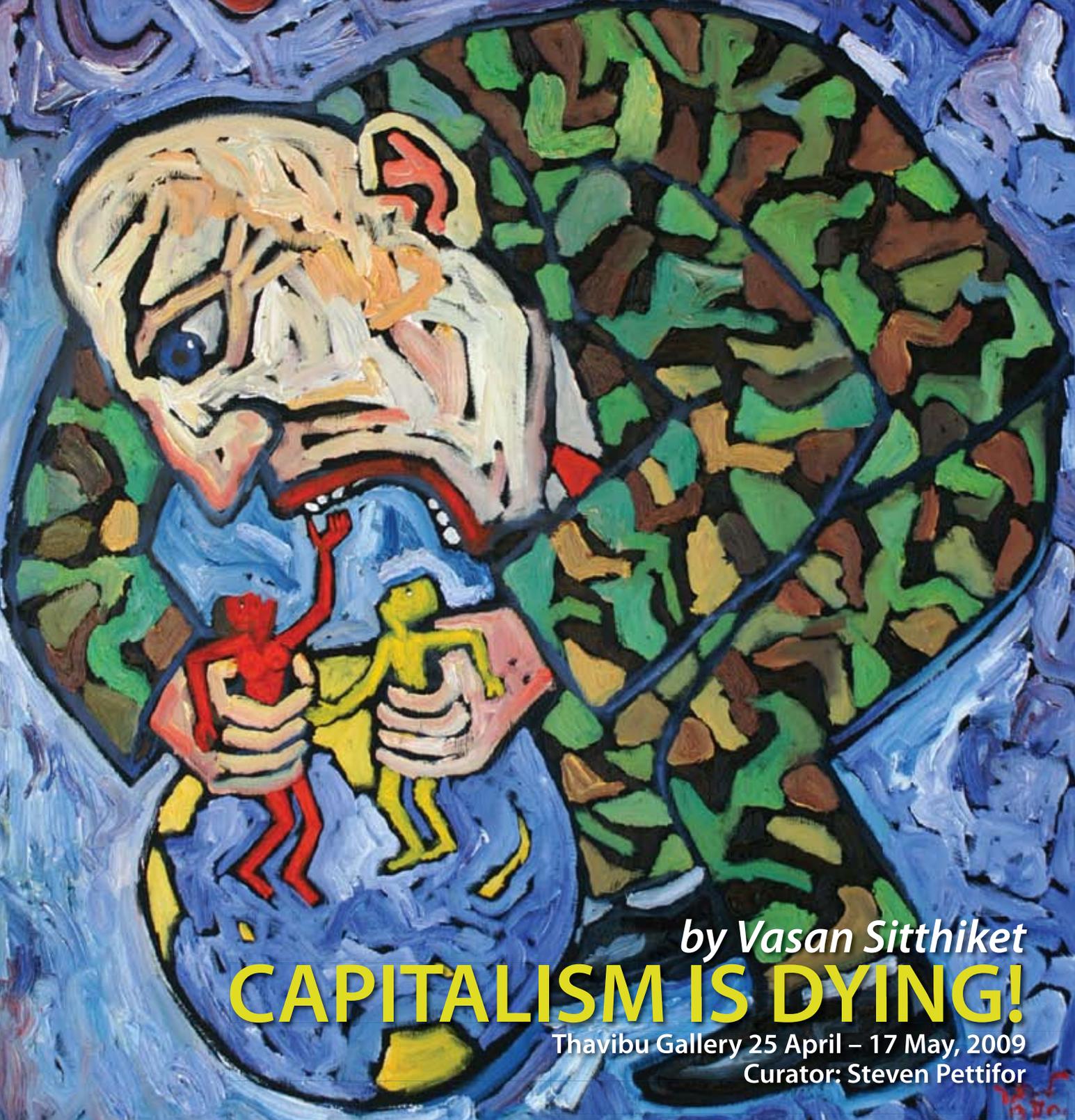


CORPORATE



by Vasan Sitthiket

CAPITALISM IS DYING!

Thavibu Gallery 25 April – 17 May, 2009

Curator: Steven Pettifor

1980
1992

by Vasan Sitthiket
CAPITALISM IS DYING!
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CAPITALISM IS DYING!

