

## St. Chic Angel: An Interdisciplinary Work in Art, Music and Language

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### Abstract

The objectives of this research are to develop a creative process utilizing an interdisciplinary approach by combining the author's background in Thai music and art via language, and to employ this process to produce a new series of visual artworks. The methodology included an investigation of the techniques favored by the Surrealists whose works were the author's visual inspiration. Additionally, aspects of Thai music were analyzed in order to apply its indispensable essence to the visual art domain. The procedures exposed the Surrealist special approaches to language and collage, which led to the creation of the work's title and the original poem that controlled the structure of the new artworks. The research also demonstrates two concepts governing the rhythmic and formal structures of Thai traditional music—the centonization and the hierarchical system—and notes their similarities to the structure of written language. By utilizing the same musical and linguistic structures and mapping the result to the visual art domain, the structural concepts of Thai music are reflected in the visual work. In conclusion, the research demonstrates the benefit of an interdisciplinary approach to art making by combining music and visual art via language. Although structurally controlled by a logical system, the work shows tension between the systematic approach and the intuitive one, belying the conflicting origins of the subconscious expression favored by the Surrealists and the rational approach of conceptual art.

**Keywords:** interdisciplinary, art, music, language

### บทคัดย่อ

จุดประสงค์งานวิจัยนี้ต้องการที่จะพัฒนากระบวนการความคิดสร้างสรรค์ที่ใช้การบูรณาการโดยการผสมกันของภูมิหลังและประสบการณ์ของผู้เขียน ดนตรีไทยและศิลปะโดยผ่านทางภาษาและเพื่อที่จะใช้กระบวนการนี้ผลิตงานศิลปะชุดใหม่ขึ้นมา กระบวนการวิจัยรวมไปถึงการสืบค้นเข้าไปหาเทคนิคที่ถูกใช้โดย "Surrealist" ซึ่งงานของ "Surrealism" นี้ได้มีอิทธิพลเป็นแรงบันดาลใจให้กับผู้เขียน นอกจากนั้นกระบวนการวิจัยนี้รวมไปถึงการวิเคราะห์ดนตรีไทยเพื่อหาองค์ประกอบที่สำคัญซึ่งจะนำไปใช้กับงานศิลปะ ผลงานวิจัยนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงวิธีการเฉพาะของ "Surrealist" ในด้านการใช้ภาษาและเทคนิคที่เรียกว่า "Collage" ซึ่งผู้เขียนได้นำมาใช้ในการ สร้างชื่องานและใช้ประพันธ์บทกวีที่ใช้คุม โครงสร้างของงานศิลปะนี้ นอกจากนี้งานวิจัยยังได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงความคิดสองอย่างที่ควบคุม โครงสร้าง ด้านจังหวะและ โครงสร้างรูปแบบของดนตรีไทยได้แก่ "Centonization" และ "Hierarchical System" และงานวิจัยนี้ยังแสดงให้เห็นว่าดนตรีไทยมีลักษณะ โครงสร้างที่คล้ายคลึงกับภาษาเขียน แนวคิดทางด้าน โครงสร้างของดนตรีไทยปรากฏอยู่ในงานศิลปะได้ด้วยการใช้โครงสร้างแบบเดียวกันนี้ และวางแนวคิดลักษณะของดนตรีไทยลงไปในงานทัศนศิลป์ ข้อเสนอแนะงานวิจัยนี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงประโยชน์ของการบูรณาการในการสร้างงานศิลปะโดยการผสมกันระหว่างดนตรีไทยและทัศนศิลป์โดยผ่านทางภาษา ถึงแม้จะถูกต้องทางด้าน โครงสร้างที่เป็นตรรกะก็ตาม งานชิ้นนี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงความตึงเครียดระหว่างการทำงานอย่างเป็นระบบ และการทำงานโดยใช้สัญชาตญาณซึ่งแสดงให้เห็นจุดความคิดเริ่มต้นที่ขัดแย้งกันของจิตใต้สำนึกซึ่งถูกใช้งานโดย "Surrealist" และการเข้าถึงแบบมี เหตุผลของพวกเขา "Conceptual Art"

**คำสำคัญ:** การบูรณาการ ศิลปะ ดนตรี ภาษา

### 1. Introduction

"Der Mensch ist, was er ißt" wrote Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach in his 1864 essay, *Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism* (Gooch, 2013), and there is truth in saying that one can see a glimpse of an artist's mind by looking at his works. Childhood, education, culture, religion, natural as well as social environments contribute to an artist's inspiration, and the works in return often reflect these influences, albeit at times in indirect or distorted portrayals.

