

surrounded by everything he loves (as a child he had gone to see the masks and marionettes at the National Museum many times). The stands on which the masks are mounted and the empty, limitless space stretching into the distance have probably been borrowed from Dali's *Sleep* (1937). Surrealism provided an inspiration that helped Chakrapan to get his message across. But this is the only time he turned to surrealist models for help. Chakrapan has since become famous as a portraitist, a painter of figures from classical literature, and a marionette maker. He works in a style that is distinctly his own but still consonant with traditional Thai culture.



Fig.11

Group 2: *Artists who have shown a sustained interest in surrealist painting*

2.1 Artists whose works are colored by their personal experiences: Kiettisak Chanonnart, Nayana Chotisuk and Wirot Nouiboute

- **Kiettisak Chanonnart**

In 1980, in an interview on the occasion of his winning the gold medal at the 26<sup>th</sup> National Art Exhibition for his painting *The State of the Subconscious*, Kiettisak remarked: "Ten years ago, after I graduated from Silpakorn University, all my works had a surrealist quality." He began to take an interest in the surrealists in 1965 when he was a student in the Faculty of Painting at Silpakorn.

The sudden death of his youngest brother was the principal cause that drove him to produce these surrealist-inspired works. Seeing his brother's body at the morgue was deeply troubling, and when he saw the works of Dali and Chirico in some art books, he felt that they echoed his own feelings.

After graduation, he launched himself into a deeper exploration of surrealism. For his master's thesis *The Silent Mystery* (Silpakorn University, 1979), Kiettisak had to study the history of surrealism, surrealist art, dadaism and the metaphysical painting at the roots of surrealist art. He also delved into Freud's psychoanalytic theories and his concept of the unconscious. Kiettisak maintains that his work continues to be inspired by surrealist art and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. But, in Kiettisak's opinion, he is no danger of wandering too far away from everyday life; social and cultural constraints keep him anchored to reality. As for the question of eroticism, so important in Western surrealism, he says: "We don't dare show that" – despite its presence in the unconscious.

Kiettisak's surrealist-influenced oils on canvas can be divided into two periods.

In his work from the earlier period (1968-1976) he insists on delving into the most labyrinthine pathways. Stimulated by the surrealists' manner of representation, Kiettisak borrows various forms to help convey the experiences that lay buried in his unconscious. These include the sudden death of his brother and his trip to the morgue where his brother's body lay wrapped in an atmosphere of silent, suffocating mystery. The artist, who tends to be introverted, reflects on these experiences in his paintings to gain an understanding of his own thoughts and feelings. An example is *Painting* (1968)(Fig.12). The subject of the painting is death, symbolized by a human skull and an animal skeleton, placed in the middle of the canvas on a train and a swing, the two main focal points of the painting. The train with its smokestack looks like a wagon for a coffin and a crematory. On the far left is a Buddhist monk seen from behind and dressed in strange attire. The monk, although presented in an unrealistic manner, is a sign of the artist's devotion to the Buddhist faith.

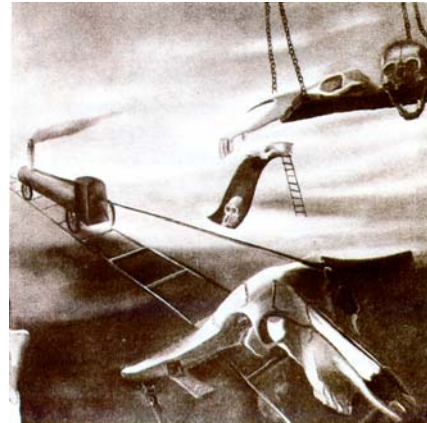


Fig.12

Although some of the forms and content of the painting appear to be surrealist-inspired, especially by the hyper-real landscapes, zigzag arrangement of objects, and trains of Chirico in such paintings as *The Philosopher's Conquest* (1941) and *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914), the Italian surrealist saw trains as a symbol of the industrial age. His trains appear in a Renaissance context to represent the conflict between different spaces and times. But Kiettisak's train, which resembles a wagon bearing a coffin and the chimney of a crematory, is symbolic of death and separation from a loved one. This symbolism is closely tied to the artist's personal experiences and, to understand, depends on an Asian cultural context based on Buddhist beliefs. As a result, his train is different from Chirico's, which was conceived in a Western context.

