

Politics of the Pink Man in the post-Thaksin Era

Manit Sriwanichpoom

By ZHUANG WUBIN

THE MOST WELL respected Thai photographer of his generation, Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961; Bangkok) has often focused his photographic practice on the socio-political issues that affect his country. Both *This Bloodless War* (1997) and the much-heralded *Pink Man Begins* (1997) capture the mood of Thailand in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, linking the latter with the country's appetite for consumption.

Protest (2002-03) is more direct and features photographs of protestors taken every Tuesday outside the government house in Bangkok. In order to have their grievances heard, some protestors would resort to extreme acts – pouring pig shit over their bodies, threatening to burn themselves – in order to attract the attention of journalists and ministers. By photographing them, Sriwanichpoom deplors the state of governance and gives parity to the voices of these commoners.

His inclination towards socio-political commentary can be explained by how he understands the role of an artist within the society. In a *Bangkok Post* interview, he cited the student leaders of the 1973 and 1976 uprisings as a source of influence, even though he has no interest in aligning himself to any ideology.

For people my age, these men and women were our heroes. They had dreams. They wanted to better society. They wanted to see equality. These were the great things that the October generation¹ instilled in people of my age, explained Sriwanichpoom in that interview. I saw their ideals as a legacy that we needed to uphold and carry forward. So I began to question my own role as well.²

Horror in Pink (2001) is an attempt to remind the Thais of the state-sponsored violence directed against these activists. And he does so by digitally inserting the Pink Man into press images of these demonstrations, drawing a parallel between his ogling protagonist and those who have forgotten these tragedies.

However, starting with the demonstrations that broke out in early 2006 calling for the resignation of PM Thaksin Shinawatra, Sriwanichpoom's work has become more 'hard-hitting'. With the exception of *Horror in Pink* and *Protest*, his photographic works prior to 2006 are rarely literal or direct. Since then, his work has become more immediate and 'reactionary', as the scope for offering multiple readings to each series has become narrower.

A way to understand his new projects is to see them as the political and artistic autobiography of a concerned citizen. In fact, in a few years' time, we will be able to consider these projects as Sriwanichpoom's personal reactions to key events shaping Thai history.

Liberators of the Nation (2006) features portraits of the demonstrators who had gathered under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to call for Shinawatra's resignation.

Gone is the gloominess of *Ordinary/Extraordinary* (2006), a series of portraits



Coup D'etat Photo Op #1, from the series Coup D'etat Photo Op (2006)

of his neighbours, with the photographer choosing to celebrate in this new work, not only the vitality of Thai democracy, but also the assertion of identity among the protestors, many of whom were middle-class Bangkok residents. As academics have pointed out, the middle-class came out against the PM due to the fear that they were 'losing political influence, and would find themselves paying for both Thaksin's populist handouts and his coterie's inflated business profits'.³

His focus on the identity rather than the cause of the protest, as least in the way he talks about the work, already implies the side he took at that time, even though he continues to emphasise the unease that he felt over other PAD's demands, beyond the resignation of Shinawatra. As an observer and participant in the rallies, he found himself drawn to the expression of individuality because typically, protestors were not expected to do anything else. By turning up, they were already supporters of the cause. The fact that they chose to express themselves in terms of fashion sense or the different placards that they brought to criticise Shinawatra suggests that the middle-class Thais have become more identity-conscious, says Sriwanichpoom. That claim seems premature and one wonders how the pro-Thaksin protestors would look in similar portraits.

Dubbed the red shirts, they have staged numerous rallies in support of the PM who was eventually ousted by a military coup on 19 September 2006. As the tanks rolled out onto the Royal Plaza, people from Bangkok and the provinces streamed into the capital to celebrate Shinawatra's deposition. *Coup d'etat Photo Op* (2006) features photographs of supporters and tourists posing with a soldier in front of a tank at the plaza, underlining the carnival-like atmosphere in an otherwise tense political

development. A common repulsion against Shinawatra had created strange bedfellows in which middle-class Thais – typically wary of the army's involvement in politics – would hail the *junta* as heroes, a point of irony that has not escaped Sriwanichpoom's attention.

On the King's birthday that year, which was also the 60th anniversary of his coronation, Sriwanichpoom photographed the Thai people who had turned up at Sanam Luang (Royal Ground) to greet the king as he travelled from his residence to the ceremonial Grand Palace for religious rites. When the photographer presented *Waiting for the King* (2006) to the students at Silpakom University (SU), Bangkok's premier arts institute, a student asked him why he chose to photograph the participants of a joyous event looking gloomy and uncomfortable. Why not show them waving and cheering, just like what people would see on TV stations?

First, I am not the PR (public relations) of the government, says Sriwanichpoom, repeating his reply to the student. For nearly eight hours, the people would stand and wait. And for a few seconds, they would wave and cheer. This is what they looked like for the bulk of the day.⁴

The decision to shoot in black-and-white is also deliberate. As usual, everyone had turned up on that day in yellow, the Thai colour for Monday, and the day of the week when the current king was born. By taking away the colour, the focus of the work falls squarely on the expressions of these Thai people. The beauty of photography, says Sriwanichpoom, is its capacity to be read in different ways. His role as a photographer is to influence the interpretations through his artistic decisions, although the viewer is the one who will read the work in her or his own way.

Interestingly, in this epoch of political uncertainty, Sriwanichpoom is not the only Thai artist who played with the

symbolism of colour in the nation-building narrative of Thailand. Natee Utarit (b. 1970 Bangkok) is even more direct, producing paintings of the Thai national flag in bleached out colours for his 2007 show, *Amusement of Dream, Hope and Perfection*.

