

Caught between tradition and modernity

Alain Soldeville's photos capture the strange juxtapositions of Bangkok's urban landscape

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In his new show, "Dreaming Alien", photographer Alain Soldeville documents the ways in which Thailand is being altered while undergoing the transformation from a nation based on traditional values - monarchy, religion - to a modern, globalised country.

His photographs show empty streets, devoid of life. Symbols of religion and glossy high fashion advertisements, ramshackle buildings and brand new shopping malls; they capture the incongruous, the strange juxtapositions in the urban landscape of Bangkok. The medium format colour photographs are beautiful, yet they exude an uneasy feeling - the places feel familiar but something is missing, the scene feels manufactured, synthetic.

With everyone blindly striving for a better social position, spirituality becomes less important and traditional moral values fade away - like healthy human cells exposed to large amounts of radiation, a culture based on simple religious ideals and respect is forced by these outside influences to change into something unnatural and deformed.

Already a well-established photojournalist, Soldeville's previous work has been featured in such publications as the New York Times, Vogue Hommes, Stern and National Geographic.

This latest exhibition, which is on display at Kathmandu Photo Gallery, and is supported by the Alliance Francaise, comprises 12 urban landscapes taken in Bangkok. Begun in 2003, the series was completed earlier this year.

The first photograph in the series shows a traditional shop house in a residential street. The scene oozes charm; it is a nostalgic contemplation of old Bangkok, evoking a sense of community. However, the derelict, rusted car parked in the foreground, seemingly abandoned, reminds us that time is running out for these traditional values - like the bodywork of the car, they are being gradually corroded away.

Several of the photographs in the exhibition depict empty spaces, buildings abandoned and destroyed or left to rot, discarded personal items from former residents littering the floors; they represent the relentless march of progress which quashes any remaining respect for past values.

Another shows a cinema screen set up in a dimly-lit soi - it suggests a reluctance to give up the attitudes of the past. The screen is adorned with flags of Thailand and pictures of the King; the scene suggests a reluctance to give up the attitudes of the past, a defiance, the staunch nationalism of the Thai people in the face of the overwhelming onslaught of globalisation. The brightly-lit construction site in the background, however, its crane towering above the city, shows that the construction and modernisation continues unrelentingly and mercilessly.

A theme of the exhibition is the confusion faced by a society caught between tradition and modernity. This confusion is most evident in the photograph of a 15-foot high printed advertisement on the temporary frontage of what will presumably be a new shopping mall project. It shows a serenely smiling face, eyes closed in an apparent state of spiritual satisfaction - strongly reminiscent of the face of a Buddha statue. The nose, however, is formed from a montage of nude and semi-nude bodies intertwined with jewellery - luxury products presented as lustworthy. Soldeville's talent for recognising such oddities is most evident in this image; a combination of two utterly incompatible philosophies.

Another shows a children's video game arcade, garishly decorated. The air hockey table has a poorly transliterated English slogan printed on the side; it is like the place is trying to be western, but it doesn't make sense. The "out of order" sign on one of the game machines again suggests that this advancement is unnatural.

The purpose of the show does not seem to be to simply label consumerism as evil, rather it highlights the danger when a culture with such strong moral values is subjected to new influences which are vastly different - a society forced to change its ways and adapt to new mindsets whilst desperately trying to cling to traditional values, a satisfaction with spiritual well-being rapidly replaced with a desire for possessions.

The series acts a warning to not let greed take over the other values; to refrain from aspiring to shallow material goals, when what we already have is better, on a much deeper level.

Probably the most ominous image in the show depicts a soon-to-open Paul Smith store, of which the trademark ubiquitous multi-coloured stripes covering the

temporary frontage evoke the bars of a prison cell. The words "opening soon" printed on the jet-black door here seem deeply sinister; this abyss will soon be open, the final phase in the transition from which there is no return

"Dreaming Alien" by Alain Soldeville runs until March 28 at Kathmandu Photo Gallery, 87 Pan Road. For more information, call 02-234-6700 or visit <http://www.kathmandu-bkk.com>. More of Alain Soldeville's work can be seen at <http://www.soldeville.com>.