



BODY AND SOUL

Pinaree Sanpitak's art of life

In her introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition 'Womanifesto', Somporn Rodboon identifies a group of women artists which:

focuses on women's issues, awareness of the changing role and status of women, their struggles, achievements and their dignity. This group of women artists use their art to question their roles in society. They strongly strive towards a meaningful art as it is drawn from experiences of everyday and as it poses questions about the present condition.¹

Pinaree Sanpitak can definitely be identified with this category; her work, however, unfolds in a number of layers, allowing for multiple readings and interpretations. Pinaree² emerged as part of the Thai art scene in 1987 and, as Apinan Poshyananda has insightfully remarked, appeared out of the blue:³ she had not been trained in Thailand nor won awards in art competitions, which at the time played a significant role in the encouragement and support of Thai artists. Since then, Pinaree has established herself as one of Thailand's most prominent and dynamic artists.



previous page, left: PINAREE SANPITAK, *The Egg*, 1997, charcoal, acrylic and pastel on canvas, 200 x 210 cm, collection the artist. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon; previous page, right: *Black Breast*, 1994 (detail), ink, acrylic and pastel on paper, 102 x 106.5 cm, private collection. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon; above: Pinaree Sanpitak. Photograph Chatchai Puipia; below: *Gold Womb*, 1997, charcoal, pastel, gold leaf and saa paper on canvas, 200 x 190 cm, collection the artist. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon.



Not only has Pinaree participated in numerous exhibitions in Thailand and abroad but she has also been one of the key players in the formation of a local trend that values innovation, experimentation and idiosyncrasy in art practice. This was facilitated in part by Silom Art Space, an alternative art gallery run by Pinaree and her husband, fellow artist Chatchai Puipia, from 1991 until 1995. In Thailand, where government funding for artists is not available, alternative venues such as Silom Art Space have played a pivotal role in the development of artists whose work may be too challenging for the conventional art market.

Pinaree was born in Bangkok in 1961 and had her first inter-cultural experience in 1979 when, under an American Field Service International Exchange Program, she completed the last year of high school in Kansas in the United States. Two years later she received a scholarship from the Japanese government to study at the Fine Arts and Design Faculty of the University of Tsukuba in Ibaraki, Japan. Since the completion of her studies she has been living and working in Bangkok, while participating in a number of art projects and exhibitions such as 'Metro Mania: ARX 1989' (PICA, Perth), 'Confess and Conceal' (an international touring exhibition organised by the Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1993–94), 'Kradaad' (a touring exhibition organised by Texas Tech University in 1995) and 'Glimpses into the Future: Art in Southeast Asia 1997' (Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997). Pinaree's initiative in studying outside Thailand and her ongoing involvement with international art events has engaged her with foreign cultures, languages and life. It also indicates her broad range of interests, and her willingness to take up the challenge of exploring new territory.

This process of constant exploration, which may have been ignited purely by the curiosity of an independent and daring young woman, has followed her in her life and her art. Pinaree's exploration shows both physical and metaphysical dimensions while using as a starting point the female body and the conditions of womanhood.

In his overview *Modern Art in Thailand*, Apinan Poshyananda identifies a trend associated with artists who 'seek to return art to its roots as a regenerative source of energy and understanding. They look back to themes and subjects which relate to the pre-modern era.'⁴ Pinaree's work, although not involving subjects and imagery associated with traditional spiritual beliefs, does engage with primal concepts and is used as a vehicle for questioning and understanding. Beyond their immediate corporeal references, her works resonate with ideas that relate to the origin of human life and the world.

Although her subject matter could be perceived as universal, Pinaree's work is informed by the multiplicity of her personal experience as a contemporary, internationally educated Thai woman artist:

*These works are distilled
from experience and emotion —
an activity directly affecting me
body and soul.⁵*

This personal approach may account for the subdued presence of the female subject in the artist's early works. Rather than revealing the whole

Pinaree's work does engage with primal concepts and is used as a vehicle for questioning and understanding. Beyond their immediate corporeal references, her works resonate with ideas that relate to the origin of human life and the world.

*left: PINAREE SANPITAK, **Patched Up**, 1997, acrylic, pastel and modelling paste on canvas, 230 x 200 cm, collection the artist. Photograph Aroon Peampoosopon; right: **Blue Note**, 1997, acrylic, pastel, charcoal, pigment and sand on canvas, 220 x 190 cm, collection the artist. Photograph Aroon Peampoosopon.*





self at once, the artist has developed an iconography that gradually initiates the viewer into her inner feelings and secrets. Her works from the late 1980s and early 1990s are mixed-media compositions comprising drawings, prints, handmade and often hand-dyed paper, manipulated photographs, paint and found objects. The objects, forms, colours and textures are carefully chosen to convey feelings and ideas that are associated with how women are perceived and how they experience womanhood – alienation of the female body, strength, emotional confusion, the mysterious Other, exploration of the self and the surrounding world, fertility. The female presence is often evoked through the visual qualities of organic forms such as the egg, kiwifruit or squash. In the work *I'm Confused*, 1991, the womb-like shape of the squash is incorporated in a lyrical abstraction. Similarly, in *Kiwi Boogoosh*, 1985, cross sections of kiwifruits reveal a wealth of seeds alluding to potential life.

