

Making Offerings

Pinaree Sanpitak is one of the few active Thai women artists whose work is internationally recognized. Her works are bold and uncompromising explorations of what it means to be a woman.

By Steven Pettifor

The number of active female artists in Thailand is increasing, but few are recognized internationally. Urbanization and modernization arrived abruptly and forcefully to Thailand in the 1970s, but this has had little effect in this traditionally patriarchal society. Demure, endearing, gracious, and submissive are all stereotypical tags of the ordinary Thai female. Dr. Apinan Poshyananda of Chulalongkorn University reiterated this point when he wrote in *The art of camouflage and exposure*: "Women, it is widely thought, are better looked over than overlooked." Although certainly not endemic to Thailand, this imbalance between sexes pervades all levels of society including the allegedly "liberal" art world, where there is a male bias in the number of artists and educators.

But things are changing. Women artists are beginning to band together to make their voices heard as a collective force through gender-specific exhibitions and festivals. In 1999 alone there has been *Womanifesto II*, the second international women's art festival which was held in one of Bangkok's few parks. There has also been an all Thai female group exhibition, *Woman Opportunity* (1998) at Tadu Gallery, which was an expose by the ten strong contingent Hers Group. They unifyingly declared, "This group is the first real women's group—giving us collective inspiration and the opportunity to expand female art in Thailand."

When looking at the work on offer, it becomes clear that unlike their Western counterparts, Thai female artists are taking a non-confrontational and apolitical approach to redressing the sexual imbalance, concentrating more on individual artistic concerns. Pinaree Sanpitak, born in Bangkok in 1961, is one of the few women managing to tilt the scales, as an internationally recognized artist. For the past ten years, Sanpitak has been sharpening her emphasis whilst persuading her viewers to re-examine their attitudes and perceptions of gender roles. She explains this peaceable ideology: "I



Pinaree Sanpitak, *Merit Memory Muse: Notes to the Soul* (detail) 1999, works on paper, bells, incense & gold leaf.

realized long ago that you cannot change people suddenly, there's no point in being aggressive in attitude. It has to be done gradually and has to be rooted in education. My art tries to subtly nudge the viewer to receive and be more open-minded."

Throughout this year, the industrious Sanpitak has had a hectic exhibition schedule both domestically and internationally. In February, she held a solo show of paintings and installation sculptures entitled *Womanly Abstract* at Bangkok's About Studio/About Cafe. She has subsequently been involved in several group exhibitions and events, including *Alter Ego* and *Womanifesto II* in Bangkok, *Festival Der Geister* in Berlin, Germany, and *The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial* in Brisbane, Australia. Most recently she did a print workshop and residency program at Northern Territory University in Darwin, Australia.

Sanpitak is in no way an open book. In order to get better insight into the motives and preoccupations of her oeuvre we should look back to one of her earlier exhibitions, *The Cross—The Egg—The Cow—The Squash* (1991) at the now defunct Silom Art Space in Bangkok. At that time, Sanpitak made a statement regarding her work that essentially 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 are mainly composed of paper—they are fragile—each possessing its individual appeal. They are of nature. They have their hidden power to speak to that elusive area of the heart and mind. They underline the womanly potential. You are the examiner—and the examined."

Sanpitak's self-exploration into the female consciousness through the corporal metaphor began after her return to Thailand in 1987. Previously her formative years of formal education were spent on a year-long scholarship at an American high school and later a degree in fine art at the University of Tsukuba in Ibaraki, Japan. This training, combined with the experience of living abroad, has given her a broader, less insular perspective and this has contributed to the direction of her imagery and media.

Prior to *Womanly Abstract*, Sanpitak's last solo exhibition was her 1997 show, *eggs, breasts, bodies, I, etcetera*, at Chulalongkorn University, in which her simplified, primitive female forms hinted at the direction she was to edge towards. In *Womanly Abstract*, as the title implies, her themes are maintained but their physical manifestations have intentionally become more enigmatic and recondite. Sanpitak elaborates on this heightened inexplicitness: "I'm playing hide-and-seek, sometimes it's concealed, other times it's confessed. I like things to be understated."

Symbols of femininity which dominated her oeuvre: breasts, the womb and the female torso, are gradually being further reduced and minimalized to their basic primeval geometric outline. In *Womanly Abstract*, the torso resembled—and was a metaphor of—a vessel. The vessel appears hollow and vacuous, once the



Pinaree Sanpitak, *The Confident Body I*, 1996, 230 x 200 cm, acrylic & charcoal on canvas.



Pinaree Sanpitak, *In the browns*, 1997, 220 x 190 cm, charcoal, pastel & saa paper on canvas.

symbol of fertility and maternity, has this now become an incomplete void? Sanpitak says not. "The vessels are like me opening myself as a woman. It's about vulnerability and how things cannot be sustained forever. But myself as a vessel doesn't mean that my life is empty, it's definitely not. It enables me to feel freer, take more risks, not being confined."

