

# Art in America

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## Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

NEW YORK,  
at SculptureCenter

by Gregory Volk



Araya  
Rasdjarmrearnsook:  
*Village and Elsewhere*;  
Jeff Koons' *Untitled*,  
Cindy Sherman's  
*Untitled*, and *Thai  
Villagers*, 2011, digital  
pigment print, 28 by  
37¼ inches; at  
SculptureCenter.

I vividly recall my first encounter with work by Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, at the 2003 Istanbul Biennial. Her video *I'm Living* (2002), unobtrusively displayed on a small monitor at the Hagia Sophia, was like nothing I'd ever seen. From above, you see a girl's corpse lying face up, with arms slightly outstretched, legs slightly apart and head turned toward the right; she wears a light pink nightgown. Kneeling, Rasdjarmrearnsook gently arranges different colorful dresses atop the corpse. She's like a child dressing a cherished doll, but with an air of solemnity and ritual. Death and life, absolute stillness and purposeful activity converge in this enthralling, yet profoundly unsettling, communion between a live woman and a female corpse. Projected onto the floor at SculptureCenter, the video was a captivating introduction to the excellent survey of Rasdjarmrearnsook's work from 2002 to the present.

Rasdjarmrearnsook's background is in printmaking and sculpture, but in the late 1990s she began making videos and films, including her internationally acclaimed works featuring corpses. *The Class I*, *The Class II* and *The Class III* (all 2005) are videos showing the artist (who lives in Chiang Mai, in North Thailand, and is a professor at the renowned art school at Chiang Mai University) delivering lectures about death to a classroom of corpses. Her "students" are, alas, experts, while she has only speculative knowledge; she appears exasperated when no one answers her questions ("What are you thinking?" "What do dead people want?"). Her curiosity about and palpable compassion for the dead—surely the most voiceless of human subjects—make these multivalenced investigations of mortality utterly compelling.

Elsewhere, Rasdjarmrearnsook approaches marginal members of society with openness and empathy. The willfully blurry three-channel video installation *Great Time Message: Storytellers of the Town* (2006) shows women in a psychiatric hospital speaking about their memories, stories, dreams, aspirations and enduring sadness. This work unflinchingly deals with issues of gender, power and coercion, while implicitly questioning who is deemed normal or abnormal, and why. These insane women actually make a great deal of sense, and their soliloquies are poetic and touching. Three digital pigment prints from Rasdjarmrearnsook's "Two Planets" series show Thai villagers from behind as they sit and contemplate framed copies of famous Western paintings, including Jean-Francois Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857). Europe and Asia, high Western art and Thai village life, 19th-century agrarian workers and current farmers are juxtaposed.

Dogs were a big deal in this exhibition, and Rasdjarmrearnsook lives with many of the ones shown, having rescued them from the perilous streets where dogs are often captured and butchered. In the video *Pray, bless us with rice and curry our great moon* (2012), dogs are distinct individuals, with subtitles providing information about them as they frolic about a festive backyard party/barbecue, excitedly prance and wag, walk to the sea, and occasionally wear what are called spirit lanterns on their backs. inter-spersed are horrific scenes of dogs crammed into cages and destined for death. Shown on pedestals nearby were three glass jars housing dog fur and small photos. Each jar serves as a portrait of one of Rasdjarmrearnsook's stray dogs, and conveys utmost love and respect.

The showstopper for me was *Some unexpected events sometimes bring momentary happiness* (2009), a slow-motion, silent, black-and-white video of a crippled dog bounding about a yard, its hindquarters sagging. According to the artist, the dog inexplicably rose and ran around for a day. Pain, joy, suffering, pleasure and transcendence combine in an entrancing video that seems spiritually wise.