On the left side of the painting a figure seen from behind resembles the hips and legs of a women stretched out on her stomach. Above her knee is a thin piece of striped cloth, and above her waist, superimposed female body parts (hips, legs, arms, chest) form a torso. Her head is made up of intertwined strings. The painting evokes an atmosphere of oppression; it is unnatural, lifeless and frightening.

In *The Cultural War* (Fig.29), painted in the same year, Somchai makes use of decoupage and a collage of human organs to convey a nightmarish quality. In portraying female body parts as hideous, he is able to show one of the consequences of the Vietnam War on Thailand – the explosion of the commercial sex industry. To suggest the degradation of women forced to sell themselves, of women so starved for money that they sacrificed their dignity, the artist has suspended a purse from the branch of a tree next to the female organs.

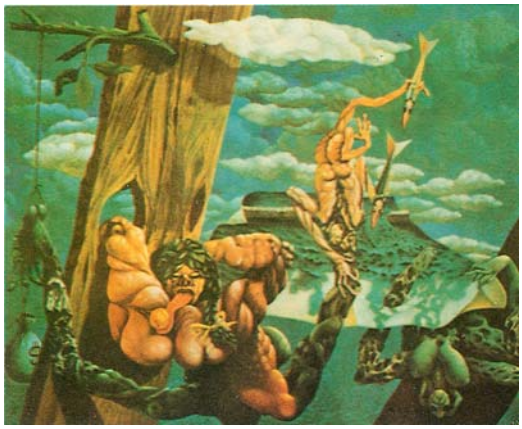

Fig.29

Three years later, Somchai produced *The Goddess Kali of the 20th Century* (Fig.30), a painting attacking Thai society for the proliferation of prostitution at the time that American soldiers invaded Southeast Asia under the pretext of saving Vietnam from the Communist threat. A female form, upright on a flower in the sea in the middle of a thick bank of clouds, is shown dancing; she resembles the goddess Lakshmi, who was born on a lotus flower in the sea. But in identifying the figure as Kali, the name of goddess Uma (the consort of Shiva) in her destructive phase, the painters merges two mythical females. Her hair hangs loose, as in the first three paintings, but here it is longer and thicker and veils her entire face. Her breasts are larger, more frightening than in *The Cultural War*, and encircled by snakes. In the opening in the middle of her body, two male faces resembling Johnson and Krushtchev (the American and Soviet leaders) talk on the telephone. On the woman's thighs are two terrifying animals; two snakes wind down her legs to her feet. In her left hand, Kali, the goddess who rules over life and death in this age, holds the tail of a large dragonfly. In the middle of the painting, above the woman, is a bird, perhaps a symbol of the artist surveying this scene. This painting could be seen as a work of ugliness, terror and repugnance, having all the signs of shocking sexual symbolism.

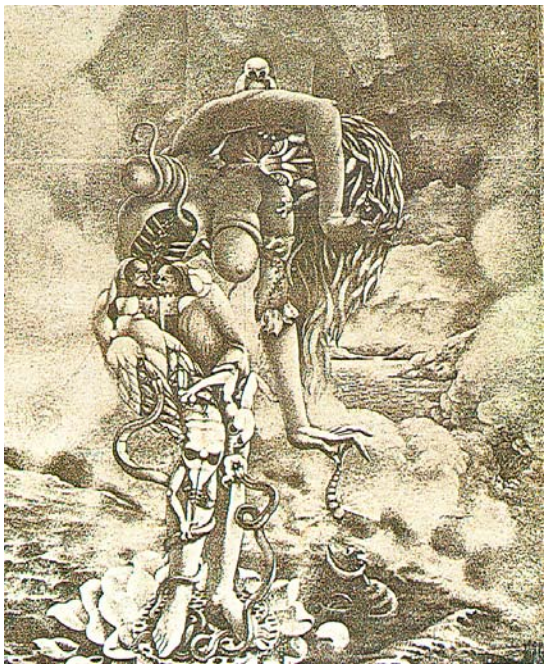

Fig.30

In *Structure of the Society* (1978) (Fig.31), the last painting from this part of Somchai's career, the artist once again lays emphasis on images of degradation, decadence and deterioration while varying his technique and his arrangement of compositional elements. The artist seems intent on pointing out the debasement of women, oppressed and exploited by a society in which men hold all the cards. The painting suggests that Thai society as a whole is in a state of moral decline. In contrast, the composition, palette and overall atmosphere are far less off-putting than in the three earlier works.

Fig.31

The style and composition of Somchai's paintings often recall the works of the European surrealists, most notably Dali. In *The Call-Girl*, the ambiguous forms, whether human or parts of the landscape, remind the viewer of *The Portrait of Frau Isabel Styler-Tas* (1945), while the leafy branch in *Structure of the Society* also recalls this work. Cutting open the human body to create the illusion of depth is also seen in Dali's *The Weaning of Furniture-Nutrition* (1934). The telephone and the grasshopper's head, symbols of sensuality, suggest that the artist was influenced by *Sublime Moment* (1938) and the *Great Masturbator* (1929).