Steven Pettifor
Curator

In his early fifties and with a career that spans almost three decades, renegade Thai artist Vasan Sittthiket must find it increasingly challenging finding new methods to armour his crusade for equality in Thai society. In the past, his art has been censored and confiscated from galleries in Bangkok, but it hasn't stopped him from scolding corrupt politicians, cops, and even monks, through his work. To date his versatile *oeuvre* includes experimentations in painting, sculpture, ceramics, performance, installation, poetry, music, and he has even run a spoof election campaign as a *faux* politician seeking office.

While international viewers may find Vasan's art somewhat blatant and weary in subject matter, domestic audiences are more used seeing local practitioners deliver their art with a non-confronting sensibility and a certain degree of self-censorship. Therefore Vasan's accessible critical wit is considered appallingly close to the mark and unrivalled by other contemporary Thai artists. A political vanguard, his campaigning art is more in line with other South East Asian firebrands such as Singapore's Vincent Leow, and Vietnam's Le Quang Ha.

Having had the bulk of his exposure within his homeland, gradually international audiences are gaining access to Vasan's iconoclastic brand of art through exhibitions and performances in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Germany, Switzerland, USA, and Australia. Back in 1996 Vasan was chosen as the face of contemporary Thai art in *Asian Modernism*. His reputation also warranted his inclusion for the 2003 inaugural Thai pavilion at the *Venice Biennale*, and he is one of the only Thai artists to be housed in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York's permanent collection.

Vasan's nihilistic art has from the outset dealt with the rampant pursuit of materialistic wealth and power bought for the price of environmental, cultural and spiritual decimation. Often playing the role of judge, jury, and executioner, Vasan affronts us with crudity and barbarism he deems necessary for the task at hand – halting the social and moral degradation being witnessed on a national and global scale.

Visiting Vasan's pastoral farm studio in Nakhon Sawan province north of Bangkok, one has the impression of a person extricating himself from the trappings of urban consumerism. Watching the artist drive round in a beaten up old military jeep and firing his catapult at strategic targets around the studio, Vasan gives the impression of a person on the fringes or outside, reluctant to conform.

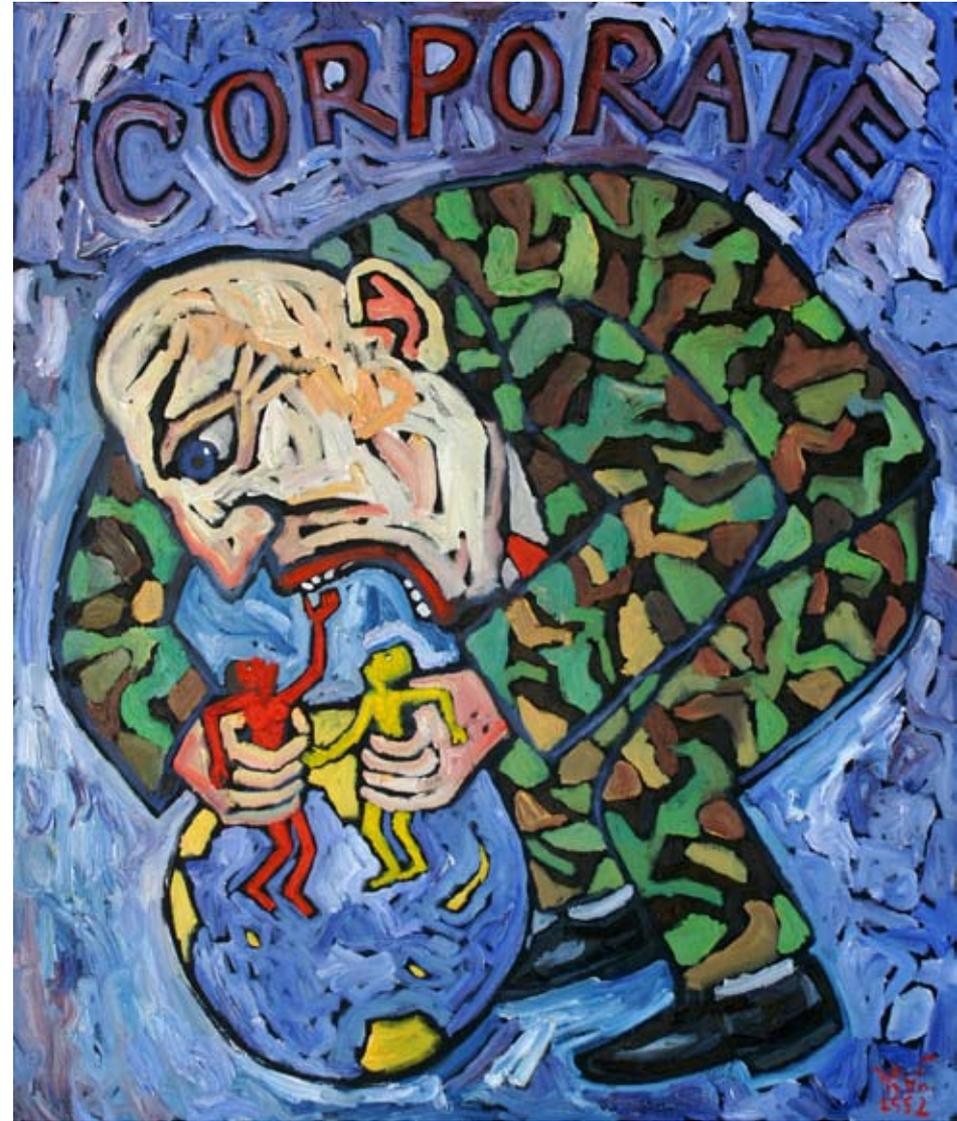
He works in the manner of an expressive painter, with quick fire gestural strokes as he attempts to manifest compositions that best surmise his latest vehement scolding. Preferring to apply his brush to short, raw dabs of paint, that are akin to the techniques of Post-impressionist painters like Van Gogh, often Vasan will resolve a canvas in less than a day.

