

The many colours of Yellow

A new exhibition at the Concrete House may make some people colour blind. But it will definitely make them think.
Chanyaporn Chanjaraen reports.



Above: Soontorn Meesri in his installation-performance "Yel-hi-low".

THIS year Bangkok has seen many weird art exhibitions. Earlier at the National Gallery a group of AIDS patients appeared naked at an exhibition opening which Buddhist monks presided over as a part of the performance. Next at the Silom Art Space Gallery, a hen was sacrificed, also as part of an opening performance. Then the Art Forum a few months ago hosted a video show of artist-activist Wasant Sitthikhet, one of the series showed the artist excreting.

Perhaps last Saturday's installation at the Concrete House in Nonthaburi was less "abhorrent" to some extent. It included a display of animal innards hanging in a row on the wall, a yellow human "living sculpture" crawling along the floor while licking a raw chicken and innards, and an artist in yellow saffron who mocked the degradation of monks. Also adding an eerie atmosphere to the performance was a musician with a newly-invented musical instrument — a huge bamboo harp.

But underlying such weird expressions are thought-provoking themes. They depict different conflicts and impressions of Man. Entitled "Sense Yellow", the exhibition is a collaboration of Thai, Singaporean and German artists.

The theme was the idea of Chumpon Apisuk and Koh Nguang How, who initiated the project earlier this year. As the venue is in Thailand, an Asian country and most participating artists are Asian, "Sense Yellow" puts more emphasis on Asian society.

"Yellow means different things for different people. For the Asians, yellow is associated with concrete things like monk saffrons, the Yellow River, the Yellow Emperor of China, or the color of their skin. But to the Western sense, the color carries more abstract symbolism. It can mean danger, hazard, as used in traffic lights, or in working suits for nuclear plants," explained Helmet Lemke, a German sound-image

artist participating the exhibition.

Such differences in interpretation are obvious in each artist's expression. The senses of lust, greed and isolation were presented in "Journey of a Yellow Man No. 4" by Singaporean Lee Wen.

Painting himself yellow and wearing only a trunk, Wen appeared a man walking in his sleep, or in deep meditation, oblivious to the crowded hall. In an attempt to understand what the artist wanted to say, one had to follow him closely as he roamed the place, acting in response to objects and activities going on in other parts of Concrete House. Part of his performance included slept-on-sneakers and piles of books concerning AIDS. He meditated and put on a tiger mask and licked a raw chicken, then eventually joined Lemke who was performing his music.

"I'm doing visionary things so that people respond to what they see. I prefer them to see things for themselves," said the 36-year-old artist. His installation, used as the first setting of his performance, comprises an extract from the Buddhist Scripture written on the wall. Below the writing is a pile of hair, surrounded by jasmine.

The performance of "Yellow Man" is the fourth one in a series. The others were staged in England, India and Singapore.

Lemke expressed his idea of yellow in music. "For me, yellow is a sharp sound, as sharp as a knife," said the German artist-musician who interpreted traffic noise, his first striking impression of Bangkok, in the music. A former jazz and blues singer/musician, Lemke uses an experimental bamboo harp for the performance under the title of "Tension between Green bamboo".

His bamboo harp consists of wires stretched from the stage up to the building balcony. Linked with the wire is an electronic amplifier. Lemke employed bamboo trunks, and Vietnamese and Western fiddle bows to create sounds. Altogether it forms an unconventional music instrument which "sings" and gives an image at the same time. Lemke's gestures



Above: Soontorn Meesri in his installation-performance "Yel-hi-low".

Left: Singaporean artist Lee Wen in "Journey of a Yellow Man No. 4" Photos by Apichit Jinakul.

while playing the instrument struck the audience in various ways. Some said the movement of the bamboo trunks gave an image of traditional Thai fighting on the backs of elephants in the old days, while another said they looked like big trees in a storm.

In his previous performances, Lemke employed various objects as musical instruments. One of them was a bell hanging in a swimming pool. The bell kept ringing over the period of two hours during which the water level in the pool was lowering gradually.

Other "musical instruments" of his have included an archaeological site and the ground on a rainy day.

Yellow is interpreted in terms of religion in the works of artists

activist Wasant Sittikhiet and Singaporean Koh Nguang How. Wasant, clad in saffron sarong and covering his head with a saffron bag, walked around like a blind man. "Today, the blind leads the blind," explained the progressive artist referring to misconducting monks.

Koh Nguang How condemned the greed of people who smuggle ancient objects and collectors who want to keep national heritage in their possession.

Veronika Radulović, 42, the only woman in the exhibition deals with the indiscriminate of human beings in the aspect of religion, race and economic condition. A former Catholic, Radulović tied tags of sayings from the Ten Commandments on pork hearts, hanging them on the wall.

Mixed with the tags were words about human basic needs like crops and clothes.

Apart from the artist's personal conflict with her former religion, the point she tries to make is that, despite the differences in religion, people share the same basic needs: food and clothing. "I chose the hearts to carry my message, as the heart has a very sensitive shape and is related to the mind," she said.

Also participating in the performance and exhibition are Chumpon Apisuk, Paisarn Plienbangchang and Soonthorn Meesri. The installations and video presentation of the performances will be on display at the Concrete House until tomorrow. It is open between 11 a.m. and 7 p.m. The telephone number is 526-8311.