

THAI-TANIC

Thai Art in the Age of Constraint and Coercion

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Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

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February 6-March 15, 2003
Ethan Cohen Fine Arts

THAI-TANIC

Thai Art in the Age of Constraint and Coercion

Curated by
Apinan Poshyananda

Artists
Vasan Sitthiket
Kamol Phaosavasdi
Manit Sriwanichpoom
Kamin Lertchaiprasert
Michael Shaowanasai
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useum Foundation

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Introduction

This exhibition came about through a conversation between the distinguished curator Professor Apinan Poshyananda and myself that started during the Asian Contemporary Art Week in New York this past Fall. Apinan and I share a common passion for contemporary art. In collaboration with the Professor, my gallery Ethan Cohen Fine Arts is honored to host this group show of six Thai artists who will reveal a fresh and unedited vision of how they see Thai society and how they fit into the world today. My gallery serves as a platform to showcase global contemporary art and thus I welcome "*Thai-Tanic: Thai Art in the age of constraint and coercion*" curated by Apinan Poshyananda.

There will be six artists in the show with works in varied media and styles. Of the various works, the photographs "*This Bloodless War*" series by Manit Sriwanichpoom seem to echo the concerns that face us all today. I wonder "have we forgotten the suffering that war and violence can bring? Manit says that "history will not forget them - their ultimate sacrifice will not have been in vain". This gives me pause as an American who grew up during the Vietnam war era. I hope that this exhibition serves as a reminder for us all to re-examine ourselves. We must never forget the tragic lessons of the past. I see this exhibition as a continuation of the dialogue between the Professor and myself, between our cultures, indeed between East and West. Especially, in this post 9/11 New York, we should share the Thai compassion and sensitivity shown in these unique art works. This is their world and their world is our world; let us learn from each other .

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

Ethan Cohen
Director

Ethan Cohen Fine Arts

January 5, 2003

THAI-TANIC

Thai Art in the Age of Constraint and Coercion

Many Thais smiled to welcome the New Year 2003 but could not get rid of the sinking messages that constantly lurk in their head.

They predict that the year of the Goat will be ferocious and clash of horns. They say that war against terrorism will continue and (soon) terrorist acts will cease. They say that if Americans wedge war on Iraq then more American blood will be spilled at home and abroad.

They say that paradise can be found in Bali, Samui, and Cebu. They advise Western tourists not to make their destination to holiday resorts in Southeast Asia. They say that Americans, Israelis, and Australians have been warned not to be near tourist spots in Bangkok such as Khaosan Road, Soi Cowboy, and Patpong. They report that Israeli tourists feel safer in Bangkok than at home despite rumors that al-Qaeda members have sneaked into southern Thailand.

They think that in 2003 Thailand will be free of International Monetary Fund (IMF) debt, but they also say that unemployment and poverty will increase. They say that Chiang Mai as the venue for APEC Summit meeting is symbolic of the Land of Smiles, the amicable place of peaceful agreement. They say that the chief of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has confessed to taking part in the Bali bombings that left almost 200 people dead. They say that terror will not strike Thailand because supernatural forces, ancestral spirits, and deities will protect citizenry from evils.

We ask who are "they" and why do "they" influence and dictate our life and fate so much?

