

IS OPTIMISM RIDICULOUS?

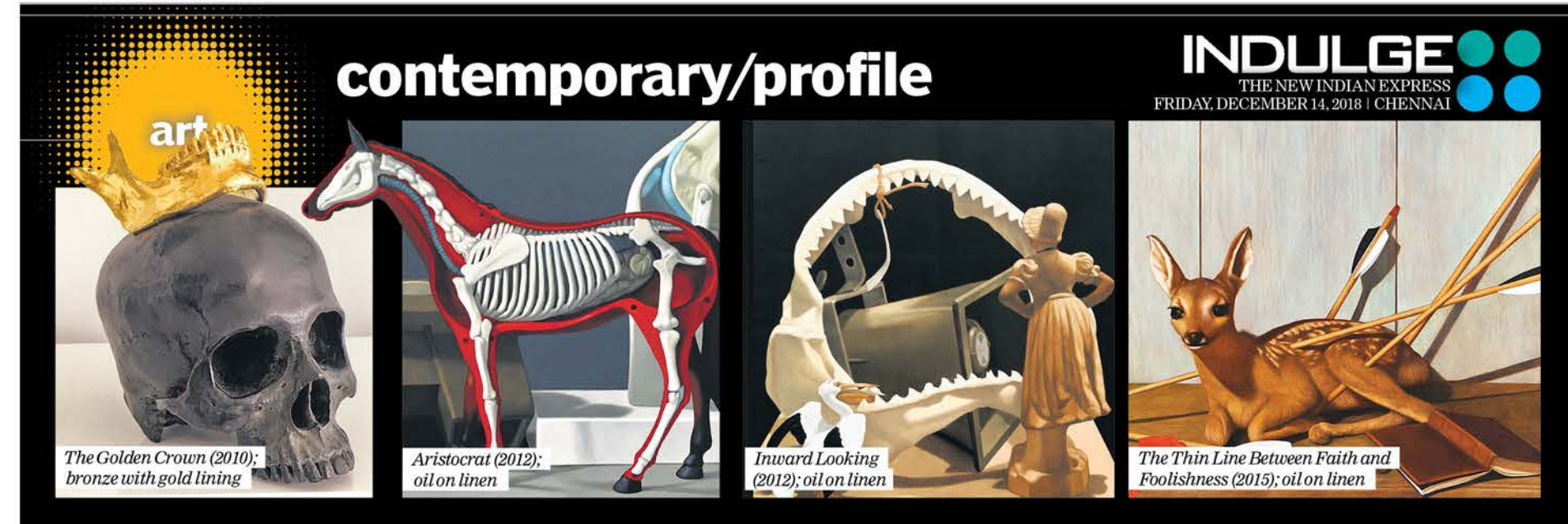
It has been a landmark year for Thai artist Natee Utarit, even as he's being hailed for his wildly subversive artworks and installations that question everything from religious beliefs and social structures to ethical and moral persuasions about capitalism and a global culture. Importantly, Natee's work reveals the power of contemporary art, as a potent medium that can create a genuinely meaningful and positive impact on people.



Surprise (2013);
(detail), oil on linen

The Bridge (2012);
(detail), oil on linen

The Private Expectation of God and
the Common Reason of Investment
(2014); diptych, oil on canvas



The Golden Crown (2010);
bronze with gold lining

Aristocrat (2012);
oil on linen

Inward Looking
(2012); oil on linen

The Thin Line Between Faith and
Foolishness (2015); oil on linen

THE idea of a willing suspension of disbelief, of disregarding reality and logic for something dreamlike and enjoyable, is the primary impulse that grips you, as you begin browsing through the paintings of Thai artist Natee Utarit. We were first introduced to Natee, who's represented by the gallery Richard Koh Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur, at the India Art Fair held in January, in New Delhi, earlier this year.

