Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography

A PROJECT BY MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM
THE COOPERATION IN RECUPERATION: CURATORIAL HOPE FOR AN INSTITUTION
Siddharta Perez

INTRODUCTION: REDISCOVERING FORGOTTEN THAI MASTERS OF PHOTOGRAPHY
Manit Sriwanichpoom

AN INTERVIEW WITH MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM
Zhuang Wubin

PHOTOGRAPHERS’ BIOGRAPHIES

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In the early 2000s, I came to know Manit Sriwanichpoom through his Masters series of monk portraits and the Pink Man images that had garnered traction through their comical tableaux of popular Western masterpieces and historic photographs. I made the common mistake of mis-attributing the actor Sompong Thawee in full fuschia glory as Manit himself, pushing the metaphoric cart of consumerism as an activated documentary on how we are to navigate manifestations of modernity. Consequently, I have learned to correct others that the actor is but part of the archive through which Manit performs his introspection on history and knowledge production.

Fast forward to about a decade after, I am in his studio not to look at the photographs he has made, but to dig through pictures he’s taken – an accumulation of research from a network of flea markets, vintage dealers, libraries, estate collections and resource centers. They include paraphernalia made defunct in the course of shifting public histories and new technologies. Those that are annotated demand but a filling of gaps (such as finding missing issues of magazines) for consolidation. Then there is also the exercise of organising other archival images, like some of his forgotten masters, which requires a certain visual and artefactual literacy only generated through a constant practice of searching, collecting and comparative analysis.

Manit talks about how classification of these images is made through the attribution of singular artists’ works. While some circumstances have been fortunate in aiding the construction of a body of photographs, other modes of gathering were not as straightforward. For instance, his friendship with S.H. Lim began from their incidental proximity in an exhibition in 2010. Buddhadasa Bhiku happened to be his spiritual master, and the recently founded Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives has digitized his particular mode of teaching the dharma through photo albums of “self-portraits” and texts. However, the process of identifying a couple of other artists articulates Manit’s cultivation of principles of photography and required pursuing sources independent of an academic prerogative. This reflects a number of things. Public institutions may seem not to privilege a study that warrants its own civic currency, to the point that Manit recalls the genesis of his research as the challenge of teaching local photographic history without a preceding matrix of fundamental resources and framework. This in turn engendered his own understanding of photography, and locates his practice as a disposition that endures as self-education first but expands to desire the collaboration with other systems of knowledge production.

There are certain models of how this project, which started as a personal research reaches out. Manit’s Kathmandu Photo Gallery is a catalytic site for provisional presentations of the found images of these “old masters”, operating within an exhibition programme of contemporary artists’ works. In this format each photographer was then framed as a solo artist in hindsight. We must remember that in the years of their “practice”, these photographers were known by their occupations as a literary writer (‘Rong Wong-savan), an ascetic-philosopher (Buddhadasa), and commercial photo studio ‘technicians’ (Pornsak Saldaenprai and Liang Ewe). These exhibitions assemble bodies of works, suggesting the nature and use of photography through their the authorial subjectivity, aptitude and skill. It elicits contextual points of the functionality of film photography through these seven photographers during the production and circulation of these images in the 50s to 70s, which current systems of ethnographic thought can find useful in understanding celebrity and cosmopolitan life alongside inland societies and the periods antecedent to Thailand’s tourism initiatives in the 60s. The idiosyncratic styles of these images suggest a dictum of the experimental in the use of photographic technology, for example, ‘Rong held the camera on the ground, and Pornsak scratched the glass negatives so that the Buddhist students need not don a wig for their civilian portraits.

These seven bodies of photographic works first made an appearance together in Bangkok University Gallery in 2015. Grouped according to each artist, these works continue to propose a retrospective attribution of works to each photographer as a solo artist, rediscovering these seven as (photography) masters who have been...
“forgotten”. The circulation of their individual originality is now being done posterior to their period of production. What this exhibition in BUG proposes, however, is that institutions enact their capacities to make use of and build from independent research.

