



PINAREE SANPITAK: QUIETLY FLOATING

MAURA REILLY AND SAISHA GRAYSON

Pinaree Sanpitak is one of the most prolific artists working in Southeast Asia today and has been a powerful voice in Thai art since the 1980s. Demonstrating from the outset an intentionally feminine sensibility in her artistic practice, Sanpitak has injected Thailand's burgeoning contemporary art scene with a strong female presence. Mining a language of forms that is emphatically personal and yet simultaneously universal, Sanpitak productively draws on the artistic traditions of East and West to continually push her work beyond such limiting binaries. In addition to her influence as an artist, she helped expand exhibition opportunities for other regional artists by co-founding and running the alternative Silom Art Space in Bangkok from 1991 to 1995.

Sanpitak has worked with a signature repertoire of symbols referencing the female body—breasts, eggs, vessels, curving silhouettes—since she came to prominence in the late 1980s. Yet one of the most distinctive characteristics of Sanpitak's art is its diversity. Constantly exploring a broad range of artistic approaches, from traditional paintings to interactive installations, from craft to culinary interpolations, from textile manipulation to glass sculpture, she continually impresses with the creativity and technical mastery she brings to bear on her subject matter. More importantly, each of these excursions into a new mode of production has invoked a different conceptual frame, deepening the significance of her overall project, which ultimately reveals itself as a meditation on the multiplicity and malleability of these female forms and their meaning.

While many writers have focused on the birth of Sanpitak's son in 1993 as the formative moment for her artistic vocabulary, the artist's maternal iconography was evident earlier in her career. Works from the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrate her conscious invocation of the female body, fertility and the assertion of personal identity within those universalizing concepts. In a 1991 mixed media collage on plywood, color blocks surround a central photograph of four squash, overexposed to become white silhouettes against a busy background (Fig. 1). Entitled *Self*, the work cheekily plays with the tension between individuality and group identity, as the singular term of the title invites a one-to-one alignment between a fruit and the artist, while the formal similarities between the four squash suggests a more universalized reading of female selfhood. Expanding this iconography in *The Squash & I* (1991-2), Sanpitak installed a cluster of papier-mâché squash on the gallery floor below a series of works on paper. These earth-toned compositions vacillate between literal and abstracted representations of the female torso and the squash. In one drawing, the emphasis is placed on the pear-like shape of wide hips curving in to

an exaggeratedly tiny waist. In others, the fruit shape is positioned as a floating womb or shrunk to serve as the tiny belly button. Suddenly, seen next to these more evocative abstractions, a traditional still-life of a squash positioned on a table takes on anthropomorphic overtones. This probing of the female body as a metaphor of fruitfulness and abundance, and also an autobiographical exploration of the self, continues throughout her oeuvre.

Her next series of works, produced between 1994 and 1996, demonstrates her continued interest in organic and natural forms, with a more pronounced concentration on the female breast. Sanpitak had just given birth to her first child and was fascinated by the power of the breast-feeding mother, who is both "giving and receiving." In the exhibition *Breast Works I* from this period, the single silhouetted mounds are isolated, pert and pointed skyward. Seen this way, as in *Pink Breast* (1994) (Fig. 2), one is struck by the relationship between the female body and the sacred Buddhist architectural tradition of the stupa. The installation *Breast Works/Untitled* (1994) (Fig. 3) from the same exhibition makes this analogy clearer, as a hundred miniature, domed sculptures made out of saa paper dot the floor like architectural models. These mark the beginning of an ongoing and productive dialogue between Sanpitak's chosen forms and Buddhist philosophical and cultural references. She subsequently foregrounds the way that breasts and wombs mirror not only the shape, but the deeper metaphoric meanings of the stupa and the alms bowl. In doing so, she reminds us that they can all be regarded as vessels of life-giving force and as containers of potent emptiness, a prized theological concept in Buddhism. As critic Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker commented in relation to Sanpitak's work, "The solid stupa, the ultimate Buddhist reliquary... encloses and protects all within itself. When inverted it becomes the Buddha's offering bowl, it is open to receive all who would seek peace... The bowl and the stupa are the ultimate expressions of the void." Later pieces from the *Breast Works II* series (1995-96) distort the basic feminine shape—elongated mammaries becoming simultaneously phallic in *The Black and the White* (1995) and nipples sprouting tails like semen in *Crosses and Breasts* (1995) (Fig. 4)—to produce ambiguous, hermaphroditic images of fertility and sexual signification.

