

Davyn: Reimagining Urban Childhood in Contemporary Bangkok Through Art Toy Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cultural significance of art toys as contemporary art media that document and critique urban transformation in Bangkok. Focusing on Davyn, an art toy created by Pasutt Kanrattanasutra and exhibited in "Somewhere Else in the World: Chareonkrung" (February 1-23, 2025), the research explores how art toys function as material narratives reflecting tensions between heritage conservation, rapid urban expansion, and evolving childhood concepts in metropolitan spaces. The Chareonkrung district, Bangkok's first paved road and a historic cultural junction, serves as both a geographical site and symbolic backdrop for understanding how urban transformation affects lived experiences and collective memory.

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining critical visual analysis, ethnographic inquiry, and spatial contextualization, drawing on material culture theory, audience reception studies, and urban anthropology. Through examination of Davyn's design elements, exhibition context, and audience engagement, this study investigates how the art toy functions as a symbol of simplicity and nostalgia while weaving complex discourses about sustainable development, community displacement, and environmental consciousness.

The findings reveal that contemporary art toys serve as cultural mediators between adult memory and childhood imagination, creating dialogic spaces where diverse audiences confront questions about progress, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility. This research contributes to contemporary art in Southeast Asian contexts and material culture studies, demonstrating how collectible objects transcend commercial value to generate meaningful conversations about urban futures and ecological sustainability. The study challenges hierarchies between high art and popular culture, positioning art toys as legitimate vehicles for social critique and cultural documentation in rapidly urbanizing environments.

Keywords: Art Toy, Urban Transformation, Childhood Narratives, Contemporary Art, Sustainable Development

Introduction

In an era of rapid urbanization, Southeast Asian cities face unprecedented challenges in balancing modernization with cultural preservation. Bangkok's historic neighborhoods undergo continuous transformation, often displacing long-established communities and erasing collective memory accumulated over generations (Herzfeld, 2016; Peleggi, 2007). Contemporary artists increasingly turn to unconventional media to document and critique these changes, challenging traditional boundaries between fine art and popular culture (Lippard, 2014). Art toys have emerged as powerful vehicles for cultural commentary, combining accessibility with sophisticated conceptual frameworks that engage diverse audiences beyond conventional gallery spaces (Yiu & Chan, 2013).

Art toys occupy a unique position in contemporary art discourse, existing at the intersection of consumer culture, fine art, and social critique (Budgeon, 2003; Crawford, 2012). Unlike conventional sculpture confined to museum and gallery environments, these objects circulate through collector communities, retail spaces, and digital platforms, reaching audiences who might not typically engage with contemporary art (Lash & Lury, 2007). Their aesthetic language draws on childhood nostalgia and playful forms, yet frequently addresses complex social, political, and environmental concerns (Cross, 1997; Stewart, 1993). This duality of being simultaneously innocent and critical makes art toys particularly effective in engaging viewers with difficult urban realities, functioning as accessible media for social critique that disarms through familiarity while delivering sophisticated commentary (Kinsella, 2000).

This study examines Davyn, an art toy created by Thai artist Pasutt Kanrattanasutra, featured in the exhibition "Somewhere Else in the World: Chareonkrung" (February 1-23, 2025). The exhibition situates itself within the Chareonkrung district, Bangkok's first paved road constructed in 1862 and a historic cultural crossroads where Chinese, Portuguese, and Thai communities converged, creating a unique multicultural urban fabric (Van Roy, 2017). Today, Chareonkrung represents a microcosm of Bangkok's urban transformation: heritage architecture stands alongside luxury condominiums, traditional shophouses give way to contemporary galleries and cafes, and long-established communities navigate displacement pressures from gentrification and commercial development (Askew, 2002; Drummond, 2000).

Davyn embodies this neighborhood's contradictions through its deceptively simple form. The character's design evokes innocence and simplicity, yet its presentation within the exhibition context invites viewers to consider profound questions: What happens to childhood in rapidly urbanizing spaces? How do communities maintain identity amid relentless development (Low, 1996)? Can aesthetic objects serve as catalysts for conversations about sustainable urban futures and the erasure of traditional ways of life (Zukin, 1995)? These questions resonate with broader theoretical discussions about material culture's role in preserving memory and facilitating social critique (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2010).