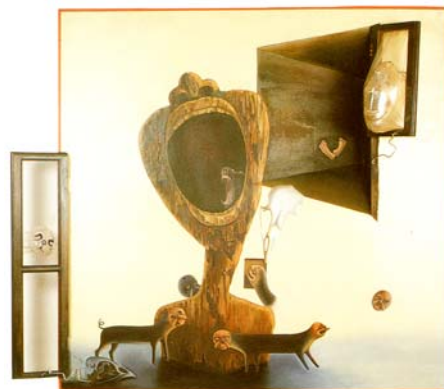


Fig.13

In the painting *Painting 2* (Fig.13), produced the following year, death reappears in the form of a skeleton in the left foreground. This figure and the overall atmosphere combine to suggest suffocation. In the center of the canvas a wooden human form with its mouth wide open reinforces the feeling of extreme oppression. Surrounding this form are terrifying animals with strange heads and shapes. Some have only one head, others two, but all evoke an odd unease. Through the wall on the right, one can see into a long room. Kiettisak has also attached an actual window and door to the left and right sides of the painting to add depth and a three-dimensional quality which evoke a sense of terrifying mystery, especially in the faces of the strange creatures on the window and door.

Kiettisak has explained the origin of the image of the man crying out with his mouth wide open and the strange animals. "I screamed like that because I had to do drawings

for a textbook for one of the departments of the National Education Ministry. I was feeling a lot of pressure and needed a release, when I saw this ugly, vicious-looking dog at Chakrapan's (Posayakit, his friend) house. As soon as I saw it, I had the feeling I could use it in a painting."

Kiettisak also attributes the image of the screaming man to *Studies for Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion* (1944) by the English painter Francis Bacon, who was a disciple of the English surrealists for a time. The use of doors and windows to decorate the canvas may have been inspired by Max Ernst's work *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924).

The large staring eyes in *Painting 2* and the same terrifying sense of oppression will reappear in *A Moment of Feeling* (1972) (Fig.14) and *Revelation of the Subconscious 4* (1974). The first of these paintings reflects the artist's feelings as he listened to a ghost story told to him on a trip to Khao Yai. The figures have oval faces, and the lower part of their body gradually widens into a morning glory or a lamp. Two of the figures are shown resting on the ground, and a third floats in the air. The oval faces are concealed beneath flower-like shapes in the space between the stalks. The wide-open eyes, like the eyes of animals, resemble the eyes in *Painting 2*, and constitute major elements in the composition. The inverted stalks and flowers as well as the oval faces are intended to surprise the viewers and draw them in. Meanwhile, the entire space from the foreground to the background is filled with black strings, like snakes, creating a mysterious, terrifying atmosphere that repels and attracts at the same time.

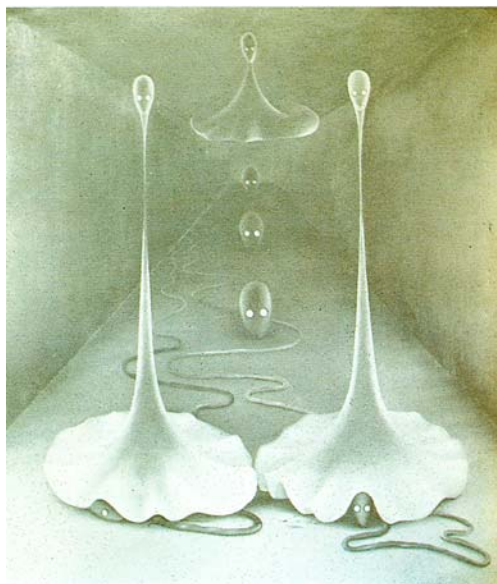


Fig.14

In *Revelation of the Subconscious 4* (Fig.15), Kiettisak's arrangement of elements adds to the depth and complexity of the painting. The viewer's gaze is drawn immediately to the center of the canvas, where there are two levels, like two superimposed rooms. A strange creature like the one in *Painting 2* (with eyes wide open as in *Painting 2* and *An Instant of Feeling*) emerges from a tube. Its reflection appears in reverse in the inside room, which is more brightly lit. The depth of the painting, its complexity, and the image of this strange, captive creature combine to express man's oppression in the world of modern technology.

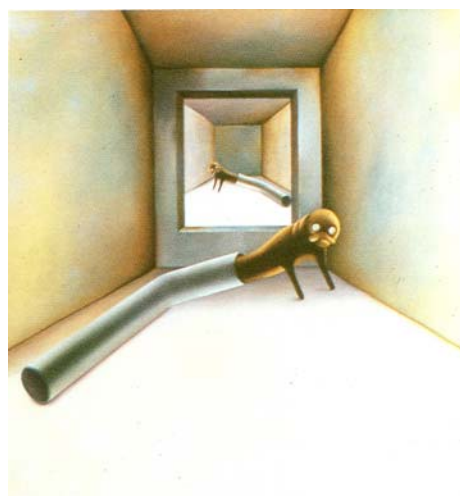


Fig.15



In terms of surrealist influence, it is possible to see the oval faces in *An Instant of Feeling* as having been inspired by the heads in Chirico's *The Disquieting Muses* (1916). The illusion of depth in the center of the painting and the placement of objects at equal intervals recalls Delvaux's painting *The Echo* (1943), and in his use of mirror images, Kiettisak appears to be borrowing from Magritte's *Not to Be Reproduced* (1937).

