

Art Criticism on an Exhibition: Vasan Sitthiket's I AM YOU

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Although the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre is independently run by the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre Foundation, the venue receives partial annual financial support from the Thai government. It seems rather startling that the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre decided to curate Vasan Sitthiket's highly political works earlier this year, many of which fiercely critique the corrupt government and politicians in Thailand. The exhibition called 'I AM YOU', therefore, shows the respectable adherence to the ideology of the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre to give artists complete freedom of expression, even though the message of the exhibited works strongly attacks its own sponsor.

Vasan Sitthiket's 'I AM YOU' is a retrospective exposition of the artist's politically-charged oeuvres over the past decades. These works collectively express the artist's dismay towards the depravation of the Thai government both under the ministries of the Democratic Party's Abhisit Vejjajiva and the Phua Thai Party's Shinawatra family, where notorious corruption and abuses of power miserably became the norm, regardless of the ruler's political pole. His flashy, colourful and confrontational artistic style may accuse Vasan of exploiting art as a channel to express his personal political views. Yet, a close study reveals how Vasan also analyses these actual demoralising phenomena with a humanistic approach. His so-called 'Social Art', in fact, entails interesting interplays between the individual, personal, and artistic views of the artist, the debauched politics in Thailand as a social phenomenon, and the personal desires of individual politicians themselves, outlining the often neglected, close ties between individuals and social spheres.

Triumphantly occupying the entire eighth floor of the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre, the 'I AM YOU' exhibition welcomes spectators with a comical display of Vasan's Artist Party publicity material. The Artist Party is a genuine Thai political party, officially registered in October 2007 by Vasan, the party leader, himself. The party is an outcome of Vasan's conceptual art project. He took the opportunity of Thai democratic freedom to establish a real political party, emphasising the importance of humanist morale through the artistic ideology often absent in other power-greedy parties. The party was symbolised by a

white pigeon and its political philosophy advocated the idea of 'ruling by NOT ruling'. The members of the party include Vasan's peer artists, famous folk music singers and bands, as well as poets and writers. The party was disqualified in 2009 when it failed to reach the required number of members and regional sectors. Yet Vasan and his members did everything a political party could possibly do to promote their idealistic policy. The Artist Party section of the 'I AM YOU' exhibition displays the legacy of this political involvement with a collection of political campaign billboards, posters and banners declaring the party's absurdly utopian policies, posing Vasan as a candidate for the position of prime minister. This seemingly playful prank on the incompetency of Thai political parties pointedly examines what they unpardonably lack as volunteers to run the country, leaving room for this Artist Party to offer itself as an alternative to the desperate political choices available in Thailand with strong personal ideals.

The colourful painting section attacks the political circumstances in Thailand even more bluntly and savagely, with such works as *'The Scene from the Meeting in Parliament'*, *'The Scene of Revising Constitution 2010'*, *'You Must Be Poor and Idiot Forever'*, acrylic-on-canvas pieces adopting the flattened perspective Buddhist mural style to criticise the endless greed of politicians in power. In these opuses, Vasan cleverly employs the didactic manners of Buddhist ancient murals found in certain temples, depicting how greed ruthlessly dehumanises individuals when they are punished in hell to illustrate the parallels with Thai politics. In *'The Scene from the Meeting in Parliament'* and *'The Scene of Revising Constitution 2010'*, Vasan portrays the parliamentary members in action as motor lizards, the most repulsively ill-behaved beast in Thailand, dressed in Western suits. They selfishly make personal demands, raising their hand to devour every right, while others indolently doze off during the meeting. The constitutional revision scene is rendered as an explicit oral-sex orgy among the long-tongued motor lizards, where naked women give fellatio to these beasts in uniform, transforming the semen into futile faeces as a metaphor for the secretive undisclosed alteration of the constitution in order to favour themselves.

