

Jakkai Siributr

**The Art Center at Chulalongkorn University,
Bangkok, Thailand**

Out of 178 countries, Thailand ranked 153rd in a 2010 press freedom index released by Reporters Without Borders. The last few years have seen an increase in lese-majesty cases, a local law that renders insults to the Thai monarchy a criminal offence punishable with up to 15 years in prison. In 2005, 18 cases were prosecuted in court; in 2009, 164; and in 2010, 478. Perhaps consequently, unlike other Southeast Asian cities, Bangkok does not have a coherent underground art scene in the manner we might associate with, say, the Indonesian artist-activist collective Taring Padi, who produce agitprop posters and street theatre; or the preponderance of ephemeral performance art made in Yangon in order to avoid military censure; or the overlapping art, music and graffiti scenes that are conspicuous in Manila. Art that is overtly oppositional to the dominant, conservative and normative understandings of Thai culture and society, or art that solicits such contextualization, is atypical in Bangkok, with only a few exceptions.

About this review

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In a context where critical debate in public is, at best, discouraged, Thai artists generally take an oblique approach to the very idea of critique. The writer Dennis Lim recently commented perceptively about the works of famed filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul in the September 2011 issue of *Artforum*: '[in Thailand] the spiritual is political'. Thailand's culture is a deeply animistic one, which places a high social premium on the production and maintenance of 'good' images. Consequently, superstition and myth-making usually inform the narratives and images of state-sponsored representation. And it's on these terms that some of the more interesting Thai artists have begun to unsettle received understandings.



Thai artist Jakkai Siributr's practice is based in stitching, embroidery and other craft methods that engage with the iconography of popular but bastardized versions of Buddhism: from the idols of a current cult of amulet worship to the forms of the Thai yantra, designs that sponsor luck, power or protection. The title of his current solo show is 'Shroud', which refers to the animist practice of using dead bodies to 'bless' cloth, on which yantras are then often drawn. Shrouding doesn't exist in Thailand; Siributr is interested in metaphors of concealment, ambiguity and potential revelation to address the hypocrisies, and occasional nonsense, that attend pervasive local versions of Thai culture and politics.



A large installation titled *Evening News* (all works 2011) hangs embroidered media images of last year's Thai protests from a type of sacred string used in temple ceremonies to connect one to a higher being. Some of the images possess pathos (a lone woman cleaning up a pool of blood), others are smirk-inducing (soldiers with sexy young women), and others depict the protesters, including a misguided foreigner who publicly declared his intention to take the upheaval as an opportunity to loot. Behind this installation is a remarkable gold-coloured and sequined hanging, *Come to Me*, which features a central lone figure gesturing to the viewer to come forward, drawing on the generic pattern of the *yantra* to comment on the seductions of worship and belief.

Other embroidered wall-hangings – such as *Realpolitik*, *Health* and *Hi-So* – also disrupt received forms, or, more accurately, draw out the implications of hysterical worship. Go-go boys, minor celebrities, phalluses and Damien Hirst-style skulls are included amidst mandala-type shapes. At issue, of course, are the contradictions of an officially religious country that remains politically unstable and grotesquely materialistic. However, Siributr's methods prove as interesting as the details of his concerns. Contemporary understandings of craft, as the academic Julia Bryan-Wilson has pointed out, also in *Artforum*, refuse a stable ideology. Artists who employ craft, from Grayson Perry to Ghada Amer, are diverse; and the politics and history of craft are skewed by the current contexts of a global labour force that is predominately female and forms of advanced capitalism that

can assimilate the so-called alternative of the handmade.

Siributr's works are clearly situated at the intersections of these understandings because they are endlessly disruptive. The seductions of his surfaces give way to provocative and disconcerting idiosyncrasies; they segue esoteric, personal and media imagery; and shift between the spectacular, materiality and questions of process. Perhaps, following Wilson, contemporary artists working with craft are uniquely positioned in this respect. The highly decorative impact of Siributr's works should not be dismissed.

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Frieze

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