This research addresses how art toys like Davyn function as material narratives that document urban transformation, mediating between adult memory and childhood imagination while creating conversational spaces where audiences confront questions about progress, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility. Drawing on material culture theory (Tilley et al., 2006), audience reception studies (Hall, 1980), and urban anthropology (Low, 2017), this study employs ethnographic inquiry with critical visual analysis to examine Davyn within its geographic, historical, and exhibition contexts. By positioning art toys as legitimate sites of cultural criticism, this research challenges persistent hierarchies between high and popular art forms (Bourdieu, 1984), demonstrating how collectible objects can generate meaningful conversations about urban futures and ecological sustainability in Southeast Asian contexts.

Research problems

How do contemporary art toys function as material narratives that mediate between heritage conservation and urban transformation in Bangkok's rapidly changing metropolitan spaces, particularly in creating conversational platforms where diverse audiences can critically engage with questions of sustainable development, community displacement, and the erasure of traditional ways of life?

Research objectives

This research aims to examine the cultural significance of art toys as contemporary art media that document and critique urban transformation in Bangkok, focusing on how these objects function as material narratives that create dialogic spaces for critical engagement with issues of sustainable development, heritage conservation, and community displacement in rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asian contexts.

Literature review

1. Art Toys as Contemporary Art Media

Art toys have emerged as a significant phenomenon in contemporary art discourse, occupying a unique position between fine art and popular culture (Crawford, 2012; Lash & Lury, 2007). Yiu and Chan (2013) argue that art toys transcend traditional boundaries of gallery spaces, circulating through collector communities, retail environments, and digital platforms to reach diverse audiences beyond the conventional art world. Unlike traditional sculpture, art toys engage viewers through aesthetic language that draws on childhood nostalgia and playful forms while addressing complex social, political, and environmental concerns (Kinsella, 2000; Stewart, 1993). This duality of being simultaneously innocent and critical makes art toys particularly effective vehicles for social critique, as they disarm viewers through familiar iconography while delivering sophisticated cultural commentary (Budgeon, 2003).

The theoretical foundations for understanding art toys as cultural objects draw from material culture studies, which examine how objects carry meanings and facilitate social relationships (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2010). Tilley et al. (2006) emphasize that material objects function as active agents in cultural processes, not merely passive reflections of social values. In the context of art toys, this perspective reveals how these objects actively shape discourse about urban transformation, childhood, and collective memory, functioning as what Latour (2005) terms "non-human actors" in social networks that influence attitudes and behaviors.

2. Urban Transformation and Heritage Conservation in Bangkok

Bangkok's rapid urbanization has generated critical scholarship examining tensions between modernization and cultural preservation (Askew, 2002; Drummond, 2000; Peleggi, 2007). Herzfeld (2016) documents how historic neighborhoods undergo transformation that often displaces communities and erases collective memory, particularly in areas like Chareonkrung where heritage architecture confronts contemporary development pressures. Van Roy (2017) traces Chareonkrung's historical significance as Bangkok's first paved road and a cultural crossroads where Chinese, Portuguese, and Thai communities converged, establishing it as a microcosm of urban transformation where traditional shophouses give way to luxury condominiums and long-established communities navigate gentrification.

Low (1996, 2017) explores how communities maintain identity amid relentless development, raising critical questions about what happens to childhood and lived experiences in rapidly urbanizing spaces. Zukin (1995) examines gentrification as a cultural process that transforms not only physical landscapes but also social relationships and community identities, a phenomenon clearly visible in Bangkok's historic districts. This scholarship reveals that urban transformation involves complex negotiations between progress and preservation, with material culture serving as crucial documentation of these processes (Lippard, 2014).

3. Material Culture Theory and Childhood Narratives

Material culture theory provides essential frameworks for understanding how objects function as cultural mediators and narrative devices (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2010; Tilley et al., 2006). Stewart (1993) demonstrates that collectible objects carry complex meanings that mediate between adult nostalgia and contemporary experience, serving as tangible connections to memory and identity. Childhood studies scholars argue that representations of childhood in material culture reflect broader societal anxieties about progress, sustainability, and the future (Cross, 1997; Kinsella, 2000). The aesthetic simplicity of childhood symbols often contrasts with conceptual complexity, inviting viewers to consider costs of development and erasure of traditional ways of life through accessible yet profound visual languages.

