

## CULTURE &amp; ENTERTAINMENT



Clockwise from above: Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal; Pinaree Sanpitak (2); Los Angeles County Museum of Art



MULTIMEDIA Clockwise from left: Pinaree Sanpitak in her Bangkok studio; 'Anything Can Break' (2011); 'Breast Stupa Topiary' (2013)

## THE MOMENT

## A Body of Work

BY JOHN KRICH

**S**urrounded by giant trees and a jungle-like garden, Pinaree Sanpitak's traditional wood-frame house and studio is a serene oasis just footsteps from street-food vendors and anxious crowds at Bangkok's immigration office.

Ms. Pinaree, 52, is likewise something of a calm, understated presence in Thailand's contemporary art scene.

With an approach that is highly introspective and personal, she has long been a champion of feminist causes and visions. Ever since her 1994 "Breast Works" show in Bangkok, she has worked with symbolic representations of breasts in various media, using repeated forms that recall Buddhist temple stupas and even bells.

Labeled "groundbreaking" by curators, her meditative paintings, sculptures, installations and collages have been exhibited in major museums and galleries in Japan, where she won a scholarship to study in the 1980s, as well as the U.S., Australia, Holland, Germany, the Philippines and Singapore.

Outside of conventional art institutions, she has also created hollow ceramic versions of mammarys, to be filled with food created by chef collaborators around the world as part of what she calls "breast-stupa cookery." She has taken this roving happening to numerous eateries, from the restaurant of Bangkok's Jim Thompson House to Le Trois restaurant in Paris.

Her latest exhibition, "Cold Cuts," at Singapore's Yavuz Fine Art gallery from Jan. 18 to Feb. 23, features both large gray-on-silver canvases—in which breasts transform into weighty globs, reminiscent of teardrops or clouds—that include pressed flowers at their edges, and stainless-steel sculptures.

She recently sat down with the Journal to talk about her fascination with the body, the role of cooking in her work, and how Thailand's political situation has made its way into her art.



SLEEP ON IT 'Hanging by a Thread' (2012) is hammock art.

**How did you begin working with the female figure as part of your art work?**

I started working with the breast form, naturally, when my son was born, and now he's 20 and studying in Belgium. There was just something in this very beautiful and powerful part of the body that got me to keep going and explore. Sometimes I was making a monument to womanhood, singular and upright, but then it has also been elongated, upside-down, coming back to reality and eventually an abstract form.

**Why are breasts such a major preoccupation in your art?**

People know me as "the breast artist," but actually [my work is] more about the body. Part or whole, as a site of contemplation, understanding, exchange. I've been working with this form for so long, there's so much I'm intrigued by and for me it takes years to let ideas settle. But it's about being human, not male or female but cross-gender.

**You've also used the breast shape in edible form.**

Starting in 2005, there have been 30 "breast-stupa cookery" events. They are very collaborative: I never tell the chefs what to do with the breast molds. It's my way of asking people what they think of this form I've been working with so long. Every

time it's different, because chefs are artists themselves and food is a great medium. Sometimes it can get pretty crazy, like organizing a dinner party, but sometimes it's for an opening of 200 or 300 people. Things get broken, but the experience remains.

**Any particularly memorable meals?**

In Japan, the chef made sweets to go with a tea ceremony, and I developed a smoother, smaller rim to turn the molds into a cup. I've made cookie-cutter breasts, lots of utensils. In China, they made steamed breast buns decorated like tigers, because they say strong women are like tigers. The most moving was probably in New Zealand in 2011, working with two Maori chefs who made their potato yeast bread and other dishes related to the monthly flow of women, some from berries they leave on the trail as markers. The chefs became very emotional introducing the works because their culture doesn't normally go in a gallery or occupy center stage.

**How else have you moved beyond painting?**

I started out studying photography in Japan, but moved to collages when I began my career back in the late '80s. I've done installations of breast-shaped cushions to rest on, exploring sensory perception. I

hung hundreds of origami boxes with wings attached and breast balloons made of glass from the ceiling, adding a soundscape that changes as the viewers move through. I've also made sculptures and colored breast beads from Murano glass and worked with everything from rattan to metal.

My recent show at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] was perhaps my most political. I strung hammocks made of twisted Thai fabrics. Here, the bodies are absent, the cloths provide comfort in a time of crisis. That's why I called it "Hanging by a Thread."

**What do you consider your main influences?**

I've been influenced a lot by Japan but can't pinpoint it. Though it's always difficult to make a living as an artist—my first show was in the back of a Bangkok bookstore—I was lucky to start my career when interest had shifted from a Western point of view to Asia-Pacific. An easy way for Westerners to understand Asian art is always through religion or politics. As for some Thai-ness to my work, I think viewers are the ones who have to look for it.

**It's not some Buddhist element in the work?**

People always say that. It's just that after all the collaborations, I always have to return to the studio to work alone. If anything bad happens, my art can bring me back to the center. With my son gone, it's an empty nest so I tried to prepare for the Singapore show. I've planned a lot of shows for this year.

**Why is your new one called "Cold Cuts"?**

I'm playing with the idea of flesh, in an ironic way. I'll be showing topiary, stainless-steel lawn sculptures made in France that people can walk inside. Only here, they will be indoors, eight of them, so I've added some plants in steel planters made in Japan. The legs of the breasts can detach; it's very IKEA. Normally my works are tactile, organic, handmade. I called this "Cold Cuts" and am playing with this idea of precision and of something that can hurt. And of reaching a stage of life where I try to take better care of things.