

# **KARMA CASH & CARRY: NEW ART BY JAKKAI SIRIBUTR**

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The Southeast Asian kingdom of Thailand is a nation increasingly divided along political and class lines. In March 2010, the red-shirted working class supporters of the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) showed their disdain for the present government by pouring human blood over the gates of the Prime Minister's residence. It was a graphic and dramatic ritualistic display in an animistic nation that places significant importance upon spiritual and cosmological governance, as well as a certain belief in the power of magic.

Amidst this volatile social and political impasse, Bangkok based artist Jakkai Siributr stokes the fire by visualizing the spiritual improbity and misguided superstitions he deems are exacerbating his country's devotional and democratic instability. In one of his latest textile based works, *Memento Mori*, Jakkai stitches caricatures of the selfish power hungry politicians he sees exploiting the somewhat naïve sensibilities of his fellow countrymen, and who are willingly propelling Thailand towards combustible civil disorder.

One of the region's few contemporary artists consistently to utilize fabric as a core medium, Jakkai is considered one of Southeast Asia's preeminent textile-based artists and is widely recognized for his imaginatively threaded, often satirical narratives. While there is a rich heritage of weave design in Thailand, Jakkai has been responsible for reinvigorating the fiber art form by delivering a biting fresh contemporary countenance that is highly relevant to a region struggling to balance its historical foundations with the concerns of modern living.

Parallel to the current international focus upon craft associated art forms, fiber and craft related art is being applied through ever more interesting and novel manifestations by prolific Asia based artists. In China, female artists lead the way, as evident in the soft textile sculptures of Yin Xiu Chen, or the tangled woven installations Lin Tianmiao. In Japan Chiharu Shiota delicately weaves intricate cobweb installations from black thread, while within Southeast Asia, Indonesia based Dutch artist Mella Jaarsma creates clothing modifications as a commentary on personal identity.

Building on themes established in his 2008 exhibition, *Temple Fair*, held at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, Jakkai highlights the growing commercialization of Thailand's predominant religion, Buddhism. He points out that certain Thai Buddhist temples are learning to market themselves by exploiting beliefs associated with bestowing luck and prosperity in order to lure otherwise lethargic worshippers. Essentially Jakkai feels that Buddhism is quickly losing, or distorting, the essential principles of the faith. Yet some might consider such adaptation as the only path to survival in an increasingly consumer driven society.

Invoking the brashness of consumer culture, Jakkai creates a garish Disneyland of contemporary Buddhist worship. Accusatory towards modern Thais' corruption of their national religion, Jakkai himself is a practicing Buddhist and therefore feels deeply embittered by any perversions of faith. Buddhism is a prevalent subject for Thai artists, generating a diversity of approaches and media presentations, much of which is labeled "Neo-Buddhist." The late Montien Boonma's aromatic and calming installation pieces were a meditative release from the earthbound, while Amrit Chusuwan brings a new media conceptual sheen in his presentation of Buddhist precepts.

Jakkai considers Wat Maha But temple in Bangkok's eastern suburbs to be one such commercially focused sanctuary. The temple draws upon – some could argue exploits – the 150-year-old true story and subsequent legend of Mae Nak, a woman who died in childbirth while her husband was away fighting as a conscripted soldier. The tale has it that he returned to live with

his wife and child, unaware that they were ghosts. The temple displays a dead baby in a coffin, attracting a stream of conscripts and mothers.

A metaphor for Buddhism's commercialization, Jakkai utilizes cheap everyday materials including pins, doilies, trashy clothing apparel, and unblessed low-quality amulets. Amulet markets, like the one found on the street beside Bangkok's Thammasat University, are another such area where distinctions between faith, superstition and commerce, blur.

In *Recession*, Pali language mantras that Jakkai chants daily are loosely pinned together in the outline of a Buddha image. Floating with an almost audible resonance, the delicate tangle of karmic slogans appears fragile. Entwined and interspersed among the fabric words are numerous amulets with depictions of Thailand's most respected clergymen. Originally a reminder to devotees of the Lord Buddha's teachings, and to preserve faith, today amulets have been relegated to protective talismans worn to bring individuals better luck, prosperity, health and safety.