From 1996 to 1999, Sanpitak's recurring iconographic element was the female torso and, as in the *Squash and I*, the body is presented in gradations of abstraction. In *Confident Bodies* (1996-97) (Fig. 5), the artist broadens her focus from isolated body parts to invoke the standing human body. One hundred and twenty vertical steel rods rise to hip-height, atop of which sprout sculpted saa paper female torsos, replete with

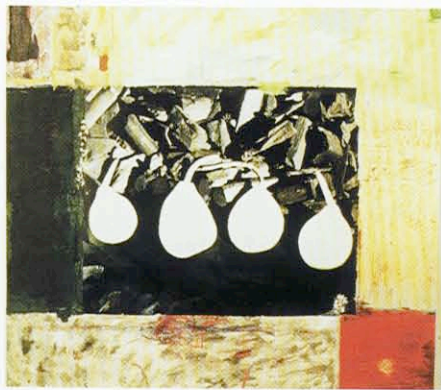


Fig. 1 *Self*

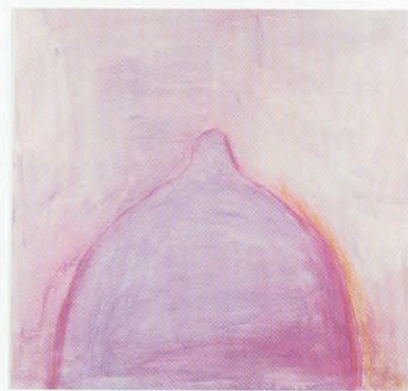


Fig. 2 *Pink Breast*

breasts, though these are often deformed or attenuated. Reminiscent of the dressmaker's headless manikin, these upright, life-size figures occupy the room with a bodily presence that is distinct from the earlier, smaller, floor-bound sculptural groups. This shift in scale is taken further in the 1998 installation, *Womanly Bodies*, composed of twenty-five towering constructions of saa fibre, rattan, jute and bamboo that almost touch the gallery ceiling. Within these roughly geometric, spiraling cubed structures, however, one can recognize the convexly curved sides that Sanpitak used in her drawings from 1991-2 to indicate the female silhouette.

Noon-Nom (2001-2) (Fig. 6), one of the artist's most important large-scale installations, returns attention to the isolated breast, but keeps the holistic body in play by inviting the audience to lay upon these furniture-sized pillows modeled after female anatomy. "Nom" can literally translate as either breast milk, which emphasizes each term's nurturing function. As such, the work's title and form both playfully evoke our earliest instinct of nestling into the soft, fleshiness of the mother's chest in search of warmth and sustenance. The full installation comprises two hundred, hand-sewn, black, white, beige and pink cushions packed into a one hundred square meter room, creating a comfortable lounge-like scene into which viewers can meander, sit, recline, and interact. This sea of breast-cushions relays ideas of bounty and comfort, and brings to mind stuffed toys, suggesting the innocence of child's play. In the similarly configured installation, *Temporary Insanity* (2003-4) (Fig. 7), Sanpitak pushed the joyful celebration of female form further by having the brightly-colored, soft sculptures imbedded with timers and sensor devices, which were triggered into movement and sound by the spectators themselves. By producing jumping, sound-producing breast-cushions Sanpitak has explained that she was attempting to expand our perception of a strong female bodily symbol and alter our attitudes through the senses of sight, sound and touch.

In 2005, when she began her *Breast Stupa Cookery* series, she aroused another sense—that of taste. In this ongoing, collaborative art project, Sanpitak works with professional and amateur chefs to create meals using specially designed breast stupa-shaped cooking molds made in cast aluminum and glazed stoneware. The artist and her collaborator-chefs have hosted many of these events, presenting their five-course nourishing nipple-meals to audiences in Thailand, Japan, China, Spain, France, and the USA. *Breast Sand Jedis* (2005), which brought together professional ceramicists and children from marginalized communities in Spain, invoked the sense of smell. The children modeled their own vessels of identity,



