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TAWAN WATTUYA

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UNIFORM/UNIFORMITY, A PEEP AT THAILAND'S BACK PARLOR

MYRTILLE TIBAYRENC

"What delicious irony! Our desperate, all-consuming search for security leads us to identify with groups of others (those with similar religious beliefs, similar ethnic backgrounds, similar whatever), and yet it is exactly this identification that causes conflict!"

Krishnamurti

Tawan Wattuya has emerged as a very significant force on the Thai contemporary art scene since first exhibiting his paintings in 2000. His art is one of provocation as he aims to directly challenge conventional understandings of the society he lives in. This new series of paintings demonstrate a verve and brilliance that ensure Wattuya's vision is one to be reckoned with.

Uniform/Uniformity explores and questions the appearance of different Thai social groups. Basing his paintings on found imagery, Wattuya focuses on posed gatherings of people at events such as weddings, political happenings, beauty competitions, student groups and others that evoke a sense of social order. The artists then strips the figures of their clothes and often the results suggest something far more ribald than the original images could have intended.



At issue it is a critical approach to the importance of appearances in the Thai society. Wattuya aims to confront the significance of social status shown by the uniform one is wearing. He searches for Thailand's hidden faces underneath ideals of social identity. Wattuya began to explore critical questions of Thai social identities in his first solo exhibition, Japanese and European (2000), where he examined the popularity of Japanese and Korean pop culture for Thai teens. His exhibition 500 (2005) showcased 500 watercolor paintings of the former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, and suggested the starting point for Wattuya's sense of the political-engaged. In 2007 he proposed a particularly provocative vision of Thai society with Siamese Freaks, portraying Thai political figures and Pop-stars as monstrous. Here politicians were portrayed on the same level as TV personalities and porn stars. A collaborative exhibition with sculptor Haritorn Akarapat in 2008, titled The Inner I, used street dogs to satirize his compatriots. By imbuing stray dogs with characteristics such as pride, contentment and erotic zeal, Wattuya once again succeeded in deconstructing Thai social identities in terms of a sophisticated and deeply critical irony. Most recently, Wattuya held a two-person show with the photographer Tada Varich, titled Story of the Eye (2009), where themes of sexuality and censorship were explored. Prudishness in Thai society was effectively lampooned. Wattuya is on the cusp of artistic maturity with his current paintings. These artworks are a profound exploration of the human condition as the artist raises questions which crucially threaten the uniformity pervasive in his own society. How can one express oneself freely against the terms of social conditioning, and ultimately emerge free from the tyranny of identity.

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"WESTERN JAPAN MERGER"

