

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART

In 2008 and again in 2011, the Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook took copies of famous European paintings, including examples by Édouard Manet, Jean-François Millet, and Artemisia Gentileschi, and of a couple of works by Jeff Koons out into the towns and countryside of Thailand to see what people there might make of them. I know of rare, similar projects undertaken not by artists but by scholars; after the 1980s debates over the influence of tribal art on early modernism, for example, the art historian Robert Farris Thompson brought images of Cubist works to Africa to see how they'd be understood there. But Rasdjarmrearnsook's videos, four of which appeared in this exhibition, come across as something other than art history or anthropology.

In her video on Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, for example, Rasdjarmrearnsook poses her full-scale, ornately framed reproduction in a bamboo grove, her audience a group of men and women clustered cross-legged on the leaf-strewn ground before it. That outdoor scene rhymes oddly with the wooded picnic shown in the painting, at the same time that it heightens the strangeness of seeing the work outside a museum, let alone in rural Asia. The same is true of the big-skied, light-filled riverbank that hosts a copy of Millet's *The Gleaners*, 1857—not coincidentally, I suspect, a big-skied, light-filled painting. The baroque Gentileschi and Koons, meanwhile, are hung in a Buddhist temple, already filled with paintings among which their twisting forms and colors seem at home.

These simultaneously insinuated continuities and differences carry through to the Thais' conversations, which contain both misunderstandings and recognitions, both distances and immediacies. "Why did she take off her clothes?" one woman asks of *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, inspiring general hilarity. Other responses are more eccentric: Are the picnickers eating bananas? Are the far-off animals yoked to a cart in *The Gleaners* perhaps elephants? Or camels? On deeper levels, though, there is identification. It's clear to the viewers of *The Gleaners* that its characters "are farmers like we are," or, since they seem to have harder lives, "like the old folks in the past." Conversely, the alfresco diners in *Le Déjeuner* are recognizably more leisured than their counterparts amid the bamboo, inspiring one to call the naked picnicker "a cute rich girl." Another fixes on her unblemished skin, describing it in terms that must be a first in the large literature on that painting: "Her face is fresh like fresh chicken drop-pings (so white and soft)."

With a singular exception—the amicable and articulate Buddhist monk who amazes by fitting the Koons (an erotic photo work) and the Gentileschi into a lesson on the five precepts of Dhamma—no individuals emerge from Rasdjarmrearnsook's videos. She shows people mainly from behind, looking over their backs to the picture beyond them; we hear their voices but can rarely tell who is

speaking. She also shoots each video in one long take and makes no effort to guide the conversation, staying silent and invisible. The visual stasis gives the videos a psychic gravity, which somehow finds serene coexistence with conversation at once sharp, funny, and absurd.

Rasdjarmrearnsook has exhibited widely internationally, though this was her first solo show in the United States. She is interested in interpersonal or intercultural lacunae, even to an extreme degree. In 2006, the American curator Dan Cameron called her "an artist who developed an international reputation by way of her interactions with corpses of the recently deceased"—a memorable lead sentence—and indeed, several earlier videos show Rasdjarmrearnsook tending to the dead, dressing them, singing to them, lecturing to them (adding, in *The Class*, 2005, "I am willing to accept the fact that this talk might be without any form of discussion. But it is okay"). Rasdjarmrearnsook's title for the 2008 works shown here is "Two Planets," as if she thought East and West incommensurable. Yet the works fascinate for the engagement they spark between the Thais and the Western artworks, even while they leave all questions of art's reception open-ended and in the air.

—David Frankel

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Two Planets: Manet's Luncheon on the Grass and the Thai Villagers*, 2008 still from a color video, 16 minutes.