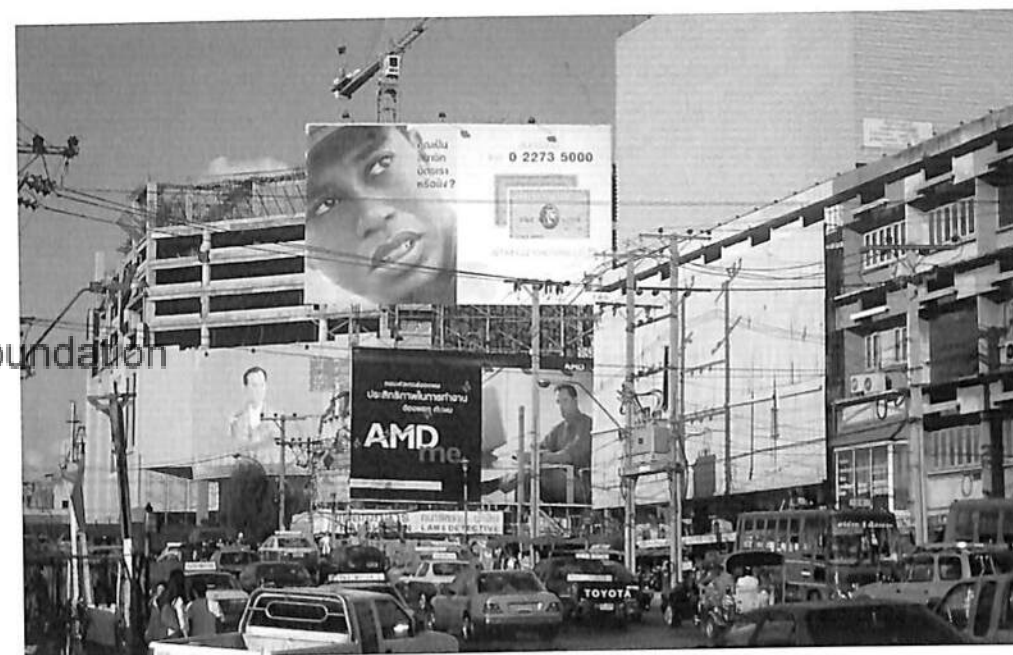
They say that when Thais make decisions they prefer to leave them open-ended. When the going gets tough Thais have a tendency to get running or change sides. When the US government forced nations worldwide to choose sides between good and evil it became evident that reality is not separated in black and white like some Hollywood films or comic books. In real life there are blurred areas between saviors and destroyers; peacekeepers and terrorists; pacifists and fanatics. At times, heroes can turn into villains.

Manipulation through media coerces Thais into acceptance that after all, things are not that bad. Bangkok has become an imaginary space of simulacra. People are bombarded constantly by appeals to their vanity and need for approval. Giant billboards and back-lit advertisement signs that litter Bangkok compete to lure consumers into submission. Their decision and judgement are constantly induced by sophisticated manipulation. Larger-than-life superstars and models in super cool outfits seduce them with brand names. Through television, cable TV, and printed media persuasion is the key to their perception and behavior. Internet and digital images have produced new media space of uncharted cultural territory. Speed and dynamism allow network information to be constantly on alert. At the same time, coercive techniques have developed to

the limit that it has become increasingly hard to separate real and imaginary or truth and deception.

If we accept Benedict Anderson's notion that nation-states are imagined communities as populations believe and act as if they constitute a single, homogeneous entity. Then we can say that Thailand has been culturally imagined into existence and her national identities need to be constantly re-imagined and up to date in order to counter the threatening forces in various guises. Ideology of Nation-Religion-Monarchy pyramidal structure that has been promoted as national slogan plays an integral part in coercion. Recently, disintegrative and potentially disruptive consequences of complex transformations due to global economic and political climate have caused concern and anxiety to defenders of national aphorism.

The emergent of global forms of cosmopolitanism resulting in a race to keep up with what is happening out there around the world has produced new cultural dimensions through telecommunication technology and multi-media advertisement. The power to persuade leading to coercion of taste and conformity through visual stimulants is clearly evident in emphasis on sex appeal in advertisement.



Billboard advertisement of American Express, Bangkok, 2003.

Shampoo, bath foam, deodorant sticks, lipsticks, perfume, breath freshener, underwear, beverage, contraception, and makeup. Brand name products, haute culture, motor vehicles, and mobile phones. Images of young, handsome, and attractive models are spewed on billboards, posters, and advertisements all over the metropolis. They gaze out to meet the consumers in various ways ranging from attraction, assertion, and seduction. They stare out to make eye contact in order to draw attention to their commodities. As presenters of products these youthful models/actors reveal the homogenized look of the beautiful Thais. As role models they display sex appeal as part of advertisement while preference for racially mixed or foreign models have been increasingly fashionable.



Bus advertisement of mobile phone, Bangkok, 2003.



Flip board advertisement of DTAC mobile phone, Bangkok, 2003.