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model provides valuable insights into how

Audiences interpret cultural objects, suggesting that viewers bring diverse interpretive frameworks to their encounters with art. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how art toys like Davyn generate multiple meanings across different audience segments. Bourdieu (1984) reminds us that cultural consumption reflects and reproduces social hierarchies, yet art toys' circulation beyond traditional art world boundaries potentially challenges these hierarchies by making sophisticated critique accessible to broader publics.

4. Art Toys and Social Critique in Southeast Asian Contexts

Recent contemporary art toys have begun examining art toys as legitimate sites of cultural criticism, challenging hierarchies between high art and popular art forms (Crawford, 2012; Lash & Lury, 2007). However, existing research primarily focuses on commercial value and collector culture, with limited attention to their potential as vehicles for documenting urban transformation and facilitating public discourse about sustainable development (Wong, 2020). This gap is particularly evident in Southeast Asian contexts, where art toys remain underexamined despite their growing presence in contemporary art exhibitions and their capacity to generate meaningful conversations about environmental consciousness, community displacement, and intergenerational responsibility.

This research addresses this gap by positioning art toys as material narratives that create conversational spaces for collective social critique in rapidly changing metropolitan environments. Drawing on Latour's (2005) actor-network theory and Lippard's (2014) work on activist art, this study examines how art toys function as active agents in cultural discourse about urban futures, demonstrating that these objects deserve serious scholarly attention as vehicles for social commentary and cultural documentation in Southeast Asian urban contexts.

Research methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative research traditions to examine Davyn as both an aesthetic object and cultural phenomenon. The methodology integrates critical visual analysis, ethnographic inquiry, and spatial contextualization to provide comprehensive understanding of how art toys function as material narratives in urban transformation contexts.

1. Critical Visual Analysis

This study employs critical visual analysis to examine Davyn as both an aesthetic object and cultural symbol. The analysis focuses on the character's design elements, including form, color, scale, and material composition, to understand how visual simplicity conveys complex narratives about urban transformation by examining Davyn's presentation within the exhibition context of "Somewhere Else in the World: Chareonkrung," this method investigates how the art toy's aesthetic language mediates tensions between childhood innocence and critical commentary on heritage conservation, sustainable development, and community displacement. This approach draws on visual culture studies methodologies (Hall, 1980) and semiotics to decode the object's symbolic meanings and cultural significance.

2. Ethnographic Inquiry and Audience Reception

The study engaged diverse audience segments across multiple demographics. Age distribution included 18-29 years (35%), 30-45 years (28%), 46-60 years (25%), and 60+ years (12%). Participants comprised local Chareonkrung residents (32%), Bangkok residents from other districts (41%), domestic tourists (18%), and international visitors (9%). Prior art engagement varied among regular gallery visitors (45%), occasional visitors (38%), and first-time gallery visitors (17%), enabling the research to capture perspectives from both art-world insiders and broader publics.

Semi-structured interviews explored four core themes: initial emotional and cognitive responses to Davyn's visual form; perceived connections between the art toy and Chareonkrung's urban transformation; personal memories or associations evoked by the work; and reflections on childhood, development, and sustainability in urban contexts. This approach examines how viewers from diverse backgrounds interpret and respond to Davyn's material narrative, revealing the object's capacity to create

dialogic spaces for discussing urban futures and ecological sustainability. The methodology follows established ethnographic research practices (Low, 2017) while incorporating audience reception theory (Hall, 1980) to understand meaning-making processes. The researcher employed thematic coding to identify recurring patterns across interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, observational field notes, and social media content, with particular attention to how diverse audiences construct meanings from their encounters with the art toy.

3. Spatial and Historical Contextualization

Drawing on material culture theory (Tilley et al., 2006) and urban studies (Askew, 2002; Herzfeld, 2016), this method contextualizes Davyn within the geographic and historical significance of the Chareonkrung district. The research examines how the exhibition site, located in Bangkok's first paved road and historic cultural crossroads, informs the art toy's meaning as a mediator between past and present. This contextualization explores how Davyn embodies the neighborhood's contradictions, connecting collective memory with contemporary urban realities to generate critical discourse about gentrification, displacement, and the erasure of traditional ways of life. The spatial analysis incorporates perspectives from urban anthropology (Low, 1996, 2017) and cultural geography to understand place-making processes and community identity.

