



Thailand's Silent Period

by Max Crosbie-Jones

Why have the country's visual artists chosen to say so little about conditions in the kingdom since the 2014 military coup? Are they frightened? Just riding out the storm? Or do they like (some of) what they see?

Lots of strange and surreal things have happened in Thailand since a bloodless coup on 22 May 2014 cleared a path for a new military government. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, a hot-tempered army general prone to rambling speeches and off-script outbursts, has released two syrupy ballads (one is played, per government diktat, on radio stations ad nauseam). Student agitators looking to circumvent a ban on political protests have been arrested for reading George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), for giving a three-fingered salute (à la *The Hunger Games*) or for eating sandwiches in public. A 2016 calendar featuring images of former PMs Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra – the political dynasty that the junta are ham-fistedly trying to purge – was banned. And in early January, some of Thailand's press corps joined the PM for a party at Government House, and – this is where things get truly surreal – dressed up like children for the occasion.

How have Thailand's visual artists chosen to respond to such a bizarre Orwellian climate? Fitfully, if at all. While the performing-arts scene has recently come into its own, with some smart and quietly subversive shows by two physical theatre companies (B-Floor and Democracy), and the Internet has spawned satirical memes in the thousands, the visual arts scene has largely steered clear of broaching the state of the nation, or life under the ruling National Council for Peace and Order, even obliquely.

A few artists *have* responded, though. Staged concurrently at the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre (BACC) and Paris's GB Agency, Pratchaya Phinthong's thought-provoking installation *Who Will Guard the Guards Themselves* (2015) centred on a lightbox image of a 7-Eleven convenience store taken during the postcoup curfew. Thepnara Kongsawang's *Unity Management Course* (2015), at Bangkok's Speedy Grandma gallery, saw visitors being given foam AK-47s to take home in a sendup of the military's omnipresence. And two shows at Chiang Mai's Lyla Gallery gave a voice to the people. Though overwrought, Paphonsak La-or's *Silent No More* (2014–15) was especially searing: a series of photorealistic paintings of radiation-contaminated rural Japan overlaid with phrases inspired by Thailand's recent troubles. But these are the exceptions, not the rule. As Gridthiya Gaweewong, a major figure on the scene best known for her role as artistic director of Bangkok's Jim Thompson Art Center, puts it: 'We are now in a silent period.'

This is perhaps understandable. Not so much strange or surreal as downright disturbing is the

litany of authoritarian measures that, as of writing, are being deployed in scarily ad hoc fashion in an effort to curb free speech: from summonses for 'attitude adjustment', to the trying of civilians in military courts with no right of appeal, to a marked increase in prosecutions for *lèse-majesté* – Thailand's harsh law against insulting the monarchy – and the amount of jail time dished out (in August 2015, a man and a woman were sentenced to a record 30 years and 28 years respectively, both for a series of Facebook posts deemed critical of the royals).

Do Thai artists have anything to be afraid of? Despite these developments, recent history suggests not. From the 1970s on, many of the kingdom's conceptually astute painters and photographers

have articulated their views on Thailand's social and political realities, albeit subtly. Think of self-taught painter Pratuang Emjaroen's brand of surrealism, photo-artist Paisal Theerapongvisanuporn's allegorical studio photographs filled with quotidian objects and, more recently, painter Natee Utarit's toy figurines and animal signifiers in his neoclassical-inspired canvases. Even those artists who have adopted a more hard-hitting stance, such as Vasan Sitthiket, whose body of acerbic impressionism includes depictions of politicians fornicating and receiving fellatio, have escaped censorship.

"Our art scene is under the radar, unlike film, which experiences strong censorship," says Manit Sriwanichpoom, the acclaimed photographer behind series such as *Coup d'Etat Photo Op* (2006), in which members of the public posed with soldiers after the September 2006 putsch that ousted the elected caretaker government of Thaksin Shinawatra. This observation is backed up anecdotally. While talks deemed political have, since the

recent coup, been cancelled on request of the authorities, and a wordless performance piece, *Bang La Merd* by B-Floor, was watched and recorded by military officers throughout its run in early 2015, never in my years spent covering the Thai visual arts scene have I encountered a case of monitoring or censoring what private galleries show. Nor has any gallerist ever mentioned one to me.

