

Chapter 3

Thai Painting with Surrealist Tendencies (1964-1984)

The period from 1964 to 1984 was a time of tremendous political unrest in Thailand. This was especially true under General Thanom Kittikhachorn whose government joined forces with the United States in its war against Vietnam. The bloody events of October 14, 1973, and October 6, 1976, which stemmed from protests against the country's military government as much as against the American presence, were traumatic and provoked a powerful response among many leading writers and artists.

It was evident that some of these artists had been influenced by surrealist works. They produced art that was born from their understanding of surrealism but that also took into account their reactions to the social conditions they were living in.

Based on the previous chapter's examination of writings on surrealism and on interviews with many artists and experts, it is possible to divide the Thai writers and painters who produced surrealist-inspired works into two major groups:

Group 1. Artists or Fine Arts students who flirted briefly with surrealist style and technique, namely: Uab Sanasan, Chuang Moolpinit, Sompong Adulsarapan, Parinya Tantisuk, Vivicha Yodnil, Sremsak Sukpiam, Supachai Sukkechote, Charun Poltacha and Chakrapan Posayakit.

Group 2. Artists whose interest in surrealism lasted longer and who can be divided into four smaller sub-groups:

2.1 Artists who created surrealist-inspired works that incorporate their personal experiences and elements of their subconscious: Kiattisak Chanonnart, Nayana Chotisuk and Viroj Nuy-butara.

2.2 Artists whose works are intended as social criticism: Thana Lauhakaikul, Kamol Thassananchalee, Somchai Hatthakitkoson, Pratuang Emjaroen, Thammasak Booncherd, Paisan Thirapongvisanuporn, Chirasak Patthanapong and Apinan Poshyananda.

2.3 Artists whose works touch on religious themes and/or are inspired by Thai traditional art: Pichai Nirand, Kowit Anekkachai (Khemanantha), Worarit Ritthakani, Panya Vijnthanasarn and Thawan Datchani.

2.4 An artist whose works are similar to surrealism in terms of their form and content: Angkarn Kalayapong.

In our discussion of these Thai artists' works, we will look at the particular stimulus that may have led them to produce surrealist-inspired art. We will also point out the specific surrealist artists and works that influenced or inspired them. Finally, we will explain the ways in which the Thai artists adapted surrealism to their own personal manner of expression.

Group 1. Artists or Fine Arts students

- **Uab Sanasen and Vivitcha Yodnit.**

Uab Sanasen's *Unfinished Melody* (1981) (Fig.1) and Vivitcha Yodnit's *The Samed Sea* (1982) (Fig.2) both depict heavy objects floating in the air.

Uab and Vivitcha admit being impressed by the forms and style of surrealist paintings, but they are unable to name any specific works. Vivitcha appears to have been inspired by Magritte's *The Castle of the Pyrenees* (1959-1969), while Uab's painting bears some similarity to the same painter's *Threatening Time* (1928). In addition, in terms of atmosphere, palette and certain details (such as the table with a tablecloth), both paintings recall Dali's *Couple with Their Heads Full of Clouds* (1936).

Despite these resemblances, the intention and subject matter of these two Thai painters are far removed from the works of the early surrealists. The musical instrument and other details in Uab's work are completely different from what one sees in the Magritte painting, which depicts a trumpet floating on the sea near a chair and the body of a woman. Magritte hoped to provoke a feeling of surprise in his viewers, forcing them to see a new kind of reality in the unusual combination of unrelated objects. He wanted to hint at the secret relations between things, between the unconscious or between sexual impulses. Uab's intention is different. In an interview on April 26, 1993, he said that he enjoyed playing the violin but had never managed to play as well as he wanted. That is why he painted a violin floating above a musical staff.

Vivitcha explains in his thesis *Stone, Sea, Sky* (1982) that he had been struck by the beauty of nature at the seashore and had wanted to express his feelings of appreciation. In an interview on June 21, 1985, he confided that he had painted a large floating rock simply for the pleasure of showing a heavy stone freed from its usual environment. This is radically different from the intention Magritte to use the irrational to surprise Western viewers, used to seeing things logically. The content of Vivitcha's painting is also different. The stones are smaller but more numerous. They hover just above the surface of the water and are accompanied by shadows. The sea is enormous and painted in vivid colors. There is no wish to shock Thai viewers, who are familiar with the world of legends, and the belief in miracles and the world of spirits. Thais would not be taken aback by Magritte's immense stone (which is as large as the castle) or by his sky, which is decidedly larger than the sea.



Fig.1



Fig.2

- **Parinya Tantisuk**

Parinya's painting *Saturday* (1981) (Fig.3), one of a series of paintings on the days of the week, is made up of forms freely adapted from natural objects. Birds, worms, insects, kites, snakes, trees, mountains, and eyes all appear to float in space. They all are given playful new shapes that express the artist's feelings for nature.