100 x 100 cm, oil on canvas, 2008

100 x 100 cm

LICK

BLUE SKY

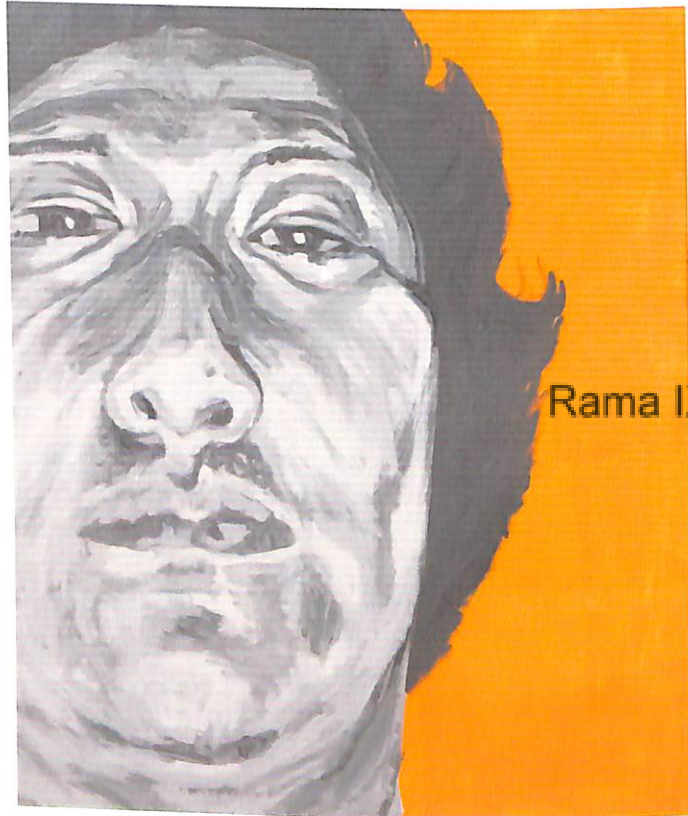
UNTITLED

WESTERN JAPAN MERGER

ORGASM



SELF PORTRAIT
SELF PORTRAIT



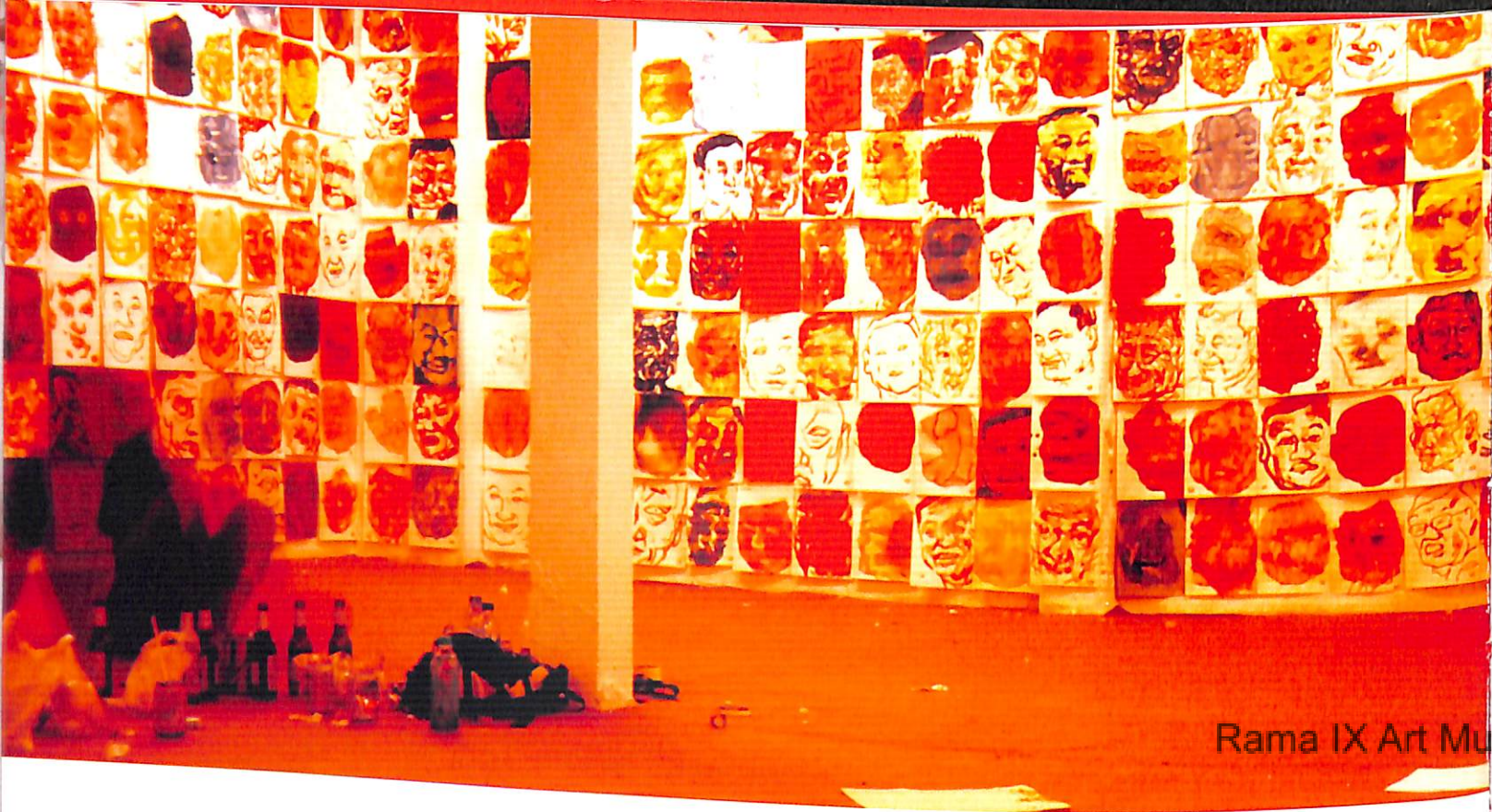
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A STORY OF ELEMENTS : WHEN WATER BEATS

