

Steven Pettifor by Martin Collins

Martin Collins on Steven Pettifor

Steven Pettifor is an art writer for international and Thai publications, a curator, an incubator and developer of Thai youth talent who has collaborated with almost all the major galleries in Bangkok. He is also an exhibiting artist, the author of the first serious contemporary view of Thai art, (Flavours 2004) and teacher of art and art history.

If Bangkok can be described, albeit superficially, as a kind of vacuum for transients where some lose themselves in the void and fall into a black hole of their own invention while others spread their wings to find opportunities and outlets they might not find at home, then Steven Pettifor is a clear example of the latter. Over the past 10 years, his involvement has spread a web of influence and enrichment throughout the Bangkok arts scene.

This is no mean feat. From personal experience, comparing the art worlds of London, Barcelona and New York, what strikes me is that 'blood is always thicker than talent,' meaning family and class connections, and correct 'channels' are upheld. For example, following the 90's success of Damien Hirst and other graduates of London's Goldsmith's College was like watching an elitist 'Kids from Fame' movie, where freshmen were asked "So you wanna be a star, huh?" Like Lee Marvin's 'Dirty Dozen' tough guy Sergeant to his prison fodder platoon, "So you wanna be a Marine, huh?"

According to my still incredulous (or traumatized) first hand witnessing of Goldsmith 'old boys' 20 years on, 'The Marines' were henceforth taught only self-publicity 'stunts' and agit prop 'strategies' and marketing in



order to launch themselves.

Expression or content was immaterial to getting 'noticed' for infantile behavior - rather in the way young children soil themselves in fury at a perceived lack of attention from multi-tasking parents.

'Irony' was the key word. Irony meaning a wonderful opportunity for generally uneducated artists to appear cool and wise by referring to some issue, and appear 'knowing,' but relieved of actually 'meaning it.' Knowing the facts took second place, as did articulating coherent opinions on issues they'd been told could put the nipples of the 'Third Reich' of English society in a vice by their Jaguar driving Post-Marxist tutors who had 'de-constructed' a theory in which smearing

oneself in excrement was (pungently) challenging bourgeois values!

The far higher proliferation of 'double-barrel' surnames in the critical and gallery world of the UK is also a class indicator, of exclusive finishing schools for horsey 'Jemimas' with top-notch dentists.

Expatriate artists are even worse off than their socially excluded brethren back home. Unable to get funding from either their home countries or their new country of residence, regardless of ability, when huge sums are spent bringing in the darlings of the Arts Council's of other countries; an opportunity for ambassadors to endow themselves with flowers, ribbons and thrilling speeches.

On top of this, expat artists are patronized somewhat as 'weekend' artists from the fact they are obliged to have a day job, whereas 'authentic artists' are those who are fully subsidized by their wealthy parents, the darlings of uneven arts sponsorship. Artists of this ilk frequently produce less work, which is often vapid due to the cocoon of wealth and indifference to issues. Privilege and security tends to artistically castrate the rich, unless some other trauma, like childhood abuse or a sexual pathology becomes a crutch to keep them on the straight and narrow creatively. Before I start enjoying or believing this socialist sounding rant I concede this is not al-



Dynastic portrait - incilius periglenes

ways the case. As I said before - I advocate 'Aristocracy for All the People' - so we all get to be rich kids.

Without indulging in Marxist resentments or suggesting the great unwashed should have their tastes gratified or that artists needs must debase their talent to the X-factor of popular prejudice, the fact remains that there is a great divide in the attitude of artists from different sides of the tracks. The fact that works so disparate can be shown in the same space or even the same show conceals the chasm separating objects loosely called art, but spawned from far flung planets in galaxies unknown to each other.

In art criticism 'formalism' and late modernism, by excluding all social, sexual or political/ identity issues for 'pure form' tends naturally to make rich people happier about being rich. Likewise, too much social, sexual and political content tends to make Jemimas think they are Che Guevaras, or worse still; 'Joans of Arc' suffering patriarchy at full volume, and getting most of the arts funding, instead of the pyre.

