

Modern Art in Thailand

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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7 Taste, Value, and Commodity

Corporate Patronage and Art Contests

THE definition of modern Thai art constantly shifts according to time, place, and the interests of individuals or groups. Since the 1970s, art contests and commissions by corporations have attempted to wipe away the pseudo-highbrow notion that the businessman is uninterested in the less material aspects of life and unmoved by beauty.

Business has maintained a view of itself as the free enterprise counterpart to government support. If art is neglected by the government, corporate leaders feel that they should give art multiple funding sources. Thus, corporate contributions have begun to play an increasingly important role. As a result, the purchase of art is seen as a status image of the all-powerful wealthy as well as the continuation of free enterprise and the support of a capitalist economy.

For some artists, the result of corporate collecting is increased sales. Contacts between artists and businessmen often result in a mutually rewarding involvement.¹ For instance, Chalood Nimsamer and Misiem Yipintsoi were commissioned to make

¹Bankers and businessmen such as Bancha Lamsam, Amnuay Virawan, Sivaporn Dardarananda, Krikiat Jalichandra, Piyapong Kaniknanda, Song Watcharasriroj, Tarin Nimmanahaeminda, and Rerngchai Marakanond play important roles in art patronage.

large bronze sculptures entitled *Sarm Ong* (1982) and *The Princess Mother* (1984), respectively, for the headquarters of the Thai Farmers Bank. Preecha Thaothong has painted murals at the Musical Art Centre of the Bangkok Bank and the Bank of Government Housing Project. All three artists have been art jurors for the Bangkok Bank and the Thai Farmers Bank. It should also be noted that such artists as Panya Vijnthanasarn, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Prinya Tantisuk, Charoon Boonsuan, Warawoot Shusangthong, and Thaiwijit Puangkasemsomboon have increased their sales after they were awarded major bank prizes.

On several occasions it has been noted that prestigious art competitions are crowded with works by students and young artists whose names may be famous for a couple of years, then forgotten for the rest of their careers. Several interrelated factors account for this. Because several members of the selection committee usually dominate these art competitions—the National Exhibition of Art, the Bua Luang Exhibition of Paintings, the Contemporary Art Exhibition—the awards tend to be rather predictable. Young Thai artists have been groomed since their high schools days to regard art awards and competitions as the ultimate

achievement. Especially for art students from Silpakorn University, to win the applause of the jurors in one art contest will usually result in a succession of prizes in other art competitions (Apinan, 1985c: 22; 1986b: 22; 1986c: 22). Art students have to be highly competitive and well acquainted with artists who are also art jurors in order to achieve instant limelight. Many Thai artists probably take seriously Andy Warhol's tongue-in-cheek comment that being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art and that making money is art and good business is the best art. Profit-making Thai artists believe that art should be exercised *en masse*; what the majority wants must be worth striving for. As a result, the artists' ambition of making it on sales alone is the measure of success. Ironically, numerous artists want art to serve their careers rather than seeing themselves as serving art.

In 1983, in a seminar on modern Thai art at Thammasat University, the role of the government and private sectors in contemporary art and art education was discussed.² It was agreed that banks and corporations generally give more direct support to artists than does the government by providing them with various means of funding as well as exhibition space and publicity. Since each institution applies its own policy to the selection and supply of art works, corporate involvement in modern Thai art has considerably influenced both art of the mainstream and the level of art patronage.

It follows that these corporations have the ability to shift both the degree of commercial value and the degree of aesthetic value which are in direct correspondence. By establishing their own collections of modern Thai art, these economic and financial institutions have the power to approve or endorse good

art and to discriminate against what they consider bad art. In this way, the corporate patrons and their selecting committees can dictate the aesthetic and financial climate of the art scene in Thailand.

This brings us to the question of the complex relationship between art, commodity, and taste. The acquisition of modern art has become a status symbol for the privileged. To the rich and famous, it demonstrates their principles of value and quality in a society that strives to emulate the capitalism of the West. Their good taste is exhibited as they surround themselves with 'high-class' art objects at home and at work. While some bankers have made excellent investments through purchasing award-winning works in the annual art contests, they justify their patronage by emphasizing the aesthetic values which they are infusing into the working atmosphere, and their contribution to the livelihood of artists and to the education of the public.