Findings

1. Davyn as Cultural Mediator Between Memory and Transformation

The critical visual analysis reveals that Davyn's deceptively simple design functions as a sophisticated narrative device that mediates tensions between heritage conservation and urban development in Bangkok's Chareonkrung district. The character's aesthetic simplicity, characterized by minimalist form and nostalgic visual language, creates an approachable entry point for audiences to engage with complex discourses about sustainable development and community displacement. Within the exhibition "Somewhere Else in the World: Chareonkrung," Davyn embodies the neighborhood's contradictions, serving as a tangible symbol that connects collective memory of traditional ways of life with the realities of rapid gentrification. The art toy's material presence in a historic cultural crossroads amplifies its function as a conversational catalyst, inviting viewers to reflect on what is lost and gained in processes of urban transformation. This finding aligns with Stewart's (1993) theory about collectible objects mediating between nostalgia and contemporary experience, while extending it to show how such mediation operates in urban transformation contexts.

2. Creation of Conversational Spaces for Social Critique

Ethnographic observations and audience reception analysis demonstrate that Davyn successfully creates dialogic spaces where diverse audiences engage in critical discussions about urban futures. Visitors from varying backgrounds, ages, and cultural contexts responded to the art toy not merely as a collectible object but as a legitimate site of cultural criticism that challenges conventional boundaries between high art and popular culture. The object's accessibility, rooted in childhood iconography, disarms viewers while simultaneously prompting profound questions about progress, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility. Audience responses revealed that Davyn's innocence contrasts effectively with its conceptual complexity, generating conversations that extend beyond the exhibition space into broader public discourse about Bangkok's metropolitan development, environmental consciousness, and the costs of modernization on traditional communities. These findings support Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, demonstrating that audiences actively construct meanings from cultural objects while bringing their own interpretive frameworks to the encounter.

3. Art Toys as Material Narratives in Southeast Asian Contexts

The findings position art toys as powerful vehicles for documenting and critiquing urban transformation in Southeast Asian metropolitan environments. Unlike conventional art forms confined to gallery spaces, Davyn circulates through multiple platforms, reaching audiences who might not typically engage with contemporary art discourse. This research demonstrates that art toys function

as material narratives capable of preserving cultural memory while simultaneously commenting on present realities and future possibilities. In the context of Chareonkrung's ongoing transformation, Davyn serves as both documentation and critique, creating a permanent record of community concerns about displacement, loss of heritage architecture, and the erasure of long-established ways of life. The study confirms that collectible objects can generate meaningful conversations about ecological sustainability and intergenerational responsibility, challenging persistent hierarchies that dismiss popular art forms as less legitimate than traditional fine art practices. This finding contributes to material culture theory (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2010; Tilley et al., 2006) by demonstrating specific mechanisms through which objects function as active cultural agents in Southeast Asian urban contexts.



Figure 1. Davyn: Art Toy by Pasutt Kanrattanasutra, Rasin, Paint, 30 x 12.5 x 14 cm.

Discussion

1. Art Toys as Solutions to Documenting Urban Transformation

This research demonstrates that art toys, specifically Davyn, effectively address the challenge of documenting and critiquing urban transformation in ways that engage diverse publics beyond conventional art audiences. The findings resolve the predicament outlined in the introduction regarding how communities can meaningfully participate in discussions about heritage conservation, sustainable development, and displacement in rapidly changing metropolitan environments. Unlike traditional fine art practices confined to gallery spaces, Davyn's circulation through multiple platforms creates accessible entry points for critical engagement with complex urban issues. The art toy's aesthetic simplicity successfully disarms viewers while prompting profound reflections on the costs of modernization, effectively bridging the gap between popular culture and serious cultural criticism as theorized by Bourdieu (1984) and Crawford (2012).

2. Connections to Prior Research and New Contributions

These findings align with Yiu and Chan's (2013) assertion that art toys transcend Traditional boundaries of the art world, while extending their framework by demonstrating specific mechanisms through which this transcendence operates in Southeast Asian urban contexts. The study confirms Stewart's (1993) theory that collectible objects mediate between adult nostalgia and contemporary experience, yet reveals a dimension not fully explored in previous scholarship: the capacity of art toys to function as material narratives that preserve cultural memory while simultaneously critiquing present realities. The research contributes to material culture theory (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2010; Tilley et al., 2006) by providing empirical evidence of how objects function as active cultural agents in urban transformation processes.

