



PHOTOGRAPHY : KANAN SUCHANIN

# Body Art

In a small soi off the CBD's Sathorn Road is a serene space where renowned artist PINAREE "AI" SANPITAK creates much of her work, most recently shown at a solo exhibition at Hong Kong's Art Basel. JINDA WEDEL pays a visit

TOWERING ROLLS OF unbleached paper and cardboard-swathed artwork lie scattered like sleeping dogs in Pinaree "Ai" Sanpitak's art studio. Works in progress and works finished can be seen here and there. Silver breasts, gourd-like, sprout from the ground; smaller glass-blown versions of the mammarys, their glossy nipples like pencil erasers, are arrayed on a tray in the far corner. The ceilings are several metres high, but the semi-outdoor enclosure (there is a defeated-sounding air conditioner in one corner), is nearly cramped nonetheless. Layers of splattered paints on the finished cement flooring. The studio is testimony to the decades of contributions Pinaree has made to the art scene, both locally and internationally.

Pinaree is widely regarded as one of Southeast Asia's greatest contemporary artists, known chiefly

for her ponderous explorations of the breast. For this she won Thailand's Ministry of Culture's prestigious Silpathorn Award in 2007.

Her interest in the female body (in particular, the breast) began 22 years ago and since then she has returned time again to it, occasionally investigating other forms. Her compelling works come from a fiercely personal and spiritual source, with accessible, open viewpoints that often invite participation. They have brought her admiration and renown throughout the art world, regionally and internationally.

"I started using the breast form from about two months after I gave birth to my son. It was a part of the body that was obviously very active and very sensitive at the time, and I was looking for a body part that differentiated clearly between men and women. Compared to





“...it’s not just about the woman. It’s about all of us”

the vagina, I felt the breast was more beautiful as a form and more meaningful,” she says. “...It’s not just about the sex, it’s about the bigger picture of the human body.”

With a career spanning decades, 54-year-old Pinaree’s works all seem part of a long-running narrative. One example was exhibited at this mid-March’s Art Basel Hong Kong, where Yavuz Gallery invited her to display various works under the heading “Conversation in the Garden” as a solo artist.

In the centre of the booth stood *The Hammock*, a striking several-hundred-kilogramme glass-and-metal installation. Over 600 hand-blown glass beads, individually created, and gliding on steel cables, were strung up as a hammock. Created during Pinaree’s recent Guest Artist Pavilion Project (GAPP) residency at the Toledo Museum



of Art Glass Pavilion in Ohio, it echoes an earlier exhibit, *Hanging by a Thread*, where multiple fabric hammocks hung in an installation.

Also on exhibit were a selection of metal structures from her 2013 *Breast Stupa Topiary* series, large-scale trellises with a futuristic bent, gleaming silver and symmetrical, meant for the outdoors. At Art Basel Hong Kong, viewers crawled around the legs of one of the giant three-

metres tall and nearly three-metres wide structures. The pieces echo some of her best-known works, the *Breast Stupa Cookery* series.

Yet again, the breast motif presented itself as part of her seeds paintings, where breast clouds, vessels and *seeds* in mixed media invite an intimate look at the works.



Her collaboration with glassblower Master Silvano Signoretto resulted in *Quietly Solid – Blue* sculptures, with amorphous, oily glass engulfing transparent blue centres.

Looking at Pinaree’s work, it might be easy to forget that the bare breast, and particularly, the nipple, are taboo in most places. And for Thai society, where much ink was spilled when breasts were exposed, for instance during a televised *Thailand’s Got Talent* competition when a contestant used her bare breasts to paint a canvas, it is particularly taboo. But it was not always so, and Pinaree sees it differently.

“Thirty years ago, this old lady used to live in the house here, and she would go bare-breasted comfortably around the house, a normal habit for her,” recalls Pinaree. Her works normalise the breast in some senses, and have been labelled as feminist, though she resists that particular label, refusing critics’ efforts to be pigeonholed. “My works are open to interpretation. I can be a feminist. I can be a woman. I can be a human being,” she says.