JULIEN LOMBARD

That which is memorable and also remains prominent in your mind is necessarily very important. I remember very well my first encounter with Tawan Wattuya and his paintings; it was winter in Brussels, a grey tone saturated everything from the pavement to the sky and seemed to kill any distinction between the city's buildings. Against this monochrome backdrop, the artist's works jumped at my sight. Tawan's paintings are full of energy and passion and illuminated the art gallery. The walls were covered by his large paintings of proud dogs, super-heroes and appropriations of pornographic imagery. The works appeared to me as metaphors for life and contemporary society, in terms of excess. Meeting Tawan was a great surprise because he is rather peaceful and seemingly discrete.

Tawan's use of watercolour suggests a painterly language suited to his personality. It is quite rare to see this medium being used to render irony and provocation and even though it is a 'soft' medium it works perfectly to demonstrate Tawan's interests, without any doubt. As every birth starts with a scream, Tawan began his career with a strong expressionist style and gradually became less aggressive but holds a strengthened proposal.



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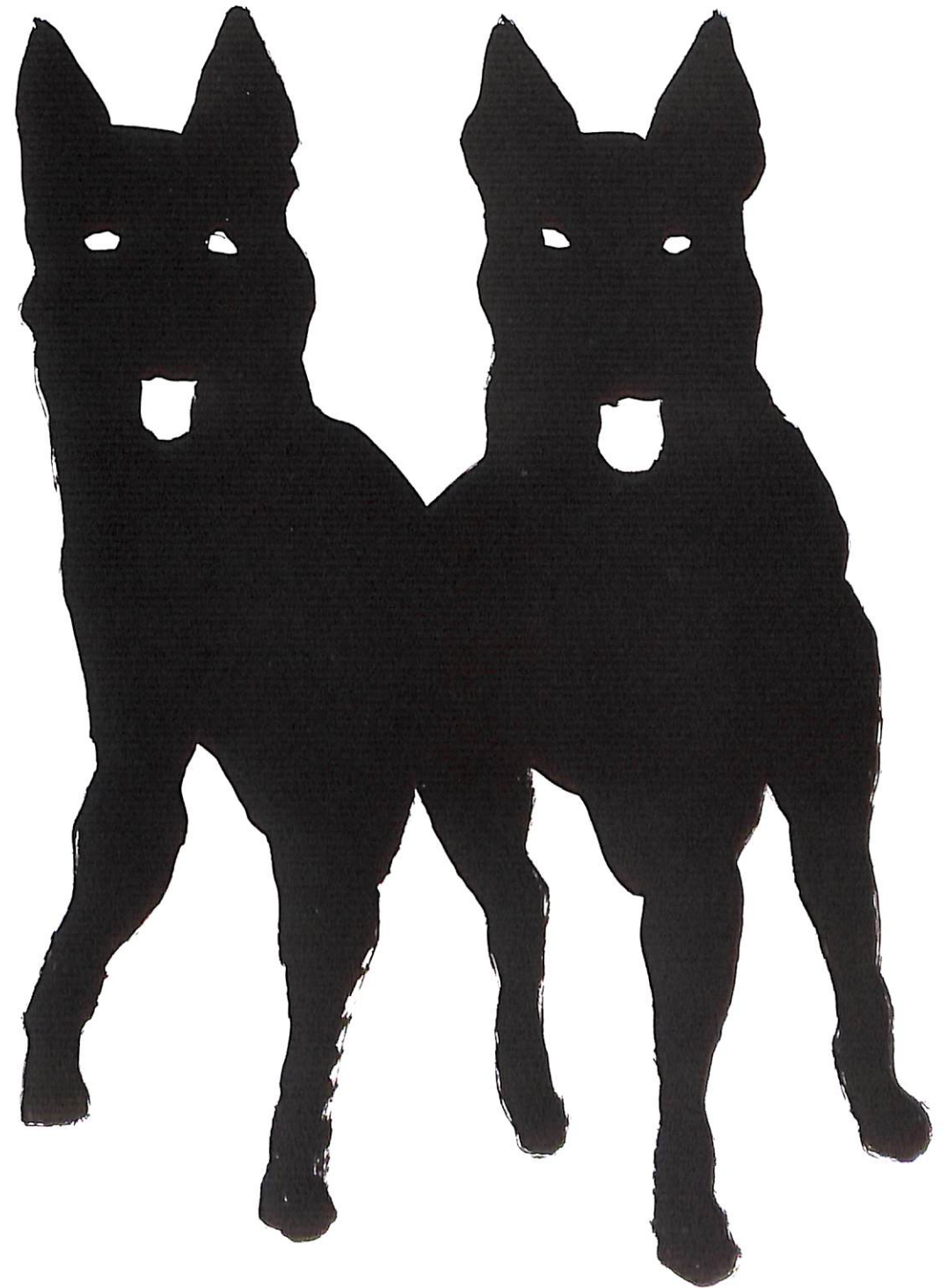
"500" Rama IX Art Museum Foundation
 ROUGE Rama IX Art Museum Foundation
 THE POPULIST Rama IX Art Museum Foundation
 PINK MASK Rama IX Art Museum Foundation
 GREY MASK Rama IX Art Museum Foundation



