



The Mirror, 2009
Aluminum and mirrored glass
Edition of 6 + 2 AP
37 ½ (height) x 76 (length) x 7 (depth) in. (95 x 193 x 18 cm)

Pinaree Sanpitak "Quietly Floating"

Valerie Gladstone

Serenity characterizes Pinaree Sanpitak's first solo New York exhibition "Quietly Floating" at the spacious Chelsea gallery of Tyler Rollins Fine Art. Her first two pieces introduce us to a gentle world where nature and the unknown harmoniously coexist. Glistening, sensuously curving aluminum frames surround mirrors shaped like boats or breasts, the one leaning against the entrance wall reflecting the other, which lies flat around the nearby corner. She asks us to step through these pools of light, not only to see her creations but also to look more deeply into ourselves. Intrigued, we move on to the eight large monochromatic canvases and a small, delicate series of paintings.

"They are about attitudes," she says, "they are about life. They are about perspectives. They are about the senses. They are quietly present, floating, observing, living and hoping. And having a bit of humor, which I consider to be essential for one's wellbeing, or at least my own." How could we resist?

One of Southeast Asia's best-known and most compelling artists, Sanpitak has been featured in numerous museum exhibitions and biennials in Asia and Europe over the past twenty years, intriguing a growing audience with her consistent explorations into new territory. Drawing on the artistic traditions of East and West, she works in many media: drawings, ceramics, sculptures, paintings, photography, glass and textiles, often creating installation pieces. The paintings and paper works here continue a series titled "Breasts and Clouds" that she began in Bangkok over a hot summer in 2006. Only after naming the works did she learn from a friend that a word in Pali/Sanskrit called Pa-yo-ta-ra means both beholder of water and beholder of milk, which linked her images.

"True to their nature," she says, "they are both givers and receivers. Sensitive and unpredictable. Ever-changing."

The following year, she accepted an artist's residency at Montalvo Arts Center, near San Francisco. Excited by the idea of spending time in a new setting, she ordered stretchers in advance so they would be ready when she arrived. She wanted to keep up the momentum. She began the current works at the center, finishing them in Santa Monica. In contrast to hot and humid Thailand, California offered her an entirely different climate, where silvery grays and blues replaced the hot yellows and reds of her homeland.

"The extraordinary light and the secluded site deeply affected me," she says. "It's quiet and contemplative. But my underlying images never change; they only evolve."

In "Quietly Floating," these images exist in a subdued atmosphere, the paintings like clouds in a minimalist environment. She pairs down the figural elements, doing something comparable with her titles, which are usually short provocative one-liners that enhance the work. Like clouds, you can imagine many things in these paintings—the rounded ovals like mysterious organisms or elongated breasts



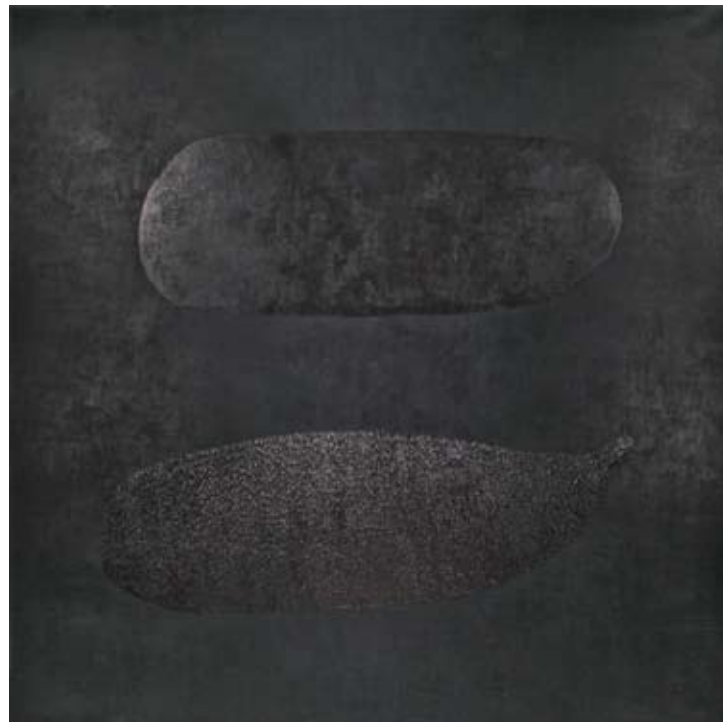
Cloud Garden, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 98 ½ in. (198 x 250 cm)



