

ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK

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TYLER ROLLINS

by maura reilly

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The Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook is perhaps best known for her video documentation of performances in which she chants, sings and reads to cadavers in a hospital morgue. Since 2008, however, she has been engaged with an entirely different subject: the intercultural translatability of artworks and the demystification of Western art. Her first solo exhibition in New York showcased four videos and several related digital prints.

"Two Planets" (2008–09) is a series of subtitled video vignettes in which large-scale reproductions of iconic 19th-century Western paintings are placed in front of Thai villagers. Seated on the ground with their backs to the camera, the country folk try to make sense of the images, though they frequently digress, their interpretations transforming quickly into local gossip and bawdy jokes.

Confronted with Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863), the viewers say that the central female figure, sitting naked outdoors with two clothed men, must be a "floozy"; they discuss her "saggy breasts" and striking face, which resembles "fresh chicken droppings, so white and soft," and compare the male sitters to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

In analyzing Millet's *Gleaners* (1857), the villagers observe that the three women "take care of their feet better than their faces," and also wonder where their husbands are. Their sincerity and lack of pretension offer an implicit challenge to the art-informed, revealing that the planet is indeed split in two, as the series title implies, or at least into contrasting pairs—urban/rural, rich/poor,

academic/philistine, high/low.

In one work from Rasdjarmrearnsook's more recent video series, "Village and Elsewhere" (2011), an art handler shuffles a giant reproduction of Jeff Koons's *Wolfman* (1991)—a photographic image showing Koons having sex with his then wife Cicciolina—through two markets in Thailand. Onlookers giggle, shop owners exclaim and at one point someone covers the image with a sheet (despite the fact that Rasdjarmrearnsook had already hidden Koons's testicles with a bright green fig leaf).

Another video from this series was, by far, the show's most conceptually complex work. In it, a bald Buddhist monk in a traditional robe teaches an "art history" lesson to an audience of adults, young children and dogs—all of whom sit before reproductions of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (ca. 1612) and an untitled Koons work (1988). The latter shows the artist surrounded by two scantily clad women, one of them touching a bizarre, seemingly braying animal's head that faces outward from Koons's groin.

In an effort to explain what are clearly befuddling images for him, the monk turns for inspiration to the Five Precepts of Dharma, which disallow murder and sexual promiscuity—both visible in the images. Once again, the transcultural encounter upends local wisdom as well as sanctioned Western art historical meanings, suggesting that our global times require not singular interpretations but rather multiple, context-dependent views.

Photo: Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: Two Planets: Manet's Luncheon on the Grass and the Thai Villagers, 2008, video, 18 minutes; at Tyler Rollins.

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