

Manit Sriwanichpoom

The Lambs of God

Artist Statement

With this series, I hope to reflect the feelings of utter helplessness that overwhelm the powerless, a category in which I include myself and perhaps the vast majority of Thai people. Trapped in the middle between the old power (the royalists and the military) and the new power (the capitalists), we are mere pawns in their struggles for ascendancy. Day in, day out, we are buffeted by the propaganda of both sides; we are raised from the womb to surrender obediently to those who would lead us and dictate our very scary future.

Waiting for the King [sitting] 2006

Waiting for the King [standing] 2006

Every year on 5th December, the present King's birthday, which is also designated National Father's Day, tens of thousands of His Majesty's subjects would congregate on the Royal Ground and along the route of the Royal Motorcade to greet their King as he travels from his residential palace to the ceremonial Grand Palace for religious rites.

2006 was a special year for Thailand, as it was the 60th anniversary of the King's coronation (making him the longest reigning monarch in the world today). As one, the Thai people put on yellow shirts (the Thai colour for Monday, the day of his birth) embroidered with the official 60th anniversary royal insignia, and waited for the King's motorcade to pass.

It seems that the present King has been able to build up the sanctity and popularity of the institution of the monarchy (which fell on dark times immediately after the end of the Absolute Monarchy in 1932) to an unprecedented degree.

Embryonia 2007

A bedraggled little lamb, its four legs tied together, lies still on a sacrificial altar, its eyes registering nothing, as if resigned to its fate. This image, from the oil painting 'Agnus Dei' by Francisco de Zurbaran (1598—1664), stopped me in my tracks as I wandered the galleries of the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain.

Forcibly, undeniably, I saw in it the predicament of ordinary Thai citizens—indeed, of all the citizens of all the nations of the world. People living in the midst of conflict and war, in the throes of greed and thirst—be they economic, political, religious or cultural. People who are raised from infancy to follow the instructions of their cowardly rulers, to grow up with the worship of false beliefs, to become self-centred, prejudiced and resentful toward others; to love only their own kind. In effect, ready to become 'loyal subjects', 'nationalists', 'terrorists', suicide-bombing 'martyrs', and 'shopaholics'.

People grow old without gaining spiritual wisdom and emotional depth, without maturity. We become obscene overgrown infants, ever obedient to society's dictatorship of lies.

Under One Flag 2006

One day in a traffic jam, my car was stuck in front of this one lonely flag, flying forlornly above a corrugated iron fence around an empty plot of land. At that time a huge number of people were entrenched on the streets around Government House, protesting against the Thaksin regime day after day, month after month, in a movement that was daily gaining in strength and emotional intensity. In response, some politicians in the regime floated the idea of 'Reconciliation' between the two opposing sides. In practice, this was, and is, hardly possible, since the protests were about concrete issues of corruption. This was no simple difference of opinion or political ideal.

The Thai flag is tri-colour. Red stands for Nation; white for Religion; blue for the King.

Coup d'Etat Photo Op (September 19) 2006

After months of street protests against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his government, partly in response to the urging of some factions of protesters, partly to prevent an imminent outbreak of violence, the military seized power in a coup d'etat on 19 September 2006. They cited four reasons that necessitated their action: that PM Thaksin was fostering a dangerous split among Thais; that his government was corrupt and nepotistic; that he undermined independent watchdog organisations; that he disrespected the institution of the monarchy.

After the coup, many people, not just from Bangkok but also from the provinces, converged on the tanks around the Royal Plaza and the Marble Temple to offer flowers and to pose for photographs with soldiers. This created a celebratory carnival atmosphere, an unbelievable phenomenon in stark contrast to the people's reaction to other coups in the past. Foreign tourists also joined in, posing for pictures with soldiers and tanks along with the Thais.

Still Life with the Thai Flag 2008

This series is my photographic equivalent of offering up blood sacrifices. I was moved to produce these pictures after the election on 23 December 2007, when the People Power Party (the reincarnation of billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra's old 'Thai Loves Thai' Party which was dissolved for massive cheating in the elections of 2006) won the right to set up the next government, with Samak Sundaravej as their new Prime Minister.

Mr Samak, a veteran extreme right politician, had been the deputy Interior Minister (the ministry that oversees the Police Department) in 1976 when soldiers, police and lynch mobs perpetrated shocking violence against students and other protesters for democracy in a shameful event that is known as the 'October 6 Massacre'. When similar violence erupted in the 'May Massacre' of 1992, Samak was again accused of supporting and abetting thuggish violence against unarmed civilians. He is now under investigation for corruption in a fire truck purchase deal for the city of Bangkok when he was its governor, and he freely admits to being Thaksin Shinawatra's nominee, the caretaker of his political party, while Thaksin himself remains in exile in England, as owner of Manchester City football club.

While Bangkok, the Central region, the East and the South voted against the PPP, and many provinces in the Lower North switched allegiance from Thaksin, the Upper North and the massive Northeast overwhelmingly voted for them. It shows that these people do not give a damn about the many accusations against Thaksin, whether they be about corruption and nepotism; the undermining of independent watchdog organisations; the disrespect towards the monarchy; or the refusal to pay income tax on the 2 billion US dollars sale of ShinCorp (his telecommunications, television and banking empire) shares to Temasek (Singaporean government investment arm). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they should be equally uninterested in Samak Sundaravej's personal history.

This is strange to me: pro-Thaksin voters are enamored of his wildly populist policies—cheap healthcare, village fund, cheap housing—yet they have never wondered where the enormous tax money to fund these paradisiacal schemes will come from, when even Thaksin himself avoided paying income tax.

As I offer up my blood sacrifices, I am haunted by these questions: How can this society continue?
How do we co-exist with these people?