

Pinaree Sanpitak

b. 1961

"I'm extricating the woman from inside me, trying to give a glimpse into a woman's being. It's about how the work can give you insights to feel however you might, and through doing so hopefully pay back with understanding and respect. It's like poetry igniting the individual's imagination."



Golden Womb, 1997
Mixed Media on Canvas
200 x 220 cm
Private Collection

For the past 10 years Pinaree Sanpitak has rarefied her primal, iconic images of femininity down to two recurring motifs - the vessel and the mound. Far from exhausting her subject matter, the industrious artist imaginatively continues to create modes of delivering her sublime and intimate takes on different female roles in modern Thai society. Often sensuous in her approach, these increasingly tactile forms are increasingly open to individual interpretation, making them more broadly identifiable.

Pinaree is in no way an open book. In order to get better insights into the motives and preoccupations of her work you should look back to one of her earlier exhibitions, the 1991 show, *The Cross - The Egg - The Cow - The Squash*. Back then, a younger Pinaree made a statement regarding her work that over a decade on still describes her intent. "Women have basic roles - as a daughter and/or wife and/or mother - I do not yearn for the greater glorification of womanhood - though I do think every woman has the right to enjoy such yearning. These works are distilled from experience and emotion - an activity directly affecting me - body and soul. They underline the womanly potential. You are the examiner - and the examined."

For Pinaree, her art is just as much about the process of creating than the fruits of creativity. Understandably then,

she pushes forward with a hectic exhibition schedule, both domestically and internationally, that has included solo shows in Singapore, the USA, and eight hangings in her native Bangkok. Her group outings have seen her travel to Korea, Japan, Italy, France, and participate in the 1999 *3rd Asia-Pacific Triennial* in Australia, and the *2nd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial* in 2002. She has also attended residency programmes in Paris, Stockholm, and California.

Her explorations into the female consciousness began after her return to Thailand back in 1987, after she'd spent a year at an American school on a special scholarship, and done a degree in Fine Art at the University of Tsukuba in Ibaraki, Japan. This training, combined with the experience of living abroad, has given Pinaree a broader, less insular perspective that has contributed to the nourishment of her imagery and media.

The simplified, primitive female forms of the 1997 show *eggs, breasts, bodies, I, etcetera*, hinted at what direction Pinaree might edge towards. In the follow-up 1999 solo outing *Womanly Abstract*, her themes were similar but the execution was more enigmatic and recondite. Pinaree elaborated on her sense of subtlety. "I'm playing 'Hide and Seek'. Sometimes it's concealed, other times it's confessed. I like things to be understated."

Symbols of femininity that predominate in her early work - breasts, the womb, and the female torso - have become simplified to their basic, geometric outlines. In *Womanly Abstract*, the torso looks like a vessel. Once a symbol of maternity and fertility, the vessel appears hollow. But has it become a complete void? Pinaree says no. "The vessels are like me opening myself as a woman. It's about vulnerability and how things cannot be sustained forever. But seeing myself as a vessel doesn't mean that my life is empty, it's definitely not. But it enables me to feel freer, take more risks, not being confined."

In *Womanly Abstract*, the paintings *Womanly Echo* and *Womanly Slick* have acrylic, pastel and collage overlaid in a mostly monochrome so that the vessel is stark, hard-edged, and accentuated through contour lines. Meanwhile, the installation *Womanly Bodies* consisted of 25 rhythmic sculptures standing two-and-a-half-metres tall, the stitched saa fibre giving them a coarse texture. On first inspection the work appears to be less sexually charged than in the past - gone are the direct references to the female as sex object. Then again, Pinaree may actually be inviting us to look beneath the skin.

Pinaree was involved in the first two *Womanifesto* events, an ambitious exposure of women's art from a melange of international female artists. Her 1999 installation *Untitled "offerings"*, was an extension of the more abstract, ambiguous vessel pieces. The site-specific sculptural work consisted of numerous, shallow vessels (made from saa fibre) spaced out on the lawn inside a public park used for the event in Bangkok. The coarse paper bowls became homes for falling leaves and inquisitive insects. Their ephemeral existence was cut short by a heavy downpour, causing them to wilt, deteriorate and decay, mirroring nature's cyclical pattern, and giving off Buddhist overtones.

For the 1999 Berlin exhibition of invited Asian artists *Festival der Geister* or *Asian Ghosts and Spirits*, Pinaree presented the site-specific installation *Merit Memory Muse: Notes to the Soul*. Her installation comprised of mono prints, candle wax and charcoal drawings on paper, with bells covered in gold leaf hanging above or placed on the floor. Images of breasts intrude once more. But now they resemble *stupas* (Buddhist reliquaries), church spires, or mosque domes. Although cautiously vague she does explain the metaphor. "I'm trying to put the female into a religious context, because we're so segregated. A nun is considered to have a lower status than a monk. When your son is ordained as a monk then everybody cherishes it, but if your daughter becomes a nun then they think, what's wrong with her?"

In 2001 Pinaree held *Vessels and Mounds*, her first solo exhibition at Bangkok's National Gallery. These primordial shapes continued evolving in her work, however, now appearing in various guises. In *120 Vessels* she dripped candle wax into small vessels, surrounding them with loose charcoal. But in *Breast Leaves I and II*, the form becomes metallic breast plates, or fallen "leaves." In *A Mound*, however, the weighty black mass of her mammary drawing could be viewed conversely as a vacuum hole, or a tunnel leading into some unseen dimension.

The large body of work is split into four rooms, the last one devoted to the meditative, spiritual, molten candle and charcoaled vessel installation *Continued-Compelled-Comforted*. "I find my work soothing and therefore I expect some of that to rub off on the viewer, especially with the burning flames from the candlelight, which is a very primeval element," Pinaree says.

If *Vessels and Mounds* was not ambitious enough in either scale or media, Pinaree leapt further with her seductive 2002 exhibition *Breasts and Beyond*. Simultaneously occupying three Bangkok galleries, she filled the rooms with physically disparate installations that engaged with multiple readings on her familiar emblems. In *Noon-nom*, the artist playfully twisted notions of sexuality and motherhood, turning breasts into objects of recreation by stuffing the gallery space with a couple of hundred puffy organza 'breast cushions'. The nipple-topped comforters produced myriad associations, from sexual exploitation to gender empowerment and infant rearing. The Thai word for breast, *nom*, is the same as that for milk, and *Noon-nom* was certainly a nourishing first attempt at physically engaging the viewer.

The breast is mutated once again in the flowing tapestries of *Breast Stupas*. The loose silk sheets hang from the ceiling in dark, earthy shades, their horizontal threads carefully pulled apart to reveal the pointed stupa towers. Wandering amongst the light-piercing fabrics, the aura is far from the mirth of *Noon-nom* - now the abstracted breast has been elevated to a sacred level.

Pinaree engages us with a very personal, non-confrontational, Asian approach to redressing gender biases. From the 70s onwards, numerous Western female artists have been tackling similar themes of female sexuality and equality as those being addressed in Pinaree's work. Yet she doesn't feel these issues have been milked dry "because the world hasn't really changed so much. The material world has but the relationships between humans aren't so different, and our basic needs remain constant - survival, sex, companionship and reproduction. I don't think it's wrong to restate things in my own manner."