It is a conjecture that this research started due to Manit’s self-educational motive as an artist working with photography, and that it took a curatorial turn through its exhibitionary presentations to address what is felt to be an urgent lack of existing scholarship. Artistic research, and its spillages, have come to gain currency in the knowledge production of institutions. As Vera Mey and Anca Rujoiu describe the position of artistic strategies and what institutions can learn from them: “The artist can represent an alternative voice unattached to the responsibilities of official histories… Noticing that the roles of the artist often overlap with civil society and all the responsibilities associated with that term, artists can be left in the position to respond to the urgencies of their locales.”

Para-institutional research, such as what we recognize as “alternative” or artist projects, is not fringe practice. It reflects particular urgencies that reach out to levels of the institutional. Their capacity to self-institutionalise reflects the content and methodologies that establishments may not prioritise in enacting their operations. The production and circulation of knowledge are found in the interstices and intersections of different levels of agency. Such collaborations address affinities in aspirations to investigate, complicate and propose beyond perpetuating systems of thought and history.

Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography’s current iteration in the NUS Museum offers collaboration in the construction of content and methodology. The rapport is in the curatorial work of finding other trajectories in the framing of art history and practice. The mutual interests began in the study of photographic material and technology, and how certain propositions on culture can be coaxed out in the use of photographic image as primary sources. The collaboration, in turn, fundamentally proposes photographic archives as a language in discovering and establishing histories. Consequently, what can unfold is the understanding of other formats of scholarship. If there was no precedent to the assembly of such particular primary sources as a curatorial one, Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography endeavors to create such an opportunity.

1 Masters is a series of 18 portraits of Buddhist monks who were locally believed to have supernatural powers to bring fortune, good luck and protection to worshippers. This series was photographed and produced in 2009.
2 Pink Man is an ongoing series that began in 1997. The works are thematically developed to talk about confrontations of consumerism, tourism, violent local histories and the celebration of cultures in the Western world.
3 Refer to Manit Shinwirichapoom’s Introduction in this brochure.
4 Mini-retrospective exhibitions of S.H. Lim, ‘Rong Wong-savun, M.L. Toy Xoomsai, Liang Ewe, Pomsak Sakdaenprai, Buddhadsa Bhiku, Swangun Limlokhaek ran 4-8 weeks from 2011-2014.
5 Vera Mey and Anca Rujoiu, text for Stories of Art by Artists, 2014 (as cited in Place. Labour. Capital., 2018.)
"Rong Wong-savun
Rama I bridge
(c. 1958)

Saengjun Limlohakul.
Yod Circus promoting
Roeng Chit Cinema Hall
(c. 1957)
Pornsak Sakdaenprai
(clockwise from left):
14/11/1966 (1966)
Untitled (date unknown)
12/11/1965 (1965)
Untitled (date unknown)

S.H. Lim
Spun Thienprasit
(c. 1960s)
Those who work in the arts and sciences in this age of globalization. I am not against the Western text in any way. On the contrary, it is essential to be well-versed in Western arts and sciences in this age of globalization. I am merely wondering what has happened to the photographic seed brought in by the French priest Père Lannaud at the order of Bishop Paleogous, a ‘royal friend’ of the Fourth Reign [King Mongkut, 1834-1868]. How did that seed sprout and grow after it was planted into Siamese soil? How has the climate of the native culture influenced the features of the fruit? What unique traits has it developed as it has grown?

Such is the beginning of the ‘Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Photographers’ project. The timeframe is set from 1932, a past that is still within our reach, the year of changing from absolute monarchy to democracy. The photographic history of the preceding period has already been written about; most histories emphasise stories related to kings, the upper-classes, the rich, and the photographers/owners of photography studios. A camera was still an expensive new invention, so photography was practised in a limited circle.

After the change in the governing system, along with industrial advances leading to mass production of camera and film which made it easier for more people to own a camera, how have Thai people used photography as a tool to express their individual identity and their democratic credentials?

