



THE ALTARPIECES

In contemporary Thai artist Natee Utarit's latest exhibition, he examines his beliefs and attitudes towards the notion of God and goodness in today's world.

Ayala Museum and Singapore-based gallery Richard Koh Fine Art, with the support of the Royal Thai Embassy in Manila, co-presented an exhibition for contemporary Thai painter Natee Utarit. Entitled *Optimism is Ridiculous: The Altarpieces*, the exhibition runs from 18 February to 9 April 2017 at the Ayala Museum's Ground Floor Gallery. As part of Utarit's *Optimism is Ridiculous* series, *The Altarpieces* serves as the artist's critique of Western modernism and capitalism. The twelve works in the exhibition are composed of multiple panels, forming a diptych, triptych or polyptych, following in the tradition of classical religious paintings that adorn the altars of churches.

"This series showcases the artist's mastery of visual imagery, incorporating iconic elements from both Christian and Buddhist religions. As a practicing

Buddhist with a familiarity with Christian beliefs and iconography, Utarit assembles and weaves all the rituals and traditions that extol, revere, and mark life, death, suffering, injustice and torment. By depicting and composing human allegories, Utarit presents a universal experience within the filter of Thai culture and Western sacred symbols," said Mariles Gustilo, Ayala Museum's Senior Director.

Utarit's multi-faceted practice focuses on his exploration of the medium of painting, connecting it with photography and classical Western art. Light and perspective are some of the elements the artist chooses to work with, focusing on painting as a means to explore image-making. His complex paintings alluding to Thailand's current social and political landscape contain rich metaphors and are usually in the format of the traditional still life. The Bangkok-born artist's works are part of the collections of Bangkok University,

(TOP) Installation view of *Optimism is Ridiculous: The Altarpieces*. (OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP) "In the name of God", 2016, 250 x 374 cm (triptych), oil on canvas; "Theater of the Absurd", 2015, 250 x 540 cm (triptych), oil on canvas.

IMAGES COURTESY OF RICHARD KOH FINE ART AND AYALA MUSEUM

Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Singapore Art Museum, as well as private collections in Europe and Asia.

In *The Altarpieces*, Utarit represents his view of God, the world around us, and contemporary events, filtered through his own Buddhist beliefs. To better understand where the artist is coming from, we asked him about his interpretation of Western religion and beliefs, based on his own Asian perspective. This interview has been edited and condensed.

1. Please tell us about *The Altarpieces*.

I expanded my realm of interest into the original contexts of altarpieces in history, religions and rituals, where paintings were first utilized and incorporated into human life and civilization. My Altarpieces reconciled with the interest I have in more specific issues such as the meaning and implication of the sacred altar, the ritualistic consecration incorporated into painting as a form of high art, and the attempt to understand the Western way of thinking through Christianity.

2. What is your perspective of Western religion and beliefs?

Millennia ago, when man first began to speculate about the existence of a supreme being with power over all of creation, he most likely described this divine figure as impersonal, just, and as essential to the



living of our lives as water and air. Voltaire, the 18th century French philosopher, famously wrote, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him." God is the necessary answer to all of man's questions. But my interest doesn't lie in whether man invented God to satisfy a fundamental need to believe. Instead, I am more interested in a different question: If man needs a god, then who is that god in the modern world, a world where science has all but obliterated the foundations on which the world's major religions were built?

Among societies with different cultural practices, whether a single god can satisfy the spiritual and intellectual needs of more than one people is a difficult question to answer. Much depends on the extent to which this deity could be reshaped to encompass the diverse beliefs and aspirations of those peoples. Throughout history, war and territorial expansion have been the foremost means of spreading religion. Contact with more advanced societies led to the adoption of new beliefs by smaller, weaker cultures. But in this process, the nature of god was altered



to satisfy the needs of a larger and more diverse group of believers.

I am Asian and as such, I have never been taught to believe in a Western conception of God. I am Buddhist, and although the Buddhist scriptures contain stories of miracles and supernatural powers, these have been rationalized and reinterpreted as philosophical allegories for more than a hundred years. This makes it impossible for me to imagine an all-powerful God who determines man's fate in the way that Westerners believe. For Asians, in the years since the colonial period, God has been a real, physical presence. He has exercised power to effect change that the old local gods have been unable to resist. This God is none other than the West. Armed with the latest military technology, the West has declared itself the God of the Future – a god with the power of life and death over a vast majority of the world's population – a power that has remained unchallenged up to the present day.

In my country, we have turned our backs on the Indian origins of our traditional religious beliefs and practices since the reign of King Rama IV in the mid-19th century. This new alignment was the result of political and bureaucratic necessity.



Western ways were embraced in the hope that they would usher in a better present and a brighter future. Over the past century and a half, we have adopted Western political, economic, and educational ideas. Our way of life has been transformed by this shift. Only in the matter of Christian theology have we been loath to follow in the footsteps of the West, and in failing to grasp the nature of Christian belief, we remain ignorant of the philosophy which

grounds the Western institutions we have adopted.

Asians have struggled with a conflict between traditional morality and modern rational necessity, between adherence to traditional customs and a new freedom that entitles individuals to act in non-traditional ways, and between rational materialism and belief in the supernatural. These conflicts are prevalent in many of the Asian societies that have replaced

OPENING NIGHT PHOTOS BY JAMIE S. MARTINEZ.

Ruel T. Maranan, Ayala Foundation, Inc. President; Natee Utarit; Amb. Thanatip Upatising, Royal Embassy of Thailand in the Philippines; Mariles L. Gustilo, Ayala Foundation, Inc. Senior Director for Art and Culture; Richard Koh of Richard Koh Fine Art Gallery.

Richard Koh, Sandy Uy, Charlene Gonzales-Muhlach, Rowell Santiago.





(FROM TOP) "Passage to the Song of Truth and Absolute Equality", 2014, 212 x 510 cm (polyptych), oil on canvas; "The Introspective", 2016, 250 x 374 cm (triptych), oil on canvas. (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP) "The Annunciation", 2016, 287 x 308 cm (triptych), oil on canvas,

their indigenous beliefs with worship of the West. People in the West have faith in God, and we have faith in the West. If there is anything wrong with this, it is that our faith is blind. We have given up the ability to tell good from bad, and consequently, the West appears to us to be the only good. This is the cause of the inner conflict we have yet to find a way to resolve.

3. What do you think are the similarities and differences between Western and Asian religious thinking?

Similarities include the idea of Death. Buddhism and Christianity have the same idea about *Memento mori* or the contem-

plation of death. As for the differences, the Christian idea is we are all born in sin. As the children of Adam and Eve, sin is our inheritance. In Buddhism, we are born innocent. Our spirits are pure – we call it Original Purity – and it is only later that we are corrupted and our spirits soiled.

4. Where will this exhibition travel?

The exhibition will move to Jakarta, then Malaysia and Singapore.

5. What are your upcoming projects?

My next project is a flower still life painting, to be exhibited at Richard Koh Fine Art Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in late May. 🍀