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ART REVIEW: MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM: BANGKOK IN PINK

By John McGee



Pink Man on European Tour #4, 2000, color photograph

Mention Thailand to most Westerners or Japanese and they'll wax lyrical about a vacation paradise—the great food, friendly people, white sand beaches and crystal clear green water. Manit Sriwanichpoom's view of his home country is more complicated and grittier than what most visitors are willing to imagine. In these six sequences of photographs—his first solo show in Japan—the 41 year old freelance photographer and artist raises social and political issues he feels have been suppressed or forgotten in Thailand's blind pursuit of modernization and tourist dollars.

Sriwanichpoom started working on his commentaries as Thailand stumbled into the 1997 Southeast Asian economic crisis. Sriwanichpoom asserts that the Thais brought the fiasco onto themselves through shortsighted speculation and the careless embrace of capricious liquidity from overseas investors. The series "This Bloodless War" (1997) recreates famous black and white photos from the Vietnam war, re contextualized as the economic battle in contemporary Thailand.



The Bloodless War #3, 1997, black and white photograph

The unforgettable shot of screaming children fleeing their recently napalmed village is re enacted as well dressed but bedraggled looking Thai adults tramping along the rocky rail bed of a suburban train line. Whether their anguished expressions result from the weight of their Chanel shopping bags or the shadow of imperialism following them (in the form of a Caucasian man in a suit) is unclear.

In 1998, Sriwanichpoom looked more closely at how the grand economic debacle helped create unrestrained consumerism at the local level. "Paradise @ the Mall" is a grid of black and white photos of people hanging out inside a new suburban mall, an attraction

Sriwanichpoom calls the first point of colonization, interspersed with reversed color close ups of flowers.

Sriwanichpoom's most spectacular creation, however, is Pink Man-contemporary Thailand personified as a tasteless robot enslaved by consumerism. Pink Man, played by a performance artist friend, is an affluent looking, middle aged Thai man wearing a suit and tie of the most flagrant fuchsia. Since 1997, Pink Man has pushed his empty pink shopping cart around Thailand and parts of Europe in rudderless desire. "Like most tourists today, he travels not to learn, but to consume: to collect exotic destinations, to shop, to show off..." writes the artist in his exhibition statement.

For Sriwanichpoom, Pink Man also exemplifies the problem of Thai forgetfulness. In the series "Horror in Pink" (2001), Sriwanichpoom inserted Pink Man into iconic black and white images of recent civil unrest in Thailand. Pink Man watches the shocking 1976 massacre of pro democracy students with a smile. He's happy because he doesn't have to think about such horrific events-they are not written about in Thai history books nor taught in schools. Indeed, Sriwanichpoom notes that such forgetfulness may have led to one of the main right wing supporters of the massacre becoming Bangkok's new governor in a landslide victory last year.

Political art always treads a fine line between awareness raising and demagoguery. Sriwanichpoom is not subtle, but he provokes with irony and dark humor, not a billy club of repentance.

Southeast Asian cultures tend to avoid confrontation, and controversy and Sriwanichpoom says he is one of only a few political artists working in Bangkok. He explains that he is not against globalization, but he wants people to think more about how Thailand can modernize and still retain its identity. If his message seems strong, it's because he's trying to shout above the noise of the tourist campaigns.

Yokohama Museum of Art, Art Gallery. Until Aug 18. Sakuragicho stn (Tokyu Toyoko line, JR Keihin Tohoku line). Minato Mirai 3 4 1, Nishi ku, Yokohama. Fri Wed 10am 6pm. Tel: 045 221 0300. Adm: Free.

Photo credit: Manit Sriwanichpoom