

5 Thai Artists Making Socio-Political Works | COBO Social

cobosocial.com Updated Jan 9th, 2019

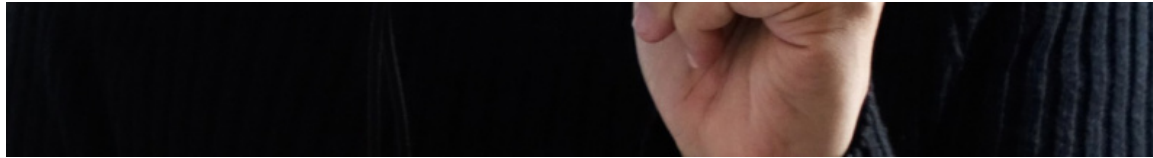
5 Thai Artists Making Socio-Political Works





Performative video artist Kawita Vatanajyankur debuts "Splashed" at Nova Contemporary gallery on October 20





Portrait of Mani Sriwanichpoom



Mani Sriwanichpoom, *Horror in Pink #4*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist.

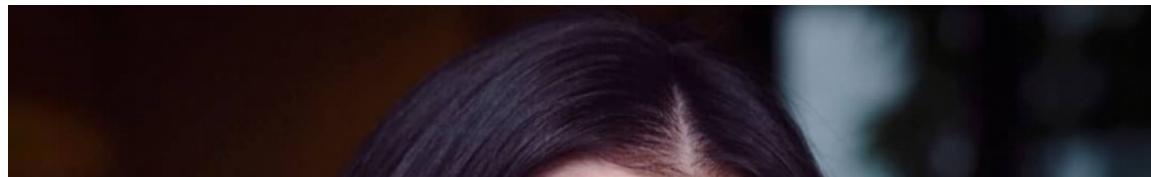




Portrait of Bussaraporn Thongchai

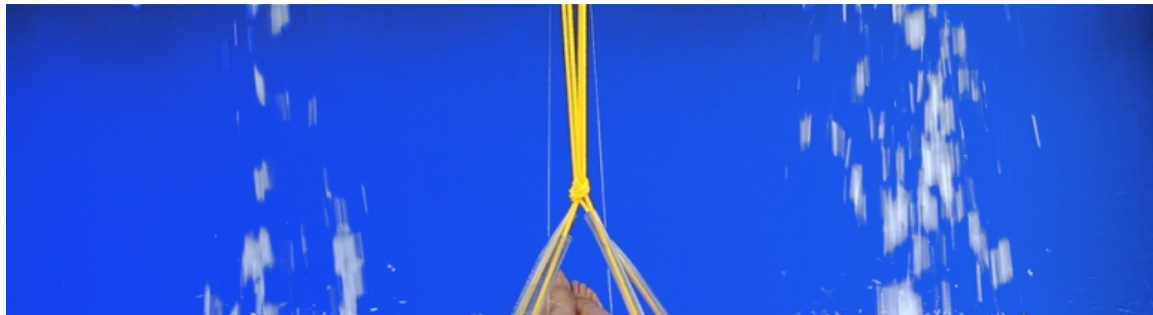


Portrait of Vasan Sithiket





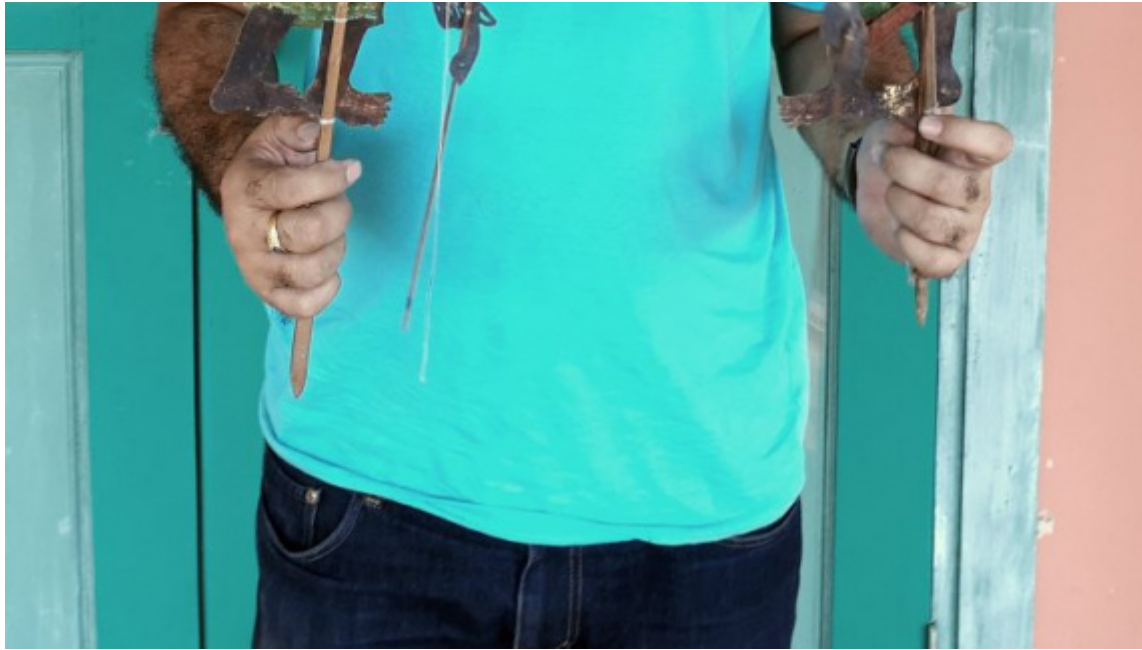
Portrait of Kawita Vatanajyankur





Kawita Vatanajyankur's Splashed at Nova Contemporary gallery





Portrait of Chusak Srikwan



Chusak Srikwan, Por. Pla-Dang (Redfish), 2008. Contemporary Shadow Puppet, 60×75

cm.

9

Jan

[Naima Morelli](#)

59

279634

2672

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

[View Profile](#)

VIDE●ARTASIA
by COBOSocial.com

**Asia's first digital archive of
video art works produced in Asia
from the 1980s to the present**

Thai artists are socio-politically engaged in a wide range of issues, from the conditions facing women to the bloody past of the country. We looked at five of the most relevant names in today's Thai art scene.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artists

In past instalments of Cobo's series on Thai contemporary art, we have looked at artists who work with spirituality and environmental themes. Today, we examine the socio-

