

**horror
in pink
manit
sriwanichpoom**

**immanences
éditions
collection
mekong series
par / by
christian
caujolle
6**

Each copy of *Horror in Pink*, sixth volume of the Mekong series, includes six chromopallaprints made by Anne-Lou Buzot on Bergger COT 320 paper.

The prints are numbered, signed, and titled by the artist.

The texts set in Baskerville and Helvetica Neue fonts by Florent Fajole are printed with digigraphy technique on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Duo 276 g. paper. The title labels are printed on Labora paper by Nestor Ljutjuk with letterpress technique at Tallina Paberikoda studio in Tallinn.

This original edition includes thirteen copies: eight copies numbered from 1 to 8 and five hors commerce copies numbered from I to V.

The portfolio is kept in a handmade box created by Justine Delval in Arles.

Bilingual Edition French/English. Translated from the French by Karine Leroux.

Size of the prints: 37 cm x 55 cm
Size of the portfolio: 40 cm x 56 cm

horror in pink manit sriwanichpoom

**immanences
éditions
collection
mekong series
par / by
christian
caujolle
6**

editio princeps

2021, paris

Price: 9600 euros

immanences-editions.com
contact@immanences-editions.com
+33 (0)7 81 67 96 92

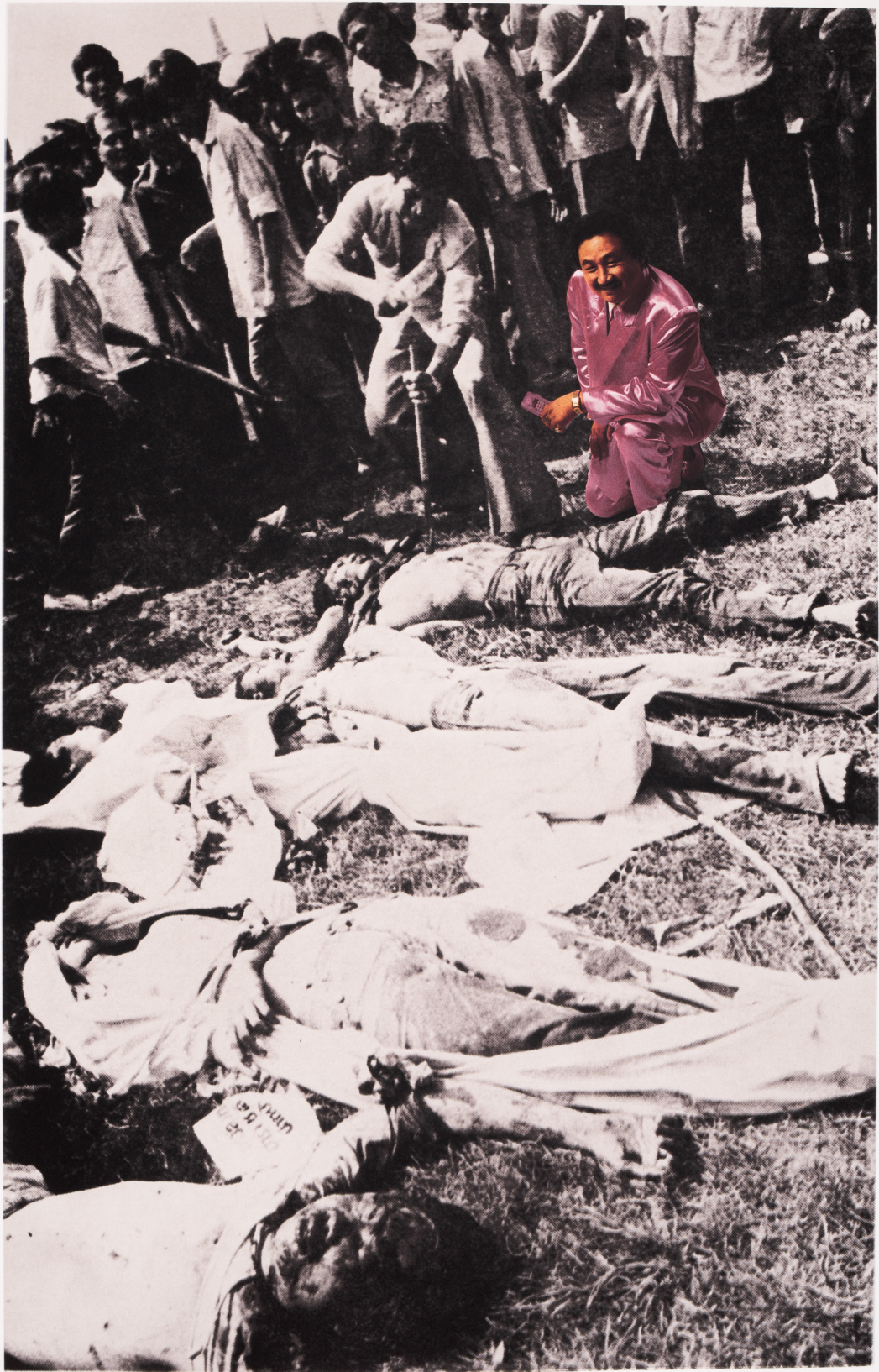












Horror in Pink, Manit Sriwanichpoom

Christian Caujolle

For twenty years, from 1997 to 2018, the actor Sompong Thawee, when working with Manit Sriwanichpoom, only had one costume. A shiny, flashy pink silk suit that he wore with patent shoes equally pink and shiny and matching short socks. His accessories were a mobile phone of the most beautiful pink, perfectly coordinated with a supermarket trolley of the same colour. A monochrome character that never dropped his detached air, somewhat grumpy and inexpressive regardless of circumstances. For twenty years, Sompong Thawee was Pink Man and incarnated the middle-class Thai, a rampant capitalist, a consumerist without limits, an epitome of bad taste, selfish, going through the world without seeing it, his only aim being to benefit from it. *«The concept of Pink Man came to me when I went to what was then the most recent shopping centre in Bangkok. That mall is huge, like a factory really, so bright with thousands of fluorescent lamps, all sorts of goods arranged in a very structured and careful manner. There were many buyers, filling their trolleys with goods, queuing to pay. I felt like they were in an amusement park. And the questions followed: to what extent has consumerism brain-washed us? What are the values measured by what we own? Pink Man expresses my feeling of being overwhelmed by the concept of consumerism that has been simply accepted without consideration by the Thai society. I think that this system has brought us into servitude without enabling us to grow. And we have no choice but to act in the same manner: we are going toward uniformity.»*

