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- ARAYA RASDJARMREANSOOK

By Lucy Rees

Presenting work from 1994 to today, 'Storytellers of the Town' at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, is the first Australian solo exhibition of Araya Rasdjarmreansook, a Thai artist known here for her contribution to the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. The 4A show is curated by Clare Veal and John Clark, and accompanied by a sister exhibition of Rasdjarmreansook's printmaking at the University of Sydney and a follow-up exhibition at Canberra's Drill Hall Gallery in July.

Lucy Rees: How did you begin to work with video? Your earlier works seen here explore the connection between the living and the dead, between insane and 'normal' people, and between humans and animals. Why was video the necessary medium to consider these themes?

Araya Rasdjarmreansook: In 1997 I began to take photos of the corpses but found that it wasn't enough. I knew that video would solve the problems. For ethical reasons I couldn't show corpses to audiences directly so I thought that video could be the best way to do it. You can't take the dead to a public space, but this was a good way to show them to a lot of people.

LR: Was the work originally met with a lot of criticism?

AR: Actually it was more controversial in Thailand than abroad. I had to go through quite difficult procedures to get access to the bodies in the first place. In Thailand they just think about ethics. That's the difference for the viewer: they need to step across the line and consume the work as art, not under the strong conditions of Thai culture.

LR: Can you comment on your interest in death?

AR: I think making art is confronting my fear. It's the unknown. I try to get closer and closer to it, each time challenging myself. I want to look in detail at the relationship to death through song and art.

I once had a solo show in Sweden and a professor of philosophy came up to me afterwards and said 'Thank you. We had never had the chance to

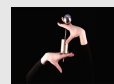
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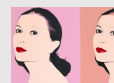
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look at dead bodies'. And during my show the prime minister of Sweden was shot. Many people then came to see the show to try to make sense of what had happened. Something strange occurred – art begins and life continues, but at some point they cross over in the middle.

LR: Tell me about the powerful multichannel video work *The insane*, 2002.

AR: It took me about two years to get the permission to film these women in a mental asylum. They were not allowed to speak to the public so I wanted to tell their stories. Finally, I simply put the camera in front of these women and let them speak as they wished. Some laughed, some cried. And there were so many different voices. Some were slow, some were loud, some were nervous.

LR: You write extensively for magazines and have written a number of books. Does writing inform your artmaking practice?

AR: When I was young I used to write about lovers and it was all about romance. During my stay and study in Germany over twenty years ago, my printmaking brought up many questions about women. I wrote a book at this time about the positioning of Thai women in Germany, and it was the first time I could get close to women like this, who in the past worked as prostitutes and then got married to German men. In Thailand I worked as a university lecturer, but I learnt so much from these women playing cards and chatting. I then made a series of works about these women that were shown at the National Gallery of Thailand in Bangkok in 1995.

LR: Your work comments on the role of women in Thailand. Could you be labelled a feminist?

AR: I think that my position as a feminist artist is problematic because there is a strand of feminist art discourse in Thailand and groups of female artists that exhibit together as feminist artists. I have never taken part in these. In lots of my works I see the position of women as one of strength; compassion for dogs or being able to connect with the women in the asylum is actually empowering and comes from being a woman. That said the women in the asylum were often traumatised by abuse from men. So I experience the world as a woman but I am aware of the inequalities.

LR: Do you consider yourself part of an art movement? Who are your peers?

AR: I am alone; I work alone. The filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul is a friend of mine. Our work is not similar at all, but he is similar in that he does not succumb to 'Thai-ness' or a prettified idea of what art should look like.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: *Storytellers of the Town*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, 14 March – 10 May 2014; Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 4 July – 10 August 2014.



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