Stylistically, many of his recent paintings vie towards illustrative caricature in the vein of 20th century German expressionist artists George Grosz and Otto Dix. Indeed Vasan's social and moral outrage with today's capitalist mechanics has much in common with Grosz's contempt at the political and social upheaval of post-war Germany in the Twenties and Thirties.

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. Under Vasan's contentious and subjective brush, the heroes are not only the innocent agrarian or working classes, or the children as in *Put Your Hatred in Your Children's Heads* (2006), but he also provocatively heralds the terrorist and the insurgents as brothers in arms.

Withering, distressed figures dominate his *oeuvre*, often interspersed with vilifying, scrawled slogans to reinforce potency. His art kicks out with vile repugnancy at unscrupulous district officials, corporate managers, politicians and even Buddhist monks, who exploit and step on the under-privileged. It has been those at the bottom of the food chain, who have been the hardest hit by unethical market speculation and the get rich quick economic policies of the corporate elite.

Tethered to the fundamentals of major world religions, the paradigm of good versus evil is a core precept that has pegged written and visual language for millennia. Within the canons of Western art, moral struggle is attached to allegories from Judeo-Christian scriptures as well as classic myths from Greco-Roman traditions.



Corporate Greed, 2009 ▲
Oil on canvas
110 x 130 cm

Vasan is obviously sensitive to such referencing, as evident in the painting *Bomb All Banks* (2009), in which he reinterprets Jesus's temple trashing when Christ ejected those lining their pockets at a site of worship; "And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers..." Matthew 21:12. In Vasan's eyes, if Jesus were a contemporary, he would be equally appalled by the profiteering actions of today's financiers and would be compelled to blow up the stock market headquarters in the manner of a terrorist.



►
Bomb All Banks, 2009
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm



Fiery Heart, 2009 ▲

Mixed media on canvas
150 x 200 cm

In fact, Vasan deems the situation more dire than Jesus throwing a tantrum in the temple, professing that capitalism is causing much of the environmental destruction currently grabbing the world's attention. Ultimately believing it will usher in the apocalypse, such themes are served up in the paintings *Dancing on Corpses* (2009) and *Fiery Heart* (2009), both of which have a certain thematic affinity to the hellish visions of medieval artist Hieronymus Bosch.



Dancing on Corpses, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 80 x 100 cm

Aside from Christian associations, Vasan also plucks symbols from his own Buddhist faith as seen in the canvas, *Profit is Evil* (2009), in which seven fireballs shower down upon the earth as an omen toward impending catastrophe.