But, as art works have become increasingly commodified—as buyers from the commercial sector have entered the scene—many Thai artists have adapted their style according to the trend and demand in the art market. Clearly, banks and corporations have replaced the religious sector as leading art patrons. Thai artists who desire to gain recognition through prestigious art competitions must produce the kind of art thought to be acceptable to corporate patrons and to their selection committees. Once they are recognized by the circle of active collectors, it appears that they are heading down the road to financial success and critical acclaim. However, in this view it is necessary for them to compromise—to create 'safe' art belonging to the mainstream, which generally does not include erotic, social protest, political, anti-religious, or anti-government themes or any experimental works such as conceptual art and

²This was organized by the Thai Kadi Research Institute and the proceedings published in 1985.

installation. By creating 'high art' for the easy consumption of the *nouveau riche* and consumer culture, numerous Thai artists are forced through the motion of self-censorship to be part of the norm. We have here the emergence of the new status of the art image, not as copies or reproductions, but as signifiers of sensory richness as used by such prominent modern artists in the West. Their works have become emblems of good taste and enshrinement of 'high art' in companies and corporate institutions.

In 1971, the Thai Investment and Securities Co. Ltd. (TISCO), with the encouragement of its president, Sivaporn Dardarananda, began to exhibit modern art, starting with a one-man show by Damrong Wong-Uparaj. In 1974, the corporation invited twenty-six artists to participate in its 'TISCO Invitation 1974' exhibition in its new corporate offices on Silom Road. The purpose was twofold: to foster an appreciation of contemporary Thai art and to select art objects to enliven TISCO's working atmosphere by granting winners purchase awards. The company aimed to show that business and art were not mutually exclusive, but could complement and benefit each other. TISCO continued to organize art exhibitions in 1977, 1981, and 1986. In addition, it has steadily increased its corporate collection to more than 200 works, including outstanding pieces by Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, Pratuang Emjaroen, Damrong Wong-Uparaj, Pichai Nirand, Somsak Chowtadapong, Pricha Arjunga, Kamol Tassananchalee, and Boonying Emjaroen.