This is a fascinating field of enquiry and readers are urged to hold this in mind while considering Steven Pettifor. I wish to enlighten TTO readers of Steven's activities starting in the living, breathing present and then work back until we run out of space.

Steve speaks with the unmistakable accent of the Dickens/ Oliver Twist variety, which sounds charming, not coarse. He himself is from South London - he would say 'Sarff Landun'.

Whereas the voice of a hi-so gallery Jemima whiffs of rosettes at pony 'gymkhanas' and fox-hunts, Steve's voice seems steeped in the common-sense skepticism of an island population fantastically resistant to ideology or fanaticism of any sort.

To illustrate the point look at the death of Oliver Cromwell - since precisely 1653, when England was briefly a theocracy under Cromwell's 'Rule of Saints' which banned beer, fighting and dancing - precisely what drunken nations do best as sport and entertainment. So when he

died they got drunk, dug him up and removed his silly head in gratitude. ing the sublime and eternal in visual form.

If, however, you the writer don't like the turd they consider a new paradigm in art practice, you can expect a social minefield ahead, and therefore critics and art journalists require acute acting skills. St. Chameleon is the patron saint to whom reviewers and critics pray for guidance while fleeing the wheedling plague of artist's power impulses in the piranha pools of ego. Consider a subculture audience, who meet only and exclusively to bitch. To bitch on art and each other blamelessly is their only activity and purpose - their raison d'être.

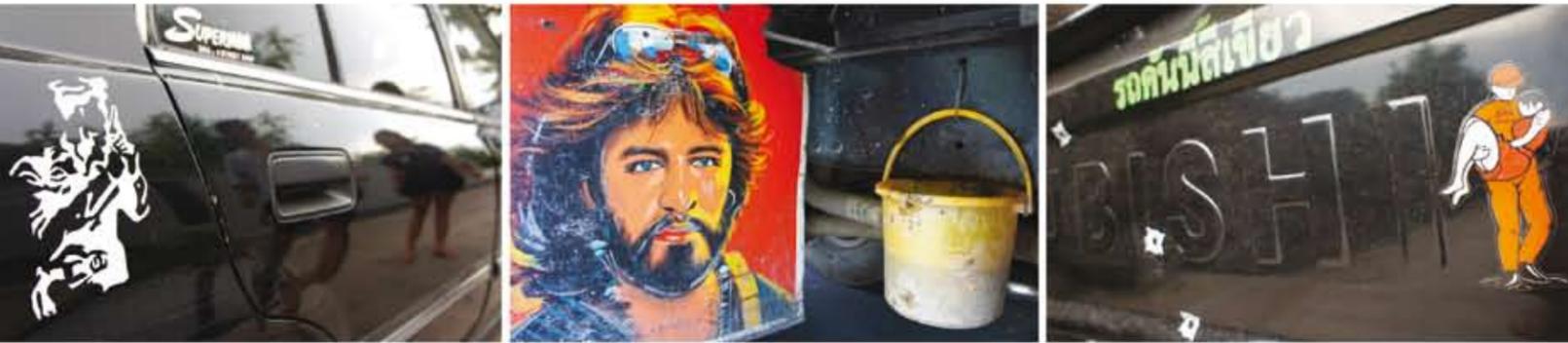
In New York, though a nobody, I began to review for a NY arts magazine, and was often embarrassed and nauseous in turns, to find artists would be excited about 'the critic' coming to their shows, making me

In art criticism this is not so easy or straight forward as, say, in sports journalism. Arts journalism is a profession in which most participants are self confessed geniuses. Naturally, these creative Titans expect a writer to address and value their immense contributions to culture and history as reflected in their mighty works, which to their minds seem touch-

ing the sublime and eternal in visual form.



Mechanics of Slumber



feel inadequate to satisfy what they had dreamed I would be. Their desperation to be recognized was palpable: giving rise to pathetic scenes. Amongst the shame were moments of compassion, leading to more embarrassment.

I tried to be positive about the good and ignore the rest. Steve, likewise is not known for rapier attacks on fellow artists or critics, but solid support for those artists and ideas who pass his criteria, or can fit his busy schedule.

