**Hunter Panther Deerfield**: I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me. I’ve read a number of your interviews, and some of what came up in other interviews I wanted to ask you more about, and other more well-known subjects, like your Pink Man series, I didn’t want to ask you about, because you can find that information elsewhere. So, my first question is: you were one of the selected artists to show at Thailand's first Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. What was that experience like?

**Manit Sriwanichpoom**: I think the Biennale itself is quite interesting. You can see a lot of the world there. Because it's one of the most important international art expos, it’s good to see artwork from many corners of the world, which is not so easy to see otherwise. Every pavilion from each country represents their best artists, so it’s interesting to see what’s going on. But like art festivals everywhere, it has a hierarchy. If you come from a bigger country you can probably have the best pavilion because you have the budget to help you, or you build your own pavilion, or rent from the Italian government. But if you come from a poor country, you may have to rent a warehouse to help insert yourself in order to be seen. It's a big festival, so if you're from Germany, or even if you're from Australia, you have your own pavilion. All the European countries have their own pavilions.

**HPD**: Did Thailand have its own building?

**MS**: No, what we had to do is because we didn’t have enough budget to rent a proper pavilion, we had to build a pavilion ourselves. Like a makeshift pavilion, a shelter. It's more like guerrilla-style, you just go there and set up your tent, and just show your artwork. We don't have the budget, that was the first time we went there, so everything we have to build it. And it's a knock down structure with vinyl sheets to cover our artworks. But I think for me it's cool. I didn't expect us to have a fancy pavilion or anything. Even today, we can't afford a pavilion, it's too expensive. You see Japan, or even Korea, let's say the big countries are able to afford. I don't know whether China has its own pavilion yet…

**HPD**: Do you remember any particular moments walking around, or seeing any artists that you were interested in at Venice?

**MS**: I think it's really nice to see friends from other countries. Because in art circles we get to meet people when we go to festivals. You are kind of networking, as well, not just showing your art. Networking with other curators or galleries, so besides just seeing good art it's an opportunity for artists to do networking.

**HPD**: My next question is that I want to ask about the role of humor in your work. With the Pink Men series, and other work as well, there's a dark irony. I’m wondering where your sense of humor is coming from. How did you develop your sense of humor?

**MS**: I think Thailand likes the term happiness [it’s often called “The Land of Smiles”]. People like to live in happy moments, they don't like being stressed or having unpleasant feelings. To be able to live your life happily, you need to have a sense of humor. People try to relax and make fun of everything. When you talk to people, they are always making fun of each other, amongst their peers, and even making fun of people in power. And when you look at art, especially in folk art — not in the official art, but in the folk art — you know they all make fun of everything. That's how people can make their day pass, because they can feel that, okay, their life is not horrible. I feel this sense of humor is helping everyone to survive and get through their day-to-day.

**HPD**: So, it's not some extra, or unnecessary thing, but vital to life and death.

**MS**: Yes. You see, probably all of Southeast Asia people live like that. You go to the Philippines, or Indonesia, they know how to make fun of people. And when you look at the folk art, you can see they make fun of and challenge the rulers. And if you go back to the stories and folktales, you realize that they make fun of a lot of things. When you read, or when you listen to music, even Luk Thung, country music, also make fun of the ‘power that be.’ If you are poor, you make fun of the rich people. Or, you make fun of yourself, and when you make fun of yourself, you feel okay. Because that is maybe part of human nature. And also, it goes along well with Buddhism, which says you don't take your life too seriously.

**HPD**: You made a film, “Shakespeare Must Die,” which was seen as critical of the government, and censored here in Thailand. And then you made a film *about* the film called “Censor Must Die” that was *allowed* to be shown here. Can you tell me a little bit about how that happened?

**MS**: I think it's simple. Since we sued the censorship board already, with one case in the court, maybe when we submitted Censor Must Die, they didn’t want another case [laughs]. They just found another way to let it go, because they know that we will never give up, and we will never give in. We’ll never surrender, and so we fight. Also, it’s not a fun thing for anyone to have it be court, even if you are right or wrong, so that is one of the reasons that they didn’t want another case. So, then they try to find a way to pass it by. Since the film is produced from real event, this follows a category that is exempt from censorship. When they gave us this reason, this reason might be cited by us now in the future. We push the censorship line into their territory, because it's never been this case before. Already, so many documentaries had been submitted, produced like ours from real events, and had been censored. But this is one of the cases which now, step by step, we can push back into the censor’s territory.

