

# Looking Glass Reality

*Thai artist Mani Sriwanichpoom is a determined social activist. Since the early-1990s his photographs have captured the covetous face of contemporary Thai society. His art reveals a unique world rich in contrasts and tensions, sometimes coarse, sometimes extraordinarily moving.*

By Steven Pettifor

In the wake of Thailand's rapid rise and fall within the turbulent world of global economics, domestic artists and social campaigners alike have understandably become obsessed with gauging and commenting upon how severe the long term social and psychological affects will be on the Thai people. While creating a *nouveau riche* middle class, hasty economic prosperity noticeably benefited only a small percentage of society, but the desire for materialistic wealth and all its trappings spread right through society.

The country's dramatic transformation most noticeably manifested itself throughout the sprawl of the capital Bangkok. In the 1980s and the early 1990s gleaming office towers and mega-malls sprang up across the city. Outrageously expensive, imported luxury items became the new barometers of status as people appeared to consume indiscriminately. The economic catastrophe of 1997 brought with it the abrupt burdens of recession.

Growing up in this clamorous economic situation, Mani Sriwanichpoom documented the excesses and consequences of the times. "After boom followed the bust, financiers were speculating against an unstable baht and I sensed vibrations of fear and trouble stirring among the people," says Sriwanichpoom. "With our history of military coups, I felt the worst was about to happen. I ner-

vously kept waiting, trying to make sense of this mood through my art."

With participation in numerous international events including the XXIV Sao Paulo Biennale (1998), First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, International Photography Biennale in Mexico, and *Cities On the Move* (1999), Sriwanichpoom is the

leader of a small but growing group of young Thai conceptual photographers. His focus—as a conceptual, rather than commercial, photographer—however, happened around the mid-1990s. Schooled in the visual arts, the change for Sriwanichpoom occurred in line with philosophical clarity and maturity, which had already become clear in earlier works, but as yet without a defined agenda.

Published in 1999, his collection of photographic prints *Bangkok in Black & White* includes many works from the mid-1980s onwards, capturing the extremities of daily existence in an emerging megalopolis. The series is a melange of urban scenes that evoke the unabashed uniqueness of the Thai capital: the dichotomy of rich-poor, urban-rural, traditional-modern, East-West, for example. Sriwanichpoom captures inequality and exorbitance, melancholy and mirth alongside the bizarre. Although many shots appear staged as with the innocent hilarity of *Dinosaur with Handbags* (1991), or the juxtaposed emblems of cultural identity in *Tribal Woman with Colonel Sanders* (1991), the photographer shot the entire catalogue purely as an opportunist bystander.

Although advertising and promotional photography are still his main sources of income, Sriwanichpoom views all forms of photography as beneficial to his artistic development, helping him to



Mani Sriwanichpoom, *Dinosaur with Handbags*, Dusit Zoo, 1991.



keep abreast of popular trends as well as honing his technical craft. "Everyday commercials must be successful if they are to sell," he says. "Whether advertising or fine art, it's still delivering a message and the methods of conveying are constantly being refined. People are force-fed with a bombardment of consumer visuals, so getting noticed and being remembered is what it boils down to."

Amidst the present international enthusiasm for conceptual photography, Sriwanichpoom's diversions into pure art themes were, and to some extent still are, pioneering for Thai photography. Domestic artists such as Kamin Lertchaiprasert had manipulated photographic techniques within their work, but by and large these were brief flirtations. Sriwanichpoom appreciates his chosen visual apparatus, for "Generally people believe what they see in photographs—whether reality or illusion, it's a convincing as well as deceptive medium."

**A**round the middle of the 1990s, Sriwanichpoom embarked upon a period of experimentation that included two short films and a series of still lifes. With tensions rising over loss of cultural integrity for the price of capitalist advancement, his deliberately contrived gaudy collection *Thai Dreams* was included in the inner city site-specific installation *Huay Kwang Mega City Project* in 1996. The group exhibition evolved around a derelict plot of urban wasteland, with Sriwanichpoom's series of photographs being unsurprisingly pilfered after just a day. However, this was a fledgling attempt to take his art outside the exclusionary and sterile gallery environment, something he attempts again with the exhibitions *This*



Mani Sriwanichpoom, *Pink Man on European Tour*, 2000.

*Bloodless War* (1997), *Pink Man* (2000), and *Paradise@the.mall* (1998).