This research is a quest to find a creative process utilizing an interdisciplinary approach by combining the author's background in Thai music and visual art to produce a series of artworks. The author was exposed to the concept of interdisciplinary approach to education during a decade of studying and teaching art in the USA. Defined as "involving two or more academic, scientific, or artistic disciplines" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and "involving two or more different subjects or areas of knowledge," (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The adjective interdisciplinary, as well as its corresponding noun interdisciplinarity, is often thought of as a twentieth century concept, but in fact the ideology had precedent in ancient times, especially in the philosophy of the ancient Greek (Ausberg, 2006). No doubt this unification of different disciplines occurred in part due to the limit of each and the belief that the synthesis of these different fields would yield new knowledge unavailable from separate studies alone. This action of bringing together seemingly unrelated concepts is often a pivotal one, leading to a creative breakthrough (Koestler, 1964), as "the clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines...ought to produce creative chances (Snow, 1964).

This idea of combining different components to achieve something new is quite attractive since finding one's own way to create is very much as important as the work resulted from creativity itself. In a way *St. Chic Angel* is a semi-autobiographical work since it originated from many sources and symbols representing the author's experiences while studying, working and living in many places in the States. These symbols were combined with concept borrowed from Thai traditional music and visual art—especially works by the Surrealist painters, through the help of language as a bonding medium, linking these elements together in a rational way.

The visual element of *St. Chic Angel* was inspired by the work of Surrealist artists. The poet and critic André Breton was arguably the first person to use the term Surrealism (Breton, 1924), a literary and artistic movement that was developed and flourished in Europe during World Wars I and II. The Surrealists were attracted to the manifestation of the subconscious and favored the irrational, randomness, and coincidences, leading to automatism, the techniques that the artists employed to tap into their subconscious. Another important technique favored by the Surrealists is collage, semantically originating from the French *coller*—to glue—and usually defined as a technique of art creation or artwork itself, utilizing an assemblage of various pre-existing materials glued onto the paper or canvas. Despite evidences of the technique since earlier time in Japan and Europe, it is clear that many authorities including the Guggenheim Museum (2003), MOMA (Kachur, 2009) and The Tate Galleries (n.d.) give much weight to the artistic usage of the term, as opposed to decorative one, and associate it with the art of the twentieth century.

Another main idea in *St. Chic Angel* is the Thai traditional music concept, which is different from the Western counterpart in many ways. At the surface level there are such matters as the tuning system and the instrumentation, which are specific to Thai music, and the heterophonic texture or polyphonic stratification (Morton, 1976), which is unique to music of some countries in Southeast Asia. While these can be considered characteristics, the most important differences between Thai and Western music lie in the compositional process. While Western music thrives on the concept of originality, in Thai music the ideas of passivity and anonymity prevail and these are reflected in the technique called centonization, a method of composing by using exclusively a large collection of short, pre-composed melodic fragments called *luuk khong*. A composer selects *luuk khong* and arranges them in a specific order to create a new melody (Myers-Moro, 1993).

Another indispensable compositional element is found in the concept of the hierarchical system. This collection of nesting rhythmic patterns governs not only the rhythm and *tempo* of the music but also the length of each phrase, section, and the whole composition. The practical result of the Thai hierarchical system is the division of the music into three metrical levels, distinguished by the relative expansion or compression of the patterns.

It is important to point out that, despite this relationship to music, *St. Chic Angel* is not a musical work but a visual artwork. The Thai music concept is translated into the visual domain through an interdisciplinary exchange and via the structural help of language.

