



Conversation with Thai artist Pinaree Sanpitak

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STPI, Yavuz Gallery and Setouchi Triennial

By Ian Tee

Pinaree Sanpitak with 'The Walls', 2018-19 © Pinaree Sanpitak/STPI. Photograph by Toni Cuhadi © STPI.

Pinaree Sanpitak is a key figure in Thai contemporary art, most recognised for her use of the female breast as a recurring motif. Over three decades, her practice has expanded from painting and collage to span mediums such as sculpture, installation and participatory projects. Often called a feminist artist, Pinaree resists such easy categorisations, preferring to let her work speak to each viewer directly with the most basic language of form, colour, and texture. Her key solo institutional exhibitions include 'The House is Crumbling' (National Gallery Singapore, 2018), 'Anything Can Break', (Toledo Museum of Art, USA, 2015), 'Collection+' (Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Australia, 2015) and 'Hanging by a Thread' (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA, 2012).

We speak to Pinaree on the occasion of her two solo exhibitions in Singapore: 'Fragmented Bodies: The Personal and The Public' at STPI Gallery and 'Bodily Space: Confessed and Concealed' at Yavuz Gallery. In this conversation, the artist shares her thoughts about collaborations, the evolution of her practice and the dialogue between both shows.



'Fragmented Bodies: The Personal and The Public', 2019, exhibition installation view at STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery. Photographed by Toni Cuhadi © STPI. All works © Pinaree Sanpitak/STPI.

I'd like to start this conversation by talking about your experience working with paper. An early major work made of paper fibre is 'Womanly Bodies' (1998), an installation of hanging torso-shaped hollow forms. The first artist residency you participated in was also at a printmaking workshop in Northern Territory University, Australia (1999). Were there any specific directions you wanted to explore during your residency at STPI?

I started using mulberry fibre from 1994, making breast forms with it for my 'Breast Works'. I first found the material in Chiang Mai, and I thought I was going to collage them but it was too beautiful to paint on. So I kept the material in the studio for some time and started sewing them together. It looks fragile but it's actually structurally sound and can hold its form. After that, I made 'Confident Bodies', 'Womanly Bodies' and 'Offering Vessels' using the material, each about two to three years apart.

I normally come to a residency open-minded, but bring with me something to grow upon. If you enter with a blank mind, it usually takes quite some time to develop something. The etchings made at my first print workshop residency in 1999 were based on 'Womanly Bodies'. This time, I wanted to use all these forms and symbols I've been working with. I had this idea of making walls, so we were thinking of how to develop that as well. I am always finding ways to challenge the different materials I work with. As such, the paper walls are naked sheets of handmade paper you can walk in between. When working with glass, I made an outdoor hammock that people can sit on.

During the STPI residency, we were experimenting on different things at the same time and there was one idea which wasn't realised. I wanted to make paper hammocks and Gordon, the senior papermaker, did some tests. The material is quite strong but we didn't have enough time to develop it. Even with 'The Walls', I was initially thinking of stacking paper, but then your gut tells you that it's not quite right. There was a sketch for it though.

Speaking about 'The Walls' (2018-19), it is a maze-like installation consisting of 80 hanging paper walls. The work made its debut in March this year at Art Basel Hong Kong as part of the 'Encounters' section. Did you make any modifications for the presentation at STPI?

Art Basel approached me a few times for an installation to be presented as part of 'Encounters'. Normally, my works require a quieter space but we thought it might be possible this time to present 'The Walls'. The fair is a busy environment so it's difficult to slow down and concentrate. I mean the installation worked but I like it better here.

This work can be set up in different ways depending on the space. There were no actual walls at the Art Basel presentation, it was open all around and people could enter from every direction. The fair also had a requirement where the works have to be hung at a certain height such that they don't block views of surrounding booths. So it was a bit lower than I would have liked, I usually base these heights on my own. If I tiptoe I can look over the walls, and children can also crawl underneath the work.

Collaborations have become an important part of your practice. I am thinking of 'Breast Stupa Cookery' (2005-ongoing) which was most recently presented at the Jim Thompson Farm Tour 2018. You have also worked with glass blowers from Murano, Italy, and then the glass studio residency with Toledo Museum of Art to create pieces such as 'The Hammock' (2014/15) which you've previously mentioned. What is your relationship with your collaborators? And what do you think are the factors behind successful collaborations?