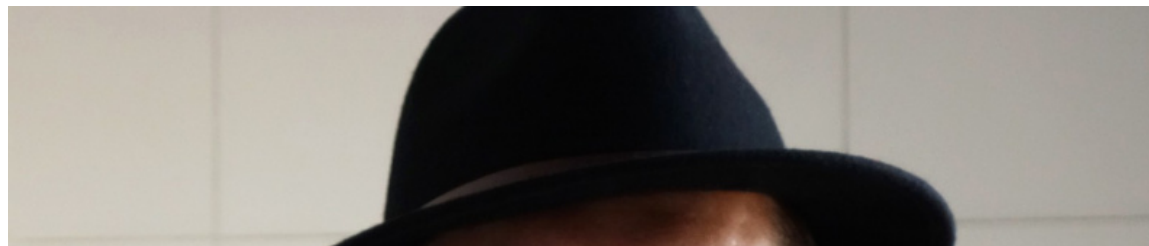
political engagement of artists, which is the other side of the coin. Indeed, the spiritual and the natural are not represented as independent entities that are disconnected from politics in Thai art. Instead of compartmentalizing these different issues, the work of Thai artists highlights the way that they are inextricably linked and engages with them.

So, what are the core concerns of this engaged art of Thailand? The first is an anxiety about an uncertain future, whether that is expressed through subtle satire or straightforward denunciation. We can also find reflections of the bloody past of Thailand, which has been marked by a series of political crises (after two successful coups in 2006 and 2014, the country has ended up with an authoritarian regime since 2014). Foreign politics is also a subject that is greatly discussed, especially in terms of globalisation and the impact of consumerist society on Thai people.

In the last few years, artists have increasingly placed emphasis on gender issues. The work of female artists, in particular, shows that the personal is political. In a country where freedom is still very much constrained by the patriarchal society, this is truer than ever. In this scenario, outspoken female artists are still marginalized, especially when they dare to speak about the body in an unconventional way.

