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# BEYOND NATURE: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND ETHICAL ECOLOGIES IN AWARD-WINNING THAI VISUAL ART

**Korrakot Kumhaeng<sup>1\*</sup>, Wittaya Hosap<sup>2</sup>, Luo Xiu<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Thai Language, School of Liberal Arts and Center of Excellence in Women and Social Security, Walailak University, Thailand, korrakot.ku@mail.wu.ac.th,  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5449-7620>*

<sup>2</sup>*Walailak University, Thailand. witthaya.ho@wu.ac.th, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9229-5392>*

<sup>3</sup>*School of Continuing Education, Xihua University. Email 305447285@qq.com,  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9276-225X>*

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Corresponding Author: Wittaya Hosap  
([witthaya.ho@wu.ac.th](mailto:witthaya.ho@wu.ac.th))

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explores how contemporary Thai artists narrate and interpret the concept of biodiversity through visual art. Drawing on 21 awarded works from the 13th White Elephant Art Award (2024), held under the theme "Biodiversity," the research investigates how ecological meanings are constructed, symbolized, and emotionally communicated. A qualitative methodology was employed, using narratology and art appreciation to analyze thematic interpretations, visual narrative strategies, and the ethical positioning of artists. The findings reveal that biodiversity is reframed not as a scientific category, but as a lived, cultural, and moral narrative. Artists engage ecological issues through diverse strategies such as symbolic allegory, material metaphor, and immersive composition, reflecting values rooted in Thai cosmology, spirituality, and local ecological knowledge. The study highlights the artists' role as cultural storytellers and ethical agents, bridging emotional experience with environmental consciousness. Ultimately, this research contributes to the field of art and ecology by proposing a culturally embedded eco-aesthetic framework that broadens how biodiversity is understood, visualized, and ethically experienced within Thai contemporary art.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Biodiversity; Visual Narrative; Thai Contemporary Art; Narratology; Eco-Aesthetic Ethics; Environmental Humanities; Cultural Ecology; Ethical Aesthetics.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the early 21st century, environmental issues have emerged as urgent global challenges, shaping the realms of economics, politics, culture, and ethics. Among these, biodiversity—the variability among organisms at genetic, species, and ecosystem levels—has drawn increasing attention in light of accelerating threats from human activities such as habitat destruction, pollution, overexploitation, and climate change (Rathoure, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Zetzsche & Fallet, 2024). The loss of biodiversity not only disrupts ecological systems, but also erodes cultural diversity, as indigenous and local knowledge systems are often deeply embedded in specific ecological contexts (Ajitha et al., 2025; Rathoure & Kumar, 2024). In this regard, biodiversity must be recognized not solely as a scientific or environmental concern, but as a complex cultural and narrative phenomenon.

Contemporary art has increasingly participated in environmental discourse, moving beyond a merely reflective function to become a critical space where artists interrogate the human–nature relationship, envision alternative futures, and cultivate collective empathy. This shift has given rise to eco-art, environmental art, and socially engaged ecological practices, which foreground sustainability, interdependence, and environmental justice (Vargas, 2024; Heuver, 2024; Pitout, 2024). Such practices frequently involve natural materials, biological processes, community participation, and site-specific installations, challenging conventional boundaries between art, science, and activism (Ćatović, 2024; Rahmani, 2024; Stammen & Meissner, 2024).

Global exhibitions and biennales have increasingly embraced ecological themes. For instance, the Taipei Biennial 2020, titled *You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet*, examined ecological fragmentation and geopolitical crisis (Whitfield, 2021), while artists at the 2022 Venice Biennale addressed post-anthropocentric imaginaries, ecological grief, and multispecies entanglements (Šlégerytė, 2022). These exhibitions demonstrate how art can shape public understanding and emotional engagement with ecological concerns, often proposing counter-narratives to dominant scientific or policy frameworks. Theoretical developments such as ecocriticism, new materialism, and posthumanism have further informed these artistic approaches, encouraging a reconceptualization of nature as an active, agential force rather than a passive backdrop. Thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Timothy Morton have notably influenced these frameworks (Morton, 2009;

Wesling, 2015; Fourie, 2018). Within this context, biodiversity is not merely documented; it is narrated and performed through artistic media. Art thereby becomes a powerful aesthetic and discursive tool through which biodiversity is interpreted beyond scientific data or policy language, opening emotional, symbolic, and philosophical pathways to imagine alternative forms of coexistence. Studying the relationship between art and biodiversity helps reveal how artists reframe ecological concerns as shared cultural responsibilities.

In Thailand, the convergence of contemporary art and environmental consciousness has gained increasing visibility. This trend reflects a broader awareness that pressing issues such as climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss are not solely scientific, but also deeply cultural and ethical. A significant platform for this convergence is the 13th White Elephant Art Award (นิทรรศการศิลปกรรมช้างเผือก), a national competition launched in 2011 by Thai Beverage Public Company Limited in collaboration with the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). As one of the most prestigious and well-funded art events in Thailand, the exhibition promotes excellence in figurative and realistic art across various media—including painting, sculpture, printmaking, and mixed media. With its open-call format welcoming both emerging and established artists, the exhibition has become a vital space for artistic experimentation and public discourse (Thai Beverage Public Company Limited, 2024).

The 13th edition of the White Elephant Art Award, held in 2024 under the theme “Biodiversity,” marked a significant intersection between Thai contemporary art and global ecological discourse. Out of 241 participating artists, 50 artworks were selected, with 21 receiving awards. The exhibition offered a wide spectrum of artistic interpretations that not only depicted ecological variety but also reflected human efforts to coexist with nature in meaningful ways. This thematic emphasis signaled a broader institutional engagement with environmental issues through the arts, positioning visual art not simply as representation, but as advocacy, reflection, and cultural imagination (Thai Beverage Public Company Limited, 2024).

Among the awarded works, *Land of Life* (ดินแดนแห่งชีวิต) by Theerapon Phoepiansri—recipient of the top prize—illustrates this convergence. Rather than merely portraying biodiversity, the artwork reflects on human adaptation to natural environments and emphasizes interspecies harmony. The use of traditional woodcut techniques

underscores a cultural specificity rooted in place, while the imagery conveys mutual support within ecosystems as a foundation for sustainable living. The piece serves as an emblematic case study of how cultural technique, narrative symbolism, and ecological ethics coalesce within Thai visual art. It also exemplifies the embeddedness of ecological meaning in what may be called a "Thai worldview"—an ethical-aesthetic system informed by Theravāda Buddhist cosmology, animist beliefs, and vernacular environmental knowledge.