It all started with a performance in the streets of Bangkok when Pink Man, pushing his not yet filled up trolley (it never will be, it is symbolic, almost an abstraction), walked through the business district and the very busy Silom Road, with its *La-lai-sap* (literally, to make money melt) market and its street restaurants patronised at lunchtime by office staff. In this first series he posed next to McDonald's emblematic clown, newly set up in Bangkok, which looks like an aberration in this city where street food is everywhere, any time of day. He also went past the Kentucky Fried Chicken character and performed various acts, like cutting through the crowd while carrying a petrol lamp and a briefcase, or a huge bunch of – pink, obviously – balloons. In these initial series, Manit Sriwanichpoom used his experience as a photojournalist and street photographer. This is how, this young man, born into a family of shop keepers and who wanted to become an architect like one of his cousins, got into social action in the 1980s while studying at the Srinakharinvirot University where he started to practise fixed imagery. He trained by documenting the ever-unstable political scene of a country who holds the sad record number of coups and powerful military regimes – as is currently the case – and by focussing on the mutations in the consumption models. Hints of these early experiences can be found in the many series, including in black and white, of this artist who describes

himself as an activist, who has established vantage points that address current issues while being conceptual around his critique of the royalty – with subjects prostrating themselves in front of the royal palace, for example – and financial disasters – the ghost buildings the construction of which was interrupted after the 1997 crisis – among other things. But soon mere statements were no longer enough for the photographer. In 1997, he staged the reconstructions of photojournalism icons, and more particularly of the Vietnam War but his refugees and napalm victims are surrounded by bags and packaging of big luxury brands.

Manit Sriwanichpoom's persona did not limit himself to Bangkok and went travelling – a lot. Through Thailand initially, as impassive and vulgar as ever, looking quite ridiculous with his trolley in a paddy field recently harvested or in the courtyard of a temple with cheap sculptures. A critique of a form of mass tourism that the government of the time wanted to develop more and more, with the slogan «*Amazing Thailand*». In 2000, Pink Man set off on a European tour. None of the clichés were spared, from the gondolas of Venice to the gypsy violinists of Vienna, through to the metal architecture of the great railway station and the ice creams in Copenhagen. Europe as a middle-class Thai person would see it and consume it, because this is how they conceive it. Or how it is sold to them.

Following the 2003 attacks that targeted tourist destinations in Bali, Pink Man resumed his travels. He went to Bali, both a braggart and a shameless consumer of landscapes that had returned to their virgin state since visitors had fled. Back in Europe, in Paris for *La vie en Pink* in 2004 – full of irony – which pastiches the classics of French painting. Numerous series attack nationalism, some with an ensemble, the exhibition of which was banned, staging the Thai flag with scouts and young children. The outlook remained acerbic and Pink Man did not smile still.

