

# HYPOCRISY

by Vasan Sitthiket



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# FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition HYPOCRISY by the Thai artist Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957). The exhibition takes place in Bangkok on 12 May – 9 June, 2012 and features a series of paintings as well as an installation of carved Thai amulets (palad khik) which are in the form of phalli. In this exhibition, he explores 'hypocrisy' and its many facets, in particular with reference to the conflict in the Middle East.

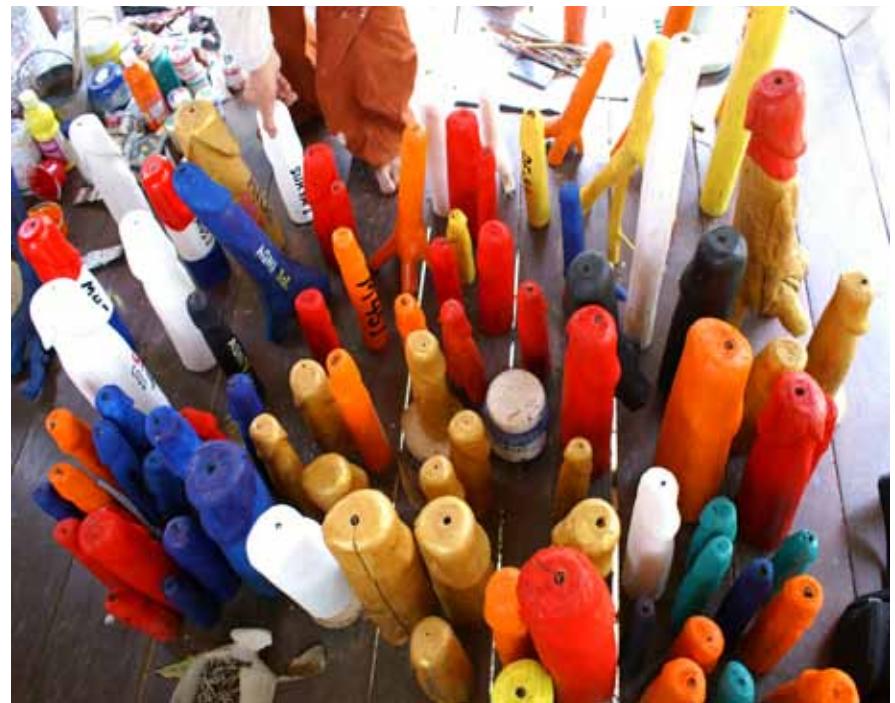
Vasan Sitthiket is an activist and one of Thailand's most well known artists internationally. He is often labeled the *enfant terrible* of Thai art and a firebrand. It can be difficult to pin him down since he turns against anyone in power and he loathes the hypocritical ways of politicians and bureaucrats, as well as of business leaders and 'capitalists'. He seems to be an anarchist at heart.

As the curator Steven Pettifor has said: "In Vasan's art the world is largely divided into two polemic camps, that of heroes and villains. But unlike predictable Hollywood yarns where the downtrodden and beaten rise triumphant, for Vasan it is the villains who have the crushing upper hand."

Vasan is a very active artist within Thai contemporary society. He has also staged three plays and is the author of more than ten books, including poetry, children's books and political writings. Take this opportunity to thank Vasan Sitthiket for his collaboration, Dercyk Whittaker for writing the essay, and Dr Chaiyan Chaiyaporn for kindly agreeing to open the exhibition.

Thai Nukes, 2012

Phallic installation, 108 wood carvings  
with wood recovered from the 2011 floods



# HYPOCRISY

(AND THE NAMING OF PARTS)

Deryck Whittaker

When you first come across Vasan's works you try to imagine the man behind them. Behind the assertively-sized canvases, the violence, the scatology, the bold palette, the angry brush-strokes, the flung-paint bespattering, the powerful images frequently set in a maelstrom of *pointillist* mosaic. You envisage some angry-young-man firebrand, all bluster and rant. But at the *vernissage* you are surprised to be introduced to a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, 55 year old, with Gandhi glasses, unruly hair and a wispy beard, looking for all the world like someone on the 70's hippy-trail. Except that in the 70's he was busy fighting on the streets against Thailand's military dictators...

