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Thai Contemporary Textiles: Jakkai Siributr

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JAKKAI SIRIBUTR (b.1969, Bangkok) is an unconventional, contemporary Thai textile artist, who left Thailand to study in the US when he was fifteen. After graduating in 1992, with a Textile/Fine Arts degree at Indiana University, Bloomington, he continued his studies with a Printed Textile Design course at Philadelphia. Jakkai returned to Bangkok in 1996, to teach at Thammasat University, which was just starting a fashion/textile department with a special curriculum - until then available only at Thai vocational schools. He taught for seven years, during which his first solo exhibition, *Jakkai On Line*, was held in 1998. This inaugurated a series of annual exhibitions in the Thai capital, as Jakkai remained committed to modern textiles. Political events in 2007-2008, however, forced him to take a stand. He began to make critical statements using textile installations, and subsequently had two further exhibitions in New York. Today, his work is found in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in Seattle. From Bangkok, Jakkai Siributr talks to the Asian Art Newspaper about his fascination with textiles and how they evolved into a political statement.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: As a child were you surrounded by textiles?

JAKKAI SIRIBUTR: One of my aunts was an artist. She was a *batik* expert and ran an atelier/boutique in her compound right in the heart of Bangkok. Thailand does not have a batik tradition like Indonesia or Malaysia,

except for some parts in the south, so her approach to batik tended to be more contemporary. My aunt created pieces by painting on silk, which were wearable art. I took some lessons with her when I was eight years old and spent a lot of time there whenever my mother visited. I really enjoyed watching her staff apply wax on to the fabrics and dyeing them. I still remember those beautiful fabrics hanging on the clothesline. However, the Sukhumvit area of 40 years ago was not what it has become today. Many old houses have been replaced by condominiums, old trees are being cut down everyday – even as we speak. I guess it is inevitable, but it makes it harder for me to live in Bangkok, to see the changes and destruction of the old Bangkok that I know and love.

AAN: Was there any other textile influence?

JS: My grandmother was considered one of the most stylish women in Thailand back in her heyday. She dyed her hair a silvery purplish shade in her sixties – and this was over 30 years ago. She often wore just a simple sarong or one of my aunt's creations. I think I may have got my aesthetic sense from observing her. I also had a nanny who kept patching and sewing old clothes and blankets over and over again. This comes from an old tradition of mending textiles, the idea of not throwing anything away. I only realised this when I started creating my own art – that I may have been greatly influenced by these women in my life.

AAN: Would your art have taken a different course had you remained in Thailand?

JS: I wanted to study art but did not consider becoming an artist. Being an artist in Thailand in the 1980s was not really an option. The Thai educational system, at the time, did not emphasise creativity. Had I stayed at home, I doubt if I would become the textile artist that I am today. I could not draw – the way the teachers wanted – which was to copy outright a subject presented to you. Contrary to this, my art teachers in the US did not care whether I could draw or not! They only wanted me to develop my own, individual style and that really gave me the courage to study art. Eventually I learned how to draw by understanding the forms of a subject. At Indiana, I was exposed for the first time to contemporary 'textile art'.

AAN: Did it change your outlook on Thai textiles in general?

JS: Thailand has a long tradition of weaving and embroidery, but only in a traditional sense. Indiana opened up a whole new world for me, even though the textile programme was considered traditional at the time, as it was quite separate from the other disciplines. I studied all the traditional craft techniques associated with the fibre arts such as weaving, felting, quilting, etc. After I graduated, I still very much wanted to be a designer working in an office. So without any work experience in an actual studio, I made a decision to further my education in textile design. I thought the industrial aspects of the textile industry would help prepare me for my career. But I ended up hating it! I did not enjoy creating something with the commercial market in mind.

AAN: Can the notion of 'fibre arts', as understood in the US, be applied to Thailand?

JS: I believe fibre arts in the US just evolved from traditional crafts over a period of time to be what it is today. There has always been a strong tradition of weaving, quilting and basketry in that country and through a creative process, it became more contemporary. The term, 'fibre arts' in Thailand is often associated with traditional hand-weaving – if it is ever used at all. Only when we can separate this practice from the word traditional, are we able to move forward.

AAN: What is 'traditional' about the Thai weaving?

JS: The tradition of Thai weaving is simply utilitarian. Silk is not viewed as the luxurious fabric that is being promoted today. When you travel to the villages of Isan (northeastern Thailand), you will see farmers and villagers wearing silk *sarongs*, and even monks wearing silk robes, because they wear what they are able to make themselves. I still believe silk is most beautiful when it is worn like any other fabric. One has to let it live a bit, work or farm in it, beat it up a bit and wash it the way one normally washes clothes – and not drycleaned. It has become 'precious', as it is used in expensive Western designer gowns.

AAN: Has your appreciation of traditional Thai textiles been influenced by your experience in the US?