By the time Manit Sriwanichpoom left for China in 2006, his character had become such a reference that he no longer needed to be present. The trolley alone stood there, still pink. High on the rubbles of small destroyed houses in Beijing, along massive, empty and barely built boulevards, or in factories amid thousands of workers, it stood as a revelator of radical and violent mutations of the country. Pink Man also became a statuette produced in limited edition, and it has been as popular with the collectors as the large prints of his saga.

In 2009, Sompong Thawee took part in an opera with an over-ornate and kitsch set, before throwing his statuette to the ground, shattering it, in 2018. His hair was now grey with a matching thick moustache. And still the same suit. So he retired and became the main character in a monograph dedicated to him. Ending up in books is probably the fate of icons and heroes.

Among Pink Man's many adventures, one very much stands out. Titled «*Horror in Pink*», dating from 2001, it is a short series of only six images, photomontages that include our anti-hero, who smiles for once, mocking

and cynical in the middle of scenes of horror and violence. This time, it all takes place in Bangkok and the shift occurs through time as the character travels back to integrate three tragic moments in the history of Thailand: the popular uprising of 14 October 1973, the massacre of 6 October 1976 at the Thammasaat University and the Black May events, between 17 and 20 May 1992. Pink Man joined history via a graphic process that Manit Sriwanichpoom would only use once again for his series *«Hungry Ghosts»* in 2003, dominated by excess and kitsch. He is somehow part of the photomontage revival, helped by the transition to digital and the use of Photoshop, and reconnects with the genre's political tradition. *«This is probably one of my most important series. I had to react to the far-right politician Samak Sundaravej being elected to the post of governor of Bangkok. In 1976, he had been the voice on the militaries' radio that had incited soldiers and extremists paramilitaries to kill students who demonstrated for democracy. He was the Thai equivalent of what would be, much later, the Radio-Télévision des Mille Collines (RTLM) in Rwanda. This was unbearable to me. I couldn't clearly remember the 1976 events – I was 15 back then – but I could still see the covers of the press at the time, with black and white photographs of dead students. In those days, I didn't know much about politics and the logic or the meaning of the events. But I could feel this worrying atmosphere that hang in the air. The government's propaganda had invaded all the radio stations who blamed the demonstrators: the Communists and the Vietnamese who wanted to topple the monarchy. I was concerned for the safety of one of my cousins who had joined the demonstration at the Thammasaat University. We had no news from him. After a few days, he came back, packed his things and went into hiding. This was the case with a lot of these protesting students. At the time, I did not know what was happening to him, why he needed to flee. Sadly later, he committed suicide. No one quite knew why. But it turned out that there were many cases of suicide among the young people involved in this tragic episode».*

Although it refers to twenty years of history, Manit Sriwanichpoom's series focuses on the 1976 events, namely reusing Neal Ulevich's famous image of a far-right militant man hitting the body of a student hanging from the branch of a tree with a chair in front of the student of the Thammasaat University on 6 October, a photo for which he won the third «Spot News» prize of the World Press Photo in Amsterdam and, in the USA, the third prize in the same category of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Two other press photos evoke, one the 1973 episode – a photograph taken by Plaek Khempila – and the other the 1992 event with a shot produced by a member of staff (who has disappeared and whose name has been lost) of the daily paper *The Nation*. 1976 makes up most of it, with four pictures, perhaps because it is the first moment to have marked the author's memory, probably also because the debate continues about the exact circumstances and the number of dead (46 officially, double that number and likely more according to many investigations). But the point today is not to determine the exact data. It is primarily about facts that repeat themselves. There is simply violence, extreme violence and state violence too. Between reusing and claiming documents, Manit Sriwanichpoom questions a memory that cannot be found in history

books when these political events have marked decades of a monarchy that is perceived from the outside, through the filter of exoticism, as «*the Land of Smiles*». In these distressing scenes, and beyond his usual role as revelator, Pink Man becomes an accomplice of the massacres. He is present at the events, approves them, leading perhaps the criminal forces, or acting as a potential agent provocateur. Visually speaking, two picture worlds clash, not solely due to the colour of our familiar star's costume contrasting with the black and white documents, but also because these documents were not selected in their original condition but from their use in the press. The old documents have half-tones, proving their usage and political, social, informative – and today denouncing – function, whereas Pink Man's uniform retains the brilliance and smooth texture of silk.