▲
Profit is Evil, 2009
Oil and mixed media
on canvas
150 x 200 cm



▲ **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**, 2009

Oil on canvas
80 x 100 cm

Ultimately, Vasan considers the only escape from corporate rapacity and this impending ecological Armageddon to be death. The growing mood of impotence is exasperating a feeling of futility that is leading to more young people willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, and Vasan purports this as a cause for increased terrorism.

Vasan regularly reverts to sexually explicit symbolism as an extreme visual apparatus that has a certain shock value, especially with Thailand's more conservative art audiences. Sex is rarely visualised as an act of mutual pleasure. In Vasan's art congressional acts are applied aggressively as an analogy for suppression, violence, and particularly rape, as in the ecologically minded, *Poor Mother Earth* (2009), or the scathing *Free Trade Agreement* (2009).



Poor Mother Earth, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 110 x 130 cm

Pushing bodily associations and functions further he also indulges graphic scatological imagery to overtly colour his themes. In *All for Me, Shit for You* (2009), Vasan employs his mainstay wolf features as a metaphor for villainy in the depiction of a camouflage wearing capitalist feeding faeces to the world's starving, who are given the continental hues of red for Latin America, yellow for Asia, and black for Africa.

▶
All for Me, Shit for You

2009

Oil on canvas

100 x 120 cm





A Day in the Life of a CEO, 2009

Oil on canvas
110 x 130 cm

In *One Day in a Life of a CEO* (2009), Vasan brings his biting sense of humour to his mocking portrayal of a corporate bigwig indulging his perverse leisure pursuits. While Vasan typically needs little or no reference points to conjure up such disturbing compositions, in this instance he sources from an alleged actual encounter between a New York based CEO and a Thai ladyboy prostitute.

During Vasan's art residency in New York in 2006, he became friendly with a Thai transsexual who was working there as a prostitute, who told the artist about the masochistic preferences of one of her tricks. Claiming the person to be one of America's most powerful corporate figures, it was somewhat ironic that such a dominant master liked to be treated as a submissive sex slave, enjoying being urinated on and consuming faeces.

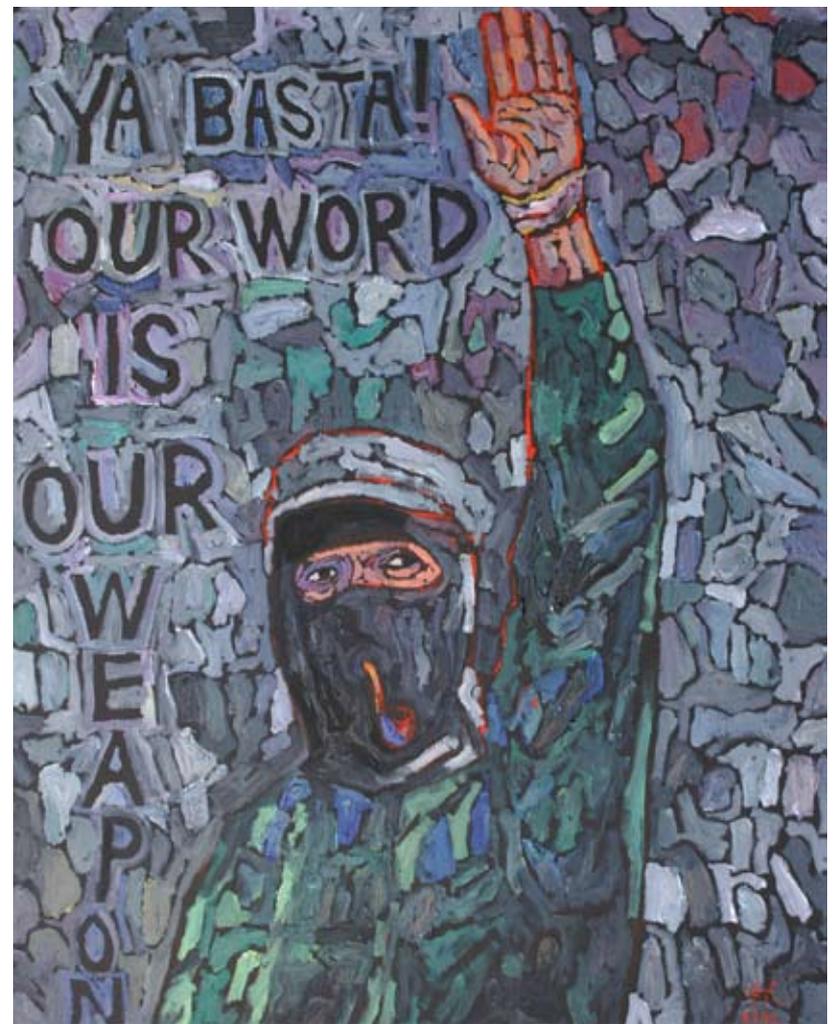
In light of the recent scandals that have signified the demise of corporate America, the painting might also be considered as a Last Supper. The crude narrative is reminiscent to the paintings of Khmer artist Vann Nath, who is best recognised for his harrowing depictions of the infamous S-21 prison camp in Phnom Penh. For Vasan, the tale is symptomatic of a system in terminal decline, in which a person is incapable of genuine emotion, having to use their wealth for gratification.



