



Left

A display of **Tsang Tsou-Choi's** Hong Kong passport, dated 1993, which the late artist graffitied with a string of words and numbers. Courtesy ArtisTree / Swire Properties, Hong Kong.

Right

MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM
Pink Man Begins #1
1997
C-print, 50.8 x 61 cm.
Courtesy the artist.

BANGKOK
G23 GALLERY

Manit Sriwanichpoom

PHENOMENA AND PROPHECIES

Thai photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom earned a visual arts degree from Bangkok's Srinakharinwirot University in 1984. Thus it is only fitting that the artist received a midcareer retrospective originally organized by the Singapore Art Museum in late 2010, with over 100 photo and video works from 1997 to 2009, at the school's g23 Gallery. One of the few Thai photographers of his generation to garner recognition abroad, Manit has long been a leading voice in Bangkok's art scene: he was among Thailand's representatives in the nation's Venice Biennale debut in 2003; and he and his wife, the independent filmmaker Ing K, own and operate Kathmandu Gallery, Bangkok's only space devoted to contemporary Thai photography.

A passionate social activist throughout his student days, Manit, now 50, began his adult career as a photojournalist for an international news wire, where he covered Thailand's tumultuous series of coups and uprisings. Manit has often said that he quickly wearied of documentary photography's limitations. "I realized that there is something beyond the actual scene that the camera could capture," he explained in an online interview in 2010, "and that maybe it's the 'emotional truth' I should try to understand and tell."

If there was an emotional truth on display, it was outrage, tempered by a sly sense of humor. In "This Bloodless War" (1997), Manit staged a series of photographs that reference and recontextualize iconic images from the Vietnam War and the atomic bombing of

Nagasaki. *This Bloodless War #3* (1997) shows a band of nouveau-riche Thai shoppers toting luxury shopping bags, staggering down a railway toward the camera, while a trio of blank-faced financiers in suits follow from behind. The image takes on a confrontational potency when you realize that the mise-en-scène is a close replica of Associated Press photographer Nick Ut's iconic, Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnam War photo of a naked young girl fleeing her napalm-bombed village as US military personnel casually stroll in pursuit.

In echoing such historical horrors, the images present a hyperbolic critique of the Thai government's acquiescence to the demands of Western market interests, and the Thai people's all-too-eager adoption of conspicuous consumption.

In "Pink Man Begins" (1997), the first collection of large color prints in an ongoing series, the eponymous antihero appears in Bangkok's swanky downtown shopping district, dressed in his signature fluorescent pink double-breasted suit while pushing a hot-pink shopping cart through bemused hordes of wannabe shoppers. Played to perfection—with a coolly contemptuous air, gold jewelry and perfectly sculpted hair—by Thai poet Sompong Thawee, Manit's Pink Man is part Thai gangster, part aristocratic overlord, and part louche lounge singer: the ultimate conspicuous consumer.

In Thai pop culture, pink is associated with crass and vulgar entertainment, such as the gaudy costumes of game-show hosts or the attire favored by Bangkok bar girls. By emblazoning his stand-in for the materialistic upper classes in pink, Manit is suggesting that his country's elites are a group of upscale pimps and prostitutes.

In the "Pink Man on Tour" series (1998), the incandescent villain pushes his pram past the rice paddies and gilded temples of the country's north—his attire contrasting stunningly with the tropical landscape. To all appearances he is laying claim to Thailand's natural beauty and touristic riches, as the ruling minority has for so long.

The various "Pink Man" photographs comprised more than half the retrospective, and it seems that Manit has carried the character as far as he will go. Yet with recent elections pushing the country's political future to the edge, Manit's cogent, socially idealistic voice is as important to the Thai intelligentsia now as ever. It will be interesting to see where and how he projects it next.

PATRICK BRZESKI

