

Artist Manit Sriwanichpoom's pink prophecies for Thailand – Art Radar interview

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THAI ARTISTS INTERVIEWS PHOTOGRAPHY VIDEO ART

“**Phenomena and Prophecies**”, which has just wrapped up at the Singapore Art Museum, is an exhibition of over 100 photographic and video works by the internationally acclaimed Thai artist **Manit Sriwanichpoom**. In an interview with the artist, *Art Radar* explores how he uses photography to expose the brutal truth behind Thai society and to denounce consumerism through satirical compositions.

For my work, how about strange, strong, and deep? For the Thai government: greedy, corrupt, and ignorant. For Thai people: tolerant, forgiving, and forgetful. *Manit Sriwanichpoom in conversation with Art Radar*

The exhibition is a collaboration between **Singapore Art Museum** and the second **Singapore International Photography Festival**. It finished on Sunday 7 November after running for one month. The exhibition was curated by Ark Fongsmut, an experienced Thai curator and lecturer in visual art.

Why is this exhibition at Singapore Art Museum called “Phenomena and Prophecies” and what are some of the other equally suitable titles that you would replace it with?

The title was given by the curator Ark Fongsmut. Actually we had another choice, “Poses from Dreamland”, which came from Ing K’s article [written for] the catalogue for the show.



Manit Sriwanichpoom, 'Pink Man on European Tour # 1 (Graz)', 2000, c-print mounted on aluminium – dibond, edition of 10, 40.6 x 50.8 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Manit Sriwanichpoom: “truth” of photojournalism versus “emotional truth” of art

Were you born and raised in Thailand? Tell us a little bit about your background (childhood, adolescence, adulthood). What do you identify yourself most with: artist, curator, lecturer, writer, or social activist?

I was born in Bangkok, on the canal surrounded by rice fields, back then considered as up-country. You could swim and drink water from the canal but not anymore. Becoming an artist was not my plan at the beginning. I was inspired by my cousin to become an architect like him. But instead of architecture school, the national university entrance examinations landed me at **Srinakharinwirot University**'s visual art faculty where I had no clue what they'd be teaching me. Gradually I realised that I was learning to find and express myself.

I'm an artist who sometimes has to take [on] other roles such as curating shows, teaching photography classes or organising and leading protests.

What inspired you to become a photojournalist instead of using painting or drawing as a medium? Have you attempted to use other media?

When I was in my first year at university I met a teacher who just got back from the U.S. with a master degree in art photography. He showed me his works, works that I'd never seen anywhere before and I couldn't imagine that they were made using a camera. I fell in love with the medium. I devoted my time to it as I felt that this was my destiny. After graduation, I felt I didn't have enough experience so I took a job as an assistant to a local famous commercial photographer and later

became a photojournalist covering political affairs for a news agency.

Also, I was interested in film as an extension of still photography. I made a few experimental films. Recently I worked as a director of photography for the feature film *Shakespeare Must Die*, directed by Ing K, [and] I adopted *Caravaggio's* lighting style for the film.

How has your work evolved during your career as an artist?

I think my work is getting stronger and stronger as I get older. The subjects that I'm dealing with are sensitive issues to the Thai authorities and people, [subjects] such as nation, religion and monarchy. We can't avoid to touch upon these three pillars of the Thai nation when we really want to know the answer to the question: 'Who are we?'

Is there a particular artist that you admire? Is there any particular art period that has influenced your work substantially?

For a long time I admired *Robert Frank* with his unconventional way of looking at America. Lately I'm so into *Diane Arbus* for her simple and direct portraits bringing out the deep psyche of herself. Photography is not just a plain image or information.

From childhood to adulthood, what are the events that have had a significant impact on your view of the world and your artwork?

The 6th October, 1976 massacre of pro-democracy students and people right in front of the Grand Palace. Although I was only fifteen and wasn't involved in the demonstration news images of the incident have stayed with me until now.

Another event was the protest against the re-landscaping of *Maya Beach* for Hollywood film *The Beach* which broke Thailand's national park law. I was part of that protest. During the campaign we were the target of threats, smear campaigns and nasty tactics from the authorities and people who had interests in the film's production. We experienced what it was like when a giant company from Hollywood with lots of money could do anything they wanted and didn't have to care a damn about the law. They can manipulate hungry locals to fight for them.

Are you trying to portray hidden truths about Thai society through your photography? What are they? How do you do this?

