

South China Morning Post 南華早報

Manit in the pink

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Pink Man is in trauma after going through the deadly riots in Bangkok in May. He doesn't know what to do next.

So says Thai artist-photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom, the creator of Pink Man - a portly mustachioed 'uncle' type, flashily dressed in a cheap, shiny pink suit, tie, and often carrying a pink suitcase or pushing a matching shocking-hued shopping trolley.

A staged figure who appears in modern Thai settings in Sriwanichpoom's glossy C-prints, the Pink Man (who is brought to life in performances by artist Sompong Thawee, before he is captured for posterity in photographs) is a comment on the consumerist excesses of his nation. Subsequently, he has become an instantly recognisable sight at exhibitions and art fairs around Asia - a conspicuous icon of conspicuous consumption, as well as a problematic symbol of cultural exchange, when posing cheerily next to Western monuments such as the Eiffel Tower or picturesque Asian tourism hot spots.

It is fitting or ironic, depending on how you look at it, that as crowds gathered late last month for the reopening of Central World shopping mall - the largest in Bangkok - four months after the Thai riots, Sriwanichpoom was gearing up for the opening of a show at the Singapore Art Museum half-dedicated to his in-limbo Pink Man.

The month-long exhibition, Manit Sriwanichpoom: Phenomena And Prophecies, is on until November 7 at the museum's 8Q contemporary art wing. A highlight of the Singapore International Photography Festival (SIPF), now in its second year, it comprises 137 of the artist's works, spanning 1997 to the present.

Like Pink Man, who has gone on hiatus, the artist-photographer, who is sometimes described as an activist for his satiric shots, is 'still digesting and observing'. As director of photography, he has recently finished shooting a Thai film adaptation of Macbeth helmed by writer-director Ing K, titled Shakespeare Must Die.

'The lighting was inspired by Caravaggio, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare,' says Sriwanichpoom of the indie project.

Next month an exhibition of his photographs taken in the aftermath of this year's Bangkok riots will be shown at a group show called Rupture at the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre.

Asked how the idea for a solo retrospective in Singapore came about, Sriwanichpoom, 49, replies tongue in cheek: 'SIPF initiated the idea to highlight a senior photographer in the region, and I guess I'm old enough for them.'

That said, the word 'retrospective' scares him; he much prefers the term 'look back'. He admits he has felt hemmed in by the fame and popularity of his Pink Man project. 'Many exhibition curators want to show the series, although I've tried to offer something else. They think Pink Man is a cool idea. He can contribute a colourful element to their show.'

Indeed, the 8Q show tries to go beyond the character to examine a different facet of its lensman's practice. Up in a separate section are works taking aim at the socio-political landscape of Thailand and other countries in Asia. His 1997 This Bloodless War series includes doctored black-and-white images taken during the Vietnam war and the Nagasaki atomic bombing.

In one controversial image, terrified people are shown fleeing towards the camera, with the crafty digital addition of branded shopping bags in their hands. It asks, among other things, questions about victimhood, especially when framed by the Western news media mode of representation.

'I used to be a photojournalist trying to capture the 'truth' that happens in front of the camera,' the artist says on what he wants to achieve with his picture. 'But, as time went on, I found that job was not fulfilling. I realised 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.'

Trained in visual art at Bangkok's Srinakharinvirot University, he didn't dream of becoming a photographer until a university lecturer showed him some photographs printed 'with some complicated techniques'.

Falling in love with the medium right away, he bought his first camera, a Pentax MX.

Counting the likes of August Sander, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Irving Penn and Joel-Peter Witkin among his influences, he is still fiercely loyal to film, preferring the excitement of waiting for his prints to return from the processing lab and the thrill of touching negatives. The streets are where he finds his inspiration, and observing people his hobby.

To him, photography, since the mid-1980s, has become a powerful tool for individuals to express themselves with, in the face of increasingly complex regimes and systems. 'Photography doesn't mean only beautiful pictures like seascapes, nature or people. Asian artists or photographers use this medium to deal with social, political, gender, race and hard issues,' Manit says.

'Photography has a role in democratic society and with the coming of digital technology, it empowers the people. They can record and present their view of events to the world almost spontaneously.'

The curator of Phenomena And Prophecies, Ark Fongsmut, describes Sriwanichpoom as 'a responsible person' in his personal dealings, whose work 'clearly reflects his character and thoughts'. He adds: 'Manit delivers such a special language on photography to the audience. His narratives are critically playful, not only with the focal point of the image, but also the little details surrounding it.'

Fongsmut, who was one of four curators of the inaugural SIPP, says he is pleased to see the

works submitted by young and up-and-coming photographers to this year's festival, which has an open-call component.

'I'm happier to see them having more opportunity to express and explore their ideas, thoughts and feelings through photography.'

This year's festival also includes a Visages Of Asia section, a contemporary portrait photography exhibition by 12 emerging photographers from Singapore and South Korea at the National Museum of Singapore until November 28.

Photography and multimedia-related film screenings, workshops, camps, seminars, forums, portfolio reviews and a travel photography competition are also in the sprawling programme.

All the buzz for shutterbugs can only be a good thing, and Sriwanichpoom is optimistic about the impact of such an annual festival. 'It can make people love photography and get photographers inspired,' he says, simply.

Topics: Photography

Source URL (retrieved on *Jan 10th 2013, 3:41pm*):

<http://www.scmp.com/article/727727/manit-pink>