

TRANSIENT SHELTER

JAKKAI SIRIBUTR



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FOREWORD

TYLER ROLLINS

Tyler Rollins Fine Art is pleased to present *Transient Shelter*, an exhibition of new works by Jakkai Siributr, taking place at our gallery in New York City from April 17 – May 31, 2014. Jakkai has long been known as one of Thailand's leading artists working with textiles, producing meticulously handmade tapestry and installation works that make powerful statements about religious, social, and political issues in contemporary Thailand. A main preoccupation of his art is the interaction between Buddhism and materialism in modern life, and the everyday popular culture of Thailand. In recent years, he has incorporated other materials and media in his work, including industrial and found materials, sound, and video. For *Transient Shelter*, Jakkai has produced a series of self-portrait photographs that have him "embodying" the elaborately embroidered and ornamented uniforms that are also part of the exhibition, along with a video work. The exhibition is curated by Singapore-based researcher, curator and critic Iola Lenzi.

The exhibition is a meditation on the transience of worldly success and the way the trappings of social status are often imbued with quasi-mystical associations that maintain a link with animistic beliefs. With the photographs, Jakkai adopts poses taken from portraits of his ancestors, many of whom served as royal courtiers and in some cases had their lives cut short by the sometimes tragic vicissitudes of Thai political history. Wearing Thai civil service uniforms (ranked from C-11, the highest category, down to C-2) decked out with awards, he evokes the type of formal portrait photographs that are included in the funeral books that Thai families compile to commemorate the lives of relatives, and that typically emphasize the deceased person's social status. Jakkai has encrusted the actual uniforms with elaborate ornaments that are inspired by Buddhist amulets and animist talismans, hinting at the deep-seated beliefs that underlie current social conventions. With some of the portraits, Jakkai poses in front of dilapidated backgrounds, pointing to the process of decay and rebirth that alludes to the cycle of life and death, as well as perhaps the state of social breakdown in today's fractious Thailand. The exhibition title itself suggests that social status, like everything else in life, is but a transitory phase. This sense is heightened by the short video work, in which a uniform jacket slowly moves under flowing water, accompanied by a soundtrack of a burning funeral pyre.

Jakkai's work has been shown in a number of museums around the world in recent years. In the United States, his work was included in *Phantoms of Asia: Contemporary Awakens the Past* at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (2012), as well as the museum's *Here / Not Here: Buddha Presence in Eight Recent Works* (2011). As part of the latter exhibition, Jakkai presented his interactive *Reciprocity* project in the Asian Art Museum's Tateuchi Gallery; his work *Recession* (2010) subsequently entered the museum's collection. In 2009, Jakkai's *Lucky Ware* installation (2008) was featured at the Rubin Museum in New York City, and he was included in *Truly Truthful* in Miami. He has presented two previous solo exhibitions at Tyler Rollins Fine Art: *Temple Fair* (2008) and *Karma Cash & Carry* (2010). In Asia, Jakkai's *Shroud* installation was recently featured in the exhibition *Exploring the Cosmos: The Stupa as a Buddhist Symbol* (2012 – 2013) at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum, which acquired the work for its permanent collection. In 2011, he presented a major exhibition of installations, sculptural works, and embroidered tapestries at the Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand (2011). He was a featured artist in the 2011 Chongqing Biennial and in the 2009 Asian Art Biennial at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, which acquired his work, *Suffrage* (2008). Other important collections of his work include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, and the Vehbi Koç Foundation, Istanbul.

TRANSIENT SHELTER: JAKKAI SIRIBUTR'S ART OF THOUGHTFUL RESISTANCE

IOLA LENZI

For the last several years, Jakkai Siributr's practice has straddled perspectives, the artist scrutinizing Thailand's cultural and political landscapes from dual personal and societal vantage points. As his fifteen-year old oeuvre has gradually moved from preponderantly formalist concerns to cultural critique, Jakkai has increasingly exploited his media of predilection – sewing, knitting, textiles, thread – as conceptual clues illuminating his vision of contemporary life. His iconographies and references have shifted as well as he focuses ever more intently on emblems from the everyday that project one truth externally, but hide a different and often murkier version of reality under the surface. Of special interest to Jakkai are the lacunae, paradoxes and falsehoods of the systems that govern our daily lives. These, however noxious, are seldom challenged, conformity and the stability it brings invariably preferred as paths of least resistance.

In his latest work, *Transient Shelter*, presented for the first time at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, Jakkai ponders a new duality, the meaning of existence as considered after death. The artist builds his three-part photography, video and sculpture-performance-relic piece on altering vistas wherein he examines a spent life from the point of view of both the living and the dead. He enters his topic via a still-thriving Thai nineteenth century tradition, the funeral book.¹ This memorial publication, distributed to guests at cremation ceremonies, through anecdote, eulogy and snippets of biography, celebrates the life of the deceased. Such books also include Buddhist chants and more eclectic cultural information, with particular emphasis placed on photographs of the deceased clothed in medal-adorned uniforms that denote rank and social strata. In these publications the late person's achievements and honors are dwelled upon, while character flaws and set-backs are minimized or ignored. Not morbid, and preciously kept as mementos, cremation books, in their amplifications and deletions play with truth and fiction, so constituting the dead's personal mythology.