In *Womanly Abstract*, the paintings like *Womanly Echo* (1998) and *Womanly Slick* (1998) have acrylics, pastels, and collage overlaid in predominantly monochrome so that the vessel is stark and hard-edged, accentuated with contour lines. Sanpitak feels she's always having to give reasons for her use of color: "Using black concentrates my work. Black for Thais represents melancholy. When my mother sees what I'm doing, she asks me, are you feeling sad? I believe that it's just another color, it's not about sorrow." The installation titled *Womanly Bodies* (1998) consisted of 25 rhythmic sculptures standing two-and-a-half-meters tall, their stitched *saa* fiber material give them a coarse texture, organic distortions in their repetitious stature. On first inspection the work appears to be less sexually charged than previously, gone are the direct references to the female as sex object. Though staring at these fibrous, animate forms, Sanpitak may be inviting us to peruse more intimately under the skin, deep inside the female sanctum.

Sanpitak has been involved with both of the *Womanifesto* events, an ambitious exposure of women's art from a melange of international female artists. This year the festival was supported by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, an encouraging sign that attitudes are changing. Sanpitak's installation, *Untitled "offerings"* (1999), was a continuing extension of the more abstract, ambiguous recent "vessel" pieces. The site-specific sculptural work consisted of numerous *saa* fiber shallow vessels interspersed within an area of lawn inside the park. The coarse paper bowls became homes for shed

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. There were also overtones of Buddhist ideology. Sanpitak's musing statement hints at her motives:

"The purple flowers are blooming. Father had explained the difference between *Tabaek* and *Intanin* (different kinds of flowering trees) but I still get confused. It's getting hotter each day. At least the "kite wind" makes the heat a bit more pleasant. It's too hot to work in the studio. As I sip my coffee, the chickens are cackling behind the wall. An egg might have been laid. Flowers bloom and wither.

Time runs on. These works are my 'offerings'. I offer my gratitude for making me a woman."

Sanpitak is quick to play down her involvement in such a politically driven forum as *Womanifesto*, "My participation in *Womanifesto* was mainly because it was situated in Thailand and events like that don't happen very often. Maybe if it was somewhere else, I wouldn't have taken part."

Her latest site-specific installation was *Merit Memory Muse: Notes to the Soul* (1999) housed in the *Kunsthau*s Tacheles, a once dilapidated East Berlin department store. At one time, occupied by the Nazis, now converted (a shining

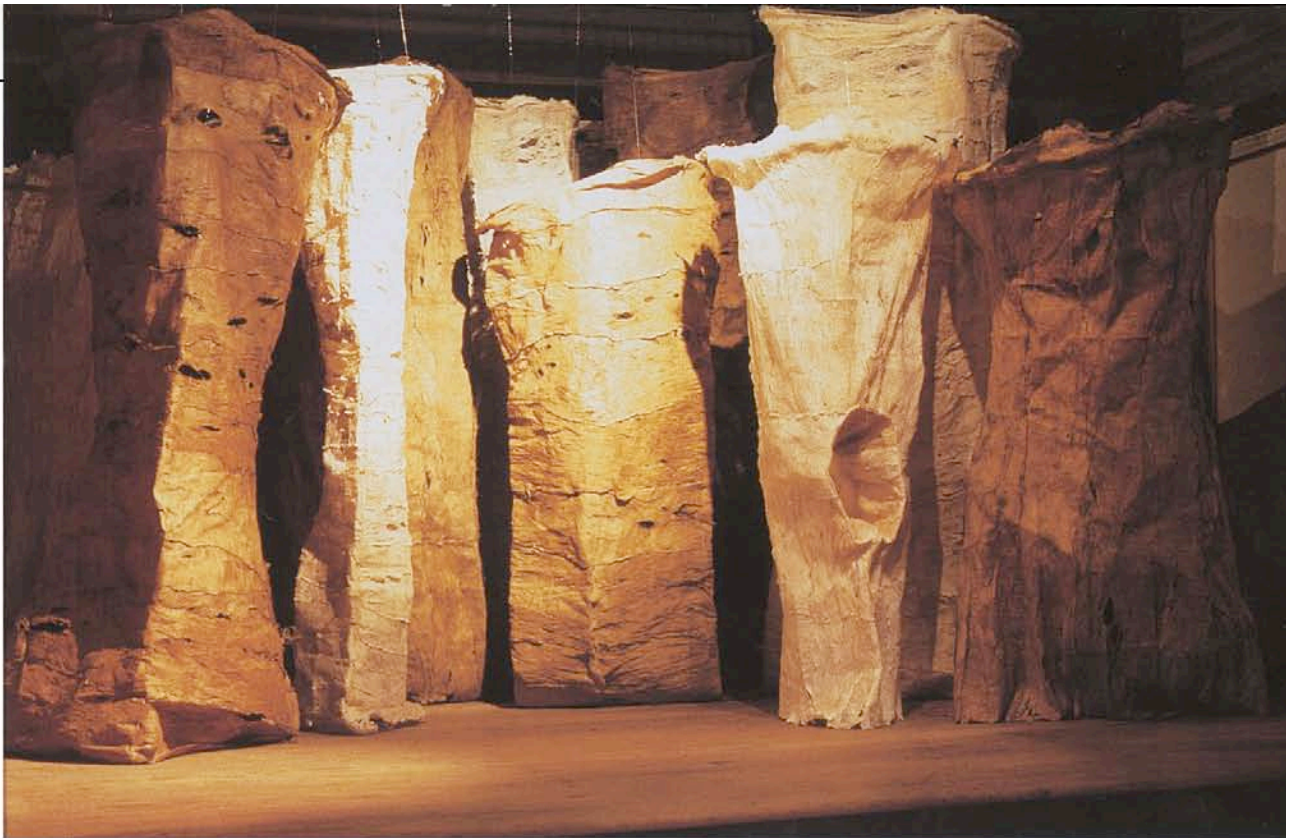
example of a unified, culturally vibrant new Germany) into a bustling art's center. The exhibition of invited Asian artists was organized under the thematic title, *Festival der Geister* or *Asian Ghosts and Spirits*. Thailand was represented by Sanpitak as well as Chumpon Apisuk, Michael Shaowanasai, and Patravadi Theater.

