

ART INTERVIEW ■ KAONA PONGPIPAT



## NEEDLING THAILAND'S LOOTERS

A hatred for politicians is the sole inspiration for Jakkai Siributr's latest exhibition

**J**akkai Siributr's latest exhibition, "Plunder", at Yavuz Fine Art in Singapore, is in a sense a haunted house. A political one, that is, with 39 Thai civil servant uniforms hanging lifelessly all over the room, and each has, in varying places, the familiar face of a Thai politician roughly embroidered on.

Walking among faces resembling Thaksin Shinawatra, his sister Yingluck and ex-prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (Suthep Thuagsuban should be somewhere — at the time of the exhibition he hadn't yet resigned to ask people to withhold their taxes), one only has to be Thai or someone who has lived in the country for some time to shudder and nod (maybe with satisfaction) while looking at these faces so grotesquely portrayed.

"My hatred for politicians is my sole inspiration for this exhibition," said Jakkai of what his work articulates.

"I've come to realise that it does not matter who's in charge of the country and how many more colour-coded protests we're going to endure, at the end of the day, the people of Thailand will

never benefit from it. All we can do is to sit and watch these people pillage our country."

He says that he chose the word "plunder" as the exhibition title as it's both a verb and a noun, and it sums up his message in the exhibition, his latest reaction to the ongoing political brouhaha. The uniform section is named "Rape And Pillage", a title Jakkai says is used literally as well as metaphorically.

"In times of war, that's what really happens, but one can also rape and pillage a nation right from inside parliament," he explains.

As viewers walk through the scattered torsos, what makes things even more eerie is how some uniforms hung on strings seem to swirl by themselves. It is, in fact, a simple-yet-clever use of the air-conditioning.

"Well, they're basically wandering ghosts waiting to be reincarnated," said Jakkai. "The uniforms with their ranking are what's left of them when they leave this world."

"You can steal all you want, but you won't be able to take it with you when you're dead."

While some faces are instantly recognisable, others are hard to distinguish due to fuzzy and loose threads.

Jakkai said that most figures are embroidered with black or grey threads while only a few that have red and yellow threads on them.

"These depict people who associated themselves with the colour-coded shirt movements and ended up with ministerial posts. The images embroidered with saffron-coloured threads are those politicians who have decided to enter the monkhood hoping to get rid of their karma."

For an even bigger impact, the sound installation of politicians' voices is played over and over again, echoing in a low, monotonous tone across the room.

"The sound component consists of three clips from various parliamentary debates blurred into one," explained Jakkai.

"There's a lot of bickering, a lot of chaos which has nothing to do with the country whatsoever. Debating about who's a prettier MP must be the stupidest thing ever and the sad thing is these are the people passing legislation."



Former university lecturer Jakkai Siributr in a civil servant's uniform.

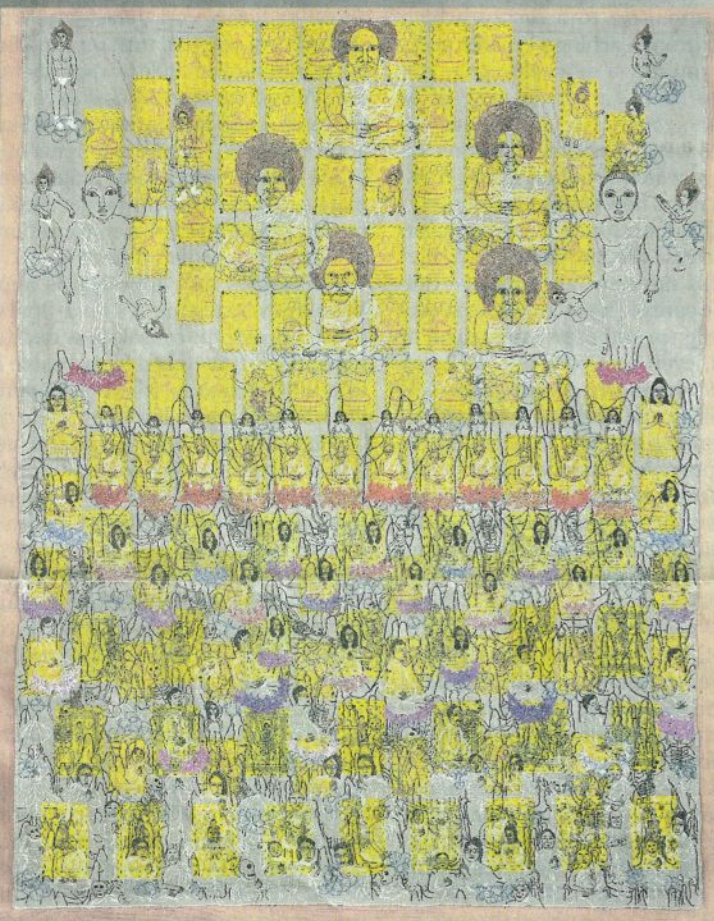
The other section of the exhibition is comprised of five hand-embroidered large-scale tapestries. With mainly patches of yantra (Buddhist talismans in the form of a piece of cloth bearing sacred symbols and inscriptions) as a backdrop, the figures on the works depict "politicians in hell as well as those 'semi-retired' politicians trying to alleviate their karma within this life time by entering monkhood or building temples".

"It's my personal way of dealing with the ridiculousness of our political system," said Jakkai. "As much as I long for politicians to be punished for the crimes they've committed, it just does not seem to be happening. And pretty much everyone seems to be able to get away with it." After extensive research on Buddhist folk tales about the afterlife and visiting many temples that are well-known for their depictions of the afterlife such as Wat Phai Rong Wua in Supan Buri, Jakkai decided to create his own "scenario through the tapestries where karma actually catch up with them".

"My work has always focused on religious and social issues in this country with a bit of politics thrown in. But since 2010, I've been focusing more on politics. And because of the political chaos our nation has been experiencing, as much as I loathe politics, I could no longer ignore it." Unfortunately, we will never know what kind of reaction this wry yet outspoken exhibition would stimulate were it to be shown here. Jakkai has no plan to show "Plunder" in Thailand.

"I don't know [about the reaction] and I don't really care because it will not be shown in this country. I believe people outside of Thailand need to know what a mess we're in," he said.

"Plunder" runs until Dec 1 at Yavuz Fine Art, 51 Waterloo Street, Singapore. The gallery is open from Tue-Sat 11am-7pm, and Sun 1pm-5pm. Visit [yavuzfineart.com](http://yavuzfineart.com)



One of the hand-embroidered large-scale tapestries.