

TEMPLE FAIR

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Sprawled across the floor of his Bangkok studio industriously stitching away as his pack of rescued street mutts scurries round sniffing for attention, Thai artist Jakkai Siributr approaches his work like an expressive painter. One of the region's only contemporary artists consistently to utilize fabric as his 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 long and 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. The coarse, almost neglected temperament of many of his finished pieces serves in part as a symbol of the futility of nostalgic living within the incessant flux of today's world, a trait to which Jakkai admits being guilty.

With *Temple Fair*, his current exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art of thread-based artworks, Jakkai's seductive woven sheen shrouds some of his most culturally sensitive work to date. This new series is an observation of a national identity in uncomfortable transition, and the preservation of such an identity that perhaps no longer reflects the true concerns of its citizens. It also reveals the self-serving individual preoccupations that have the potential to destabilize the bedrock institutions of the Thai kingdom.

Historically, temples have been at the heart of the Thai community, places not only to pray but also to learn, to be treated for illness, as well as to find a social forum. The Buddhist temple is also the traditional site where people go to relax and have fun at seasonal fundraising *ngan wat*, or temple fairs. Far from pious, the temple fair is an occasion typically enriched with a brash carnival of snack stalls, kick boxing bouts, open air mobile movies, freak sideshows, and beauty pageants, alongside stages enlivened by bawdy comedy and dance routines.

A popular, galvanizing event aimed at the masses, the traditional temple fair is gradually mutating under the constraints of a developing society. Nowadays, consumption of alcohol, gambling, and even sexual solicitation have been known to occur at temple celebrations. In modern, urbanizing Thailand, families often gather at these sanctuaries only for the convenient, self-enhancing rituals of making merit, seeking luck, or asking for forgiveness. Their new temples have become modern shopping malls as people turn away from the environ that offers peace and mental well being. Jakkai adopts the contrasting associations of temple fairs as entry points to the culturally provocative themes in his latest series of fiber creations.

Jakkai can be considered one of Thailand's only contemporary artists to utilize fiber as his primary medium. Since the turn of the millennium, Jakkai has gradually distanced himself from the idea of his art works as meticulously crafted, precious "one-off" tapestry designs, and he has explored methods and techniques that enable him to loosen up and become more expressive in use of fabric and construction. Terming his methodology a "process of layering," the artist centers his creativity around the presence of hand, be it through draftsmanship or treatment of fabric; his art focuses on physicality and evidence of touch.

To attain a freedom of expression in his textile production, Jakkai uses diverse techniques of dyeing, color combinations, and ways of cutting the materials. He believes it is the fibers that infuse his pieces with individuality through their texture, color and palpability. The surfaces are further enlivened by the incorporation of coarsely woven thread, plastic beads, pins, and tape, which accentuate a ragged, discarded veneer.

Until recently, textile design in Thailand was thought of as a craft rather than a contemporary art form, although contemporary artists such as Pinaree Sanpitak have occasionally incorporated woven forms into their mainstay production. Likewise in Indonesia, where there is a tradition of batik design, local artists Arahmaiani and Eko Nugroho have also combined fabric art with their own idiosyncratic visualizations. Yet unlike so many artists whose adoption of fiber as a medium is largely passive, Jakkai uses thread, stitch, and fabric as his tactile brush, palette, and canvas.

Due in part to archaic attitudes within the Thai educational system, it is only in the last decade that Textile Design has appeared as an independent course option upon any university syllabus. Although it is still very much in its infancy in Thailand, Jakkai hopes that eventually Textile Design will be taught with a greater emphasis on conceptual as well as technical development. However, there is still a resisting, reactionary argument that modernism is destroying or diluting Thailand's long history of woven craft.