I decided to start up the project in 2010 and I had a providential meeting with S.H. Lim, one of our pioneers of fashion photography, when he brought his old work to show in the ‘In Celebration of Fifty Years of Friendship’ exhibition by the Royal Photographic Society of Thailand. My work which was included in the show was hanging next to his. After that initial step, I relied on word of mouth to bring attention to my project. All these doors to our photographic history had been closed now opened, and the work of one master after another flowed out before my eyes. To this date I have collected together seven masters, the ones appearing in this book.

I do regret that the work of many people, whom I attempted to study, has entirely disappeared. Nothing of them remains for us to see. Some photos published in old magazines like Chao Krung and Slam Rath Weekly are their only mementos. Others whose work remains are yet too ‘ordinary’ for their work; most historians discovered their work during the exhibition ‘Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography’ at this time. I hope the exhibition will fit to be placed on a pedestal as the work of a ‘master’. I do elucidate here that, to judge one as a ‘master’, I look at many factors such as the outstanding content, the perspective, the camera angle, the photographic technique, the cleverness of the creativity in the social context of their lifetime. I also look at each person’s understanding and use of the medium of photography in their self-expression. The quantity of work must also be sufficient to attest to the person’s serious commitment to work in this medium. I consider the work’s anthropological and sociological relevance and value as well.

In all, these seven photographers Buddhadasa Bhiku, ‘Rong Wong-savun, Liang Ewe, Pornsak Sakdaenprai, Saengjun Limlohakul, M.L. Toy Xoomsai and S.H. Lim are ‘Masters’ in my view; this remains to be proven and accepted by the Thai society and the world.
Liang Ewe
Untitled
(1960)
Pornsak Sakdaenprai
Untitled
(1965)

Pornsak Sakdaenprai
Untitled
(1965)
In 2011, Manit Sriwanichpoom decided to actively intervene in the historiography of Thai photography. As the owner of Kathmandu Photo Gallery in Bangkok, Manit started hosting a series of solo exhibitions at his space, each dedicated to a forgotten Thai master of photography. He rediscovered these masters by following the leads given by his friends while looking more closely into the exhibitions held previously in Thailand. Since then, I have followed this series of exhibitions with keen interest. Manit’s curating involves a re-contextualisation of commercial photography, journalism and even Buddhist instruction, elevating the photographic practices in Thailand since the 1930s.

This transcript is put together for purpose of this publication and was made from earlier interviews. The first was conducted on 17 November 2012 at the beginning stages of the project, after Manit had already featured the works of several masters at his gallery. The second interview was conducted on 1 October 2015, when the works of all seven masters were shown as a group exhibition at Bangkok University Gallery (BUG). The show, which lasted from 19 September to 31 October 2015, was one of the main highlights of the inaugural Photo Bangkok 2015.

Zhuang Wubin (ZW): Why have you embarked on this project of rediscovering the past photographers of Thailand?

Manit Sriwanichpoom (MS): I used to teach photography in Thailand. Here, we can easily name-drop photographers from the West, like Robert Frank or Henri Cartier-Bresson. But when it comes to Thai photographers, we say we don't have anyone. I know there has been research done on the photographic works of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and the other Thai kings. My interest, however, is centered on how the Thai people have used photography to express themselves and their freedom since 1932, when Thailand turned democratic. This is why I use the year 1932 as the benchmark to start my research. Photography helps people understand themselves and their existence in this world. It provides historical proof for future generations, allowing them to see our lives today, when we are no longer around.

As such, beyond photographic history, this project also concerns our visual history. At the BUG show, we had some older visitors who even cried at the exhibition. Someone told the gallery sitter that he was very happy to see his past memories at the show. More importantly, he was glad that the younger generation could have the chance to recognise the past. In Thailand, there is a huge focus on the royal family. The common people have no space or place for themselves. In this show, you can see how the common people lived.

ZW: In this project, you are using exhibition making to write photographic history. Why do you take such an approach?

MS: In the writing of photographic history, we need to see the real work. We need to see the actual prints. You can't just say that this person is good without showing the work. You have to see enough to make a judgment. I want to challenge people in the circle. You need the art to speak for itself. You cannot use an institution or a professor to prove it.