Fig.3

The way in which the artist has transformed natural forms into lively, simple shapes that float freely in space, as well as his two-dimensional use of color recall Miró's painting *Carnival of Harlequin* (1924-5). Meanwhile, the objects are shortened, which is reminiscent of the stripes in Kandinsky's *Black Points* (1937).

During an interview on June 25, 1986, Parinya admitted that he was interested in Miró's use of color, his shapes, and his unnatural metamorphosis of forms. But whereas the Spanish artist was driven to paint by an internal stimulus (the automatism of dreams, or the delirium brought on by a combination of hunger and sexual obsession -- states much favored by the early surrealists), the forms in Parinya's paintings are colored by his perceptions of nature on a vacation he took outside Bangkok. Unlike Miró, he does not draw from his unconscious nor from his libido.

- **Chuang Moolpinit, Sompong Adulsarapan, Sremsak Sukpiam, and Supachai Sukkechote**

The painting *Ayuthaya* (1977) (Fig.4) by Chuang Moolpinit contains the same compositional elements and atmosphere as Ernst's painting *The Whole City* (1935), a work inspired by the artist's fear of impending catastrophe in the form of Hitler's war on Europe. But in an interview on August 23, 1993, Chuang claimed that on seeing the ruined temple at Ayuthaya (Siam's former capital destroyed by the Burmese in 1767), he had merely reimagined the temple in its entirety. As for his technique, he had tried to print a lace design on the canvas just as Ernst had done, but he found that it took too much time and gave it up in later works.

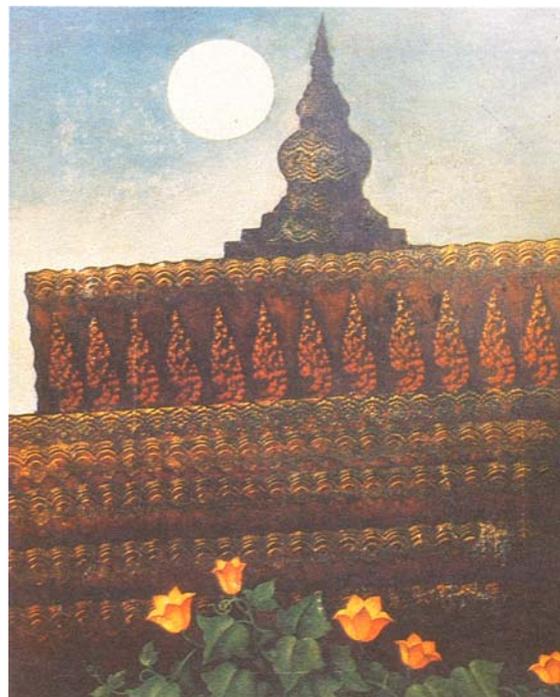


Fig.4

Sompong's paintings *Mannequin* (Fig.5) and *Dream at the Seashore* (1981)(Fig.6) are both concerned with the sea, but Sompong insists on transforming the female figures into slack, fossil-like objects, a style beloved by the surrealists. The distinctive feature of the first painting, a combination of human body parts, or women with trees or flowers for heads, recalls Ernst's women in the painting *Napoleon in the Desert* (1941) and Dali's women in *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra* (1936). While in the second case, he may have been inspired by Magritte's *Collective Invention* (1935), in which a mermaid figure has been turned to stone, it is equally likely that Sompong was inspired by various drawings by Hieronymus Bosch (15th century), who also influenced the surrealists.

