

# In conversation with photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom (Thailand)

By hongkongandme / May 17, 2013 / Artist, interview, photography, Uncategorized / Leave a comment

*Manit Sriwanichpoom* (b.1961) is a contemporary Thai artist who has widely exhibited across the globe. The artist is well-known for his pink man series which criticizes consumerism and the loss of values; many of his photographs are impregnated with a political and/or social element. Manit is actually not an observer but also very implicated in the cultural and contemporary art scene in Thailand and Bangkok, fighting to see BACC get off the ground and being a member of the Contemporary Art Bureau of Thailand. He's passionate about photography and has his own gallery, Kathamandu Photo Gallery, in Bangkok where he curates exhibitions, conducts research and showcases photographs of his own but also many other artists. Manit Sriwanichpoom has a B.A. in Visual Arts from Srinakharinvirot University, Bangkok (1984).



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Manit Sriwanichpoom (2013)

*Manit Sriwanichpoom* : My work is always involved in social activity or issue, maybe because I was influenced by the senior generation, who fought for democracy .By the time I was studying at university, that kind of movement, I can feel having an influence from them, and that's what the 70s generation is about. I think that when I look back, that 70s generation got influenced by idea, about my heart because we question a lot what art means. Is it for decoration or does it have a bigger purpose? And then also have art for life. Do you know what art for life is? During the communist era, the revolution art had to have meaning to the society and be for political purpose.

**Art Flow : But it was also always within the propaganda. You couldn't do anything outside the government's way of thinking.**

Yes, besides art was part of the propaganda, by this stage by the government but artists can also do something which is the opposite to try and make people think of a situation, what's happening in their life, in their daily life. If you look at my work from Pink Man series, it is questioning the economic bubble at that time, consumerism.

**Also, I saw images and in some works you used photographs from the Vietnam War and you restaged them to talk about consumerism.**

After the economic crisis happened in 1997, the impact, because we never experienced that, the Thai Bath currency suffered a devaluation by more than 50%. So it's a big loss, especially for people who work in an office and who have nothing to do with the bubble.



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Manit Sriwanichpoom, from the series "This Bloodless War – greed, globalization and the end of independence", a roadside photography exhibition, 1997 © Manit Sriwanichpoom

**I think it happened at the same in Argentina with the banks closing and people rushing there to try to get their money.**

Yes, so I want to do something to reflect what's going on, I want my art to say 'attack, attack that'. Most of the people don't know what to do, they have to take what they have. But as an artist we can do something and that's why I think this is a question of economic war, it's a war with which we never see blood. (title of image: "This Bloodless War – greed, globalization and the end of independence",) It's still going on and on, it happened to other countries, and it still affects us, but

this kind of modern economy is a big issue, how can we prevent these crisis because they keep changing form all the time? It is very difficult. Although we try in many ways to prevent that, but nobody can do that. Since 1997 happened and what happened in 2008 in the US and Europe, it's like a vicious circle and it keeps coming back. So maybe that's why art has to do something to put the question to the global community that we should find a more sustainable economy. Not just an economy that benefits to a certain group, a small group of people. Most of the people gain nothing and they suffer from this. So in this series, it is quite obvious that I stage, reconstruct, the war in a modern picture.

**And so do you think that as an artist for you it is a responsibility, you have a role to play?**

For me it is not just an artist who is responsible for the society, everyone is.

**But your responsibility to show people, to find ways to explain to people what is happening?**

Yes, because maybe first I can do that, luckily I can do that as an artist. I am lucky that I have art that can be my tool to reflect my thoughts, my thinking. So this is important, otherwise I may go in the street and carry a demonstration banner. Besides, I use my art to support people, raise questions. I am also involved in an activity like campaigning to support the construction of BACC (Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre constructed in 2008) (2). But actually in 2000 when the new governor came into office, he cancelled the project. People had pushed the project and the new governor wanted to use the space for a new shopping mall. So we fought for it, we went to the streets, we occupied the site of the Shopping Mall to stop the construction and make sure nobody can take this piece of land because it was reserved for the cultural centre. Then we were lucky, when the term of the governor was finished, we got a new governor who supported the project of the BACC. This is one of the projects I was involved with, I was the spearhead to get the project.

**So do you feel a bit like an activist or a commentator?**

Yes, sometimes, we have to because besides using my art, to voice my concerns is maybe not enough. I have to take action. I am also involved in the formation of the office of contemporary art which is part of the Ministry of Culture so I am one of the members to form the office. But now, unfortunately, it turns out to be more and more bureaucratic, despite our efforts to make it more independent, we cannot do anything. We already tried in many ways to push contemporary art forward because the struggle between the conservatives who think of art in a traditional way and the contemporary art is still two different blocks.

**They don't see it as a continuity but two different things with one which is valid and the other one not.**

Yes, that's still happening here. For example, my film *Shakespeare Must Die* was banned by the government. The office of contemporary art gave their support to the project and gave 3 million THB to make the film, but when the film was finished, we had to submit it to another department which is more conservative and they banned the film. So now we are going to the administrative court, we are suing the government.