▲ **All for Everyone**, 2009
Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm

Offering a more socialist alternate to capitalism's flawed fundamentals, Vasan has always been sympathetic to those who have the courage to flout the ideological bullying of the economic powerhouses of the United States and Europe. Portrayed as heroic in the painting *All for Everyone* (2009), he views Venezuela's left wing leader Hugo Chavez as a particular champion of the downtrodden, and as a leader trying to implement a more equal and socially beneficial system of governance.

Staying within Latin America, in *Ya Basta!* (2009), Vasan emblazons his painting with the Spanish phrase "Enough is Enough," which has become a rallying cry for differing groups of radical dissenters. Here



▲ **Ya Basta!**, 2009
Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm

he again champions anti-capitalist revolution with a depiction of the balaclava wearing Mexican rebel leader Marcos, who heads the indigenous Zapatista Army, or EZLN.

Emphatic to a more Marxist ideology built around small independent communities existing on a system of barter, Vasan believes that respect or a secularised "enlightenment" can be achieved through doing benevolent deeds for one another. He pushes the Buddhist symbolism further by applauding the anonymity of the Latin rebels, which he feels is a denial of the self for the greater good of the cause, rather than being a security measure to avoid detection.

Their anonymity also stands in marked contrast to the self promoting cult of political celebrity that Thailand is witnessing through the media antics of deposed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Reflecting Vasan's bi-partisan view of the world, Thailand's recent factious domestic political landscape is also polarized into two opposing groups of protestation. These have been delineated according to the colour coding of yellow for the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the red of the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD).

As with Vasan's summations of capitalists as the evil wrongdoers and the lowly people as the undeserving victims, the red and yellow divisions have been drawn along similar lines, with the yellows of the PAD supposedly representing those championing democracy, while the UDD reds are portrayed as capitalist leaning supporters of Thaksin.

Yet the yin-yang nature of good versus evil is not so transparent here. Vasan has long been a denouncer of the military, whether self-serving local generals or more international forces led by the rank of America and Britain. Indeed in 2003 he travelled to Baghdad to support the Iraqi people in the build up to the war, which has subsequently been denounced as a contrived conflict designed to prop up American military spending.

Donning his capitalist dogs in camouflage suits, Vasan levels that the arms trade is a means of control and suppression not protection. However, the position of the Thai army is deeply and inextricably woven into the fabric of Thai political system and their 2006 coup to oust Thaksin was widely lauded on the domestic front. Yet today, with the political impasse still clouding daily governance and the military never far from the melee, one could also challenge that it is not only capitalism that is dying, but for Thailand it is also democracy that is in real peril.

Having largely maintained the same castigations towards society for almost three decades, one could suppose that Vasan might have succumbed to the futility of his quest. But claiming to be a voice for the voiceless, Vasan believes that his fellow Thais have only gotten more rapacious during this time and that they are obliviously "dancing in hell". In true Vasan provocation, he challenges that if he cannot vent his frustrations visually, then he will have to resort to detonating a bomb to make his statement.



Stimulate the Economy, 2009 | Oil and mixed media on canvas | 150 x 200 cm

CHRONOLOGY



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

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 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

- 2009 *Bangkok 226* at Bangkok Metropolitan Art Centre - 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 - Hiraokata 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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