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An Emerging Thai Artist Explores Identity and Buddhism in a Striking Series of Self-Portraits

ARTSY

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Kamolpan Chotvichai
Tension, 2015
Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Kamolpan Chotvichai's striking new works blur the line between photograph and sculpture. The Thai artist works with images of her own body, cutting and draping the paper or canvas to create a unique style of self-portraiture that's both beautiful and disturbing. Coinciding with her solo show "Fragility of the Self" at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York, we talked with Chotvichai about her artistic process, gender roles in Thailand, and how the Buddhist principle of "sunyata," or "emptiness," guides her practice.



Kamolpan Chotvichai
Karma (deed), 2015
Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Artsy: You've said your work challenges "the formal limitations of paper and canvas." What exactly are these limitations, in your view?

Kamolpan Chotvichai: For me, paper and canvas are the usual materials, what we usually draw and paint on. They are the most common medium. They're two-dimensional; they're flat images that we hang on the wall. The process of my work—cutting the paper, reconstructing the two-dimensional plane, reshaping the images—pushes the work to a point that formal art practices usually do not. I have to actually destruct the material to create my work.



Image courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Artsy: You are your own subject. What can you achieve through this medium that's different than what you could do with traditional portraiture by, say, employing a model?

KC: I wanted to explore my own self—so my subject can't be anyone else. People always place importance on their own selves, and so do I. In Buddhism, everything is emptiness. Seeing myself as “emptiness” involves working with images of myself, of no one else but me. I wanted to become an observer of my own self.

The core Buddhist principle is that everything is emptiness, including us, as human beings. The self is formations and perceptions. I focus on my hands while cutting the images of my body, to attain the state of void of thoughts. It's like a form of meditation.



Kamolpan Chotvichai
Atta (self), 2015
Sundaram Tagore Gallery



Kamolpan Chotvichai
Restlessness, 2015
Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Artsy: In the political and social climate of New York, where your new exhibition is being shown, gender and identity are highly charged topics. Can you comment on the climate in your native Thailand and why you've chosen to explore these themes in your work?

KC: While I aimed to convey Buddhist principles, most people in Bangkok are already familiar with these ideas. Buddhism is at the very core of our culture.

And yet Buddhism in my country is full of prohibitions, many of them dictated by gender. Growing up in my culture, becoming a woman involves strict rules and ideas, so I wanted to explore the idea of emptiness through the lens of identity and gender.

—Bridget Gleeson

"Kamolpan Chotvichai: Fragility of the Self" is on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, May 4–Jun. 4, 2016.

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