Despite the growing relevance of this topic, there remains a lack of scholarly attention to how Thai contemporary artists visually and conceptually engage with biodiversity. While global scholarship on art and ecology is expanding, few studies have examined how these ecological concerns are interpreted through Thai narrative traditions, symbolic vocabularies, and aesthetic practices (Siriuyasak, 1991; Fongsut, 2024). This gap limits our understanding of how localized artistic expressions contribute to broader ecological discourse.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how Thai artists interpret and re-narrate the notion of biodiversity in the context of the 13th White Elephant Art Award. Specifically, it examines the aesthetic choices, symbolic structures, and narrative frameworks employed in 21 awarded artworks. Drawing on narratology and art appreciation, the study approaches artists as storytellers who generate ecological meaning not only through form and technique, but also through metaphor, composition, and emotional resonance. These artworks are interpreted as ecological narratives that embed biodiversity within Thai ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic systems. Ultimately, the study contributes to the interdisciplinary field of art and ecology in Southeast Asia, while enriching global discourse by foregrounding culturally situated interpretations of biodiversity through Thai visual culture. The study also proposes a localized eco-aesthetic model rooted in Thai narrative and spiritual traditions—expanding current understandings of biodiversity as a culturally imagined, visually mediated, and ethically resonant concept.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between art and ecology has become a prominent subject of inquiry in response to urgent environmental challenges of the 21st century. Contemporary visual art increasingly functions not only as reflection but as critical engagement in ecological discourse, using symbolic, affective, and

narrative practices to visualize interdependence, critique degradation, and construct cultural meaning around nonhuman life. This study reviews four strands of literature: (1) global developments in ecological art, (2) narrative and symbolic strategies, (3) cultural and religious ecology in Southeast Asia, and (4) art as ethical and epistemic practice.

First, global eco-art scholarship highlights the shift from representation to activism. The term "eco-art" encompasses not only artistic responses to environmental issues but also practices of restoration, scientific collaboration, and public education (Schoenacher, 2014; Çakiroğlu, 2022). Concepts such as "environmental aesthetics" and "soft ecology" explore how aesthetics intersect with moral concern, particularly in visualizing climate change and biodiversity loss (Blanc, 2022; Dimova, 2024). Artists like Mel Chin and Terike Haapoja illustrate how art mediates between science and public emotion, while theorists frame eco-art as both revelation and resistance (Weintraub, 2012; Demos, 2013).

Second, narratology and semiotics show how visual form conveys story and meaning. Scholars emphasize compositional structure, symbolism, and materiality as narrative devices that extend beyond linguistic form (Akleman et al., 2015; Wang, 2023). Eisner (2008) and Serafini (2024) illustrate how visual media embed meaning through gesture, layout, and repetition, while design theory highlights narrative's epistemic role in shaping imagination and proposing futures (Trocchianesi, 2023; Maia, 2018). Collectively, this literature shows how artists communicate ecological complexity through visual storytelling.

Third, cultural and religious perspectives in Southeast Asia situate ecology within cosmology. In Thailand, animist beliefs, Buddhist cosmology, and local rituals (such as reverence for Mae Phosop, the Rice Goddess) frame ecological harmony as sacred and relational (Lertpiboon, 2025; Savage, 2021). These cosmologies coexist uneasily with technocratic environmentalism, revealing tensions between local values and modern development (Panya & Sirisai, 2003). Such tensions are crucial to understanding how Thai artists draw on cultural memory and spirituality when addressing ecological themes.

Finally, art is increasingly theorized as moral and epistemic practice. Scholars emphasize the artist's role as mediator and ethical agent, critiquing ideological roots of ecological degradation while imagining alternative relationalities (Baldacci, 2023; Caballero, 2014). New media and sound arts expand ecological aesthetics by foregrounding nonhuman perspectives, underscoring that artistic responses are

both representational and ethical propositions (Schorpp & Galliker, 2024; Lorusso & Braida, 2012; Gielen, 2014).

Together, these four strands establish a multidimensional framework for this study. While global scholarship has addressed eco-art, narrative symbolism, and cultural ecology, limited work explores how these intersect in the Thai context—particularly in nationally curated exhibitions like the White Elephant Art Award. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do Thai contemporary artists conceptualize and narrate biodiversity through visual art? It examines the thematic interpretations, symbolic structures, and visual strategies in 21 awarded works, positioning artists as cultural storytellers who construct ethical, spiritual, and affective engagements with biodiversity.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in visual and interpretive analysis to investigate how Thai contemporary artists narrate and conceptualize biodiversity through visual art. The dataset comprises 21 artworks that received awards at the 13th White Elephant Art Award (2024), an exhibition held under the theme “Biodiversity.” This exhibition was chosen because it is one of the most prominent and best-funded art competitions in Thailand. It includes multiple mediums (painting, sculpture, printmaking, and mixed media) and enjoys national visibility, supported by a judging panel of esteemed figures, including National Artists. These features make the White Elephant Art Award a valuable site for analyzing how biodiversity is represented within culturally and institutionally validated forms of contemporary Thai art.

The analysis is guided by two interrelated theoretical frameworks: narratology and art appreciation. Narratological tools—such as focalization, symbolism, sequencing, and narrative structure—were applied to examine how each artwork constructs ecological narratives through visual storytelling (Wolf, 2003; Lejano, 2013). These were complemented by art appreciation approaches that attend to formal composition, visual elements (e.g., color, texture, line, perspective), and contextual interpretation, enabling a holistic reading that integrates aesthetic form and symbolic content. This dual framework allowed the study to investigate how visual form and narrative meaning intersect in conveying ecological ideas.

Each artwork was analyzed alongside available artist statements, curatorial notes, and exhibition

texts, allowing for triangulation between visual data and authorial intent. The interpretive process was structured using thematic coding in three phases: (1) open coding to identify visual motifs and narrative cues; (2) axial coding to link visual elements with interpretive themes (e.g., interdependence, transformation, spirituality); and (3) selective coding to map these themes onto broader conceptual categories.

The resulting data were examined across three interrelated dimensions:

1. Thematic interpretations of biodiversity (e.g., coexistence, ecological grief, or spiritual cosmology),
2. Visual narrative strategies (e.g., symbolic metaphor, allegorical structure, material poetics), and
3. The role of the artist as a cultural storyteller and ethical agent within Thai ecological discourse.

This methodological approach integrates close visual reading with narrative interpretation, emphasizing how biodiversity is not only depicted but also symbolically reimagined within culturally embedded frameworks. The combination of theoretical rigor and visual detail enabled the study to uncover the layered ways in which Thai artists articulate ecological meaning through their creative practices.