## 2. Objectives

1. To find a creative process utilizing an interdisciplinary approach by combining the author's background in Thai music and visual art to create a new artwork.
2. To analyze the creative process of *St. Chic Angel*.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The research was initiated by investigating the author's diverse aptitudes and their possible integrations (Thai traditional music and visual art) as well as investigating the sources of inspirations and outside influences that were relevant, including information on a relevant technique (collage) and art movement (Surrealism), then collecting necessary information.

Once the relevant information had been gathered, the analysis and synthesis processes followed. The most important step here was to analyze the nature of Thai music and identify its necessary and sufficient conditions, without which the music would lose its identity, and which made other characteristics simply decorative by nature.

The next step was to find a method for representing these essential characteristics of Thai music in the visual art domain, that is, a method of mapping musical concepts onto visual artwork, i.e. synthesizing the two worlds, and to determine whether the transfer from an arguably more abstract art form (music) to a more representative one (Surrealism influenced visual artwork) would benefit from another intermediate, transferring medium, specifically language.

The last step was the creation of the artwork. This included 1) creating the title and poem by using the collage concept to derive the work title and using letter permutation to create an original poem on which the artwork series is based; 2) mapping the poem to the visual world to create the initial visual components and structure of the artwork; 3) making necessary adjustment to the overall tones, textures and detailed composition digitally; and 4) printing the work.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### The Essential Characteristics of Thai Music

The analysis of the essence of Thai traditional music revealed that, although Thai music possesses a number of unique characteristics, some, including its tuning system, instrumentation and heterophonic textures, were outer or surface characteristics due to the fact that the lack of these properties did not cause the music to completely lose its identity. On the other hand, the concepts of centonization and hierarchical system—the compositional process that yield Thai formal structures—form the necessary and sufficient conditions of Thai music, without which the music would be simply unintelligible and unimaginable to its practitioners.

### Simulating the Essential Characteristics of Thai Music

What was needed was therefore a new structure based on Thai music, relying simply on the Thai ideas of hierarchy and centonization. The artwork created from this system would have the inner qualities of Thai music, regardless of its outer appearance. Similar to the construction of a gong melody, which is Thai music in its simplest form, the first thing was to invent a new collection of many "visual" *luuk khong*. If there were as many of these building blocks as in the Thai *luuk khong* collection, then logically there was a potential to create something as complex as the Thai musical system. There were many factors that helped improve the compatibility between all *luuk khong*. The uniform use of rhythmic gestures and intervals, for example, was calculated for this purpose. Likewise, visually similar styles of textures, color schemes, materials, etc. helped increase the potential for interchangeability.

The more difficult task was to establish a system to put these blocks together. It was unavoidable that certain *luuk khong* would be more likely to follow specific ones and not the others. Equal possibility would of course result in randomness. One way to develop a system for connecting visual blocks was to use new materials that we built for a period of time, and learn what was good or what did not work through a method of trial and error. After playing with these new materials long enough, a set of a suitable visual "connections" would emerge.

Another way to determine the connections was to invent a totally artificial system dictating the connection of one block to another. In this case, the arbitrary rules would control the coherence and unity of the work. These two methods for deriving rules of connection from trial and error and from an artificial system may be combined. The system might be invented first, for example, then, after a period of testing, the system would be modified to produce the outcome to one's liking so that the result from the artificial system was refined further by personal taste and experience.

The most difficult step was inventing a hierarchical structure for the system. This was probably because it was more abstract than the previous steps. In Thai music the drum pattern (*na tap*) is divided by the gong strokes, and the two patterns further divided by the *ching* strokes. A level is established by how these patterns relate to *luuk khong*. These proportional rhythms may be simulated visually by using various sizes and lengths to appropriate the temporal parameter and relationship of the levels and hierarchy.