HERO
KHMER SOLDIERS
BLACK DOG



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WHEN COLOUR IS ENERGY

The energy in Tawan's paintings is striking, no matter the size of the work or the subject. Each artwork is very intense, and has been since his first acrylic paintings when the artist relied on contrasting colours; now he uses the affects of staining for impact. Viewers necessarily participate in the creative process of the artist. We can see and feel how the brush has moved. The artist's energy is generous and communicative. On the one hand, our engagement with an artwork is 'passive' and, on the other, we experience the artist's vivacity. Tawan's sense of pleasure, as a positive energy, is present everywhere. I remember him telling me how he loves to paint and can stay in his studio working frenetically without interruption. Tawan's use of watercolour is performative, the brushstrokes dancing on the page. There are similarities with the Gutai movement, even if their modus operandi is not the same. A unity of paper, painting and performance is perfectly achieved.

Another aspect of the energy of Tawan's art is in his use of the series, such as his 300 Portraits. A high productivity suggests the affects of a whole symphony with every individual painting acting as part of a large ensemble in terms of contributing a specific tone. The symbolic aspect of Tawan's artworks is in his rebel and provocative stance against society's excesses. However, he doesn't merely pass judgement, rather he claims that we should pay close attention to life.

His Dog series, for example, is concerned with the politics of power, protection and custody. Here the animals are shown to be standing proudly and sometimes their tongue hangs out. However, their scale and expressiveness can make us feel insecure. Also, some of the dogs seem poised to attack. Tawan understands what politics can be: protective as well as corrupt and often aggressive. His series Robots and Super-heroes represent a kind of 'last chance' for those who cannot trust State power to protect them, as the artist suggests what hope can mean for a world constantly seeking it. A sense of the revolutionary is not the exclusive aspect of the spirit of rebellion. Tawan's explorations of pornography are a double criticism regarding this point.

Firstly, art may be legitimated in terms of opposing academicism. Tawan's sex scenes display a great sense of the aesthetic for their delight in sexual expression and this somehow makes them more provocative. He transforms nudes from art lessons into porno-chic iconography and the results raise issues of pleasure to peak level. Secondly, Tawan's sex paintings offer a warning against hypocrisy about a world already saturated by sex, violence and other forms of vice. He states clearly that we shouldn't hide behind false icons of so-called purity. Those scenes are all around us, which the artist renders with a distinct style. His use of watercolour dissipates voyeurism.