On her own contribution to the exhibition, Sanpitak wrote: "dripping, rubbing, rinsing, washing, pressing, building, lighting, smelling, binding... gestures which take place in many spiritual ceremonies that surround me. I bring them into my art as a medium to create these personal interpretations of those rituals. Memories are awoken, the mind muses and hopefully someone merits."

The Berlin installation comprised of monoprints, candle wax, and charcoal drawings on paper with bells covered in gold leaf hanging and placed over the floor. This forced visitors to concentrate on the environment as a whole. Sanpitak adapted and utilized a ventilation outlet by covering the grate with gold leaf, her justification being, "It signifies life, breathing, and the total energy within the space. It's very subliminal, how things affect you unknowingly, your subconscious." A bowl of burning incense was placed in front of the outlet saturating the room with the aromatic atmosphere of spirituality.



Pinaree Sanpitak, *Womanly Slick*, 1998, 205 x 107 cm, acrylic, pastel, ink, charcoal on paper.



Pinaree Sanpitak, *Womanly Bodies*, 1998, H.180-260 cm, saa fiber & ratan.

Images of breasts again feature in this installation, they now resemble temple stupas, church spires, or mosque domes in Sanpitak's ambiguous comparison to religious iconography. 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?"

The black weighty mass of her mammourous drawings can also be viewed conversely as vacuous holes, tunnels leading to an unseen dimension or destiny, once again reverting to the notion of the vessel. Sanpitak elaborates upon this mood within her work, "I've been feeling rather unsettled. It was really good for me to do this work. Although there was a theme behind the piece, it's made me aware of feelings, a way of healing. It's very personal."

Domestically, Sanpitak does have a few female peers with whom to exchange ideas, though hardly any have had the

same degree of international validation. Araya Rasjamreansook is another artist who is constantly being bracketed with Sanpitak as a female Thai artist with international acclaim. Physically the work of the two artists bears little resemblance, though they both use sculptural installations and the importance of language is

also close to them. Rasjamreansook, a lecturer at Chiangmai University, is also a reputable writer. Thematic crossovers occur as both women explore their roles as women in Thai society from a personal standpoint in the search for self-realization.

Sanpitak believes that she hasn't drawn any real direct influence from feminist art trends in the West, though she does appreciate the humor in the works of American artist Cindy Sherman. From the 1970s onwards numerous Western female artists have been tackling similar themes of female sexuality and equality as those being addressed in Sanpitak's work. Asked whether she felt the issue had been exhausted, she replied: "Because the world hasn't really changed so much—the material world has, but the relationships between humans aren't so different—our basic needs remain constant. Survival, sex, companionship, and reproduction. I don't think it's wrong to restate things in my own manner."

Sanpitak is not one to frivolously follow trends and that which is constant in the artist and her oeuvre is her integrity and honesty with herself, her artistic ambition is personal—not political or material. Δ



Pinaree Sanpitak, *Womanly Echo*, 1998, 200 x 170 cm, acrylic, pastel collage on canvas.