At the time, Natee had just released his hugely influential collection, *Optimism is Ridiculous: The Altarpieces*, following up with a more elaborate presentation extending the prevailing theme, *Optimism is Ridiculous: Paintings on Figure of Speech, Paradoxes and Inward Journey* in April. In June, Natee went on to show *View from the Tower*, his first solo in Bangkok after 11 years, before going on to host the exhibition *Untitled Poems Of Theodore Rousseau* in October. He also saw the launch of the book, *Natee Utarit: Optimism is Ridiculous*, edited by Italian curator and art critic Demetrio Paparoni.

To be sure, even as Natee is being hailed in art circles around the globe, his ideas are resolutely subversive and decidedly post-9/11 in context. Concerns over the commodification of religion and the commercialisation of art fuel his works, as do matters of colonialism and imperialism, and the constant interplay between European and Asian ideologies, and their evident disintegration in this technology-driven age.

In the simplest terms, Natee questions the construct of God, in the present day; his works frequently cite tributes and existentialist quotes by Friedrich Nietzsche, Voltaire ('If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him' says one canvas), and Jean Paul-Sartre ('*l'enfer, c'est les autres*' or 'hell is other people'). On a personal level, however, Natee remains an avowed Buddhist.

In essence, Natee's works convey a load of anti-establishment sentiments, taking to statements such as 'innocence is over-rated' or 'money can't buy friends, but it can get you a better class of enemy'. But he's also careful not to come across as overtly sacrilegious, and consciously avoids all profanity.

For an aesthetic overview, Natee's works might seem like modern-day Hieronymus Bosch polyptychs, given their elaborately complex nature, rife with progressive and often deliberately provocative ideas. Some might even say, Natee's ideas are not for the faint-hearted, not when he's prone to dissect the divinities under a cultural microscope, and reduce generations of social mores and mannerisms to mere posturing and pithy platitudes.

Yet, at a time when contemporary art itself finds itself under question — for its motives and purpose, its constructs and limitations —

the art of Natee Utarit gains importance, as a mirror to the possibilities that art presents today, not just for thought, but for actual social change. In that sense, Natee might well be on the cusp of a revolution — one that's slowly rearing its head, and gearing up to be acknowledged in a larger manner — as he plays the figurehead of another immensely impactful and politically driven art movement, much like Chinese contemporary artist and activist, Ai Weiwei. In an email interaction, Natee spoke about his formative ideas, warming up to concepts of globalised acculturation, and paving the path for a meaningful creative process.

The idea, 'Optimism is Ridiculous': How did you arrive at this assertion? And how relevant is the idea to current affairs?

'Optimism is ridiculous' reflects affairs of the present day, especially those happening in my country — and with my region — ever since the post-colonial period.

I like the sentence: Optimism is ridiculous. Sarcastic as it may sound, the sentence quite obviously evinces attitudes towards what happened. I myself don't have a problem with optimism. But then again, an optimistic or one-sided viewpoint can cause you far more problems than just being ridiculous.

Certainly, it concerns not only the relationship between one's self and one's perception of the outer world, but also the relationship between one's self and one's perception of the inner world. As for my work, the sentence embraces my attitudes towards obscurities in social, cultural and religious beliefs that stem from changes since the post-colonial period.

My country (Thailand) succeeded in avoiding Western colonisation *de jure*, but in practice, it seems to have a greater effect that has influenced our social and cultural perspectives. My current set of paintings echo such matters via figures of speech, paradoxes and comparison, and an inward looking way, according to beliefs of Buddhism.

Are you a pessimist or a realist by nature?

In the words of Quentin Crisp, the English writer and raconteur (1908-99): "If you describe things as better than they are, you are thought a romantic. If you describe things as worse than they are, you are thought a realist."

I don't think there's 'newness' in art anymore. What exists is 'new angles of interpretation' under different attitudes and contexts

If you describe things as exactly as they are, then you are thought a satirist."

For a recent show, I called one of my paintings, *The man who is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after, he knows too little*. The canvas shows a fox staring at its own reflection in a mirror. I am very fond of this sentiment. It expresses something that is very true.

I am now 48 years old. I consider myself to be an existentialist and a pessimist. My philosophical beliefs were shaken for a while when it seemed to me that the only existentialists in the 21st century were tired old conservatives who were never satisfied with anything — people unhappy with a world of rapidly changing social and cultural conditions — a world where we seem to have so many more choices than in the past.

