

The works discussed below – *Waiting for Death 1* –(Fig.19) are all intaglios completed when she was a fifth-year student at Silpakorn University's Faculty of Painting.

Produced in the same year, *Way Out of the Suppressed Mind 2* (Fig.20) and 3 (Fig.21) depict frozen waves that bear little resemblance to reality. In the first engraving, the waves and the water are shown to have a destructive power. Dead trees, either fallen or leaning, with their dead leaves suggest the artist's anguish and her deepest, darkest pessimism. The second is equally pessimistic in its vision, with the eerie static waves encroaching on a road bordered on both sides by enormous clothespins. Withered plants are scattered here and there, some of them apparently dead. On the road in the foreground are dead leaves, just as in *Way Out of the Suppressed Mind 2*. The shadows cast by the giant clothespins make no sense. Some extend over the roadway and the water; others stretch up the clothespins themselves. The sky is dark, and the atmosphere is silent, mysterious and almost lifeless.

In her dissertation, Nayana writes that she was influenced by the spatial arrangement and elongated perspective of Delvaux's *Echo* (1943), as well as by the use of pale blue to convey a sense of silence, sadness and mystery, which the Belgian artist put to good effect in *Entrance to the City* (1940).

Chirico may also have contributed to Nayana's poetic imagery, the atmosphere of lonely, mysterious silence, and the imprecise sense of time. In *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914), there is no clear indication of the time of day. In fact, the artist gives us conflicting signals. And in *Way Out of the Suppressed Mind 3*, the elongated shadows on the road lead us to think it is late afternoon, while the shadows on the clothespins tell us it is noon.

Magritte's influence can be felt in the presence of everyday objects that have been distorted and placed in unusual contexts. The flower and the gigantic clothespins may owe a debt to Magritte's *Tomb of the Wrestlers* (1960) and *Personal Values* (1952).

Yet, despite these influences from Delvaux, Chirico and Magritte, Nayana's use of color,



Fig.19



Fig.20



Fig.21

her depiction of shadows and unusual objects, and her symbolism are distinctly her own. Through these symbols she is able to communicate effectively with viewers who understand and experience the same emotions as the artist.

Interestingly, while Nayana professes an admiration for the works of Delvaux, many of which are filled with naked women, half-awake, half-asleep and often highly sensual, she claims not to like nudity or eroticism. She finds nothing appealing about looking at it. This may be the result of her rather traditional upbringing.

- **Viroj Nuy-butara**

While Kiettisak and Nayana find inspiration in surrealist art without making use of its aggressive nature or its hostile attitude toward traditional values, particularly with regard to sex, Viroj represents a clear contrast. His work is aggressive, rebellious and decidedly erotic.

In 1964, Viroj painted his self-portrait, inspired by Magritte's *The Rape* (1932)(Fig.22). But Viroj's painting is even more shocking. By placing the male genital organs square in the middle of his face, he seems to be making fun of himself. He has said, "I claim to be an educated person, but I have a filthy mouth, I'm sex-obsessed, my eyes are wide open and full of suspicions like birds. I have no faith in what I see."



Fig.22

Viroj sets himself up as a critic of Thai society, which he sees as rife with insincerity, deceit, and corruption. In an interview in 1986, he said, "Our society is being turned on its head. In times like these, I couldn't possibly make realist art, so I made surrealist art where certain objects stand in as symbols for other things."

Viroj loves to poke fun at society by dressing up like Dali (Fig.23) to shock people and raise questions about his identity, his motivations and his activities. Viroj achieved his goals on the day of the opening of an art exhibit at the German cultural center in June 1978. "I covered my head with lots of pig and dog fur because my co-exhibitor was related to the royal family (Thidathep Devakul). A lot of royals were there that day. I was being sarcastic. They thought what I did was over the top, but I didn't think so. I could have been even more outrageous."



Fig.23

Viroj intended to protest against deforestation by wearing a suit and tie and some lipstick and walking around the trunks of trees

until people thought he was crazy. And in his work called *Tree and Bra* (1965)(Fig.24) he transgressed social norms by putting a bra and a pair of panties on a tree trunk and filling the bra with fake breasts.

Dressing up trees in sexually provocative ways recalls the work of certain surrealist poets who saw the world through a veil of eroticism. Louis Aragon, for example, saw the Eiffel Tower as a naked woman with her legs spread apart, and René Crevel saw the city of Marseilles as a naked woman lounging seductively. Viroj's work is also reminiscent of surrealist painting and sculpture, which are often loaded with erotic overtones as a means of mocking the manners of the European middle classes. Two such examples are Magritte's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1947) and Dali's *Aphrodisiac Dinner Jacket* (1938).



Fig.24

In June 1975, Viroj presented an exhibition of drawings and poems (with German artist Horst Janssen) at the Goethe Institute in Bangkok. On display were about 200 drawings and 70 poems written in India ink, most of them containing the ideogram for bitterness and an ironic remark on the political situation of the time. The exhibit attracted a great deal of attention from the media and the general public. Some of the more erotic drawings were censored. In response, the newspaper *The Voice of the Nation* (June 4, 1975) published the following appraisal: "However, there are brilliant collages of Adam picking an apple and a female body for which he has cut parts out of celebrities like (Mrs) Kennedy's lips, Liz Taylor's eyes and Sophia Loren's arms and arranged them together"(Fig.25).