### 4. RESULTS

This study examines 21 awarded artworks from the 13th White Elephant Art Award (2024) to investigate how Thai contemporary artists conceptualize and narrate biodiversity. Using narratology and art appreciation, the analysis combines visual interpretation, symbolic reading, and consideration of artist intent. The results are organized into three parts: (1) thematic interpretations of biodiversity, (2) visual strategies for constructing ecological narratives, and (3) the artist’s role as a cultural storyteller and ethical voice. Together, these findings provide a multidimensional view of how biodiversity is reimagined in Thai visual culture.

#### 4.1. *Interpretive Themes Of Biodiversity And Their Narrative Foundations*

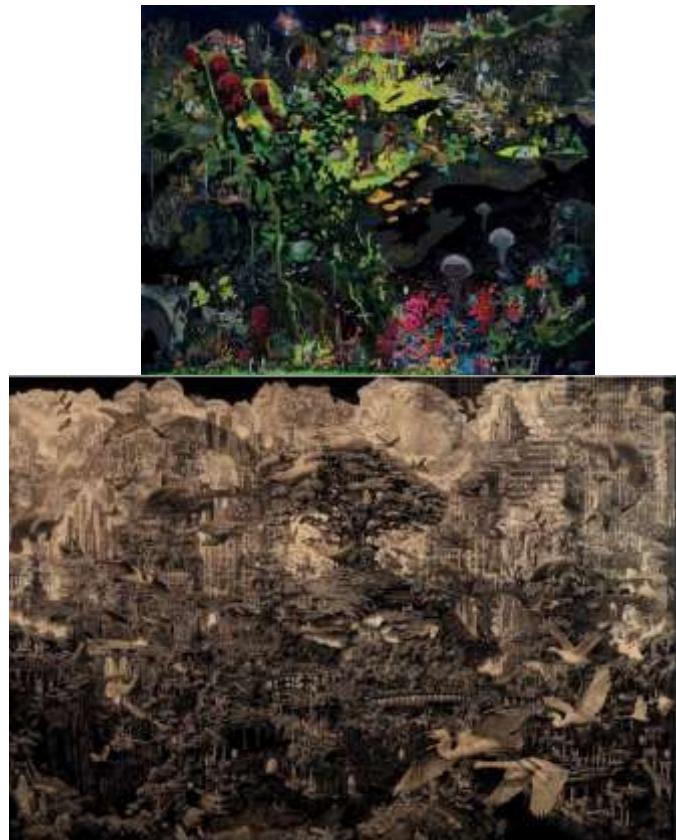
An in-depth examination of the 21 awarded artworks from the 13th White Elephant Art Award shows that biodiversity is interpreted not as a single ecological issue but as a site of cultural, emotional, philosophical, and symbolic exploration. Rather than relying solely on scientific representation, Thai artists

reframe biodiversity through narratives rooted in memory, spirituality, socio-political critique, imagination, and abstraction. This plurality reflects the diverse epistemologies embedded in Thai contemporary art, allowing biodiversity to emerge as a relational, ethical, and affective construct.

As Singh (2024) defines, biodiversity encompasses the variety of life at genetic, species, and ecosystem levels. In this study, however, the concept extends beyond biology into cultural, symbolic, and narrative dimensions. Scholars in the environmental humanities argue that biodiversity must be seen as a multilayered cultural construct, embedded in stories, values, and worldviews that differ across societies (Haila, 1999; Pretty et al., 2009). This view resonates with “cultural ecology,” which holds that human interpretations of the environment are shaped by belief systems, histories, and expressive forms (Sutton, 2020).

The analysis identifies six major interpretive themes. First, Interdependence and Mutual Support conceptualizes biodiversity as a web of life sustained through relational care and balance. This theme aligns with the ecological principle of mutualism, which posits that all life forms arise and persist through interconnection (Davison, 2020). Works such as Fragrance of Life (กรุณกลิ่นชีวัน) by Ladakorn Pungbubpha and Warm Embrace (โอบอุ่น โอบกอด) by Teppong Hongsrimueang employ floral imagery and natural motifs to express this interdependence.

A representative case is Bond of Friendship (ความผูกพันแห่งมิตรภาพ) by Yerrinda Keawsuwan (Figure 1). Executed in embroidery on canvas, the work uses fine threads and layered stitching as metaphors for ecological bonds. The delicacy of the medium evokes care and nurture, resonating with ecofeminist aesthetics that revalorize feminine-associated materials as carriers of ecological meaning. The artwork suggests that biodiversity endures not only through scientific mechanisms but also through emotional attachment and ethical responsibility. By embedding ecological meaning in intimate materials and careful labor, Bond of Friendship transforms a visual object into a tactile narrative—inviting viewers to reflect on the fragility and value of interspecies connection.



*Figure 1: Bond Of Friendship  
(ความผูกพันแห่งมิตรภาพ) By Yerrinda Keawsuwan.  
Land Of Life (ดินแดนแห่งชีวิต) By Teerapon Phopae Sri.*

Second, Coexistence in Balance portrays biodiversity as a condition of dynamic equilibrium among humans, animals, and the natural world. This notion draws on Thai-Buddhist cosmology, where the harmony of the four elements (earth, water, wind, fire) reflects both physical and moral order. Works such as Earth, Water, Wind, Fire (ดิน น้ำ ลม ไฟ) by Pornsawan Nonthapha and Balance (ดุลยภาพ) by Nara Viboonsuntipong and Teerapon Sisung express this worldview through symmetry, layered materials, and symbolic references to natural forces. Collectively, these works embody ecological holism, suggesting that systems must be understood as interdependent wholes rather than isolated parts.

A representative example is Land of Life (ดินแดนแห่งชีวิต) by Teerapon Phopae Sri (Figure 2). Executed in traditional woodcut, the work presents a densely layered ecological scene where flora, fauna, and human figures coexist within a unified symbolic space. Rhythmic organic forms, curvilinear movement, and balanced spacing suggest a continuous circulation of energy and life. This interconnectedness resonates with the Thai-Buddhist

worldview of *samsāra*—the cyclical nature of existence—and karmic interdependence. The tactile resistance of woodcut carving further reflects ecological care and spiritual discipline. The resulting tableau functions not as a landscape to observe, but as a living mandala in which biodiversity is experienced as sacred order. Through this composition, the artist enacts an ecological ethics grounded in cultural worldview, material practice, and visual harmony.

The third theme, Transformation and Evolution, frames biodiversity as a process of adaptation, mutation, and metamorphosis. Conceptually, it draws on Darwinian evolutionary theory (Davies, 2012) as well as posthumanist discourse that destabilizes species boundaries in the Anthropocene (Zapf, 2022). Works such as *White Canvas* (ผืนผ้าใบสีขาว) by Tawinwich Chaotanakit and *Decay - Change - Birth* (เสื่อม slavery) by Jarun Pan-onta visualize biodiversity as unstable and speculative, blending naturalistic elements with imagined or mutated forms. Collectively, these works contribute to what scholars describe as speculative ecologies—artistic representations that project alternative environmental futures in response to crisis.

