

Chapter 2

Thai Publications on Surrealism (1964-1984)

1. *The writings of No Na Paknam (1967-1972)*

After the death of Professor Silpa Bhirasri in 1962, Prayoon Uluchada resigned his post as teacher and director of Chang Silpa (Silpakorn University preparatory school) and dedicated the rest of his life to research. His studies resulted in numerous books and articles, which he published under the pseudonym No Na Paknam. Much of what he wrote was intended as an introduction meant to cultivate an appreciation for Thai and Western art. His writings, frequently published in weekly or monthly magazines such as *Siamrat*, *Chorfa* and *Chaokrung*, are often full of charm and were enjoyed by people from the country's artistic and literary communities. Many of them were collected and reprinted in book form. His most important books are *History of Art and Artists* (1967), *Western Art: An Introduction to Universal Art* (1968), *Perspectives on Art* (1968), *The Vocabulary of Art* (1st edition 1972, 2nd edition 1979), and *Lives of the Great Painters* (1972).

In these works, No Na Paknam approaches his subject with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. He is an excellent popularizer, writing from impressions and often from memory. He has a gift for recounting the history of art through striking details, for treating his subjects from a distinctly personal perspective, and for placing his examples within a Thai context, facilitating comprehension for his Thai readers. Sometimes, however, this approach risks distorting the original meaning. This is especially true in the case of surrealism.

In *The Vocabulary of Art* (1972), he defines surrealism this way:

Surrealism is an artistic group situated between collage and constructivism, and in opposition to cubism. Surrealism prefers the story of a dream or a thought with no reality, for example in the works of Klee, Chirico, Tanguy, Dali and Man Ray. At times, surrealism sets out to satirize society (or religion) as in the case of Dali's image of a woman with drawers.

One could say quite a lot about this definition, but it is chiefly perceptions like this which have colored Thais' understanding of surrealism for the past twenty years, and which to a certain extent still hold true even today. No Na Paknam did not pretend that his views were scientific or supported by academic research, but nothing prevented Thai surrealism in its entirety from developing out of his interpretation. Here, No Na Paknam confuses techniques with schools. While constructivism was in fact a school of art, one which preceded surrealism by a few years, collage is not an artistic doctrine but an artistic medium. Besides, for the surrealist painters, collage grew out of the notion of automatic writing (*écriture automatique*) – keeping in mind that surrealism was a literary laboratory before it became an esthetic in painting. No Na Paknam also wrongly includes Klee among the surrealists. And as for satire, it was never a prevalent trait of surrealism.

In the second edition of 1979, No Na Paknam adds:

In fact, surrealism should be against naturalism even if certain artists

paint a new nature arising from dreams; it presents a certain power, a new perspective on reality. In this case, they attach a great deal of importance to the world of the imagination and the distortion of reality. Although Dali's paintings show a twisting of reality, they still make use of a technique borrowed from realism. The surrealists, with their preference for subjects taken from dreams or emotions not found in nature, have diverse styles as can be seen in the works of Tanguy, Dali, Ernst, and Miró, all of whom have individual styles. For example, in Miró's works, abstract forms combine with emotion aroused by dance; the rhythm of the aerial space creates the image of a world which seems very real. The power of the artist lies in his ability to create all that.

As these quotes make clear, No Na Paknam, who had a great deal of influence on the way people understood surrealism, had in fact little understanding himself of the original philosophical underpinnings of the surrealist movement.

In *Western Art*, No Na Paknam writes that surrealism is: "a movement that seeks to present the unconscious in the form of images." He also gives the following explanation of Freudian theory:

Freud, the great psychoanalyst, explains that because we live under the constraints of the social system, free emotions must remain hidden at the bottom of the soul. Bit by bit, they look for a way out, finding it in dreams and the imagination. What matters is the unconscious, since nothing is true when we are awake. It is only in dreams where everything is real.

Evidently, the charming popularizer was as ill-informed about Freudianism and its importance to the surrealists as he was about surrealism itself. In his explanation of the terms *unconscious* and *dream*, No Na Paknam neglects to mention sexuality, which is fundamental to an understanding of Freud and surrealism. Instead, in the Thai context, he only gives examples of the desire to own (things) and the desire to be (a hero) – this is radically different from the original surrealism and even more so from the theories of Freud. Even when he is forced to deal with the theme of eroticism, to which the surrealists attached tremendous importance, No Na Paknam's comments demonstrate a respect for conventional Thai morality, as this passage from *Perspectives on Art* shows:

...several surrealist painters try to portray the hidden world of the unconscious, but they do so only in bits and pieces. Our unconscious is a mixture of good and evil; artists can only expose a small part of it with a certain satirical humor. If they wished to be completely honest and had to reveal their primitive instincts, they would have to resort to a great many immoral obscenities.