In *'You Must Be Poor and Idiot Forever'*, the orgy is depicted yet again. The high officials are transformed into motor lizards as well as a mischievous fox receiving fellatio from a male governor and his naked wife, leaving the human citizen wishing for their fortune through gambling and superstition; the only way to escape poverty. The unsophisticated

mural style of these works subtly reminds spectators of how the Buddhist philosophy accentuates individual greed as a major trigger of human misconduct. The uninhabited sexual desires also lead to immoral sins, driving an individual to perpetually satisfy his/her own personal needs, completely ignoring the suffering of others. The heavy use of sexual acts in Vasan's works identifies how the personal biological desires of politicians and people in power lead to their corruptive misconduct. The images clearly show that the broader social deterioration of Thai politics stems from the endless individual cravings of just a few.

The Buddhist philosophy reference is also apparent in a series of paintings called '*Preta*'; a tall, skinny Buddhist demon who suffers from eternal starving as his mouth is shrunk to the size of a pin-head, severely limiting food consumption as a result of unforgivable sins committed in a past life. In this series, Vasan paints five monochrome tableaux in the manner of Henri Matisse's '*The Dance*', showing the circles of karma among the Pretas in hell: devouring, burning, slashing, punishing and raping each other. The five colours of the monochrome tableaux form the red-white-blue-white-red of the Thai national flag, condemning the state as a kingdom of sinners even though the country claims itself as a devoted Buddhist nation. Preta symbolises a being who suffers from his/her own incapability to suppress indecent lust, allowing selfishness to overcome moral integrity. The tableaux illustrate humans in their future life in the most dehumanised form, as an alarming warning that greed may easily overthrow the nation when one is selfishly wrapped up in one's own needs.

Another series of acrylic-and-mud-on-rice-paper paintings called '*We Came from the Same Way*' underscores our equitable biological factor regardless of how great the individual mind. It shows drawings of the heads of Vincent van Gogh, Pope John Paul II, Friedrich Engels, Chitr Bumisak (a famous Thai political activist) and the artist himself as grown-ups, each popping out downward from a woman's womb. The series intentionally shows the carnal origins of these great minds which are indeed indifferent from our own. The work again reminds us of our biological nature as a driving force for behaviour as an organism, but civilised individuals are well-aware of this and will find a way to manage their personal drives to maintain order in society. This becomes the general theme of this exhibition in which success and failure to consciously overcome one's own carnal desires

are vividly depicted, laced with Buddhist flavours that chiefly study the process of perishing one's own yearnings within the individual sphere.

The exhibition mischievously closes with four daring life-sized monochrome fibre-glass sculptors of Vasan himself, standing completely naked with a fully-erect penis. He unabashedly declares that the driving power behind all this creativity actually comes from his libido, which may also be the case with all the politicians, governors and men in power portrayed in this exhibition.

This Freudian conclusion also reflects the Buddhist's observation that carnal desire is one of the most powerfully destructive drivers. Though sexual drive is essential for the preservation of the human race, at the personal level it lets our innate savagery go wild and strongly draws us into selfishness. Taming one's own libido is, therefore, one of the Buddhist self-practices, keeping sexual activity merely for the sake of reproduction.

This seemingly bold and outrageous art exhibition, especially for a religious and culturally sensitive society like Thailand, in fact, offers a subtle and intricate analysis of Thai political corruption. The clear connection to the Buddhist philosophy also declares the failure of the religion to sustain the morale of society. 'I AM YOU' distinctly exhibits the struggle between strong personal ideology and inevitable personal desires where a 'tie' is not a possible result. The exhibition title 'I AM YOU' also highlights the personal plane of the overall discussion, which is at the root of all social and political problems. This exhibition undoubtedly merits public exposition to generate a dialogue with Thai society. The official Bangkok Art & Culture Centre has proven to be a perfect yet very surprising venue for this uncompromisingly free artistic expression, though several questions remain for the authorities in charge of all these creative affairs.

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