

Intangible Beauty of Reality

Examining Natee Utarit's solo exhibit at the Singapore Art Museum

By Loredana Paracciani

An overwhelming sense of peace mixed with nostalgia pervades the atmosphere while visiting *Natee Utarit: After Painting*, a solo exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum. This show represents a survey exhibition of Natee's extensive production, featuring over 80 works from the artist's early days to the present.

Born in 1970 in Bangkok, Natee Utarit completed his art studies at Silpakorn University. While still in the art academy, he developed various art practices always centred on the idea of the reality of painting and the painting as an object.

Influenced by post-modernist theories of deconstructing classical artworks and challenging their originality, Natee Utarit's opus maintains an underlying positive approach to reality reflected in his works, which are often seductive and poetic.

As the visitor makes his way through the exhibition galleries, captions and wall text invite the viewer into different 'chapters' of Natee's works.

The *Landscapes* photo-realistic series is based on the idea of paintings as reproductions of photographs. Through these images the artist wants to question what is real, to invite the viewer to contemplate whether a true landscape really exists or if it is only the idea of it that exists in our own minds. In so doing, Natee investigates the value of two seemingly different mediums: photography and painting.

The 1999 series *Mother* is an intimate recollection of his close relationship with his mother. The viewer is invited to enter the pictorial space of these images in search of a contact, a gaze reflected in the woman's eyes. Yet all we are left with is the back of the head, the shoulders, a light profile. In Natee's words, his paintings are "a channel of communication between the inside and the outside" forcing the viewer to go beyond what he sees and search for what he feels.

In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, a more recent series, the artist debates the notions of beauty and harmony by reproducing segments of Old Master paintings and once again challenging the notions of 'true' and 'real'.

Judith, for instance, is Natee's version of Caravaggio's well-known work *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c1598). The artist chooses to portray only a tight close-up of Judith's face,



Mother Triptych, 64 x 47cm, oil on canvas, 1999, Queensland Art Gallery

enhancing the memory of the classical image both on a visual and conceptual level.

He diligently reproduces the image of Judith, yet destroys it with the use of ferocious brush strokes and encrusted enamel. On a conceptual level the aesthetic value of the painting is no longer in the resemblance of the original, but in the rejection of it. In so doing, the expression of Judith seems to be depicted with her true feelings revealed on the surface and openly declared.

The 2009 series *Tales of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* marks Natee's most recent artistic and conceptual development.

Monochromatic renderings of Thai historical symbols are combined with toys as allegorical elements depicted in hues of bright colours addressing the idea of reality within a political and social context.

Throughout his accomplished career and his numerous solo exhibitions Natee Utarit has consistently focused on exploring the power of the canvas as a two-dimensional device able to "function as a bridge – as an emotional harbour."

Ultimately the viewer will be his only witness to the intangible beauty of reality.

Natee Utarit: After Painting is on display at the Singapore Art Museum until 13 February 2011.

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Photos courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum



Pictorial Dialogue at 17.45 pm, 140 x 116cm (each), 2000, oil on canvas, Private Collection, part of *Landscapes* series



Judith, 76 x 61cm, oil and enamel on canvas, 2001, part of *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* series



The Prince, 180 x 160cm, oil on linen, 2008, part of *Tales of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* series