Fig. 3 *Breast Works / Untitled*

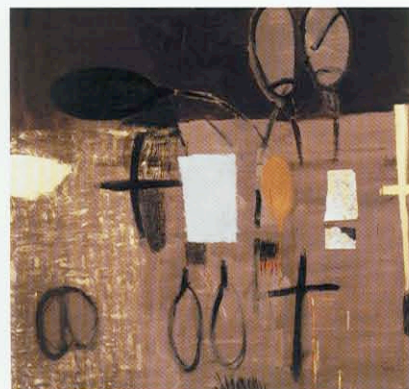


Fig. 4 *Crosses and Breasts*

which were then fired, glazed and filled with scented objects of their choosing. Sanpitak's most recent collaboration with master glass blowers from Murano, Italy, is closely tied to the current exhibition. Together, they translated the breast cloud morphology into translucent colored glass sculptures for the series *Quietly Solid* (2010) (Fig. 8). These interactive, collaborative projects and large-scale gallery installations partake in a lexicon of global contemporary art marked by the post-medium, conceptual, biennial framework, moving effortlessly from the kind of (ominous) bodily presence emphasized by minimalist and monumental sculpture to the kind of warm interactivity and communal togetherness valued in relational works by her fellow countryman, Rikrit Tiraviniija.

Alongside these assertively of-the-moment contemporary installations and her projects with a pointedly Thai referent, Sanpitak also has a trajectory of two dimensional works on canvas that engage with the more formalistic, painterly tradition of Western high art and Modernism. Building on the gestural, symbolically-laden works of *Breast Works I & II*, future canvases have focused on pairing down the figural elements, whether to cartoon-like shapes or abstract anthropomorphic forms, and pushing color and texture as dynamic elements. Only the title and Sanpitak's past works require a maternal interpretation of *Womanly Heaven* from 1999; this ovoid could be an egg, a womb, fruit or female body, but it is also vague and not necessarily representational. *Vessel in Blue* (2001) (Fig. 9), *Silver Offering II*, (2003) and *Over the Blue* (2006-7) more clearly depict "an object" that is their subject, but the bodily referent is no longer clear. The vessel has become the literal outline of a bowl, the offering a silver collage of leaves that form an apple, a tear-drop, a breast, a candle. Each invites a purely aesthetic appreciation of tonal quality, brushwork and the balance of vibrant blue and opalescent peach, or silver against grey.

It is from this body of work that the large-scale canvases in the exhibition *Quietly Floating* emerge. In these eight paintings, the artist extends her painterly turn in response to the space, light and quiet seclusion she experienced during a recent residency in California. Set as clouds against a wide-open sky, the formal potential of her chosen subjects is again highlighted. One sees how they can morph, become abstract, vague, and hybrid; how breasts become pods, wombs become clouds, and clouds sprout pod-shaped leaves. These works stand out, however, for their rigorous reduction. Gone are dark outlines and sharp color contrasts; instead the works are almost monochromatic, with white the primary vehicle used to distinguish the figure and produce textural variation. This texture, too, is smoother than the collage-like