Jakkai doesn't really hold any close affinity to traditional Thai textiles, although he does admire the visible craftsmanship of hill tribe embroidery by the Mon tribesfolk. He is also appreciative of Lanna textiles from Northern Thailand, with their intricate layering of weave designs and bold juxtapositions of color and pattern surrounded by decorous, elaborate borders. Drawing comparisons to the representative symbols and images in Mexican and Native American decorative textiles, Jakkai finds remarkable similarities between traditional woven Thai textiles and those of Africa or the Americas. Such an appreciation of folk methodology can also be found in the hand woven, geometrically patterned quilts of the present day Alabama rural community of Gee's Bend.

Since the establishment of the modern Thai state in 1933, much of what has constituted the Thai sensibility has emanated from the three core pillars of religion, monarchy, and nationhood. The importance of these three central facets of the Thai psyche should never be underestimated. Systematically ingrained into every child, and incessantly reinforced through complicit media propaganda, these key principles are symbolically represented in the tricolor red, white, and blue of the national flag.

As with the overwhelming majority of his fellow 60-million-plus countrymen, from his earliest years Jakkai has been conditioned unquestioningly to extol and revere such rule of governance. However, as he has matured Jakkai has become increasingly aware and critical of the ways some Thais have manipulated and abused these institutions to fulfill personal agendas. While Jakkai's intention is not to criticize or undermine the kingdom's core institutions, his latest fabric creations sarcastically mock the manner in which these tenets are being exploited, and those whom he deems responsible.

Regurgitated ad nauseum by self-serving populist politicians who pray upon the naiveté and unwavering loyalty of Thailand's largely agrarian populace, once patriotic rallying cries such as *rak chart*, meaning to love and serve the country, have been rendered little more than hollow clichés. Ignorantly consuming their own vacuous mantras, such guileful power-wielders have even taken to using the untouchable status of the Thai monarchy to push forward with their own causes.

Understandably when it comes to issues of identity in art, a country's national flag becomes a convenient icon around which to engage visual dialogue. Among the many interpretations of the Thai standard, the tricolor has been reformatted into a glowing fluorescent light installation by Nopachai "Toi" Ungkavatanapong (2005), while painter Natee Utarit's muted artificial flag series, *The Substance of Red, White and Blue* (2007), hints at the fragility of Thai democracy.

Jakkai's patchwork variant, **Standard**, is strongly reminiscent of the methodology of his earlier abstract fiber works executed in the late 1990s. A hoarder of fabric samples which he never discards, Jakkai constructs his flag from fragmented strips of otherwise unwanted material. The composite small strands create a rippling sea of red, white and blue that represents the diversity of the Thai people and their unity as championed in the national anthem.

With modern Thailand embroiled in a Muslim insurgency in its southernmost provinces, its northern hill tribesfolk struggling to attain legitimate citizenship, and growing discord between the largely Bangkok centered urban elite and the disgruntled agrarian masses, this superficial portrayal of a nation living in harmony is far from reality. The weathered veneer of Jakkai's flag imbues it with the air of a bygone era, which the artist uses to question the notion of patriotism in Thailand today. Given the self-perpetuating moniker of the "Land of Smiles," Thais consider themselves a peaceful, fun loving nation. While many visitors superficially affirm this character, Jakkai views his countrymen's present attitudes and behavior as somewhat contradictory.

The modern day persona of Thailand's Buddhist order has also come under scrutiny in recent years. Rapid modernization in a more globalised world has resulted in the rise of capitalist consumerism and materialistic desire, which have increasingly engulfing the Thai character. One result has been incidences of moral waywardness among Buddhist monks.

In a country at great odds with itself, struggling to adhere to its historic cultural backbone while readily embracing the trappings of a consumer driven society, a despondent Jakkai ponders whether he should even deliberate such issues. Against the increasingly turbulent political deadlock of daily street demonstrations that has gripped Thailand since the 2006 coup that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Jakkai yearns to extricate himself from the consumption and misinformation of a nation in political limbo.

