

# Pinaree Sanpitak: ART THROUGH THE BREAST

Iola Lenzi



Pinaree Sanpitak is one of Thailand's leading contemporary practitioners as well as one of the country's few internationally recognized woman artists. Known primarily for her restrained and restated lexicon of images associated with the female body, Pinaree's work stands apart from that of some of her more socially and politically vocal Thai counterparts. Claimed as she inevitably is by the feminist camp, the artist disputes her categorization as a woman artist exploiting a gender agenda, as well as the implicit connotations of such labeling. And though some have read her use of domestic-related media—silk, food, soft furnishings, candles—as confirming a gender bias, these commentators ignore both Pinaree's frequent reliance on gender neutral media such as cast metal, as well as the fact that numerous Southeast Asian male practitioners un-self consciously choose craft/soft materials for their creations. Indeed, the universality of Pinaree's vision and message, albeit conveyed in a deeply personal manner, gives her practice a broad resonance, the female form—or one of its deconstructed parts—articulating a pluralistic, expansionist view of the world rather than a feminist perspective of exclusion.

In the early days of her career, Pinaree formalized the female body. Her limbless, headless torsos were massive and abstracted, heavy with a womanly rather than feminine potency that was more narrative-of-self than generic gender commentary. Gradually, over time, Pinaree progressed from an evocation of the female trunk, always formally reductive, to more specific anatomical references. The breast, with its powers of nurture and solace, became a particular favorite. Reworked in various media, evoking different atmospheres and rhythms, Pinaree's subtly differentiated breast icons, despite constant thematic repetition, remain visually and conceptually fresh to this day.

Much of Pinaree's work, whether graphic or three dimensional, possesses a sculptural, organic, abstracted quality. In her oeuvre of the last several years, her breast images have been assimilated with vessels and stupas, both key icons of the Buddhist faith. But the intention is not so much a religious reference as an identification, elliptical at that, with the humanity at the heart of all faiths, as well as an oblique look at Asian cultural renewal through the re-interpretation of indigenous emblems. "... in Southeast Asia these emblems have a coded value with religious as well as wider cultural connotations. I am quite aware of these but I also like the shapes, the purely formal aspect of these totems..." says the artist. Certainly, there is a clear link between their centrality in the tradition, and their appeasing, tactilely and aesthetically comforting shape.

In the early 1990s, at the beginning of the artist's career, which coincided with a period of intense artistic vibrancy in Thailand, Pinaree focused primarily on two-dimensional expression. Seminal series of the time include a paint on canvas group of abstracted female Caesarian-scarred torsos (*Patched up*, 1997) which emerged after the birth of the artist's first child, as well as a yet more stylized,



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*Womanly Bodies*

geometric interpretation of the same imagery which the artist produced as both charcoal drawings and prints on paper (*Womanly Tensions*, 1999). Large scale and generally monochrome, these radiant canvases and graphic works speak of the monumentality of motherhood, birth, and by extension, the most fundamental of human dynamics, the birth, life, and death cycle.

Out of these two sets of images came *breast stupas* and these in turn spawned the vessel series that the artist continues to expand upon today. Static as they are, Pinaree's vessels engage in contemplative dialogue with the viewer, translated into three dimensional sculptural form, as a composition of graphic, outline-only drawings, or finally as vast monochrome planes of velvety midnight-dark charcoal, black on black, evoking the unlimited and unknown universe with all the philosophical connotations of such musings. Iconographically, as well as functionally echoing the female breast, the vessel is of course a universal metaphor for generosity and plenty. But the shape also speaks of possibility and promise, with Pinaree's vision often hovering



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*noon-nom*, 2001-2002  
organza, synthetic fiber  
site: Bangkok University Art Gallery, 93  
square meter, 200 pieces, size variable

between spiritual suggestion and a tangible certainty of abundance. It is this floating quality, this ambiguity that takes the artist's corpus of signs from the confines of the literal into the realm of the illuminated.

At the beginning of the millennium, Pinaree achieved a breakthrough of sorts, creating *noon nom*, a soft-sculpture installation comprising breast-shaped pillows. Its title translated as "nestling at the breast", the work, exhibited in 2002 in Bangkok, was the artist's first fully interactive piece. Consisting of 200-odd huge breast-shaped pillows in human flesh tones of pink, white, grey or black, the work was stuffed into a 90m<sup>2</sup> gallery so that the space became a sea of breasts calling viewers to submerge themselves in its depths. About abundance, softness, indulgence, and comfort, but also exuding sexuality, *noon nom*

was a departure for the artist in both its conceptual reach and extroverted thrust.