Works from Kiettisak's second period insist on the unknowable nature of things. What the painter is searching for appears as clothing (symbols) and certain body parts (hands and feet), but the essential elements that would allow us to recognize the whole person are always missing. The open door in the middle of the chest suggests an inner mystery.

In *State of the Subconscious I* (1980)(Fig.16), Kiettisak's arrangement of elements is even more complex. The painting is broken up into three sections, with what looks like a frame setting off the two parts at the top. The section at the bottom is shown from a different perspective, creating a sense of symmetry and balance. The new characters are the shirt and the pants, which seem to symbolize the artist himself as he leaves his inner world, or the world of his subconscious, and approaches the viewer. The fact that the shirt is almost as large as the thick-walled room suggests that the painter's subconscious feels isolated, solitary, oppressed and alone, and is seeking a way to move toward the world outside. What the viewer finds most unexpected is that the shirt and pants float in space, with a face or a body. Only the hands and feet are visible.



Fig.16

Clothing and rooms as conceptual images are explored different in Kiettisak's subsequent works. *Hallucination of the Subconscious 2* (1982) (Fig.17) shows a set of clothing seated in a chair. The position has changed slightly, the arms are on the arms of the chair, the hands hang loose, and the toes are touching. The most noticeable difference, however, is the depth of the room at chest-level. Rather than putting the man in the room, as in the previous painting, here the artist puts the room in the man, hinting perhaps at the depth and mystery of the soul in the ego of the man or the artist.

This quality of "a vision superimposed on reality" is seen clearly in *Hallucination of the*

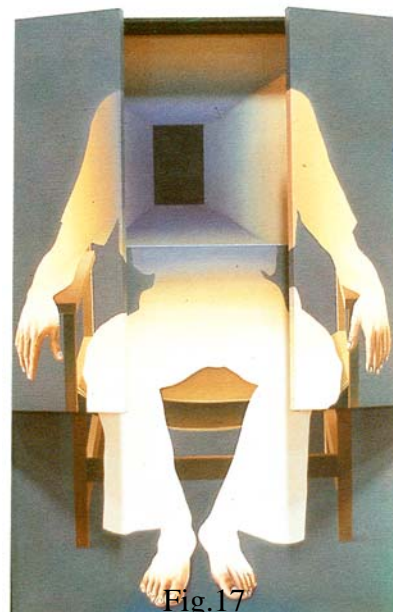


Fig.17

*Subconscious I* (1982)(Fig.18), where headless human forms in black clothes sit on stools, their right hand on their knee. One form appears to be the reflection of the other, but the arm and hand of the reflected image are different from the first. One of the bodies is wearing a long-sleeved shirt, while the other has on a short-sleeved shirt, and the hand of the reflected figure is on his leg, not his knee. It is the artist's attempt to separate his ego into two parts: the first, on the left is the conscious part, existing within the bounds of reason; the second, on the right, is the unconscious, which is free.



Fig.18

Kiettisak's use of clothing as a stand-in for the human being, and his decision to show neither the face nor the body but, in works completed between 1980 and 1982, only the hands and feet, were inspired by such Magritte paintings as *The Pleasure Principle* (1937), *The Therapist* (1937) and *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1947).

Yet despite this initial inspiration from Magritte, Kiettisak went on to find his own source of inspiration in the usual Western outfit of short-sleeved shirts and jeans – the clothes of everyday life. He places these “characters” in various poses that complement the overall composition of the work. These paintings represent a real step forward in his artistic development. Nevertheless, whereas Magritte was motivated by a desire to protest against the conventions of realist art, or to mock the notions of what is true and false, empty and full, or to shock his audience with his overtly sexual messages, Kiettisak is more interested in the tenuous nature of identity and the difference between true and false. There are no sexual overtones in his work. Kiettisak aims to explore the complex metaphor of the human soul rather than provoke a powerful response in the people who see his paintings. He appears content to leave things hidden behind a screen rather than to reveal the essential make-up of the subconscious. This is an attitude in perfect keeping with Asian culture, and especially with the Thai mindset.

But, on the other hand, these images of floating shirts and headless people show Kiettisak's willingness to go beyond the limits of traditional beliefs, particularly regarding the shadow of the head. Kiettisak is the first Thai artist to produce three-dimensional paintings with actual objects, such as doors and windows, attached to the canvas. He is also widely admired for his pleasingly symmetrical compositions and his subtle, appealing use of color.

- **Nayana Chotisuk**

Nayana is an artist whose works have a very direct relation to her personal experiences and inner truth.