ZW: In your rediscovery of past photographers in Thailand, you have included several commercial photographers. What prompted you to re-contextualise their works? Broadly speaking, what are your criteria in selecting these masters?

MS: I don’t use theory. I use my thoughts, ideas and experiences to curate this project. When we talk about the art of photography, we have to include aesthetics in our consideration. Commercial work can also be artistic too. Look at Irving Penn or Richard Avedon—you can’t dismiss them. Of course, my selection is based on my interpretation but I cannot just display the simple record of any photographer. If you look at the work of Aree Khorhachareon (1911-92, b. Phuket), the person who opened Liang Ewe studio in Phuket, for instance, you can see that he was excellent from a technical standpoint. He had a great eye, good composition and directing his clients. This is the basic consideration. On top of that, from a sociological standpoint, this is an important work because we can see the different peoples who lived in Phuket then. The photographer stuck to and did what he was good at.

In the case of Rong Wong-Savun (1932-2009, b. Chai Nat), based on what I have found, he was one of the first photographers to cover the dark side of Bangkok. At that time, the appearance of slum areas in Bangkok was a new societal phenomenon that people did not care much about. Perhaps because he worked for Siam Rath Weekly Review, he developed that kind of consciousness about the society early on. As for M.L. Toy Klongsai (1906-51), his interest in nude photography made many people suspicious of him. Even his brother thought that he was doing pornography. If you think of the context of his era, it wasn’t easy to pursue his interest. You can tell that he loved women and he tried to make them pose in a classical way, unlike pornography where you would have them spread their legs, for instance. He spent time and effort to create beautiful photographs. He was very careful with the lighting, for example. Because he was part of the royal family, he had to be extra cautious. Most of the photographs were hardly published or shown in his time. He kept them for himself.

ZW: How do you relate your curating of these past photographers to the global history of photography from the West?
MS: We have learnt about the stories of others for too long. Do we have our stories to tell? We should start recording our stories. If not, people will think that the best is from the West and we will end up dismissing our own. We will think that our society has nothing to offer. And that’s not true. It doesn’t mean that we are against the West. We just have to start our own story. This is the power of knowledge. We should create another pole of knowledge. The world should not just have one core of aesthetics. This is my hidden agenda here.

When we talk about global photography, it’s the same story with the same names. Are you not bored with that? With the seven Thai masters whom I have presented, they offer us other dimensions to explore. I also use the term “master” as another keyword to counter the West. Can the third world have their own masters of photography on their own terms? I don’t care if the camera came from the West. If they want to dismiss this project, that’s their game. I understand this is a power game. But if they are open-minded, they will see this as a contribution to the photographic world. The world should not only have one centre.

I will bring the show to different parts of the world because this will serve as a confirmation that these masters are recognised and will not be forgotten. It will also have an impact in Thailand. If the world recognises these photographers, the Thai society will not be able to ignore them. Perhaps they will have to think if they should build a museum to keep the work. I want to give photography a better ground. When you talk about painting, they can talk about its development in Thailand. As for photography, they cannot even give us five names.

ZW: In your project to rediscover the Thai masters of photography, do you inevitably use Western standards to measure them?

MS: I think visual language is probably the common language that people share. Nevertheless, since colonisation, you can’t deny that our knowledge has been rooted in the West. If the world recognises these photographers, the Thai society will not be able to ignore them. Perhaps they will have to think if they should build a museum to keep the work. I want to give photography a better ground. When you talk about painting, they can talk about its development in Thailand. As for photography, they cannot even give us five names.

Zhuang Wubin is a writer, curator and artist. As a writer/curator, Zhuang focuses on the photographic practices in Southeast Asia. Published by NUS Press, Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey (2016) is his fourth book. He is a recipient of the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship 2017 in Singapore, and has been further invited to research residency programmes at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan (2017), Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2015) and Institute Technology of Bandung (2013). He is the contributing curator of the biennial Chiang Mai Photo Festival (2015, 2017).

