

## Chapter 5

### Surrealist Tendencies in Contemporary Thai Art and Literature

Despite an apparent decline in Thai painters and writers' interest in surrealism, a dozen or so artists have continued to produce works with surrealist tendencies. One of the reasons for this may be the increasing number of scholarly studies in the Thai language which have delved more deeply into the surrealist movement and made a more detailed analysis of the works of surrealist painters and poets. At the risk of sounding boastful, we suggest that the publication of Sodchuen Chaiprasathna's *Interpretation of Reality in Surrealist Poetry and Painting in France from 1919 to 1969* (1<sup>st</sup> edition: 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: 1994), and her *Thai Painting and Literature with Surrealist Tendencies from 1964 to 1984* (1996) may have played some role here. These two volumes have been widely read by art and literature students, as well as by artists and writers.

The past few years have seen a growth in the variety of types of works having surrealist characteristics. These have ranged from sculpture to engraving and installations. In painting, a considerable number of artists have continued to create works of art that have grown out of the paintings they produced in the period between 1964 and 1984. A number of other avant-garde Thai artists have emerged whose works seem likely to have been inspired by Western surrealism, while in contrast, the few literary works which might be characterized as surrealist have frequently been produced by writers who are also artists.

In 2003 alone, there were three art exhibitions showcasing works of a surrealist nature, a fact which proves that even today surrealism continues to appeal to various Thai artists. The first of these exhibits, held in Bangkok from March 11-22, was for undergraduates in the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Printmaking at Silpakorn University. Several of the works on display manifested a surrealist influence or certain surrealist traits.<sup>14</sup>

The second exhibition took place at the Chulalongkorn University Art Gallery from April 1 to May 9. Under the direction of Paisan Thirapongvisanuporn, a painter and essayist (see Chapter 3), the show was entitled "Reality, Dream, Politics, Life and the Surrealist Imagination." It featured paintings, prints, and drawings – 35 works in all – by some six artists. Five of them, namely Somchai Hatthakitkoson, Kiettisak Chanonnart, Nayana Chotisuk, Sompong Adulsarapan and Chirasak Patthanamong, were already well known prior to 1984 and enjoyed a considerable reputation as surrealist-inspired artists. The sixth contributor, Chatchai Puipia, is younger than the others and has been considered an avant-garde artist since 1987.

The third exhibit was a one-man show featuring the works of Prateep Kochabua and entitled "Sur-Episode: Surrealism Painting Exhibition" (sic). It was held at the Atelier Art Gallery, Tisco Building, from November 8-30, 2003.

It is our wish here to shine a light on some of the more recent works by artists discussed in earlier chapters and by a number of newer artists.

Somchai Hatthakitkoson was among the very first Thai artists who, between the years 1969 and 1978, produced works clearly influenced by European surrealism. After

devoting himself to sculpture for a number of years, he returned to painting and was the primary organizer of the major art exhibition held in 1993. Some of the more important works in the series he exhibited include *The Cycle of Life* (Fig.75) and *The Metamorphosed Body* (Fig.76). These recent paintings emphasize oval and spherical shapes that resemble works of sculpture.



Fig75

In the former work, the presence of a hollow human figure calls to mind René Magritte's *The Delusion of Grandeur* (1961), while the empty spaces and subtle gradations of color recall Dali. Yet, the painting displays a high degree of originality through the artist's use of color, his composition, and the symbolism (a scarlet flower whose shape and petals resemble an ovary).

The orange horizontal figure that dominates the center of the canvas can be seen either as an enchanting landscape or as a penis laced with blood vessels. The moon and the beautiful scene in the background of the painting are part of a dream; things that do not exist in the real world.



Fig76

In *The Metamorphosed Body*, the artist has taken a cubist approach. In comparison to his works from the period between 1969 and 1978, there are fewer details and less movement, despite the presence of a certain inspiration from Dali, including the juxtaposition of different body parts. The arms, for example, flow into the chest. The originality of the picture, however, lies in the reduced complexity of the different elements and the way in which the artist integrates sculptural shapes into his painting. As a result, the female figures here are more cubist in appearance, and their faces belong to the school of naïve art. Other ambiguous elements can be found in the lotus leaves and clouds.