**So this is censorship.**

Yes there is still censorship. We're still fighting against it.

**Is there a quite active group of artists in the art community. Do you feel a group of people is active, the new generation as well?**

My generation was more confrontational.

**Maybe because of history and this new generation has an easier life.**

If you want to see society change, we have to change by our hands.

**In regards to your work the King and the Queen Waiting, can you please tell me about this work but also about the actual Queen and King and their role in the Thai society, are they relevant anymore?**



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Manit Sriwanichpoom, Waiting for the King (Standing), 2006 – gelatine silver print photography  
© Manit Sriwanichpoom

It is still relevant. I look at the British monarchy as a model. They're relevant for these people. For Thais it is still relevant although the problem is there's still people who want to abolish the monarchy but if we look at it from the history point of view it is very difficult to do that. Look at the monarchy like a big tree: when you try to uproot a tree it is very hard, the root is so deep. So in a way we still have a big issue, the question of how the monarchy should be in the modern

world. I think the monarchy has to be adapted and be more democratic which means that people can express themselves about the monarchy in a constructive way. For me the monarchy has to be open.

**Also, what I notice here if you compare to England, the Queen and the family are respected, they do have a role and there is a prime minister, but in the eventuality of a large issue, she can take over the power. But also what I see here is large portraits of the King and the Queen everywhere.**

Yes, because if you know the Thai politics, you know that during the revolution the monarchy had no power at all. And because of the army and the Coup d'Etat they made, they wanted to be legitimized and use the monarchy in an another way, as a propaganda tool, to make them legitimate. And also the monarchy see that maybe they can do something together, bring the popularity of the monarchy back. Especially the current king did a lot of things and brought the popularity of the monarchy to a high that never happened in the history. That particular series that I did was shot during the celebration of the King's 60th anniversary (3) on the throne which is one of the longest monarch in the world. And people came out to wait for the king. If you see that happening after the Coup d'Etat happened in 2006. The king's anniversary was in December but the Coup d'Etat happened in September, so a few months earlier. It's a mixed feeling.

**Feeling a bit confused about wanting or not the monarchy and at the same time they wanted to attend the event.**

It is a very difficult situation for that series. I did not plan, I followed my instinct and went. I thought there was something I wanted to observe, I wanted to photograph people, and also to see any kind of mechanism that can bring millions people on the street. If he's successful in this way, the same mechanism will happen again, can do the same in the same way as well. If the propaganda is functioning, if the popularity of the king can go to the top, you imagine in the opposite way. Which is why we have Thaksin Shinawatra who is our prime minister.

**He could use that same propaganda.**

Yes, the same! So I mean my question is, this is a danger of the propaganda. Because propaganda takes no question, so that's the same way it is happening now. Thaksin Shinawatra takes no questions as well. So, they never allow anyone to have questions. If anyone has a question, they try to discredit your question, discredit your credibility, who you are. 'Are you with me or are you against me? If you're against me, your question is irrelevant'.

**And what's the relationship between Thaksin Shinawatra and the royal family?**

If you look at – I don't know the deep relationship between them – you can see it is a power struggle. It is very obvious it is a power struggle, whether old power or new power. And we people say it's like when two elephants crash. We call it collateral damage, unavoidable. In the series, I made a lot of layers. I don't know how much you know about the history and that's why a couple of museums, the Art Gallery of Queensland and The Singapore Museum bought a series because they put things into a context. Australia is positioning itself as part of Asia, there is not point for them to link themselves to Europe.

## Did you take the photographs from the Pink Man series in different locations?

Yes, I took the Pink Man to different locations, including to Paris (I did a residency in Paris) and Beijing (at the time, the character was not well and didn't come) at the Summer Palace for example.



[\(http://artflow-press.com/2013/05/17/in-conversation-with-photographer-manit-sriwanichpoom-thailand/sriwanichpoompink\\_man\\_in\\_paradise\\_220070422193715/\)](http://artflow-press.com/2013/05/17/in-conversation-with-photographer-manit-sriwanichpoom-thailand/sriwanichpoompink_man_in_paradise_220070422193715/)

Manit Sriwanichpoom, Pink Man in Paradise(#2) 2003 – C-print © Manit Sriwanichpoom

### China has the same issues with consumerism.

With what's happening with the capitalism, it just bombarded our village with money and you see they destroy old buildings, old houses are gone, they don't care about the poor, they kick them out, and it becomes all new condos. When I saw what was happening in Beijing with the hutongs (destruction of hutongs prior to the 2008 Olympic Games and displacing the poor to the outskirts of the city) it reminded me of what was happening here so I learnt to fight. It happens almost everywhere with the money, the poor have no power in front of the money.

**They don't foresee the future, they only think in the present. Some people in Hong Kong buy Chanel bags on credit, the values have changed, people don't think about the past or the future, they live day by day.**

Yes this is also happening in the USA. In many countries, people are experiencing that and if you say you want that, they say 'ok you have already'. If you have a car they tell you no you shouldn't have car you already have one, I don't have one and this is my first car. This is *'shut your mouth'*. It is happening here, this government, they have a project of tax refund for your first car, and everyone is queuing to get a car. Last year, if you purchased a car within a set 6-month period, you get a refund, about 1/5 of the price, so people are queuing.