In her 1993 exhibition entitled 'Mother & Child: A Dialogue' Pinaree presented a series of paintings closely related to her then-recent experience of pregnancy and motherhood. In these works the body emerges through the contours of the pregnant silhouette or oneiric abstractions, reminiscent of a womb environment. The series addresses a number of questions associated with gender and its social implications: 'What if you are a girl?', questions one of the paintings. A visual poem written by the artist and published in the exhibition catalogue expresses, in the infinite form of a spiral, feelings and thoughts about the experience of having a child: how the mother's experience is different from that of the father, what dynamics and tensions it creates in their relationship, what under-

standings, misunderstandings, pain and happiness emerge out of these, and how these conditions are interwoven with social parameters and spiritual beliefs. The spiral's outer point is identified with the syllable 'om', which in Buddhist belief signifies the idea of the 'pregnant void', the emptiness that is perceived as the origin of the world.

In the series 'Breast Works', 1994, the female figure is more explicitly expressed through the image of the female breast, depicted in various outlines, colours and textures. The works evoke the different ways in which this intrinsic part of the female body is perceived by both viewer and viewed – subject and object:

*Breasts ... I feel their presence.
I admire their potential.*

*Breasts are delicate, sensitive and
unique. They are symbols of beauty.
They are the baby's most important
source of nutrition. They symbolise
women as sex objects. They are soft
and warm. They have strength. They
are victims. They have become
taboo in some cultures.*

*Breasts ...
These works might give pleasure?
convey a thought?
provoke a change in attitude?⁶*



Most of these works are painted on paper, inheriting some of the material's warmth and sensual richness. The breasts face upwards, resembling the abstracted shape of mountains in a landscape. At the same time they are full of life, the life of the breastfeeding mother, the sparkling adolescent, the yearning lover but also that of the lonely wanderer, the drained mother, the cancer fighter, the hired lover. The series presents a whole anatomy of the female psyche and its cycles, moods, temperaments, emotions, reflections and negotiations. As part of the exhibition Pinaree presented a minimal installation of breasts sculptured in *saa* fibres – the raw material used for the production of Thailand's famous *saa* paper. The three-dimensional treatment of the individual sculptures led to a tangible effect. The dense, yet organic, arrangement of the pieces and their placement directly on the floor where they could be viewed from above or approached quite closely created an ambiguous assemblage which alluded to themes and legends of female fertility as well as to earthly formations.

The ideas surrounding 'Breast Works' were further expanded in the series of paintings 'Breast Works II', 1995. This time the paintings are much larger in scale, they are mostly applied on canvas and the breasts face downwards. What happened to the uplifting works of the previous year? The 1994 works were aware of a complex reality, yet their dynamic presence inspired confidence and hope. Works like *The Black and the White* or *Washedout* in the 1995 series express a darker outlook through their ascetic colour and heavy, sagging forms. These elements, and their visual proximity to the human figure evoke more pathos than the abstracted forms of the previous year. Autobiographical references underlie and thread through the works the exhausting experience of motherhood, which can come as an anticlimax to the exciting fulfilment of birth.

The visual characteristics of the works allow for interpretations that extend beyond themes of womanhood. As Michael O'Ferrall has remarked:

Her simple forms and use of pastel and thin washes of acrylic all suggest a slightly defocused view where volume, lines and colours float and intersect in delicate and elusive visual games. There is no sense of time, or, at least, past time distanced from the present.⁷

This sense of the 'timeless', as exemplified in *The Black and the White*, is indeed a very significant element in Pinaree's work. In addition, her treatment of the visual surface focuses on flat planes, eliminating the pictorial depth of her images and creating a sense of 'spacelessness'. Pinaree's images, although sensual and full of life, transcribe conventional time and space in an almost immaterial, ethereal existence which could be associated with the idea of the primal, 'pregnant emptiness'.

These multiple layers of meaning and references have emerged more strongly than ever in her recent monumental works – a series of large-scale paintings, as well as an installation of female torsos. The works were presented in the exhibition 'eggs, breasts, bodies, I, etcetera' in 1997 and were created in parallel with a large number of works on paper.⁸ The paintings incorporate the artist's familiar visual vocabulary – the figure of the breast, womb, egg – composed in the silhouette of a torso. The

opposite, left: PINAREE SANPITAK, *Pink Breast*, 1994, acrylic and pastel on paper, 105.5 x 106 cm, private collection. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon; opposite, right: *Black Breast*, 1994, ink, acrylic and pastel on paper, 102 x 106.5 cm, private collection. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon; opposite, below: *The Black and the White*, 1995, acrylic, pastel and charcoal on canvas, 200 x 150 cm, collection the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon; below: *Crosses and Breasts*, 1995, acrylic, tumeric, pastel and collage on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, collection the artist. Photograph Aroon Peampoonsopon.



