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Manit Sriwanichpoom – The man and his camera

Written by Cheng Zu,
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One of Thailand's most visionary photographers, Manit Sriwanichpoom explores his latest portraiture exhibition, "In Your Face", at Numthong Gallery this month, with bold, dashing strategy where he exclaims, "What's in your face? What's in your face, shoved through the camera in my face."

Manit came into this field almost as far back as 20 years ago when he got hooked to the medium while studying at Srinakharinvirot University under Ajarn Pramuang Buruphat. Then followed by working stints in advertising and then as a photojournalist in Bureau Bangkok, where assignments took him to face battlefields such as the Khmer Rouge days. Long been influenced by photojournalism, he has always kept this social enthuse as one of his key principles in his artistic opus right up to this day as a full-fledged photo-artist.

And "In Your Face" takes a typical Manit-style approach to his subject matter - portraits of contemporary visual artists. Rather than plodding along the well trodden done-to-death path of photo-portraits of artists with their work, the 41 year-old took a different approach and actively recontextualises the artist's works and methods into his own.

"The key concept of photojournalism is to try to tell a story and it's the same as I do with portraits. The key is the images must reveal something internal about them. Not just a facade representation." He reveals.

For most visual artists, if not all, have probed into the world of portraits in at least some period of their practice. Hardly a surprise, portraiture has been recognised as one of the oldest and highly utilised form of art expression.

A visual representation of a subject, historically, this genre relates only to the reproduction of physical likeness - mostly in figuration - fleshing out of the character by the artists, providing us a with a broader context for speculation about the character's personal lives, expression of inner states and emotion.

Not surprisingly, a bulk of photographic portraits has served as a kind of institutional icon; they merely conform to prevailing notions of beauty, leadership or poised disposition. A recent photo exhibition of National Artists exemplifies this agenda as these commemorative portraits serve historical and sentimental value for the artists.

However, the genre has since expanded, probing even further into a multifaceted engagement with notions of selfhood, human subject and its representation and raising of social and cultural issues.

Referring to an earlier exhibition of the same genre way back in 1992 at Alliance Francaise, "I don't want to use the same format of elements I explored before," Manit explains. Simply titled "Artists in Black and White", he shot almost as much as 30 laureates working in the fields of Arts with a capital A. "I shot those artists in a studio, either against or merging as part of their artwork, posing in different angles of juxtaposition."

This present exhibition, however, holds no similarities. With more than 10 years separating the previous one and this show which he prepares since last December, Manit thinks, "Why don't I just use artist's body to tell a story? Push their bodily gesture more than ever. Not just only face but their whole entity to reflect their personality, their work."

In such instances, it proves a difficult but challenging process for Manit is not just functioning as a shooting lensman but has to submerge himself also internally as a collaborative partner-in-crime.

All Black and White shots on special warm tone paper, these poses reflect upon the individuals' artistic styles mostly in reference to their artworks.

"It's very difficult." Manit explains further, "everyone have their own ideal image of themselves and so, is self-conscious about it. Some of these artists cannot really accept this form of self-representation I am trying to push. That is one of the problems but I want to break this barrier with them."

Not one to shy away from controversies and taboos, Manit encourages the artists to break away from self-ego and play with their inner psyche to the extreme. Some then pose naked; some did a 'performance' in front of the camera while others, presenting ways that would be inconceivable even to themselves.

Breaking barriers is an impetus synonymous to the artist's artistic career, which has been finally paid off as he became the only South East Asia's entry in Phaidon Press's latest publication, Blink – which showcases 100 of the world's most exciting, rising stars in contemporary photography, selected by 10 international curators.

>From forthright provocative to ironical disposition, Manit certainly got a flair for sharp observations and exposures of the foibles of Thai society. The personality and energy of his oeuvre can be located in the tension between subjective values, social concerns and personal experience.

The work that first propelled him to international fame was "The Bloodless War" – a black-and-white series based on well-known shots taken

during the Japanese Invasion of China and the Vietnam War. Manit used these as a mirror image of to the then-economic crisis. The relentless poses and movements in the photographs portrayed the sense of incarcerated helplessness and resignation felt by Thai people at the time.