Be this as it may, many artists are choosing not to exercise that freedom. A serviceable theory as to why this is: many artists and gallerists are sympathetic towards the military government and its mission to purge Thailand of cronyism and corruption. Some, such as Sitthiket, were vocal supporters of the Bangkok shutdown: the



above Manit Sriwanichpoom, *The Election of Hatred*, 2011, photographs, 60 × 90 cm each. Courtesy the artist

preceding pages Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015. Photo: Chai Siris. Courtesy Kick the Machine Films



Paphonsak La-or, *Silent No More*, 2014–15,
acrylic and dust on canvas, 250 × 450 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Lyla Gallery, Chiang Mai



Pratchaya Phinthong, *Who will guard the guards themselves*, 2015,
lightbox, duratrans and steel frame, 161 × 200 × 9 cm.
Courtesy the artist and GB Agency, Paris

whistleblowing, tricolour garb-wearing street protest movement that paralysed much of downtown Bangkok in late 2013 and early 2014 in an attempt to oust the then ruling Pheu Thai Party – and which got its wish on 22 May, when the military stepped in on the pretext of preventing bloody street clashes and ‘returning happiness to the people’.

Another theory: subversive artists have decided to ride out the storm, either by not showing at all or only showing abroad. Chiang Mai-based conceptual artist Thasnai Sethaseree, for example, chose to present his latest work – partly comprising archival images of past student uprisings, riots and tyrants layered in paint as a metaphor for factual distortion and concealment – in a group show at the University of Chicago’s Logan Center (on through 13 March). He has no plans to show it in Thailand. Meanwhile, multimedia artist Prapat Jiwirangsan hasn’t presented work in Bangkok since *Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in South-east Asia* (2014), a group show of relational installations and conceptual agitprop at the BACC that ran, somewhat serendipitously, as Bangkok shutdown protesters rallied.

One last theory: Thailand’s art institutions are self-censoring even more than they used to, restricting the few artists who do want to raise the volume to underground spaces. Luckana Kunavichayanont, director of the BACC, adamantly denies that this is the case. A recent spike in honorific retrospectives and didactic shows, and lack of more scholarly and socially pertinent exhibitions, is, she explained via email, to do with time constraints and a lack of resources, namely funds, curators and administrators, not a calculated decision to help keep the peace. Still, the perception exists among some.

Since the coup, there have also been positive developments. Despite scant government support for artists and a weak market with few buyers, Thailand’s visual arts scene is undeniably sprightly. Driven by passion projects and a DIY ethos, things are happening. Commercial gallery scene stalwart Thavibu closed but some new white cubes opened (Bangkok CityCity, YenakArt Villa), as have a small cluster of experimental, mixed-use spaces in Chinatown geared mostly towards collaboration and photography (Cloud, Cho Why, NACC Club). Meanwhile, galleries with international connections – and plenty of inoffensive/apolitical paintings on the books – are blossoming. A-list artists Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pinaree Sanpitak and Natee Utarit have stayed away since the coup, as has the

young but fast-rising Korakrit Arunanondchai, but other well-established names staged important shows, including the reclusive painter Chatchai Puipia, who reemerged with a two-part exhibition at Bangkok’s 100 Tonson Gallery, and Navin Rawanchaikul, who last year staged a retrospective across three venues in Chiang Mai up in the northwest, including his dad’s fabric shop (see the Winter 2016 issue of *ArtReview Asia*). There was also an exciting first: PhotoBangkok, a many-pronged photo festival organised by contemporary photographer Piyat Hemmatat and slated to return in 2017.

Two private museums founded by collectors with sizable holdings of contemporary art are in the pipeline. One is a new-build construction in central Bangkok (Bangkok University chairman and former pop star Petch Osathanugrah’s O Museum, unofficially announced for 2019), the other a converted warehouse on the outskirts of Chiang Mai (French art patron Jean-Michel Beurdeley’s MICAM). The latter opens 3 July with a retrospective by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. This is something of a surprise – a pleasant one – given that the Palme d’Or-winning filmmaker and installation artist announced last October that he won’t be releasing his 2015 sylvan cine-poem *Cemetery of Splendour* in Thailand due to the likelihood of it being censored, nor will he be making any more films there for as long as the army is in power. Back in Bangkok, the Culture Ministry’s new headquarters on busy Ratchadaphisek Road is set to include the Asian Culture Gateway, a \$900 million (£17.5m) museum that will house its growing collection of heritage and contemporary art as well as temporary exhibitions (opening date: unknown).

Despite all this, a sense that visual artists are underperforming lingers. “I’m totally overwhelmed with the scene. It is by no means dead but its function has dramatically changed due to self-censorship,” says Somrak Sila, the co-owner of WTF Bar & Gallery, and the curator behind several postcoup shows aimed at prodding the Bangkok community out of its stagnation and ennui, such as *Conflicted Visions* (2014) and *This is not a Political Act*, an exhibition about forced disappearances that opened in February. “We’ve been seeing a lot of art festivals in recent months, such as Bukruk and Bangkok Edge,” she adds. “But none of the art in these festivals has any political message. It’s just art for aesthetic pleasure, which is perfect for gentrifying neighbourhoods. It definitely creates a lot of hype – and distracts you from what’s really going on here.” ar



Sutee Kunavichayanont,
My Motherland, 2012/14, foam sheet,
58 × 55 cm.
Courtesy the artist