However, this study diverges from Wong's (2020) emphasis on commercial value by revealing that art toys' significance extends far beyond market dynamics. Audience reception data demonstrates viewers engage with Davyn primarily as a site of cultural criticism rather than as a commodity, suggesting that the cultural work these objects perform cannot be reduced to economic exchange. This finding challenges assumptions in consumer culture studies (Lash & Lury, 2007) that treat collectible objects primarily through market logics, demonstrating that art toys occupy more complex positions in cultural discourse than market-based analyses suggest.

3. Theoretical Implications and Future Directions

The significance of these findings extends across multiple domains. First, this research challenges persistent hierarchies that dismiss popular art forms as less legitimate than traditional fine art practices (Bourdieu, 1984), suggesting that effectiveness in promoting social dialogue should be valued alongside aesthetic innovation. The study demonstrates that art toys function as what Latour (2005) terms "non-human actors" capable of reshaping discourse about urban futures and environmental sustainability. Second, the research has important implications for heritage conservation strategies in rapidly developing Southeast Asian cities (Askew, 2002; Herzfeld, 2016; Peleggi, 2007), revealing that accessible cultural objects can serve as catalysts for public engagement in ways that technical reports and policy documents cannot.

Future research should explore comparative studies examining how art toys function in other Southeast Asian cities undergoing rapid transformation, such as Manila, Ho Chi Minh City, or Jakarta, to test the generalizability of these findings across different urban contexts and cultural traditions. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking how conversations initiated by objects like Davyn evolve over time could illuminate the sustained impact of material culture on public discourse and whether critical questions translate into changed attitudes or policy positions. Research should also examine how digital platforms and social media extend the circulation and impact of art toys beyond physical exhibition spaces, potentially amplifying their role as vehicles for cultural critique and social dialogue.

Conclusions

This research establishes that contemporary art toys function as powerful vehicles for documenting and critiquing urban transformation in Southeast Asian metropolitan contexts. Through critical examination of Davyn, an art toy created by Pasutt Kanrattanasutra and exhibited in "Somewhere Else in the World: Chareonkrung," this study demonstrates three significant findings that contribute to contemporary art scholarship, material culture studies, and urban anthropology.

First, art toys operate as cultural mediators that bridge heritage conservation and contemporary urban development discourse. Davyn's aesthetic simplicity creates accessible entry points for diverse audiences to engage with complex questions about sustainable development, community displacement, and the erasure of traditional ways of life. The research demonstrates that these objects function not merely as passive reflections of social concerns but as active agents capable of shaping discourse about urban futures, confirming material culture theory's insights about objects' agency in cultural processes (Appadurai, 1986; Latour, 2005; Tilley et al., 2006).

Second, art toys create dialogic spaces where audiences from varying backgrounds participate in critical discussions about metropolitan futures. Unlike conventional art forms confined to gallery environments, these objects circulate through multiple platforms to reach publics who might not typically engage with contemporary art discourse. Viewers respond to art toys as legitimate sites of cultural criticism rather than merely collectible commodities, demonstrating that effectiveness in promoting social dialogue represents a valuable dimension of contemporary art practice that deserves recognition alongside traditional aesthetic criteria (Bourdieu, 1984; Crawford, 2012; Lippard, 2014).

Third, this research challenges persistent hierarchies between high art and popular culture by positioning art toys as material narratives with significant social and political potential. The study reveals that collectible objects can preserve cultural memory while simultaneously critiquing present conditions and imagining alternative futures, establishing art toys as vehicles for collective social critique and agents of cultural discourse in contexts of accelerated urban change (Hall, 1980; Stewart, 1993; Zukin, 1995).

These conclusions have important implications for contemporary art practice, heritage conservation strategies, and material culture studies in rapidly developing Southeast Asian cities (Askew, 2002; Drummond, 2000; Herzfeld, 2016; Peleggi, 2007; Van Roy, 2017). The research contributes new frameworks for understanding how societies document, critique, and respond to rapid metropolitan transformation while establishing that art toys represent significant yet underexamined phenomena deserving scholarly attention. Future investigations should explore comparative studies across Southeast Asian urban contexts and longitudinal analyses tracking the sustained impact of material culture on public discourse about urban development and environmental sustainability.

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