

FOR WHICH IT STANDS:  
**AMERICANA IN CONTEMPORARY ART**  
CURATED BY CARLA SAKAMOTO

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by Carla Sakamoto

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## **Introduction**

By Carla Sakamoto

By dictionary definition, the term “Americana” is used to describe objects, old and new, that conjure tradition, patriotism, and nostalgia, having to do with American culture. Although the United States of America is a relatively young country, its culture has already produced its own unique artifacts, establishing a distinctive iconography, admired or reviled, but rarely eliciting a neutral response, from people the world over. There is hardly a human being on the planet that does not recognize a certain swatch of fabric with red and white horizontal bands surrounding rows of bright white stars set against a square blue field.

Much like the diverse patchwork that makes up America’s citizens, the artists represented in this book are a purposely eclectic mix from the U.S. and over a dozen different countries from around the globe—a most fitting metaphor for a book that showcases a spectrum of artistic visions and voices, alternately glorifying or questioning the perils and pleasures that signify this storied land of freedom and destiny.

For their original inspiration, more than a handful of the selected artists credit the unofficial forefather of Americana in modern art, Jasper Johns, by paying spiritual homage to his non-ironic and unabashedly painterly American flag works of the 1950s. But our book is only partly about the genuflection of the highly-identifiable red, white, and blue banner, as many of the artists offer scathing critique or a complicit wink, in their commentary on this country’s absurdities. Direct or abstract appropriation of other such symbols of American worship: the almighty dollar, the tenets of the Constitution, movie stars, superheroes, baseball, and fast food, is proof that images from this culture have been emblazoned on the consciousness of many over the generations.

Like a well-worn Hollywood script, the history of the United States is a universal allegory that represents modern man’s ebb and flow of dreams and sorrows: independence and indivisibility, commerce and wealth, an ignorant past and a beaming future, the middle of nowhere and the promised land, are ever-present themes in our collective imaginations. Our compendium of artwork is at once contemplative, subversive, hilarious, pedestrian, political, observant, clever, mesmerizing, ridiculous, rude, sublime, refined, controversial, joyful, monumental, poetic, riotous, mournful, and proud.

However timely it is to do such a book in an election year and on the eve of the nation’s 236th birthday, we happily broaden our definition of “Americana” as we learn that the word can represent an ‘American-ness’ of spirit or attitude, an exuberance, whether celebratory or critical, and regardless of nationality. Helen Keller once said, “There has never existed a truly free and democratic nation in the world.” The world of art, however, daringly speaks to the contrary as it embraces the notion of limitless possibilities that freedom offers. It seems that the mere act of expression through an artistic medium, without persecution for doing so, is truly American, indeed.

