

Thai Transience at the Singapore Art Museum

By Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

Coinciding with the exhibition *Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand* at the Asian Civilisations Museum and as part of the larger focus on ASEAN countries, the Singapore Art Museum opened *Thai Transience* on 26 October, unveiling a showcase of some 20 artists from Thailand.

Combining emerging and established talents, the show aims to focus on faith and religion as the overarching theme throughout Thai art history and its strong heritage of craft – artefacts dating to the Rattanakosin period are elegantly displayed alongside contemporary works, creating a powerful and thoughtful visual impact.



Imhathai Suwatthanasilp, *My Father's Pigtail*, 2006, wood, photograph, artist's collection

crucial part of many of the featured artists' visual narrative. Imhathai Suwatthanasilp (b 1981), a young female artist from Bangkok, tackles death and memory through a compelling body of work that features thin hair finely knitted to form

Titled *Thai Transience*, the show makes reference to the transient and impermanent nature of life, especially if viewed in the context of recent Thai history. The flood, the worst natural calamity in recent history, and the 2010 uprising and continuous instability of the Thai political status quo are but two instances where the temporal element of human life, emphasised in Buddhist theology, is taken to its most enduring extreme.

Life and death – intended in Buddhism as a recurring cycle in one's existence – forms a



Imhathai Suwatthanasilp, *My Father's Pillow*, 2008, artist's hair weaving, pillow of the artist's father, see-through fabric, artist's collection

various meaningful shapes. Hair is a strong symbol in Thai culture and the way it is kept or styled signifies a lot about a person. The most obvious example is the rite of renunciation and purification within Buddhist clergy whereby novices and monks are required to shave their heads. At the opposite extreme, Thai ladies are encouraged to grow their hair long to show their femininity and their role in the family.

Suwatthanasilp picks up on this visual signifier to build the narrative of her work by using her own hair incorporated with that of her late father. Symbolic mementos of her father's life are displayed throughout the installation together with her new pieces.

On a coffin-like plinth lies her father's pillow delicately covered in crocheted hair; on another is her father's finely braided hair accompanied by a picture in *My Father's Pigtail* (2006). Other works refer to the artist's own experience with suffering and disease.

While the use of hair in Thai art relates to the social and cultural meaning attached to this bodily matter, the act of weaving and crocheting it is equally important in relating to the devotional process of art and craft. Chusak Srikwan (b.



Chusak Srikwan, *Free Form Avaricious is a Precious Blessing*, 2007, leather carving, private collection

1983) leverages on the craft element of Thai traditional art in his installation *Free Form Avaricious is a Precious Blessing* (2007) displayed in the gallery on the second floor. Featured for the second time this year in Singapore (the first was in the 2012 group exhibition CUT THRU at LASALLE Singapore), Srikwan's vibrant installations are about traditional art-making based on the practice of *Naan Taluang* (puppetry), a craft that is prominent in the southern part of Thailand.

Srikwan adopts Buddhist iconography in his practice as a language easily recognisable and familiar to most Thais, thus producing works of literal message if read by an audience familiar with Buddhist mythology. Injecting new energy into preserving traditional art in Thailand, Srikwan chooses the

vernacular tradition of shadow puppetry, producing formal and impactful installations of leather carvings. Used for the longest time as a tool of propaganda, Thai traditional puppetry historically addresses social and religious themes. Similarly, the artist in his practice cites contemporary social and political issues, emphasising through them the moral choices we should all make.



Krit Ngamsom, King of Buddha, 2011, video, wood and metal, artist's collection

Also connecting Buddhist practices with the social disparity between the rural masses in the outskirts of Bangkok and the urban elite is Krit Ngamsom's (b. 1983) kinetic works. In *Klong Plane* (2011) a row of alms bowls is used as drums to draw the viewer's attention. At a deeper level, the repetitive and rhythmic sound of the drums conceptually reinforces the persistent call to follow Buddhist declarations at a time when those same declarations are often forgotten or overlooked. The digital installation *King of Buddha* (2011) is of the same nature. Loosely known as *Phra Kreung* in Thai,

these charms or amulets are considered to have magical powers that protect and also bring material benefits to their owner, who should wear them at all times. Ironically, here the amulet is but a digital image projected within the typical amulet case, signifying the transient quality of religious images in contemporary society.



Krit Ngamsom, Klong Plane, 2011, mixed media installation, artist's collection

The variety of works and artists showcased in *Thai Transience* makes this first effort by the Singapore Art Museum in presenting Thai modern and contemporary art on a wider scale very valuable, especially for a new and uninformed audience. In a cultural hub such as Singapore it is important for museums to offer a panoramic view on art around the region with a special focus on countries such as Thailand, which are below the radar of major art events and fairs. For a vibrant art scene, it is desirable to see more exhibitions putting a spotlight on young and emerging Thai artists.

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