

## Confronting social taboos through art

### Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's first retrospective is now showing in New York

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Feeding dogs, faking pregnancy and talking to corpses — these are a few examples of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's art.

Her experimental works over the past 25 years, as well as representing Thailand at the Venice Biennale and exhibiting in a number of major international shows, has ensured Araya is one of the most celebrated contemporary artists in Southeast Asia.

Her name summons devotion from followers, with her first retrospective in the United States opening on Jan 25 at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York.

Born in Trad in 1957, Araya, who now teaches at Chiang Mai University, is known for her video art. Her work has never shied away from controversy and confronting social taboos, such as when she opened a classroom to "teach" six lying corpses in 2005. But Araya is perhaps best recognised for teasing people in the wider art world. In "Village And Elsewhere" (2011) and "The Two Planets" (2008), she brought well-known Western masterpieces, from Millet to Jeff Koons, to places such as a rice field, a fresh market and a temple and invited rural Thai villagers to discuss the value of them.

The retrospective exhibition, which displays over 20 of her new, famous and rarely seen works, was crowdfunded on Kickstarter last November, and occupies the first floor of the SculptureCenter, the venue converted from a 1907 trolley repair shop. Here, the rawness of the brick interior of the high-ceiling exhibition space adds to the uncanny, if at times spooky, feel of the artwork. But it's the artist's love for dogs — Araya keeps over 20 at her home in Chiang Mai, and the canine has become integral in her late opuses — that first greets the visitor.

From the entrance, the footage projected on the wall shows a crippled dog, sporting dusty leg casts, running around with the owner. The artist's passion for the animal continues in a small adjoining room with another dog video. Pray, Bless Us With Rice And Curry, Our Great Moon video, the name of which resonates in a Thai folk lullaby, is a whimsical narrative revolving around generations of her dogs attending a house BBQ party. Despite the lighthearted feel, the video addresses the dog trafficking problem in Thailand as well as grieves over the death of her deceased dogs. In the main space, her new work features bottles of various sizes filled with the fur of her dogs and their portraits; it doesn't only confirm the love of her dogs, but also her yearning sentiment.

Death, life and loss have always been in Araya's interests — and it goes beyond just canine mourning and affection. In this exhibition, the visitor will see that amid the dogs are the human dead. The life-size, muted footage screened on the floor aptly draws in the audience. Here, the artist is seen putting dresses on a dead woman laying on a white sheet, adding chilling tones to the exhibition. There are three separate analogue screens showing the controversial "The Class" (2005) series, in which the artist and her corpse "pupils" engage in a conversation about death. It is a strange and intriguing visual, one that urges you to spend time in front of the TVs, but it's the artist's dialogue that is the key. The quirky language Araya uses to address the deceased is a lament about life to the living audience. Its poignant and serene tone raises the piece above the level of gimmick and controversy-baiting.

The four walls of the other adjoining room simultaneously show four videos. On one side, there is Nine-Days Pregnancy Of A Single, Middle-Aged Associate Professor (2005), a voice-over video in which Araya tells her colleague at Chiang Mai University she was pregnant (in fact she wasn't). The piece highlights the unease directed towards the artist from her peers, who did not expect her colleague to get pregnant, and it also mentions how she faced criticism when they finally learned that the pregnancy was fake.

The exhibition highlights, the Village And Elsewhere and Two Planets series, are displayed close together. The comical discussion by the villagers about Western masterpieces is in fact highlighting that people in the art world — unlike these villagers — lack an innocence for art appreciation. It's a shame, though, that the set-up of the video near the exhibition's exit does not help the visitor spend more time with it.

It is easy to view a Thai artist whose subject matter includes death, monks and corpses as Buddhism-leaning, but that would be a quick and mistaken judgement. What binds these rather varied works is the artist's perceptiveness in connecting two sources: the spoken and the muted, a person and society, art and life, and life and death. The retrospective look at Araya's work offers a sincere look at her personal view of life: simple yet puzzling, saddening yet hopeful. As the visitor becomes immersed in the artist's work, the mournful but serene lamentation is a haunting, meditative experience.

**The Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook retrospective is curated by Ruba Katrib and on view at SculptureCenter (44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, NY), until March 30.**



'Tong', as a noun means 'pregnancy';  
as a verb it means 'being pregnant'.

Nine-Days Pregnancy Of A Single, Middle-Aged Associate Professor.



The Class, a 2005 work in which Araya gives lessons to six corpses.



The Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook retrospective is taking place at SculptureCenter in Long Island, NY.

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