Thais' hunger for heroes has shifted from political, religious, corporate, and military leaders to popular actors/artists, celebrities, and sportsmen. Tiger Woods, whose mother is Thai, is seen by many locals as national superstar. Blown-up portraits of Woods (as presenter of American Express) are seen on highways competing with those of David Beckham and Ronaldo (as presenters of UBC cable TV). Paradorn Srichaphan and Tamarine Tanasugarn, young emerging tennis players, have been elevated to the status of stardom with their success abroad. Countless pop, rap and rock musicians whose physiognomy and sex appeal are often preferred to their singing ability have experienced their brief moments of fame in the Thai music industry. While favorite singers such as Thongchai McIntyre (Bird) and Yuenyong Opakul (Add Carabao) have adapted their image according to consumers' taste. McIntyre, a famous pop singer and dancer has collaborated with country music singers and dancers for his top hit album. Add Carabao's advertisement of the album Naksuu phu yingyai (The great fighters) is focused on the theme of heroic freedom fighters and defenders of the Thai nation. Promotion of heroes who sacrificed their lives for Thai independence has been adapted to suite with the marketing strategy of the new beverage Carabao daeng. The marketing strategy of music for the masses that arouse national fervor has been impelled to combine with beverage that stimulate strength.



Thongchai McIntyre, pop star singer, 2003.

The yearning for a father figure that the Thai public could trust is most evident when Thais celebrate King Bhumibol Adulyadej's birthday. As part of the promulgation of Thai identities King Bhumibol's popularity has been elevated to the stature of deity-king. Thais proudly promote the sovereign whose paternal love for his citizenry has proven to be the unifying force that alleviate and assuage differences in ideologies and beliefs. Hundreds of thousands candles were lit on the night of His Majesty's birthday as symbolic of the guiding brightness for the citizenry. Pageantry and splendor prevail differences among Thais who are brought together to stress homogeneity and unity on the memorable occasion. Recently, court strategy to inculcate royal fervor was the promotion of King Bhumibol's new book on his favorite dog Tongdaeng. Affection, loyalty and kindness became the theme for Thais who feverishly purchased the King's books and shirts with the logo of his favorite pet.

The gigantic cut outs, billboards, posters, and calendars of King Bhumibol that are decorated on the streets, offices, shopping malls, restaurants, karaoke bars, and private quarters inculcate Thai devotion and commitment for their beloved father figure. Larger-than-life portraits of King Bhumibol erected outside the Grand Palace are symbolic of the epicenter of national heritage and Thai-ness. Visual domination of King Bhumibol has produced visibility that represents the national totality. Public ceremonials and pageants have made King Bhumibol and his spectacles visible to the people of the nation. At the same time, the royal pageants also coerced the Thais into becoming objects of the royal gaze. King Bhumibol's portraits are part of the cultural apparatus that cast a single and centralizing gaze across the nation and into the souls of all Thais. However, Thai royal



Christmas decoration and signboard of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 75th Birthday Celebration, Bangkok, 2002

visual domination is not one of control, discipline and surveillance but patriotism and paternalism. The images of gazing King Bhumibol facilitate the citizenry into re-imagined process paternal linkage to their hero-king. Unlike the stare of young models and presenters who lure consumers to buy their goods, royal portraits in public places are symbolic reminders of the father of the nation who has endured and sacrificed for the wellbeing of his children.

During the collapse of the economic bubble in 1997 to the September 11, 2001 cataclysm, many Thais experienced social and economic crisis that have been detrimental and deleterious. Desire for official inventiveness of Thai culture to foster and reflect a sense of national unity has been designed to counter the threat of globalization. Cultural tourism through promotion of royalty and heritage is seen as unique qualities of Thai-ness that fabricate and validate the sense of cultural specificity. The main features of Thai-ness were disseminated through films of heroic persons and events such as Bangrachan, Suriyothai, and Taksin. Visual domination included exhibitions and art contests related to patriotic themes and Thai identity. Mainstream contemporary Thai art consisted of reverence of Thai values and national pride. State and corporate sponsored funds continued to support art exhibitions and cultural activities related to high profile occasions such as birthday cycles of the royal family.