Because of the breadth of the topic, we have decided to narrow our selection of political and engaged artists down to five by choosing those who have used emblematic approaches to the socio-political realm.

Manit Sriwanichpoom: Consumer culture and Thai politics





Portrait of Manit Sriwanichpoom

Unarguably, one of the most popular Thai artists is Manit Sriwanichpoom, who is known as the Pink Man. This is an identity that he assumed in his namesake series, which consisted of photos shot at different locations around the world of a man in a pink shopping cart wearing a pink silk tuxedo, who was a critique of consumerist society.

Manit's commitment to social activism started when he was still a student in the 1980s. Back then, he established himself as a photojournalist, working for an international news service to document Thailand's political scene and rapidly developing consumer culture.

The straightforwardness and dark humor of some of his strongest work feel like a punch to the stomach. An example is the series ‘Horror in Pink’, from 2011, where his Pink Man observes hideous scenes of violence from Thailand’s recent past in a staid, disengaged attitude. The series is a reminder of our passive attitude towards tragedies.

The scope of Manit’s work extends far beyond the Pink Man, developing across a vast range of media, from photography to installation. However, he constantly satirizes Thai nationalism, provides a critique of current economic forces, and worries for his country’s present situation. In his practice, he mixes technical elegance, irony, emotional depth and directness.



Manit Sriwanichpoom, Horror in Pink #4, 2001. Courtesy of the artist.

Bio: Born in 1961, Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom lives and works in Bangkok. Sriwanichpoom has exhibited worldwide, including the 50th Venice Biennale in 2000 and

the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial in 2009. He is collected by the Maison Europeenne de la Photographie (Paris), DG Bank (Germany), ABN-AMRO Bank (Netherlands), Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (Japan), Singapore Art Museum (Singapore), Queensland Art Gallery (Australia), Vehbi Koç Foundation (Turkey) and numerous international private collections. In 2007, Sriwanichpoom was awarded Japan's prestigious Higashikawa Photo Fiesta Prize, and in 2014, the Chevalier des Arts et Lettres by French Ministry of Culture & Communication.

Bussaraporn Thongchai: Intimacy and the Female Body



Portrait of Bussaraporn Thongchai

Young artist Bussaraporn Thongchai is emerging as one of the stronger voices working with the representation of bodies, gender and sexuality. In her paintings and drawings, she uncovers multiple layers of the female psyche. Her undertones are quite dark; the women presented in her work are distraught, panic-stricken and hysterical.

In a society that is lacking women artists who dare to question the patriarchal purview of Thailand, her work goes against the grain. In the exhibition, 'I'm Not Your Holy Mother' at Ardel's Third Place Gallery in Bangkok, she presented a series of intimate artwork charged with intense feelings.

The inspiration for the exhibit was Bussaraporn's own take on the tormented relationship between women and men. In the show, she transfigured her own experience into traditional myths and religious beliefs. The pure angelic image of a woman, as it has been stereotypically seen through the eyes of men, was portrayed as a human one with blood and flesh that bears feelings of both love and hate.

In her most recent exhibition from 2018, called 'Pieces from Berlin', Bussaraporn widens the scope of her social engagement, expanding it to include stories, experiences and encounters of cultural diversity, ethnicity and migration, as well as the ongoing conflicts and negotiation between morality and the struggle for life.

Bio: Bussaraporn Thongchai is a Thai contemporary artist who works primarily in drawing and painting. She was born in a small town in the Nakhonphanom Province in 1985 and raised in Isarn, the northeastern region of Thailand. She studied Bachelor and Master of fine arts at Silpakorn University in Bangkok (2004-2013). During her final year of Bachelor's study (2009), she was selected by Brand New Art Project. Her solo exhibitions have been 'All About Her' (2010) at Ardel Gallery of Modern Art in Bangkok, 'The Man Number 10' (2012), 'I'm not your Holy Mother' (2015). Bussaraporn has also exhibited her works extensively through group exhibitions, such as 'Art in the Ninth Reign: Thai Trends from Localism to Internationalism' at Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, Bangkok, Thailand and 'Thai Transience' by 25 Thai Artists at Singapore Art Museum. In 2014, she was among the 30 finalists of the Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2014 in Hong Kong. In 2015, she was invited to be a part of the 'Thailand Eye' Exhibition along with 24 other Thai Artists at the Saatchi Gallery, London.

