

PERSPECTIVE REVIEW

ART

Manit Sriwanichpoom's photographs, including *Dead dove on Thai flag*, capture the darker moments in Thailand's political evolution.



He's frightened for the future and can see more bloodshed coming, but he's also concerned about the dangers of rampant consumerism. (Arguably, Sriwanichpoom's most well-known work internationally is his *Pink Man* series which was concerned with the burgeoning Thai consumer culture.)

"I understand that for capitalism you need consumerism - the system functions through consumerism. The question is how can we go [on] like this," he says.

"The government tried to push people to spend money and the private sector tried to push people to spend money. And [many times] you get something that is unnecessary to your life.

"Is being wealthy the meaning of everything? We have a lot of money but we're not happy. You travel to the villages in the South and they have no money but they're happy.

"I think we have to stop and think if [this] is a good way of life [that] we pursue. Everyone has a good intention when they work hard - but they work hard for what?"

Sriwanichpoom says the West doesn't always understand Thai society and sometimes misses the depth of what is really going on.

"Thais are a very gentle, smiling people. They [are] very easy," he says, but adds that this is only on a superficial level.

"They make a joke and laugh about it, but in the end they run amok. The violence here is very extreme.

"I hope that I can share something from my point of view - I can show how the Thai people [are] underneath the smiling face - what they've been fighting for."

And what they've been fighting for may well be a fighting chance at a genuine democracy.

Sriwanichpoom is worried at the lack of transparency in Thai society and cites the government's zealous censorship when it comes to the work of artists. He considers the cutting of four scenes from a recent film by the Cannes jury prize-winning director

Apichatpong Weerasethakul to be particularly concerning. The scenes ordered cut from the movie depicted monks flying a kite, doctors kissing, doctors drinking whiskey and monks playing with a radio controlled toy - hardly controversial by international standards. After Weerasethakul appealed the decision, he was ordered to cut a further scene. The director told *Variety* magazine in February that he'd show the film in Thailand, with black leader tape showing where the cuts had been made as a protest.

Sriwanichpoom, with some justification, feels his work may come under the same scrutiny.

"We have to be cautious about censorship - the pictures that I am showing at the Centre for Contemporary Photography have never been shown in Thailand. I haven't shown [them] in Thailand yet because I have to find the right time - the right moment," he says.

Lambs of God runs at Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography until May 10, with a public-floor talk by the artist at midday on March 29. Sriwanichpoom will give public lectures at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra on Tuesday, April 1, at 2pm, the National Thai Studies Centre at the ANU on April 1 at 5pm, and the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, on April 2 at 6pm.

Thailand in focus: the blood behind the smiles

An exhibition by Manit Sriwanichpoom exposes the harsher realities of Thai life, writes **Stewart Hawkins**.

Manit Sriwanichpoom's voice is calm and soothing, his manner, like many of his fellow Thais, is polite and he's quick to laugh. He has also created photographs that feature a bleeding pig's heart on the Thai flag, dead chickens and dogs' skulls on the same, and children trussed up as sacrificial lambs (after the painting *Agnus Dei* by the 17th century Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbaran).

Sriwanichpoom is a complex artist.

Spend some time in Bangkok and the complexities of the society on which Sriwanichpoom comments, however, are thrown into sharp relief.

This is a developing country, but its biggest city is crowded with super malls stocked with more high-end gear than you'll find in the ritziest of Australian shopping precincts. Meanwhile the city is dotted with slums.

The people are gentle and friendly and always smiling - so reads the condescending tourist brochure copy - but go to Lumpini Stadium on a Tuesday night and take in a few rounds of Muay Thai

(a martial art which is almost a national obsession) and see how easygoing you think Thais are after that.

Read up on the brutal crackdowns against alleged drug dealers and extrajudicial killings that occurred under the former government led by telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, and the ongoing Muslim insurgency in the South that has resulted in the deaths of about 3000 people in the past four years, and the "Land of Smiles" starts to sound like an optimistic moniker.

Sure, this assessment is a particularly cynical one. On the whole, most of the millions of Australians who have travelled to Thailand have had very positive experiences, which is why the exhibition by one of Thailand's leading contemporary artists entitled *Lambs of God*, which opened on Friday at Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography, may be quite confronting for some.

(Although, not as confronting, it seems, as it might be for the new Thai government. These pictures have not been seen in Thailand and Sriwanichpoom is not sure they ever will be.)

The pictures, he says, reflect the way he feels about the events of the past two years - the 2006 coup, the exile of Thaksin, his return and the victory of the People's Power Party (the

successor to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party), the leader of which Thaksin hand picked.

In his artist's statement for the exhibition, Sriwanichpoom says he wants to show the "feelings of utter helplessness that overwhelm the powerless", in which category he includes the majority of Thais.

"People trapped in the middle between the old power [the royalists and the military] and the new power [the capitalists], we are mere pawns in their struggles for ascendancy," he writes.

'They make a joke and laugh about it, but in the end they run amok. The violence here is very extreme.'

The exhibition images are diverse, from reportage pictures of crowds gathered to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the reign of the Thai King and people having their holiday snaps taken with the tanks guarding the Royal Plaza, to his surreal series *Still Life with the Thai Flag* and *Embryonia*.

Sriwanichpoom says he's very depressed about what happened under Thaksin and the state of Thailand at the moment - seemingly people haven't learned from the excesses of the former regime.