#### Written Language as a Basic System to Approach Thai Music

This line of reasoning and experiments continued further as the new system was refined. The problem that arose immediately was the justification of the system. There was logic in its mechanics, yet that proved nothing of its value. The uniformity and compatibility between *luuk khong* in Thai music on the other hand was the direct result of the experiments and practices of Thai musicians over many generations. After a large span of time, many defective and incompatible ideas and elements had been filtered out (Setabundhu, 2001). Even if the new system had been tested for a few years, the result could hardly be a match to the original system whose refinement had spanned over many hundred years.

It was at this point that the written language, which was similarly the result of many years of experimentation and practices by many practitioners, became a welcome mediator. A written language system already contained necessary building blocks and a hierarchical structure. It is therefore better not to cap the value of the newly invented system by limiting experience alone but to use a written language system as a link transferring the Thai music characteristics to the visual arts. The parallel relationship between characters/words in a written language and pitches/*luuk khong* in Thai music is apparent enough. Some combinations produce meaningless results while others yield intelligible words and melodic fragments. The "tradition" of these combinations and connections therefore formed the basic rules for this project. Likewise the English language system provided not only the methods of how the building blocks would be connected to form words, but also how each words should be connected to form larger structures. The hierarchy of *ching*, gong and drum patterns could easily be mapped to those formed by words, phrases, clauses, sentences and so on. The new system would be as strict as the grammatical usages of a specific language, while at the same time as flexible as there are many exceptions in any language systems.

#### Title, Logo and Poem

The title "St. Chic Angel" and the subtitle "State of Independence" reflects the influence of the Surrealists as well as demonstrates the flexibility of the language-based system. It utilizes a collage technique through the cutting and pasting fragments from the names of three cities where the authors resided in the USA: Saint Louis, Chicago and Los Angeles. The subtitle is the motto for the state of Pennsylvania (here representing the city of Philadelphia). The logo of the series is also a playful collage comprising of images related to the four cities (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** *St. Chic Angel* logo

For the creation of the poem, automatism and collage techniques were employed to deconstruct the words/phrases “Saint Louis”, “Chicago”, “Los Angeles”, and “State of Independence” that were then reconstituted to form new words. The processes included: 1) fragmentation of each word, producing such words as “is” and “ago”; 2) rearrangement of characters in each word, resulting in new words such as “soul”, “else” and “descend”; 3) derivation of new words from all characters in all source words/phrases. In 2) and 3) all characters were used and no repetitions/duplications of characters were allowed beyond those already appeared in the original words/phrases. Here is the final version of the poem:

St. Chic angel sits often in a fine deep light,  
 Casts a pool of sad tea in this decaf night,  
 As long lenses light, at noon soul fight,  
 Else a cine chic, a science of sound,  
 Descends to a cage of noises long ago tine,  
 St. Chic angel lost in an ageless line.

Despite the mechanical processes of word derivation, the result was surprisingly in line with the Surrealist *ethos*, as well as contained many words related to light (thus visual) and sound.

**The Mapping Process**

As the artwork was to be achieved using collage techniques, the mapping process transferring the poem to visual imagery played an important and essential role in determining the “look” of the collage. Therefore the process was kept simple and loose enough so that the author could still partly be in control of the result. Each alphabet was mapped to specific objects. The criteria for the selection of these objects were simply that 1) the first letter of the object was the same with the English character in question; and 2) the objects were compatible with the author’s vision of the whole work. In order to have more possibilities for the creative process, each English character was mapped onto two or three objects as shown in Table 1.

