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## East and West Meet, Checking Norms at the Door

By Ken Johnson



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook This exhibition at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, includes video works like “Village and Elsewhere,” above, where people from rural Thailand discuss Western art.

Credit Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

After a leave of absence in 2003, the Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook returned to Chiang Mai University, where she teaches, apparently pregnant. Her friends and co-workers reacted joyfully to this surprising turn of events. Then, nine days later, she announced that she wasn't with child at all, and that her fake pregnancy was a work of performance art called “The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor.” She documented it in a fragmentary five-minute video, in which viewers hear her thoughts on pregnancy and about her colleagues' disappointed and angry reactions to her deception.

The video is the earliest piece in “Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook,” an exhibition of mostly video works at SculptureCenter, and it illustrates her penchant for overriding social norms in the service of art, moral amelioration and collective mind expansion. A pre-eminent artist in Southeast Asia, Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook (pronounced Raz-JAR-min-suk) addresses topics like death, the insane, cultural differences, the disenfranchisement of women and the rights of animals, often in discomfiting and sometimes, as in her fake-pregnancy performance, objectionable ways. Her work has appeared in numerous international art exhibitions; this show was organized by Ruba Katrib, SculptureCenter's curator.

In three videos from 2005 — “Class I,” “Class II” and “Class III” — Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook delivers lectures about death to real corpses covered to the shoulders by white sheets. Speaking in a soft, sweet, schoolteacher-ish voice, sometimes pausing to encourage the silent bodies to share their thoughts, she holds forth on the subject of death from historical, cultural and philosophical angles. Emulating the Conceptual artist and social activist Joseph Bueys, she writes her main ideas on a blackboard.

While Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook’s disquisitions on death are mildly interesting, the corpses are catalytic in a not necessarily good way. Adding a dimension of darkly comic absurdity, they’re morally troubling. Nobody likes to see dead human bodies mistreated, and Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook’s use of them as props might strike some as an improper, sensationalist gimmick. Does this reveal a cultural difference between East and West? Are people raised in predominately Buddhist societies, as Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook was, more nonchalant about death and mortal remains than people in the Judeo-Christian and Muslim worlds? It’s hard to say.

Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook has dealt directly with East-West cultural differences more cheerfully in videos in which small groups of rural people in Thailand who evidently know little about Western art are invited to discuss reproductions of famous European and American works. On view is “Village and Elsewhere: Artemisia Gentileschi’s ‘Judith Beheading Holofernes,’ Jeff Koons’ ‘Untitled,’ and Thai Villagers” (2011). Inside a Buddhist temple, a genial monk speaks with schoolchildren and their adult caretakers about the Gentileschi painting and a blown-up version of the photograph of Mr. Koons with two young women in bikinis that served to advertise his “Banality” exhibition of 1988. The audience seems to be equally amused and bemused, and the whole discussion is lighthearted and often funny. It’s a relief from Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook’s more heavy-handed works.

Not so entertaining is “Great Times Message: Storytellers of the Town” (2006). Each of three video projections shows a woman sitting in a chair against a white wall. The women’s images are blurred, obscuring their identities and suggesting their relative social invisibility, as all are patients in a psychiatric hospital.

Responding to questions asked by an off-camera interviewer, the women talk haltingly and distractedly about their histories, which in many cases involve deprivation, abuse, crimes and drugs. It’s grim and almost unbearably tedious, which might be the point, for these are people few others are eager to hear from.

Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook’s most recent works are about dogs. She has 17 dogs living in her home, and more who stay outdoors in her yard. The only conventionally sculptural works here are three sets of glass bottles, each of which contains a small photograph of one of Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook’s canine pets and a quantity of that animal’s fur.

The dog videos include one of a partly paralyzed dog struggling to run around in a yard; it's painful to watch. Another documents a backyard barbecue for dogs. Scenes of Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook feeding morsels to about a dozen hungry dogs are interspersed with abysmal footage of men throwing captured street dogs destined for the meat trade into crowded cages. Certainly, dogs are more than just dogs for Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook, but because most of these videos seem so literal, they're perplexing: In the bigger scheme of things, how much should we really care about dogs, especially considering that many other species are facing outright extinction? Not to mention that Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook feeds her four-legged guests the flesh of other animals.

With a video called "The Treachery of the Moon" (2012), Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook puts herself, her dogs and her whole oeuvre into a broader, spiritually inspirational context. We see her in a meditational posture on a mattress, watching a television on which clips from Thai soap operas alternate with scenes of violent urban rioting.

The takeaway is that by simultaneously staying in touch with the animal life of the body and nature, on the one hand, and communing with transcendental consciousness — whatever that might be — on the other, a person might attain a holistic, equanimous perspective on the turmoil of everyday life.



Ms. Rasdjarmrearnsook and her dogs in "The Treachery of the Moon."  
Credit Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art