**HPD**: So, it is a precedent that you can use now on other films. That's great. I read somewhere that there was a Hollywood film called “The Beach” that was changing the landscape of a bay called Maya Bay, and that you fought back over this. Can you tell me a bit more about what was happening? Why were they changing the local landscape?

**MS**: When The Beach production came to Thailand, they looked for a location to fit their perception of a tropical beach. That means a tropical beach must have coconut trees, which is ridiculous, because if you travel to the south, to the islands, they don't look like that. But they wanted to plant coconut trees anyway, for the production value. So, they chose Maya Bay, and went to the authorities to get permits. And we know that they broke the law, because in the law it protects the landscape, no altering is allowed on those pristine islands. But because they have a lot of money, they said they “donated” the money to the authorities, and they said they created jobs for local people. Anyway, they bypassed the law, and we disagreed and so we fought that, and it became a campaign. The situation became nasty because 21st Century Fox didn't want to step back, and we even told them that they should use CG [Computer Graphics]. If they can make Space Odyssey, if they can make Star Wars, what is the difficulty in making a fake beach? But the producer said that it was too expensive for them. That means they can't pay for the CG, but they can pay to destroy our nature for their own “tropical” scene. So, you can see how a big company with a lot of money can destroy other countries.

We even took this to the US Embassy, trying to complain about how an American company was destroying this, and even bribed the local government to get their business done. You have to have the law. This law is implemented everywhere. But they had a lot of money, and they had PR. And we were just normal people. We didn’t have lobbyists. We don't have a PR Company working for us. So, who do you think is going to win? So, after that, they could do whatever they wanted. They shot the film; they finished the film. But because what happened to them… what happened to Leonardo DiCaprio, and the film’s director, [Danny Boyle] this case stuck in their minds. DiCaprio has tried to fix this, to donate, to set up Green World Rising, and to whitewash what he did to our country, to the nature. But by then the case had passed by for twenty years. And now the courts say that 21st Century Fox has to pay restoration for the beach. But after twenty year. Forget it. I mean, how will justice prevail after twenty years? I mean belated justice is an injustice in itself.

That's what happened, but we became villains because we obstructed the film. They called us an NGO, but we are not an NGO, we are just artists. But because we lose, they point to us and say that we just wanted to be known, because of a celebrity like DiCaprio. But as for me, I don't care who the fuck he is. He can make millions in the US, it doesn't matter, I have nothing to do with that. But then, let's say this “moral consciousness” stuck in these people’s minds even today. And when you ask the question about what happened during those days, they are going to freak out saying, “I did everything right, above the law, etc, etc.” They’re so defensive. But already the damage is done. What can they do? I already said that they could save the nature. They didn’t have to do it the way they did. They could just go there and shoot. Because I am a filmmaker, I know how to do that. You shoot something there, and the rest you do with CG, computer graphics.

**HPD**: How did you find out about this incident at all?

**MS**: They did the PR for the film, and we realized that this was not just a simple thing. And Ing K [Manit’s partner] used to be a beach bum over there. She used to sleep on the beach. It’s so beautiful there.

**HPD**: Can you tell me about social activism in your work? And also, how that relates to your photojournalism.

**MS**: I used to do photojournalism, but then I realized that when you just report, it's not enough. You have to take action. And so, then I decided, instead of just running after the story, it's better to create the story. So, I changed the strategy. If you wanted to stop something that might happen, because the government policy is wrong, then you have to do something. You have to make people aware. To make a dialogue. This is the way; to try to make people concerned with what's going on, and to understand the situation.

**HPD**: Are there particular artists who are or activists or people that you are inspired by or particularly like?

**MS**: I think I’m inspired by the art, for instance, of Barbara Kruger. I think she is very strong. And even the Guerrilla Girls. I like artists from the 1970s, when they did all the the movements. Also, people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and even Aung San Suu Kyi. The way these people fight is very inspiring.

