

Tawan Wattuya: Exposé of the Human Condition

The striking watercolours of the Thai artist Tawan Wattuya are not just brash provocations, they also turn the notion of social groups on its head.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Tawan Wattuya, Honesty at all cost, even to loose one's life, 2009. Watercolor on paper, 90x152cm

“The concept for my paintings usually comes little by little,” said Thai artists Tawan Wattuya. “Sometimes, I’ll have a complete idea, sometimes it will become clear while I’m painting. When I have finished four or five paintings, I can understand what the idea is that drew me to it in the first place.” I met Tawan in Rome, on his way back from Taranto, South of Italy, where he had participated in a three-man show with Vasan Sitthiket and Tanasade Silaaphiwon, two of his colleagues from Thailand. I found he had been dazzled and inspired by what he saw at the Vatican museums, especially the treatment of the human figure, a subject very near and dear to his heart.

The first impact of Tawan’s work can be highly aesthetic and even shocking, because of the harsh nudity and borderline pornographic content. However, this shock is no more than a device that makes us look beyond man-made structures and hierarchies.

His real focus is on different social groups. The images he transforms into paintings are from magazine photographs of gatherings, weddings, political happenings, beauty competitions, student groups that all evoke a sense of social order. By stripping the figures of their clothes, he shatters the appearances that are so key in Thai society, and in doing so, overturns the rules and eliminates hierarchies. He quite literally shows his characters in their naked truth, beyond social identity. He either reveals an underlying reality of oneness to us, or just crude human instincts, depending on the viewer’s beliefs regarding human nature.

I started our conversation off by asking Tawan to talk me through his trajectory in the contemporary art realm, starting from the very beginning. With his quiet, gentle tone, Tawan started by telling me that he simply liked to draw as a kid.

“My uncle Niti Wattuya is a famous painter in Thailand, so my family has always been open to the idea of me becoming a painter. But I didn’t have artistic ambitions at the beginning. My dream was to become a Hollywood-style film director. I wasn’t good at school and my parents were worried about my future. Since I could draw, they advised me

to go to art school. I mindlessly followed the suggestion, and chose to enrol in the painting department at the Silpakorn University in Bangkok.”

How was your experience at Silpakorn University?

What I enjoyed the most at art school was the freedom. Painting, drawing and making art has always been enjoyable for me, even if I didn't really have any ambition to become an artist. I simply studied like everyone else, made paintings as assignments, but ultimately, I didn't care much. I started fighting a lot with a professor who didn't like my art in my fourth year at the school. It ended up pretty badly for me, as I had to repeat the year. I was very upset, and I followed my childhood dream of becoming a film director by working on a film production, but I realized I didn't feel good there, so I went back to art school. I was rejected again after fighting again with another professor. Finally, I graduated with a bachelor's degree after nine years. It usually takes five. I became committed to painting after that, mostly to prove my professors and the other students wrong.

How did your work evolve from there and how did you navigate your emergence as an artist in Thailand?

It wasn't easy, as portraits and figures were not popular in Thailand at the time. On top of that, there was one single art group that controlled the scene, especially one major art contest. One needed to get an award from them in order to become an artist. Only a few artists could make it without their approval; my uncle Niti and Vasan Sitthiket were among the very few who achieved this. So while I had become serious about painting, it still was quite hard because I didn't have the award. You have to also consider that the internet only arrived in Thailand in 2000, so I didn't have any access to the international landscape; I couldn't even read English. In addition, people in Thailand couldn't understand my work. My first breakthrough came when one gallery believed in my work and showed it at a time when I had doubted myself. From that first show, I started to gain more confidence in my

work, and then I had the chance to go to Okinawa in Japan for a residency, which increased my understanding of art further.

You have been exploring Thai social identities since your first solo exhibition, 'Japanese and European', in 2000, where you addressed the fascination of Thai teens for foreign pop culture. Can you tell me how you worked on that initial series?

I always create paintings from magazine and newspaper pictures, as I like the fact the images are public. I'm interested in many different things, like fashion, subcultures, and politics, and I mix everything together. In 2000, I was very interested in different cultures coming from other countries, and the fact that when European, American and Japanese culture came to Thailand, Thai people tried to copy it.

It seems you don't take a stance in the works, is that true?

I don't judge as to whether something is right or wrong. I never try to convince people. I'm quite open to share my work and receive comments, but I don't need people to think like me. Humour helps in this. For example, in the work for the *Rogues Gallery: Monsters, Villains & Hellbent Politicians* show, I changed the colours a little bit to create a creepy effect. I changed the colour Trump's skin to green and did the same with Aung San Suu Kyi.

Why did you decide to use watercolours almost exclusively?

As a painter, I started off doing acrylic on canvas, but did not enjoy it so much; I prefer the immediacy of watercolours. Also, the acrylics they weren't very successful when I exhibited them, so I stopped using acrylics for five years. Then slowly, little by little, I returned to them to create some canvases. One year, my output was 70% watercolours and 30% canvases.

What role does nudity and the naked body have in your work?

Let's take my Miss Thailand series as an example. In the original photograph, which I used as a basis for the painting, the people depicted are in swimsuits. By stripping them of their clothes, I wanted to play a little bit. I'm interested in pop culture, especially the idea contests, which are very popular in Thailand. I wanted to poke fun at the Miss Thailand competition, and of course, the male competition too. It all comes back to my interest in the socio-political realm, and the same process applies to the depiction of groups of people in uniforms. By connecting these two concepts, it dawned on me that nudity is a uniform of sorts as well. In my show at the Castello Aragonese in Taranto, I presented a series after the Uniforms series, which was based on the concept that we are often faced with menus of humans and catalogues of humans in consumerist cultures.

Are you working on something new at the moment?

I usually do two or three projects at the same time. I may push a series aside for five years, and then want to return to it at a certain point. At the moment, I'm involved in a long-term project and I don't know when I will finish it. I have started something different, live paintings that are focused on groups that have a specific significance in different parts of the world. In Mexico, I painted workers who built a museum there, in the South of Thailand, I painted only Muslim people, and in Switzerland, I painted refugees from Afghanistan and Syria. It is a long project that extends beyond my interest in Thailand to look at the wider dynamics of the world.

About the artist:

Tawan Wattuya was born in 1973 in Bangkok, Thailand, where he currently lives and works. He is known primarily for his vibrantly colorful and expressive paintings in watercolor and ink, and for choosing often politically relevant, sometimes controversial subject matter. His international exhibition record of solo shows, group shows and art fairs is extensive, and his paintings are held in many collections. He was one of the artists in a two-person show at The Lodge Gallery in 2016, and he has had work in recent exhibitions at Sundaram Tagore, in New York City, and at Saatchi Gallery, in London. In Thailand, Wattuya has exhibited at Toot Yung Art Center, The Art Center of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok Art & Cultural Center (BACC), HOF Art Gallery, WTF Gallery, Tang Contemporary Art, Gallery D-9, Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, and Numthong Gallery. He has also shown in a number of galleries in Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia and France.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.