Sometimes, I have the distinct impression that I know too many things, but just as often I feel as if I don't know anything at all. But then maybe there isn't really much difference between knowing and not knowing. After all, knowing too much makes it hard for us to face the truth. It changes our perspective on the world around us, and as a result, what we value and find meaningful in life changes, too.

I'm always asking the people around me if we aren't looking at things too optimistically. Is everything we see really as beautiful as it seems? These kinds of questions aren't meant to destroy people's faith; they are a reflection of our uncertainty and loss of belief in the reality right there in front of us.

We can't deny that always looking at life through rose-coloured glasses doesn't teach us much of anything about how to live our lives in the world as it is today — a world where reality is so much more intense and so radically different from the past.

How important is the act of subversion for your artistic process?

I am interested in 'deconstruction', because it leads to inner and outer self-analysis.

I don't think there's 'newness' in art anymore. Everything has been sought-after and created through hundreds of years of 'art development'. What exists are 'new angles of interpretation' under different attitudes and contexts. In my paintings, I often start with 'Why' and 'How' questions, which help shape the content as well as my method of creation.

I'm interested in artistic ideas that question everything around and challenge existing ideas 'smartly' and 'politely'.

But I will not draw the audience's attention with aggressive moves.

How can it be possible to ask for a sense of refinement and delicacy, as well as concentration of the mind, if you have to grab the audience by the collar or use vulgarity?

I've been very careful about this.

We cannot use 'art' as an excuse for any violation or misleading act, as in, artistic pieces crafted to specifically challenge or overthrow existing ideas.

There are sensitive issues in society and many should be questioned. The 'How' question is necessary to create a balance between content and artistic presentation.

There are so many reasons around in the world today to be unhappy. We're keen to learn about your ideas of channelising strong emotions such as anger, frustration and outrage into art.

I'm enthused by negative and gloomy feelings from news and public incidents, as well as people's emotions on Facebook.

Subjects of art once used to be about beauty only. But once art expands to include other possibilities, there is a wider space for other emotions including rage, aggression, and depression — all consequences of the era.

Things happen without warnings. It's like the elementary school shootings in the US. These incidents reflect the emotional and spiritual crises of our vice-indulging time.

Art's mission is to perceive what becomes of the world, and present it via a creator's attitudes. Contemporary art has raised issues, encouraging audiences to think and look back at more individualistic questions. Art is a creative process, and it exists for human ideas and spirits to gain more insightful perceptions of the world.

Is there an idea here about a unified global religion — one which takes in the good and bad of all other belief systems? Is contemporary art the new religion of progressive minds?

I found that all beliefs of the West and the world changed after 9/11. They were severely shaken. Questions about God and his existence and scientific progress proceeded rapidly in the reverse direction.

Contradictions between belief and the current state of being, expectations and occurrence, faith and proof, all lead us to the picture of one throwing a giant rock into serene waters. Such chaos happens on Earth in every region, at different ratios and contexts.

I think there's an obvious change — some realise happiness in their remaining lives; as the future is unpredictable. When sought after, at the fullest, it's all about individual happiness. Many people have left no stone unturned, reaching out for new faith to re-enhance their spiritual strength. There are more atheists. And most just realise the uncertainty of the future, unlike they have ever felt before.

It's a scene from my point of view.

Art (and contemporary art) are mere movements under global change. Art itself is not a core factor to change human beings' beliefs and thoughts. It's like a wave on a surface of water — the rise and fall before a new wave reaches. Contemporary art is not a stone tossed into the river. It is simply a tidal wave of all changes. To create more possibilities, more stones need to be thrown for the surface waves to move further. Or there might be no more waves.

That is my guess: Optimism is Ridiculous.

For updates on Natee Utarit's shows or to request copies of the book *Optimism is Ridiculous*, contact Richard Koh Fine Art on their website or Facebook page. Read the complete interview at indulgeexpress.com

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