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Cadavers, Canines, and Koons at the SculptureCenter

By Noelle Bodick - January 30, 2015

During last week's installation at the SculptureCenter, curator Ruba Katrib sorted through 21 glass jars and bottles, each containing clumps of fur and a stamp-sized photograph of a dog. "This is Rambo — he's tough," she said, pointing to one vile. There was also Ngab, which means "bite" in Thai, and Sornrak, with a white stripe dividing an orange, foxlike face.

"Araya wanted them to contribute as artists, but all they could do is give their hair," Katrib continued, referring to Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, who sat quietly nearby.

Soft spoken with a toothy smile and mass of wavy, silver hair, Rasdjarmrearnsook — whose new show is on view at the SculptureCenter through March 30 — sometimes interrupted herself during our conversation, oohing and aahing at a floppy-tongued dog flashing across a nearby screen. In her Chiang Mai home, Rasdjarmrearnsook lives with 17 dogs. She dropped that information as offhandedly as if telling me she has a great-aunt or that she enjoys swimming. Some of the animals are kept in the front yard and others in the back garden, she explained. She cares for the strays that roam the streets, too.

But "cares for" is an understatement. This is a woman who has thrown a barbeque party for her canine companions, as recorded in her film "Pray, bless us with rice and curry our great moon," 2012. In that work, one dog is stashed in a baby carrier pouch as Rasdjarmrearnsook flips meat, others circle around her feet, tails wagging. Interspersed throughout the festivities is news footage of dogs captured for the meat industry in China.

In the new exhibition, videos, sculptures, and photographs of dogs are presented alongside recorded stories told by women in an asylum, a video that documents a fake pregnancy, and photographs of Thai villagers looking at Western masterpieces.

Did I mention the corpses? There are some of those, too, in films during which Rasdjarmrearnsook gives lectures on metaphysics in front of a blackboard. When she walks into the classroom — professorial, albeit shoeless — she admits that there "might not" be much discussion in the seminar, which is attended by a half-dozen still bodies; before dismissing them, she checks, "Does anyone have any questions?"

One of Southeast Asia's foremost contemporary artists, Rasdjarmrearnsook, born in 1957, represented her country in the Venice Biennale in 2005. She was included in dOCUMENTA (13) in 2013 and the Sydney Biennale in 2010, but her work has been largely overlooked in the United States. She has only participated in few group shows (at Asia Society and the Guggenheim in New York and the Bass Museum in Miami), and one solo show at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in 2012.

"It's so different — it's heavy," Katrib said later. "The works require a lot of time from the viewer." As a curator, Katrib is trying to avoid resting too much on Rasdjarmrearnsook's being Thai or the prevalence of Buddhist thought in Thailand when contextualizing this work.

In fact, Rasdjarmrearnsook's art shouldn't feel so foreign to us, Katrib said. From Rachel Rose to Joan Jonas, American artists are deeply engaged with ideas around animism and speculative realism. But Rasdjarmrearnsook, Katrib admits, is "really stretching it to confusing territory."

Born in Trat, Thailand, near the border of Cambodia, Rasdjarmrearnsook grew up as an only child, raised by her father who was a doctor. By the age of 3, Rasdjarmrearnsook had lost her mom, who was a teacher of crafts and sewing.

This early death inspired her later work with corpses. "I needed to wake up my memory in a different way," she said. In the earliest work on display, "I'm Living," 2001 — projected onto the ground — Rasdjarmrearnsook tends to the body of a young, deceased Thai woman, laying cloth dresses over her, creating folds around the curves of her body, tying a dainty bow on a pink slip. It's hard not to imagine that it's Rasdjarmrearnsook's daughter, she works with such tenderness. But it's not; Rasdjarmrearnsook doesn't even know the woman's name.

And, in fact, Rasdjarmrearnsook has no children — a taboo in Thai culture that she assaults in the video “The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor,” 2003. After a six-month trip to Germany, Rasdjarmrearnsook returns to the university where she teaches with a pillow stuffed under her shirt, carefully bowing away as aggressively congratulatory female colleagues try to touch the bump. Then, after nine days, as the title suggests, the pregnancy is over. No more fake baby. One colleague dressed in black to protest the stunt; another refused to talk to her again. Rasdjarmrearnsook gave roses to her students to announce the end of the life of the non-entity; one boy threw away her flower.

“If I show these series in Thailand, it becomes about ethics and morality. Academic people are against my art,” she said. At the SculptureCenter opening last week, a Bangkok gallery owner told me that her assistant quit after the gallery screened a Rasdjarmrearnsook video documenting a slaughterhouse (this particular work is not on view in the New York exhibition).

In recent years, Rasdjarmrearnsook uses her absurdist sensibility to more comical ends. “There is more humor in older age,” she said. Indeed, don’t miss “Village and Elsewhere: Artemisia Gentileschi’s Judith Beheading Holofernes, Jeff Koons’ Untitled, and Thai Villagers,” 2011. For almost 20 minutes, a monk explains to a congregation — of children, the old, and a few dogs — how Koons’s licentious self-portrait with two bikini-clad women will result in ruthless murder, depicted in the Baroque masterpiece “Judith Beheading Holofernes.”

“This is a person with too much love,” the monk says, pointing to Koons, who has violated the third precept of Dharma Buddhism condemning polygamy. “Are the women pretty?” the monk asks. “No,” the class replies. “Is the man handsome?” “No.” “OK, everything is clear now?” One student asks what’s on Koons’s forehead. “Well, it’s just his hairstyle,” the monk responds.

The conversation fits well within the artist’s oeuvre — dialogues that flatten the plane of being, between life and death, and are open to all.