**HPD**: A question that Hans-Ulrich Obrist always asks, that I read in a book of interviews that he did, is a question that I now want to ask you. What is an unrealized project that you have? Something that you would like to do but haven't done yet.

**MS**: It’s too big for me, but a photography museum. With a priority on local knowledge. Understand local photography first, because international work you can find on the internet. But this would work on saving local knowledge, local archives. That is the most important, because this stuff is gone every day.

**HPD**: A really striking feature of Bangkok's developing urban landscape is the emergence of all these shopping malls, springing up all over the place. How do you feel about this?

**MS**: I just came back from a public hearing from the city planning group, and my concern is that in the new group they are drafting, Bangkok is still centralized. So, that's what I voice to the planner. This is not the good idea, because we talk about decentralization, not just only about political power, but also economic power. We have to spread it out. We have to distribute this wealth and economy to the other cities. Otherwise, Bangkok is going to have more and more problems. I gave them the example of old cities like Paris, or even New York, they stop growing. Also, we don’t know in a twenty-year time what the economy will be like. Since its the digital era, many jobs and many businesses that we have today might disappear, and our lifestyle might be rapidly changed. So, I'm not sure the draft their planning is relevant, also my concern about decentralization is still an issue.

**HPD**: And shopping malls are for you an example of centralization?

**MS**: Yes, because of the amount of consumption by city people. It’s scary. I think this has to be a question for everyone, for every family, for every country, about how much we consume every day. Do you really need that much? Things that you never use. Why do you have them? People never have that question themselves. We have to make people aware of this. Capitalism might not be growing without consumerism. Consumerism is the mechanism that makes capitalism grow. So, if you push people to consume less, it means that capitalism grows slowly. But why do you need it to go fast? Like so many young people want to be billionaires in a few years. Why? What's the good of that? We can name so many billionaires, but what have they done for the world? They just have money, that's all. But when you look through civilization, what have created? Florence without the Medicis wouldn't be the Florence today. But what that means is that if you have money, the question becomes how you are going to use it. That’s the question for Thailand. We have lots of millionaires and billionaires, but what have they done for the country? They own businesses, okay, they create jobs and so on, but what else do they do?

**HPD**: Leo Tolstoy said that the way to get people to get along is to ask them what they love, and what they hate. Because often we love and hate similar things. So, I just want to ask you, not about art, but just about yourself: what do you love and what you hate?

**MS**: [laughs] First thing I have to love is humans. I have to love animals. I have to love our planet. Because if you don't have love you will destroy everything. I talk about this in a broad meaning. When I think about loving a *particular* thing, that means I have a bias, because then I hate other things. We care about the planet, and we don't want to destroy it. And how are we going to accomplish that? We love animals and so we care about animals, even though they don’t belong to us. Anywhere in this world. When you learn about something happening to an animal, you have feelings. So, when you say love to the human, regardless of race, no matter if you're white, or black, or yellow, or short, or tall, that’s what I care most about.

**HPD**: And what do you hate?

**MS**: I hate people who have no love.

[laughs]

**MS**: Because no love kills everything. People kill each other today because they have no love. Why do you kill the other person? Because you are worried the other person is going to steal something from you? Why are white supremacists worried about black people? Because they worry that the black people are going to steal something from them. Because they hate them, then they can be able to kill them. We bomb other people because we are worried that they are going to do something to us. Because we don't have much love. We don't have love anymore. It’s very simple. And I hate people who have no love. That's the problem, and I try to love them, but I'm not sure that I can.

**HPD**: Is there anything final that you'd like to say?

**MS**: I think everyone can feel that our world today is very hard to live in. Conflict is everywhere. The weather in Bangkok is hotter than ever before. So, I'm worried we won't be able to find solutions to save our planet fast enough. When we talk about saving the planet, it’s not just about humans, but saving the whole planet. And I don't think we have that consensus, that strong will. So, when you talk about the G20, they still are talking about the carbon tax and that is all. About who is going to gain and who is going to lose. And no issue at all about how we are going to save the world. Everyone just does their business, no matter. When everything is gone, I don't know how they are going to enjoy life. That is the problem.

**HPD**: Well thank you so much for your thoughts, and your openness, and your honesty.