I Googled synonyms for "Penis", and, judging by their pathetically pumped-up propensity, I guess nearly all had been coined by men, such as: *yard* (!); *thunder-stick*; *trouser-snake*; *shaft*; *meat-stick*; and *fuck pole*. But then there were the more disturbing ones, the large number of phallus-as-weapon, or power-tool, results, including: *love-pistol*; *passion rifle*; *meat-spear*; *pink torpedo*; *chopper*; *love-truncheon*; *power-sceptre*, *Excalibur*; *hammer of the gods*; *mack the knife*; *your majesty*; *the chief*; *the judge*. And it is not for nothing that the Penis forms part of Vasan's stock-in-trade. Or more appropriately, that the Penis figures consistently in his work as one of his props, given that the word "Hypocrisy" comes from the Greek *hypokrisis* being the "act of playing a part on the stage".

His painting ***I Love Democracy, Ha Ha*** incorporates a few, familiar, props: the missile/phallus, the dove of peace, the Stars and Stripes and the singular Star of David. Here you have two figures down-trodden beneath the jack-boots of the US President, provocatively costumed as half-executive, half-soldier. And now that Obama is his target, rather than Bush in his earlier works, he has allowed a further provocation: that of the hypocrisy of the most powerful black man in the world maltreating his diminutively-dimensioned brothers. Here the scales of justice are manipulated and a false equilibrium is maintained between the white dove gently cradled in his right hand, and a naked figure wriggling in a throttle-hold in his left. (And remember that the USA removed itself from the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice in 1986....). This theme recurs in ***The Rascal!*** where again the US are portrayed in their tainted self-proclaimed role of policing the world. This time North Korea and Iran are getting a scolding for their nuclear aims, whilst Israel developed their bomb unhindered 40-odd years ago to a deafening international silence. Here the work is doubly penis-endowed with the purple-headed World Bank labelled missile, and the FTA inscribed phallus, in parallel thrust.

The scales of justice effectively make 2 appearances in the ***Oh My God*** work. [image on request] In this painting Vasan addresses perhaps the largest of the present global hypocrisies: the enforced re-ordering of the history and geography of Palestine, and the general indifference of the world towards the nightmare of quotidian existence in such territory as remains to its people. This is a subject which is close to Vasan's heart. Of course the *Fuck God* caption and that giant phallic finger is pretty much full-on, but that's Vasan. He draws on direct, first-level devices, and the liberal use of the exclamation mark. That's not to belittle the enterprise, as it is his inimitable methodology of getting strong, important subjects across. No messing! As a self-declared

anarchist, Vasan is totally non-partisan, and may turn up at any of the colour-coded political rallies in Thailand, for example, if he feels that his own standards relating to such subjects as inequality, prejudice, injustice, racism or labour-exploitation are not being met. The scales of justice symbol is therefore a particularly appropriate device for his purposes. In **OMG**, the scales are tipped by the weight of the shit of existence for a Palestinian in Hebron, compared with life in Tel Aviv where the sun always shines. (I remembered the final clinching moments of the film *Paradise Now*, where the young Palestinian discovers the beaches, the fun, the sea and the sand of Youth denied to him, and makes his decision to mount the crowded bus with his Semtex and hot wires). And there is the further imbalance depicted by the 2 executives held aloft and distant from the slaughter taking place at a diagonal below. In a possible nod to Feng Zhengjie, God's eyes diverge to their two extremes; an effective device, at once portraying Him as all-seeing whilst presenting us with only the inscrutable screen of the whites of his eyes – chilling in the context. And in the painting isn't that Vasan himself among the group at the receiving end of God's injustice?

An almost endearing aspect of Vasan's work is that he obviously insists on writing his own titles for, and his William Blake type captions within, his paintings, and often the grammar and spelling reveal the risks in the fact of English not being his first language. But the result is to enhance the sincerity of the endeavour. In the case of **OMG**, he has written ".....*I will be there God*" and presumably intended "*their*". But it still works, and now not only does Vasan have God granting the territory to his Chosen People, but he has effectively placed him on hand, policing the arrangement. Anyway, Vasan is not interested in such niceties, and the commitment shines through.

Multi-national executive heads explode in **Killing Idiot – Greed in Your Heads**. Having reached a personal limit, Buddha is mentally ridding the world of a coven of kleptocrats, whilst in the background the nodding donkeys quietly add their increment to the oil-fuelled commercial dynamic.