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POT/AMAN

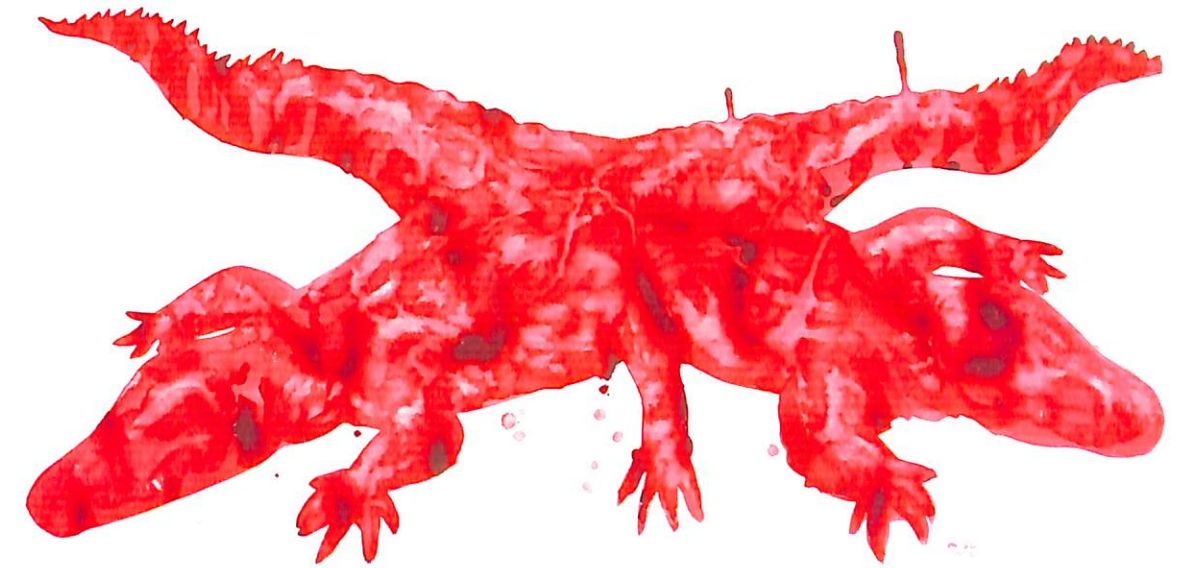


WHEN DUALITY MEANS MORE THAN TWO

Duality is present in all of Tawan's work and has been there since the beginning. Initially, he used this method in a quiet way with close-up portraits that emphasized the eyes. Then duality became more pronounced by 2007 and is now used regularly. In 2007 Tawan began to employ the iconography of twins. He painted many Siamese bodies: two heads, two sets of genitals and dogs with two tails. Away from issues of national symbolism, there are also references to psychology and sociology.

Twin figures are not solely about physical characteristics and Tawan is interested in allegories of human nature. He raises issues of psychology in terms of double personality and a certain sense of ambiguity. The artist also advises us to look at his work in terms of multiple levels of signification. Tawan's Superheroes series offers a key reflection on understandings of double personality. Each of the figures is playing a double game and living a double life. As flip sides of the same coin, one is famous and the other anonymous and one is in light and the other is in dark. Above all, the figure is cautious never to mix both lives.

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“SIAMESE FREAKS”
 2007, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
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RED CROSS
 2008, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
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Tawan has often painted a subject twice on one page. While a seemingly simple approach, the meaning is nevertheless broad. There is a parallel with the Rorschach test, though a realistic representation can raise more questions than an abstract one. Abstraction demands that the viewer dig deep inside him for psychological evaluation and this is an issue of the personal rather than the universal. Tawan's paintings hold references within and we are required to share his personal view.

In more sociological terms, the couples in the sex scenes as well as Tawan's portraits participate in a dynamic of reproduction and duality. For example, two bodies become one in a relationship. The artist is concerned to engage more than one person with a specific question, like a sociologist. Through duality and multiplication he gives us a universal answer to what society is.