Vasan Sitthiket: Anarchy, Sex and Violence



Portrait of Vasan Sitthiket

Confrontational and very often controversial, Vasan Sitthiket's paintings, performances and installations address the problems that exist within both Thai and international societies. They take aim, in particular, at the intersection of greed, corruption and religion, while some of them are related to natural or erotic motifs.

Often labeled as the “enfant terrible” of Thai art, Vasan Sitthiket's work elicits rebellion through the infallible tools of violence and sex. In 2000, his exhibition, which included 50 paintings of Thai politicians and military officers in sexually compromising poses, was cancelled by Chulalongkorn University, five days before opening. One of his most discussed performances, which involved fake rubber breasts and buttocks, simulated the rape of the entire nation of Thailand.

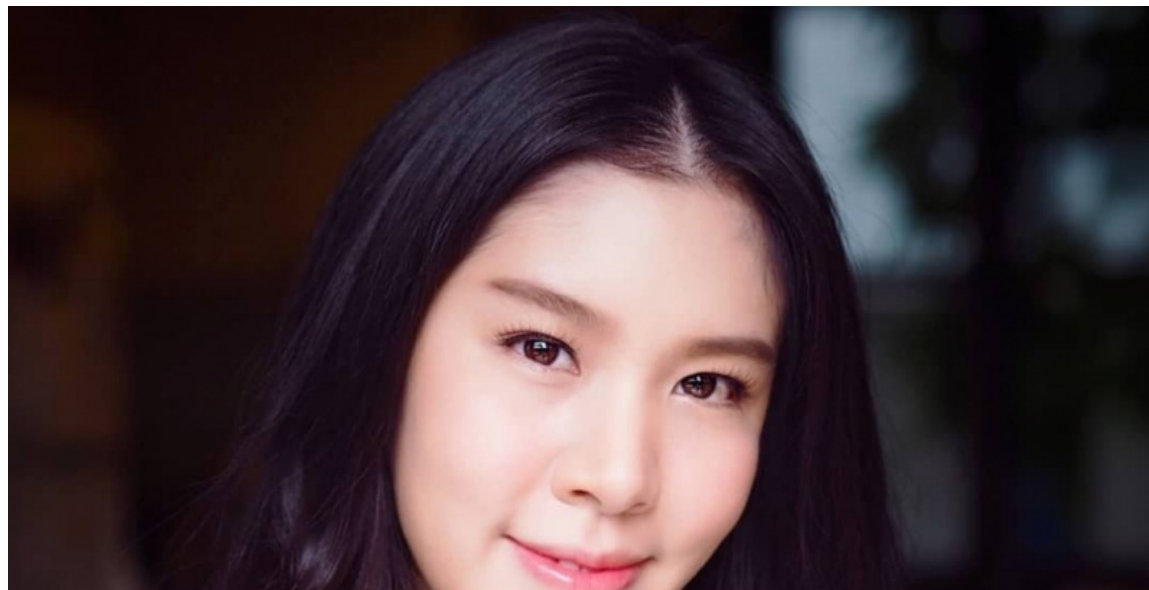
In 2005, Vasan set up the Artist Party, a political art project that mocked the then-

ruling Thai Rak Thai party and Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Politically, he supported the People's Alliance for Democracy (Yellow Shirts) against Thaksin. Vasan has appeared at their rallies to recite poems or perform music and they have used his work on their T-shirts in propaganda outlets and for demonstration stages.

A multi-talented figure, Vasan has also staged three plays and written more than 10 books of poetry, children's books and political writings.

Bio: Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957) is one of contemporary Thailand's most prominent and socio-politically engaged artists. 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.

Kawita Vatanajyankur: Women's Labor and Social Injustice





Portrait of Kawita Vatanajyankur

The Thai-Australian artist Kawita Vatanajyanku is moved by an acute sense of social justice. Based in Bangkok, she mainly works with photography, video and performance, creating alluring pieces. Her oeuvre offers a powerful examination of the psychological, social and cultural ways that Thai society operates. Her focus is everyday life, domestic work and daily chores; the time-consuming and physically exhausting tasks often done by women.