**In My Life is My Message** Vasan gives as desperation in the extreme: the recognition by a suicide of the importance of Life, and yet his willingness to resort to self-immolation in the name of maintaining the values to which Vasan himself subscribes.

Obama is Superman in **In God We Trust**, the Dollar sign in place of the familiar pecs-stretched S emblem. The phallic weapon/power-tool and the jack-boots again make an appearance, and nuclear cooling towers stride the globe, with Vasan fingering the monstrous Monsanto, a company with the notoriety of riding rough-shod over environmental issues.

**In Death of Gaddafi** the dictator is depicted in the spare delineation of Cocteau. He is borne aloft (after a particularly bestial end) on the wings of Democracy, Liberty and Free Trade, his ascent emphasized by the vertical thrust of the streaks of trailed colour. The hypocrisy here, of course, being the sudden demotion to *persona non grata* status by nations whose representatives had accepted, and returned, his hospitality only a year earlier.

The stone became the symbol of the Intifada of 1987 and largely remains so, being the material most readily at hand and since the Palestinians have little else in their armoury to avail themselves of, and in **Stones** they

are facing helicopters and bombs; the Palestinian flag borne away in Vasan's darker areas of oolitic flow. The theme recurs in ***Post Modern David and Heads of Devil***, where a sling-wielding, Picasso-esque, figure is pitched against Netanyahu and Obama with their mega-firepower, in an inversion of the tale of David and Goliath. The strategically meandering Wall, appropriately sanguine, and the Dome of the Rock, place us firmly in context.

It is not the first time that Vasan has addressed Osama bin Laden in his works (remember the larger-than-life portrait of 2009), and in ***Peace*** we are at the pivotal moment when he is about to meet his Maker, the US military knocking at his door in Abbottabad. Bin Laden for once without his signature beatific demeanour, in cruciform pose, and the red-daubed areas, all anticipating the imminent blood-letting.

In the ***Why Do You Do Genocide?*** work, after the heft of the other paintings in the exhibition, we could be surprised by the tender handling of the subject; where 4 tiny corpses are swaddled for burial, reposed in a field of wild flowers. But then images of murdered children should need no further elaboration, and Vasan simply allows them to quietly speak for themselves. Three of the figures lie head upwards, while the third draped in the Palestinian flag is inverted, the odd one out. His or her surviving brother a future conscript perhaps.

***Hegemony***, has a nonplussed US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, naked except for her nail-varnish and pearl ear-rings, giving birth to a monstrous penis. A far stronger image than her merely sprouting a phallus, as it gets across the need for her to put some sweat into acquiring the balls necessary to carry out a man's work. To stand alone - Kill Bill, if you like. In this painting Vasan's caption highlights a further hypocrisy: the difference between the stated US democratic agenda relating to the Arab Spring and the familiar hegemonic hidden one. The inclusion of a black cat, a skeleton and the ongoing bombardment bode ill for a favourable outcome to the whole venture.

Appropriately, the final work reviewed, ***Long Live All People!*** serves as a summary of many of the subjects with which Vasan is passionately engaged: saving the earth, the kleptomania of unbridled capitalism, world peace, USA/Israel militarism, inequality, even the CND symbol is enlisted. Interestingly, the demonstrators and not the security forces are the ones behind the riot-shields, but the uniform masks and scarves concealing the lower half of the face remind us of the risks which participation in revolutionary street protests carry in many countries. The non-use of foreshortening, of bringing all of the faces forward to the picture-plane, and the stretcher-bond configuration, contributes to the sense of unitedness. As does the device of the regular spacing of the diverse slogans inscribed on the scarves - more successfully in this instance than Vasan's Blakean word-bubbles.

In the exhibition, Vasan's 13 paintings and a performance piece will be complemented by 108 phalluses of varying dimensions dispersed around the gallery. The phalluses, carved from Vasan's trees destroyed by last year's floods, will be painted in the colours which appear in various national flags, and labelled with the technical designation given to nuclear missiles by the respective countries who stockpile them, and also key-words from the present-day political lexicon ("Globalization", "Neo-Liberalism" etc). The message comes across loud and clear.

The collective noun for alligators is a *congregation*. You have a flange of baboons, a *file* of civil servants. So what about lots of phalluses? Perhaps a *pantheon*? Or maybe a *pride*? Yes a ***pride of pricks***- that will do nicely!