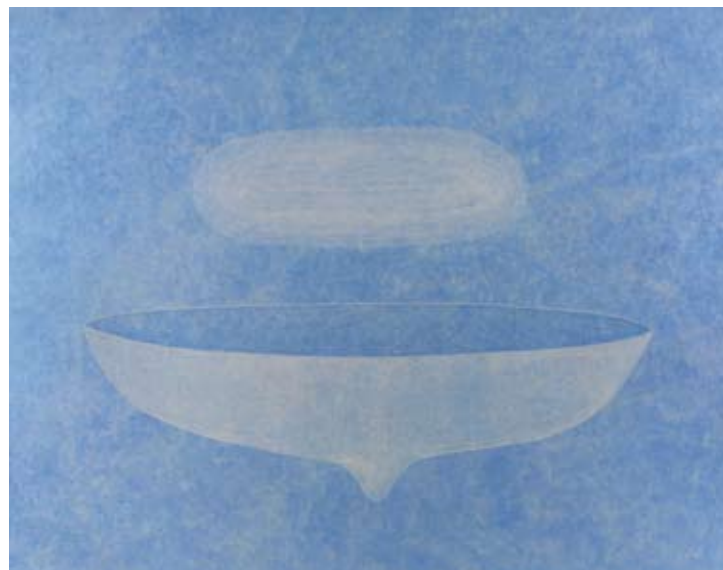
Cloud Track, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 98 ½ in. (198 x 250 cm)



Cloud Sprout, 2008, acrylic on linen, 78 x 78 in. (198 x 198 cm)



Dark and Sweet, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 69 x 75 in. (175 x 190 cm)



Brilliant Blue, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 98 1/2 in. (198 x 250 cm)



with pointed nipples, the space around them pale and luminous in “Quietly Floating Quietly Funny” and “Cloud Track.”

Behind the tactile oval in “Cloud Sprout” flowers sprout, thin Miro-like lines. More of them appear in “Cloud Garden,” their tiny roots planted in nothing but space. “Cloud Mist” glimmers pale yellow, a single plump oval an even paler shade of yellow. In “Brilliant Blue,” another of her recurring images appears, the vessel, and the cloud floats above, in subtle harmony. Bright color floods “Vermillion Sky,” for which Sanpitak selected the intense red paint in Bangkok, under the influence of the hot climate. Here too, the breast-ovals appear to be living, breathing forms. They bring you to “Dark and Sweet,” dark purple-black images against a blue-black background, reflecting unseen light, so that they appear three-dimensional, visitors from another world. She reduces her abstractions to such elemental forms that you can’t determine specifics.

If these works were not riches enough for one exhibit, Sanpitak shows another aspect of her prodigious talent in a series of small subtle paintings on shikishi paper. So delicately drawn that you must move in close to discern all the lines, they are private, intimate, haunting and deceptively childlike in their simplicity. They resemble sewing samplers, in a way, because of their domestic scale and the thread-like texture of the brushstrokes. Yet they also seem like symbols left behind by an ancient people, who may have known what is finally most essential—the breast, the flower, the vessel, the cloud, everything circular, like the life cycle. Bowls have always been metaphors for fertility and abundance; they hold and receive waters of life, like breasts hold milk. They provide sustenance for life. She sees and represents the spiritual link between all things, all the while investigating the concave and convex possibilities of the hemispherical form.