In this philosophical 'impressionism,' No Na Paknam, as a good Thai, avoids all discussion of eroticism, which was one of the primary tenets of the surrealist esthetic.

In *The Lives of the Great Painters*, Chapter 24 is devoted to "André Breton, the founder of surrealism." What follows are various details about Breton's life. Having worked in a psychiatric clinic, he developed an interest in the unconscious. Later, with

Max Ernst, he founded the surrealist movement, which succeeded cubism and dadaism.

Although he provides a lot of information about Breton and surrealism, No Na Paknam fails to specify that Breton was a poet and art critic; he wrote manifestoes on surrealism and was the author of a collection of articles on painting – but he himself was not a painter. He overlooks Breton's role as the head of the movement – the so-called Pope of Surrealism – and as the leader of a group of artists and poets who agreed to abide by the general doctrine of the movement. Breton also played the role of inquisitor, verifying the credentials of group members and summarily dismissing those who lacked the requisite qualifications (as in the case of Dali in 1938 and of Ernst in 1952). Breton invited artists who shared the same vision and methods of working but were not members of the surrealist camp *per se* to take part in exhibitions (for instance Picasso, Klee and Kandinsky); others, such as Matta and Lam, were recruited into the group. This helped to prolong the life of the surrealist movement (1924-1969) and inspired a plethora of innovative activities for almost half a century. Surrealism really only ended in 1969 with Breton's death, although it enjoyed its greatest impact in the period between the two world wars.

No Na Paknam's assertion that surrealism is markedly different from cubism probably came from the fact that surrealism repudiates lines, geometric forms and especially the static quality of cubism. It opts instead for a technique centered around the distortion of nature, reflected in strange shapes and forms that are meant to imitate the basic uncertainty at work in the human soul.

In the case of Ernst, No Na Paknam writes briefly in *Western Art* and *The Vocabulary of Art* that he was a German painter who was introduced to dadaism in Cologne and who liked to stick bits of paper or small ornaments on his canvases. Later he left Germany and moved to Paris. According to No Na Paknam, Ernst had a taste for painting mysterious scenes or terrifying and disgusting realms. He concludes, however, by saying that Ernst was a very successful surrealist.

No Na Paknam provides even less information about other major surrealists. Tanguy, Magritte and Man Ray are only mentioned in passing, while in the section on surrealism in *The Vocabulary of Art* (1979), No Na Paknam analyzes Miró's technique for creating images. More to the point, however, the few details that No Na Paknam provides about Miró and his abstract style makes it impossible to appreciate the importance of his particular way of creating automatic images that come from the unconscious or the world of dreams. What's more, he seems to have no knowledge at all of André Masson. As a result, Thai readers have never given importance to the concept of automatism, which played such a prominent role in the esthetics of the surrealist group.

In *The Vocabulary of Art* and in *Western Art*, No Na Paknam notes that Giorgio de Chirico was an Italian of Greek ancestry who founded the metaphysical school of painting. He loved to paint architectural scenes from a disorienting angle, like a gallery extending into infinity, or an apartment building with arched door and windows adorned with ancient statues. He gave tremendous importance to objects (a mannequin, an antique picture frame, a triangle, a ball, etc.) that convey the mysterious atmosphere of times past without specifying a date and resembling, in fact,

an imaginary world. Moreover, No Na Paknam considered Chirico *one of the founders of surrealism*.

No Na Paknam gives more attention to Marc Chagall than to De Chirico. He presents a detailed biography of the Russian painter, discussing his arrival in Paris in 1910 and the influence of cubism on his work prior to his return to Moscow. Then he makes a point of mentioning his second trip to Paris in 1923. He also compares Chagall's style as the sketches of a child who paints the images of a dream or a fantasy, opening up the surrealist painters to a new way of seeing. In the chapters dealing with surrealist paintings and abstract art in his book *Western Art*, No Na Paknam adds more historical information and stresses the style of Chagall (who uses cubist technique to communicate the story of a dream and evoke a certain nostalgia for the country of his birth) as an example of surrealist style. The paintings *The Birthday* and *My Village and I* are accompanied by the following comment: "Chagall's technique seems to have a higher artistic quality than that of Dali, as he had an exceptional gift for using colors and emotions in his paintings."