This does not please some egos, and can place pressure on friendships, loyalties, and affections, reigned against one's own real thoughts, time and ambition.

Unlike many art-writers he prefers a plain style addressed to the general, non-specialist reader that has my full sympathy. A common ruse by art academics is to invent a fancy vocabulary to replace common words and ideas, and then perform grammatical acrobatics with them – a kind of 'Spaghetti Art Western' dropped into an impenetrable block of 'text' perhaps titled 'A Fist Full of Hyphens.' A simple ploy to make it appear they are saying original things about the world when they are simply shuffling inverted cups devoid of peas.

Usually, no-one is the wiser until the statement is translated back into plain speech where its empty absurdity is immediately obvious to even young children - and yes, I have been rebuked by young children when applying some of these concepts in simplified forms to toys, pets or facts, and told not to be silly.

Currently, at Ardel's DOB gallery Steve has a new work, fresh from his creative mill consisting of a staggered triptych combining his carefully selected theme-based photo-groups. This complex piece, printed on silver ground creating a mysterious, non-linear narrative of a mystery journey and the poetics of perceiving the physical and cultural realities, reflections and self appraisals of his own impressions and understanding from nearly two decades of experience in Thailand.

His works are double, or triple-edged in that he casts his nets for insights and subtle revelations of Thai people looking inwards, in moments of solitude. He creates a shifting multiplicity of visual clues revealing Pettifor not as outsider looking in, but Thai connoisseur looking out with the affection and contempt bred through extreme familiarity.

He blurs classical distinctions of 'cultural difference' or 'other' by using raw materials and processes that are Thai and in many senses Thai style. His images bear none of the baggage of photojournalism and they do not depend on classical or modernist canons of beauty, colour or abstract form. Instead they bear testimony to Steven's own relationship with his surrogate culture and its physical and subjective manifestations, but from the inside-out in an intimate examination of how Thais view themselves in fact or fantasy.

Nonetheless, the selection and choices and the way the photos work off each other is beautiful, compel-



ling, and other-worldly. By 'other-worldly' I do not mean they suggest another reality, merely that Steven's choices, which I admire, would never have been taken by me.

Steven's mind works differently, and from the same contact sheet I think we would rarely pick the same photo. Steve is the other world, an alien intelligence, a culture, value system, weighing machine. I find these differences of vision and focus thrilling when one respects the qualities and processes and thought of contemporary artists, far removed from your own: something almost unthinkable 60 years ago.

On his work *The Road* Stephen Pettifor says, "After nearly two decades in Thailand and having watched the Kingdom become more politicized and socially malcontent in recent years, my enthusiasm for the country has begun to cloud. I use the analogy of locality and journey to express estrangement and doubt. In a broader sense, the blurred travelogue is symbolic of a society lost."

Depending on how you approach 'The Road' from its various potential entry points, you get new 'sets' of emotions, silences, myster-

ies and/or clues. One finds new criteria for the missing information that sooner or later, whichever path way you take in the journey blocks your way. To continue the story or thread you need more information, specifics. That in itself is not a problem...to desire more dramatic information, a sound, smell or a snatch of conversation. It is a good thing to feel hunger, to know more...perhaps only one more photo or triple arrangement would reveal the full drama? Show me!

These images have a forensic relation to Steven's felt drama, as the tail of a meteorite might show a trajectory, yet in the mysterious visual world, what it means to be or feel 'meteoric' is the whole game, unlike the physicists unashamedly fascinated with trajectories yet incapable of communicating experience'

Artists should not be condemned for drawing fascination on how our fellow meteorites are feeling, and on means to express feelings of various sorts in the hope of a repeatable, testable and proven physics of feeling and expression.



Steve's piece can be viewed at **DOB Gallery Hua Lomphong** throughout Sept 2010.

DOB Building 4F, 318 rama4 Rd., Mahapreutharam, Bangrak, Bangkok 10500
Tel. 0-2237-5592-4,
085-482-3566
Website : www.dobthailand.com