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A Reluctant Provocateur Tweaks Thailand



Mani Sriwanichpoom

An image from Mani Sriwanichpoom's 'Obscene' exhibition, which critiques Thailand's current prime minister.

Thai photographer **Mani Sriwanichpoom** says he's reluctant to assume the mantle of "artist provocateur," but in light of his recent work, and the controversy that surrounds it, he admits that he can't dismiss it either.

One of Thailand's leading contemporary photographers, Mr. Mani runs Bangkok's bohemian Kathmandu Gallery and was among the seven artists chosen to represent the country in its first appearance at the Venice Biennale in 2003. He has held solo exhibitions at Galerie VU in Paris, Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography and the Yokohama Museum of Art in Japan. His work was the subject of a solo retrospective at the Singapore Museum of Art in 2010.

In April, the 50-year-old artist and his wife Samanrat Kanjanavanit, a Thai filmmaker better known as Ing K, made headlines around the world when [their film "Shakespeare Must Die" was banned by Thailand's Ministry of Culture](#), which issued a statement saying that its content would "cause divisiveness among the people of the nation." The movie, shot and produced by Mr. Mani, reimagines Shakespeare's "Macbeth" in Thai, with a contemporary setting and political shadings.

He first came to international notice with the launch of his "Pink Man" project in 1997, a photo series featuring the paunchy Thai poet Sompong Thawee dressed in a hot pink three-piece suit. In the various Pink Man works that followed, the eponymous anti-hero is seen pushing his matching pink shopping cart through Southeast Asian cities, landscapes and archival images of historical atrocity – all part of a playful but trenchant criticism of the materialism and apathy of the Thai upper crust.



Mani Sriwanichpoom

A still from banned film 'Shakespeare Must Die.'

His latest exhibition, currently on view at Bangkok's H Gallery through July 30, offers two new provocative photo series in one. The first is a collection of dramatically lit female nudes and semi-nudes in saturated color. According to Mr. Mani, the hues and objects that accessorize the figures – such as red sickles, guns and designer handbags – are a critique of Thailand's prime minister and the red-shirt political movement that supports her and her brother, ousted former leader Thaksin Shinawatra. The second series is composed of blurry monochrome photos of Thai phallic totems – inspired, the artist says, by a moment of middle-aged sexual insecurity.

Mr. Mani, who wore a bright red button-down shirt to the show's opening, spoke with the Journal about obscenity, the hunger for power and why his iconic pink man is taking a break.

The Wall Street Journal: You worked as a photojournalist early in your career. How did that inform what you do as an artist?

Mr. Mani: To become an artist you need experience. Everything comes from your experience. When I graduated from art school, I knew I was young and that I didn't really know much. I thought becoming a photojournalist would be a good way to see all kinds of things. I was sent out to cover stories and conflicts near the Thai border, and I got to travel to places in Thailand I had never had a chance to see. So it was a way to learn about my own culture and my own country. And that's important. Also, when you work as a photojournalist, you have to know how to tell your story with one picture. It's quite challenging to do well.



Mani Sriwanichpoom

The artist is best known for his 'Pink Man' series, criticizing greed and consumerism in Thai society.

As an artist, you're best known for Pink Man, but he hasn't made any recent appearances in your work. Is Pink Man dead?

I'd rather not say that he is dead. But he is less active now. Pink Man was born and lived through a particular time. He was synchronized to a specific historical situation. He was a critique of the greed and consumerism of that period. At the current moment, the issues are more complex. It's difficult to use him to make useful comments currently. Let's say he's resting.

Your photographs often have a strong social or political message. Do you feel social engagement is one of your responsibilities as an artist?

If you just ignore the lies and problems and let things happen around you, or sit back and complain without doing anything, well, I don't think that's fair. Everybody has to engage from their area of activity. I'm an artist; this is my area. So this is how I can contribute.

Why is your new exhibition titled “Obscene”?

Well, it's a nude series. But I always try to put some stories into my work; and the story I'm trying to tell in this one is more obscene than the nudity. You know Thailand is now run by our first female prime minister. This is something we should all be proud of. But sadly, I don't think many Thai people feel that way. Many people think that she doesn't really have any qualifications for running the country other than her family name and her political backers. And that's not enough.

Do you see your role as partly that of the provocateur?

I never saw myself that way, but looking at this new work, maybe I have to accept the title. If I provoke, it's to get people to wake up.

At the moment in Thailand, both sides are fighting for their own power, not for the benefit of everyone. They don't progress society. They put society in danger. And when big conflicts do happen, both sides gain their interests, because people are forced to choose sides. Then everyone bombards each other with hatred, and the elites on each side gain their power from the hatred and passion. You can see this happening in many societies. Maybe this is something you recognize from the situation in America?

Tell us about the origins of the other half of the exhibition, “Holy Machismo.”

Last year I turned 50. You know, man, when you come to a certain age, you start to worry that something inside you might be fading. As a man, maybe you worry about your testosterone levels. But it's not just about sex drive. It's scary to think that you might be losing your passion for life. I normally try to avoid putting personal stuff in my work. I used to do it when I was younger — you know the teenage thing, “Oh me, oh my, who am I?” Now I usually have other things I want to address. But I thought that this issue was universal and worth exploring.

Giant phalluses, hot-button political issues and a nude model used to critique the country's first female prime minister – this is a pretty controversial show. Did you worry about how it might be received?

You can usually get away with expressing yourself freely in art galleries in Thailand. For film, there's a mechanism in place for censorship. Raising questions in film scares them, because they fear the power of the medium. But we're safer in art.

– *Edited from an interview with Patrick Brzeski*