A representative case is *To You, One Million Years* (แต่ເຮືອວຶກ 1 ລ້ານປີ) by Janejira Khodchawat (Figure 3). Constructed through collage, a medium suited to fragmentation and recombination, the work assembles biological, mechanical, and imaginary elements into hybridized life forms. While drawing on Darwinian evolution and natural selection, it overlays them with a posthumanist sensibility: survival here is not only biological, but also technological, aesthetic, and existential. The juxtaposition of botanical imagery with genetically modified organisms, alien flora, and artificial membranes conveys the erosion of stable species identity. At the same time, the second-person address—“to you”—creates intimacy, positioning the viewer as descendant, participant, or remnant. This ambiguity provokes reflection on both ecological futures and human accountability. In this way, the work transcends illustration and enters the realm of speculative ecology, offering not prediction but provocation—a meditation on what evolution might become under conditions of crisis.

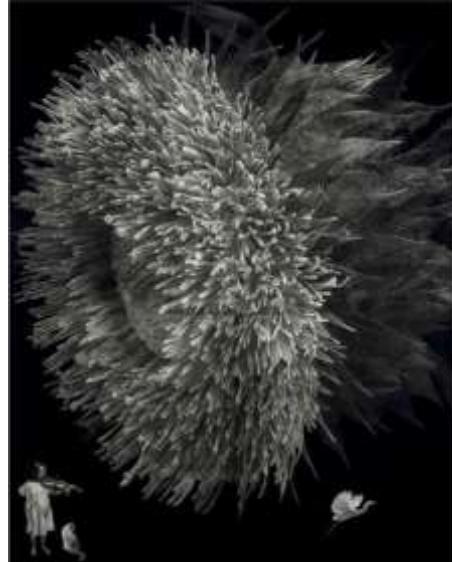
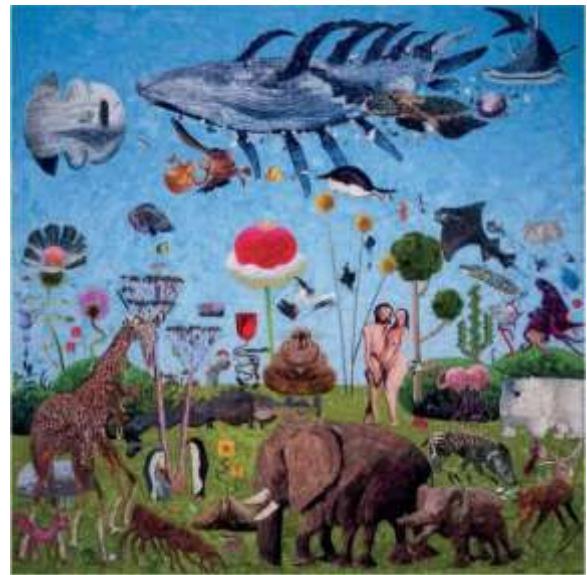


Figure 2: *To You, One Million Years* by Janejira Khodchawat

Figure 3: *A Flower and Her Melody* by Boonmee Sangkhum

The fourth theme, Imagination and Emotional Positivity, shifts the focus from critique to celebration. Here biodiversity is presented as a source of joy, playfulness, and sensory pleasure. These works resonate with affective ecocriticism, which explores how wonder and delight foster deeper ecological connection. Originating from childhood experience and familial intimacy, pieces such as *Dream* (ฝัน) by Vipabhon Nilubon and *Diversity No.1* (สรรพชิริต หมวดเลข 1) by Weerapong Sansomporn highlight biodiversity as a space of comfort, care, and hope through whimsical imagery, vibrant colors, and rhythmic repetition.

A representative case is *A Flower and Her Melody*

(គត់ដីកំពង់សិំសង្គមទីៗទៀត) by Boonmee Sangkhum (Figure 4). Inspired by the artist's child—who believed music could help plants and animals flourish—the work reframes a naïve belief as an ecologically profound insight. Rendered in mezzotint, with tonal softness and rich textures, the composition evokes tenderness and meditative calm. Flowing forms, concentric rhythms, and gentle contrasts mirror the cadence of a lullaby, suggesting that sound itself can serve as an ecological bridge between humans and nonhuman life. This aligns with affective ecocriticism, which emphasizes how wonder, affection, and care deepen ecological engagement. By translating a child's imagination into visual form, the work affirms the value of childhood ecology—the idea that early emotional bonds with nature shape lifelong environmental consciousness. In this vision, biodiversity is not an external system to analyze but an extension of familial love, musical harmony, and intimate ecological feeling.

Fifth, the theme of Biodiversity Under Threat addresses environmental degradation caused by human activity. These works participate in what scholars term eco-critique—a visual form of social commentary linking human behavior with ecological crisis (Collins, 2016). The Reflection of Consumerism (រាយការណ៍អេងតីអិប្រិកិនិយម) by Somdit Thawinmart and Sound from the Forest (សីេយ៉ាតាកបា) by Santi Seedarach critique consumerism and pollution, while Diversity Within Dominated Condition (គ្មានអាចលាយកាយឱ្យសភារ៉ាទ្វករូបា) by Chaiyan Ninlabon exposes the domination of industrial systems over biodiversity. Collectively, these works employ fragmented structures, distressed materials, and stark contrasts to convey urgency and implicate viewers in ecological harm.

A representative case is Diversity Within Dominated Condition by Chaiyan Ninlabon (Figure 5). Constructed from lead, steel, papier-mâché, and resin, the work's imposing scale and heavy materials confront the tension between the organic and the artificial. The industrial media themselves function as critique, embodying what scholars call critical materiality, where substances carry ideological and ecological charge. Fragmented and clustered forms evoke entrapment and mutation, suggesting that once-diverse life forms are now deformed under technological control. This conceptual domination extends beyond the material, reflecting how human systems define, classify, and constrain nature's dynamism. In doing so, the work operates not only as representation but as enactment of eco-critique, positioning the viewer within structures of complicity and prompting reflection on the costs of

unchecked progress and the ethical limits of expansion.



Figure 4: *Diversity Within Dominated Condition* by Chaiyan Ninlabon.

Figure 5: *The God of Biodiversity* by Phra Phumminan Ngoenkhon.