Jakkai uses the funeral book's austere-posed portraits as both the notional and formal departure points for *Transient Shelter*. Thus the artist quotes and subverts these images to produce his work's conceptual core, a series of ten performative self-portrait-photographs set in his Bangkok house and garden. In these stiffly-official shots Jakkai has donned richly decorated uniforms, familiar emblems of power to Thais – military, civil servant, police² – that display a plethora of ribbons and medals apparently confirming, as in the real funeral book portraits, his high rank and social importance. But on close inspection, the heavily embellished jackets exhibit invented insignia, sashes, and crests crafted by the artist. Some of these are Buddhist relics of a talismanic nature. Others, confected from the ritual and magical amulets typical of Thailand's syncretic village Buddhism³, infused with animism, attest to the superstition that still underpins superficially-modern Thai life. In particular, in one frame a somber Jakkai sports a necklace of strung phallus charms known as Palad Khik, worn by many Thais to ward off evil, attract women, and improve gambling luck. The uniforms, hand-embroidered and ornamented by Jakkai, also present sewn-thread quotations from Buddhist chants, and in one case the names of Jakkai's ancestors, some of whom are figures from Thai history due to the artist's affiliation with Thai royalty.

Through the appropriation and re-contextualization of these various signifiers of power, convention, and belief – rational or not – and their composition into mock images honoring would-be distinguished lives, Jakkai casts a critical eye on the way tradition is employed in the service of image-making and vacuous exhibitionism, as well as the emptiness underneath acclaim. In so doing, he reveals the disconnect between the true value and spirituality of existence, and its cosmetically-inflated appearance. The critique applies as much to individuals as to society, where in politics, organized religion, and other forms of public life, packaging is given more importance than content. In his impersonation of a cremation book dead man, he asks his audience to contemplate death as a means of understanding the meaning of life, not as a series of successful feats, but as an internalized learning experience, viewed and experienced only by the self.

Constructing a tri-part installation, Jakkai combines his solemn-pastiche photographs with the three-dimensional embroidered uniform jackets as well as with a projection showing the jackets being obscured, magnified, and ultimately destroyed by water. The jackets take their place in the installation as sculptural performance relics, the artist moving metaphorically back and forth between life-as-fiction as seen in the prints, and real erosion or death as embodied by the discarded-but-tangible remnants of the performance, the jackets that still carry the memory of the artist's body. This to-and-fro play within the work, which has no beginning or end, creates a subtle but lively tension that compels audiences to ponder and respond. A similar contradiction dwells in each of the installation's video, object and photograph-series parts: the still images' visual seduction progressively yields to discomfort as the viewer discovers their trickery; the uniforms, performance props, though displayed as lifeless objects, are invitingly tactile and therefore more real than the photographs and their fictional narrative of Jakkai-as-remembered-dead-man in facsimile uniform proclaiming irrational superstition as rank; the short film, which sensually depicts a moving, water-submerged gilt-buttoned uniform jacket, entrances with its visual poetry while also assailing with its reference to drowning. This dichotomy is amplified through sound as the clip's crackling-fire funeral pyre audio-track provokes unease in its contradiction of the watery images.

With *Transient Shelter* Jakkai continues his investigation of performative practice identified in his installation, *Rape and Pillage* (2013), and expands his expressive range with photography and video. Here again mining local icons of religion and entrenched cultural tradition, Jakkai produces an art of thoughtful resistance that allusively takes aim at meaningless hierarchies, ineffective systems, and empty gestures masquerading as consequential. In its questioning of overlapping fiction and truth, dance with image and reality, and to-and-fro between life and death, *Transient Shelter*, though starting with ideas rooted in Thai culture, speaks to a universal audience.

April 2014

NOTES

1. Siamese funeral keepsake books date back to the 1880s, King Rama V starting the practice with the distribution of Dharma prayer books on the occasion of the cremation of one of his queens. Until the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, the use of funeral books was limited to the kingdom's ruling class as a means of record keeping and history recording. Only later did funeral book publication and distribution become a wider social practice, civil servants and government officials taking it up as a way of marking their contribution to the nation and thus justifying celebrating their lives. Thailand's funeral books are rich repositories of information for historians.
2. On the significance of the uniform in the art of Jakkai Siributr see Iola Lenzi, "Rape and Pillage new directions in the art of Jakkai Siributr," *Plunder*, exhibition catalogue, Yavuz Fine Art, Singapore, 2013, pp. 6-7.
3. J.T. McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost & the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 8-13, on magical Buddhism's acceptance by Thais of all social classes.

