

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Following the Threads that Connect Clothing to Religious Persecution in Southeast Asia

The real subject of *Displaced* is the arbitrary means by which Muslims of Thailand and Myanmar are subjected to abhorrent violence.

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Exhibition view of *Displaced* at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (all images courtesy the artist)

The violence meted out against people for their religious, political, and ethnic affiliations, often signaled by clothing and the symbols they wear, provides a lens through which to see abuses of power. All over the world, clothing and symbols can take on protective, threatening, or dangerous meanings.

As happens in the West, discrimination against Muslims also occurs in Thailand and Southeast Asia — especially in southern Thailand and northwestern Myanmar. These prejudices are the subject of Thai artist Jakkai Siributr's solo exhibition, *Displaced*, currently at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (BACC).

As he has done before, Siributr looks with a penetrating gaze at the surface forms of Thai culture to consider the politics hiding beneath. Siributr, who was born in Thailand, and studied textile arts in the US before returning to Thailand to live and work, uses textiles to decipher and reveal the meaning of symbols that are powerful in Thai culture, especially those found in religious iconography. (The artist told me via email that he has his own religious practice which is the Middle Path of Buddhism.) In this way his artistic practice is reminiscent of Yinka Shonibare and Grayson Perry, who both use the aesthetics of fabric and clothing to deeply investigate their societies. For *Displaced*, Siributr focuses specifically on the relationships

of the Theravadic Buddhist majority to the Muslim minority in Thailand and Myanmar through his use of devotional fabrics and symbols.



Installation view of “78” (2014)

Siributr’s “78” (2014) is a chilling installation memorializing the people who were killed by Thai officials in the town of Tak Bai on October 25th, 2004, when 1,300 protestors gathered to protest the arrest of men charged with arming Muslim separatists. They were arrested by the military, stripped, and stacked like sardines for a five-hour drive to a military base. It was hot. Seventy-eight of the protestors died in transit. The installation is a large cube, with a skin of jet black cloth and gold stitching, that visually references the Kaaba (which comes from the Arabic for cube), Islam’s most sacred site. Entering the installation, you see a skeleton of steel scaffolding and stacked beds of bamboo. You are surrounded by the names of those killed; they are written and numbered on the beds, which reach all the way to the top of the cube. The piece was first shown on the ten-year anniversary of the tragic mass killing, which remains unpunished. The power of “78,” lies in its fabrication as a complex environment where violence, loss, and reverence coexist — demonstrating that cloth can function as an invitation, a welcoming, and a shunning.



Detail shot of “78” (2014)

In “The Outlaw’s Flag,” (2016) Siributr has invented 21 flags, pointing them towards, curator Iola Lenzi writes in her essay for the exhibition, “the perniciousness of nationalism that with its boundaries and exclusions, is often used to excuse abuses of power.” The flags are various sizes and colors, hung from bamboo poles attached to the ceiling. Although invented, there are obvious similarities between these flags and those of existing countries and groups.



Installation shot of “The Outlaw Flags,” (2016)

“Changing Room,” (2016) is a socially engaged installation consisting of free standing steel racks of military camouflage jackets partially surrounding a small table. On the table are piled songkoks, a Southeast Asian version of the taqiyah, a skullcap mostly worn by Muslims. Overlaying the camouflaged jackets are cross-stitched jovial scenes, drawn by Thai Muslim schoolchildren, found by Siributr. Conversely, the songkoks are white on the outside, representing purity and reverence, but lined with camouflage inside them. Also on the inside, Siributr has embroidered media depictions of violence from deep southern Thailand, a region with a militant Muslim majority that advocates for joining with the more Islamic Malaysia, just south of the border.

The audience is invited to try these items on in a conceptually challenging game of dress up. Photographs and selfies are encouraged, with the tags of #displaced and #changingroom, suggested for use on Instagram and Facebook.



One of the jackets in “Changing Room,” (2016)

Through the act of sporting the clothing Siributr makes available, we are invited to reflect on the precarity of prejudice. What, the installation asks, honestly separates me from “them”? If a change of outfit can make us targets on the streets, what does that say about our society, and the human rights we claim to espouse? This piece offers a valuable experiment in empathy, but in the end, indigenous groups and religious minorities cannot change their clothes with the same ease as I; these are projections of their identity as much as protection for their bodies.



Installation shot of “Dressing Room,” (2016) with active participants

The real subject here is not the audience at BACC, their religious affiliations, or their social media accounts, but the arbitrary means by which Muslims of Thailand and Myanmar are subjected to abhorrent violence. While I can exchange clothes as an experiment in empathy, for Muslims to change their clothes would be to alter something they consider fundamental to their identity. This is not a criticism of “Changing Room,” as much as a right-sizing of the work. Small windows into other worlds can allow great affinity with the other, or exoticize them, or collapse into nothing more than an inconsequential snapshot.

“While the audience may be initially concerned about getting the best selfies and the best pose,” Siributr wrote me, “they will look and look at what they’re wearing and slowly start to see the patterns. Comments will start to come in, creating some sort of dialog with the work.” Whether those comments spur a positive dialogue or trolling remains to be seen. The hashtags functions as much as an advertisement for Siributr as a confrontation of Islamophobia.



Detail of Taqiyahs in “Changing Room” (2016)

As in the case of many artworks seeking to raise awareness or build empathy, I find that the gallery setting, the short duration of the intervention, and a lack of deeper community organizing limits the political impact of this exhibition. To me, Siributr's work is a great example of contemporary relational art. Lenzi confirmed this: "these are not didactic artworks, but rather open-ended installations creating dialogues with viewers." If we consider success in terms of the kind of thought or discussion the artwork engenders, Siributr is high quality. I've never reflected more, or more deeply about the textiles surrounding me.

*Jakkai Siributr's Displaced continues at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (939 Rama 1 Road, Bangkok, Thailand) through May 13th.*