They are parts of me, the personal and the public. In my practice, there's the private aspect where it's just me in the studio making paintings and drawings. I don't have a permanent assistant at home; I only having them

for certain projects. So at times, people visit me and they're surprised like "oh you're here by yourself." But I need that quiet moment to paint.

Then there's this other side where I share and learn from others. I don't teach at the university, so this is probably my way of staying in contact with the world. 'Breast Stupa Cookery' was a development from 'Noon-Nom' (2001), when I experimented with different sensory experiences and perceptions, beginning with touch and movement. Working with food and the senses of taste and smell was the next step.

I'm super pleased with my time at STPI. There were struggles and challenges, but we worked hard and everyone put in their all. The team doesn't say no and they will try anything. I always give my collaborators an open space because if you're going to collaborate, you don't give orders, right? For 'Breast Stupa Cookery' I just give the moulds to the chefs and then they come up with the idea and interpretation. Likewise, I am neither a printmaker nor a papermaker. So when partnering with these experts, it became a question of how I tap into their knowledge and develop something new.

Could you talk about some key innovations or interesting processes you've developed with the team at STPI? You shared that it is the first time black paper pulp is made at the workshop.

After the first phase of my residency, I told Gordon that I need paper fibre in black tone. But there's no natural fibre that comes in black, so when I was back in Bangkok I sent ebony fruit which is traditionally used to dye fabrics black. However, to create an even deeper shade of black, you need to mix indigo with ebony. So I sent indigo sourced from Laos and the northern part of Thailand, and the workshop was concocting different paper pulps that gave us these beautiful hues.

After we developed the black paper, we embossed shapes onto it to create outlines. It looks like drawn lines but it's actually an embossing.

I don't think you mentioned this technique during the artist tour.

I forgot (laughs). We did so many things during this residency. For instance, these embossed outlines are used to give the etching on gampi paper some form. As a painter, I don't like flat things so I was trying to give it more depth. Shadows help create that illusion.

I was also thinking of how to combine these different printing techniques into one work. We were in the wet room and I found out that we could embed print works onto wet paper. I brought my old drawings, prints and photography and we inserted them into the paper. They look like they're glued on, but they are actually part of the paper. It's like creating a new narrative, so I titled these works 'Breast Talks' and 'Breast Notes'. In some of these compositions, you can see a dry-point print I made in 1999 next to other forms made by silk-screen printing or etching done at STPI in 2019.

You co-founded and co-managed Silom Art Space between 1991 and 1995. It was a gallery which provided support to many artists from Thailand. Can you share more about the art scene in Bangkok in the early 1990s. What were your motivations behind opening the space?

Chatchai Puipia and I had access to a space so we decided to open Silom Art Space for friends and ourselves. Today, similar spaces would be like those at [N22](#). When there are not enough places to exhibit works, you create your own space. If you noticed, I was showing my solo shows there at that time. It was super convenient! (laughs) We started Silom Art Space in 1991, and my son Shone was born in October 1993.

Silom Art Space became a connection for me with the Thai art community too. In fact, I knew people from the literature circle and music scene before I knew visual artists. Before coming back to Bangkok, I was doing some coordination work for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). They were inviting different people to tour Japan for six months as part of a programme by then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. My colleague, this Japanese gentleman, knew the Thai music band Caravan and linked us up.

I returned to Bangkok around 1988. In a way, I am lucky because I studied in Japan, so I am not associated with any of the local art academies like Silapakorn University. I was an outsider so I could do whatever I wanted. At that time, most of the galleries are affiliated with the schools, which is still the case today. Other venues would be the National Gallery along Chao Fa Road which wasn't in good condition, the British Council and Goethe Institut... That was about it, so we thought why not do something since we have a space. Chatchai and I became much busier in 1995 and it was not fun anymore so we closed the gallery.

In this interview with STPI, you mentioned that your son, Shone Puipia, is your favourite artist. He's a fashion designer who has an eponymous label SHONE PUIPIA. Both of your practices intersect in a number of areas, from the use of textiles to a focus on the human body. Has he influenced your work in any way?

Actually, part of my job is being his assistant (laughs). Our studios are in the same building so I think we influence each other naturally. He's picked up some of my materials and I got him to make the pattern for the 2016 version of 'Noon-Nom' which was presented at QAGOMA. The new version is in bold pinks and blacks, whereas the one at SAM done in 2002 was in pastel tones.