She’s modest, even serene about her exhibit at Art Basel. The mega-exhibition, she believes, has merits, and as an installation artist, she hopes viewers will make the effort to go to galleries and museums as well. “Maybe if they follow an artist, they will go to an exhibition where the settings are thorough. Art fairs are

fun but limited in a real space. Art fairs for me are not real spaces,” she says.

Her Bangkok studio is where she spends much of her time (in between residencies in Australia, Sweden, various places in the United States, and France), and it’s a fascinating artist’s abode. The studio and her home are shared with four others (and her son, now 21, when he is home from Antwerp where he is studying Fashion Design). Shelves of books, disproportionately cookbooks (she reveals that she has a passion for baking), of several languages line the walls, and the garden can be easily seen from the windows. It is a cool, quiet, and thoughtful haven amidst a hectic part of Bangkok – and also an extension of Pinaree.

Cooking is a familial pleasure for the artist, which she shares with her son. “He also likes to cook, and it was a way of teaching math to him.” Her love for cooking and her art came together in another series kicked off in 2005 (and ongoing) – bringing the personal to the public. “I make these cooking molds and then invite different chefs to work with them, both professional non-professional. It’s my way of asking what they think about this form that I have been working on for so long. They interpret them into food and we all share,” she says. “There’ve been 30 events so far.”

Though Bangkok is where Pinaree has been living for the past two decades, she also considers the northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen her hometowns. Her parents were working as doctors in the provinces, moving house when she was just a toddler. As a result, Bangkok is something of a second home, a place she moved to after her BFA in Visual Arts and Communication Design at the University of Tsukuba in Japan.

At present, she’s working on another series of paintings, due for an exhibition in September in New York, and multiple large canvases lean against various walls in the studio. Upstairs in her workroom, she (as well as a helper and also her mother) are in the process of sewing white fabric into rhomboid shapes; they are part of an examination of another body – the Thai wreath, or *phuang malai*.

It’s part of a lifelong exploration of not just the female body, but the body in general, and her entire portfolio reflects that – even the breast is a cross-gender body, both male and female. As for whether she will continue exploring the breast form, Pinaree says she still hasn’t finished her journey. “For me, the sense of touch, smell, taste, movement and sound – it’s not just about the woman. It’s about all of us.” ■

## BODY OF WORK

Pinaree’s works through the years have been exhibited around the world



*Noon-Nom* (2001-2002) organza, synthetic fiber, size variable. Installation view: SENSORIUM 360° Singapore Art Museum (2014) Instagram @aidah\_a



*Temporary Insanity* (2004) silk, synthetic fiber, battery, motor, propeller, sound device, fabric by Jim Thompson, size variable. Installation view: The Contemporary Austin, Austin, Texas, USA (2013) Photo credit Pinaree Sanpitak



*Hanging by a Thread* (2012), 18 hammocks made of Paa-lai Thai printed cotton, size variable. Installation view: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA, USA (2013) Photo courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art



*Breast Stupa Topiary* (2013), stainless steel, size variable. Installation view: Yavuz Gallery, Singapore (2014) Photo courtesy Yavuz Gallery

**THIS PAGE:** (ABOVE) *CONVERSATION IN THE GARDEN*, ART BASEL HONG KONG, HONG KONG (2015) PHOTO COURTESY YAVUZ GALLERY (BELOW) *ANYTHING CAN BREAK* (2011- ON GOING), HANDMADE GLASS, PAPER, SPECIALLY COMPOSED MUSIC, MOTION SENSORS, SOUND SYSTEM, SIZE VARIABLE. INSTALLATION VIEW: THE ART CENTER, CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY, BANGKOK (2011) PHOTO CREDIT: AROON PERMPOONSOPOL  
**OPPOSITE PAGE:** *BLACK BREAST-BREAST WORKS* (1994), INK, ACRYLIC, PASTEL ON PAPER, 102X106.5 CM, SILOM ART SPACE, BANGKOK PHOTO CREDIT: AROON PERMPOONSOPOL