

Elephant : The Construction of Contemporary Representation Images

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In contemporary culture, the surface of information is thoughtfully constructed; it contains visual material that symbolizes nature and artifact. The work demonstrates the reality of how we view elephants and relate with the different representations informed by contemporary and cultural environments.



Fig 1. Stonework, 2004, Rattapol Chaiyarat, Digital Image.



Fig 2. Untitled 2, 2009, Rattapol Chaiyarat, Digital Image printed on photographic paper, 60 x 60cm.

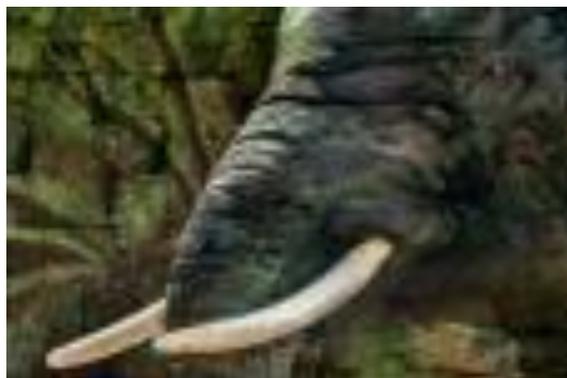


Fig 3. Untitled 3, 2009, Rattapol Chaiyarat, Digital Image printed on photographic paper, 60 x 85cm.

Introduction

This research is aimed at constructing and creating a body of work that communicates, in digital imagery, key issues around the contemporary representation of Asian elephants. To develop this work I will investigate the changing role of the elephant in Thai culture both in historic and contemporary terms. A significant direct interest in this research is the power and effect of “visual culture.” [1] My artwork is a fabricated simulation, created and constructed from image material. The animal images are digitally manipulated into illusions and investigate how humans experience nature through visual contemporary culture. In this way, I relate with different kinds of visual representation for their specific forms and effects.

Objectives:

1. To investigate the construction of image and representation of elephants in contemporary life.
2. To create a body of artwork that communicates in digital images, and an expressive commentary on the contemporary representation.

Contemporary context: Cultural Representation

As Stuart Hall asserts in his book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, “It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify.” He adds,

Meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another. There is no guarantee that every object in one culture will have an equivalent meaning in another, precisely because cultures differ, sometimes radically, from one another in their codes – the ways they carve up, classify and assign meaning to the world. [2]

The process of creating meaning is complicated and each culture has its own way to construct and communicate through signs and representations. However, in recent years, the globalization of the Internet has been increasing and it is not unusual for us to be able to experience contemporary signs and representation from different cultures.

As Nick Lacey writes:

Saussure’s description of signs, [...] is important in Media Studies because it emphasizes that they are social constructs; they do not possess inherent meaning. Once this is understood, the task of analysis is to deconstruct not individual sign, but sign systems to show how meaning is created. [3]

We have been experiencing – and probably creating and contributing – new meanings and representations to our society for quite some time since through our global social media network. People across the globe are able to exchange experiences and ideas through new media and learn about each other through culture. Artists are able to present their works through these new media channels; they can express their creations through signs and representations. In *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin writes that:

The artist “represents” his object as something, or as having certain characteristics when he depicts it, makes allegations about its appearance. [...] When he represents something by a symbol, that symbol

may well be a recognizable object, but it need not be and usually is not a representation of what it symbolizes.” [4]

Representation can be constructed by using a set of objects or symbols, and it can be interpreted by linking specific facts of each symbol together to create meanings. “In the *constructionist perspective*, representation involves making meaning by forging links between three different orders of a thing, [...] and the signs, arranged into languages, which ‘stand for’ or communicate these concepts.” [5]

In contemporary art practice, representations of animals are therefore not only about the reality of the animal itself but also the associated symbolism and cultural values that we attach to animals. The material appearance of Olly and Suzi’s *Cheetahs* (Namibia 1998), [6] for example, collaboratively create a painting on location. The photograph presents a painting of cheetahs that is surrounded by the animals themselves in their natural habitat. The work is focused on environmentalism and the conservation of endangered species. There are some other artists, such as Sue Coe, Frank Noelker, and Britta Jaschinski, who have used their art to address the confinement or mistreatment of animals. [7]

Research Methodology

This current research is focused on the construction of representations of elephants by using visual methodologies to explore contemporary images of elephants and the consequent impact on perception; aimed at creating a body of work that communicates its findings through digital imagery. To develop this work I will investigate the visual material in terms of cultural significance and social practices.

The Construction of Contemporary Representation Images

I use photographs as tools to generate digital images and create new meanings by combining surface information that represents the animal in contemporary life. Digital manipulation allows me to combine different images which contain several symbolic meanings together. *Stonework* (2004), for example (Fig. 1) is a natural raw material that retains its qualities even when crafted and manipulated by humans to become a more meaningful artifact; therefore, it symbolizes human civilization and cultural heritage.

In *Untitled 2*, 2009 (Fig. 2), the brickstones connect the elephants with ancient man-made structures and traditional heritage. Centuries have passed by, but the stones are still there with the trapped animal, suggesting the core of our culture continues on. Brick by brick, block of stone after block of stone, we shaped them up into whatever we would like them to be. The image perhaps reflects how humans have tried to occupy and colonize the powerful raw materials of nature.

Untitled 3 (Fig 3.) represents the way humans view animals in captivity through bars, fences and boundaries, which are completely changed in appearance to an invisible enclosure. An elephant is merged with leaves and branches; its skin is almost blended together with the captive environment.

In captive environments that are open to the public, such as zoos, visitors are not only viewing the actual animals but also the visual material that represents their natural habitat. The enclosures effectively stimulate viewers’ reactions actively relating them in the process of experiencing nature.

The images also demonstrate the animals on display in contemporary society. We love to look at them and appreciate the greatest living figures. We place them in our society and celebrate our triumph over

nature. The work is another example of reconstruction and exploration of visual representations from different materials.

Conclusion

My works *demonstrate the construction of contemporary representational images of elephants. The visual culture that surrounds our everyday lives has a huge effect on how we construct and interpret our experiences.* I often use the animal identity and its environment; representing them as a metaphor for issues and concepts affecting contemporary culture. Images of the animal itself form a very important solid layer of information for my work because it already deals very effectively with something that has an everyday existence as well as social and cultural associations because of its history and relationships with mankind and the natural environment.

References and Notes:

1. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2007), xiii.
2. Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, 61 (The Open University: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2003).
3. Nick Lacey, "Semiotic," in *Image and Representation: Key Concepts in Media Studies* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 65.
4. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "'Standing For' – Symbolic Representation," in *The Concept of Representation* (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1972), 94.
5. Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation."
6. Olly and Suzi, "Cheetahs," www.ollysuzi.com, <http://www.ollysuzi.com/galleries/v/photographic+editions/photographs/echeetah.jpg.html> (accessed September 10, 2011).
7. Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animal, Identity, and Representation*, foreword by Carol J. Adams, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), xxvi.

Secondary References

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).
2. Ratapol Chaiyarat, *The Odyssey of Elephants: Contemporary Images and Representation* (Monash University, VIC, Australia 2009).
3. Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
4. Eric Scigliano, *Seeing the Elephant: The Ties that Bind Elephants and Humans* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006).