I Love Democracy, Ha Ha, 2012 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



The Rascal!, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Killing Idiot-Greed in Your Heads, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm



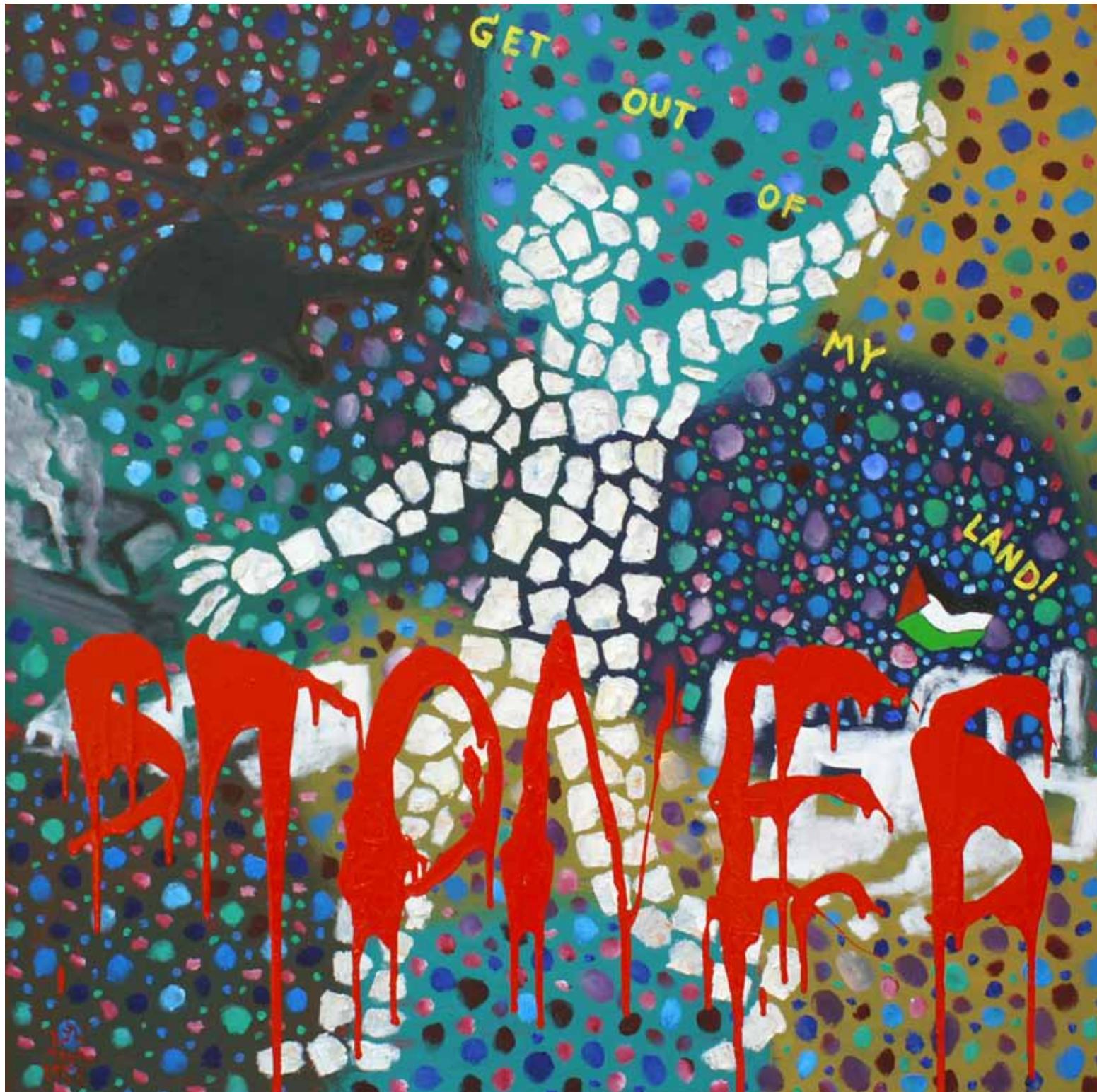
My Life is My Message, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