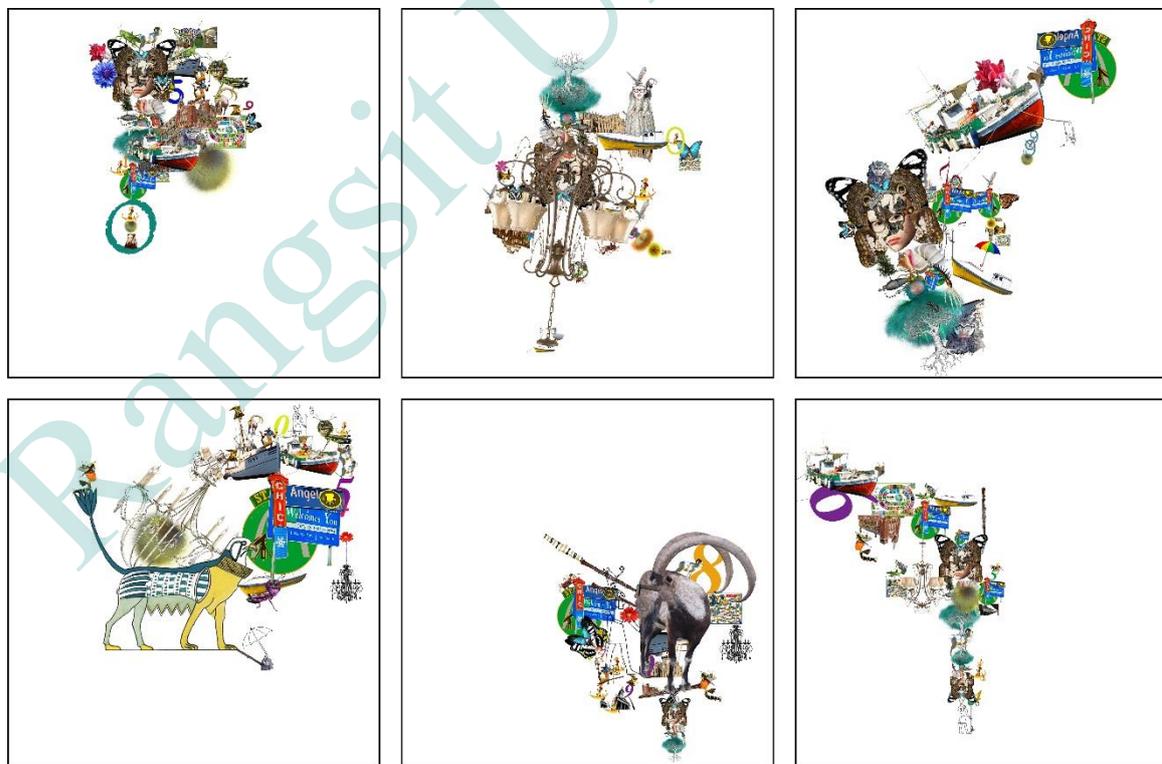
**Table 1** Mapping of English characters in the poem and specific objects

Character	Objects	Character	Objects
A	Angel, Ant	L	Lips, Logo
C	Chicago, Cow, Chandelier	N	Note, Numbers
D	Deer, Duck	O	Owl, Oboe
E	Egyptian gods, Electronic	P	Prinda, Philadelphia
F	Flowers, Fossil	S	St. Louis, Ship
G	Goat, Game	T	Temple, Train
H	Hair, Heart	U	Utensil, Umbrella
I	Insect, Instrument		

When it came to artistic judgment, there could be as many exceptions as there were rules. This was the case for *St. Chic Angel*, whose governing structural rules were loosely defined. Having said that, two most important ones were the objects' sizes and superimposition or stacking. These parameters controlled much of the appearance of the work and were dictated by the grammatical aspect and the order of appearance in the word they represented. Regarding the size, an object representing the first character of each word was the largest. These were gradually smaller so that the last character of the word was the smallest. Additionally, objects representing grammatically important points such as the main noun of the subject-group and the object-group in a sentence took on the largest sizes while those representing articles, conjunctions and so on were smallest.

Comparatively the rule for object superimposition was simpler. For each line the character to the left resided on a higher superimposition than, i.e., in a layer above, those occurring later. The placement of any objects on a canvas was mostly left to the artistic judgment. The only requirement was that all objects in each line together had to form a single, continuous body, i.e., no free floating objects or object-groups were allowed.

The six lines of the poem were mapped onto the visual framework according to the rules above, resulting in six collages of 1:1 width-height ratio, with the exact dimension of 150 cm x 150 cm and a resolution of 300 dpi. These collages were of various complexities depending on the lengths of the lines, the grammatical structure of the lines, and the basic object types. Despite the superimposition, these base collages were flat in nature (see Figure 2.) Note that the blank space around each collage was intentional and was calculated for the next step.