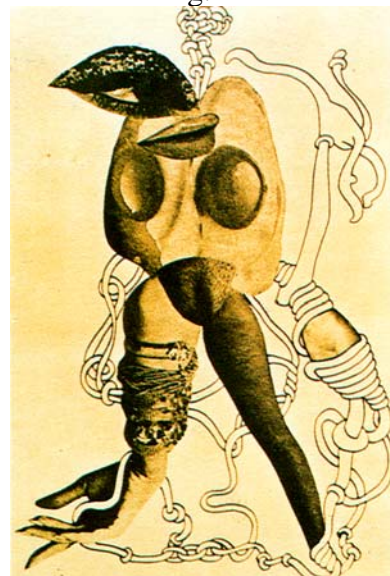


Fig.25

Piecing together the body parts of these global celebrities is similar to the technique of *free collage*, a surrealist technique that made no reference to any type of reality nor to any manner of rationality.

Viroj explains his *Collage of a Woman* this way:

I took Liz Taylor's eye, Kennedy's wife's mouth, parts of these world famous women of the time...it's a social chain. I put on the chain like a knot made out of drunkenness. The mouth that spoke the words: 'come to the moon' with peace for all mankind; they wrote the word 'peace' in gold on the moon! ...Then they went to the moon to make war and consolidate their power. They claimed they were in Vietnam to make peace. Peace...right...they brought weapons. That's what their mouth is like. It's like taking a pee, some kind of peace...hah!

Viroj's persona and the work he completed between 1964 and 1975 were largely inspired by the works of the surrealists and the Dadaists. Viroj seems to understand the essence of surrealism. He expresses his thoughts directly and openly, without censoring them, as a revolt against the values and rules of his society. This is a quality that holds true as much for what he says as for the way he dresses, the paintings he paints, or the poems he writes (See Chapter 4). The surrealist approach proved very helpful in enabling him to find a way to validate his personal experiences and express his rejection of social norms. His personality and his works – provocative, strange, marginal, aggressive and erotic – have both interested and exasperated journalists and fellow writers and artists. Still, his creative period turned out to be relatively short. He gave up writing and painting in 1978 to become a devout Buddhist and a follower of the very strict Santi Asok sect. Since this radical change in lifestyle, he has produced no more surrealist-inspired work.

2.2 Artists whose work contains elements of social criticism

- **Thana Lauhakaikul and Kamol Thassananchalee**

Between 1965 and 1966, before settling permanently in the United States where he worked as an artist and taught fine arts, Thana Lauhakaikul painted several canvases that turn a critical gaze on Thai society. Most notable are *The Hospital's Mask*, *The Farmers*, *After the War*, and *The Grand Theater* (1965)(Fig. 26).



Fig.26

In this last painting, the artist compares society to a grand theatrical spectacle.

The influence of surrealist art is evident in the use of free collage, the lack of connection between objects, the combination of animal and human forms, and the resulting atmosphere of mystery. The painting has an otherworldly quality that seems to have risen up from a (bad) dream. The upper portion of the painting is dark, murky and mysterious. There is no reference to any specific time or place. The entire painting, including the cow's head, recalls Picasso's *Guernica* (1937-8), and its use of animals as symbols for people is a technique also used by Dali and Miró.

Thana was among the first artists to use surrealist methods as a way of commenting on the Thai political scene. In response to a set of questions dated August 2, 1986, the artist explained: "*The Grand Theater* set my imagination, my politics, and my creativity on an infinite road of freedom, independence, isolation and hope. Even today this work is a help to me in producing other works. It has also sparked my interest in the concepts of time and space, which artists call the 4th dimension."

Kamol Thassananchalee, another artist who left Thailand and settled in the US, produced several canvases that reflect his bitterness over the Vietnam War. In *Flesh*

and Blood (1969-70)(Fig.27), the artist depicts the tragic consequences of war through a number of representational and non-representational motifs. Faces with their mouths wrenched open in agony float in the air; headless corpses lie amidst ruined buildings, and human limbs lie scattered about. The painting plunges the viewer into a nightmare world.

Kamol's painting style, characterized by free, rapid brush strokes of vivid color, recalls the automatic method employed by André Masson in *Pythia* (1943) or by De Kooning in *Woman I* (1950-2). De Kooning, an American artist, was

likewise influenced by Masson.



Fig.27

But surrealism's hold on Kamol was only temporary. Later on he turned to other artistic movements, notably pop and conceptual art, for inspiration.

- **Somchai Hatthakitkoson**

Most of the paintings Somchai Hatthakitkoson completed between 1964 and 1978 are difficult to track down as they were purchased by foreign collectors, and Somchai did not take photos of his works. Nor did he keep records of the collectors' addresses. All we have are two paintings in the National Gallery: *The Goddess Kali of the 20th Century* (1972) and *Structure of the Society* (1978). Copies of two other works painted in 1969, *The Call-Girl* and *The Cultural War*, exist in postcard form.

In an interview on August 29, 1986, Somchai spoke his source of inspiration as he worked on his paintings in 1969. "I had to decorate a bar on New Petchburi Road during the Vietnam War. There were lots of American soldiers and I'd seen a lot of pathetic, heartbroken Thai women. So I decided to do a few paintings...a series."

In *The Call Girl* (1969)(Fig.28), Somchai expresses his pity and disgust for Thai women reduced to prostituting themselves over the phone. A telephone with a long cord is attached to the bottom of a bed inside the open stomach of a woman whose lower body is made of metal. Where her genitals should be is the head of an insect – a beetle, perhaps, or a grasshopper.



Fig.28

She has fruit instead of breasts, and from her neck to the top of her head and all over her face there is a tangle of wires or pipes, as well as shrimp, fish, fruit, etc.