

ARNDT

NATEE UTARIT
ILLUSTRATION
OF THE CRISIS

12 SEPTEMBER - 17 OCTOBER 2012

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LOOKING AT THE PAST TO UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT. ON NATEE UTARIT'S *ILLUSTRATION OF THE CRISIS*.

BY KATERINA VALDIVIA BRUCH

ARNDT Berlin is proud to present *Illustration of the Crisis*, the first solo exhibition of Thai artist Natee Utarit in Berlin.

Initially influenced by German Expressionism and abstract art in his early body of work, Utarit has undergone an exploration of the medium painting connecting it with photography and classical Western art. Light and perspective are some of the elements the artist chooses to work with, focusing on painting as a means to explore image-making. In the last decade, his paintings have been inspired by old masters of Western art history from the Italian Renaissance - such as Fra Angelico (1395-1455) or Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) - and the Baroque era, approaching, in a critical way, Thai social subject matters.

Between 2009 and 2011, Thailand was living a series of political contradictions that were affecting public life in the country. It was more a crisis connected to power relations and Buddhist belief, rather than just an economic crisis related to the country's development. For the artist, Thai's current crisis is intangible and therefore complex to understand as it is happening in Thai's soul: "It is a crisis that strikes at the heart of some of our most treasured illusions, those which have sustained us for centuries and that only we Thais can understand in the context of our own society and our own cultural beliefs." ¹

But, how can we illustrate this crisis on canvas? Thus, the complexity of the pictorial language allows him to speak about these sensitive issues. The artist considers that the symbolism of the 15 - 17th centuries Western painting techniques, such as landscape and still life, are capable to show multiple layers of reality. For him, "This language relied heavily on metaphors and hidden symbols to communicate"². In the series *Illustration of the Crisis*, the artist uses "the language and grammar of painting of the past"³ to portray current social concerns.

The change in power has made people afraid of an unpredictable future. There has been a construction of an image of happiness founded on the basis of fear and anxiety. In order to express these contradictions, the artist includes symbols of Thai society and politics in a dreamlike atmosphere. Although this possible world is based on his personal imagination, for him "There is no irony. There are no optical illusions. Everything is meant to tell a story in the same direct manner that characterised paintings for centuries."⁴ In general, the artist refers to his work as dealing with social issues rather than considering it political art, confronting local subjects with universal human themes.

Before starting to work, Utarit composes an artificial scenery created with objects chosen from antique markets or accumulation shops (similar to flea markets). During his search, he tries to find items that are suitable to be painted, in order to later create a dialogue between the found objects and the ideas he wants to transmit with them.

The artist's studio reminds us of a sort of medical laboratory or a room for experiments, in which all objects are closely observed, organised and separated. Later, he will put some objects together in a particular arrangement meaningful for him. After this process of composition, he photographs the dialogic setup of the items. While painting, he chooses the proper colours to create the atmosphere he wants to achieve. This artificiality creates some distance between the hidden reality he is addressing and leaves the viewer the option to decipher the questions he is posing to the audience. To reach a more abstract environment, the artist deliberately does not take nature as an example to create the settings of his canvases. And, right after setting up this artificial scenario, he starts to paint.

In the series *Illustration of the Crisis*, the symbolic language and the dialogue of the objects portrayed by the artist mix elements of reality and fiction, combining found objects such as bones, brushes, scissors, spoons, old chandeliers, a head of a Buddha or busts of military characters with plastic toys, anatomy models and plastic animal figures. In fact, these animals are not intended to correspond to real animals. More likely, they are metaphors of different human behaviours, thoughts and emotions, as if we would be speaking of characters taken from fairytales.

Symptoms of the crisis are visible in the use of animal jaws, such as in *Inward Looking* (2012), in which the mouth of a shark skeleton, containing an old megaphone, seems to be shouting at the figure of an European woman wearing 19th century clothes, or in *The Bridge* (2012), where a rabbit lies on an animal jaw behind some toy soldiers facing the front, but also in *Crocodile Tears* (2011), in which the title itself stands for hypocrisy. It seems as if you open your mouth you might get into trouble, as in *Saying the truth is a suicide* (2012) with false human teeth. According to the artist, his works "are telling things that are beyond speaking and most people in our society are not willing to hear or talk to".⁵

Utarit's canvases are famous for questioning the nature of images and how these are made: either influenced by photography, or combined with elements from landscape painting or still lifes, or taking ideas from antique markets, the language of painting in *Illustration of the Crisis* is challenging the audience to reflect on the multifarious possibilities to understand contemporary painting, but also to take a look at ways to address contemporary issues.