Incensed and dismayed by the impunity of those responsible for the massacres, Manit Sriwanichpoom cannot accept that they were elected for important political posts and explains the situation – which keeps on repeating itself in the history of the country to the point of becoming a structural basis – with the amnesia organised by the official discourse. Consequently, he practises a hit-hard imagery. By making distinct periods (yesterday and today) clash, he updates images from the past sadly erased from the school curriculum and so from memories, and denounces a ridiculous and caricatural class in power, laughable to a point. Until the time of the tragedy it is involved in, in the reality of the events and, today, in the images which it wishes to erase the very existence of. All of this is perfectly coherent with the way Manit Sriwanichpoom defines his role and his position as an artist: an activist.

Révolté et consterné par l'impunité des responsables des massacres, n'acceptant pas qu'ils puissent être élus à d'importants postes de responsabilité politique et expliquant cette situation – qui se répète dans l'histoire du pays jusqu'à devenir une base structurelle – par l'amnésie organisée par le discours officiel, Manit Sriwanichpoom pratique une imagerie coup de poing. En faisant se choquer les périodes, en combinant hier et aujourd'hui, il réactualise des images du passé hélas gommées de l'enseignement puis des mémoires et dénonce une classe au pouvoir, ridicule, caricaturale, dont on pouvait rire jusqu'à un certain point. Jusqu'au moment de la tragédie dans laquelle ils s'impliquent. Dans la réalité des événements et, aujourd'hui, dans les images dont ils veulent effacer jusqu'à l'existence. Tout cela est parfaitement cohérent avec la façon dont Manit Sriwanichpoom définit son rôle et sa position d'artiste : activiste.

Manit Sriwanichpoom

Born on 27 September 1961 in Bangkok, Manit Sriwanichpoom is one of today's leading contemporary artists in Thailand. As much for the density and intensity of his visual work – he is one of the rare contemporary artists who uses mostly photography – as for his multiple activities as a gallery director, independent cinema organiser, film producer and director, Thailand photography historian, curator, teacher and more.

Yet nothing seemed to indicate that he would one day become an artist, and more specifically an activist with art as his daily tool. *«I was born into a family of immigrants. My grandfather was from southern China, my father was born in Thailand, and I am the third generation of a family of shop keepers. In my family, no one had anything to do with the world of art and I had no idea what that was about until I was about twelve-years old when a cousin, an architecture student, came to live with us. I liked his pictures, I'd look at them. I also liked his models. Gradually, I wanted to be an architect like him. But I wasn't thinking about becoming an artist. During my high-school years, I read a lot of French and English literature, and philosophers. I was an idealist and I wondered what the point of studying could be, who I was and what I wanted to do with my life.»*

After high school, Manit Sriwanichpoom applied to the architecture school but was rejected and directed towards what was called «official art» – a strange term for visual arts – i.e. «fine arts». At the Srinakharinwirot public university, he met one of the professors, Pramuan Burusphat, who taught photography. The young man was immediately fascinated by what the teacher showed him, which was totally new to him. Even though film photography was deemed a lesser form of art that could not rival with other disciplines, and even though in these 1980s, you could not find any photographers' books or books on photography in Bangkok, he soon realised that he had found his tool. «I had to work to be able to buy a small second-hand camera and as soon as I started using it, I knew what my goal was. I wanted to express myself and also prove that photography was an art form. I had to work as a professional and at the same time I had to prove that I was an artist. After graduating in 1984, he worked as a photojournalist in collaboration with Bureau Bangkok, an international news agency, and in particular covered the many upheavals of the country's political life and the mutations in consumption trends. In 1986, he exhibited as part of a collective presentation, *Five Viewpoints*, at the Bhirasi Modern Art Institute in Bangkok. In 1990, he presented his first solo exhibition with the title «Artists in Back & White at the Alliance Française in Bangkok.

But he soon came to think that reporting, much as he respected it, had too many limitations for him and he turned to conceptual series and staging. He then sought to develop a more meaningful critique that could communicate what he calls «emotional truth», radically different from the one that allegedly forms the basis of press photography, and wanted to give free rein to his exuberant visual desire. The most notable of these series, the six images of *This Bloodless War* (1997) reinterprets photojournalism icons, and more particularly of the Vietnam War by having his refugees and napalm

victims transport bags from the luxury industry (Chanel, Versace). The black and white pictures, in large prints, were framed with heavy golden sticks and exhibited for a week in a busy street in Bangkok, carried by friends of the artist who supported him in this initial performing exhibition.