**They think about the refund but you still have to pay the 4 /5**

Exactly! And then they think about the refund because they want to take the opportunity to get the refund and then everyone ran to the showroom to get a car and about 1.2 million cars were sold at once so now, another 1.2 millions cars are coming on the street.

**Which is very strange because in a lot of countries we are actually closing down the roads and the city centres encouraging people to use their bike or public transport. There is enough pollution already.**

And then when the people criticize they have the support of government and also academy. They say it is a car, the former finance minister's 50<sup>th</sup> car, and the first car of the poor so why do you make a fuss. This is the logic by the professors. But no, we don't talk about that, we're talking about the idea, you encourage people to buy car. Yes, we disagree that even the millionaire can have 50 car, nobody is happy he has a car, but we can't do anything, but we don't have a policy to encourage people. But then these people encourage people to buy a car, that's totally different. I mean you could tax on car, it's expensive so people use their bike on the street, that's the policy that we want.

**Yes, push people to pollute more or buy at credit.**

This is why Louis Vuitton is the first bag of the poor and for the millionaire maybe the 100<sup>th</sup>. It's not the point. That's not democracy, how can you say it is a democracy. Here now, if you say anything, they turn to you, they twist it. If I say anything, they say *'are you in the elite? You're in the elite, right? You can't say anything, I'm the poor, I can say anything'*.

**It's not about who's the good one or the bad one. Democracy is maybe about having the same value to your voice and not 'I'm not going to listen to you because you're rich and I'm not'. It's not about who is right or wrong, maybe this guy has something interesting to say or not, but at least hear him out. Otherwise by sticking to two opposite blocks, the rich and the poor it doesn't work 'you have more stuff so your voice should be more valuable'. It's more about leveling things, living together.**

Now everybody is judging by material, what you have. It is very dangerous. What about the meaning of life? This a Buddhist country so this means we used to be against materialist ideas and now it is totally the opposite.

*Manit Sriwanichpoom also did a photographic series of monks. He saw monks in the street made of wax in a very similar way to the statues one can see at Madame Tussaud. Manit is quite disturbed by the fact that that the only way Buddhist temples can make money now is by developing products, to sell some trinkets and so on. They have to introduce a commercial component to survive.*



[\(http://artflow-press.com/2013/05/17/in-conversation-with-photographer-manit-sriwanichpoom-thailand/manit4/\)](http://artflow-press.com/2013/05/17/in-conversation-with-photographer-manit-sriwanichpoom-thailand/manit4/)

**Do you have any hope for the future of the country.**

I think if I am still walking, I still have hope. If I don't walk, I cannot hope. Doctors assess life on if you're still eating, if you're still eating, you still want to live. Even tiny hope is still hope. My wish might not happen when I'm still alive, but it's more a concept, you pass your idea to another generation, maybe something I took from my previous generation. It's not only me who thinks this way, maybe someone from the previous generation already though like that. I don't have a kid, I don't have children because I don't believe in that kind of value. My work is my baby, so it stays longer. People might have babies because they still want to have the genes. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi, he may not have seen everything change during his life but still, it changed.

**And the part you're doing might be a stepping stone.**

Yes, I think so. So I realize what I'm doing, who I am.

*Interview by Severine Levrel for Art Flow, Bangkok, April 2013*

Manit Sriwanichpoom is one of the 6 contemporary Thai artists exhibiting in Subjective Truth curated by Iola Lenzi for 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong kong.

More about the exhibition : SUBJECTIVE TRUTH with Prapat Jiwarangsan, Sutee Kunavichayanont, Tawatchai Puntusawasdi, Michael Shaowanasai, Manit Sriwanichpoom, Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit



*Contemporary Thailand has never been more polarized. The country embodies paradox: for outsiders it represents all that is serenely Buddhist. But from inside, it is perceived by many Thais as politically, socially and even spiritually dysfunctional. Bangkok, the City of Angels, is simultaneously booming and burning, affluent Thais partying in the capital's sky-scraping night-clubs, while Red and Yellow shirts clash on the streets below. Social media speak for the nation, fiction and reality tangled into one on facebook, streams of contradictory truths disseminated via twitter. In Subjective Truth, curated for 10 Chancery Lane Gallery by Southeast Asia specialist Iola Lenzi, six Thai artists grapple with their version of today's Thailand.*

*Exhibition dates: 20 May – 20 July*

10 Chancery Lane Gallery, G/F 10 Chancery Lane, SoHo, Hong Kong

[www.10chancerylanegallery.com](http://www.10chancerylanegallery.com) (<http://www.10chancerylanegallery.com>)

(1) <http://www.kathmandu-bkk.com> (<http://www.kathmandu-bkk.com>)

(2) <http://www.bacc.or.th> (<http://www.bacc.or.th>)

(3) Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) has been King of Thailand since 1946, the longest serving head of state in the world and the country's longest reigning monarch

*Interview by Severine Levrel for Art Flow*

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