Finally, Sacred Order and Spiritual Cosmology positions biodiversity within a moral and metaphysical framework. Here nature is not only alive but sacred, governed by unseen forces that demand reverence. This theme aligns with theories of ecospirituality, which suggest that many cultures perceive ecological systems through religious, animist, or spiritual lenses. Works such as Sky and Earth (កំណែអេងកំបុងកំណុំតិន) by Panchat Yodmanee portray the natural world as governed by divine intention, while Warm Embrace and Land of Life subtly invoke ritualistic dimensions of ecology, suggesting that harmony with nature is karmic as well as practical.

A representative case is The God of Biodiversity (ពេធដូស្ឋាអំគ្មានអាចលាយកាយឱ្យសភារ៉ាទ្វករូបា) by Phra Phumminan Ngoenkhon (Figure 6). The central

figure—a cosmic deity encircled by diverse flora and fauna—serves as both creator and protector, visually anchoring biodiversity within a spiritual cosmology. Organized in a circular, galaxy-like structure echoing Buddhist mandalas and traditional cosmographs, the composition situates biodiversity in a metaphysical space of harmony and transcendence. This symbolic structure aligns with ecospirituality, which views ecological awareness and spiritual consciousness as deeply intertwined. The multitude of life forms orbiting the divine center suggests not random distribution but divine coordination, each with moral significance and cosmic function. Drawing on Buddhist and animist traditions, the iconography merges doctrinal belief with folk cosmology to form a kind of visual theology. In this reading, biodiversity becomes a sacred tapestry of life, sustained by spiritual equilibrium rather than ecological chance. The artwork reframes environmental stewardship as reverence, moral duty, and spiritual alignment with cosmic order.

Collectively, these six themes show that biodiversity in Thai contemporary art is not simply a biological category but a culturally embedded narrative construct. As scholars in environmental aesthetics note, its meaning is not fixed but emerges through historically and culturally specific forms of representation. Drawing on sources from the empirical to the spiritual, artists reposition biodiversity as a shared cultural responsibility. Through these narrative strategies, their works invite audiences to engage with ecological knowledge not only cognitively but also emotionally and ethically—through feeling, imagination, and reflection.

In sum, Thai contemporary artists approach biodiversity through diverse lenses that yield six interrelated thematic interpretations. Rooted in personal memory, scientific reasoning, spiritual belief, political critique, and symbolic imagination, these themes reflect a pluralistic cultural ecology in which biodiversity is simultaneously biological, moral, emotional, and cosmological. The artworks do not merely depict biodiversity; they re-narrate it, embedding ecological meaning in cultural ritual, personal experience, and artistic imagination. This diversity affirms the role of contemporary Thai art as a discursive space where ecological knowledge is shaped, shared, and made culturally intelligible.

#### **4.2. Visual Narrative Strategies In The Representation Of Biodiversity**

Beyond thematic interpretation, the 21 awarded artworks reveal a range of visual strategies that function as narrative devices through which

biodiversity is represented, questioned, and reimagined. These strategies are not merely illustrative but operate as performative and discursive structures in their own right. Drawing on narratology, visual culture studies, and art appreciation, this section identifies seven key approaches: symbolic narrative, allegorical composition, fantastical scenario-building, scientific referencing, material metaphor, immersive tableaux, and fragmented collage. Each reflects a particular way of organizing visual information to convey ecological meaning, shaped by the artist's positionality, cultural context, and worldview. This diversity is best understood through visual narrative theory, which extends classical narratology into image-based meaning-making. As Goodnow (2020) notes, while textual narratives focus on plot and chronology, visual narrative emphasizes the arrangement of elements such as characters, symbols, spatial relations, and compositional flow. In this sense, narrative is not only the recounting of events but also the cultural organization of visual signs that generate meaning across time, space, and symbolic registers.

One prominent strategy is symbolic narrative, where biodiversity is conveyed through metaphors that evoke broader ecological and ethical concerns. In Bond of Friendship (ความผูกพันแห่งมิตรภาพ) by Yerrinda Keawsuwan – Figure 1, embroidered threads become symbols of ecological interdependence and fragility: the breaking of a single strand suggests systemic collapse. Here, textile functions not only as medium but as metaphor, aligning with ecofeminist aesthetics that revalorize materials traditionally linked to care and nurture. Other works, such as Sky and Earth (ก้อนเมฆกับก้อนดิน) by Panchat Yodmanee – Figure 7, also employ symbolic dualism to reflect cosmological balance rooted in animist and Buddhist traditions. Collectively, these examples illustrate what Roland Barthes termed “mythic signification,” where cultural symbols acquire ideological meaning beyond their literal form, inviting viewers to see biodiversity as a sacred relationship rather than a biological inventory.



Figure 6: *Sky and Earth* (កំណើនមនុស្សកំណើនពិធី) by Panchat Yodmanee

A second strategy is allegorical composition, which stages biodiversity as a visual drama where spatial organization reflects moral and philosophical narratives. *Land of Life* (ឯកណែនដោងជីវិត) by Teerapon Phophaesri exemplifies this approach. Using traditional woodcut, the artist constructs a densely layered ecosystem in which human, animal, and vegetal forms coexist across horizontal bands, suggesting spatial zones and narrative episodes. This allegorical structure frames coexistence as a moral proposition: each species is not merely part of nature but an agent in a shared world. The woodcut technique, with its depth and rhythmic repetition, reinforces continuity over hierarchy, while local architectural motifs integrated with organic patterns emphasize the interdependence of culture and environment. Rather than offering a single storyline, the work invites an open-ended reading, where meaning arises from spatial proximity, visual contrast, and symbolic density. In this way, *Land of Life* illustrates how allegory can move beyond illustration to enact a worldview, transforming biodiversity into a lived ethical structure.

The third strategy is fantastical and imaginative scenario-building, where artists create fictional or dreamlike environments that reframe biodiversity as a realm of play, wonder, and affective resonance rather than scientific reality. Works such as *A Flower and Her Melody* (ទោកអីកំណើនសិល្បៈណានទីរីខែងកូក) by Boonmee Sangkhum use children's imagination to depict joyful coexistence among life forms. These narratives embody Paul Ricoeur's notion of productive imagination, which enables viewers to suspend the empirical in favor of symbolic insight.

A representative case is *Dream* (ដំណើ) by Vipabhorn Nilubon (Figure 8). Inspired by a dream recounted by the artist's child, the work visualizes a utopian world

where animals and flowers coexist free of conflict or hierarchy. Softened lines, vibrant hues, and fluid forms emphasize affective coherence over scientific accuracy, inviting viewers into a space where joy, curiosity, and companionship shape ecological relations. In this context, *Dream* becomes a visual enactment of Ricoeur's productive imagination, privileging symbolic potential over empirical reference (Schwartz, 1983). Biodiversity here is rendered as a feeling and a fantasy—an ethical invitation to approach the natural world not only with the mind but with the heart.



