**Lawan Upa-In**  (12 January 1935 -)

Lawan Upa-In is a female Thai artist renowned for her work in portraiture. Her artistic mentor was the so-called ‘father’ of Thai modern art, Professor Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci). In her early twenties, Lawan studied at Silpakorn University in the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts. She graduated as the first female student to be granted a Bachelor of Arts in painting and became well known as a female artist in an entirely male dominated field at the time. Lawan is an artist who over her vast career has mastered the art of capturing the nuances of the human character in oil paint on canvas. Lawan is a descendent of the Thai monarchy and initial commissions from the Thai royal family soon helped to develop her reputation as an artist. Her style reflects the Western art tradition of her mentor Professor Silpa Bhirasri Her portraits have some attributes of photo-realism, however the artist aims to capture the ‘heart’ of the subject, an attribute the she believes a photograph cannot capture. Some of her works, however, divert from this style to include narrative elements that reflect political turmoil in Thailand.



Lawan Upa-In, *Why?,* 1993, oil on canvas, 120.5 x 101 cm, collection of the artist. <http://rama9art.org/lawan/index.html>

One of Lawan’s most remarkable works dealing with political turmoil is *Why?*. The painting depicts her feelings in reference to the massacre of students that she experienced during conflicts in October 1976. A rose-cradled portrait drips blood from its thorn-less, bloody stem. The fractured landscape that surrounds the illuminated bloom is tragic and macabre, referencing photographs from the violent event. A shadowed Buddha stands in watch of fallen bodies and armed military. Lawan had been accused of being a right-wing tyrant in 1973 when she took a commission to paint the portrait of Thanom Kittikachorn, a military leader. The artist firmly denied these accusations, and those made against her in 1976 when she was accused again in a political climate where the crime of *lèse-majesté* could involve politically motivated art. The incident in 1976 was triggered by a performance art piece at Thammasat University the involved a staged fictitious hanging, and was thought to be the cause of the violent massacre of students days later. The artists reflection on these times some years later in the work *Why?* portrays her sorrow for the future generations and her country’s political difficulties.

Lawan began teaching at Silpakorn prior to graduation and it was only in 2012 at the age of seventy-six that she retired from teaching due to poor health. For over forty years Lawan has exhibited extensively in Thailand, winning numerous prestigious national art prizes and holding a number of retrospective solo exhibitions. Recently she has held retrospectives of her work at Silpakorn University's Art Centre and The Queens Gallery in Bangkok.

**References and further reading**

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