

PINAREE SANPITAK

TEMPORARY INSANITY

Pinaree Sanpitak's "Temporary Insanity," at Austin's AMOA-Arthouse, explored the liminal space between genders while navigating between the silks of Thailand and the sands of Texas. The Bangkok-born artist has been exhibiting internationally for over two decades, encompassing major biennials in Australia, Italy, Japan and Korea. Her evolving and overlapping series of works employ a variety of media to explore the female body, with a particular focus on the breast. In *Temporary Insanity* (2003–04), which was the exhibition's sole installation and namesake and consists of 100 soft sculptures, the artist poetically muddles bodily forms and their associative functions.

Originally shown in 2004, *Temporary Insanity* is an arrangement of roundish cushioned objects, upholstered in fine Thai silk, placed directly on the gallery floor. Each component houses an invisible motor that detects the sound of approaching gallery viewers—an interactivity that is typical of Sanpitak's work. The machinery initiates subtle quivering motions within the sculptures and produces a soft audio effect that is mechanically derived yet reminiscent of natural sound. The rippling responsiveness of the pieces, and their slow descent into silence, is highly evocative.

In a recent email to this writer, Sanpitak noted that, in *Temporary Insanity*, "my breast forms have crossed gender. The shapes are more morphed, [both] breasts and balls." All under one meter in height and diameter, only a few have bulges that appear nipple-like. Some have longer protrusions that seem not only phallic but almost geologic; though most of the sculptures are nearly spherical. They could be breasts or balls, but also fruits or stones. The effect is not only a blurring of genders, but also a blending of the human and the inanimate. The exhibition's setting—a museum housed in the shell of a 1920s theater—only underscored this ambiguity. Were these objects to be read as the ghostly appendages of past theatergoers, or mysterious growths from the venue's exposed walls? Should we understand these forms as figures on the flat expanse of the gallery floor, or do they collectively comprise a kind of landscape, their fleshy tones recalling Thailand's soft sunsets over humid rice paddies?

The interplay between possible understandings was facilitated by the scale of the installation and its components. On entering the cavernous upper-level gallery, *Temporary Insanity* appeared to spread boundlessly across the space: no component was less than a meter and a half from another. From a standing perspective, the breast/balls seemed to merge into one shimmering, expansive field. At closer view, though, the seams and bulges of each piece were evident. The gentle mechanical wiggling, set in motion by viewers'

movements, invited closer inspection, and visitors would suddenly find themselves not standing at a hesitant distance, but crouching on the floor amid the spherical sculptures. From this vantage point, *Temporary Insanity* shifts from being a kind of landscape to offering an experience almost of the monumental, the hundred breast/balls teetering between individuation and interdependence. This tension between the part and the whole is an important motif in Sanpitak's practice—it is both a formal experiment and a marker of phenomenological and spiritual possibilities.

Sanpitak has dubbed her trademark biomorphic sculptures "breast stupas," named after the conical structures used for the preservation of funerary remains throughout Buddhist Southeast Asia, including Thailand. The viewing experience of *Temporary Insanity* recalls Buddhist practice in another way. By inviting viewers to stoop to the ground, the installation invokes the conventional gesture for paying respect and offering prayer. And in using the earthy, warm colors of its dyed silks to evoke both flesh and the countryside, the work also recalls the palette of Buddhist pagoda frescoes and ceremonial objects.

Thailand is a vital lens for understanding Sanpitak's work, as are the artist's gender and her interest in its bodily and political boundaries. Yet "Temporary Insanity" provided a different context for viewers to explore and appreciate her complexly associative practice. The installation held its own in the expanses of the Texan desert, and in the seemingly haunted halls of the AMOA-Arthouse. Seeing it afresh a decade after its creation, the work proposed a fluidity that is as enthralling as it is eerie.

ROGER NELSON

PINAREE SANPITAK

Temporary Insanity

2003–04

Installed at AMOA-Arthouse, Austin, 2013.
Silk, synthetic fiber, battery, motor, propeller,
sound device, dimensions variable.
Courtesy AMOA-Arthouse.

