

# FLAVOURS

## Thai Contemporary Art

Steven Pettifor



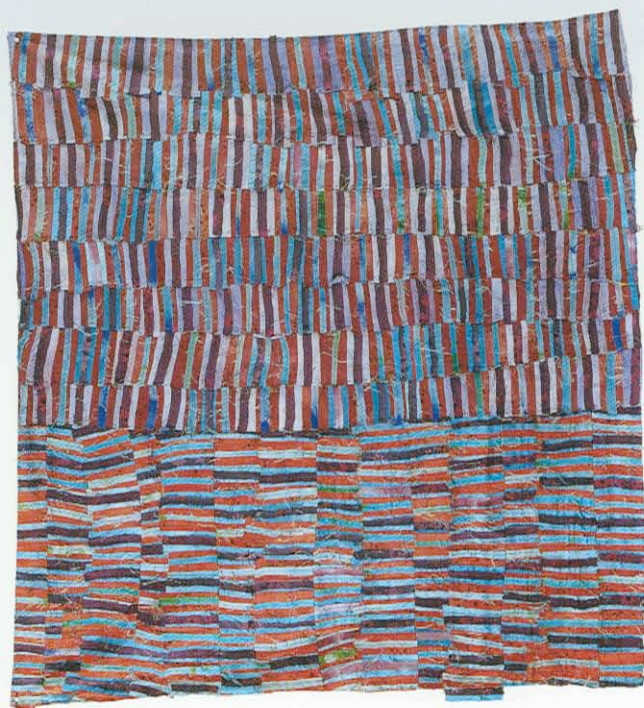
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# Jakkai Siributr

b. 1969

*"It has been difficult for me to convey my feelings through textiles and it was always easier with paint. Yet fibres have their own distinctive characteristics that I utilise in my own manner with room for experimentation within the medium's construction process. It's the texture and tactility of the fibres that really bring the work to life. I want people to feel and touch the pieces, even pull strands off if they desire."*



**Flow, 2003**

Silk  
140 x 155 cm  
Courtesy of H Gallery

Until recently, textile design in Thailand was perceived as a craft rather than an expressive art form, partly because of archaic attitudes within the education system. It's only in the last decade that it has even appeared as an independent course option on any university syllabuses. Weave artist Jakkai Siributr hopes that eventually Textile Design will be taught with a greater emphasis on conceptual as well as technical development. But there is resistance. Traditionalists claim that modernising Thai textiles is unravelling their long history in Thailand.

During his time studying a B.A. in Textiles/Fine Arts at Indiana University in the United States, Jakkai's lecturer encouraged him to consider textile art as a viable medium, to get a feel for and explore fibre as its own entity, and not to imitate or be influenced by other mediums such as painting. He was also urged to loosen up - stylistically and technically - which gradually pushed his work towards colour abstractions.

But his creative freedom was strait-jacketed when he went on to take a Master's Degree in Textile Design at the Philadelphia School of Textiles and Sciences. The institute was more concerned with science than art, whereas Jakkai wanted to create 'one-off' pieces. "Edging closer to the fine art side of textiles gave me the flexibility and freedom that I'd been craving. At the end of my course everyone was producing yards

of printed floral fabrics. I was the only one creating singular pieces and prints derived from my paintings. I was ignoring the market. And everyone despised it!"

Since his return to Bangkok in the late-90s, the artist has held a string of five solo hangings. In 2001, he was a recipient of the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Grant. Aside from his regular illustrations for local fashion magazines, Jakkai is a lecturer at Thammasat University, one of the first local art schools to introduce Textile Design as a Bachelor of Arts programme.

Jakkai doesn't really hold any close affinity to traditional Thai textiles. Although he does appreciate Lanna textiles from Northern Thailand, with their intricate layering of weave designs based on a technique locally called 'jok'. Lanna textiles, which first started to appear around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, consist of bold juxtapositions of colours and patterns surrounded by elaborate borders. He draws some comparisons between these motifs and other traditional fabrics. "What I find remarkable is that when you look at traditional woven Thai textiles, many of the motifs are identical to those in South America or Africa. Even the looms have the same mechanics. I love folk art for its honesty as well as the hands-on labour involved."

he artist-weaver first started garnering plaudits in 1999 with his second solo exhibition of textiles and paintings in Bangkok. Drawing inspiration from recorded memories of his five travels around Asia, America and Europe, he was particularly enamoured with Greece, spending the majority of his time in a small town on the island of Santorini. The *Oia! Threads of a Greek Journal*, was a poetic reflection on his stay there. The painstakingly assembled textile pictures, some of which took up to a month to complete, are imbued with the atmosphere and spirit of the town during spring and autumn, when he was there.