Carrying Sriwanichpoom's art to the public is an important part of his methodology. In fact he does this quite literally in the 1997 series *This Bloodless War*, which was 'hung' on the shoulders of a group of fellow artists and transported by foot around Bangkok's business district. This manner of delivery, along with the theatrical dramas contained inside the frames, were clear indicators of how Sriwanichpoom's work was becoming more directorial in order to portray subjective concepts and symbolism.

*This Bloodless War* refers to the Thai government's futile and disastrously reckless defense of the baht at a time of intense speculating from foreign market players. Subsequent intervention by the IMF only heightened a mood of external interference and left Thais bitter with globalization, as well as dismay at their own policymakers. Sriwanichpoom draws in-

famous imagery from the Vietnam War, using their recognizable graphicness as a basis for his stinging black-and-white imitations. The choreographed adaptations highlight yet another failed Asian incursive experience.

Rather than mere finger-pointing at so-called "Western commercial imperialism," he hopes that the work provokes internal questioning. "It's too easy to use the West as a scapegoat, it's the whole system that's at fault. Greed swallowed us up from both inside and out," says Sriwanichpoom. "Having never survived under colonial rule, we were inexperienced and incapable of protecting ourselves in such a climate. But the biggest doubt has to be whether we've (Thailand) actually learnt from our mistakes." Sriwanichpoom expands the Thailand scenario against a universal uncertainty over the lasting affects of globalization.

In 2000, he presented an equally morose, yet less staged, sequel to this metaphoric war, in a collection of bleak black-and-white architectural studies titled *Dream Interruptus* (2000). The stark ruins of incomplete skyscrapers litter Bangkok's cityscape, abandoned like a post-apocalyptic graveyard. For Sriwanichpoom this is "concrete proof" of the [economic] war and it's accumulative devastation. Desperately hoping for economic revival yet having to stare up at monolithic rust-ridden skeletons, what will be the lasting scars on Thailand's urban psyche?

Originally conceived before the bubble burst, Sriwanichpoom's *Pink Man* incarnation is arguably his most imaginative and potent work to date. This can be attributed as much to colorful role-playing by collaborator Sompong Thawee as the garish icon. It is the charismatic presence of this performance artist-poet impersonating a m  le of emblematic caricatures from Thai hierarchy—*Golfing Pink Man*, *Socialist Pink Man*, *Pink Man the*



Mani Sriwanichpoom, *Pink Man on Tour #2*, 1998.





Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Paradise@the.mall*, 1998.

*Siamese Intellectual*—which imbue such savage mockery.

Sriwanichpoom explains his inspiration, "After moving home I went shopping to deck out my new place, venturing into a hyper-market for the first time. I couldn't believe my eyes, the scale and excess was overwhelming, I felt lost, alienated and insignificant. People were piling up mammoth trolleys with supplies for a lifetime! I asked myself when had life stopped being so simple and how much did they need to buy to fill the void? *Pink Man* was born out of this insanity."

Once more taking art out to the people, *Pink Man* silently parades the city streets. Pushing a cart or carrying balloons, pedestrians are immediately confused by—and later intrigued by—his aimless journey. In bitter irony a few even ask, "What is he selling?"

In later divergences of *Pink Man*, the jester's escapades carry him round the country and even to European shores. Coinciding with the Tourist Authority's hugely publicized *Amazing Thailand* campaign of 1998-1999, Sriwanichpoom parodies the claim of his country as 'amazing' in the debris of economic disaster, with postcards of a solitary *Pink Man on Tour* wheeling his garish cart through remote paddy fields and unpopulated dusty markets. Where have the tourists migrated to as he stoically stands in front of historic sites?

Tourism is one of the nation's largest grossing industries, and dressing up new promotions or reinventing old ones to increase tourist revenues is a relentless pursuit—

often to the detriment of the Kingdom's natural resources. Conversely, the *Amazing Thailand* campaign of packaging and selling its cultural heritage proved hugely lucrative with the lure of a weak baht attracting millions of first time visitors. As it lambasted foreign forces for its economic demise, the government was also welcoming external intrusion through the tourist dollar.

For the millennial exhibition *Paradise@the.mall*, Sriwanichpoom peers inside the concrete megaliths of shopping

malls to witness close-up shoppers' stultifying behavior as they languish vacantly in the lure of their supposed artificial idyll. Glossy and bright, retouched negatives of plastic flowers are interspersed with black-and-white shots of Bangkokians surviving—eating, drinking, playing, and sleeping—in air-conditioned Eden. Exhibited through a shop-front window on dusty street sides, the series asks the viewer: where does reality end and illusion begin?