From a distance the torsos look paper-like, delicate and fragile; when touched, however, they feel rough and tough. The metaphor is obvious: women are not the weak, beauty-obsessed, fatuous creatures represented in the mass media of the consumerist engine ...



above: PINAREE SANPITAK, *Untitled*, 1994, monoprints and saa fibre sculptures, dimensions variable, collection the artist. Photograph the artist; above, right and opposite: *Confident Bodies*, 1996–97 (detail), saa fibres and steel, dimensions variable, private collection. Photograph the artist.



awesome presence of the works (some more than 2 metres high) makes for powerful abstractions of the female body, physically overwhelming yet still elusive.

Paintings such as *Blue Note*, *The Egg*, *Patched Up* and *Gold Womb* further explore themes of previous series while introducing new concepts and symbols. In *Patched Up* and *Gold Womb* the shoulder line of the torsos is reminiscent of Buddha's composed figure as depicted in Thai religious sculpture, while the use of gold leaf in *Gold Womb* alludes to both Buddhist and royal gold, and hence to spiritual and secular power. These references could be interpreted as re-attributing empowering characteristics to the female status at both a mundane level and beyond. They could also be seen, however, as extensions of the metaphysical dimensions observed in earlier works.

The installation *Confident Bodies* evolved as an organic development from the paintings. The work originally comprised fifty⁹ female torsos made of saa fibres, presented on shop-window stands. Paper is Pinaree's favourite medium and she has explored its potential in a variety of art-forms, from photography to collage, painting and sculptural pieces. Like many artists in Thailand and Vietnam – both countries with a local production of handmade paper – Pinaree seems to respond to the material's particular textural, visual and emotive qualities which are imbued with the marks of nature and people.

In *Confident Bodies* the textural and visual qualities of the saa fibres form intrinsic components of the work: from a distance the torsos look paper-like, delicate and fragile; when touched, however, they feel rough



and tough. The metaphor is obvious: women are not the weak, beauty-obsessed, fatuous creatures represented in the mass media of the consumerist engine; the view of women presented by these constructs contradicts our everyday reality, at home and work, where women contribute equally and increasingly control their lives.

Confident Bodies epitomises Pinaree's long-term concern with the theme of the gaze as it intrudes on the female body. In the catalogue for the exhibition 'eggs, breasts, bodies, I, etcetera' Pinaree throws the ball back to the viewer: 'You are the examiner and the examined', she says, repeating a statement that first emerged in 1991 in relation to the works in 'The Cross The Egg The Cow & The Squash' show. In that respect her oeuvre can be seen in the context of artistic work which, particularly in this century, has challenged traditional approaches to the female body and allowed for new gazing experiences of and by the female self.¹⁰

The torsos in *Confident Bodies*, like the breasts in *Untitled*, 1994, have moved out of the two-dimensional confines of the canvas and could be perceived as Pinaree's most realistic representations of the female body. In a sense they represent a more wholesome female self, more conscious of its nature and strength. Tangible as they are, these confident bodies are nothing but coils of an intangible hollow which questions their realism and represents ... what? The emptiness of our existence or the metaphysical 'pregnant void' of our primal origin?

The work encapsulates Pinaree's unique way of interweaving in a cyclical process – from paper, to canvas, to sculpture and over again – the everyday and the physical with the philosophical and the metaphysical,

producing a genuine expression of the inner qualities, ambiguities and richness of being human.

- 1 Somporn Rodboon, *Womanifesto: An International Women's Art Exchange Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Baan Chao Phraya, Bangkok, 1996, unpaginated.
- 2 In the Thai mode of address, both formal and informal, preference is given to the first name.
- 3 Apinan Poshyananda, 'Pinaree Sanpitak Making her Mark', in *Recent Works by Chatchai Puipia and Pinaree Sanpitak*, exhibition catalogue, the National Gallery, Bangkok, 1991, unpaginated.
- 4 Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 194.
- 5 Artist's statement in *The Cross The Egg The Cow & The Squash*, exhibition catalogue, 1991, unpaginated.
- 6 Extract from artist's statement, *Breast Works: Pinaree Sanpitak*, exhibition catalogue, Silom Art Space, 1994, unpaginated.
- 7 Michael A. O'Ferrall, 'Object for Consideration – The Body and its Reflection, Behind the Pleasure of the Gaze', in *Doris Hinzen-Roebring, Pinaree Sanpitak, Judy Watson – Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, the National Gallery, Bangkok, 1996, unpaginated.
- 8 The installation *Confident Bodies* was first shown in the exhibition 'Womanifesto', Bangkok, 1996.
- 9 The work has since been developed and comprises 120 pieces.
- 10 See also O'Ferrall, op. cit.

Dionissia Giakoumi is Assistant Curator, International Art, the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.