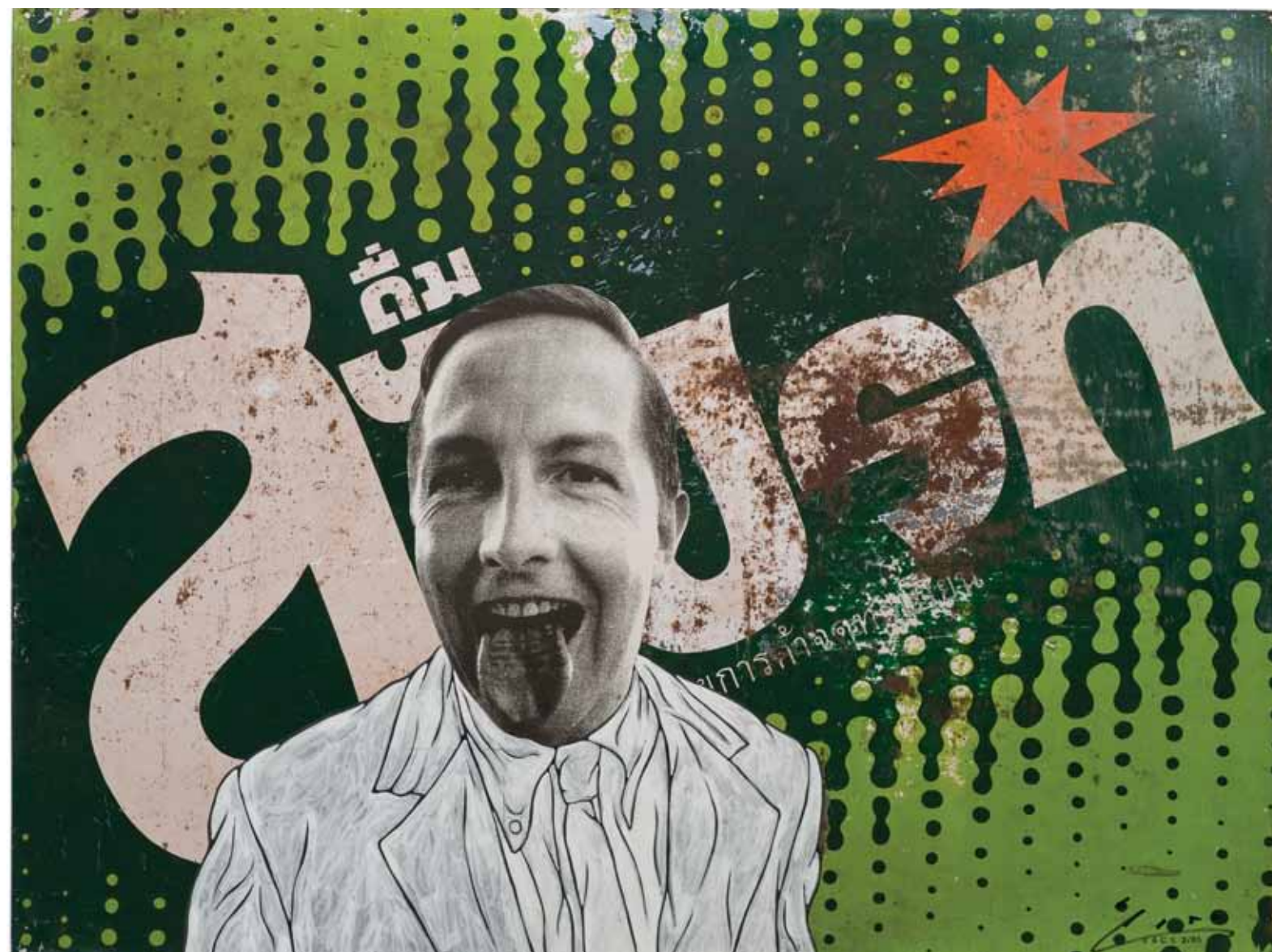
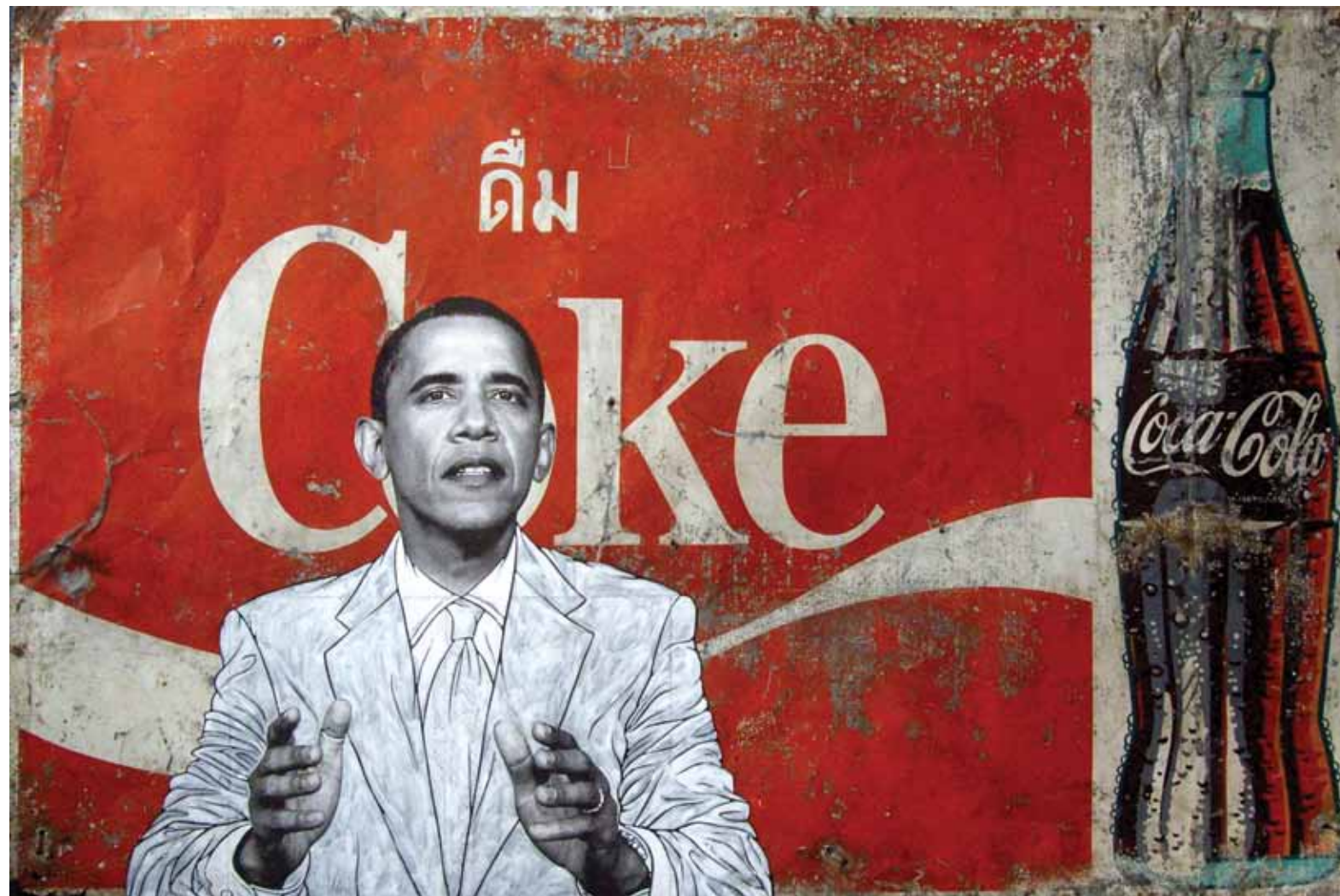


“...I am interested in the idea of the artist as a brand and I am also exploring the Warholian idea of mass consumption and the art and artists as a commodity.”