In God We Trust, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



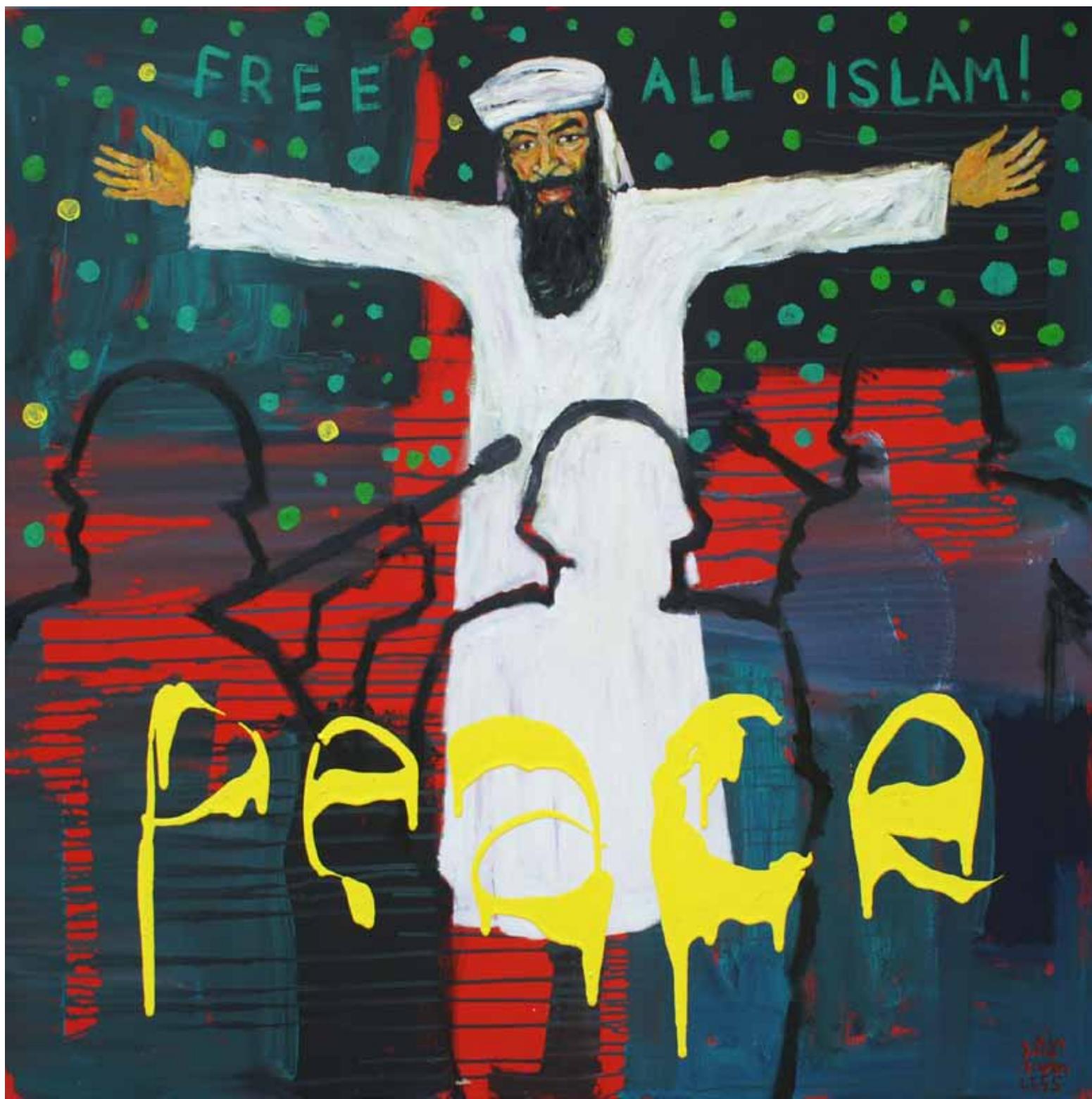
Death of Gaddafi, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Stones, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Post Modern David and Heads of Devil, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Peace, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Why Do You Do Genocide?, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Hegemony, 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm



Long Live All People! | 2012 | Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm

# CHRONOLOGY



## Vasan Sitthiket

Born 1957 in Nakhon Sawan  
1976-1981 College of Fine Arts, Bangkok

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2012 *Hypocrisy* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok
- 2011 *Ecce Homo* at Art Stage Singapore – **Singapore**  
*Obsessive Compulsive* at Number One Gallery, Bangkok  
*Sex Bomb 24 Hours* at Yavuz Fine Art – **Singapore**  
*Free All* at Gallery Gachet – Vancouver, **Canada**
- 2010 *10 Evil Scenes of Thai Politics* at Number One Gallery, Bangkok
- 2009 *Capitalism is Dying!* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok  
*Vasan's Women* at Valentine Willie Fine Art - Kuala Lumpur, **Malaysia**
- 2008 *Red Planet: Iraq War Five Years Later* at the National Gallery – Jakarta, **Indonesia**  
*The Darkness Age* at Numthong Gallery, Bangkok  
*Body Colours* at Surapon Gallery, Bangkok
- 2006 *The Darkness Age* at Thammasart University -Bangkok  
*Made in LA*, 18th Street Art Complex, Santa Monica - Los Angeles, **USA**  
*Out of American Dream* at Planet Thailand – New York, **USA**
- 2005 *Sex Bombs (24 hours)* at HOF Art Gallery - Bangkok
- 2004 *Truth is Elsewhere* at Numthong Gallery - Bangkok
- 2003 *Red Planet* at Bangkok Art Gallery - Bangkok
- 2002 *Living on Earth* at Akko Gallery - Bangkok  
*Nightmare in Paradise* at Valentine Willie Fine Art - Bali, **Indonesia**
- 2001 *We Come From the Same Way* at Numthong Gallery - Bangkok  
*This World is Not a Theatre* at Si-am Art Space - Bangkok
- 2000 *Waiting for Nothing* at Gajah Gallery - **Singapore**  
*What is in our heads?* at Chulalongkorn University Gallery - Bangkok
- 1999 *Chaos* at Bangkok Art Gallery - Bangkok
- 1998 *Farmers are Farmers* at TADU Contemporary Art Gallery - Bangkok
- 1996 *With Love and Hate* at Art Forum Gallery - Bangkok  
*Blue October* at Sunday Gallery - Bangkok
- 1994 *I Love Thai Culture* at the National Art Gallery - Bangkok  
*Nature is Dying* at Bangkok Art Gallery - Bangkok

- 1991   *Inferno* at the National Art Gallery - Bangkok  
      *Unbalance* at Visual Dharmma Art Gallery - Bangkok

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 2011   *Why Did I Get Here?* at Da Wang High Land Artist Residency – Shenzhen, **China**
- 2010   *20/20* at Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre – Bangkok
- 2009   *Bangkok 226* at Bangkok Metropolitan Art Centre - Bangkok  
      *Always as it was* at Tang Gallery – Bangkok  
      *Mini Matters* at Galerie N - Bangkok
- 2008   *The Scale of Black* at Valentine Willie Fine Art - **Singapore**  
      *Siamese Smile* at the Bangkok Metropolitan Art Centre - Bangkok
- 2007   *Soft Power* at Shanghai Zendai MoMA - Shanghai, **China**
- 2006   *Out of Chaos* at the Gwangju Biennale 2006 - Gwangju, **Korea**
- 2005   *Neo-Nationalism* at Chulalongkorn University Gallery - Bangkok
- 2004   *Truth is Elsewhere* at the Sydney Biennale, Gallery4A - Sydney, **Australia**
- 2003   *Thai-Tanic* at Ethan Cohen Fine Arts - New York, **USA**  
      *Dreams and Conflicts* at the 50th La Biennale di Venezia - **Italy**  
      *EV+A 2002: Heroes + Holies* at Limerick City Gallery - Limerick, **Ireland**  
      *Story of the I* at Chiang Mai Art Museum – Chiang Mai  
      *Seoul-Asia Art Now* - Seoul, **Korea**
- 2002   *Gwangju Biennale* - Gwangju, **Korea**
- 2001   *Thai Contemporary Art* at Valentine Willie Fine Art - Kuala Lumpur, **Malaysia**
- 1996   *Asian Modernism* at the Japan Foundation Asia Center - Tokyo, **Japan**
- 1988   *Asian Works* at Anri Gallery - Nagoya, **Japan**.  
      *Voices of Souls* at the Public Hall - Hirakata City, **Japan**

### **Museum Collections**

- Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York  
National Art Gallery, Thailand  
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia  
Singapore Art Museum, Singapore





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