The current series, on view at the gallery, is a continuation of his previous explorations of the pictorial language in Western painting techniques. Earlier series, such as *Pictorial Statement* (2000), connected reproductions of old masters with Thai landscapes, or *The Last Description of the Old Romantic* (2005) used copies of floral still lifes. For him, the multiple facets of reality are best depicted through these means.

Natee Utarit was born in 1970 in Bangkok, where he lives. He studied at the College of Fine Art, and graduated in Graphic Arts at the Painting and Sculpture Faculty at Silpakorn University, both in Bangkok. During his art studies at Silpakorn University, he was influenced by classical art, but also by theories of postmodernism that deconstruct classicism connecting it to modern concerns.

His international career dates back to the late 1980's, participating in group exhibitions such as the "Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art Brisbane" (1999), "Next Move: Contemporary Art from Thailand at La Salle College of the Arts" (2003) or "Traces of Siamese Smile: Art, Faith, Politics and Love at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center" (2008). Recent solo exhibitions include "The Amusement of Dreams, Hope and Perfection at the Art Center of Chulalongkorn University" (2007) and "Natee Utarit: After Painting" at the Singapore Art Museum (2010). His work is part of renowned collections, such the Bangkok University, the Queensland Art Gallery, the Singapore Art Museum, as well as private collections in Europe and Asia.

¹ Artist statement on *Illustration of the Crisis*.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Personal communication with the artist.

⁵ Personal communication with the artist.



THE BRIDGE 2012
OIL ON LINEN
150 X 200 CM | 59.06 X 78.74 IN



I WAS BORN WITH A COPPER SPOON 2011
OIL ON LINEN
60 X 80 CM | 23.62 X 31.5 IN



CROCODILE TEARS 2011
OIL ON LINEN
70 X 100 CM | 27.56 X 39.37 IN



FRAGILE 2012
OIL ON LINEN
160 X 250 CM | 62.99 X 98.43 IN



CANDLE LIGHT 2012
OIL ON LINEN
160 X 140 CM | 62.99 X 55.12 IN



SAYING THE TRUTH IS A SUICIDE 2012
OIL ON LINEN
90 X 100 CM | 35.43 X 39.37 IN



ARISTOCRAT 2012
OIL ON LINEN
140 X 160 CM | 55.12 X 62.99 IN



INWARD LOOKING 2012
OIL ON LINEN
160 X 140 CM | 62.99 X 55.12 IN



OBSERVER 2011
OIL ON LINEN
100 X 90 CM | 39.37 X 35.43 IN



REVOLUTIONIST 2012
OIL ON LINEN
30 X 40 CM | 11.81 X 15.75 IN



RABBIT HEAD 2012
OIL ON LINEN
40 X 30 CM | 15.75 X 11.81 IN



NATEE UTARIT

Born in 1970 in Bangkok, Thailand
Lives and works in Bangkok, Thailand

EDUCATION

- 1987 College of Fine Art, Bangkok
1991 B.A. Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Illustration of the Crisis*, ARNDT Berlin, Germany
- 2011 *Illustration of the Crisis*, Art Season Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland
Bourgeois Dilemma, Finale Art File, Philippines
- 2010 *Natee Utarit, After Painting*, works from 1992 – 2008,
Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- 2009 *Tales of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Richard Koh Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 *Transparency happiness*, Soka Art Center, Beijing, China
Dreams, Hope and Perfection, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia
- 2007 *The Amusement of Dreams, Hope and Perfection*, The Art Center, Center of
Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok
The Amusement of Dreams, Hope and Perfection,
Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 2006 *Kyotek Sae-Wu's 12 photographs during 1969-1973*,
Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
The fragment and the sublime, Valentine Willie Fine Art,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 *The Last Description of the Old Romantic*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
Ballad for Khrua Inkong, Chiang mai University Art Museum, Chiang mai
New Works, The Art Gallery of the faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic
Arts. Silpakorn University, Bangkok
- 2003 *Recent Paintings*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
Recent Paintings, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Still Pictures, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Singapore
- 2002 *Reason and Monster Project*
Silent laughing of monster / Large scale, The Gallery of Art and Design,
Silpakorn University, Bangkok
Painting with pure reason, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
Silent laughing of monster, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 2001 *Equivalence second dialectic*, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Singapore
Views and Transference, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 2000 *Pictorial Statement*, Bangkok University Art Gallery, Bangkok
- 1999 *Homage to Landscape Painting*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
Internal Landscape, Art Forum, Singapore
Appearance and Reality, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 1998 *Internal Landscape*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 1997 *Mother Figure*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 1995 *Drawing and Water colors*, British Council Gallery, Bangkok
- 1994 *Anthropology*, The Bangkok Playhouse, Bangkok