JS: In the US, technology and creativity are an integral part of the production process. 'Traditional crafts' are often given an update, because many artists and designers are familiar with technology and can use it to update traditional crafts. They are not afraid to experiment even though the results might be unexpected. However, in Thailand, traditional crafts such as *mud-mee (ikat)* weaving are passed on from generation to generation. Many weavers memorise the techniques, patterns and colour combinations so that they can pass the same information to the next generation. When I was teaching, I also worked with silk weavers from different parts of the country – mainly villagers in Isan, such as Khon Khaen province, and Chiangmai in the north. In Isan, mud-mee textiles are made with a supplementary weft technique called khit and parts of Chiangmai produce *teen-jok* textiles with a basic supplementary weft technique. It was not easy to persuade these weavers to try a new design, or even a

different colour combination, simply because they did not feel comfortable weaving it. But once in a while, one might just come across a weaver who is not afraid to break away from tradition and is willing to experiment.

AAN: How did you approach Thai textiles using the Western idea of 'contemporary textile art'?

JS: When I returned to Thailand in 1996, a few artists and designers – mostly Westerners or Western-educated Thais – were already creating contemporary textiles and working with village weavers. Traditional looms were being adapted to accommodate more complex weaving techniques. These silk textiles were given a more 'Western' look and, of course, they were praised, as well as criticised. While I also approached textiles from a Western background, I realised that there was a lot more to learn from traditional weavers, particularly through their use of natural dyes, and there was a period when I dyed my own fabrics using them.

AAN: What sort of natural Thai dyes did you use?

JS: Natural dyes commonly used in Thailand are *krang*, 'lac' for red, *kram*, 'indigo' and *maklua*, 'ebony tree' for black. Different yellows and greens may come from *mamuang*, 'mango' and *khanoon*, 'jackfruit'. However, I really enjoyed using *khlon*, 'mud' to dye fabric because every part of Thailand produces mud that is different. Depending on their mineral content, there are different shades of brown; some might be redder and some, almost black. I like the fact that mud, a basic ingredient, can be used in the dyeing process. It is a very simple process, you dip the wet fabric into a mud bath with just enough for the mud to coat the fabric. For other natural dyes, you might need to boil the dye bath and add a mordant for the dye to adhere to the fibre. Mud is often used when you want to reduce the intensity of a fabric's colour.

AAN: Why did you move into textile installation art?

JS: I have been making art for 15 years now. During this time, I struggled with the words, 'craft' and 'fine art'. I started out with abstract textile pieces and then switched to representational paintings but have never been quite successful combining the two together. Gradually, I realised that I can do pretty much anything I wanted to do and not restrict myself with words. Textile can be anything. It does not always have to be a two-dimensional wall hanging. It can be decorative, or conceptual. The most important thing is that I fully embrace it.

AAN: When did you start using installations to make social, political, or religious statements?

JS: I made a conscious decision to come back to Thailand to live and work after more than a decade of living abroad. I never cared for politics at all. Suddenly around 2007 and 2008, Thailand entered this phase of political instability and I could not ignore it any longer. When I had left the country at fifteen, I saw it from my childhood memory. Living here now and after spending time in different parts of the country, I began to understand why Thailand is the way it is today. Why it has not changed in years and will probably not change in the years to come. Despite the modern façade that we see, most Thais are still animists (myself included). Superstitions still play an important role on every level – in government and politics. So how can we, the people, rely on any government that is full of animists? We might as well just rely on gods and spirits ourselves. The transition for me was very easy and natural, as I am still, more or less, inspired by my environment. And I am now surrounded by hopelessness, instability and absurdity every single day.

AAN: If you are surrounded by hopelessness, how do your textile installations help redress this situation?

JS: Living in the midst of political uncertainty and instability, it is my duty as an artist to express and share my feelings with the public. And it makes me feel better to be able to communicate through my art.

AAN: How do you make your installations?

JS: The process varies with each work. I sketch or visualise the work according to the concept or story that I want to tell, but often the finished work is quite different from that visualised. Because each piece is unique, the working process is also an experiment which evolves as I try to solve various problems. My early abstract works represent a therapeutic process of creation. They are about being in the present. They reflect my experiences and emotions through pattern, textures and colours. At the time, I was questioning how I can be a Buddhist living in this modern world. How does one follow the Five Precepts when one has to deal with all kinds of people and their problems? In *Red Hallucination*, I have combined commercially printed fabric, industrial cloth tape, with hand woven silk and then dyed some parts with mud, printing the other parts with pigment for a final juxtaposition. Whereas for *Shroud*, I just started knitting Buddhas and dipped them in wax. I was fascinated by their individual forms. Then I toyed around with different ideas and finally ended up hanging them the way I did. Same with *Evening News*, where I started embroidering front page news images that I had been collecting for over a year and then installed the work specifically for the Chula Art Center space (at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok).

AAN: How do you see your work developing?

JS: I never know how my work will evolve, but as long as I am still working and experimenting, I remain very open to any possibilities and wherever it will take me.

INTERVIEW BY YVONNE TAN