*Pink Man* is revived yet again for the most scathing finger-pointing of his nation's values. Included in the trio exhibition *History & Memory* held at Chulalongkorn University last year, Sriwanichpoom serves up his repugnance via a set of grizzly photo manipulations entitled *Horror in Pink*. Bolstered by paintings from partner Ing K and interactive installation from Sutee Kunavichayanont, the three—some critically exposed media censorship of historic atrocities in the fight for Thailand's democratic freedom, as well as the collective amnesia and apathy towards this search for truth.

In the provocateur's most startling and controversial work to date, he superimposes his colorfully blasé champion of greed—fuchsia-garbed *Pink Man*, into large black-and-white photographic archive reproductions of pro-democratic crack-downs. In one brutal scene a dead, blood-sodden student hangs from a tree while his body is battered by a gleeful mob of spectators, *Pink Man* gloating onward.

Through such vivid appositions, Sriwanichpoom asks why they sacrificed themselves for a cause that has been forgotten at the bot-



Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Tribal Woman With Colonel Sanders*, 1991.



tom of a shopping cart. The accompanying manifesto vilifies the capital's present stalwart headman as an emancipation saboteur, "How shocking when, last year, more than a million voters elected Samak Sundaravej their new governor of Bangkok. I was flabbergasted," he says. "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 with the most horrifying massacre in Bangkok history?"

Although *Pink Man* and consumption have yet to exhaust Sriwanichpoom, he has diverted his castigations to a mellower focus in portraits of fellow artisans. Reinvigorating and expanding a set of black-and-white photographs he began in the early-1990s, the latest subjects are raw and stimulating in their poses. Showing at Bangkok's Numthong Gallery later this year, Sriwanichpoom codes each shot with traits pertaining to an individual's artistic style, like kindred cynic Chatchai Puipia with his foot rammed in his mouth—the outrageously disrespectful action (in Thai society) mimics an older Puipia painting.

**A**n ardent social activist, Sriwanichpoom has also been involved in several significant demonstrations, the most publicized of which was the ecological wrangling with Fox Studios and their star Leonardo di Caprio over the environmental destruction caused during filming of *The Beach*.

Sriwanichpoom's art is a part of a social crusade by a small yet passionate outspoken section of Thailand's intelligentsia that includes fellow artists Vasan Sitthiket, Chumpon Apisuk, Paisan and Mongkol Pleinbangchang. The limitations of art as a political weapon are generally accepted and their goals realized as somewhat optimistic, yet complacency and silence signify defeat. In a nation where complaint equates loss of 'face' and the general attitude is one of *sabai sabai* (relax) or *mai pen rai* (it doesn't matter), these activists refuse to be trampled on.

It could be argued that the path of evolution has enabled Western art to leave such issues behind and concentrate on



Manit Sriwanichpoom, *This Bloodless War*, 1997, a street show.

concepts, aesthetics, and practice. "Political engagement is no longer a driving force in Western art. The militancy of the past has disappeared. Understandably. The main points of dispute have largely been resolved," wrote the critic Rutger Pontzen as part of a European Union-sponsored exposé on Thai art. Yet this lack of contention or conflict amidst stable comfort has sucked the marrow and bite from its supposed protagonists—sensationalism and gimmickry superseding.

For art of this nature, the West now looks outside itself to "lesser developed regions" and repressed peoples clawing for equality, quietly deeming it almost exotic or even nostalgic compared to art emanating from their own secure democracies. Asian artists are utilizing international trends like interactive, digital or video art, and infusing it with pertinence derived from genuine malaise, giving this media a heightened vitality and effervescence.

Much of what underpins Sriwanichpoom's art isn't unique to Thailand or even other parts of Asia, but has become the accepted norm for more industrialized nations. The affects of globalization have woken international youth to some of the pitfalls of ceaseless consumerism. However, it is Sriwanichpoom's proximity to, as well as firsthand experience of, Thailand's rampant development and the vociferous materialism it has spawned in the name of progress, which imbues his art with particular vehemence. It is this no surrender placard that keeps his art alive. Δ



Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Dream Interrupts No. 1*, 2000.

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