I used to be a photojournalist trying to capture the 'truth' that happens in front of the camera. But as time went on I found that

this job was not fulfilling as I realised that there is something beyond the actual scene that the camera could capture. Maybe it's the 'emotional truth' that I try to understand and tell.

Mani Sriwanichpoom on his use of the colour pink

What significance and implications do the colours that you use in your art work carry?

In my case 'pink' represents vulgarity and tastelessness. Pink gives sweet and cute feelings which contrast with the figure of the fat man. Yellow makes things look sacred and holy like gold, which is not the colour that fits my man.

If I'm not mistaken, the Pink Man, repetitively seen in your photos, is Sompong Thawee, a poet and one of your long-time collaborators. What makes him so suitable for this series of work and why not a woman, a couple, or a family?

The important part of Pink Man, besides being fat and Asian-looking, [is that] he needs to have a sense of dissatisfaction and hidden anger which Sompong [Thawee] can deliver subtly. I [tried to work with] some other male models but it did not work out. For me, Pink Man must be a man because men still dominate the world and I want him to reflect this fact.



You have explored many different themes, developing them as series: "Pink Man in Shopping District", "Pink Man in Opera", "Pink Man on Tour", "Pink Man in Europe", "Horror in Pink"... Which is your favorite series and why? Which event in Thai history affects you the most?

“Horror in Pink” is one of my favorite series. The work is relevant to Thailand’s political crisis even now. People are still weak and easily manipulated by powerful politicians to benefit their interests. The **October 6 massacre** used to be my most hated event, but it looks so innocent now compared to what’s happening today with **Thaksin Shinawatra** and his gang.

What, if anything, ties these themes together?

Like most tourists today, Pink Man travels not to learn but to consume: to collect exotic destinations, to shop, to show off. He searches but he never learns because he’s insincere.

Manit Sriwanichpoom on the Pink Man travelling West

For “Pink Man in Europe”, why didn’t you use any recognisable, distinctive European monuments such as the Eiffel Tower?

The Eiffel Tower was included in one of my series, “La Vie en Pink”, when [Pink Man] falls in love with a young Parisian girl. This photography was inspired by *Paris Kiss (Le baiser de l’Hotel de Ville)*, a photo by Robert Doisneau created in 1950.

Since American imperialism and globalisation are often exchangeable terms, why isn’t there a series on Pink Man in America?

I haven’t thought of it yet. Maybe in the future. Let’s see how the economic crisis has changed the U.S..



Manit Sriwanichpoom, 'Pink Man on Tour # 6 (Amazing Rice Field. Northern Thailand)', 1998, c-print mounted on aluminium – dibond, edition 6 of 10, 40.6 x 50.8 cm. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

While you criticised tourism in “Pink Man on Tour”, you travelled quite a bit yourself to conceive the series. What is the most memorable place you’ve been to?

Venice, Italy. It's a beautiful city in terms of art and architecture but the people are not friendly with tourists. Venice has been one of the most popular tourist destinations since the eighteenth century or earlier. The relationship between tourists and locals [there] is like one between customers and hookers. They love and hate each other but they still need each other. This thing made me think of Thailand's tourism situation ... we aren't different.

In comparison with the East, how are the reactions from people in the West different when you're shooting in public?

Western people are not afraid of Pink Man. They like to play and act with him. But in Asia people are skeptical: Who's this fat and funny guy? What's he trying to sell?

If you were to do a series of Pink Man for the West, such as for America or Europe, which facets of society or which historical events would you portray?

If I had to choose, maybe America. And the issue that I might take on is 'terrorism' which has affected us since 9/11.

Manit Sriwanichpoom on his contemporary renderings of violent historical moments

In the series "Coup d'Etat", do you feel that people posing with soldiers is a strange phenomenon? Are the people you have used in the photographs local or mostly tourists?



Manit Sriwanichpoom, 'Coup d'Etat Photo Op #1', 2006, gelatin silver print, 49 x 49 cm. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

After months of street protests against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his government, partly in response to the urging of some factions of protesters, partly to prevent an imminent outbreak of violence, the military-seized power in a **coup d'état on 19 September, 2006**. They cited four reasons that necessitated their action: that Prime Minister Thaksin was fostering a dangerous split among Thais; that his government was corrupt and nepotistic; that he undermined independent watchdog organisations; that he disrespected the institution of the monarchy.

After the coup, many people, not just from Bangkok but also from the provinces, converged on the tanks around the Royal Plaza and the Marble Temple to offer flowers and to pose for photographs with soldiers. This created a celebratory carnival atmosphere, an unbelievable phenomenon in stark contrast to the people's reaction to other coups in the past. Foreign tourists also joined in, posing for pictures with soldiers and tanks along with the Thai.