As is the vast majority of Thailand's population, Jakkai is a practicing Buddhist. A key facet of the Buddhist path to enlightenment is the spiritual centering of being mindful, attaining a state of peace in the mind. For Jakkai, focusing himself on such a goal has become increasingly difficult considering the climate of simmering agitation in the Thai capital, Bangkok. Attempting to find his own sanctuary, Jakkai has built himself a home in the northern province of Chiang Mai, a place to gain distance from all the interference. In much the same manner that the late Montien Boonma's aromatic and calming installation pieces were a meditative act, the time-consuming physical construction of Jakkai's art has also become a meditative and therapeutic process that allows him physical and mental control. This helps him gain perspective on an instantaneous global society where everything is monitored against the clock.

The vitalization and curative merits of abiding by Buddhist principles have pervaded the varying media explorations of numerous Thai artists, including the process-driven works of Kamin Lertchaiprasert and the early installations of Sakarin Krue-on. The incorporation of Buddhist textual incantations into Jakkai's artworks was first manifested in the 2004 series, *Strange Land*, and resurfaced again in the 2008 tapestry, ***Suffrage***, in which the artist appropriates traditional rust hued monastic robes. The utilization of these cloths is mirrored in the controversial paintings of young emerging artist Anupong Chantorn, whose depictions of scavenging, crow-faced monks have drawn scorn from Thailand's Buddhist Council.

Embellished with ancient Pali language mantras and entwined with the rhythmic flow of bold floral prints and colorful bird motifs, *Suffrage* is Jakkai's whimsically idealized vision of nirvana. Within this sacral realm, he stitches in a pageant of *hi-so* (high society) ladies known in Thailand as *khunyng*. Recognized for their trademark bouffant hairdos that are dyed jet black long into the twilight years, many such ladies of leisure choose to devote their time to following a particularly revered monk. Jakkai visualizes these ladies with their hands in prayer, dressed in the virginal white robes that Buddhist nuns wear. Yet he contradicts any sense of purity by cladding them in high heels, with bright red lipstick and a black coiffure. The implication is of a certain taboo sexual energy that these women harmlessly foster knowing that the man-of-the-cloth is physically unobtainable. *Suffrage* also levels a deeper critique of male hierarchical bias within the orthodox Thai Buddhist monastic community.

Scrutiny of religious practice has edged Jakkai beyond two-dimensional fiber art into installation for the merit-making work, ***Lucky Ware***. For Thai Buddhist worshippers, it is customary to make a donation of a saffron colored plastic bucket full of practical items to benefit monks, who are supposed to live a

humble existence. In the wake of several media scandals that have exposed some members of the modern clergy as behaving in a manner that is far from austere or celibate, today Jakkai feels he fulfills this selfless duty with growing resentment and impurity. Removing the bags of rice, matches, candles, medicine, incense, and other everyday supplies typically stocked in such spiritual packages, for this installation of ready-mades and an antique religious painting, Jakkai supplants contemporary items associated with selfishness and vice. In the artist's jaded commodified interpretation of *sangha than* buckets, alcohol, condoms, skin whitening creams, and lottery tickets are the new sustenance of worship.

Jakkai continues his critique of the hollow ritualism of contemporary Thais towards the Buddhist faith in the piece, ***Fashion***. A conscious observer of the industry's trends, Jakkai emblazons the woven cloth with the seasonal fashion determiner of "Spring/Summer 07." His sarcastic patchwork quilt derides the craze for collecting *Jatukham* amulets, a fad which lasted little over a year and which led to one woman's death in a stampede to procure the fortuitous trinkets. With much of the country briefly consumed by a desire to possess the purportedly powerful talismans as a means to great luck and prosperity, Jakkai points his finger at both collectors and the opportunist temple that was blessing the amulets by the hundreds of thousands.

Jakkai deems such obsessive behavior as self-delusive, a theme which he maintains in the work, ***Munsai***, or Envy. Evoking the largely monochromatic *toile de jouy* designs of 18th century Europe, in *Munsai* Jakkai serves up a menagerie of animal costumes. Far from evoking a fancy dress party, the artist uses his recurrent theme of people trussed in animal costumes as a metaphor for the contrived personas humans construct in order to placate societal norms. With the humans "going at it like rabbits," the somewhat comedic visualization of a bunny-style Kama Sutra across dainty white doilies also suggests that hedonistic escapism is not being true to oneself.