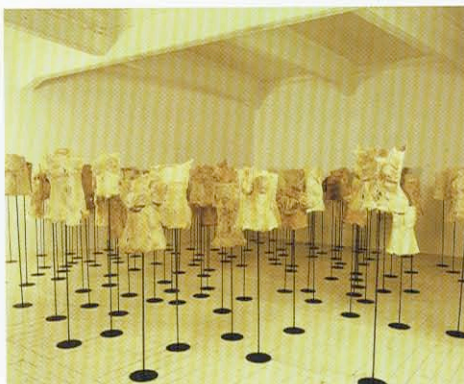


Fig. 5 *Confident Bodies*

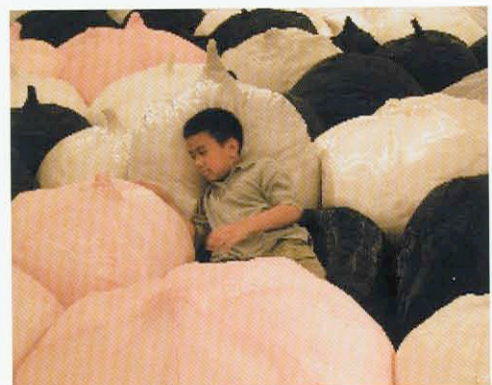


Fig. 6 *Noon-Nom*

color blocks found in *Womanly Heaven*, *Vessel in Blue* and the leafing of *Silver Offering II*, producing an undulating wave of varying intensities of hue in *Brilliant Blue* (2009) and *Cloud Track* (2009). These paintings also seem to lighten the metaphoric load not only from the proffered symbolism of *Noon-Nom* or *Breast Stupa Cookery*, but also from the more literal titles of her earlier paintings. Both visually and linguistically, connections to Buddhism or femaleness are left unstated and up to interpretation. Instead, the canvases and their titles redirect the viewer towards a contemplation of shape, color, texture and an appreciation of the application of paint to canvas and compositional balance. Their Zen tranquility is produced by enveloping the viewer within their subtle surfaces rather than by referring them to Buddhist iconography or traditionally Thai materials.

Likewise, the mirrored sculpture—developing out of bodily-scaled, three-dimensional vessels begun in 2002—is a more abstract, less literal translation of one of her primary subjects. No longer the empty alms bowl or inverted breast, the base of this container is flattened into a shallow basin. The reflective bottom, though, creates an imaginary depth that allows the viewer to contemplate a Narcissus-like double when standing before or above it. This shiny surface is filled by reflections of the world rather than the symbolic void. The drawings in the exhibition are intimate and delicate counterpoints to the paintings, demonstrating the same reinterpretation of her career-long interest in female iconography but through a more abstract lens. Clouds and breast forms float in gravity-free, cream-colored landscapes; the repetition of sprouting roots, plants and leaves, which speak to life-giving or generative forces, suggests a reemergence of botanical analogies within the artist's vocabulary.

Quietly Floating's successful deployment of the formal language of abstraction, as yet another way to draw out the potentiality of her organic imagery, leads to a deeper appreciation of Sanpitak as an artistic chameleon. This overview has touched briefly on only a few of the many concatenation these shapes have taken in Sanpitak's work. Embracing the conceptual, material and aesthetic considerations of a multiplicity of practices, she uses her chosen forms as the fulcrum for an otherwise heterogeneous body of work. The shapes lend cohesion to her project without ever limiting her horizons, as they are always ripe nourishing power, artistically, and continue to bear fruit in Sanpitak's exploration. In particular, this constant return to the same pool of symbolic forms allows Sanpitak to consider all the ways in which they are invested with meaning. These "essential" female tropes can be culturally specific and universal,



Fig. 7 *Temporary Insanity*

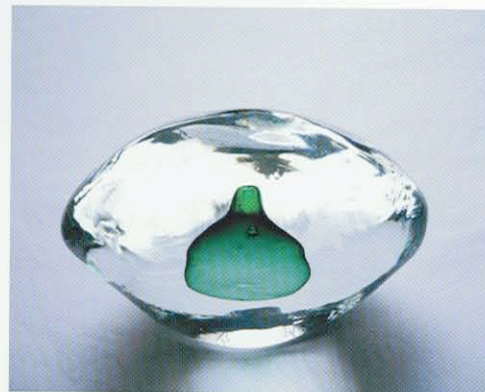


Fig. 8 *Quietly Solid*

grandiose and playful, uplifting and introspective, spiritually potent and devotedly materialist. By fixing one set of terms, she demonstrates their flexibility and the ways in which artistic intervention and practice shape meaning and viewer experience.

The freedom found within this limited repertoire of forms leads her to produce an endlessly variable dialogue between her work and her audience, between her cultural referents and theirs, between her personal artistic project and a shared exploration of selfhood. A Western viewer familiar with feminist art from the second half of the 20th century can see relations between Sanpitak and the core imagery espoused by Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, the organic forms of Mira Schor; Rona Pondick's installation of breast-like pods, their precursor in Louise Bourgeois's repetition of detached breast protrusions; and Eva Hesse's eccentric abstraction and post-minimalist repetition of organic forms. A viewer looking to connect the work to Sanpitak's Thai heritage will be more likely to note its relationship to the Buddhist iconography of the mound and vessel, as discussed, or the traditional privileging of fertility as a source of ritual and even magical power for pre-colonial Southeast Asian women or other artists of her generation who have used the metaphor of the bowl, such as Montien Boonma. The most recent generation of contemporary art audiences might recognize practices that have emerged as central in the last few decades—interactive installations, site-specific and responsive projects, collaborations with performance groups and local communities; processes which rely in some way on others to complete the piece. Against this backdrop, the simplicity and clarity of these new large-scale paintings is all the more striking. Who would have initially thought to compare Sanpitak to Mark Rothko or Georgia O'Keeffe? And yet this is the other artistic language she is adapting to her project in the current work, one that deploys the affect of color and the abstraction of forms to an aesthetic, emotive and intellectual end.

