Towering rolls of unbleached paper and cardboard-swathed artwork lie scattered like sleeping dogs in Pinaree “Ai” Sanpitak’s art studio. Works in progress and works finished can be seen here and there. Silver breasts, gourd-like, sprout from the ground; smaller glass-blown versions of the mammarys, their glossy nipples like pencil erasers, are arrayed on a tray in the far corner. The ceilings are several metres high, but the semi-outdoor enclosure (there is a defeated-sounding air conditioner in one corner), is nearly cramped nonetheless. Layers of splattered paints on the finished cement flooring. The studio is testimony to the decades of contributions Pinaree has made to the art scene, both locally and internationally.

Pinaree is widely regarded as one of Southeast Asia’s greatest contemporary artists, known chiefly for her ponderous explorations of the breast. For this she won Thailand’s Ministry of Culture’s prestigious Silpatorn Award in 2007. Her interest in the female body (in particular, the breast) began 22 years ago and since then she has returned time again to it, occasionally investigating other forms. Her compelling works come from a fiercely personal and spiritual source, with accessible, open viewpoints that often invite participation. They have brought her admiration and renown throughout the art world regionally and internationally.

“I started using the breast form from about two months after I gave birth to my son. It was a part of the body that was obviously very active and very sensitive at the time, and I was looking for a body part that differentiated clearly between men and women. Compared to...
...it’s not just about the woman. It’s about all of us"

Her collaboration with glassblower Master Silvaro Signoretto resulted in Quietly Soli – glass sculptures with amorphous, oily glass engulfing transparent blue centres. Looking at Pinaree’s work, it might be easy to forget that the bare breasts, and particularly the nipple, are taboo in most places. And for Thai society, where much ink was spilled when breasts were exposed, for instances during a televised Thailand’s Got Talent competition when a contestant used her bare breasts to paint a canvas, it is particularly taboo. But it was not always so, as Pinaree sees it differently.

“Thirty years ago, this old lady used to live in the house here, and she would go bare-breasted comfortably around the house, a normal habit for her,” recalls Pinaree. Her work normalises the breasts in ironic senses, and has been labelled as feminist, though she resists that description. “My works are open to interpretation. I can be a woman. I can be a feminist. I can be a woman artist. I can be a non-feminist. I can be a woman. I can be a man. I can be a cross-gender body, both male and female.”

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