But despite his preference for Chagall's technique, No Na Paknam accords Dali greater importance, discussing his life and works in considerable detail in his book *The Vocabulary of Art*:

Early on, he started working in a cubist style then became one of the leaders of the surrealist group. An opponent of Marxism, he converted to Catholicism; his works are universally known.

Obviously, this is a terribly sketchy description of Dali's political ideas, which were infinitely more complex than a simple rejection of Marxism and his conversion to Christianity, the latter one of Dali's favorite themes after his expulsion from the surrealist group.

In his biography of Dali in *Western Art*, No Na Paknam includes these comments on the artist's original attitudes:

Salvador Dali is a remarkable surrealist...of a profound surrealism. His behavior is as strange and surreal as his paintings. In an interview in London, he created a surrealistic atmosphere by wearing a race car driver's helmet. And on his first trip to New York, Dali showed up for an interview with a lamb's skeleton on his head. He loves to behave in bizarre ways, like wearing a scuba diving suit for an interview. Dali was born in 1904, and was a three-year-old child in Catalonia when Picasso and Braque launched the cubist movement. At 21, he had his first exhibition in Barcelona and then in Madrid, where he himself cut a very strange figure in the midst of his paintings. Even if he was not yet a surrealist, he was already under the influence of Sigmund Freud. As a student at the School of Fine Arts in Madrid, he was rejected by his classmates because of his passion for philosophy books, which had a great impact on his work. On a personal level, Dali was a rather chauvinistic young Spaniard. He loved Picasso for his fame and decided to go to Paris to meet him, where by chance he also met the members of the surrealist group which had just been established. He joined the movement and took part in an

exhibition which was even better received than cubism. This was the start of Dali's fame.

No Na Paknam wrote on several of Dali's works, including numerous illustrations and critical analyses of his paintings. Some of these critiques are an expression of his appreciation for and personal interpretation of what seemed to him to represent ideas not so different from traditional Thai religious beliefs. For example, about the painting *The Persistence of Memory*, which he called *Soft Watches*, he writes:

The first painting is a work by Dali entitled *Soft Watches (Persistence of Memory)*. It seeks to describe memories imprinted on the mind. At first glance, one probably wonders about these soft objects -- these watches which melt as though made of wax. Then on closer inspection, one notices that beneath this deep, dark landscape, one's imagination extends infinitely toward a brilliant light that illuminates a distant rock. This work is our unconscious, which after the boredom of some task, invades our spirit; in an instant, one becomes listless and one desires nothing: it is a kingdom of solitude. And it is at that particular moment that one rediscovers a reality that is unequivocally present in the ambiguity of things, including time (the melting watch), nature, mountains, and a profound uncertainty about the future. At this stage, one can penetrate the Dharma, like the will of the painter. Looking at a painting should expand the level of thought and allow this thought to grow until one arrives at the truth, which may differ from person to person. It is just like classical music, which rings out pleasantly if one is in a good mood while listening to it or that brings consolation when one is sad: this is the magic of art to which all of us are susceptible. Similarly, with this painting by Dali, if you look at it with a light and happy heart, you say to yourself: "This painter is sick. Everything he does is really weird." But if you are feeling a bit sad as you stand staring at it, you will feel something springing up miraculously to console you."

In the same book, No Na Paknam describes Dali's work (notably *Flaming Giraffe*, without the accompanying illustration), to show that surrealist paintings are "curiosities resulting from the free play of the unconscious."

He paints the elongated silhouette of a woman wandering in the middle of the desert, one hand extended before her like a blind person; on her bust and on one leg is a set of drawers; coming out of her back are pieces of wood, one of which is a cane. Farther away in the distance is a giraffe on fire from its neck to its back. At first glance, the painting appears to have been done by a madman, but after a more considered examination, it seems to hold a secret lurking behind it as if the artist wanted to convey a negative view of women. It needs no explanation, as with a single word of explanation, it stops being surrealist. When you guess, it can be more or less wrong, but it serves in some measure to refresh your intellect.

The Dali painting which No Na Paknam particularly admired was *The Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. He provides a lengthy analysis in which he includes his personal interpretation and perspective: