

Thai Artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook Emerges From the Shadows in Sydney

by Nicholas Forrest 03/04/14 9:57 PM EDT



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook
(4A Centre)

The work of respected Thai artist [Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook](#) has been presented at some of the world's most prestigious art institutions, including the **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum**, New York and the **National Art Gallery**, Singapore, to name a few, yet her name will be unfamiliar to most, perhaps because she prefers to let her work speak for itself, and perhaps because her surname is so difficult to pronounce (it's pronounced ra-djarm-re-arn-sook, said rather quickly, for those who were wondering). Outside of Thailand, Rasdjarmrearnsook's profile does not reflect the significance of her practice, especially in Australia, which makes the mini retrospective of her work currently on show in Sydney an important show for her profile in Australia, but also for her profile in the wider Western art world.

Spread across two Sydney venues, the [4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#) and the [University of Sydney Art Gallery](#), "Storytellers of the Town" and "The Village and Elsewhere" spans two decades of Rasdjarmrearnsook's career, from 1994 to the present, including seminal installations and video works, a number of which have never been presented outside of Thailand. Although the exhibition is small in scale, it has been tightly and thoughtfully curated by retired Professor of Asian Art History at the University of Sydney, **John Clark**, and PHD candidate **Clare Veal**, providing an intimate yet insightful and informative window into Rasdjarmrearnsook's practice that is broad enough without being overwhelming. Considering

the meditative nature of her work, the intimate nature of the show is very appropriate.

Surveying the exhibition across its two venues reveals an overwhelming sense that Rasdjarmrearnsook doesn't just engage with viewers as mere spectators, she casts them as active participants, encapsulating them with her provocative and compelling visual language, at times even evoking a feeling of complicity. But although her practice is intensive and compelling in nature, she exhibits a level of restraint through which she relinquishes enough information and insight to engage the viewer, while at the same time withholding just the right amount to encourage the viewer to connect with her practice on a deeper level than would otherwise be achievable – the sign of a truly great artist. As the exhibition unfolds the initial tone of the works develop into the substance of her philosophies and preoccupations, expressed visually through her work, which exposes her as one of the most important artists of the South-East Asia region.

Those who are familiar with Rasdjarmrearnsook's work will most likely relate her practice to her confronting video installations on the taboo subject of mortality, which are informed by the early experience of losing her mother when she was aged three and then the passing of her grandmother in 1987. But there is far more to her oeuvre. Interwoven with the interrogations of the prevailing perceptions of death and mortality are explorations of a broad range of poignant themes relating to culture, society, politics, class, and gender. Although the focus of her work has remained relatively stable, over the last twenty years her practice has evolved from a more feminist stance and a more externally expression of the themes that pervade her oeuvre, to a practice that has become increasingly personal in which the artist shifts her gaze further inwards. She describes the inspiration behind her current practice as, “teaching, women's issues, and stray dogs” – of which she has 15 in her care.



The first encounter with Rasdjarmrearnsook's practice is at the 4A Centre where on the ground

floor an early installation by the artist entitled “Has Girl Lost Her Memory” (1994). Standing upturned in the middle of a pile of corn husks, which are sometimes used by Thai villagers as offering flowers for cremation ceremonies, is a very utilitarian metal bed frame reminiscent of those used in institutions, an orphanage perhaps, or a boarding school such as the one she was sent to as a teenager – an institution where the role and restrictions of the Thai women were instilled. “The bed is turned over which suggests the ending of it all,” explains Rasdjarmrearnsook in an interview with 4A. Drawing from her own sense of fragility and vulnerability at the time, “Has Girl Lost Her Memory” is as much a lamentation as an interrogation of the role of women in contemporary Thai society. Without knowledge of Thai traditions and culture it is difficult to fully appreciate the magnitude of the statement, but Rasdjarmrearnsook’s visual language is strong enough to prevail, connecting with the viewer on multiple levels.

Just beyond this is one of the artist’s most famous video works, “The Class” (2005), in which the artist lectures to a classroom of six corpses which lie on the floor, side by side, shrouded in white sheets. Although the futility of lecturing to the dead is obvious, the directness and severity of the act speaks of society’s attitudes towards death which are most often informed by deeply ingrained prejudices, preconceived opinions, and archaic traditions.



Moving to the upstairs gallery of 4A reveals three more major video installations. In “Treachery of the Moon” (2012), Rasdjarmrearnsook sits on a mattress on the floor with her back to the viewer and a dog on either side, watching a television set that switches between news footage of political clashes in 21st century Thailand and footage from drama programs. Running concurrently to the television is conflicting footage projected from behind the artist and her dogs onto the wall which holds the television, turning the room into a psychedelic diorama of moving images. In addition to suggesting that the media is complicit in the desensitization of contemporary society towards the horrors of war and disaster, and that the atrocities of the world creep ever closer towards the realm of the domestic, the work is also a simple insight into the artist’s day to day life.

One of the most confronting works in the show, the video piece “Some unexpected events sometimes bring momentary happiness. Afterwards, regret rises in our memory even for bygone hardship” (2009) is presented in a room on its own in which the footage is cleverly projected

onto the floor where it is reflected by the black plastic covering that surrounds the room, transforming the space into something akin to an oracle's crystal ball, channeling the emotions and atmosphere of the work itself. In the black and white video a crippled dog walks awkwardly around a grassed area, seemingly unaware of its condition and status – quite happy, in fact. It's a difficult piece to watch, but just as hard to pull away from. Juxtaposed with the sadness of the dog's situation, the monochrome footage evoke a sense of nostalgia and the happiness of the dog instills a sense of hope that keeps the viewer engaged in anticipation of a positive development.

Spread across three walls in the main upstairs space is the namesake work of the exhibition, the multichannel video installation "Great Times Message, Storytellers of the Town, The Insane," (2002). Consisting of three concurrently-running video interviews with female patients of an insane asylum whose identities are kept hidden by the blurred footage, highlighting the plight of each patient and enabling the viewer to immerse themselves in each woman's story, the installation is a powerful investigation of grief and a poignant exploration of femininity.

In part two of the exhibition, "[Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook](#): The Village and Elsewhere," at the University of Sydney (USYD) Art Gallery are two more video works as well as a series of series of drawings and film stills. The central work at USYD, "Village and Elsewhere: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Beheading Holofernes, Jeff Koons' Untitled and Thai Villagers" (2011) is from the artist's "Village and Elsewhere" series. In the video a Buddhist monk attempts to teach a group of men, women, children, and dogs, all of whom face away from the viewer, about two works of art, a raunchy untitled work by Jeff Koons and Artemisia Gentileschi's 1612 painting "Judith Beheading Holofernes." Clearly out of his depth, the monk turns to Buddhist philosophy in an attempt to explain the works. Complementing the "Village and Elsewhere" video is a film still from the artist's "The Two Planet (Van Gogh's The Midday Sleep 1889/90 and the Thai villagers" (2007) in which a group of Thai villagers discuss iconic Western artworks while sitting in the middle of a field. Both works investigate the dichotomy between Thai and European art history, while at the same time expose the complexities of contemporary life, status and identify in particular, through two very different cultures and societies.

The second video work at USYD is "I'm Living" (2002) in which a woman lays different outfits on the lifeless body of a dead female, evoking the paper dolls that were a staple toy of young girls in the not too distant past. The tenderness with which the body is dressed suggests that perhaps the actions of the woman are in some way impacting the status of the body. But regardless of which item of clothing the body is covered with, death still prevails, highlighting the futility of the ritualistic process, which although beautiful and loving, has no impact on the body, only on the woman doing the dressing. "I'm Living" (2002) challenges perceptions of the rites and rituals associated with death, and explores the process of grieving.



One of the highlight of the exhibition is the technically masterful series of early intaglio prints that reflect melancholic poetics of childhood and her memories of being an Asian woman, focusing on illness and the death of members of her family, according to the Grove Art index. It is these hauntingly beautiful, spiritual works that perhaps best reflect the context of her practice, which is provincial in nature but global in scope. The aesthetic displayed in the print series is reminiscent of that seen in other artists from the South East Asia region, speaking of a regional visual language that successfully combines the traditions of her own culture with influences from the Western art world, resulting in a regionally significant but internationally accessible practice that. Rasdjarmrearnsook's work resonates with that of artists such as Cambodian sculptor **Sopheap Pich**, whose work is influenced by his connection with his homeland of Cambodia as well as his own personal history, but is also characterized by its architectural geometric grid construction, initiating a fascinating dialogue between the traditional and the avant-garde, much like Rasdjarmrearnsook's work. But regardless of what the exhibitions reveal about the context of Rasdjarmrearnsook's practice in a wider art historical context, which could potentially place her as the progenitor of a distinct aesthetic, in "Storytellers of the Town" and "The Village and Elsewhere" Rasdjarmrearnsook emerges as an artist of immense talent, intuition, and honesty.

"[Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: Storytellers of the Town](#)" is at the [4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#) until May 10, 2014 and "[Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: The Village and Elsewhere](#)" is at the [University of Sydney Art Gallery](#) until May 3, 2014.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook is represented by [100 Tonson Gallery](#) in Bangkok and [Tyler Rollins Fine Art](#) in New York.

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