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February 2, 2015

Morbid Curiosities: Inside artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's first United States retrospective

By Kat Herriman

Though Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's work often deals with the idea of death, describing it as dark wouldn't be entirely accurate. Rather, through an amalgamation of video, sculpture, photography, and performance, the Thai artist delves into the subject with warmth and serenity that seems at odds with the cadavers she sometimes employs. At the SculptureCenter in Queens this month, Rasdjarmrearnsook and her morbid muses are receiving a long overdue stateside retrospective. A professor, activist, and journalist as well as an artist, Rasdjarmrearnsook is often physically present in her work, which engages issues of power and identity, especially for subjugated populations she observes around her, ranging from the mentally handicapped to animals. A dog lover, she's adopted over 30 strays from the streets of her native Chiang Mai. "I think being an artist gets boring," Rasdjarmrearnsook says. "Dogs are so lively." Her sense of humor is present in works like videos of rural Thai villagers speaking about their impressions of Modernist masterpieces and her curious bottles of dog hair, which attempt to distill the essence of her pooches' personalities. Seen altogether, the show is alternately gruesome and beautiful much like life—and death—itself.