**Figure 2** The six base collages representing the six lines of the poem

Next, the collages were stacked in different arrangements to add more depth to the works. Since the dimension of each base collage was the same, the stacking was done by simply aligning the edge of one over another. This would be possible only if the stacking and the placement of objects on the canvas had been more or less calculated beforehand—thus the blank space left around each base collage, otherwise the result might not yield the desired effect. The process produced a new set of six artworks—the first simply being selected from one of the base collages; the second the composite of two base collages and so on, so that the last contained all six base collages superimposed one over another (see Table 3 for details). The decision as to which base collages would be selected for the new artworks was made by a random process—in this case by coin tossing. Three coins were used, out of which came eight possibilities. Table 2 shows the mapping of toss results and base collages. H represents head; T equals tail.

**Table 2** Mapping table of coin tossing and base collages

Coin Face	Base Collage
HHH	Free choice (F)
THH	Base collage no. 1 (1)
HTH	Base collage no. 2 (2)
HHT	Base collage no. 3 (3)
TTH	Base collage no. 4 (4)
THT	Base collage no. 5 (5)
HTT	Base collage no. 6 (6)
TTT	Free choice (F)

The all heads and all tails yielded “free choice,” whereby any base image might be selected depending on the author’s judgment as well as the possibilities left over after other base collage(s) had been selected. The first toss—the first base collage selected—would become the lowest layer over which other collages from the later tosses would be placed. Table 3 shows the result of tossing and the consequent stacks of the collages.

**Table 3** Coin tossing result and image stacking order

Artwork no.	Number of Layers	Toss Result	Base Collages (bottom to top)
1	1	THH	1
2	2	THT, HHT	5, 3
3	3	HTT, TTT, THH	6, F, 1 (6, 5, 1)
4	4	THT, HTH, TTT, HHH	5, 2, F, F (5, 2, 3, 4)
5	5	TTH, HHH, THT, THH, HTT	4, F, 5, 1, 6 (4, 2, 5, 1, 6)
6	6	TTT, HTH, HHT, TTH, HTT, HHH	F, 2, 3, 4, 6, F (5, 2, 3, 4, 6, 1)

The more stacks there were, the less likely the bottom images would show through. Each base collage was arranged around a specific location on a canvas earlier as the time of the creation to avoid any of them being completely hidden under the others. This also helped to insure that the composite contours of any groups of base images were aesthetically pleasing regardless of the combination.

The five composite images (artworks no. 2-6—no. 1 being simply the base collage no. 1) were then transformed further to simulate charcoal and color pencil sketches, fresco and crackle effects. These re-interpretative layers were again superimposed over the originals. To facilitate the visibility of all layers involved and to create more depth in the final artworks, each layer above the base was cut through at grammatically strategic places such as the first letter of the main noun. The end result was a combination of various drawing and painting techniques juxtaposed next to and superimposed over each other, creating a another level of the collage concept. The holes resulting from the cutting through the top layers, together with the placement of lighting and shadow density, created a sense of depth and augmented the difference between light and shadow while simultaneously provoked a sense of mystery. The final result in Figure 3 shows the six completed collages.