Kiettisak Chanonnart also gained a reputation as a surrealist-inspired painter during the years from 1968 to 1982. After having been the subject for his own paintings earlier in his career, in recent years Kiettisak has begun to paint fish and chickens in order to express his disgust for human violence against animals. His paintings have become gradually more abstract.



Fig77

In the painting *Land Animals* (1987)(Fig.77), Kiettisak has created a genuinely original type of still life, one that depicts the connection between man and fish. Inspiration for the canvas may have come from surrealists such as Magritte (*Collective Invention*, 1935) or figures from traditional Thai painting

and literature like Matchanu and Suphannamacha (from the *Ramakien*) or like the half-woman half-fish character from *Phra Apaimani*. The only difference is in the realistic treatment of the fish and the hands. There is also an element of mystery and humor. The Western-style setting, the empty spaces, and the shadowy depths combine to evoke feelings of uncertainty and secrecy. The painting has been praised for the artist's mastery of esthetic considerations as well as its great emotional impact.

Starting in 1980, the artist set to work on a series of paintings (Fig.78) intended to portray the inner self. In *Inner Feeling* (1990), Kiettisak has turned an actual human figure into an abstraction. The only visible portions of the female figure in the center of the canvas are her breasts and hips, her most erotic and seductive body parts. The figure is surrounded by abstract shapes meant to refer to the male sex. The artist freely combines a large diversity of elements, colors, light and shadow, dominated by the color purple, which veils the entire composition in mystery. The painting is, in a sense, an homage to the Spanish painter Miró, a well-known member of the surrealist group, and especially his *Women, Bird by Moonlight* (1944), in which a mysterious woman, lost in her own musings, seems to have emerged from the world of the subconscious. The painter has also remarked that in the later stages of this series of paintings, he tried to incorporate a musical esthetic as a means of alleviating the stresses and strains of his life. He was happy, a fact which probably worked to his advantage as he launched into his next series of works.<sup>15</sup>

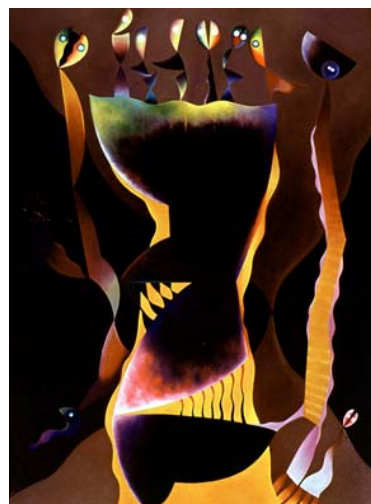


Fig78

*Beauty of Life 21* (2000)(Fig.79) is part of an upbeat series of paintings inspired perhaps by the artist's own happiness. The painting is a pleasing and harmonious combination of diverse elements, which, nonetheless, create a certain tension because of their shapes and energy. The warm violets, reds and oranges contrast with the cool blue background. The black gives the painting even greater intensity. The canvas seems to suggest that despite the artist's relative contentment, something always remains hidden; there is still a certain mystery to his life. One thing to notice is that the artist has made no attempt to create a sense of depth here, using curves instead to make things more visible. Subtle gradations of color also give the figures in the background the appearance of three-dimensionality. The forms have been stripped down and simplified, as has the background. The artist has borrowed a technique used by Miró but taken to such a point that the Thai painter has made it his own.



Fig79

Kiettisak himself has said: “Despite my great admiration for surrealist art, I don’t intend for my works to be what you would call strictly surrealist...I don’t deny that surrealism has had an influence on me, but it should be considered as one of the signposts on the road to my own esthetic and artistic development.”<sup>16</sup>

Nayana Chotisuk is the only female artist who contributed to the exhibition “Reality, Dream, Politics, Life and the Surrealist Imagination.” Her negative take on urban life is always represented in her works by a certain sad atmosphere and a strange loneliness that seems to have been learned from the paintings of Chirico. In such prints as *Behind the School*, *Friday Night* (1983)(Fig.80), the artist evokes a desert-like vision that speaks of tremendous loneliness. The paper boats scattered throughout may be meant to symbolize children, who are either abandoned or ignored. Two back-lit wooden horses near the top of the painting may be symbols of a happy childhood now lost



Fig80

forever. Nayana has managed to combine a nostalgia for the past and memories of her own happy childhood with her concern for the fate of young people today. The size of the objects found in the painting is determined not by the normal laws of perspective but by the emotional importance the artist attaches to each.