Playfully evoking both potency and vulnerability, the *noon nom* breast explodes from the artist's inner being, a provocative creation speaking boldly of worldly issues and shifting Pinaree from contemplative ground to a new realm of active exchange. Dislocated from the female body, the breast-as-cushion transcends its many circumscribed roles to suggest freedom and a reclaimed sense of individuality. With layered meanings, the installation considers the feminine condition beyond the boundaries of standard feminist discourse, challenging the age-old dichotomy opposing woman-as-nurturing-mother-figure and woman-as-seductress-vixen. The work's approach to female sexuality is ironic and celebratory rather than righteous, and thus successfully



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*Temporary insanity*, 2003-2004  
 silk, synthetic fiber, battery, motor,  
 propeller, sound device,  
 fabric by Jim Thompson  
 over all size variable

reconciles and negates such black-and-white male-made clichés. And though sensually compelling, offering a direct reference to well-worn stereotypes of woman as sexual commodity, *noon nom*, through its humorous allusion to female objectivization, in tandem with its rebellious subtext, successfully debunks the stereotype and endorses empowerment for all.

Extending the concept of *noon nom*, Pinaree created *Temporary Insanity* for a solo show at The Art Center, Jim Thompson House, Bangkok in 2004. Kinetic rather than interactive, this installation's breast cushion forms are no longer designed to be fallen into but instead are fitted with small battery-powered motors in their bases; the breasts gyrate alluringly and unsynchronized in the darkened gallery space. This piece marks a further transition in Pinaree's artistic

scope, the work here yet more confident and active in its engagement with its audience. Sewn-up in vibrant hot orange and yellow silk, the *Temporary Insanity* cushion-breasts offer a flamboyant visual presence, which, added to the purring whir of their submerged motors, speaks of the artist's ever more assertive relationship with her viewer.

In 2005 the artist moved conceptually in yet another direction, turning from the vessels themselves to what these might contain and influence. In her *Breast Stupa Cookery* series, Pinaree's inverted breast-stupa-vessels have become molds, taking their place in glazed stoneware or cast aluminum at the center of that locus of everyday communion, the dinner table. Yet the cookery series is not truly about food itself, however delicious, as it appears documented on video or seen in the flesh and tasted in live, collaborative and interactive performance.



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Candles-Sweden



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Crystal Fruit



◀ Aworuka-OshisushiBuffet

Rather, returning in an allusive and metaphorical way to all past works navigating nurture and generosity, this series amplifies these concepts. Food, a medium of universal connection is used as a vehicle to usher in something entirely new: the idea of exchange between the inside and outside, and the influence of one over the other. On a formal level, playing on the polarization of positive and negative space embodied by food and mold, the artist conjures a discreet tension that echoes the pull *Breast Stupa Cookery* creates between Pinaree and cook, cook and diners, cook/diners and audience.

Further, as multi-layered interactive collaborative performances where a chef in Paris, a pair of women cooks in Tokyo or a Chinese chef in Singapore prepare real food for real diners using Pinaree's molds as they, not the artist, determine, *Breast Stupa Cookery* is that rare thing: rigorously and confidently conceptually manned by the artist, yet also absolutely free in terms of process and aesthetic result. For despite the complexity of these improvised pieces that involve the exploration of various non-aligned relationships —Pinaree and the chef, the chef and the mold, the diners and the molded food, the diners and the concept of the mold, the external audience watching all this on a TV monitor—they are universally accessible and engaging, promoting deep musing and a sense of connection in the viewer. Comprising elements of surprise, conviviality, eroticism, sharing, taboo shedding,

*Breast Stupa Cookery* is more than the sum of all its parts. Light-touched, assertive, uplifting and profound, it shows the artist firmly in control of her expressive language.

Pinaree's practice has developed considerably in the last decade. Its formal rigor has remained constant, as has its foundation in the artist's inner sanctum and concern with the metaphorical. But moving over the years from the contemplative, suggestive and introspective toward a dynamic quest for intercourse, it has carved a unique niche for itself at the heart of contemporary Thai visual culture. With its increasing play on scale, mounting interest in three-dimensional space, and fearless experimentation with media and concept, Pinaree's current work is both sure-footed and conceptually sophisticated. Reflecting the artist's growing expressive confidence, it has entirely shed the elusiveness of earlier creation in favor of a deliberately open stance, heightened by a humor-tinged sexuality. In the eclectic context of contemporary Thai practice, or indeed regional contemporary practice, Pinaree Sanpitak's pluralistic and empowering artistic voice stands apart. 🍷

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