Before judging us, think how much people had to suffer under Thaksin for them to cheer at a coup d'état. He was a violent and oppressive man.

I didn't like the coup, but I understood the people posing for pictures with soldiers. I understood their relief and joy.



Manit Sriwanichpoom, 'La Vie en Pink # 2', 2004, C-print, edition of 10, size 76 x 95 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Could you elaborate on the process of making each of your works?

First I get an idea of what I want to say. Then I think about images that can convey my message to my audience. Often I look for visual inspiration from historical photos and painting books. As I studied art, I know about art history, which has helped me a lot to work things out.

What is your biggest challenge in creating art?

To get a strong image. I always bear in mind that my work has to compete with all the other media out there. How can people remember my work when they are bombarded with thousands of pictures a day? Photojournalists know this challenge well. So do we artists.

In your series “The Bloodless War”, you made reference to the famous news photograph of Kim Phúc and siblings fleeing a South Vietnamese napalm attack on their village during the Vietnam War. Your image (*The Bloodless War # 3*, 1997) portrays a kind of contemporary war. What is this war about and why are all of your subjects running on a railroad?



Mani Sriwanichpoom, 'This Bloodless War # 3', 1997, gelatin silver print, edition of 5, 50.8 x 61 cm. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

The contemporary war [in this image] is an economic war, happening through the monetary system and stock market. That's why we haven't seen blood and casualties. The victims in "This Bloodless War" series were running away from [creditors] on a railroad which was abandoned. The company who got a government concession to build the elevated rail track went bankrupt after the Thai currency was devalued by more than 100 percent.

“Horror in Pink” portrays the 1976 student uprising in name of liberation. Why does the Pink Man smirk in this series? It's

the first time that he smiles in any of the series you have created. Can you explain this change?

Here is my statement for the "Horror in Pink" series: 'Question: What did they die for? Answer: So we can go shopping.'

How shocking when, [in 2000], more than a million voters elected **Samak Sundaravej** their new governor of Bangkok. I was flabbergasted. Was this not the same Samak who back in October 1976 went on radio to urge that brute force be used against pro-democracy protesters, in the events that culminated in the most horrifying massacre in Bangkok history?

I asked myself: 'Has everyone forgotten? Does [the Massacre of] October 6 mean nothing to us now? Do we even care? Have we learned nothing from history?'

Because of this, I don't think it would be too much for me to hold that Pink Man stands for present day Thailand. While out shopping, the man in the obscene pink satin suit with a matching obscene pink shopping cart – a soulless man without a conscience to trouble him – amuses himself by joining the ogling crowd in news photographs of unimaginable cruelty from the May Massacre and the events of 6 and 14 October. My, he's really getting his rocks off. How he enjoys himself.



Manit Sriwanichpoom, 'Pink, White & Blue # 3 (The Scent of Love)', 2005, c-print mounted on aluminum – dibond, edition of 12, 61 x 50.8 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

In “Pink, White & Blue”, you portrayed a classroom parody where the children are literally blinded. Likewise in “Embryonia”, the children’s feet are bound. Are you pessimistic about these children’s future, and do you believe anything can improve their future?

As the country’s education system has never been improved, the result is we produce only ‘victims’ for consumerism and nationalism.

You use the colours of Thailand’s national flag as a backdrop for these photos. What does this symbolise?

For Thailand’s flag, the colours are red, white and blue. Red for the nation (people), white for religion and blue for the king (monarchy).

Manit Sriwanichpoom on living and working in Thailand

Would you like to leave Thailand at some point and immigrate to another country? What is your ideal place (or

“utopia”) and does it exist?

The idea of leaving Thailand for another country never occurs to me. I realise that every society has a different set of problems... When you live in another country you immediately become a second or third class citizen and you don't have the same rights as [those who are] native [to the country], which I find problematic.

What are your views of the art scene in Singapore compared with that in Thailand?

Different levels and styles of restriction, censorship and freedom of expression make art from these two countries different.

In the case of Singapore, if I may say from my rough observation, I found that Singaporean artists face difficulties when they want to do political commentary works... The Singaporean government and authorities have absolute power and control over their people unlike in Thailand. We have more freedom of expression here which in someone's eyes might look like the country has no stability and unity. This is the nature of democracy. We have to be open-minded and get used to different opinions and diversity.

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