That same year, he created Pink Man, his caricatural middle-class Thai character who, for twenty years, would be the hero of critique series on consumerism, social violence and the local echoes of international crises. These images have been shown throughout the world, in solo as well as group exhibitions and are the artist's trademark. In particular, he took part in the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1998, the exhibition in Thailand's first pavilion at the fifth Venice Biennial in 2003, and had a great mid-career retrospective, *Phenomena & Prophecies*, at the Singapore Art Museum in 2010. It must be stressed that, although the long series of Pink Man's adventures was central, it should not overshadow numerous other works, many in black and white, from intimate portraits of his neighbours and the strange, if frightening, pictures of effigies of venerated Buddhist monks, to critique sequences on the attitudes of submission, the royalty and the recent scenes of urban riots and street demonstrations.

Shown since its creation in 2001, the short series – six images – from Horror in Pink was part of the *History and Memory* exhibition at the Chulalongkorn University Art Center in Bangkok alongside the artist Sutee Kunavichayanont and the film-maker, writer and painter Ing K. In the catalogue, the latter wrote:

«Buddhism may be the state religion, but it could be said that our true faith is oblivion. In terms of historical perception, most of us are potted plants in a white room without context or link to our roots. Whole chapters connecting us to the past have been erased from our conscience. Even entire journals dating to 1945 and 1946 cannot be found in the archives of the national library. (...) Aside from the deliberate sabotage and censorship, Thai propensity to «let the past go» to keep up appearances of peace at any price encourage collective amnesia and consequently ignorance. We do not know our own past; how can we know ourselves? It is no surprise that we so ridiculously suffer from an identity crisis».

It is also to fight against this amnesia that Manit Sriwanichpoom has worked for years to save what he can of photographers' archive funds – much of which has been destroyed. As a result, he has been able to highlight remarkable studio funds, works by fashion and advertising photographers, some rather striking and rare nudes (a genre that is not part of the local aesthetic tradition), and the most surprising work of a religious dignitary who practised a mix of self-portraits, often in multiple exposures, that he associated to poems he would write in albums that form a singular work. As a curator and faithful supporter of festivals, he has exhibited these works on several occasions and they are part of his photography history teachings, which he also considers to be a crucial training for memory. With the same purpose in mind, he opened in 2005 the only gallery dedicated to photography in Thailand, Kathmandu Photo Gallery, in the district of Silom in Bangkok, where he offers prints for sale and where he regularly shows young local authors as well as foreign photographers living in the country, and, when possible, prints by old practitioners whose funds he's found.

Consistent in his commitments, the self-proclaimed activist has been one of the pillars of the battle for the creation of a contemporary art centre in Bangkok. Following an eventful period, the site, selected by the city governor in 1995, opened no earlier than 2008 after being cancelled several times. Mani Sriwanichpoom was among those who relentlessly demonstrated each week over several years to demand its creation.

He is also very interested in cinema, as a producer and a co-director, with Ing K. among others. (*Citizen Juling*, 2008; *Shakespeare Must Die*, 2012 and *Censor Must Die*, 2014), political and poetic films, all censored. This has led him to open, again with Ing Kanjanavanit, a small independent cinema, Cinema Oasis, where they can show their films and those of their friends, victims of censorship.

He has regularly published books in order to take stock of his work, usually as self-publications: *Bangkok in Black & White*, text by Ing K., published by Chang Puek Nga Dum, 1999; *Mani Sriwanichpoom*, text by Rutger Pontzen, Montreuil, Editions de l'œil, «Carnets» collection, 2002; *Protest*, text by Ing K., published by Chang Puek Nga Dum, 2003; *Ordinary/Extraordinary*, edited by Kathmandu Photo Gallery, 2007; *Bangkok in Technicolor*, edited by Kathmandu Photo Gallery, 2014; *Rediscovering Thai Masters of Photography*, edited by Kathmandu Photo Gallery, 2015; *FEAR*, edited by Kathmandu Photo Gallery, 2016; *LOST*, published by A+ Works of Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2018.

His works can be found in many private collections as well as several institutions, including: ABN-AMRO Bank, Netherlands; Art Vantage, Israel; Chulalongkorn University, Thailand; DZ Bank, Germany; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; Han Nefkens Foundation, Spain; H&F Foundation, Netherlands; LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore; MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, Thailand; Maison Européenne de la Photographie, France; National Gallery of Australia; National Gallery Singapore; Oslo Foto Kunst Skole, Norway; Queensland Art Gallery, Australia; Singapore Art Museum; Vehbi Koc Foundation, Turkey.

Mani Sriwanichpoom received the Ordre de Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French Ministry of Culture in 2014, and the prestigious Higashikawa Overseas Photographer Award in 2017 in Japan.