

## Pinaree Sanpitak

### Thailand

'Vessels and mounds', Pinaree Sanpitak's largest and most evocative exhibition to date, invited us to share with her the rich and sometimes precarious meaning of being a woman. For more than a decade and a half, Pinaree has explored the poetry of the abstracted female body. For this show, her first solo exhibition, at the National Gallery in Bangkok, the 39-year-old artist worked and re-worked forms evoking the breast and body, reflecting on not only the nature of femininity, but also the healing power of art, indeed of metaphor itself. The show quietly persuaded us that for Pinaree, womanhood is the embodiment of the precious, even sacred, capacity to accept and to offer.

Pinaree clearly likes being a woman, yet recognises the limits imposed by definitions of what is female. Through her work she delves into metaphors for womanhood and femininity so as to dislodge their constraints. She exposes the hidden prejudices and blind spots of conventional tropes in order to see more clearly herself. Her artworks are the record, the embodiment, of this healing process, which is deeply personal but openly offered for our reflection.

Her vessels are wide-mouthed bowls, some drawn in candle-wax and charcoal on paper, others hand-sculpted from wax. These vessels accept what is put into them, but equally they offer it up. With this apt tropology Pinaree questions the notion that femininity is essentially passive by interrogating the notion of passivity itself. Her vessels are not mere receptacles – they receive but also deliver, transfer, transport. (This calls to mind a secondary meaning of vessel as a ship.) The vessel is suggestive of sexuality and procreation, interpersonal relationships, even the interdependence between the artist and the viewer, and the process of artistic creation and influence.

Turn the vessel over and it becomes a mound, the image of a breast, a symbol of the mother's or lover's body and capacity to nurture. The breast itself is a vessel, of nourishment and meaning. But the mound – portrayed in the exhibition in the form of drawings and wax candles – also points to mortality in evoking the stupa or pagoda, a Buddhist structure built to enshrine such relics as the ashes of a revered monk. Pinaree's mound inevitably recalls the signature stupa paintings of the late Montien Boonma, those deeply melancholy monuments of death. But Pinaree rejects this finality; her mounds quickly become breasts trembling with life and subverting what is, after all, a patriarchal structure (stupas are built to enshrine clerics, all of whom are male in Theravada Buddhism).

Pinaree creates a new form to evoke mortality, small tear-shaped sculpted pieces which she calls 'breast leaves'. Some of these breast-like medallions or pendants are rendered in terracotta, and were perched precariously on the gallery wall, leaning on small pegs. Others are cast in gilded bronze, and were scattered on a low platform like fallen leaves beneath a tree, or piled on top of each other, on a smaller platform, in the shape of a mound, like a funeral pyre. The breast leaves are poignant mementos of the body's fragility, its inevitable decay and passage. As a group, they suggest the collective plight of women.

