

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

4A CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART

181-187 Hay Street

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Those of us stuck on the art world's endless forced march will recall this Chiang Mai–based artist from the Thai pavilion of the 2005 Venice Biennale or from the last Documenta, during which she and her dogs lived for three weeks in a Kassel chalet. It still comes as a relief to see her art in a proper solo exhibition, spanning two decades of her career and including several works never before seen outside Thailand. Together, the works cohere into an impressive practice with several taut threads running through it: the fragility of identity, the tension between history and fate, the role of women, and—especially—the omnipresence of death in even the most modern society. (A concurrent show of Rasdjarmrearnsook's work runs at the University of Sydney Art Gallery through May 3.)

Troubling wails bleed from the gallery that displays the three-channel video installation *Great Times Message, Storytellers of the Town, The Insane*, 2002, which documents female patients in a Thai mental asylum. As the three women tell their stories, some of which involve hideous abuse, they at times lunge into intense outbursts—yet Araya has obscured each of them with the same black-and-white blur, and the illegible images and overlapping sound drown the women's specificity in a general, numb howl. More recent works are less explicitly death-soaked, such as *Treachery of the Moon*, 2012, a video showing Araya and her dogs from behind while they watch brainless soap operas and newscasts about Thailand's political struggles. Yet this work, too, exhibits, around its sly humor, a melancholy awareness of Araya's part of the brevity of all things.

Transience is also the subject of the titular seminar in her haunting video *The Class*, 2005, in which Araya stands at the front of a schoolroom speaking to six corpses arrayed on metal stretchers, and though they're shrouded in white, their hairless heads peek out grimly from beneath the sheets. The artist isn't bothered: She pauses to listen to their thoughts while we hear only silence, and then she consistently follows up with cutting responses that feel at once otherworldly and futile. In Thailand, only monks, all of them men, are normally allowed to be this close to cadavers, and her willingness to violate such an elemental taboo has a fair share of political force. But the video is also a synecdoche for Araya's whole oeuvre: Her art is an ongoing debate with the dead, and it isn't calm and worshipful, but rigorous and ceaselessly fraught.

— Jason Farago



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Treachery of the Moon*, 2012, single-channel video installation, dimensions variable.