There are many facets to consider when acquiring an amulet, particularly when, where, and from what it was made. It is also vital which monk blessed the charm, with certain clergymen considered to be endowed with magical powers. Certain monks have capitalized on their iconic position, generating significant funds for their temple and charitable causes. Philanthropy aside, Jakkai maintains that some of these famous monks behave like celebrities and that the consumerist attitude and instant gratifications expected of such charms are a perversion of Buddhism.

The Buddha shaped hole in the middle of *Recession* is in opposition to the typical golden deities of Buddha, and makes reference to the Buddhist notion of the void. The spiritually vacant center accentuates the implied vapidness of the amulets while lending emphasis to the mantra outline as a sincere mechanism of Buddhist principles.

Loosely constructed from a layered patchwork of garishly hued readymade table doilies, *Red Buddha* is an aesthetically juxtaposing yang to the yin of the vacant Buddha in *Recession*. The roughly formed outline of Buddha has an organic and archaic quality, as if Buddhism itself is struggling to maintain formality or a rigidity of presence, becoming misshapen and bent. Deliberately decorous, the red and magenta doilies are prevalent in vernacular Asian aesthetics, where chintz and frilly materials customize and embellish common objects. Contrary to the amulet icons paraded in *Recession*, in *Red Buddha* the artist inserts larger round stickers of respected monks he holds as honorable to Buddhist tenets.

Extending the amulet theme further, the multiple readymade relief tablet *Somdet* is assembled in rows to evoke the floor displays at typical amulet markets located adjacent to temples around Bangkok. With certain amulets holding great value depending upon their origins and purported power, the Phra Somdet Wat Rakhong from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is deemed the most auspicious and highly prized.

With a dash of irony, Jakkai has procured and lined up rows of unblessed, cheap, two-baht (and therefore worthless) copies of this treasured charm. Pushing the irony further, he embellishes and elevates each trinket by encasing it in a special hand-knitted holder. Taking jabs at an industry that generates over \$250 million a year, Jakkai attempts to subvert the trade and profit attached to these talismans by repetitively arranging them, in the hope of pushing viewers to consider the spiritual countenance of what the Buddha image represents. While not necessarily a part of the artist's intent, this work could also be viewed as a commentary on the commodification of art itself.

Besides personal talismans, in *Fast Money I* and *Fast Money II*, Jakkai also scrutinizes the prevalence of trade talismans adorning businesses and shops in Thailand. Intended to attract custom and profit for the establishment, these mascots take on various guises, with many Chinese in origin, a reflection of the merchant's ethnicity. Depicted with a hand held out to usher in trade, two of the best known trade talismans are the *nang kwak*, or beckoning lady, and the Japanese equivalent of the beckoning cat, or *maneki-neko*. To invoke the power of such talismans, they must be blessed, which has become another regular revenue source for temples.

Jakkai customizes his own gaudy trade mascots by appropriating existing talismans of a protective crocodile and mermaid, enlivening the two squares of layered cloth with good-fortune-inducing mantras. Sourced from ubiquitous high street clothing adornments, the works are rich in a layered mosaic of rainbow sequins and emblazoned with cartoons of Mickey Mouse, Hello Kitty, teddy bears, and bunnies. Superficially a tongue-in-cheek celebration, these talismans also challenge the materially driven vacuousness of such over-the-counter fast tracks to good fortune.

Artist Sakarin Krue-on has also reinterpreted the *nang kwak* talisman as a metaphoric symbol for rampant greed and materialism in *Nang Kwak: The 2005 Crisis*. Krue-on uniformly lined up rows of the image on the floor, enticing viewers to follow her call and be rewarded with instant gratification.

Individual monks are also known to sanctify their own talismanic yantra cloths, which typically comprise an identifiable image of the monk, usually portrayed in one of their trademark self-edifying postures, with his fortuitous blessing and the date. In *Yantra* and *Yantra II*, Jakkai provocatively parodies these monk-endorsed promotional placards, and the general cult of sacral celebrity, by assuming the guise of a pseudo-clergyman.