From issues of faith, in ***Heel*** Jakkai examines another intrinsic facet of the Thai character by looking at the delicate subject of the Thai monarchy. Worshipped by many as demigods, Thailand's monarchs are held up as the vital cornerstone of the nation and are looked to for resolution in times of crisis. In the past, commoners had to prostrate themselves in front of the king so that their head was positioned below the lowest part of the king's body, his feet. In the title of *Heel*, the artist makes reference both to the human appendages as well as to the canine-associated order to behave obediently as a master demands. Drawing from Buddhist mythology, *Heel* is enlivened with an assortment of animals brandishing sticks and bows and arrows. The recurrent bestial imagery and narrative tropes are reminiscent of American artist Kiki Smith, whose multi-angled approach to artistic production intrigues Jakkai.

Hunting down some unseen enemy, *Heel's* analogy is to the undermining of the institution of the monarchy. People use the mantle of the monarchy as a banner to hide behind, as well as a weapon for bringing down their enemies, with accusations of *lèse majesté* often thrown round to discredit opponents. As Thais can often be highly superstitious and ritualistic, the days of the week are symbolized by different colors. One only has to look at the coded shirt colors worn by much of the populace to recognize the particular day of the week. Reflected in the reverential yellow, saffron and gold mosaic backdrop of *Heel*, Monday's metaphoric color shines brightest across Bangkok's thoroughfares as it denotes the prestigious birthday of the present king.

Not uncommon among the court-connected circles of the Thai capital that have long been tethered to the extended ancestral lineage of earlier Thai monarchs, it is interesting to note that Jakkai himself has some regal binding. Considered one of Thailand's most influential artists of his generation, Jakkai's grandfather was HSH Prince Subha Svasti, a grandson of King Mongkut (Rama IV), the 19th century monarch written about in the *Anna and the King* memoirs.

Originally intended to function as a triptych is the three patchwork quilt series, ***Hopes & Dreams***. The gaudily colored fabrics are a response to vernacular Thai homes in which tenants typically adorn a wall with a dedicated image of His Majesty the King placed at the highest point, with all other images, such as portraits of revered monks, respectfully hung below. With an absence of consideration, Jakkai has

witnessed such walls of homage also dressed with a hotchpotch montage of pop cultural layering, including scantily clad calendar girls and famous international soccer players.

Enamored of the sublime tackiness of kitsch provincial aesthetics, Jakkai admires Thai artist Top Chantrakul's ability to imaginatively reconstitute vernacular culture with fresh perspectives. Again incorporating lottery numbers across the surface, the artist refers to the desire for instant resolution and success, a characteristic that is perhaps born out of Buddhism's focus on the present state of being. Jakkai himself admits to being entrenched in such a mindset.

Maintaining the compositional approach of inserting narrative portrait-style frames within the larger picture plane, the autobiographical tapestry, *Ruam Mitr*, or Family Reunion, sees Jakkai withdrawing and isolating himself among those he deems fundamental to his well being, his family and friends. Unashamedly nostalgic and sentimental, a photo album of snapshot memories carries viewers on an episodic life journey that serves as a distancing mechanism from the strain of reality. However, this focusing on the self is somewhat ironic in that it is also perceived as selfish and socially irresponsible.

Jakkai Siributr's latest series of fiber art paints a discordant picture of an artist bewildered by the path his country is veering along, both sympathetic towards, and repulsed by, the capricious society he is immersed within. His present confusion is symptomatic of the state of mind of many of his fellow Thais amidst the present political impasse. With Thailand a fragile democracy at best, a nepotistic plutocracy at worst, Jakkai yearns to escape to a more serene and spiritual plane of existence. The question now is will his country let him?

Steven Pettifor is an independent curator and critic based in Bangkok. This essay was written in September 2008, at a time when a state of emergency had just been declared in Bangkok due to escalating civil disobedience among pro- and anti-government groups.

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