

The Pink Man cometh

Manit Sriwanichpoom's Pink Man keeps popping up in all sorts of inconvenient places

BY **BLAKE CARTER**
STAFF REPORTER

The title character in Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Pink Man* series couldn't even be bothered to make an appearance in what may be the last photographs to bear his name. No pock-marked face, no swollen jowls, no double chin. No stoic poise as the world goes to hell around him. All that's left of Manit's bloated symbol of everything that's wrong with modern man is his signature pink shopping cart.

"I especially like this one," Manit says, pointing to a photograph of the pink cart, abandoned under a Beckettian tree amid the rubble of a demolished Beijing neighborhood. "This is the violence of capitalism. You can just throw money and everyone comes to grab it. You don't have to go to the air and bomb. Now you've found another way."

Of the 12 photographs by Manit included in the Eslite Gallery exhibit *Coffee, Cigarettes and Pad Thai: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia*, two are part of what he says is the final installment of his *Pink Man* series, taken in Beijing in 2006.

Giving up Pink Man isn't easy. Manit originally thought of the



Left: The *Pink Man Mascot*, an installation, welcomes visitors to an exhibit of Manit Sriwanichpoom's work at Eslite Gallery. PHOTO COURTESY OF ESLITE GALLERY
Right: In *Beijing Pink No. 12*, all that's left of Manit's famous Pink Man is his signature shopping cart. PHOTO COURTESY OF ESLITE GALLERY



character in 1997 for a performance piece. He dressed a friend up in a garish pink suit and photographed him wheeling an empty shopping cart through Bangkok's financial district. Pink Man was about consumption, tourism, urbanization, indifference. But in giving such a charismatic face to the societal flaws he was trying to criticize, Manit created a monster.

"I was surprised because I thought I only wanted to do maybe one or two performances," says Manit, speaking at a recent press conference at Eslite late last month, more than 10 years after he began the series. "But they say it works well. The collectors say it represents what people think about society today."

Later photographs found Pink Man hitting Thailand's tourist attractions in a critique of the government's Amazing Thailand tourism campaign, which Manit says brought money to those who

needed it the least. His comment on one of the most poignant pictures from the installment, not included in the Eslite show, epitomizes what he tries to do with the entire series. *Pink Man on Tour No. 4* shows the Pink Man surrounded by chickens and dogs in front of a dusty, run-down market and a sign emblazoned with the Pepsi logo, reading "Pepsi Hilltribe Culture Conservation Village." An online caption by Manit reads "Amazing billboard."

Wherever he appears, Manit's grotesque fusion of Hello Kitty, *Where's Waldo?* and Judas makes us see the world through different eyes.

In 2001's *Horror in Pink*, Pink Man's portly visage is digitally collaged into black-and-white photos from the Thai government's brutal crackdowns on student protesters in 1973, 1976 and 1995. These and other demonstrations are subjects Manit often revisits.

"It's something we never learn

about in history," he says.

The press conference for Eslite's exhibition fell on the day before Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundavarej — who has been implicated in the 1976 massacre — faced a no-confidence motion in Thailand's parliament. Activists including Manit say dozens of leftist demonstrators were killed. Samak says only "one unlucky guy" died. The motion failed, and Samak remains in power.

Can art help?

"Art can raise questions," Manit says. "It can knock at the door [to show] where our society is going. That's the important thing art can do."

Though the humor in the *Pink Man* series lightens his message, much of Manit's work isn't as pretty. He's currently working on a series using photos of the 1976 crackdown that were secretly photocopied from files the government has never released. He submerges them in trays

of blood and photographs them as they float to the surface.

Most of Manit's pieces at Eslite aren't as confrontational as they are cute, but the message is there for the finding. It's hard not to think curator Eugene Tan's (陳維德) choice of Manit's *Pink Man* series — by far the best-known works by the best-known artist in the exhibition — wasn't meant to add a sense of familiarity to the show.

In any case, it works. For the first time in five years, Eslite Gallery has expanded into the Eslite Visions room across the hall. Hopefully the popularity of Manit and *Pink Man* will draw interest to the 16 other artists included in the show.

And what of Sompong Thawee, the model for the resolute loner *Pink Man*, who is noticeably absent from the last pictures in the series?

"He's got a boy," Manit says. "Now he's a family man."

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Coffee, Cigarettes and Pad Thai: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia (咖啡、菸、泰式炒河粉: 東南亞當代藝術)

WHERE: Eslite Gallery, Eslite Dunhua Bookstore, 245, Dunhua South Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段245號)

WHEN: Through July 27

TICKETS: Admission is free