Pakpoom Silaphan was born in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1972. He received a Postgraduate Diploma in Printmaking at the Camberwell College of Art in 2001 and his MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art & Design in 2002. In 2004, he was shortlisted for John Moore’s 23, Liverpool Museum, Liverpool, UK. Amongst Silaphan’s numerous international exhibitions, including the U.S., France, and Italy, he was featured in *My Private Collection* with Grayson Perry, David Hockney, Shepard Fairey, and Banksy, at the Paul Smith Gallery in Tokyo in 2009. Also that year, he participated in the exhibitions, *UK Future Greats and Establishing Establishment*, his solo show, both at the Salon Gallery, London. That solo show, *Establishing Establishment*, traveled to No Borders Art in Hong Kong in 2010, and another one, *Remastering The Masters*, shown at Scream Gallery in London, followed in 2011. Most recently, in 2012, Pakpoom exhibited at Scope Art Fair, New York and London Art Fair, London. His work can also be found in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. Silaphan currently lives and works in London.

Pakpoom Silaphan  
*Four Times Andy Sits on Pepsi*, 2012  
 Mixed media on vintage metal signs  
 123.1 x 160.7 cm  
 Courtesy of Scream Gallery  
 Photo credit: Goswin Schwendinger





Your series of work pairs famous artists of the last half century with universally recognizable backdrops—the bright colors and graphics (minus the non-Western typography) of the most popular American soft drink logos. It is not the first time the look of consumer advertising has co-mingled on the canvas to create warmly familiar, yet visually-arresting “high art” pieces.

**What was your original impetus behind using American imagery or images referencing America (Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Sprite and the nationality of some of the famous artists) in your work? Or was this merely incidental in your choice of using prevalent global advertising signage (and certain prominent art world figures)—that just happen to be American?** When I was a child growing up in rural Thailand, I was surrounded by Coke, Pepsi, and Fanta advertising signs without realizing they were part of Western culture. Over time, these signs formed an iconic corporate ‘wallpaper’ that was to become intrinsically linked with my childhood environment. Later in my life, when I was living in Bangkok, I started collecting these signs to remind me of my childhood, and when I returned to Thailand after a decade long hiatus studying Fine Art in London, I saw my collection in a completely different light, for the first time seeing that they were every bit as embedded in popular culture as the artists I had been studying in London—and from that, a new series was conceived. The signs I use as a canvas and the artists that populate them are figures I admire, but are also emblematic of this influence and convergence of Eastern and Western cultures.

**Does the connection that you are making between the art world and American consumer products have a political, sociological, philosophical, or other symbolic message? Or is this combination primarily an aesthetic choice?** The signs themselves don’t have any meaning as such—they all make the same “sound” in every language. The original endeavor of these global brands to sell products in different territories—and through their distinct brand identities, established through advertising in the use of color, graphics and logos—also assimilate many different cultures to broaden their resonance and appeal. I feel this series has a strong aesthetic quality, but I am also interested in the idea of the artist as a brand and I am also exploring the Warholian idea of mass consumption and the art, and artists as a commodity. The signs allow my work to be appreciated by many people, whatever their background or location, and this appeals to me.

**Generally speaking, why do you think American cultural iconography, symbols, and corporate, and consumer logos are so powerful in the world today?** When I lived in Bangkok, we were very influenced by American culture, we used to dress up as Cowboys and Red Indians, and its influence infiltrated music, film, and fast food. America is a young country, in comparison with Thailand for example. There is huge cultural diversity and the mix of ethnicities is blended together to create a new culture. I believe this gives the U.S. a powerful reach, as it creates connections with people all over the world.

Pakpoom Silaphan  
*Obama on Coke*, 2012  
Mixed media on vintage metal sign  
80 x 120 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Scream Gallery

Pakpoom Silaphan  
*Rauschenberg on Sprite*, 2012  
Mixed media on vintage metal sign  
62.7 x 59.6 cm  
Courtesy of Scream Gallery  
Photo credit: Goswin Schwendinger



Pakpoom Silaphan  
*Basquiat Sits on Double Coke*, 2012  
 Mixed media on vintage metal signs  
 125.2 x 165.8 cm  
 Courtesy of Scream Gallery  
 Photo credit: Goswin Schwendinger

Pakpoom Silaphan  
*Three Times Dali on Pepsi*, 2012  
 Mixed media on vintage metal signs  
 181.1 x 162.3 cm  
 Courtesy of Scream Gallery  
 Photo credit: Goswin Schwendinger

Pakpoom Silaphan  
*Haring Sits on Double Pepsi*, 2012  
 Mixed media on vintage metal signs  
 163.3 x 122.6 cm  
 Courtesy of Scream Gallery  
 Photo credit: Goswin Schwendinger