Figure 7: *Dream* (ដំណើ) by Vipabhorn Nilubon.

Figure 9: *Fragrance of Life* by Ladakorn Pungbubpha.

In contrast, some works employ scientific referencing as a narrative foundation. For instance, *Eyewall of Insectbots* (ការរំភេងតាមផែកគុក) by Apiwat Banler merges storm systems with mechanized insects to comment on technological incursions into biology. More broadly, such compositions resonate with the idea of epistemic imagery in scientific visualization—images designed not only to display knowledge but also to persuade or problematize it. A representative case is *Fragrance of Life* (ក្រុងក្នុងជីវិន) by Ladakorn Pungbubpha (Figure 9). The etching depicts microbiological relationships such as mycorrhizal symbiosis with diagram-like clarity, yet

transforms them into an organic visual field that evokes wonder as well as information. Subtle textures and fine lines suggest both the delicacy of ecological interdependence and the precision of biological systems. In this way, the work exemplifies epistemic imagery: translating scientific reference into symbolic visual form that bridges empirical observation with poetic interpretation, positioning biodiversity as both a system to understand and a mystery to respect.

Material metaphor is a central strategy through which artists allow the medium itself to carry symbolic weight. For example, *Diversity No.1* (สรรพชีวิต หมายเลข 1) by Weerapong Sansomporn uses woven copper wire to simulate ecological complexity, while *Balance* (สมดุล) by Teerapon Sisung reconfigures discarded electronic components into a fragile sculptural system that critiques environmental costs of modern technology. These works illustrate that form does not merely support content—it embodies it.

A representative case is *Balance* by Teerapon Sisung (Figure 10). Constructed from circuit boards, filters, and glass, the sculpture turns technological debris into a precarious structure that mirrors ecological instability. The sharp metallic surfaces juxtaposed with transparent glass create visual dissonance, intensifying the sense of imbalance. This approach exemplifies theories of eco-critical materiality, in which the physical substance of art conveys ecological meaning directly (Triyono *et al.*, 2023). Sisung does not simply depict imbalance; he constructs it both visually and materially, compelling viewers to confront the contradictions of technological progress and environmental degradation.



Figure 8: *Balance* (สมดุล) by Teerapon Sisung.

Some works employ immersive tableaux to

extend the narrative experience. *Land of Life* and *Fragrance of Life* invite viewers into layered visual environments that resist a single focal point, allowing meaning to unfold through navigation across interconnected zones. These compositions exemplify what Marie-Laure Ryan terms spatial narratives, where coherence is achieved not through chronology but through spatial relationships and symbolic density. This reflects an eco-visual sensibility that values complexity, interrelation, and multiscalar perception. A representative case is *Fragrance of Life* by Ladakorn Pungbubpha (Figure 9). The etching disperses attention across zones filled with fungi, bacteria, and plant matter, requiring the viewer to “read” the work through movement and association. Fine tonal gradations evoke both scientific observation and poetic texture, reinforcing the tableau’s immersive quality. In this sense, the work exemplifies Ryan’s concept of spatial narrative, where meaning arises from layered simultaneity rather than sequence. Its ecological resonance lies in mirroring the entangled complexity of ecosystems, foregrounding multiplicity, interdependence, and the unseen intricacies of life.

Lastly, fragmented or collaged storytelling reflects the instability of ecological systems. Works such as *To You, One Million Years* (แต่ເຮືອອີກ 1 ສຳນປີ) by Janejira Khodchawat and *Decay – Change – Birth* (ເສື່ອມສລາຍ) by Jarun Pan-onta use fragmentation in both form and logic to depict disintegration and reassembly as narrative processes. These strategies align with N. Katherine Hayles’s (1999) notion of posthuman aesthetics, where the boundaries between life forms, technologies, and narrative itself are porous and unstable. In this view, biodiversity is not a static catalog but an evolving matrix.

A representative case is *Decay – Change – Birth* by Jarun Pan-onta (Figure 11). The tripartite composition resists continuity, presenting environmental collapse, synthetic mutation, and speculative rebirth. Acrylic brushstrokes shift from organic textures to abstract geometries, signaling ruptures between natural and artificial states. The central hybrid organism—composed of plastic-like forms—suggests a future where biodiversity adapts through unnatural evolution, embodying Hayles’s (2023) posthuman aesthetics. The work offers no resolution but poses an ontological question: what constitutes life when nature itself has been overwritten? In this sense, its collage-like logic becomes a metaphor for ecological precarity, urging viewers to confront a future shaped as much by collapse as by regeneration.

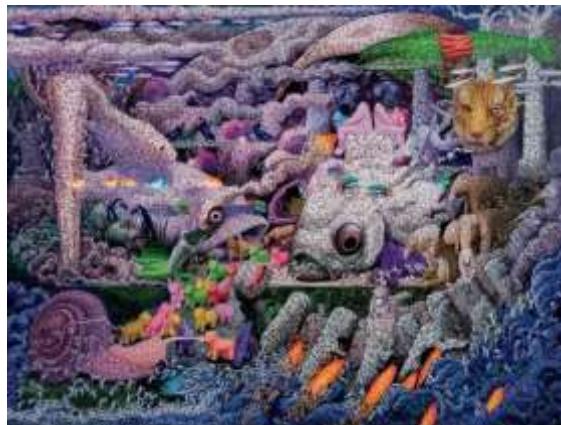


Figure 9: Decay - Change - Birth By Jarun Pan-Ontha.

In sum, the visual strategies identified in these artworks show that biodiversity is constructed not only through what is represented but through how it is represented. Compositional choices, material forms, and structural arrangements function as narrative acts that challenge, reframe, and deepen ecological understanding. Through symbolic condensation, spatial logic, material metaphor, and epistemic play, Thai artists expand the visual vocabulary through which biodiversity can be imagined. Their work demonstrates that visual art does not simply reflect ecological ideas but actively produces them within cultural and interpretive frameworks.

The thematic interpretations outlined earlier are inseparable from these strategies. Works emphasizing interdependence often employed symbolic narrative and material metaphor, while those addressing ecological threat relied on fragmented collage and critical materiality. Spiritual cosmology was frequently conveyed through immersive tableaux and allegory, while imaginative or celebratory themes drew on fantastical scenario-building and playful rhythm. These cross-linkages confirm that visual strategy is not merely formal but a narrative mechanism through which Thai artists communicate plural ecological worldviews. Taken together, the findings suggest that the visual construction of biodiversity in Thai art is not only representational but deeply narrative, symbolic, and culturally embedded. Each artwork functions as an ecological statement—composed, imagined, and felt. The interplay of theme and strategy reveals an eco-aesthetic grammar in which biodiversity is reimagined not as a scientific inventory but as ethical terrain, spiritual continuum, and cultural memory. This complexity underscores the role of the artist not merely as image-maker but as cultural narrator and ethical agent within ecological consciousness.