Whereas the aforementioned Bussaraporn Thongchai expresses the female identity in disquieting hues, Vatanajyanku's uses highly saturated colors. For her aesthetics, Kawita draws from a globalized and digitally networked visual language of consumption and instant gratification.

However, under the artwork's seemingly blithe look, there is both dark humor and violent undercurrents that are both centrepieces of her work. Her staged performances are at the edge of being both playful and painful, and resemble physical experiments that test the body's limits.

An example of this is Kawita's 2015 video, 'The Scale 2,' where the artist hangs suspended from ropes with her eyes closed and arms outstretched, supporting two wide, flat baskets. A neon green background blazes out at the viewer and dried rice begins to fall into the baskets. As the trickle becomes a torrent; grains ricochet off her face and her arms sway under the load. The downpour intensifies for two increasingly uncomfortable minutes before fading out. Throughout, her expression remains unchanged.



Kawita Vatanajyankur's Splashed at Nova Contemporary gallery

Bio: Vatanajyankur graduated from RMIT University (BA, Fine Art) in 2011. In 2015, she was a finalist in the Jaguar Asia Pacific Tech Art Prize and curated the prestigious 'Thailand Eye' exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, London. In 2017, her work was curated in the 'Islands in the Stream' exhibition in Venice, Italy, that was held alongside the 57th Venice Biennale, as well as the Asia Triennale of Performing Arts at the Melbourne Arts Centre, and 'Negotiating the Future', a curated exhibition of the Asian Art Biennial Taiwan. In 2018, she is showing her work as part of the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018.

Vatanajyankur has exhibited widely across Australia, as well as Asia, USA and Europe. Her work is held in Museum collections, including Singapore Art Museum and Dunedin Public Art Gallery (Dunedin Art Museum), as well as University collections and private collections in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Europe and America. She is currently represented by Nova Contemporary, Bangkok / Alamak! Project / Clear Edition & Gallery, Tokyo.

Chusak Srikwan: Entertainer and Critic of Society





Portrait of Chusak Srikwan

Born in Songkhla Province, Srikwan, Chusak has a professional background in Nang Talung (shadow puppetry), and has become a master puppeteer and puppet carver. In his reinterpretations of this traditional narrative form, he pursues the original mission of the traditional shadow puppet master: that of being an entertainer and critic of society.

Nang Talung is traditionally based on mystical themes and historical events, and serves as a reminder of the importance of Thai values in a changing world. Chusak started from this foundation to create contemporary puppets, which commented on recent socio-political events, the dynamics of power and the transformation of cultural values.

The intention of the puppets' symbolism and ironic appearance was to raise awareness amongst the audience. Freed from a theatre context, his leather puppets display ironic criticism and are arranged into mobile, atmospheric installations of varying shapes and sizes that hang suspended from the ceiling.

In his solo exhibition. '[Shadow Play – Dharma](#)' (2010). he combined traditional Jataka

tales, consisting of Buddhist doctrines, with symbolic expressions of shadow figures and Dharma puzzles. The artist's intention was to transmit wisdom and encourage a Buddhist lifestyle that could facilitate the attainment of peace for both people and society.



Chusak Srikwan, Por. Pla-Dang (Redfish), 2008. Contemporary Shadow Puppet, 60×75 cm.

Bio: Chusak SRIKWAN was born in Songkhla, and now lives and works in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. He is also a lecturer at the Department of Thai Art, Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University. Selected group exhibitions include 'Over The Wall: Paintings Tempted by Installation' (2016), Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing, China, Chaoyang, 'Thailand Eye', Saatchi Gallery, UK, London, (2015), Anthropolos, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, Chelsea, USA, (2014).

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.

[#Bussaraporn Thongchai](#)[#Chusak Srikwan](#)[#Kawita Vatanajyankur](#)[#Manit Sriwanichpoom](#)[#Naima Morelli](#)[#Thai artist](#)[#Vasan Sitthiket](#)

Leave a Comment

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Evernote makes it easy to remember things big and small from your everyday life using your computer, tablet, phone and the web.