

Vasan Sitthiket: I Am the One with the People | COBO Social

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Vasan Sitthiket, We Must Choose Our Future! , 2012, woodcut, 73 x 100 cm





Portrait of Vasan Sitthiket. Courtesy of the artist and ARTERY by IJ Innovation Co.,Ltd.



Vasan Sitthiket, We Must Choose Our Future! , 2012, woodcut, 73 x 100 cm. Courtesy of Yavuz Gallery.





Vasan Sittthiket, Postmodern Thai Monk Now, 2011. Mixed media on canvas, 300x200cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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A natural-born provocateur, Thai artist Vasan Siththiket went from a philosophical and religious worldview to political art activism. To him, artists have a responsibility to change society and speak to the people.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and ARTERY by IJ Innovation Co.,Ltd.





Portrait of Vasan Sitthiket. Courtesy of the artist and ARTERY by IJ Innovation Co.,Ltd.

This July, I was visiting the exhibition 'Road to Justice' at the MAXXI museum in Rome. I was in the company of the Thai artist Vasan Sitthiket and a group of artists, gallerists and curators from Bangkok. As soon as we entered the space of the exhibition, Vasan stopped in front of an installation. It was 'Batons (Circle)', by the South African artist Kendell Geers. This was a highly political installation consisting of police batons placed in a circle on the wall. Vasan could barely contain his excitement and asked to have his picture taken with the work, and then pulled up his middle finger and struck a "fuck the police" pose.

I feel this episode describes the character of Vasan Sitthiket quite well. A major artist in Thailand, he is one of those souls who incarnate rebellion in an almost punk way. In his work, which spans many different mediums, he sees things in black and white. To him, the world is a fight between the forces of good versus the armies of evil, and the second usually prevail. In this sense, he is like a Thai Ai Wei Wei or a Southeast Asian Johnny Rotten. "Sex and bombs. All you need is sex and bombs to make the world go round," he said in an interview with *The Bangkok Post*.

Being provocative is his main device and he has been at the centre of many art scandals. In 1992, Vasan created a large painting which included, among other scenes, a portrayal of a Thai Buddhist monk raping a girl. Then, his 2000 exhibition featured paintings of Thai politicians and military officers in sexually compromising poses. The show was cancelled by Chulalongkorn University, five days before it was due to open.

What I found most interesting when talking to Vasan, was the fact that he walks in a direction which is almost opposite to the Western experience. Many Western artists who have a knack for politics often start with an ideological and action-oriented mindset, and slowly allow humanity and compassion enter their art through the door of spirituality and philosophy. For Vasan, the contrary is the case.

He had a strong spiritual upbringing, but later felt that the world had proved this perspective to be wrong. After the Black May Massacre, when the military crushed a pro-democracy uprising in the streets of Bangkok in 1992, he found his only solace was in political action. However, delving deeper into his convictions, you could still see there are spiritual beliefs of oneness looming in the background.

Born in 1957 in Nakhon Sawan Province, Vasan grew up in a big family. His mother was a doula, his father a local doctor and one of his brothers was a painter. “As a child, I used to paint a lot, mainly about the life of Jesus. This gave me the confidence to go and study art in Bangkok later on.”

In 1973, when you were studying at the College of Fine Art in Bangkok, it was the time of the Thai popular uprising. Can you tell me how you navigated that difficult time in the history of your country?

At the time. I was living outside of Bangkok. After the revolution in Thailand, the students were really active everywhere. In those days, I was interested in Greek philosophers, Christianity and Buddhism. The main question in my mind was: what are

we living for? I thought that the basis for societal good was to have individuals cultivating the good in themselves. This was contrary to what my schoolmates thought. They said the only way to improve society was to come together to fight alongside the people, the workers and the farmers.



Vasan Sitthiket, We Must Choose Our Future! , 2012, woodcut, 73 x 100 cm. Courtesy of Yavuz Gallery.

How did you react when you saw the Thammasat University massacre on 6 October 1976?

I remember the shock I felt when seeing the news reports on TV. In that moment, my ideas died. I used to think that you suffer because you think you are suffering. But after

seeing those images, I had no doubt that I was wrong. I saw how evil our ruler was and how much suffering he was creating for our people and society. So I dropped my religious ways – namely, meditation and prayers – and joined the revolution. I became part of the communist party and a student activist.