#### 4.3. The Artist As Cultural Storyteller And Ethical Agent

Building on the previous analysis of thematic interpretation and visual narrative strategies, this section examines the artist's role as a cultural storyteller and ethical agent. Beyond producing aesthetic objects, artists narrate ecological values, mediate cultural knowledge, and engage in ethical reflection. The analysis identifies three discursive intentions: (1) raising ecological awareness, (2) proposing models of coexistence and harmony, and (3) re-narrating biodiversity through cultural memory, belief, and imagination.

First, many works serve as direct calls for awareness of ecological degradation and biodiversity loss. They employ what scholars describe as an “aesthetics of environmental crisis,” making visible the damage caused by human activity. *Diversity Within Dominated Condition* by Chaiyan Ninlabon critiques anthropocentric expansion through heavy industrial materials, visualizing the encroachment of artificial systems on ecological complexity. Similarly, *The Reflection of Consumerism* (ກາພສະຫວັນແຫ່ງລັກອົບຮົງໂຄນິຍມ) by Somdit Thawinmart - see figure 12 adopts a confrontational visual language, using stark composition and abrasive textures to reflect the pervasiveness of plastic waste. Both works resonate with Timothy Morton's notion of “dark ecology,” which highlights the uncanny and ethically disquieting aspects of human–nature relations. Here, the artist assumes the role of a critical witness, alerting viewers to the urgency of environmental decline and the ethical implications of complicity.



Figure 10: The Reflection Of Consumerism By Somdit Thawinmart.

Second, many works project visions of harmony, interconnection, and peaceful coexistence. Artists such as Teerapon Phopae Sri (Land of Life), Yerrinda Keawsuwan (Bond of Friendship), and Pornsawan Nonthapha (Earth, Water, Wind, Fire) employ imagery and material processes that emphasize relational aesthetics and interdependence. These compositions embody what scholars term eco-aesthetic ethics—the idea that art can model social and ecological harmony through beauty, structure, and balance. As noted earlier, such works often rely on allegorical composition, symbolic symmetry, and immersive tableaux to express systemic equilibrium and mutual care. Here the ethical gesture lies not in critique but in proposition: envisioning alternative ways of living together and fostering empathy with the more-than-human world.

In *Earth, Water, Wind, Fire* (Figure 13), Pornsawan Nonthapha synthesizes symbolic form and material presence to evoke elemental harmony. Constructed from high-fired ceramics, the sculpture invokes the four classical elements not as metaphors but as interdependent forces essential to life. Its circular arrangement and balanced proportions reflect a deep ecological sensibility, where no element dominates and each sustains the whole. The tactile qualities of the glazed surfaces—smooth, weathered, organic—invite intimate sensory engagement that reinforces its contemplative tone. Rather than warning of collapse, the piece offers a vision of continuity and cohabitation. Through form, material, and structure, it models eco-aesthetic ethics: proposing a way of being grounded in balance, respect, and coexistence. In this vision, the viewer is not cast as a transgressor but as a participant in a shared system, echoing Thai-Buddhist notions of elemental equilibrium and karmic interdependence.



*Figure 11: Earth, Water, Wind, Fire* By Pornsawan Nonthapha.

Third, several works reframe biodiversity as a space of cultural memory, belief, and symbolic imagination. Here biodiversity is treated not as a scientific construct but as a storied concept rooted in lived experience, spiritual cosmology, and emotional attachment. Such works often employ mythic allegory, circular composition, and iconographic layering to embed ecological meaning within sacred systems. In *Dream* by Vipabphon Nilubon and A Flower and Her Melody (ດອກໄມ້ກັບສີບດັຕະລູກ) by Boonmee Sangkhum, childhood memory and parental intimacy become the emotional ground for imagining ecological relations. Meanwhile, *Sky and Earth* (ກ່ອນແພັນກັບກ່ອນດິນ) by Panchat Yodmanee and The God of Biodiversity (ເທັກສ້າງຄວາມໜາກທ່າຍທາງໝ້າກຳພ) by Phra Phumminan Ngoenkhon weave biodiversity into cosmological narratives that connect earthly life to sacred order. Together, these works exemplify what anthropologists call ethno-ecological storytelling—narratives that embed ecological knowledge in cosmology, ritual, and cultural imagination.

In *The God of Biodiversity* (Figure 6), Phra Phumminan Ngoenkhon situates ecological diversity within a mythic cosmology. At the center stands a divine figure surrounded by flora and fauna, depicted not as taxonomic specimens but as sacred manifestations orbiting a cosmic force. Drawing on Buddhist and animist traditions, the artist uses symbolic geometry and layered iconography to construct a visual theology where biodiversity is governed by moral and metaphysical laws. The mandala-like arrangement signifies both balance and transcendence, aligning biodiversity with karmic order and spiritual duty. In this vision, the artist does not merely depict nature but sanctifies it, inviting viewers into a cosmological imagination where caring for life is ancestral, spiritual, and ethically sacred.

This symbolic framing prepares the ground for understanding the artist not only as an image-maker but as a moral narrator. What unites the three discursive gestures—ecological alert, harmonious proposition, and cultural re-narration—is the artist's position as a storyteller with moral agency. Through compositional choices, symbolic forms, and emotional cues, these works invite viewers to re-evaluate their ethical relationship with nature. Taken together, they show that Thai artists do not simply aestheticize biodiversity but narrate it as something to be felt, remembered, and lived with. In doing so, biodiversity is positioned not as an object to be saved but as a moral narrative to be inhabited.

To consolidate these findings, Table 1 summarizes

the interpretive themes, narrative strategies, and artist roles across the 21 awarded works. By mapping each theme to its corresponding visual approaches and representative case studies, the table highlights how Thai artists employ diverse yet interconnected

methods to narrate biodiversity. This overview also demonstrates how thematic concerns are inseparable from visual practice, with artists assuming ethical and cultural roles that extend beyond aesthetic representation.