As an artist, Zhuang uses photography and text to visualise the experiences of the Chinese communities across Southeast Asia. Zhuang has made presentations, exhibited work, curated shows and taught classes in art institutions, festivals and universities in Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Emirates and Russia.
Buddhadasa Bhiku
Untitled
(date unknown)
An elephant procession, Takua Pa, Phang Nga (c. 1955)
“Rong Wong-savun
Ayutthaya
(1956)

“Rong Wong-savun
Hua Hin Beach
(1957)
The exhibition, ‘Rong Wong-savun: 1932–2009’ (2005), opened in Thonburi, Bangkok, at Siriraj Hospital, where Rong had worked as a photographer. It was the first time Rong’s photographic work was publicly exhibited. The exhibition included 27 black and white prints taken between 1965 and 1967 by Pornsak Sakdaenprai, who had no inkling of such terms as ‘conceptual art’ and ‘conceptual photography’. Each picture was accompanied by a dharma-teaching poem that he had written for it. The series is entitled ‘Dharma Text Next to Image’.

These 27 black and white photographic prints, taken between 1965 and 1967, by Pornsak Sakdaenprai’s Pornsak Photo Studio achieved success by manifesting such fantasies, transforming the sun-burned young farmers of a small town into glamorous Luang Thung gods and goddesses as they thronged his studio for new images of itself. Open up to modernisation and ‘civilisation’ by one of Thailand’s oldest communities began to reflect the influence and inspiration of Thai country music, as modern photography had become the memory of that age, appearing as magazine covers, calendars and movie posters, all of them vivacious, beautiful, elegant, male fantasies concerning the opposite sex. Models’ confidence in their bodies, and Thai public, explored the beauty of Thai women, the romanticised appeal once shaped the identity of Thai country music (Pornsak Sakdaenprai, 1954 – 1964), ‘Rong managed to stand ahead of his time, when the Thai art world still faced with criticism in the prudish days of Field Marshal P. Pibulsongkram’s nationalist government which daily strived to micro-manage the lives and minds of Thai people, over every isssue from strip and proper conduct to the warning of expansionist war upon a neighbouring country. In such a context, M.L. Toy’s nude art is more than pictures of naked models: they are acts of defiance against the power of the fascist state and its imposed social order. They reflect the artists’ courage to publicly explore the beauty of Thai women, the models’ confidence in their bodies, and Thai male fantasies concerning the opposite sex. This set of nine, 41 immaculately made original prints (produced between the year 1946 – 1957), by this photographer who was a writing colleague and contemporary of Sri Buphak Khulsat Saparpai, proves beyond doubt that M.L. Toy Xoomsai is a true pioneer of Thai nude photography.

S.H. Lim (1930 – )

An encounter with S.H. Lim (Novit Phayawynakul) and hisihan and glamour photography is akin to a trip in a time machine; it brings one back to the glory days and uncomplicated appeal of Thai cinema and beauty contests post-1957. His photographic prints have become the memory of that age, appearing as magazine covers, calendars and movie posters, all of them innumerable, beautiful, elegant, cool and dynamically sexy. Thailand’s first Miss Universe, Apasara Hongsilal, stepping out of an aeroplane fresh from her triumph in Miami, an angelic invitation to fantasies. Price Rungruang, celestial sex sire, in a ‘two-piece’, Apasara Prayuwanee, Miss Thailand 1957, in Thai traditional dress, or bikini clad two-spirited star Geasa Isaraksu na Ayuthaya, exquisitely keeping in the air over coconut fronds. These are iconic images, but their photographer remains unknown to most of us.

S.H. Lim, a Thai photographer of Chinese blood, was born in 1930. A self-taught talent, he took pictures for many well-known Thai publications such as Satit Thai, Bangkok Weekly, Phromph, Or DurTor and Sawasri, from 1962 until his retirement in 1987. In 1963 he was awarded the silver and bronze medals by the New York Kodak Expo Photography Contest.

Compiled by Manit Sriwanichpoom