With a full mop of hair (monks are shaven headed), he whimsically poses himself as a contemplative thinker in *Yantra*, or sitting cross-legged decadently sipping champagne in *Yantra II*. Engulfing the figure in *Yantra*, the artist invokes his own self-satisfying mantras to a proliferation of money and carnal pleasure. In *Yantra II*, a bed of black sequins fringes a random line of shop-bought fabric numbers, a reference to Thais seeking winning lottery numbers by visiting temples. Jakkai's approach is to expose the shallowness of reputed monk mantras that declare a devotee will become "super rich," by countering with morally sincere incantations to good business practice, though ultimately he emblazons his fabric with "super happy."

The yantra cloths also highlight the long-rooted ritualistic nature of Thai society, where even politicians place great weight upon animistic and cosmological factors. Jakkai also plays with the objectification and elevation of something from the everyday to being precious or sacral, and how this mirrors the art industry.

Criticism of Buddhism in Thailand is highly controversial and rarely engaged, though Jakkai somewhat circumvents scrutiny through playful veils of irony. Other artists who have previously attempted similar accusations include Thai-American multidisciplinary artist Michael Shaowanasai, whose sexually suggestive contribution to the 2000 group exhibit *Alien(Gener)ation* incensed one national daily enough to run a front page spread of the artist's *Portrait of a Man in Habbits #1* – a photo of himself dressed in a monk's saffron robes wearing make-up and holding a *Pokemon* handkerchief.

Another artist who feels that the original teachings of Buddha have been perverted amidst the surge in materialism is Thai art's *enfant terrible*, Vasan Siththiket. He has regularly taken blasphemous pot-shots at wayward monks, most contentious of which was the painting *Buddha Visits Thailand 1992*, which sparked condemnation from forty-three Buddhist institutions.

A more tributary reflection of Buddhism is put forward in Jakkai's fiber work, *Jataka*, which is an interpretation of one of the *jataka* tales – stories that pertain to Buddha's past lives. The artist's mother previously wrote and published a book based on these tales, which she would often read to a younger Jakkai.

Further consolidating his recent experimentations with more sculptural installation works, Jakkai completes this latest exhibition with an atmospheric shrine and a spirit-house. In the installation *Karma Cash & Carry*, the artist erects a pseudo roadside shrine that would typically be built to pay respect to deceased elders. But for Jakkai's interpretation, he looks to a temple where devotees make merit for terminating pregnancies, an action that contravenes Buddhist principles and therefore cannot be absolved.

Inside the bamboo shrine, Jakkai whimsically deifies plastic dolls by coating them in gold leaf and dressing them with fake floral garlands. Around the shrine he follows the common practice of placing offering bowls to appease the dead spirits, filling them with placatory gifts of condoms for fertility, coins for prosperity, medicine for good health, and so on. While conscious that he is merely creating an art object, the artist still feels certain apprehension and anxiety toward invoking some real spiritual backlash for his provocative installation.

More personally, and with a deliberately nostalgic air, Jakkai presents his first ever video work, *18/28*, inside a tailor-made spirit-house to his regally descended ancestors. Erected as an appeasing containment abode for a land's resident spirits, spirit-houses are placed on the site of most Thai homes and businesses. Traditional shrines are made from wood with miniature attendant figurines placed in front and tributary offerings regularly presented.

Inside Jakkai's contemporary spirit-house of steel, the video shows the artist himself and a female companion re-enacting the regular dining rituals of his late royal court-connected relatives, attired in period clothing found in his family home. This haunting film is a respectful acknowledgement of the residual energies that he feels lingers in his familial abode. Jakkai's personal evocation of a spirit-house is a subtle pointer of how adherence to, and distortions of, ancient mythologies and religious principles are helping to forge the uncertain direction in which his country is presently heading.

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This essay was published in the catalogue for *Karma Cash & Carry*, a solo exhibition of Jakkai Siributr, at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York City, in April-May 2010.