

Amulets and the art of
worshipping

ART P.5

ART REVIEW ■ PATTARA DANUTRA

Holier than thou

Prateep Suthathongthai's new exhibition probes the state of religion in Thailand

Thailand calls itself a Buddhist country, but we should be regarded as a land of ironies as well. Occasionally, we hear news about public anger against a foreign commercial that juxtaposes the image of the Lord Buddha with some improper objects, like shoes, or with half-naked women. Meanwhile, we see a large number of collectors appreciating Buddhist amulets on sale along Bangkok's dirty footpaths.

Of course, no one ever protests against this "inappropriateness". Ironically as well as interestingly, images and figures of the Lord Buddha are popular subjects among many local artists. The supreme icon of worship intrigues them, and they employ it as a motif in many forms — some present it in a reverent manner, others do not.

"Holy-Production", Prateep Suthathongthai's current exhibition at 100 Tonson Gallery, is another case that employs objects regarded as sacred as a platform for thoughtful discourse. Faith marketing,

religious commercialisation and the culture of reproduction are major themes in Prateep's new works, conveyed through the media of printing techniques.

In the show, the lecturer from Mahasarakham University presents five two-dimensional works made using the technique of Lambda printing. Four of them are photomontages, whose titles share the word "commodity" as their prefix. From a distance, all of them look like blurry, non-figurative images. On closer examination, each of them is an assemblage of many undersized images showing a similar pattern.

Phra Buddha Chinnaraj, Gagie and Phra Pidta — these titles are preceded by the prefix "commodity" — depict a large collage of images of sacred Buddhist figures or amulets. While the first surveys those of Lord Buddha with a refined profile, the other two gather those of famous monks in popular postures. All share the element of earth tone pixels with some gold interspersed, and each pixel represents a figure. With such a

great number of visual subjects documented, viewing this show can be a pleasant excursion through the variation of several sculptural styles.

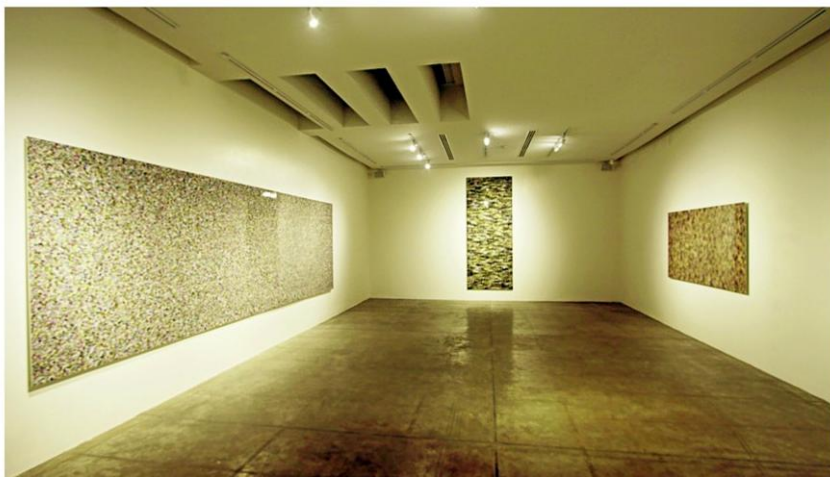
The largest, and the highlight, is *Locket*: a huge photomontage panel made up of countless small images of photographic lockets of many monks and some dignitaries, made from metal, plastic or synthetic materials. Anyone who can recognise the faces on these items must be an expert or avid collector of this religious craft. What stands out is an image that does not belong to any sacred or revered icon, but that of a tragic artist: it is, quite astonishingly, Vincent van Gogh.

The Dutch painter's bust is presented as an amulet configuration, entitled *Medallion Of Vincent*. His image is canonised not only in the two-dimensional work, but also in a project of miniature sculptures. A thousand metal embossed amulets with Van Gogh's image are distributed to each exhibition visitor for free — probably for art worship.

Inserting this image in the middle of other spiritual figures may stir a reaction from orthodox Buddhists.

The exhibition's Thai title, "Chorb Ngern Sod" (meaning "Like Cash") bears another satirical significance. All three Thai words come from the initials of a trio of highly revered monks, whose "blessed" amulets and images are in great demand among worshippers. The string of their initials form a new word — the "like cash" mnemonic — and seem to add extra benediction.

Prateep's intention is to question the survival of true religion under the mainstream, mundane religious industry. He seems to want to ask us whether the more we reproduce such amulets and figures, the less we'll be able to access the wisdom that the Lord Buddha bequeathed us over 2,500 years ago.



An exhibition view of 'Holy-Production' at 100 Tonson.



A photomontage of religious amulets in the 'Commodity' series.

Four years ago, Prateep displayed his photomontage exhibition under the title "Take/Turn" at this same venue.

In comparison to the current show, the previous prints engaged more technical sophistication (four of them are re-exhibited at the room next to the main hall). However, those in "Holy-Production" are distinctive for the patience and minute dedication required in the making of them. In terms of aesthetics, the current project looks somewhat simple; however, it required considerable research and documentation to collect a massive number of images of holy items to make up the assemblages.

Prateep's working process is appealing. He focuses on one particular technique, and renders it in various visual interpretations.

With the gimmick of repetitiveness, the artist's achievement more or less follows in Andy Warhol's footsteps. Interestingly, both artists exploit popular icons



A Vincent van Gogh amulet.

through a medium that can be mass-reproduced, like printing.

Moreover, to arrange the repeated patterns in all four prints seamlessly requires very meticulous labour, and all works are executed neatly enough. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of technology, Prateep can't deliver the mural-scale *Locket* piece in a single long sheet. It still needs three large sheets joined together. As a result, some minor overlaps from the joining are visible. That's a minor quibble though, and the show has a sort of eerie feeling and also poses immediate questions about the state of religion in this Buddhist nation.

'Holy-Production' runs until April 7.

100 Tonson Gallery is located at Soi Tonson, Phloenchit Road, and is open Thursday-Sunday, from 11am-7pm. Call 02-684-1527 or go to www.facebook.com/100TonsonGallery for more details.