


THE ARTS

A Provocative Eye

Manit Sriwanichpoom uses photographs to skewer the failings of contemporary Thailand, from the rise of bland consumerism to the country's economic mismanagement

By Michael Vatikiotis/BANGKOK



BUILDING SIGHT:
In Manit Sriwanichpoom's latest work, the unfinished buildings that litter Bangkok's cityscape are made to resemble bombed-out shells

"RECESSION IS ANOTHER FORM OF WAR," declares Manit Sriwanichpoom. It's a typically outrageous statement from the 41-year-old artist, who uses photographic images to wrestle with Thailand's economic boom and spectacular bust, often borrowing images of victims of war to portray the changing fortunes of the Thai consumer and office worker.

Take his *Pink Man* series. Each of these photo-montages features a portly man dressed in lurid pink, usually accompanied by a shopping cart or a mobile phone. At first, Manit posed the Pink Man in front of familiar places, a temple or some ruins. Then he took things further. One image, for instance, juxtaposed the Pink Man with an image of a policeman shooting at students during the bloody 1976 suppression of protests at Bangkok's Thammasat University.

"The Pink Man represents the modern conscience," Manit explains. "He's the modern Thai consumer. He's fat and happy—

he has a happy life. These students died so that the Pink Man can go shopping."

Manit responded to the financial crisis of 1997 with his *Bloodless War* images, which place middle-class Thais in recreations of iconic pictures from the Vietnam War. Thus, the famous image of a South Vietnamese army officer shooting a Vietcong suspect becomes a cigar-smoking Thai boss "shooting" a worker.

Bad taste? Bangkok art-dealer Valentine Willie, who is helping Manit with a new show, doesn't believe so: "It's good to see a layer of humour without losing the bite and edge these images convey," he says. Manit's response is more cryptic: "War is never over and people are still dying."

Manit has never been content just with ►►



OFF COLOUR: In the *Pink Man* series, a cartoon-like character poses amid some of the most brutal scenes from contemporary Thai history: "He's the modern Thai consumer," says Manit. "He's fat and happy—he has a happy life. These students died so that the Pink Man can go shopping."

exhibiting his pictures in galleries—they don't reach enough people, he says. So he's done street-side installations, stopping traffic and pedestrians with images of middle-class shoppers being towed behind a limousine; evoking the famous shot of Vietcong dead being towed behind an armoured personnel carrier.

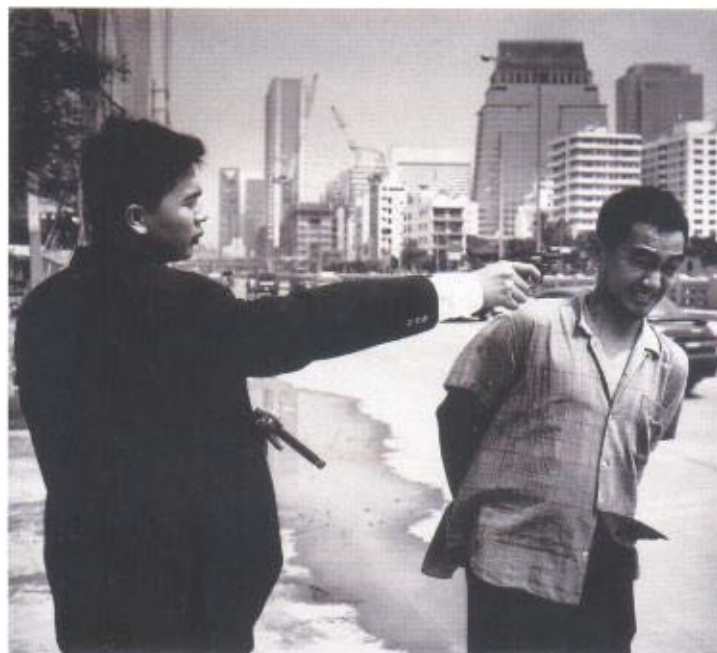
Despite his outrageous approach, Manit has never experienced any form of official censorship. As Valentine Willie explains, "Of all the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand has taken well to contemporary mediums like video and photography."

More recently, Manit has been travelling around Bangkok

shooting the abandoned and unfinished office blocks and condominiums that litter the city. Through his eyes they look like bombed-out shells. After any war, there is debris and wreckage, and so these buildings are the debris of recession.

As ever with Manit, the images are an attempt to shock people into thinking about contemporary Thai society. "As Thais we are taught to suppress personal anguish and pain," he says. "Provocative art is a reaction to cultural conformity." ■

NICK UT/AP



EDDIE ADAMS/AP

WAR, OF SORTS: Manit's *Bloodless War* series uses Vietnam War images to communicate the artist's belief that recession is "another form of war." The original photographs, of children fleeing a napalm attack (*above left*) and a South Vietnamese general executing a Vietcong suspect (*bottom right*), were taken by Nick Ut and Eddie Adams