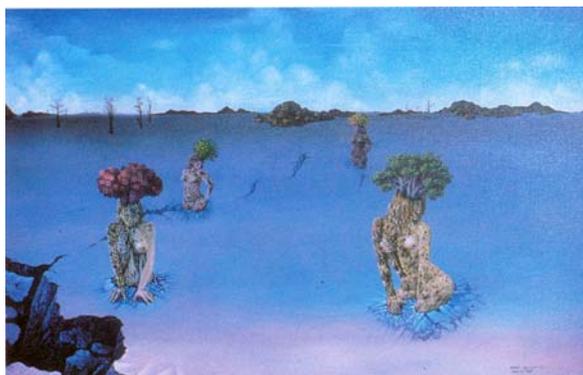


Fig.5

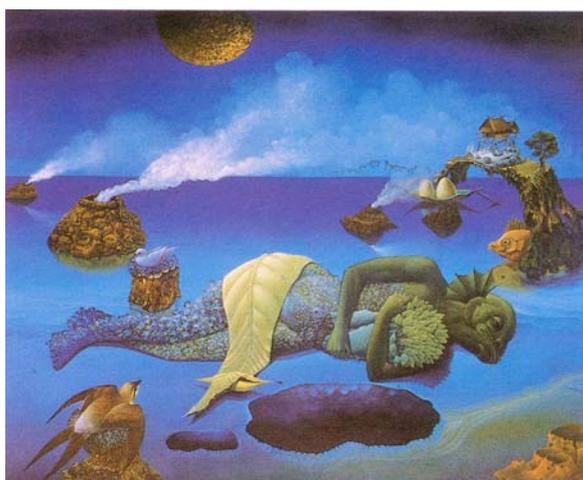


Fig.6

In an interview on May 24, 1986, Sompong admitted that he loved the smooth, seductive surfaces of Dali's paintings. He acknowledged that surrealism was easy in one way, in that it allowed him to give free rein to his imagination. Sompong also said that as he worked on these two paintings, he used his imagination in painting a nude body so that rotting flesh would be transformed into wood, stone, or some other natural element. Instead of putting a brain in the woman's head, he put in a tree, a flower, a bird, a fish – whatever struck his imagination!

Sremsak and Supachai are two students at the Faculty of Painting at Silpakorn University. One is working on his Master's degree, the other on his Bachelor's. Both have stated that their works are inspired by the European surrealists, especially Dali and Ernst. What they find interesting about these European masters is their technique of placing objects in the middle of a vast, horizon-less space or their way of freely juxtaposing hybrid objects or conveying a dreamlike atmosphere. Sremsak's canvas *Opposition of Different Forms in the Imagination 2* (1985)(Fig.7)



Fig.7

suggests the Buddhist concept of impermanence through the contrast between soft,

solid forms and hard ones, scattered in a dark, empty space. The painting as a whole recalls Dali's *Premonition of Civil War* or his *Cannibalism of Autumn*, as well as Tanguy's *Mama, Papa Is Wounded* (1927), and Ernst's *Napoleon in the Desert* (1941). In his thesis, which has the same name as his painting, Sremsak admits to being influenced by the work of the European surrealists:

In creating works of art, one is always influenced by other artists. This is certainly true of my work. I am interested in surrealist paintings, and in my own paintings, I emphasize the importance of imagination and dreams, and in this, I am not so different from the surrealists. I have studied the methods of artists like Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, and Max Ernst, and adapted these methods to my own work, and eventually I have developed my own particular style.

What distinguishes Supachai's canvas, *070 hour* (Fig.8), is the unusual nature of the hybrid animal (a combination sheep's head, bird's beak, buffalo's horn and kiwi) in the midst of an empty atmosphere bathed in yellow light. The pointed feet that perched precariously on the ground make the creature appear to float. The painting shares certain features with Dali's *Sleep* and Max Ernst's *The Angel of Hearth and Home*.



Fig.8

- **Charun Poltacha**

This student explains in his dissertation "The Surreal in Thai Painting" (1976)(Fig.9) that he uses surrealist techniques to tell stories like the *Ramakien* and *Phra Apaimani*. In his first painting, inspired by Dali's *Atavistic Vestiges after Rain* (1934) and Magritte's *Signs of Evening* (1936), Charun may have wanted to create a two-dimensional point of view. In the second painting (Fig.10), which borrows from Magritte's *Not to Be Reproduced* (1937), he suggests the dual nature of the demon, who is both fierce and kind. Borrowing from Magritte allows Charun to communicate his ancient subject matter more effectively.

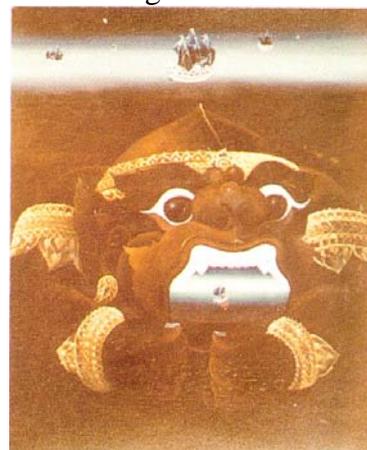


Fig.9

- **Chakrapan Posayakit**

At 21, when Chakrapan was a student at Silpakorn, he demonstrated his love for the marionettes and masks from Thai popular theater in a painting (Fig.11) submitted as a composition exam in 1965. The painting is a self-portrait in which the artist is

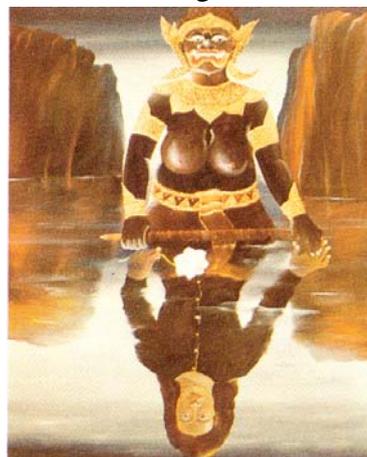


Fig.10