This period also witnessed a flourish of art activities and creative works by Thai artists who began to question and redefine Thai-ness in context of contemporary culture in the epoch of globalization. Globalization process came to be discussed in the early 1990s when Thailand was seen as one of newly industrializing countries (NICs). Some Thais coined the abbreviation NICs as "narok (hell) is coming soon". Thai names given to globalization varied from *lokawiat*, *lokawiwat* to *lokaphiwat*, *lokawibat*. Meanings range from global change to global catastrophe. Debate on the pros and cons of globalization became tense in the Chatichai government as attempt was made to turn battlefields of Indochina into market places. Military coup d'état that led to the bloody crackdown known as the May massacre in 1992 resulted in strong reaction by activists, intellectuals and NGO (non-government organizations). Thus, globalization and dictatorship became double threats that Thai activist artists saw as the roots of the problems that led to political, economic, and social catastrophe in Thailand.

Vasan Sitthiket is a leading art activist and a member of the Ukabat (Meteor) Group. He is renowned as an advocate for the disenfranchised and the rural and urban poor. His aggressive attitude towards tyrants, corrupt politicians and mischievous monks has earned him the trademark of a nihilist and anarchist. Among the many paintings that got Sitthiket into trouble with the authority is *Buddha Visits Thailand '92* (1992) depicting the Lord Buddha witnessing inauspicious scenes such as military mayhem, monks



Vasan Sitthiket, Buddha returns to Bangkok '92 1992 oil on canvas, 400 x 200 cm



Vasan Sitthiket, *Resurrection*, 1992, oil on canvas, 400 x 200 cm.



Chatchai Puipia, *Siamese Smile*, 1995, oil on canvas.

time, Thailand, the nation known as the emerging tiger, became comparable to a tamed kitten under threat of foreign takeovers. Those who committed economic crime to the nation went unpunished causing dismay and disillusion to the majority who faced the consequences. Popular phrases such as *Ya ploi hai khon chua loi nuam* (don't let the villains get away) failed to bring those responsible to justice.

Manit Sriwanichpoom's black-and-white photographs entitled *This Bloodless War Series* (1997)

raping women, cultural tourism, and sex supermarket. Condemned by 43 Buddhist institutions as reckless blasphemy to Buddhism, Sitthiket argued that his art is like a mirror reflecting the current society for the general public. In *Resurrection* (1992), he paints Jesus Christ with the Cross smashing the multinational enterprises and global corporate institutions. The scene depicts the collapse of the global epoch, which at the time, was interpreted as the golden age at the turn of the millenium. Less controversial is Chatchai Puipia's *Siamese Smile* (1995) revealing his self-portrait as an urban lunatic whose grin turns into a grimace of horror. Reflecting life in the metropolis, disrupted and uncertain, a person's life under constant strain and tension could easily snap like an over stretched bow. Songsak Tung's allegorical painting combines neo-traditional Thai art with postmodern vocabulary that critiques Thai consumer society in dilemma. The impact of globalization on food, fashion, and leisure is reflected in signifiers of brand name products and counterfeit commodities. Tung's intentional blurring of the authentic and simulacra adds new narratives as images of Thai symbols are mixed with Gianni Versace and Captain Sanders.

Thai economic down spiral in 1997 known as the *tomyum kung* (spicy shrimp) syndrome came like a stomach virus causing the nation's economy in disruption. Multinational enterprises, foreign investment and corruption were held accountable for Thailand's economic collapse. In postmodern politics, neo-colonialism is seen as maintenance of economic domination of people and nations through multinational and transnational companies and international institutions that control communication networks and media and disseminating Western popular culture. Over a short span of

capture the zeitgeist of Thai society at its nadir. By choosing the medium of photography Sriwanichpoom appropriates infamous war photos and broadcast of atrocious coverage of massacre of Vietnam victims by the Americans at My Lai and Song My during the Vietnam War. Unforgettable photo shots of broken bodies slaughtered by American platoons and the naked Vietnamese girl with napalm wounds running in front of the camera. Similar scenes are re-staged in Bangkok to resemble the horrific mayhem that occurred in Vietnam decades earlier. Instead of twisted corpses, bullet torn, and burnt flesh, Sriwanichpoom uses models/friends dressed in brand name outfits with shopping bags of Chanel and Versace. They scream, run, and collapse like victims of armed conflict. However, there are no weapons or troops to be found. In postmodern warfare and neo-colonial conquer, weaponry are in the forms of cultural flows, information, knowledge, and media control and financial enterprises.