The painting *City of Solitude I* (1993) (Fig.81) portrays a girl running near the corner of a building in a deserted city that is lifeless and empty of people. Her shadow stretches out in front of her, indicating that the girl is in flight from something. The atmosphere is heavy with mystery and even dread. The dominant color is yellow, which conveys a sense of dry heat. It creates a striking contrast with the blue on the opposite side, where

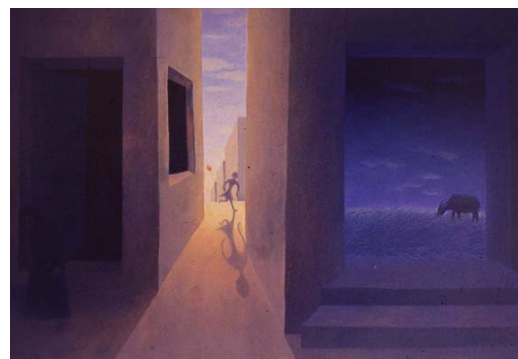


Fig81

a buffalo is walking through a field, and where the clouds are symbols of freshness and fertility.

The atmosphere in *Lost* (2001)(Fig.82) is similarly stark and lifeless. A large flock of agitated ducks has strayed into the canyon formed by two rows of high buildings. The sun is setting in the distance. In this painting, the artist is expressing the sense of alienation, the intrusion of various objects, and feelings of loneliness. It may be intended as the



Fig82



painter's commentary on the flight of villagers to the big city with its promise of a better future – a phenomenon of tremendous concern to the artist.

Despite the use of a surrealist-influenced perspective and atmosphere, Nayana has still found a way to express her own point of view, focusing on internal tensions that point to an analysis of social conditions.

Somphong Adulsarapan's paintings depict fossil-like figures on a hard, ridged surface in a seaside atmosphere (see, for example, *Mannequin* and *Dream at the Seashore* in Chapter 3). Using the same techniques, he pays tribute to Magritte's *Castle of the Pyrenees* in his painting *Towards the New World* (1990)(Fig.83). The spherical shape in the center of the canvas has a certain ambiguity. While representing the ecosystem, it also resembles a human head. The colors at the bottom of the canvas are rather light, while those at the top are darker, and it is unclear whether they are meant to be the sea or the sky. It may be that the figurative ecosystem represents the artist's ideal world, a world of natural beauty but without any trace of human life. At the heart of the canvas is the image of a scarecrow. The painting's appeal lies in the sophistication of the compositional elements, the brilliance of the colors, and varied nature of the surface – all clear evidence of the artist's skills and the development of his ideas.

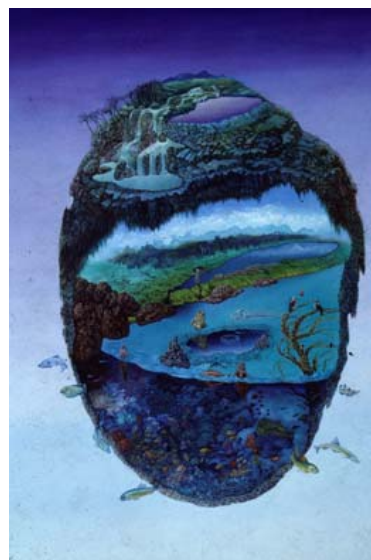


Fig83

The early works of Chirasak Patthanapong were social critiques in the style of Dali and Magritte. Later he adopted a more overtly sexual approach. After moving to Phuket, an island province in the south of Thailand, Chirasak began to include images of fish in paintings such as *Fish Head Lady* (1990)(Fig.84). In subsequent works, there is a distinctly maritime atmosphere and the fish become more stylized, eventually metamorphosing into an image of the artist himself. In *Entry into the Mind* (2000)(Fig85), part of the exhibit entitled "Desire for Love," he combines various elements with the image of a naked woman, pierced through with holes and melded into a musical instrument and other complex patterns. The painting gives expression to the artist's inner desires.



Fig84

In addition to the elements already described, the picture contains a bed and a pillow next to a black sea on which a swan swims beneath the head of a fish that floats in the sky. It is as if the painter is playing with the normal arrangement of objects in a style that is distinctly his own.

Chatchai Puipia has attracted public attention with his oversized canvases, a strategy likewise employed by Magritte. He has also made use of details and a viewpoint