This assembling of female body parts in *The Cultural War*, the predominance of pink and yellow, the goddess Kali's breast, and the structure of the female form in *Structure of the Society* all recall Dali's *Premonition of Civil War* (1936), while the human body composed entirely of elements animal and vegetable elements echoes the surrealist approach used by Delvaux in *Call of the Night* (1937). The trompe l'oeil depiction of the sea in *The Cultural War* was likely inspired by Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*.

Even though Somchai's paintings were inspired by surrealist artists such as Dali and Delvaux (or by those artists like Bosch or Arcimboldo, who provided inspiration to the surrealists), particularly in the use of semi-real, semi-dreamlike images, *trompe l'oeil*, ambiguity, metamorphosis (human form + animal or vegetable element), the theme of woman and eroticism, he seems to differ from the surrealists most notably in his attitude. If he makes use of the female form and eroticism, it is for reasons of social critique. Somchai borrows surrealist techniques chiefly as a means of self-expression.

- **Pratuang Emjaroen and Chang Sae Tang**

Like Somchai Hatthakitkoson, Pratuang is a self-taught artist. Early works, such as *Life* and *The Metallic Tree*, were completed in 1966. The works of the succeeding period were painted around the time of the political turmoil of October 14, 1973 and

October 6, 1976, two events that aroused powerful emotions in the artist. *Dharma-Adharma* (1966), *Red Morning Glories and Rotten Rifles* (1976) and *The Mortification of Buddha* (1976) are among his better-known early works.

In *Life* (1966)(Fig.32), Prathuang evokes his pain and that of the other members of his immediate group by carving out ruts in the surface of the canvas and putting garbage on top. The dominant colors are yellow mixed with varying shades of brown or red. Occasional patches of blue draw attention to some of the focal points of the painting. *Life* depicts a woman and child. The woman is painted in brown; she has three faces, an arm and a hand on each side. The child at her stomach resembles a light blue embryo dominated by a large vivid eye. In an interview on March 25, 1986, Pratuang spoke of this particular painting, explaining: "The woman with three faces is life…It's the impression I have of the ordinary people I meet. The woman who posed for the painting expressed her feelings clearly and in various ways. Sometimes she was anxious, sometimes she was in pain; sometimes she felt hopeless. The expressions on the face there in front of me told me that the social conditions around her had caused her sadness."

Fig.32

The free, ethereal form of the image resembles something out of a dream or the subconscious. In this painting, the image is partially dreamlike, partially automatic. The blurred, fossil-like faces with their numerous eyes recall Ernst's painting *The Eye of Silence* (1944).

It is possible that Pratuang was inspired by another Ernst painting entitled *Oedipus Rex* (1992), in which a piece of pointed metal protruding from a finger and a walnut are symbols of suffering. As in *The Metallic Tree* (1966)(Fig.33), Pratuang depicts a metal shoot (symbol of some destructive force) growing through a large tree trunk (life destroyed). He uses blue-gray for the metal, and dark brown for the background, while a bluish shadow represents the suffering of the artist, who has no other way to fight.

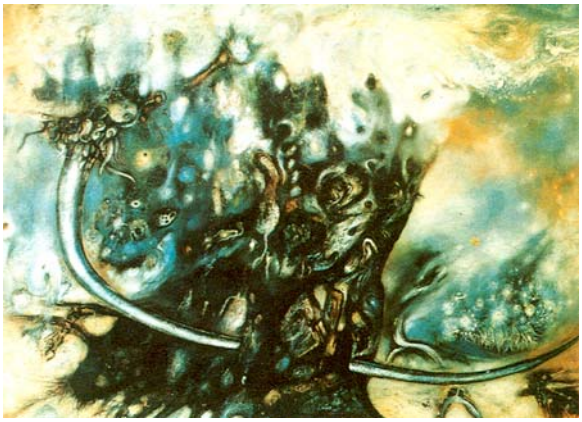

Fig.33

The events of October 14, 1973, a day of great sorrow, outraged Pratuang. He painted *Dharma-Adharma* (1973-4)(Fig.34) to denounce the massacre of students and other victims who had demanded a return to democracy and respect for the constitution. The painting's power comes from the violent movement of various juxtaposed elements. The symbols of the *Dharma* – the wheel, the head of a Buddha statue, and a

Fig.34

white flower (a symbol of purity) – have been crushed. The wheel, of which certain bits lie beneath a weapon, is broken…The Buddha head has been pierced by a weapon and, like the flower, is stained with blood. The figures representing *Adharma* include rifle butts and muzzles, and a sword in a hand with long, tapered fingernails. Frightened, suffering faces are scattered throughout the picture. In the upper right is a circle (representing perhaps the sun), and in the middle of the circle is a smaller circle with a blue nucleus from which rays emanate. Beneath one of these rays is a large eye staring fixedly (it may be the artist's eye). About the painting, Pratuang has commented:

> I wanted to symbolize the feelings of confusion and disbelief at the sight of such horrific scenes. There are crying faces and a sky with heavy black storm clouds. Tears stream endlessly down the face of the Buddha, a symbol of the Thai people under threat.