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Asia: Looking South*, ARNDT Berlin, Germany
Wonderland, G23 Srinakharinwirot University
Future Pass – From Asia to the World
Collateral Event of the 54th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, Palazzo Mangilli-Valmarana, Venice, Italy
Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991 - 2011, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- 2010 *Beacons of Archipelago*, Arario Gallery, Cheonan, Korea
Clouds, Power of Asian Contemporary Art, Soka Art Center, 798, Beijing, China
- 2008 *Mapping Asia*, The Special Project of CIGE 2008, Beijing, China
This is not a fairytale, Contemporary Thai Art Exhibition, Soka Art Center, Taipei
Traces of Siamese Smile/ Art, Faith, Politics and Love, Bangkok Art and Culture Center, Bangkok
- 2007 *Diversity in print*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore
Thai Contemporary: Charm and Chasm, Tang Gallery, Beijing, China
Southeast Asian Contemporary Art, Soka Art Center, Beijing, China
Asian Art Now, Soka Contemporary Space, Taiwan
- 2006 *Signed and Dated*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 *On Paintings*, Bangkok University Art Gallery (Rangsit), Bangkok
Portrait, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2003 *Overseas*, The Gallery of Art and Design, Silpakorn University, Bangkok
Next Move, Earl Lu Gallery, Lasalle-Sia College of the Art, Singapore
- 2002 *Present perfect*, Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, Bangkok
Fusion Vision, Thai Australian Artistic Connection, The Gallery of Art and Design, Silpakorn University, Bangkok
Developing Time, Tadu Gallery, Bangkok
- 2001 *Painted*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
ARS 01, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
Thai Contemporary Exhibition, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Root, Open Art Space, Bangkok
- 2000 *Snapshot*, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Singapore
- 1999 *The Third Asia – Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Alter Ego, The 1st Thai – EU Art Project, The Art Gallery of The Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Bangkok
- 1998 *Portrait*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok The Art Exhibition of Vietnamese – Thai Artist, Fine Art Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi Fine Art University, Hanoi, Viet Nam
Book, Kurusapa Building, Bangkok
Bangkok Art Project 1998, Public Art in Community lives across the Rattanakosin Island, Bangkok
- 1997 *Conversing Contemporary*, Numthong Gallery, Bangkok
- 1996 *Hidden Agenda*, Project 304, Bangkok
- 1995 *Man and The Forest*, A Fundraising Exhibition Benefit The Northern Development, The Art Center, The Center of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok
- 1993 *Life Now*, Dialogue Gallery, Bangkok
Premio Internazionale Biella Per l'Incisione 1993, Biella, Italy

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS - CONTINUED

- 1992 *Small Work*, An Art Exhibition by 56 Thai Artists, Silom Art Space, Bangkok
The Exhibition of Prints, Dialogue Gallery, Bangkok
Art Thesis Exhibition by the Graduating Class of the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Bangkok
The Exhibition of Prints, Foyer Gallery, Canberra School of Art, Australia
The Contemporary Graphic Arts by New Artists, The National Gallery, Bangkok
- 1991 *The 19th International Biennial of Graphic Art 1991*, Ljubijana, Yugoslavia
The Contemporary Art Competition 1991, The National Gallery, Bangkok
Small Work, Group Show by 3 Artists, The Seven Seas Gallery, Bangkok
Spiritual Sense, 2 Artists Exhibition of Prints, British Council Gallery, Bangkok
The Small Prints by 10 Artists, River City Gallery, Bangkok
The 3rd Toshiba Art Competition, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, Bangkok
The 8th Exhibition of Contemporary Art by Young Artists, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, Bangkok
The 5th International Biennial Print Exhibition 1991, ROC Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taiwan
- 1990-85 *The Contemporary Art Competition 1990*, The National Gallery, Bangkok
The 3rd, 5th Exhibition of Contemporary Art by PTT, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, Bangkok
The 3rd, 7th Exhibition of Contemporary Art by Young Artists, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, Bangkok
The 1st, 2nd Toshiba Art Competition, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, Bangkok
The Male Formy Grafiki, Polska-Lodz'89, Poland
The 2nd, 3rd Youth Art Exhibition of Thailand

COLLECTIONS

- Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Lasale SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
Fine Art Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Canvas Foundation, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Silpakorn University, Bangkok
Bangkok University, Bangkok
British Council, Bangkok
Private Collections in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Japan, Australia, France and Hong Kong

COURTESY AND PHOTOCREDIT

All images courtesy the artist, Richard Koh Fine Art & ARNDT Berlin,
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Matthias Arndt wishes to express his gratitude for the kind collaboration with Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