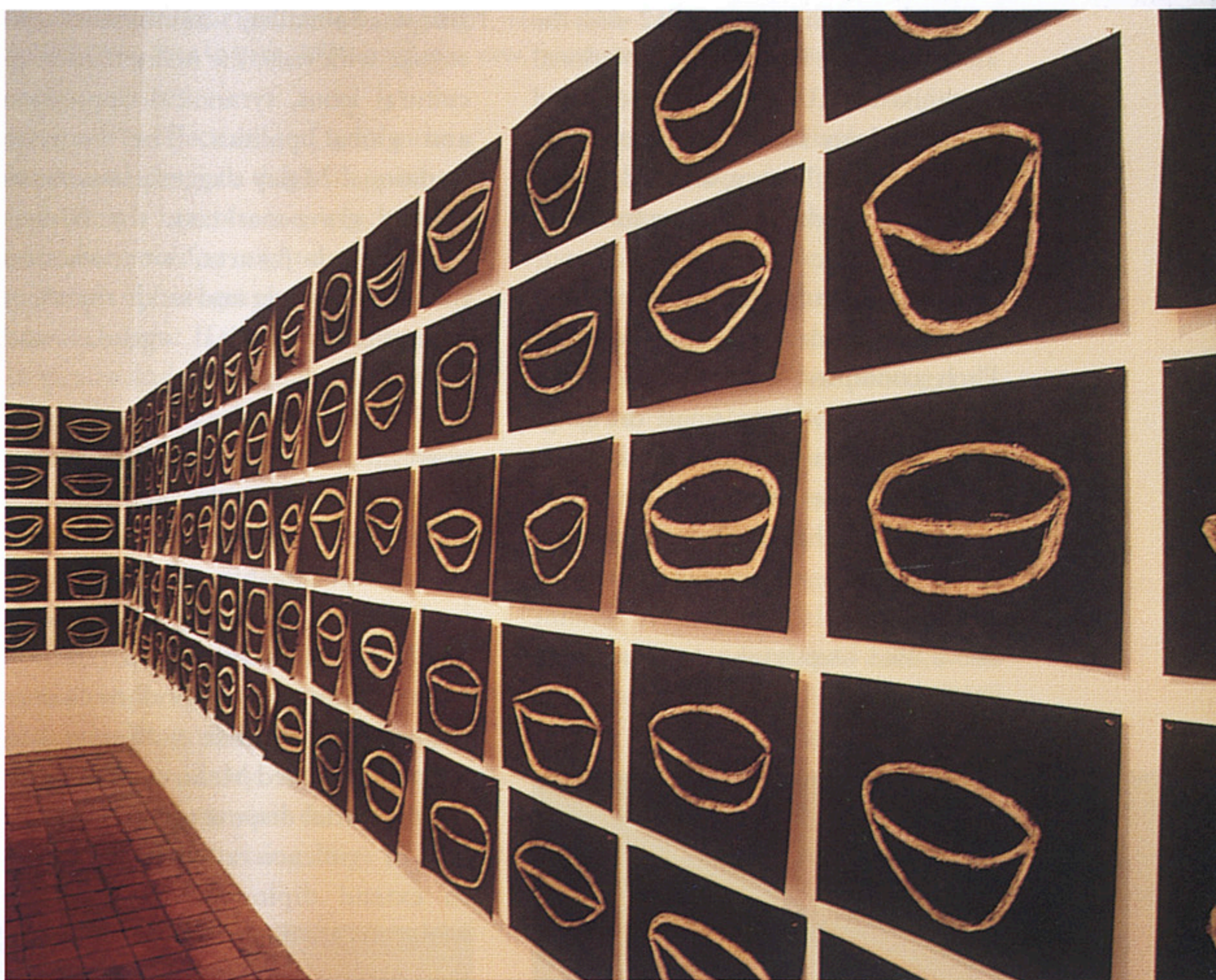
Like the four movements of a sonata, the exhibition was conceived in four parts and set in four adjoining chambers. The first gallery introduced the 'vessel and mound' theme with a series of small drawings, '120 Vessels', 2000–2001, and a much larger canvas, *a vessel*, 2000, then inverted in *a mound*, 2000. In the second gallery the vessels became forty-three waxen bowls, titled *consciously here, subconsciously there*, 2000–2001. In the same room were the terracotta pieces,

120 in all, titled *precariously sacred*, 2000–2001, as well as a mound painting, *Matters of Consequence*, 2000, sombrely black against a charcoal grey background. The gilded bronze medallions, *breast leaves I and II*, 2000–2001, were in a third gallery. In the final room the mood brightened, the vessels reappearing in a series of eight drawings, 'continued-compelled-comforted', 2000–2001. On the floor were dozens of mounds, now rendered as scented candles offering soft, warm light.

Pinaree's subtle play with metaphor appeals to the literary imagination. She has written verse to accompany

and its restrained palette and dim lighting. The handworked materials, textures and surfaces yearn to be touched. Her gift for understatement makes interpretation of the work all the more inviting. This art is not difficult, but rewards sustained contemplation.

Rarely, if ever, has Thailand seen an exhibition more expertly staged than this one, thanks in part to cooperation between the National Gallery and About Art Related Activities, which furnished the exhibition with custom lighting, a video and a series of public programs. Two years in the making,



PINAREE SANPITAK, *120 Vessels*, 2000–2001 (detail), candle wax, charcoal on paper, 120 pieces, each 30 x 40 cm.

earlier work, and the titles of the works in 'vessels and mounds' are rendered in fine language. Her art shares a remarkable kinship with the large body of poetry written by American feminists in recent decades.

Shunning the overtly political and didactic in favour of the psychological and suggestive, Pinaree's work is persuasive through its soft, warm tone, its meditative and gently playful nature,

'vessels and mounds' is a virtuoso summation of Pinaree's work to date, and points to more appealing work to come.

Pinaree Sanpitak, *vessels and mounds*, National Gallery, Bangkok, 4–25 February 2001.

Brian Mertens