam Square and the academic area of Chulalongkorn University. In 2014, the “*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*” was moved to Park @ Siam and it has become part of Siam Square since then. It is a meeting place for people of the new generation and it is a colourful area in Bangkok.

Park @ Siam is a connecting area between urban modernity and an academic institution, with the *Khao Mo* symbolically serving as the gateway to an area that connects a public urban space and the academic area of Chulalongkorn University.



Figure 9:
Khao Mo in new context at Park @ Siam, serving as the gateway to an area that connects a public urban space and the academic area of Chulalongkorn University.

The location of the “*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*” is among mature trees in the park. The exhibit helps to reflect the beauty of the surrounding plants; at the same time, these plants can make *the Khao Mo* more interesting because they add a natural dimension to the exhibit, making the area lively and investing it with a new meaning. The *Khao Mo* and the trees encourage people to be aware of the importance of conserving those old trees.

The *Khao Mo* of the past, which was created from the arrangement of rocks and trees, has been replaced by the new “*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*”

which simply uses the reflected image of the natural greenery to cover its surface. The physical condition of the “*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*” has been reduced to pieces of Thai traditional mirror that reflect the surroundings. At the same time, they also enable people to see the gradual change in surrounding nature, from dawn until dusk, from the hot season to the rainy season and eventually to the cool season. The physical existence and the non-physical existence of the “*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*” have opened a space where people are able to stop, to think and to observe the changes around them. (Figure 9 & 10)



Figure 10:
“*Khao Mo (Mythical Escapism)*”, simply uses the reflected image of the natural greenery to cover its surface.

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