In the textile *Looking Up from Amoudi Beach* (1999), Jakkai has carefully selected materials like hand-woven cotton and scraps of metal to represent the temperament of the Aegean sea on the island's coast. This glistening, hazy composition bears a resemblance to the abstract landscapes by artist J. M. W. Turner, and although Jakkai is familiar with his work, the similarity is purely coincidental.

In another 1999 work, *Explosions on a Church Door*, Jakkai showed how he was attempting to infuse elements of his paintings into the fabric. A crucifix is centrally placed in the composition, as we begin to see representational features creeping into his abstract studies. Rich in vibrant oranges and reds, the piece seizes upon the sights of a religious festival during the Greek version of Easter. The pungent smell of gunpowder from fireworks and their effervescent explosions of colour struck Jakkai as ironic, considering the island's close proximity to more destructive explosions taking place in Kosovo.

The artist's third solo exhibition *Hiatus*, in 2001, marked a turning point in the artist's life and career. Reflecting a period of artistic and philosophical contemplation after taking a year's sabbatical from art production to evaluate his direction, methodology and motivation, the 15 hangings and paintings on show clearly stated a newfound positivism and confidence, especially in his much-improved paintings.

Dispensing with his usual approach of transferring recorded memories of extensive travels into art pieces, for *Hiatus* Jakkai confined himself to examining his immediate surroundings in Bangkok: the plant life in his garden; the variety of birds seeking refuge; and his pet dogs. After having read several books about *dharma*, Jakkai was musing more about nature and the cycle of life. Titles like *In Touch With All Beings and Embracing Impermanence* reinforce this period of mindfulness.

In the paintings, Jakkai began to draw in textile influences incorporating beads and silk along with acrylic paint. Visually, the two mediums still look disparate, with all five textiles

completely abstract in composition, as compared to the more figurative paintings. But patterned backgrounds on the canvases highlight how he had started aligning the two techniques.

This amalgamation of production styles was consolidated further in the subsequent one-man hangings *Hounds Under Foot* (2002), and the impressive *Revel* in 2003. Further exploring man's control over (or lack of), and interaction with his environment, Jakkai humorously dressed up his painted figures in animal costumes to satirise the belief that beasts possess human traits and mannerisms. Digging deeper, Jakkai uses the bestial metaphor to question individual identities and the roles we assume in society, conscious or otherwise.

In *Hounds Under Foot*, for the first time Jakkai began painting onto coarsely prepared textile backdrops, hoping he could enhance the still muted expressiveness of his tapestries. While satisfied with this "loosening up", he still did not want to completely relinquish the process of textile design. Although upon first glance *Revel* appears to be a much brasher version of his usual abstract weaves, the series was his first attempt at transplanting the figuration of his paintings onto the textiles - without using paint. To achieve this he subtly stitched on the outline of a solitary animal - like a rabbit, a bear chasing bees, a fly, and a dog - which are almost indistinguishable atop the colourful patterns. "I realised that instead of trying to draw images out from the compositions that I should implant them even deeper. By doing so I hope that viewers will spend more time in front of each piece looking into and through the materials at the figures hidden beneath."

Ultimately, Jakkai strives to combine his two preferred mediums - textiles and painting - or at least for them to have a harmonic existence within his work. He now believes he has attained freedom of expression in his textile production through the use of diversification in dyeing, colour combinations, and ways of cutting the materials. He feels it's the fibres that infuse his pieces with individuality, through their texture, colour and palpability. With the majority of textile artists immersed in the commercial design industry, Jakkai is definitely something of a maverick within the contemporary Thai art scene.



**Rice Field, 1998**

Silk and Metallic Threads • 100 x 150 cm • Courtesy of Dr. Philip Braun



**Switching Self, 2002**

Acrylic on Silk • 100 x 100 cm • Courtesy of the Artist