
PHOTO ESSAY: THE ART OF GROWING FACES: ON LAMPU KANSANOH AND EXAGGERATION AS PRAXIS

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Illustration 1: Lampu Kansanoh: My Beloved Vendor²

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² Lampu Kansanoh: *My Beloved Vendor*. 2015. Khao Yai Art Museum.

The paintings by Thai artist Lampu Kansanoh confront us with a difficult choice: either we take her art seriously and risk missing the humor and satire in her work – or we look at her work with a smile and a laugh and miss her sincerity and seriousness. Kansanoh has once stated that one of the aims of her work is to «always see humor in distress».³ But in her case, the reverse statement would appear equally true: ‘to always see distress in humor’. Kansanoh herself doesn’t choose between the two. Her brushstrokes carry us to the extremes of human expression where the difference between laughter and pain is indiscernible and seems impossible to settle once and for all. With Kansanoh’s faces, we no longer know precisely what faces us: happiness or despair? Joy or distress? This is the unsettling quality of her work: faces and expressions, grins and heads that are simply too large to fit within the simple concepts of communication. Her enlargements and exaggerations don’t bring increasing precision but increasing hesitation and doubt. Such is therefore the strange lesson that her figures teach us: the closer you look at something the more uncertain and rebellious it becomes.

Painting large and distorted heads is Kansanoh’s signature style. Her work is thus intimately connected to the world of cartoons and caricatures where big heads, humor and satire commonly go hand in hand. This is the light and playful vein that runs through her oeuvre and which turns each head into a humorous relative of Bugs Bunny or a happy offspring of Betty Boop. Her kinetic brushstrokes, the fast pace of her work perfectly echoes the rhythm of comic books and of cartoon films where drawing is less a matter of fixing and stabilizing than of animating, expressively pushing towards extremes. Although capturing a moment in time, Kansanoh’s paintings are dynamic like an animated film. But beyond these comparisons to cartoons and caricature, Kansanoh’s big heads also point to a basic physiological and biological fact about us humans: we are simply born with very big heads – so big, in fact, that child birth has always been a hazardous and potentially lethal affair. Our very entry into this world is almost blocked by our own heads. The

³ See: <https://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/thai-artist-lampu-kansanoh>

very possibility of life is paradoxically grounded on the difficulty of being born. Our heads may very well be the birthplace of culture, of art and of everything that is considered valuable and beautiful in this world but they are also – before anything else – stop-blocks that momentarily bring the easy flow of nature to a halt. In a similar way, the spectator of Kansanoh's work is also brought to a halt: what is being born before us is not divinely shaped humans, created in the perfect image of God, but misshapes and misfits whose heads seem to fit as poorly and awkwardly on Kansanoh's own canvases as we humans in general fit within the frames of nature itself. Kansanoh's people appear before us not as gracious and superior creatures – the sons and daughters of everything that is lofty, beautiful and precious – but as the strange product of our own strange human conditions; they even seem somewhat rattled and perplexed by the simple fact of having been born at all.

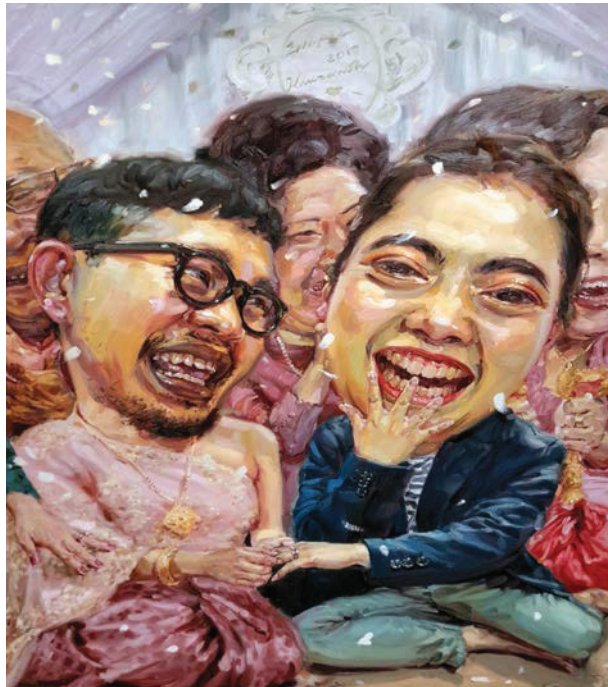


Illustration 2: Lampu Kansanoh: *I am so surprised!*⁴

⁴ Lampu Kansanoh: *I am so surprised!* 2017. Khao Yai Art Museum

In addition to this timeless aspect, Kansanoh's art also has a much more contemporary dimension that places us firmly in our present time and world. To put it briefly: The human face of today is in a state of crisis. Too much is constantly asked of it – too many snapshots, too many selfies, too many smiles and grimaces. Our faces are exhausted by photos – run over and run flat by images. Every party and gathering, every dinner and simple everyday situation is shot and recorded from every possible angle and shared, multiplied and magnified a thousand times. Kansanoh's faces testify to this excessive use and misuse of our human traits, of our human identities – her faces point to our shared image-mania. The ugliness we see – the bad skin, the yellow teeth, the googly eyes – is in this sense not strictly personal, not particularly limited to any single individual, but broadly disseminated across every face and canvas as a reflection of our social media culture. Faces living under the rules of Facebook and the dictates of Instagram – faces that must constantly and everywhere



meet the demands of cell phones and the expectations of showmanship lose their calm and beauty on the way – which is to say: the ugliness that Kansanoh places before us is an ugliness we all necessarily share with her figures. Any brief look at our own Instagram or Facebook profiles would quickly confirm as much. In the age of picture saturation, our faces must necessarily be rendered as a parody.

Kansanoh has curiously stated that she never really dreamt of becoming an artist, nor is she sure she really loves art. In her own words: “I’ve just lived with it for so long that all I want is to keep creating it”.⁵ Art for art’s sake has, in other words, no place or meaning in Kansanoh’s artistic praxis. She doesn’t care about medium specificity nor does she seem to believe that the medium is the message. To live with art – as Kansanoh says she does – and to live for art are two very different things. While the latter expresses a typical modernist urge and feeling of necessity, the former expresses a much less dramatic and far more casual attitude: art is there – rather like furniture, cats, and trees are there. One learns to live with them. Over time, a certain bonding takes place, a certain level of affection. But at bottom art is no more miraculous or precious than the smile and yellow teeth of a dear friend.

REFERENCES

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- Lampu Kansanoh: I am so surprised! 2017. Khao Yai Art Museum.
- Lampu Kansanoh: My Beloved Vendor. 2015. Khao Yai Art Museum.

⁵ See: <https://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/thai-artist-lampu-kansanoh>