What is most important to recognize, however, is that these affinities come from the various artists responding to the same inspiration, the same desire on the part of each individual to explore that which is closest to them: their bodies, their cultural conditions, their environment. Rather than thinking of overlapping tendencies as lines of influence, it is more productive to see them as cross-cultural and contingent reactions to those things shared amongst the various groupings. The sensitivity Sanpitak shows to her specific socio-cultural moment is what makes her unique, as her work accurately reflects the complexity of the world in which she seeks to understand herself. Refusing to produce a totalizing, coherent self or stylistically static body of work, she celebrates the multiplicity of forms from which we can construct meaning.

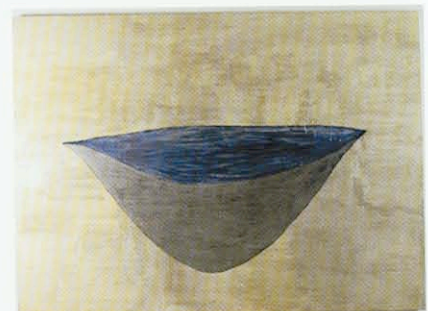


Fig. 9 *Vessel in Blue*

Maura Reilly, PhD, is Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts. Prior to the AFA, she was the founding curator of the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where she organized several exhibitions, including the critically acclaimed *Global Feminisms*, co-curated with Linda Nochlin. Her recent curatorial projects include *La Mirada Iracunda (The Furious Gaze)*, *Nayland Blake: Behavior*, *Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became*, *Richard Bell: I Am Not Sorry*, and *Ghada Amer: Happily Ever After*.

Saisha Grayson is a PhD candidate in contemporary art and feminist theory at The Graduate Center, CUNY, and writes frequently on issues of the body in art. She also works as a freelance curator, presenting emerging artists at alternative spaces throughout New York.

NOTES

1 "Femininity on a Plate." *Bangkok Post*, March 4, 2009. http://www.trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0089/Bangkok_Post_article.pdf

2 Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, "Breast and Bowls: Metaphor and Meaning in the Art of Pinaree Sanpitak," *Temporary Insanity* (James H.W. Thompson Foundation, 2004), 34.

3 Milford-Lutzker, 34.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. *Self*, 1991

photograph, collage, mixed medium on paper and plywood

63 x 63 in. (160 x 160 cm)

collection Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia

2. *Pink Breast*, 1994

acrylic, pastel on paper

41.5 x 42 in. (105.5 x 106.5 cm)

private collection

3. *Breast Works/Untitled*, 1994

100 saa paper mulberry fiber sculptures

17 monoprints on paper, size variable

4. *Crosses and Breasts*, 1995

acrylic, turmeric, pastel, collage on canvas

79 x 79 in. (200 x 200 cm)

5. *Confident Bodies*, 1996-97

saa fiber and steel, 120 pieces

height 47-71 in. (120-180 cm)

collection Misiem Yip-intsoi Sculpture Garden

6. *Noon-Nom*, 2001-2002

organza, synthetic fiber, 200 pieces

installation: 1000 square feet (93 square meters)

Bangkok University Art Gallery

photo courtesy of Art-U Room, Tokyo

7. *Temporary Insanity*, 2003-2004

silk, synthetic fiber, battery, motor, propeller, sound device

overall size variable

site: Nuit Blanche Brussels 2008; Hôtel de Ville, La Grande Place

8. *Quietly Solid*, 2008-2010

hand blown Murano glass by master Silvano Signoretto

from a series of 10 unique pieces, approximate length 12^{1/2} in. (31.5 cm)

9. *Vessel in Blue*, 2001

acrylic, charcoal on canvas

63 x 87 in. (160 x 220.5 cm)

private collection