The flag is also alluded to in Sriwanichpoom's *Embryonia* (2007), which features nine portraits of Thai children in school uniform with their limbs tied up, each lying against a background of red, white or blue – colours of the national flag.

Their pose references *Agnus Dei*, an oil painting by Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664), in which a lamb is seen tied up on a sacrificial altar, resigned to its fate. Its Latin title translates into 'Lamb of God', which references Jesus' sacrificial role in atoning the sins of his believers. But the children in *Embryonia* seem primed only for the 'sacrifice' in the name of political gamesmanship.

The coup had brought the junta back into power, but they had no capacity to run the country. Meanwhile, political opponents continued to bombard the Thais with propaganda and lies. The work articulates Sriwanichpoom's sense of helplessness and highlights the pressure of conformity affecting the country and these young sacrificial lambs.

The tipping point was reached when Samak Sundaravej (1935-2009), acting as the proxy of Thaksin Shinawatra, won the election on 23 December 2007 and became the PM. It is widely believed that the right-wing Sundaravej had instigated the 1976 massacre by calling the protestors 'communists', a charge often used in Thailand alongside accusations of *lèse-majesté* against political opponents. He was also the deputy PM of the 1992 cabinet that sanctioned the killings of demonstrators calling for an end to the army's involvement in Thai politics.

When his 'favourite' politician came into power, Sriwanichpoom took it as a sign that blood would spread all across Thailand. *Still Life with the Thai Flag* (2008) contextualises the sacrificial act as a reference of Sundaravej's 'track record' over the years. The symbolism of the blood has long been enshrined in the red colour of the Thai flag, referring to the blood that 'Thai people should be prepared to sacrifice in defence of the nation'.⁵ But with Sundaravej in power, the only blood that would be spilt, says Sriwanichpoom, would be for personal political gains and not for the long-term betterment of the country.

One of the first things that Sundaravej did in power was to tell CNN that only one person had died during the 1976 massacre. It was a reversal of his own statement made as the Interior Minister in 1977 when he told Thai students in France that 48 had died. This blatant attempt at erasure infuriated Sriwanichpoom and prompted him to 'retaliate' with *Died on 6th October, 1976* (2008). It was possible to make the work only because someone had photocopied the pictures of the victims from the attorney general's secret files and leaked

them to the public in protest at Sundaravej's comments.

On 6 October 1996, 20 years after the tragedy, a symbolic cremation was finally given to the victims at the soccer field where the massacre occurred. Everyone was honoured as individuals with 'faces, names and families', but most of them had no photos during the commemoration. The most significant outcome for the former radicals however, was the opportunity to publicly share for the first time 'their painful personal and collective memories of a unique generation of activists who had played roles in a history, which has been neglected,' noted historian Thongchai Winichakul, who was also a student leader in 1976. The fear of being denied was finally over.⁶ However, the attempt to reconcile this blemish in Thai history was nearly undone by Sundaravej's CNN sound bite.

In *Died on 6th October, 1976*, the metaphor of blood is used to remind viewers of the brutality of this state-sanctioned violence. By enlarging the images and placing them in a developing tray filled with fresh blood, Sriwanichpoom would photograph the portraits as they floated to the surface. It is a simple and poignant attempt to give his audience something visual – in the form of the victims' portraits – to hold on against further attempts of erasure.

It is only with *Masters* (2009) that Sriwanichpoom decides to take a short break from reacting against the political mess, directing his attention to the consumption of Buddhism in Thailand. The issue of consumerism has been an obsession in his photographic practice since 1997. But what irked him to make *Masters* was a chance encounter one day, when he drove past religious icon shops in Bangkok and saw two life-size statues of revered monks. Strangely though, that sight alone was enough to make his skin crawl.

In *Masters*, he questions the necessity of worshipping these monks, which is contradictory to the philosophies of Buddhism. And he does so by photographing the resin sculptures of these old masters in an out-of-focus manner, referencing 'a society that has lost its spiritual compass'.⁷

In closing, since the political turmoil in 2006, Sriwanichpoom has been using his artistic practice to challenge and sustain the boundaries of expression in Thailand. Credit has to be given to Sriwanichpoom for not worrying about the market value of his work and not being bogged down by the rhetorical questions of whether his new projects can be deemed as 'art'.

The tendency with fame and age is for an artist to become more defensive. In his case, he sees it as a calling, as he gets more established internationally, to put across more of his concerns to the society. He feels a certain obligation to use his fame to influence the younger artists and to benefit the public. This is the mindset that will inform his artistic practice in the coming years.

From 1 November, more images relating to this article are on www.asianartnewspaper.com.

1 The "October Generation" is used nowadays to refer to the activists who gathered on October 1976 at the Thammasat University in Bangkok to protest the return of former military dictator Thanom Kittikachorn (1911-2004). The clampdown on the protestors by right-wing groups led to the 6 October 1976 massacre, which left at least 46 dead, including many students. 2 Amitha Amranand, "Flying in the Face of Complacency," *Bangkok Post*, January 25, 2007, sec. Outlook. 3 Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 269. 4 Manit Sriwanichpoom, interview by author, Bangkok, Thailand, February 2009. 5 Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 107. 6 Thongchai Winichakul, "Remembering/Silencing the Traumatic Past: The Ambivalent Memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, ed. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 275-76. 7 David Teh, "Model and Medium," in *Masters*, exh. cat. (Bangkok/Sydney: Kathmandu Photo Gallery/Chalk House, 2009), 3.