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore based researcher, curator and critic of Southeast Asian contemporary art. Key exhibitions include: *Negotiating Home History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011*, Singapore Art Museum (2011); *Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (2013); and *Masterpieces Digital Art in Southeast Asia*, Samsung Art Projects. She is the author of *Museums of Southeast Asia* (2005) and teaches in Lasalle-Goldsmiths Singapore's MA of Asian Art Histories programme.



VIEW OF THE INSTALLATION AT TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART



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VIEW OF THE INSTALLATION AT TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART



C-2
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-3
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-4
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-5
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-6
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-7
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-8
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)
edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-9
2014
digital print
40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm
edition of 4 + 2 APs)



C-10

2014

digital print

40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)

edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-11

2014

digital print

40 x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)

edition of 4 + 2 APs



C-2
2014
civil servant's uniform, embellished with objects
28 x 25 x 9 in. (71 x 64 x 23 cm)



C-3

2014

civil servant's uniform, embellished with objects
27 x 19 x 9 in. (69 x 48 x 23 cm)



C-4
2014
civil servant's uniform, embellished with objects
28 x 18 x 9 in. (71 x 46 x 23 cm)



C-5
2014
military uniform, embellished with objects
27 x 17 x 9 in. (69 x 43 x 23 cm)



C-6
2014
civil servant's uniform, embellished with objects
28 x 20 x 9 in. (71 x 51 x 23 cm)



C-7

2014

police uniform, embellished with objects

27 x 19 x 9 in. (69 x 48 x 23 cm)



C-8

2014

civil servant's uniform, embellished with objects
27 x 19 x 9 in. (69 x 43 x 23 cm)



C-9
2014
police uniform, embellished with objects
27 x 18 x 10 in. (69 x 46 x 25 cm)



C-10

2014

military uniform, embellished with objects

28 x 20 x 9 in. (71 x 51 x 23 cm)



C-11

2014

civil servant's uniform, embellished with objects

28 x 17 x 9 in. (71 x 51 x 23 cm)



ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

2014

embroidery on linen handkerchiefs

87 x 106 in (220 x 270 cm)



TRANSIENT SHELTER
2014
video
2:00 min.

JAKKAI SIRIBUTR

SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

Born 1969 in Bangkok, Thailand. Lives and works in Bangkok.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

M.S. in Printed Textile Design, 1996, Philadelphia University.
B.A. in Textile / Fine Arts, 1992, Indiana University, Bloomington.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014

Transient Shelter, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.

2013

Plunder, Yavuz Fine Art, Singapore.

2011

Shroud, The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

2010

Karma Cash & Carry, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.

2008

Temple Fair, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.

2005

ArtPosition, Murten, Switzerland.
Strange Land, H Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand.

2004

Indigen, The Intercontinental, Bangkok, Thailand.

2003

Revel, BMW Meets Arts III and H Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand.

2002

Hounds Under Foot, H Gallery and Eat Me, Bangkok, Thailand.

2001

Hiatus, Eat Me, Bangkok, Thailand.
Oia! Threads of a Greek Journal, 2 Oceans 23, Bangkok, Thailand.

1998

Jakkai On Line, 2 Oceans 23, Bangkok, Thailand.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013

Gentle Matter, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore.
Exploring the Cosmos: The Stupa as a Buddhist Symbol, Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore.

2012

Radiation, DAGC Gallery, Manila.
Phantoms of Asia: Contemporary Awakens the Past, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, CA.

2011

Link Tradition and Future, The 2nd Chongqing Biennale for Young Artists, The Art Museum of Sichuan Fine Art Institute, Chongqing, China.

Bangkok, DOB Hualamphong Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand.
Here / Not Here: Buddha Presence in Eight Recent Works, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA.

2010

Artists Scarecrow Rice Paddy, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

2009

Viewpoints and Viewing Points - The 2009 Asian Art Biennial, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts.
Truly Truthful, Art Asia, Miami, FL.
Asian Contemporary Art Week, Open Portfolio, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY.
Dreaming in Public, Gallery Souflower, Bangkok, Thailand.

2007

Perversion/Subversion, Bangkok International Art Festival, Playground Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand.

2006

NOR:TH, Norway and Thailand: Converging a Prelude to Globalization, The Queen's Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand.

1999

Crossroads of Thailand, 2 Oceans 23, Bangkok, Thailand.

1997

Festival of Woven Arts, Goethe Institute, Bangkok, Thailand.

1996

Printed Fabric Show, Golden Pailey Design Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

AWARDS

2001

Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Grant

EXPERIENCE

1996 – 2006

Lecturer, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand.

1998 – 2000

Guest Lecturer, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

National Taiwan Museum of Fine Art, Taiwan.
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, CA.
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, WA.
Vehbi Koç Foundation, Istanbul, Turkey.
Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

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TRANSIENT SHELTER

JAKKAI SIRIBUTR

APRIL 17 - MAY 31, 2014

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