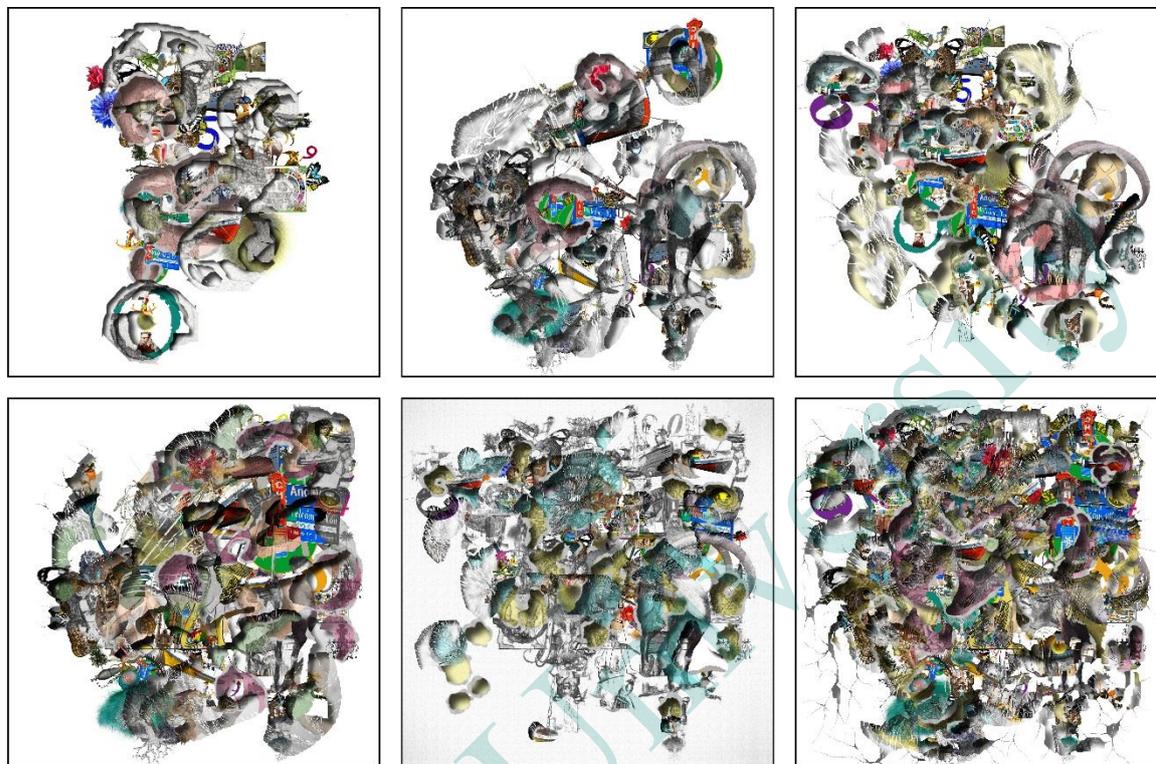


Figure 3 *St. Chic Angel* final composite collages

## 5. Conclusion

The research demonstrates a quest to find a creative process utilizing an interdisciplinary approach by combining the author's background in Thai music and visual art to produce a creative work. The process of creating the work can be traced back to the Surrealist approach to language and collage, which resulted in the form of the artwork title and an original poem that controlled the structure of the work as well as the visual texture of the six artworks. The research demonstrates two concepts governing the rhythmic and formal structure of the Thai traditional music—the centonization and the hierarchical structure, and notes the similarity to the structure of a written language. By utilizing the same structure in the form of a newly composed poem and mapping the result to the visual art domain, *St. Chic Angel* reflects the integration of structural concepts of both written language and Thai music in a form of a new artwork series.

One essential aspect of *St. Chic Angel* is the relationship between the systematic, logical thinking and freedom of artistic expression. The use of the system reflecting a written language and the Thai musical concept, as well as the mapping process, demonstrates the systematic approach to art. At the same time, there are many aspects of the work that are not governed by the mapping. There is always room for personal artistic decisions.

These two different approaches in the creative process of the work—the systematic approach and the free artistic expression or “intuition”—may not be contradictory after all. Is it not possible, for example, that a systematic structure is simply a simple form of artistic intuition? In other words, intuition, which we may not understand completely, may be nothing but the complicated manifestation of simpler systematic thinking. After all, the seemingly chaotic natural phenomena that we know are complicated manifestations of much simpler rules that can be expressed by mathematical formulas. A simple statement of the law of gravity implicates vast complex phenomena affecting not only terrestrial objects but also the whole universe.

In this way, *St. Chic Angel* may not and should not directly reflect only its systematic approach. One may be able to trace back to it, in the same way that we now learn more about rules of nature by studying their manifestation in natural phenomena, or one may not, as we are still not able to deduce simple logic from intuition. I hope that *St. Chic Angel*, originated by means of systematic procedure as it was, is perceived as an artwork with an artistic expression on its own.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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