

Thai Artists, Resisting the Age of Spectacle

By: Sandra Cate

CONVERSATIONS OUTSIDE THE WHITE CUBE

Pinaree's *Breast Stupa Cookery Project* (BSCP) involves collaboration, but also the ceding of her own artistic control, an action that generates both (in her words) "detachment and realization."⁴³ Used by chefs at art events around the world, Pinaree's aluminum and ceramic breast-stupa molds perform myriad functions—as molds, as vessels to hold food, as table decorations. What might be deemed the "art

⁴¹ See, for example, breasts rendered on paper, as gold leaves, and as wax candles in the exhibit "Vessels and Mounds," February 4–25, 2001, National Gallery, Bangkok.

⁴² "Breasts and Clouds," 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok, July 19–August 19, 2007.

⁴³ Pinaree Sanpitak, talk on *Breast Stupa Cookery Project*, Mills College, Oakland, CA, May 1, 2008.

object" at the events is the food created by the chef(s) using the molds, and, indeed, many of the chefs plate their creations as food art. Some in the Thai art world have argued that the message Pinaree communicates through these events has grown old and that she should "move on." Having participated in several of the BSCPs, I disagree, as the events continually challenge boundaries between the artist and the viewer and between the production and consumption of art. The BSCP events say



Mills College student Susan McLean and her fruit-filled breast stupa, with artist Pinaree Sanpitak. Photo by author

less about objects and what they unmold than about the nature of artistic collaboration and the myriad possibilities of social engagement the events can generate. Chefs practice their own art while integrating Pinaree's art; their disparate cultural/culinary backgrounds (Japanese, Thai, French, Ethiopian, Chinese, Moroccan, American) insure surprising results. Indeed, many of the chefs involved with the *Breast Stupa Cookery Project* speak of "fusion" in describing the menus they devise using the breast-stupa molds. Carefully documented in video, the chefs tell their own stories about their experimentation and what associations the molds summon forth. As part of the final exam for an art course at Mills College in

Oakland, CA, each student took home a different breast-stupa mold to produce food for the final class, which Pinaree attended. Unexpectedly, each student brought a mini-story to tell along with her creation: one had tried to make a *Tres Leches* cake, but when unmolded, it "started lactating uncontrollably," so she molded layers of strawberries, mango slices, and kiwi fruit instead. Another brought a *panna cotta*, "from my one-half Italian heritage," that appeared "kind of tired and it reminded me of how I felt when breastfeeding." A Japanese-American student used a breast flower mold and mochi arranged into flowers, "translucent sorts of things like breasts and skin." Later, reviewing this event, the students focused on its sociability, evidenced by the way it had broken down the formal structure of the class and had given art history students an opportunity to show off their own creativity and ethnically inflected cooking skills. Significantly, Pinaree's breast-stupa motif seemed to recede in significance during the discussion. One student expressed her amazement at "all these mini-breasts on the table and no one blinked an eye."

In another San Francisco iteration of the BSCP, Pinaree was asked to share her own assessment of the evening. Her reply, "What beats good food and good company?" The breast stupa, then, triggers new social relations, with lingering effects for both Pinaree, the artist, and the chefs and guests as participating collaborators. According to one curator, "This process of exchange is like a re-birth; [it] symbolically manifests the life cycle" as the breast stupa creations are never the same or repeated.⁴⁴ Documenting the breast-stupa cookery events constitutes another collaboration—between the videographer/editor and both the artists and participants, who are interviewed before, during, and after the actual event. Some of the videos, focused on the cooking and the eating of the breast stupas, provide straightforward documents of an event; others incorporate music or extended interviews with participants that foreground the creativity of the video-maker, establishing his or her agency in creating the final and lingering nature of the individual event.

(RE)CREATING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Navin Rawanchaikul, uneasy in his own cultural position as an Indo-Thai, often does work addressing the ambiguities and insecurities of an immigrant identity, documented in his comic book "Who is Navin?," an insert in the retrospective publication *Navin's Sala*.⁴⁵ His taxi project invites wide participation of (often immigrant) taxi drivers who are asked to supply stories for the comic books distributed in the roaming cabs that comprise Navin's Taxi Galleries, which have circulated on the streets of Bangkok (*Navin Gallery Bangkok*, 1995–2000), of Sydney, Australia (*Another Day in Sydney*, 1998), of Birmingham, England (*Shakespeare in Taxi*, 2000), of Mexico City (*Love Whispers from a Mayan Taxi*, 2006), and other international venues. His taxi art, which is about and is situated in taxis, also intervenes directly in the daily trials of getting around the city. Navin has been generous in acknowledging friends and colleagues by painting them into his Bollywood-movie-poster-style paintings, an inclusive gesture that challenges notions about the

⁴⁴ Ng, "Thai Contemporary: Charm and Chasm," p. 26.

⁴⁵ Navin Rawanchaikul, ed., *Navin's Sala* (Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Paris: Navin Production Co., Ltd., in collaboration with Galeries Enrico Navarra, 2008).