California was not her first residency. Since leaving home as a young woman to study in Japan, where she graduated from the School of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Tsukuba, she has looked for opportunities to work abroad, in the past spending time in France, Sweden and Australia, as well as in California twice before. In the United States, she enjoyed the ease with which she could get materials. One of the first things she did, after ordering stretchers, was to order paint that she must wait for in Thailand. She also visited a shop in Santa Monica to buy shikishi paper for her small works. Given a painting studio at the top of a hill at the Montalvo Arts Center, she settled in, planning as she usually does in new settings, to explore new materials.

“I had ordered oranges and blues,” she says, “but soon I was reacting to my new place, and I changed to a far quieter palette. I felt completely unconfined.”

Throughout her career, Sanpitak has celebrated the nourishing qualities of womanhood through her breast works, vessels, mounds

◀
Vermillion Sky, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
69 x 75 in. (175 x 190 cm)

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Exhibition
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Works on Paper 3, 2008-9, acrylic on shikishi paper, 9 1/2 x 10 3/4 in. (24.1 x 27.3 cm)



Works on Paper 4, 2008-9, acrylic on shikishi paper, 9 1/2 x 10 3/4 in. (24.1 x 27.3 cm)

and noon-nom, and stupas. But though she supports feminism, she expresses no feelings of victimization. Though not religious, she employs Buddhist symbols.

“My breast form was an icon that came to me naturally after giving birth to my son Shone in 1993,” she says, “and it later grew into bodies, and the bodies into body/vessels and then open body/vessels. I thread between the sacred and the profane. I do not practice Buddhism but it is part of my surroundings and upbringing. I love going to the temples to see the statuary. I don’t intend to talk about it intentionally, but I would not be able to deny that it has imbedded upon me the way I handle my life or way of thinking. The process of making the work is self-analyzing/self-healing process.”

You become aware of her process looking back over her work, particularly three striking installation pieces that she created in the

past decade. Repetition is central to their emotional impact. She understands that repetition as an artistic device offers sustaining, meditative and surprising outcomes. Repetition also resembles a ritual. In the poetic “120 Vessels” (2000-2001), she draws row upon row of vessels with candle wax and charcoal on paper, recalling the Buddha’s miraculous multiplication of himself a thousand times. “Noon-nom” (2002) consists of 200 plump hand-sewn forms of black, beige, white and pink organza, spread over 93 square meters of floor space. Tactile and interactive, they produced a lounge like scene, which gave whimsical and sensual pleasure. She took interaction to another level in “Temporary Insanity” (2003-04), with soft sculptures in shades of orange, vermilion and lemon that were embedded with timers and sensor devices. She called them “breast fruit.” The spectators triggered them into movement and sound simply by being in the space.

By then, Sanpitak had incorporated sight, sound and touch in her works. All that was left was taste. She introduced taste with the Breast Stupa Cookery series in 2005. In this ongoing collaborative art project, she works with professional and amateur chefs to create meals using specially designed breast stupa-shaped cooking molds made of cast aluminum and glazed stoneware. She has hosted many events, presenting five-course nourishing nipple meals to audiences in Thailand, Japan, China, Spain, France and the United States. The recipes and cooking process are documented and compiled as video and a cookbook.

As unpredictable as she is protean, she spent the last year collaborating with master glass blowers in Murano, Italy. Together, they translated the breast cloud morphology into translucent colored glass sculptures for the series “Quietly Solid” (2010). Solid yet ephemeral in their transparent lustrous presence, they are related to the works in her current exhibition.

“Even though these paintings may seem different from past works,” she says, “I created them using the same meditative process. I repeated strokes and lines, developing a three dimensional effect by building up the paint. The most important goal is to challenge the conscious and subconscious of not only the viewer but also my own. It is my attempt to ‘reach out’ to expand our perception and alter our attitudes through the senses, aroused by this strong female bodily symbol: the breast, whether from a painting, a drawing, a sculpture or an installation. Being Thai allows me to be open to possibilities. Nothing excites me more than not knowing what direction I’ll take next.”

Valerie Gladstone is an arts writer based in New York. She contributes to various art media and is the publisher of books on selected artists



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