

## MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM: Heavenly Pink

One of Thailand's best-known contemporary artists, Manit Sriwanichpoom has negotiated the art world at home as well as abroad in several capacities – as artist, curator and cinematographer. A keen observer of society and inclined towards social activism since his student days, Sriwanichpoom first worked as a photo-journalist, chronicling Thailand's volatile politics and its burgeoning culture of consumerism, before he turned to photography. He is often synonymous with Pink Man, a character he created in 1997 and embodied by Thai poet Sompong Thawee: a portly Asian man dressed in a garish pink suit pushing a bright pink trolley – an icon of and for the vacuous consumerism overtaking society that Sriwanichpoom observed with a satirical eye.

Over two decades, Sriwanichpoom sent Pink Man around the world and staged him in various guises, the somewhat comical figure serving as a vehicle for Sriwanichpoom's barbed social commentary. Inserted like a lurid *punctum* in European cityscapes and desolate scenes of Bali and Beijing, Pink Man personifies the tourist looking to voraciously 'consume' sights and experiences, or echoes the dangers of unbridled capitalism and development. Pink Man also appears frequently in his home country, staged to lampoon various social 'types' or otherwise enacting hollow tableaux sharply critical of the cult of nationalism. More often than not, Pink Man is a witness to history, and some of the most arresting images juxtapose the droll bystander with horrific scenes of brutality from Thailand's not so distant past. Disconcertingly, Pink Man looks on with a bemused expression, a single image speaking volumes about society's priorities and values.

Around 2018, Sriwanichpoom began to think about the conclusion of his *Pink Man* series, and staged long-time collaborator Sompong Thawee in a grey wig contemplating his mortality: he is shown face to face with a Buddha, holding a skull in his hands, and – in a mischievous nod to artist Ai Weiwei's iconic performance for the camera – dropping an effigy of himself. Pink Man was laid to rest in the streets of New York in 2018, in a pink body bag laid out next to the iconic pink trolley. True to form, the character's personal narrative also served as wider commentary, in this case, highlighting the troubling culture of (gun) violence.

In discussing Pink Man's denouement, Sriwanichpoom reveals that he was planning a performance of "Post Pink Man", where the protagonist visits earth as an angel – a performance that had to be shelved due to the pandemic. Sriwanichpoom's solo presentation at Ames Yavuz marks Pink Man's return, this time journeying through the afterlife instead of through our world. We are presented with a collection of visual riddles: Pink Man's iconic trolley hooked up to IV drips; a suspended wooden boat evocative of the vessels that carry the soul on its journey to spiritual realms; images of broken Buddha statues; and a short animation which sees a haloed Pink Man appearing in an iconic image painted by Khrua In Khong in the temple of Wat Borom Niwat, depicting a group of Westerners marveling at a giant lotus flower, a symbol of Buddhism.

Where earlier works often had a more direct address or stance, this new chapter is far more ambivalent in tenor. Each image introduces multiple registers (of kitsch, beauty, and satire), prompting audiences to parse the semiotics of spirituality and consumerist culture in Pink Man's afterlife, and to consider what new narratives this reckoning might hold.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

An independent curator and former Museum professional, Tan Siuli has over a decade of curatorial experience with a focus on contemporary art from Southeast Asia. Formerly Head of Collections and Senior Curator at the Singapore Art Museum, her exhibition projects include two editions of the Singapore Biennale 2013 and 2016, inter-institutional traveling exhibitions, as well as mentoring and commissioning platforms such as the President's Young Talents exhibition series. She has also lectured on Museum-based learning and Southeast Asian art history at institutes of higher learning such as the National Institute of Education as well as LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

Her recent speaking engagements include presentations on Southeast Asian contemporary art at Frieze Academy London and Bloomberg's Brilliant Ideas series. Tan holds an MA in Art History from University College London, a BA in Literature and Art History from the University of Nottingham, UK, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art from the School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, UK.