



Hopes and Dreams II from Here/Not Here installation at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2011.

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WEAVING DISSIDENT

Socio-political critiques are woven deep into the fabric of Jakkai Siributr's art.

BY BRIAN CURTIN

Decoration is probably the last taboo for contemporary art. While the international art world prides itself on accepting an outré range of practices, any implication of frivolity, the excessive or merely delightful is guarded against for lack of seriousness. Such characterisations are typically (and misguidedly) applied to decorative arts, but for a world that also prides itself on addressing the range of human experience, it seems a profound oversight to ignore the potential significance of these arts to “contemporary art.”

One of the artists challenging this bias is Thailand's Jakkai Siributr. Trained as a textile designer in the US, he is fast developing an international reputation as a visual artist thanks to regular exhibitions abroad and regionally. His works, in embroidery, tapestry and, more recently, installation, make



Come to Me, 2011.

great demands on viewers to re-think historical and conceptual relationships between craft, decoration and fine art; and Jakkai's mixing of esoteric pattern and contemporary references offers grist to the mill of cool, streamlined art we so typically see at biennales, art fairs, et al.

And therein lies the rub. The intricate and bejeweled surfaces of Jakkai's works reveal how beauty and excess can seduce us across a range of contexts: historical traditions, contemporary consumerism and cultural beliefs. In this artist's world, the secular and decadent are woven with the spiritual, reflecting our own conflicted desires about who we are and what we might be in the current world.

Jakkai works from his home amidst the aristocratic elegance of a family compound off central Sukhumvit. He is currently preparing for Art Basel Hong Kong in May, where his work has

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been selected for a specially curated section, and he also has an upcoming solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York City. While his art is clearly situated as contemporary art, his methods can be casually linked to ideas of craft and fiber arts. However, Jakkai tells me that his education, like anyone's, provided a base to react against. “My education in textiles at university in the US was very traditional as far as western textile art was concerned – weaving, dyeing, felting, printing and even basketry. That was in the early '90s and so I think the movement of textile art as craft and separate from the rest of fine arts from the '70s and '80s still lingered on. But my graduate program was the total opposite, as the emphasis was on the industrial production of textile design. Marketing, science and technology were the big emphases. All the things I hated most.”

Indeed, feminist critiques



Detail from Karma Cash and Carry, installation at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York City, 2010.



Shroud, 2011.

in the '70s sought for craft to be acknowledged as possessing equal cultural importance as fine art, as these critiques explored how craft was marginalised as “women's work.” However, such a claim had the important but inadvertently problematic effect of insisting on a distinction that should probably be best exploded. Subsequent generations have since sought to explode assumptions about craft and femininity and “low” and “high” technology. The current range of contemporary artists who employ traditional craft methods include Tracey Emin, Ghada Amer, Grayson Perry and El Anatsui. We can now accept artists as agents of craft, exploring its coded qualities rather than as an expressive medium per se; that is, craft as a rich area of interest for contemporary art, an area that may be studied for its historical and critical interest. Jakkai is important here.

All the artists mentioned, however, possess important differences. Jakkai's works, for example, carry an explicitly political edge. His installation for Art Basel Hong Kong is titled 78, named after the number of people who died as a result of the so-called Tak Bai protest incident in Southern Thailand in 2004. Modeled on the *Ka'aba* – the sacred cuboid structure in Saudi Arabia that functions as a unifying focal point for the Islamic world – Jakkai is creating a claustrophobic cube for visitors to enter; and within which are rows of trays occupied by traditional Arab clothing and embroidered by the artist with the names of those killed, in Malay/Yawi script. The protest occurred after the arrest of six men accused of supplying

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villages of the northeast and the north and that experience has given me a new perspective. I mostly see what is wrong with Thailand these days."

This politicised sensibility can be seen in *Evening News* (2011), where embroidered media imagery from the bloody 2010 democracy protests in Bangkok hang from the white thread used by monks to bless their subjects; and criss-cross a spirit house wrapped in cheap, colourful plastic typically used by local migrant workers, the class that made up the body of the protestors. In other works, politics is abstracted. *Shroud* (2011) comprises hundreds of Buddha silhouettes, handcrafted from raw string, that form an enormous stupa which is enlivened by a play of light. The installation heightens ideas of mortality and commemoration with a pronounced sense of physicality. *Come to Me* (2011) is a remarkable gold-coloured and sequined tapestry in which a lone figure beckons amidst the swirls of a *yantra* pattern – traditional forms that support a variety of local superstitions. Jakkai often introduces images of go-go boys, minor celebrities, phalluses, and bejeweled skulls amidst *yantra*-style compositions.

But at the heart of his importance as an artist is the particular use of decoration, or elements typically associated with the decorative. To paraphrase one of Susan Sontag's famous notes on camp (not wholly unrelated): to speak about decoration is to betray it. That is, the casual definition of decoration as supplementary, embellishing and excessive becomes strange when one closely examines its histories and functions. As we know,



Red Buddha, 2010.

weapons to Islamic insurgents, and the violent reaction of Thai police is now legendary. 78 suggests a highly sanitised concentration camp, as Jakkai continues to mine the violent contradictions of sacred beliefs and political realities.

Like his choice of medium, the question of art and politics can be vexing. He explained to me: "I wouldn't call myself an activist or even a political artist. But I do have concerns about the world I live in. That is why my work in recent years often has strong socio-political themes. I lived in the US for 10 years and at the time I was not really aware of what was happening in Thailand. I've been back for more than 15 years now and I'm beginning to see Thailand in a different light. I'm no longer an observer but very much a part of this place. During my tenure as a lecturer at Thammasat University, I spent a lot of time upcountry living in rural



Detail from *Reciprocity*, 2010.

Western Modernism vilified decoration, and this is a legacy we continue to live with; but, as we also might know, ideas of the supplementary and excessive have far less currency for Asian cultures, from the structural function of Islamic patterns to the "decadent" forms of Art Nouveau, where decorative effects and practicality were often united. When Thailand's King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, toured Europe in the 19th century he was wowed by Baroque and Rococo designs and famously wrote that a casino in Monte Carlo was so beautiful it should have been a palace. In this respect, it is most useful to think of Jakkai's practice as an artist as a challenge to orthodox views. He allows for visual pleasures that can be ordinarily excluded by the pretensions of "serious" thinking on contemporary art. His works possess a liberating lack of rationality and he provides us with a seductive



Detail from *Karma Cash and Carry*, installation at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York City, 2010.

sense of defiance that demands we think and re-think the role of contemporary art and its relationship to everything else. On the significance of his art, Jakkai tells me, "Many people only see my work as merely decorative because of the medium. And my work gets labeled 'textile art' all the time and I can't seem to shake being called a textile artist! And yet other people think that this vocabulary may have negative connotations. But I am not bothered by it. It's just a medium where I've chosen to express my ideas, and I try to stay true to this as much as I possibly can. But, at the same time, once people get past the 'textile art' preconception, they will see that my art is as conceptual and as layered as any other examples of contemporary art. It has always been my goal to take domestic craft to the next level, and it's a challenge for me to push it as far as I can." ✖