

## ART



"Pink Man on European Tour #4" (2000)

# Pink, shocking as ever

By Haruko Kohno

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

**M**anit Sriwanichpoom is a photographer who has the ability to expose a reality that is greater than what his camera can actually capture. Highly fabricated but rooted in realism, Sriwanichpoom's works that satirize contemporary values are real eye-openers, and the magnitude of the shock one receives from his work may be a barometer of how blind he or she is.

On view until Aug. 18 at the Art Gallery, an annex of the Yokohama Museum of Art, is a powerful show titled *Bangkok in Pink*, which showcases key works of the Thai artist's oeuvre.

Sriwanichpoom, 41, already enjoys international exposure through major exhibitions such as the Sao Paulo Biennale, Photo Espana in Madrid and the First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, but this is his first solo show in Japan.

Staged and shot in contemporary settings, *This Bloodless War* is a series of photographs based on indelible photo-reportage images that are imprinted on our collective psyche. One such image is the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo from the Vietnam War of a young girl fleeing an aerial napalm attack.

In Sriwanichpoom's work, the chilling image has been replaced by a young woman in a dressy blouse and tight skirt, walking barefoot on a gravelled railroad track. Her arms are outstretched, not in agony but holding glossy shopping bags that read Chanel and Ferragamo. The woman, who is infatuated and victimized by brand names and commodities, personifies the consumer-oriented consciousness of contemporary Thailand, the only country in Southeast Asia that has never been colonized but has adapted to Western ways. "The same old people still colonize the world today, but now they call themselves global investors," the wall text reads.

Sriwanichpoom's most important work is *Pink Man on Tour*, a photo-travelogue of a plump man in a tasteless satin pink suit (complete with a

pink tie, pink socks and even pink shoes). The gaudy figure poses stiff-backed and expressionless in front of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and other must-see tourist spots. He also goes on to visit cities in Europe. The Pink Man, who is portrayed by Sriwanichpoom's friend, is the artist's tool for criticizing the Thai government's "Amazing Thailand" campaign, which is meant to promote international tourism. Pink Man is a shameless show-off whose endeavor for recognition is sadly ignored wherever he goes. He is symbolic of the Thai government's cheap promotion to bring in a fast buck at the cost of the country's integrity. An accompanying video work tailored in the fashion of a tourist promotion video shows the Pink Man in motion, pushing his empty pink shopping cart around various cities. Aerial views of island resorts are slotted in from time to time, while traditional Thai music serves as background music.

This is an interesting video, though in my view, the stills seem to work more effectively because the freeze frame presentation mirrors the sense of immobility Thailand now faces, gridlocked as a result of its impetuous pursuit of globalization. The shocking pink color also shows more vividly in the photographs.

*Paradise@the mall* from 1998 is a particularly intriguing piece. Monochrome photos capturing banal images of people at a modern shopping mall are juxtaposed with colorful closeups of tropical flowers. There's a tired baby in a stroller, young girls with vacant looks idling their time away, and deplorable piles of leftover food. The tropical flowers, though beautiful, are photographed in unrealistic colors.

Sriwanichpoom shows that all is fake and fantasy, but also that this decadent mirage is in part the reality in which we live. This is the tepid truth of Thailand today, Sriwanichpoom says through his art, where the tropical heat is artificially moderated by shopping mall air-conditioning.

In stark contrast to this colorful "paradise," an eerie monochrome world that bespeaks the negative effects of rapid development unfolds in the series *Dream Interruptus*. Derelict skyscrapers shot in gradations of phantom grays show the crippling damage inflicted on the "Thai Dream," as the economy collapsed in 1997. The severe depre-



"This Bloodless War #3" (1997)

ciation of the baht, followed by a mass exodus of capital, left the city looking like a big jigsaw puzzle only half-finished. These pictures look awfully like Tokyo after the bubble burst, or like any city that is painfully suspended between what should have been and what is.

Sriwanichpoom is an artist who doesn't mince words. He tells it the way he sees it. In fact, a contemporary artist like Sriwanichpoom should be appreciated because so much of what we encounter nowadays seems top-heavy with concept, and yet, lamentably shallow in what it can really claim in the end. That said, I don't think there is much scope left for a different kind of interpretation from what he intends and this could be both the strength and limitation of Sriwanichpoom's art. You either take it, or leave it.

## Manit Sriwanichpoom—*Bangkok in Pink*

Through Aug. 18, Closed on Thursdays  
Yokohama Museum of Art, Art Gallery, a 10-minute walk from JR Sakuragicho Station  
Admission: free  
Information: (045) 221-0300

Running until Oct. 6 at the adjacent Yokohama Museum of Art is Jean-Març Bustamante's *Private Crossing*, a thorough presentation of the French artist's landscape photographs and Plexiglas silkscreen works. Bustamante will represent France at next year's Venice Biennale.