I feel like I've moved on during the 14 years between the two iterations. The woman has changed and Shone helped me make an updated breast form to reflect that. We have these constant exchanges.

You've been looking at the breast motif for thirty years. Has its significance changed for you?

In a way, you can see it as a self portrait. It's ongoing, and will probably remain an interest until I die. I started exploring the motif in 1994 and at one point, people were saying "she's doing the breast again?" But I was fascinated by it, and kept looking at the breast from different perspectives.

It seems like I am talking about the breast, but actually, it's about the body. It's easier to explain and talk about my work now especially after such installations like 'Hanging by a Thread' (2011), 'Anything Can Break' (2012), 'The House is Crumbling' (2018) or 'The Roof' (2017). It's not just about the woman but all of us. How we relate to each other. How we share space. How we can make things better.

You will also be opening a solo exhibition of new paintings at Yavuz Gallery. I'd like to ask you about the titles you've given the works, in particular, 'Red Alert! My Body My Space' (2018-19) which has a strong declarative tone.

That painting is a continuation of the 'Red Alert' series which I started in 2017. You can also see a few works in the series done using collagraph technique at STPI. I moved to a new studio two years ago, which is larger with better light, and I wanted to return to painting. These new works still feature the breast forms or breast vessels, but they're painted in bright shades of red. With what's going on around the world today, women's issues are still relevant. This is disheartening but we have to keep working on it. I want to bring a new alert to them.

I started some paintings in Bangkok and picked up on them again after the STPI residency. I had been thinking about walls and the idea of space this whole time, so geometric elements began appearing in the paintings as well. I've also used indigo in a few of the works, which gives them a different depth. That's something I want to further develop after I return from Japan.

So there's a strong dialogue between the two shows.

Yes, that's why we arranged to have the exhibitions at the same time. It was planned when I took up the residency. This is helpful because I work in many mediums and materials, so it establishes a context for these works. I've arranged multiple-venue shows before. For example, there was 'Breast and Beyond' (2002, Bangkok) where 'Noon-Nom', 'Offering Vessels' and 'Breast Stupa' were presented at three locations. In 2011, 'Flying Cubes' and 'Anything can Break' were on view during the same period too.

I'm really lucky to have the opportunity to have my works at different sites at the same time. I think once you've seen those paintings and this show, they link up as two parts developed in parallel. The exhibition titles are also closely connected: 'Fragmented Bodies: The Personal and The Public' (STPI) and 'Bodily Space: Confessed and Concealed' (Yavuz Gallery).

I'd like to end this interview talking about your project for Setouchi Triennale 2019.

This year, the Triennale wanted to connect more with Southeast Asia so they designated one island for Thailand, one for Indonesia and Dinh Q. Le for Vietnam has one too. I was given a site on Honjima island. It is a beautiful house and it's also my first time working with such a space.

The owner of the house passed away some years ago and the residence was left as it is so it was quite messy when we first came. It was almost like CSI (Crime Scene Investigation), we had to look for clues about its former owner because even the organisers didn't have information. Later, we discovered that he was one of the last Shiwaku Daiku carpenters and a descendent of the shogun's navy.

My work for the Triennale is called 'The Black and The Red House'. It is a collaborative installation project incorporating cultural and historical elements from the site, my own work and my Thai background. I've painted the tatami room black and placed paper sculptures in the tokonoma. While the work 'Breast Stupa Topiary' made of yakisugi charred wood stands in the back garden. Recently, I discovered that the master for Mohachi paper which I have been using has passed away without any successor too. The project is part of an homage to the lost masters.

The other room is a café with red pillows and Chef Ramses Yanagida will be working there. He is half Sri-Lankan and half Japanese. He will be serving his version of 'Breast Stupa Cookery' curry, Thai tea and Thai custard. The House becomes a platform for exchange, connections and contemplation.

All through the island of Honjima, the islanders will be serving their own version of Thai drinks snacks and food. This is a result from the workshop we conducted earlier in May with Thai Chef Weerawat Triyasenawat of Samuay & sons. My proposal is a multi-faceted project which evolves and grows.

'Fragmented Bodies: The Personal and The Public' is on show at STPI from 25 September till 3 November 2019, while 'Bodily Space: Confessed and Concealed' is on view at Yavuz Gallery from 12 October till 17 November 2019.

The Autumn season of Setouchi Triennale 2019 runs from 28 September to 4 November 2019.