After 6 October, five thousand students went to the jungle to join the guerrillas, and in my third year of University, I decided to join them. However, when I arrived in the mountains, they had gone home and I realized the best way I could contribute at that point was through my art.

So how was your art affected by that internal shift and the realization that it could be of service to the revolution?

I have always considered my art to be a voice and a symbol for the people to hold on to. Even before that internal shift happened, I was already interested in painting life, the poor, the ugliness of the people. I didn't want my paintings to be beautiful and depict pleasant subjects. My aim has always been to make good art. I had a book about Vincent Van Gogh, which was my biggest inspiration when I was in my teens. The book was called *Lust for life* and showcased paintings he did when he went to the coal mine and lived with the workers. I always thought that art was meant for the poor, not to be hanged on the walls.

Do you think the artist is “one of the people”, or is he more of an intellectual who talks to the people?

I think the artist is an intellectual. He needs to learn about history, understand life and the people, and how to communicate with them. Otherwise, who are you painting for? Without the people, there is no art. It doesn't mean anything if I just paint for myself. Why would you sing a song that no one is listening to? I feel I'm at one with the people. Each individual is everybody, we are living together, we have to share, to help each other.

At the same time, the artist has more time to think about the wider picture than the people do. Thai people are working hard, busy making a living and they have no time to think about the meaning of life, the reason for our suffering and why there is a dictator. Buddhism is teaching the essence of life, and Thailand is a Buddhist country. However, people have lost their way. Even the monks have lost their way. They have all been lost in consumerism and can't see the essence of Buddhism anymore.

Indeed you addressed the corruption of the monks in your controversial 1992 show. Have you ever felt that censorship in Thailand limits your freedom of expression?

My art has been censored many times. In a private gallery, it is usually fine, but if I am invited to the National Gallery, my controversial work becomes problematic. My paintings have been taken off the walls overnight. I always try to create very strong and powerful images in my work, but it is not only about shocking people, it is also about the meaning below the surface. The paintings themselves might look beautiful, and they exhibit them, but when the message becomes apparent, they might change their mind. I don't want to trick people, I just want to allow them to respond to my art in whatever way they want. I want to show the truth of society's evils. Then if you still want to live in this society, it is none of my business. My only aim is to open people's eyes and awaken their consciousness.





Vasan Sittthiket, Postmodern Thai Monk Now, 2011. Mixed media on canvas, 300x200cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Do you still define yourself as an anarchist?

I would say I belong to the artists' party. Art is not anarchy, art is not communism, art is not socialism. Joseph Beuys said that everybody is an artist. Art has the power to create our society. For the time being, we artists tend to work alone, but in the future, I envision an army of artists from everywhere working together. Not everyone believes in capitalism, and we are realizing that the world is falling to pieces because of this wicked system. War is the consequence of capitalism.

I feel we are in Orwell's animal farm. For most of their life, people are reduced to produce and they consume, nothing else. I think, in truth, what people want is freedom and liberty, food on the table, and to enjoy their lives together and to share. I feel a revolution is needed. Right now, we are passing through dark times. It is true that we are connected all over the world, but we are also watched and controlled through technology. It is a selfie-society where we are so self-obsessed, and we seldom come together, really together, to share our joy.

In your art, you are very critical of capitalism, but at the same time, you are also part of the art system, exhibiting internationally with private galleries and public

institutions. How do you live within this paradox?

I have to continually fight within the art system. I feel the art market is really conservative and favours beautiful paintings, sculptures, abstract art and art for art's sake. As a professor, I tell my students that art is meant to be for life. Artists have a responsibility to the people. Political ideology and life can and must mix together. I don't care what the art system wants. I work really fast, I feel a fire in my heart that is ready to explode. I don't make art, I make bombs.

About the artist

Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957) is one of contemporary Thailand's most prominent and socio-politically engaged artists. Confrontational and very often controversial, his works address problems and hypocrisy within Thai and international societies, taking aim in particular at the intersection of greed, politics, and religion. Employing a variety of media to express his opinions, his body of work includes painting, drawings, woodcut prints, installations and performance art.

In addition to numerous shows in Thailand, Vasan has participated in frequent shows abroad, including the Venice Biennale in 2003. He was awarded the Silpathon Award from the Thai Ministry of Culture in 2007, and his works have been collected by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Thailand's National Art Gallery, the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia and the Singapore Art Museum.

Vasan lives and works in Bangkok and Nakhon Sawan, Thailand.

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.

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