However, it is his creation, Pink Man that he is most commonly associated with. Already immortalised in four different series, his iconic subject – modelled by artist/poet friend Sompong Thawee - is all tailored up in a signature pink suit.

“Pink man is my upset and alienated feeling towards the concept of consumerism which has been accepted simply and without consideration by Thai society,” he says. “In addition, I intentionally use the colour Pink to subvert the aesthetics of local art.”

As an ardent social activist, Manit has organised several public art projects and demonstrations. Anyone who's been here long enough, will remember the saga that shrouded the making of the film, *The Beach*. Manit did much to fight the environmental destruction wreaked by Leonardo di Caprio's cinematic calamity. He was also instrumental in the fight against the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's conversion of the proposed Bangkok Contemporary Art Museum into a car-park-cum-shopping mall.

Back to “In Your Face”, Manit has chosen some of the most up-front individuals working right now. You are talking about the notorious Vasan Sittthiket, famed for his social and political spews; Pinaree Sanpitak, whose profound is synonymous to her paintings of breasts and vessels; a motley crew of performances artists namely the Plienbangchang brothers, Chumpon Apisuk and Sompong Tawee, Pink Man himself.

The younger generation are also included in the presence of Thaweesak Srithongdee, fashion designer cum artist Montri Toemsombat and Peeraphong Limtharong.

The results are a multifarious mix of personal manifestation through a variety of poses ranging from loud characteristic to awestruck mimicry. Even pensive representations have been produced.

The notion of selfhood is widely explored as a strategy to evoke inner perspective as the artists relate to the external reality of the ever-changing socio-political and cultural realms of the region.

Take Nitaya Ue-areeworakul, for example. Known for her abstract figurative paintings of women bodies, Manit goes straight to the core of her oeuvre. “She deals a lot about women issues through her paintings and we discuss about body in her concept.” As being naked is in this society is still a hypocritical taboo, especially considering a ‘good’ girl is supposed to uphold, Manit probes, “I said to her why don’t you reclaim your own body like your paintings. Your body is your own decision. What I trying to do is put yourself and your work together so then my camera input completes the

collaboration.”

Another that Manit finds a challenge shooting is Michael Shaowanasai, a multi-disciplinary artist who works with gay issues. Manit had to ask him to come back for a second photo session after being dissatisfied with the first.

“I felt I didn’t push him enough before and this time I want to play with a more surrealist effect, because he always exaggerates his homosexual identity in his work. If I just photograph him directly, I don’t think I can achieve the level of forthrightness.”

Holding two cucumbers in his crotch, “ I want to portray him like a ‘demon’, seducing the audience.”

Not all works, despite most, is like gulping hot tequila shot straight into our throat, as there are also some who connects well with subtlety.

Artist Kamin Lerchaiprasert’s snap is a close-up image of the artist with his eyes closed as if in an introspective stance.

“His works always deal with Buddhist philosophy and initially, I had a bit of difficulty thinking how should I shoot him. But during our discussion, I look at his face and there is a silent yet strong expressiveness and so during the session, I ask him to, maybe, do a meditation and he did and I just capture that.”

As an artist dealing with a mass-cultural medium that is steadily inserting itself as a legitimate art form in its own right, how does Manit feels now about being invited to exhibit in an established commercial art gallery?

“It’s about recognition because in this society, I think people do believe this is another art form but perhaps they don’t take it seriously enough compared to other conventions of visual art. Maybe that’s because the production method is from a machine rather than the hands. I wish to think the situation will get better.”

Reflecting on his career, Manit fondly reveals, “My first photographic exhibition was back in 1982 and reaching to this stage, I’m happy people are finally acknowledging my aspiration because, you know, my work is mostly dealing with political and social issues and they are all very hard subjects.”

“It’s been a long journey and at least it confirms that I am in the right direction and that’s enough.”

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