Songsak Tung, *The Army of Dharma*, 1998, oil on canvas, 147 x 147cm.



Manit Sriwanichpoom, *This Bloodless War Series*, 1997, photograph.

Sriwanichpoom and his friends dressed in white overalls displayed these photos on the streets outside shopping malls and financial districts in Bangkok. Apart from issues on neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism, the photos are meant to criticize the Thai art scene with unpredictable market prices due to economic instability. A scene of a South Vietnamese soldier shoot a suspected Viet Cong collaborator is replaced by a well known art collector, Chongrux

Chanthaworrasut, aiming the pistol at the head of artist Chatchai Puipia. Thai artist is seen as a victim of the art system that in turn is manipulated by investors, dealers, and art merchants. Coercion in contemporary Thai art was controlled by cash flows from corporate and private collectors. When the purchasing power was cut dry the immature Thai art system went bankrupt.

While promotion of Thai-ness is employed to hold back global challenge, turning to the local can be used as reason to control and marginalize certain groups within the nation. The process of endo-colonialism might sound strange for Thailand, a country that claims to have escaped colonization. The reaction against global values has been an excuse for certain groups to maintain power over other groups in Thai society. Sriwanichpoom's *Pink Man on Tour* (1998) was created at the time the campaign Amazing Thailand was promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Pink Man is a personification of a Thai middle-class consumer whose avarice and rapacity misguide him aimlessly with his pink shopping cart. Like a customer who finds all local, exotic goods amazing Pink Man visits places such as the hill tribe culture conservation village supported by Pepsi in Chiang Mai. In *Horror in Pink* (2001), Sriwanichpoom re-touched historic photos of uprisings of October 1973 and 1976 by inserting Pink Man as a cynical observer who witnesses intense national fervor that resulted in brutality and anarchy. By re-visiting these events through a time warp of photographic manipulation the gluttonous Pink Man plays the role of ethnocentric parochial man whose passion and infatuation for Thai-ness could lead to murder of his compatriots.

Buddhism in Thailand in the postmodern times has faced pressure exerted by forces of capitalism and globalization. Constantly, the relationship between Buddhism and the state is negotiated as the official religion has gone through phases of transition and turmoil. The Sangha as a Buddhist institution is seen as outdated and in need of reform in order to adapt with cultural flows of global epoch. As a vehicle for promotion of Thai-ness Buddhism has been instrumental as defense of communism and globalization. As Thai people lose faith in the state and corporate institutions they turn to meditation and guidance of monks gifted at preaching, healing, and giving advice. Some monks are seen as activists as they vehemently attack modernization in order to protect the forest and ecology. Sadly, some monks were criticized as they became unusually rich with land and money. Some claim to have supernatural forces while others have been mischievous with women. Recently, the scene of a disturbed monk who threatened hostages with an AK-47 assault rifle in the Parliament in Bangkok was televised nation wide. These few bad monks and their outrageous incidents have caused a decline in the Buddhist faith among devout.

Neo-traditional Thai art, a movement in the late 1980s, that received positive reception and became bureaucratized as part of official Thai art faced new challenges in the late 1990s. With declining state and corporate support redefinition of neo-traditional Thai art had to be formulated. Kamin Lertchaiprasert is among the practicing Buddhist artists whose devotion to the teaching of the Buddha has converged art making and Buddhist practice as part of everyday life. Inspired by the biography of Acharn Chah Supphato, a revered forest monk, Lertchaiprasert began to live his systematic and orderly life by practicing meditation and yoga. By putting the Buddhist method into practice he began the project *Problem-Wisdom* (1993-95) as he made a paper sculpture inspired by newspaper everyday for two years. His daily practice of art and meditation is regarded as endeavor to attain pure reason and ultimate emptiness. His series of charcoal drawings *Normal & Nature* (1995-96) and *Anitjang Thukkhang Anata* (1999) consist of Thai calligraphy concoct with illustrative images related to Buddhist teaching. Impermanence and sorrow are recurrent in cycles of life.



Phramaha Sayanjerassuttho holding an assault rifle at hostages at the Thai Parliament, Bangkok, 2002.

Lertchaiprasert's *The Ordinary Man is a Buddha. Passion is bodhi* (the wisdom of enlightenment) (2001) is inspired by the writing of the philosopher Voi Lang. Varnished wooden sculptures depict subjects of human passion - anger, greed and illusion. Photo silk-screens represent self-portraits of Lertchaiprasert as an ordinary man in T-shirt and jeans meeting with the Lord Buddha. Superimposition of the artist and the Buddha as a part of the traditional temple mural painting in the Grand Palace is intended to shift the time frame and context. In a space of virtual reality or Thai temple art, an ordinary man who is free of foolishness could meet or become a Buddha through wisdom of enlightenment. He could also visit hell and return to earth. Exhibited a few months after September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center these works neither condemn nor praise the shocking event. Instead Lertchaiprasert indicates that to attain peace an ordinary man must reduce anger, greed, and illusion.

In the computer game *Command & Conquer: Yuri's Revenge, Red Alert II*, the program stages New York under attack by bombers and rocket launchers. Players could compete in the virtual game the destruction of the Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Center. Today, vendors selling to tourists DVDs of hijacked planes exploding into the Twin Towers in front of Ground Zero give a sense of time warp and feeling of remorse mixed with macabre. The announcement of al-Qaeda's www.mojahedoon.org with portrait of Osama Bin Laden and images of fighter planes and burning American flag is also disturbing. Global telecommunications have reached the critical point where it is extremely hard to know between truths and lies, real news and false news, authenticity and simulacra.

Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai telecom tycoon, has done what no other Thai political leaders has achieved by capturing an outright majority in parliament for his Thai Rak Thai (Thai love Thai) Party. In his two years in office Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has implemented many key projects promised during his election campaign. These include the 30-baht health care program, the people's bank and one tambon/one village, and village funds. These projects sound promising and the prime minister is determined to improve economic and political situation despite the prospect of war in Iraq looming large. His huge signboards above Bangkok's expressways announce "I will make the year 2003 better than this year as a New Year's gift to

the Thai people". The optimist promise gives a reassuring feeling for the citizens as they hope that public relations strategy from the government will be fulfilled. Yet, some critics feel that coercive techniques to create homogeneity through national spirit are misleading. Thirayuth Boonmee, a leading social thinker, has coined the term "Thaksinocracy" to describe the prime minister's endeavor to monopolize power. "Thaskinization" might work but crack down on underground economic activities and corruption by politicians and civil servants still needs to be improved. Heated debate and crash between the authority and NGO workers indicate that all is not well.

Since the crash of "Bin Laden" airplanes into the World Trade Center and the prospect of war in Iraq looming large, debate among Thai academicians on globalization has been intense. The End of Globalization? Leading scholars Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Charnvit Kasetsiri, and Chaiwat Thiraphan have opined their views on the crumbling of the one happy, friendly world and its consequence on Thai politics, economy, and culture. Collapse of turbo-capitalism and global terrorism have caused Thailand to face reality that as a member of poor global players the nation is in a state of confusion due to open-border crime. These criminals include multinational financiers, investors, tourists, and terrorists. Benedict Anderson's special lecture on "State Terrorism/ Private Terrorism: Reflection on the New World Disorder" pointed out types and intention of terrorism. He warned about coercive techniques of global information. For instance, the bombing in Bali that killed many Australians did not mean the work of al-Qaeda but terrorism stemming from intense local frictions and deteriorating bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Australia. In context of Thai terrorism and tourism, Anderson felt that international terrorists tend to visit Thailand as a refuge and rendezvous. Local and private terrorism might occur but do not relate to global terrorism. He explained the meaning of terror. He also asked the audience to name the country that carried out most terror in the world in modern history.

Vasan Sitthiker's paintings and prints criticize the abuse of power and threat of neo-colonialism to the Thai society. *End Game* (2002) depicts Thai politicians and businessmen stranded and isolated on islands surrounded by a flood. In a global trap they look like global parasites that are helpless and about to sink into oblivion. From the dark sky, rockets and fireballs descend like falling rain. *Who take all our money?* (2002) portrays icons of global figures including Miss Universe, Ronaldo, and Osama Bin Laden. They are among beasts and parasites dressed in tie and jacket with national flags painted on their face. Like World Cup soccer supporters these national representatives are fanatic as they cheer their country and jeer at their opponents (enemies). At times, fervor spills into bigotry and violence. Love our nation and hate our enemies are revealed on the image of TV set showing the bombing of the World Trade. *War against capitalism* (2002) is a clash of ideologies as the Buddha is seen with an assault rifle aiming at brute creatures that symbolize capitalism. The message written on the canvas read: "Shooting their idiot greedy mind".