**Table 1: Summary of interpretive themes, narrative strategies, and artist roles across 21 awarded works from the 13th White Elephant Art Award.**

Theme (Interpretive Focus)	Representative Strategy	Artist's Role	Example Works (Case Studies)
1. Interdependence & Mutual Support	Symbolic Narrative, Material Metaphor	Mediator of relational care	<i>Bond of Friendship</i> (Yerrinda Keawsuwan), <i>Fragrance of Life</i> (Ladakorn Pungbubpha), <i>Warm Embrace</i> (Teppong Hongsrimueang)
2. Coexistence in Balance	Allegorical Composition, Immersive Tableau	Narrator of ecological harmony	<i>Land of Life</i> (Teerapon Phopae Sri), <i>Earth, Water, Wind, Fire</i> (Pornsawan Nonthapha), <i>Balance</i> (Nara Viboonsuntipong, Teerapon Sisung)
3. Transformation & Evolution	Fragmented Collage, Scientific Referencing	Ethical voice on adaptation	<i>To You, One Million Years</i> (Janejira Khodchawat), <i>White Canvas</i> (Tawinwich Chaotanakit), <i>Decay-Change-Birth</i> (Jarin Pan-onta)
4. Imagination & Emotional Positivity	Fantastical Scenario-Building	Storyteller of affect & wonder	<i>A Flower and Her Melody</i> (Boonmee Sangkhum), <i>Dream</i> (Vipabhorn Nilubon), <i>Diversity No.1</i> (Weerapong Sansomporn)
5. Biodiversity Under Threat	Critical Materiality, Fragmented Collage	Witness of ecological crisis	<i>Diversity Within Dominated Condition</i> (Chaiyan Ninlabon), <i>The Reflection of Consumerism</i> (Somdit Thawinmart), <i>Sound from the Forest</i> (Santi Seedarach)
6. Sacred Order & Spiritual Cosmology	Allegorical Composition, Immersive Tableau	Moral narrator within cosmology	<i>The God of Biodiversity</i> (Phra Phumminan Ngoenkhon), <i>Sky and Earth</i> (Panchat Yodmanee), <i>Land of Life</i> (Teerapon Phopae Sri)

As Table 1 illustrates, the six thematic interpretations, seven narrative strategies, and three discursive roles intersect in complex but coherent ways. This eco-aesthetic matrix affirms that biodiversity in Thai contemporary art is not merely observed but actively constructed through cultural memory, symbolic form, and ethical imagination. These intersections set the stage for the following discussion, which situates Thai eco-art within broader global conversations on ecology, culture, and sustainability.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the richness and complexity with which Thai contemporary artists engage the theme of biodiversity. Across the 21 awarded artworks analyzed, biodiversity emerges not as a purely scientific term, but as a relational, emotional, and culturally situated construct. Through visual narrative, symbolic form, and affective engagement, these artists do not merely illustrate ecological themes—they re-narrate biodiversity as a lived, storied, and ethical reality.

One of the most significant insights emerging from this analysis is the role of the artist as a cultural mediator. Rather than transmitting a fixed or universal meaning, Thai artists bring diverse cosmologies, memories, and aesthetic traditions into dialogue with ecological thought. This supports the

broader argument in environmental humanities that biodiversity is not only biological, but also narrative and epistemic—constructed through the stories we tell and the relationships we imagine with the more-than-human world (Lejano et al., 2013; Pretty et al., 2009). This is consistent with Guaraldo's (2023) view of the artist as an ethical agent who reveals ecological injustices while envisioning alternatives through creative practices. It also resonates with Dimova's (2024) concept of "soft ecology," in which art integrates ecological awareness into aesthetic form, inviting reflection and emotional response.

The themes identified—interdependence, transformation, crisis, and spiritual cosmology—reflect not only conceptual diversity but also emotional registers that range from grief to wonder, reverence to resistance. These are conveyed through strategies such as symbolic allegory, material metaphor, and immersive tableaux. What emerges is a Thai eco-aesthetic pluralism: an interwoven set of visual grammars in which ecology is felt, imagined, and embodied. This pluralism is neither wholly traditional nor fully modern; rather, it is a layered narrative space where Buddhist cosmology, folk animism, posthuman sensibility, and artistic experimentation converge (Morton, 2009; Gablik, 1991). Through this lens, Thai artists contribute to what Demos (2013) calls the "cultural politics of sustainability," positioning their work as a vehicle for

rethinking ethical relations with nature.

While distinctively rooted in Buddhist cosmology and animist traditions, Thai eco-art also resonates with international eco-art movements. Similar to global practices showcased in the Venice Biennale or the projects of artists like Mel Chin and Terike Haapoja, Thai artists address issues of biodiversity loss and climate change through symbolic and affective means. However, the Thai context emphasizes spiritual cosmology and moral interdependence, offering a complementary perspective to the activist and posthumanist approaches often seen in Euro-American contexts. This comparative positioning situates Thai eco-art within a global discourse while highlighting its unique contribution to eco-aesthetic pluralism.

Importantly, this cultural specificity offers an alternative to dominant technocratic or conservationist approaches. In many of these works, ecological awareness is not grounded in data or scientific argument, but in sacred cosmology, familial affection, and symbolic imagination. As such, the artist becomes not only an aesthetic agent but an ontological storyteller: one who mediates how we understand life, interdependence, and moral responsibility in an era of ecological crisis. This aligns with Blanc's (2022) argument that environmental aesthetics must address the emotional, symbolic, and cultural facets of ecological perception.

At the same time, the artworks also speak to global ecological concerns—climate change, species extinction, and environmental degradation—positioning Thai art within planetary discourse. Their hybridity of form and voice allows them to speak across cultural boundaries while remaining deeply rooted in local values. This hybrid articulation

strengthens what Seymour (2022) describes as art's capacity to render visible the complexities of environmental crisis, while also mobilizing affect and ethical engagement.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, Thai eco-art also offers practical insights for environmental education and cultural policy. By embedding ecological ethics within visual narratives, these artworks provide valuable tools for schools, museums, and community programs to foster ecological awareness through culturally resonant forms. Moreover, the incorporation of spiritual and emotional registers into public discourse may encourage policymakers to consider cultural values in biodiversity conservation. Thus, Thai eco-art can function not only as cultural critique but also as a catalyst for community engagement and sustainable policy dialogue.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contemporary Thai artists play a vital role in shaping how biodiversity is culturally imagined and ethically redefined. Through symbolic construction, narrative practice, and aesthetic mediation, the artworks analyzed serve not as passive representations but as discursive interventions—acts of ecological world-making. By drawing on cultural memory, spiritual ethics, and creative experimentation, these artists expand the global grammar of ecological storytelling. Future research may build upon this foundation by exploring how visual narratives from other Southeast Asian contexts similarly negotiate the tensions between tradition and ecological modernity. More broadly, it calls for sustained attention to how artistic imagination—both in Thailand and globally—can generate new ways of knowing, feeling, and living with biodiversity in times of planetary uncertainty.

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Wittaya Hosap (Corresponding Author): art technique analysis, conceptual framework, literature review, methodology, visual documentation, manuscript writing and editing. Luo Xiu (Co-Author): manuscript writing and editing.

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