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THAILAND USA

FINDING BALANCE: INTERVIEW WITH PINAREE SANPITAK

BY JENNIFER S. LI



PINAREE SANPITAK, installation view of *Hanging by a Thread* (2012) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2013. Copyright the artist and Museum Associates, LACMA. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.

*For over two decades, Thai artist Pinaree Sanpitak has been creating art that interprets the human form. Her latest installation was inspired by the severe floods that swept through Thailand in 2011, ravaging more than two thirds of the country and during which Sanpitak herself was forced to swiftly relocate from her studio and home in Bangkok to just outside the city. Induced by a feeling of uncertainty, and created with the limited materials she had access to, the work consists of 18 dangling handmade hammocks expressing the human desire for comfort and the triumph of creativity in the midst of disaster. ArtAsiaPacific sat down with the artist to discuss her projects and the latest iteration of *Hanging by a Thread (2012)* currently on view at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art \(LACMA\)](#), which seems to have found a new balance, now that the proverbial dust, or water, has settled.*

Can you talk about your work and your focus on the human body?

In Thai, the word for “body” denotes both the mental and physical, body and soul. I had always worked with the body, but when my son was born in 1994, I became constantly conscious of the breast. It became more sacred, because I was upholding another human life with it, and so I started calling them “breast stupas,” in reference to the Buddhist monuments. To me they not only signified motherhood, but womanhood in general. I wanted a body part that differentiated female and male, and to me the breast was much more meaningful and beautiful than the vagina.



PINAREE SANPITAK, “Breast Stupas Cookery” (2005–) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2013, glass, mirror and orchids, dimensions variable. Photo by Don Little. Courtesy LACMA.

“Breast Stupa Cookery” (2005–) is an ongoing project in which you create clay and metal molds shaped like breast forms and collaborate with local chefs to create meals. Do you see food as a way to connect with people of different regions?

I’ve done “Breast Stupa Cookery” almost a dozen times now in places around the world. It’s different every single time. I wanted to incorporate food into my work because I think food is a connecting substance. One day, I was working with ceramics and the idea came to me that I could make cooking molds! That way, I can invite people to work with them.

When I did “Breast Stupa Cookery” in New Zealand with the Parihaka Maori community in 2011, it was a very emotional experience. I worked with two ladies descended from the Parihaka, famous for their peaceful resistance to European colonizers. We made potato-yeast bread in the breast stupas using yeast that was one hundred years old. In Paris it was much fancier, at a fine-dining restaurant. Each chef that I work with interprets the project differently.



PINAREE SANPITAK, "Breast Stupa Cookery" (2005–) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2013. Copyright the artist and Museum Associates, LACMA. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.

The 18 hammocks of *Hanging by a Thread* are hung around a 10th-century sculpture of the Hindu god Vishnu created during the Khmer Empire. How do you see this ancient, traditional work in relation to yours?

When I was installing *Hanging by a Thread*, museum curators said that the sculpture of Vishnu would be very difficult to move. It had already fallen once during an earthquake and incurred some damage. The sculpture is now on a very heavy earthquake-resistant pedestal and it "dances" when there is seismic activity.

When I saw the sculpture, I thought it would be perfect. There would be no need to move it. Vishnu is the protector. It made sense that my piece would be in this part of the museum. I like seeing my work reinstalled in new ways and new places. It changes every time. When I was installing the debut of *Hanging by a Thread* at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York, I realized that I was inadvertently hanging the pieces lopsided, almost turbulently. I left them like that, because I thought it really represented the unstable environment in which I made them. In its current installation at LACMA, with Vishnu in the center of the gallery—and now that I am back at my home and studio in Bangkok—*Hanging by a Thread* feels very much in balance.



PINAREE SANPITAK, installation view of *Hanging by a Thread* (2012) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2013. Photo copyright the artist and Museum Associates, LACMA. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.

Pinaree Sanpitak: Hanging by a Thread is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from June 21–September 29, 2013.

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