

# DIS/PLACED

*The politics of ethnicity and religion in the art of*

JAKKAI SIRIBUTR









# DIS/PLACED

*The politics of ethnicity and religion in the art of*

**JAKKAI SIRIBUTR**

Jakkai Siributr's (b.1969) practice explores social contradictions and political frictions in Thailand and Southeast Asia today. Through a combination of irony and empathy, it trains a critical eye on entrenched customs and power-holders, probing legitimacy. Jakkai's oeuvre, if often textile-rich, encompasses all media of the contemporary, the artist selecting techniques, images, and vernacular materials which operate deliberately as conceptual clues via their embedded cultural references, so communicating complex ideas to broad publics.

In this predominantly new body of work DISPLACED the politics of ethnicity and religion in the art of Jakkai Siributr, curated by Iola Lenzi for BACC, Jakkai extends his investigation of sectarian violence from Thailand to Myanmar.

The evolving place and content of Thai Buddhism have preoccupied the artist for over a decade. In 2014, Jakkai turned his attention to Thailand's Deep South, spotlighting Muslim-Buddhist communal strife, on the rise since 2000. From this concern came the installation 78, which is being exhibited for the first time in Thailand in DISPLACED. 78 is a somber and pathos-charged installation tribute to 78 Thai Muslim civilians who died suffocated during their transportation in trucks by the Thai military in October 2004. Still and meditative, 78 evokes a stylised graveyard that through textile, script, and reference to mosque architecture, returns dignity to the disenfranchised dead. Jakkai's artistic statement thus obliquely spurs critical thinking about religious politics in Thailand.

Continuing this thematic exploration, three years later Jakkai has produced his 2017 costume-based piece Changing Room. This installation investigates how sectarian tensions affect different groups in the South: civilians of different ages and faiths, and soldiers from all parts of Thailand. Contrary to the introspective 78, Changing Room places dynamic public intervention at the heart of its aesthetic as audiences try-on military jackets and Muslim-Malay headgear in the exhibition space. But Jakkai has transformed the songkok skull-caps worn by Muslim-Malay men. He has lined the white caps with camouflage-printed cloth, embroidered with images of violence borrowed from media coverage of the troubled South. Camouflage jackets of the Thai military, for their part, have been embroidered with happy scenes imagined by Muslim children from the South. Jakkai appropriated these hopeful images produced by Southern school kids when he conducted school workshops with them during several stints in the South. Thus, the clothing installation, through the fun of dress-up, conveys a deeply serious tension as its imagery confronts violent reality as depicted on the caps, with projected hope, as



depicted on the jackets. The public is therefore compelled to reconcile these opposites, becoming involved in the Southern problem. Via this confrontation, and the change of identity afforded by costume, Jakkai co-opts viewers into the lives of the “other”, Muslim Southerners. Audiences, now experiencing the conflict from the intimate vantage point of Changing Room, cross the sectarian divide.

In a third work, moving from Thailand to Myanmar, Jakkai scrutinizes the plight of Buddhist Burma’s persecuted minority Muslim Rohingyas. The Outlaw’s Flag examines the Rohingya’s displacement via video and a flag installation. Through 21 invented “flags” —embroidered seeds and beads on Burmese longyi and monks’ robes— unclaimed by any nation, the artist points to the perniciousness of nationalism that with its boundaries and exclusions, is often used to excuse abuses of power. Paired with a two-screen video cryptically narrating the stateless Rohingya’s exile from Burma, Jakkai’s piece, through visual drama and artistic metaphor playing on the flag emblem, beyond the fate of the Rohingya, brings attention to larger ethical issues of persecution and displacement, relevant everywhere today. Jakkai Siributr’s DISPLACED at BACC, rooted in Thailand and Burma, resonates globally.

Jakkai Siributr’s art is internationally-recognised and has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in Asia, Europe and the United States. In Thailand, his work has been shown at The Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University, among others. Jakkai’s pieces are featured in numerous institutional collections, including the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; the Vehbi Koç Foundation, Istanbul; and the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based curator and critic of Southeast Asian art. With a background in law and art history, she has conceptualised numerous institutional exhibitions exploring the discourse-shaping place of socially-engaged practices in Southeast Asian art history. In Bangkok she has curated exhibitions at BACC and the Jim Thompson Art Center. She is the author of Museums of Southeast Asia, and teaches graduate Asian art history in Singapore.























































