Thai artist seeks discomfort as a medium for his message

Manit Sriwanichpoom, known for his provocative commentary on growing Thai consumer culture, advises Cambodia to look to Thailand in order to avoid the pitfalls of development.

BY ELENA ROY

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S AMERICA’s post-Thanksgiving sales degenerated into consumer chaos on Saturday - one Wal-Mart employee was crushed to death beneath frenzied bargain hunters and a gangster erupted in a Toys R Us store - Thai photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom stirred his black coffee and looked with curiosity and the second interior of Metro, a very different Phnom Penh from the one he knew when working as a freelance photographer here in 1992-93.

It is rather scary coming back because I know tourism must have changed things dramatically. The countryside is still very beautiful, but Phnom Penh architecture seems a bit of a mess, I think Cambodia should look to Thailand as a case study to avoid the pitfalls of development. It seems that Cambodia is at a crossroads right now - didn’t Phnom Penh use to be called the Paris of the East?

Manit is visiting Phnom Penh for the first time ever. Photo Phnom Penh festival, which is being hosted by 11 different venues acquainted with photojournalism.

Manit’s work can be seen at the French Cultural Centre during the festival, and he will be hosting a projection introducing new talents in photography from Thailand at 8pm today at the same venue.

Documenting vs creating

Initially trained as a visual artist, Manit has been working as a photographer since the early 1980s. He began his career working for advertising agencies in Bangkok and as a freelance news photographer on the Thai-Cambodian border, where a humanitarian crisis at the vast refugee camps provided him with more than enough work.

What I love about photojournalism is that you have only one chance to speak out, one image to capture an idea and everything has to be in that image,” Manit said.

“...but gradually I began to get frustrated with photojournalism, as everyday I was waiting for the work call - where you are going and what you are shooting, even if it doesn’t really interest you. As a photojournalist you are waiting for things to happen. But because I was trained as a visual artist, I was taught to create them by yourself and I had a kind of conflict within me. It was frustrating to not be able to express myself, so I said, okay, I don’t want to be a photojournalist anymore. Instead I want to express my feelings, my ideas and my anger,” he said.

“However, I do sometimes miss the feeling of photojournalism that you always have constructing provocative images on the growing Thai consumer culture, often putting his own spin on famous photographs from the Vietnam War.

One of his best known works is the "Pink Man Series" - consumer icons of the contemporary Thai man, pushing his pink supermodel carr in search of material satisfaction.

The suit is a symbol of Westernisation and capitalistic success. The flashy pink satin personality tassel s as the people to be really feel very sometimes and what I have to be prepared and move faster,” he added.

Talking about photography

Following his creative calling, Manit began making what is commonly dubbed "art photography’ and started commenting on and conscious consumption,” Manit said.

"I did Horror in Pink in 2001. In the year 2000, one of the politicans - the last prime minister of Thailand, Samak Sundaranin, was elected as mayor of Bangkok. Now Bangkok is meant to be made up of educated, well informed people - communitas, and comunism was the ghost of the time that would eat you up. Vietnam had just fallen to communists and rumours was spread that these Thai students were in fact Vietnamese invaders.

By placing the pink man in this context, Manit was trying to bring this photograph to the attention of the new Thai generation, which is often unaware of this event.

When I was at the print shop printing this image, the young shop assistant came up and said where is this? I told her to guess, and she said, ‘Cambodia, Burma, I don’t know’. I said, ‘look at the picture, can’t you see the palace, look for the temple - it is Bangkok’. She was really shocked and said, ‘No, no, no, no’ and I said, ‘Yes, this is not the Thailand that you know’.

The land of smiles?

Thailand calls itself the land of smiles, but this is a myth, Manit said. In many parts of Southeast Asia, nationalism is very strong and it is used by the government as a tool to control the people. Manit added.

Manit said the pink man works because he is annoying, he gets under people’s skin, and makes them ask questions which, even if they don’t have answers, are important means to begin dialogue.

Nearing the end of the interview, talk inevitably turned to the border dispute near Preah Vihear temple in 11th-century Cambodian rain that is at the centre of a military standoff between the two countries, and the current occupation of Bangkok’s international airports by anti-government protesters.

Despite having to make the 12-hour overland journey the day before to reach Phnom Penh, Manit thinks the current disruption in his homeland is a blessing in disguise.

‘I don’t think anybody likes the situation at the moment, but is a good thing that it is happening. This is a chance for the Thai people to reconsidere themselves, and what is happening in their own country, in their culture, in politics and everything,’ he said. ‘It is a good time for Thai people to come back and examine the problems - they have to open themselves up.

These disruptions are a sign that, whether we like it or not, maybe we have a problem in ourselves, we have a cancer in ourselves. And if it is, like a cancer - we must go through an operation even if it is painful’.

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