Sitthiker's art is a mixture of dynamics of urban art, street music, and graffiti. The series of mono prints *VIP/un-VIP* (2002) is conceptual combining coercive techniques found in popular imagery of billboard advertisement and political propaganda. Over-sized portraits of political



Vasan Sitthiker, *End Game*, 2002, oil on canvas.

leaders look dignified and alluring from the distant. Close up sheets of prints reveal slogans related to anger, greed, and lust stamped all over their face.

Globalization has resulted in cultural and information flows that offer instantaneous and unlimited access to knowledge. In the imagined space of information technology knowledge equates power. The capacity to manipulate information means that reality and fiction are often inseparable. In virtual reality anything is possible. Our imagination is enriched and twisted to the point that fictitious elements and news can be equally believable. Viewers could hardly believe when life broadcast showed the catastrophic events on September 11, 2001. They could hardly accept the outrageous attack by the suicide pilots (so-called martyrs) and the slackness of American security system.



Vasan Sitthiker, *VIP/un-VIP (George Bush)*, 2003, mixed media on paper, size 250 x 280 cm.

Virtual humanism and dream scape allow mind games into journeys of consciousness and sub consciousness. Kamol Phaovasasdi, one of the leading video and conceptual artists, experiments with electronic time-based art that takes viewers into the realm of hyper reality. In *Dilemma* (2001), Phaovasasdi converted the gallery into public place where clients and viewers could have their astrological signs read by the fortunetellers. Interaction between viewers and quartz crystals through healing and psychic experience offered release that went beyond reason or scientific explanation. Under extreme pressure and stress many Thais have turned to the occult in order to disengage themselves from the living *narok* (hell). To get out of the dead end, Phaovasasdi offers escape routes through digital art and animation.

In *Memories Fly* (2002), viewers could lounge, eat, drink, and dance at Bed Supper Club as they experience on giant video screen overlays of stimulating sound and waves of images. In *Bon Voyage* (2002), we enter into the realm of psychic imagination where the unexpected is to be expected. Like dream interpretation reality is warped and out of synchronization with the present. Fake butterflies flutter in bucolic fields; sharks fly among trees. A drowning swimmer struggles in the emerald water with hell fire. The artist drinks a glass water and fire ignites on his arm. There is no pain. Bon voyage is no goodbye. Time like memory plays tricks on the eye. Sadly, all is not well in these time scapes. The scenes are evocative of Thai tension, Thai terror, Thai tremor, Thai tragic, Thai panic, Thai frantic, Thai manic, Thai lunatic, and Thai die.

Invention of real and imagined enemies of Thailand is part of ongoing strategy to re-define and re-imagine Thai-ness. Michael Shaowanasai's video series *Iron Pussy* is hilarious, controversial, and poignant depiction of life of transvestites and gays in the famous sex district, Patpong in Bangkok. Thai male sexual homosexuality is represented as marginalized in female dominated sex supermarket of Patpong. In turn, transvestitism in relation to gayness is shown as cultural territory as Thai transvestites are challenged by infiltration of foreign (Chinese) transvestites. Clash of transvestites took place on the streets of Patpong and Thai transvestites were beaten up. This defeat was unbearable so the disgruntled Thai gang leader (Shaowanasai) went to the gym and pumped iron. S(h)e returned with his entourage to smash the uncouth invaders to regain Thai transvestite pride. Stability and calmness returned as local transvestites went back to work with their clients.

Thai youth culture reflects confusion, dilemma, and disorientation. Exposure to global flows of information, fashion, music, and advertisement has resulted in hybrids and mixtures of internationalism. Crisscross of influences from Europe, America, China, and Japan bombard Thai youths with brand name, logos, fast food, and hype. They are astonished and seduced by the most in fads. In turn, they are told that these foreign values are infectious and degrading to Thai values of their ancestors. These teenagers are constantly exposed to news of crime, rape, murder, robbery, drugs, and violence. Many feel that they are victims of dominators at home and abroad who control and manipulate their perception and behavior.