Apinan calls this painting "one of the most powerful testaments against violence in all of modern Thai art." He remembers that when Pratuang displayed the painting at the National Gallery in 1974, many viewers sat in front of the canvas and cried, reflecting back on the events they had witnessed (Apinan: 1992:161).

With regard to any possible surrealist influence, we agree with Apinan, who feels that Pratuang was inspired by paintings of war and killing like Picasso's *Guernica*. Even so, the use of bright colors and free, staccato, almost irrational brushstrokes to tell the story of those terrible events and the images emerging from Pratuang's subconscious recall the painting style employed by Masson in such works as *Paysage Iroquois* (1944), in which brilliant colors also dominate.

Shortly before the bloody events of October 6, 1976, Pratuang painted *Red Morning Glories and Rotten Rifles* and *The Mortification of Buddha*. These two paintings share a common feature – a scattering of holes or black circles that reveal targets or the mouths of canons. These are symbols of destruction, as in *Dharma-Adharma*.

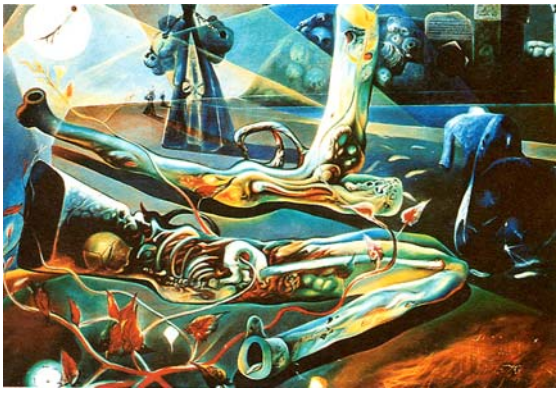

Fig.35

Pratuang contributed *Red Morning Glories and Rotten Rifles* (Fig.35) to the

Dharma Group's third show at the Bhirasri Gallery on the eve of the October 6 massacre. The high point of the painting is the soft form of the rifles (M16), one of which is curved like a leg tucked under and the other with a mouth resembling an extended arm. Within the cylinders of these two rifles are wires wrapped around tendons and muscles, most of which are green like rotten meat. In contrast, certain other parts are yellow and red, which Pratuang himself has said represent pus and blood. There are worms eating away at the inside and wriggling their way to the outside. The morning glories with their white blooms crawl out of the lower left-hand corner and over the two rifles. Where the rifle barrels end, there are blue shapes that resemble an exploded head and the headless, handless torso of a shattered Buddha statue. The dominant color in the foreground is a greenish orange, while the background is brown, blue and green. The hill is made of human skulls.

Pratuang explains the origin and meaning of the painting in this way:

> Every day I had news that my fellow countrymen and women were being gunned down day and night without stop. A deep sorrow remained like a wound in the hearts of parents, brothers, sisters, wives, children and friends. I shared the sadness of my compatriots and decided to do this painting to compare and contrast the morning glories, which grow up out of the soil and nourish us, with rifles that have the odor of blood and pus. I wanted to show what is lost in the effort to soften the hearts of the savage men who fired the guns in order to make them have love for their fellow Thais instead.

It is clear that the artist was inspired by several surrealist paintings, especially Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* in which solid objects appear to melt and metamorphose. The various shapes given to the softened weapons and human body parts recall *Premonition of Civil War*, and the way in which the butts and muzzles of the rifles are connected by human muscles recalls Magritte's *Red Model* (1936), in which a foot is joined to the upper portion of a shoe.

Pratuang borrowed from these surrealist models and related them to the story of the Buddha in order to criticize Thai society more effectively. In *The Mortification of Buddha* (Fig.36), the artist portrays Prince Siddharta seated in meditation prior to attaining enlightenment. It would appear that Pratuang intended for the suffering of the Bodhisattva to be a symbol of Thai society's suffering in 1976. The head of the Bodhisattva, in a white halo, is barely visible, a technique inspired perhaps by two of Magritte's paintings: *The Pleasure Principle* (1937) and *The Art of Living* (1967). Beneath the left shoulder there is a black hole (a bullet hole, a symbol of destruction). In the middle of the body there is a large hole behind his folded hands, and beneath the hole one can see a white circle (in the place where, in meditation, a circle of light appears). The

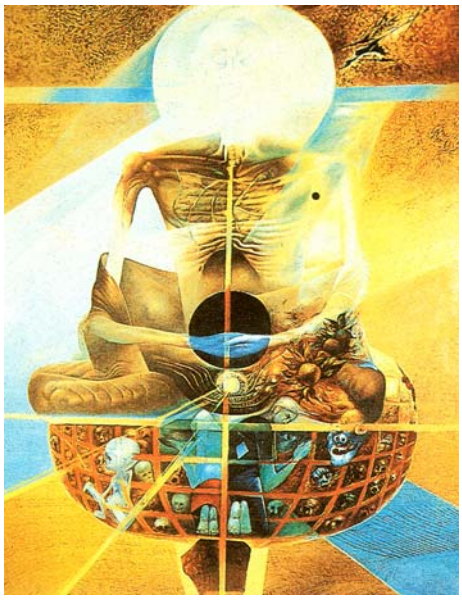

Fig.36