Busadee Laomanachareon is a young video artist who her body to reflect anxiety and distress in Thai transition. *Tribe* (2002) was performed on the streets near teenage shopping centers as Laomanachareon dressed like a blonde superstar. Her outlook and behavior were received with fascination and surprise. In *I doubt* (2002), she has an intimate conversation with the video camera. She doubts at all kinds of behavior, norms, and standards. Innocent questions turn to complex doubting that lead to epistemology, philosophy, and psychology. She epitomizes a Thai youth whose self doubt is not directed to any one in particular but her questions relate to all. In *A-ma loves mueng Thai* (2002) records her mother performing as a Chinese immigrant who is proud to be Thai. She talks about her life in Bangkok and her travels to America. She dresses in pretty traditional Thai costumes and dances sweetly to the camera.

To maintain the national face and keep up the national image of the Land of Smiles, Thais grin and tolerate (*yim soo*) the difficult times ahead. The majority of Thais feel that they are in the same boat and hope that they will survive the angry storm. In Sriwanichpoom's *Wedding Photo* (2003), the newly wed couple stand and grin in front of abandoned unfinished skyscrapers and sky train projects. No money, no problem. The young have learned the survival game. While the old and traditionalists continue to yearn for the good old days.

Let us hope that this will not be the Year of the Scapegoat and the theme song of *The Titanic* will not replace the Thai national anthem.

Apinan Poshyananda

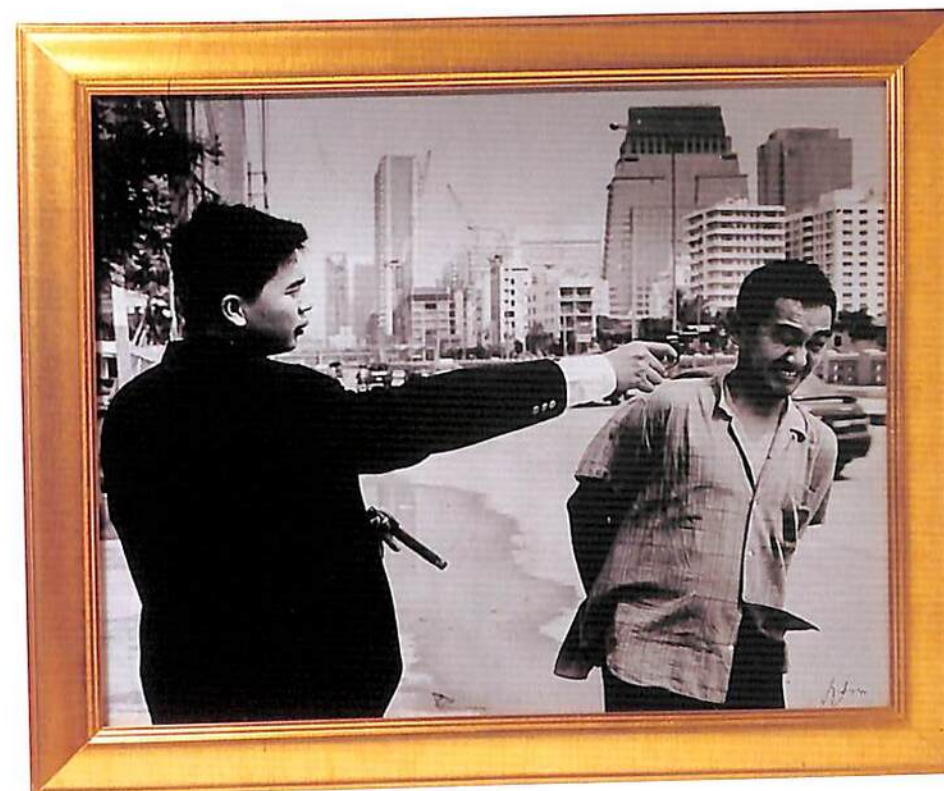
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Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

Artwork

Manit Sriwanichpoom



Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

This Bloodless War # 2, 1997
gelatin silver print,
size 48 x 58 cm.