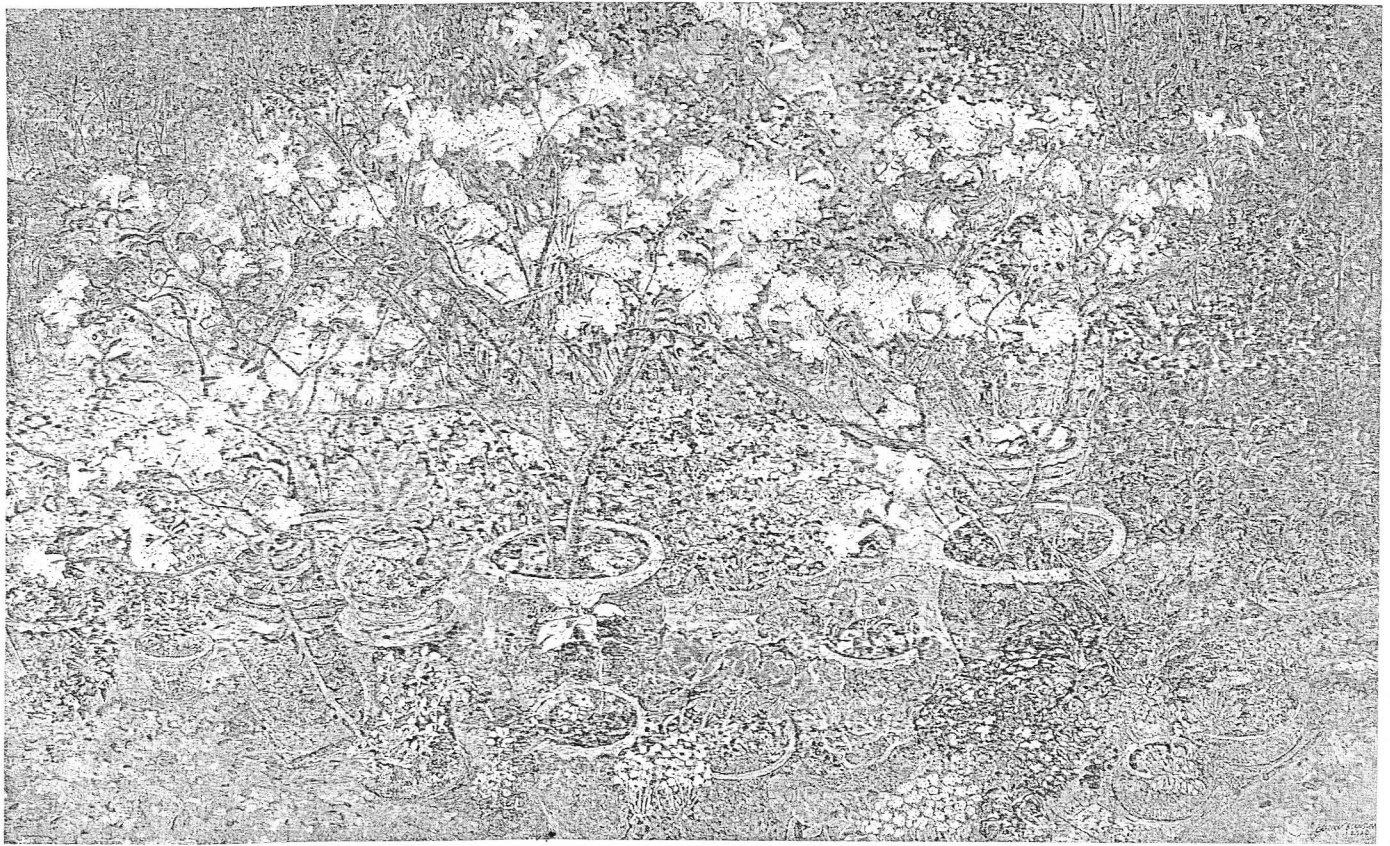
In 1974, senior executives and advisers of the Bangkok Bank organized the Bua Luang Exhibition of Paintings, offering purchase awards in traditional and contemporary painting. The Bangkok Bank invited established artists such as Sawasdi Tantisuk, Chalood Nimsamer, Chalerm Nakiraks, and Misiem Yipintsoi to be on the selection committee. The first prizes at the inaugural exhibition

went to Walaphit Sotprasert and Chaiyanandha Cha-Um Ngarm.³ The Bua Luang Exhibition of Paintings has since become a prestigious annual event where prizes are divided between contemporary and traditional art.

The Bua Luang Exhibition of Paintings received much praise from critics, especially Pishnu Supanimit, who wrote frequently about the contest and its award winners. However, the contest did not escape criticism. One critic observed that the Bua Luang Exhibition of Paintings was merely an extension of power control by Silpakorn University, and that the selection committee, award winners, and artists were monopolized by this art institution (Wirun, 1981). Inevitably, the door was closed to 'outsiders'. The complaints became so frequent that, in 1981, an article was published by Kamchorn Soonpongsri (one of the jurors) in the catalogue to the competition clarifying the selection process. Yet, it was noted that in this competition, which was held at Silpakorn University, all the prizes went to art lecturers and graduates from the 'Silpakorn camp'. Despite criticism, the selected jurors remained but the exhibition of the annual contest moved to the bank's headquarters and then to the Musical Art Centre, Phan Fa Branch.

The Bangkok Bank's own collection has grown considerably since the inauguration of the Bua Luang Exhibition of Paintings and includes a variety of themes and subjects. Among the acquisitions, for instance, are Charoon Boonsuan's paintings, like *Colour in Landscape 4/28* (1985) (Plate 116), which are full of bright, sensuous colours. Using his secluded garden in Lamphun as his studio, Charoon creates out-of-doors scenes in an impressionistic technique where shadows look mauve, dark green, or any

³The top prize winners were given cash awards of 15,000 baht.



116. Charoon Boonsuan, *Colour in Landscape 4/28*, 1985, oil on canvas, 125 x 175 cm, Bangkok Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Bangkok Bank.)

number of colours, depending on the light. In contrast, Plaiwan Dakliang's *Time* (1984) shows hyper-realistic brush work to record the scene of archaic ruins. Other works in the bank's collection—by Viroj Chiamchirawat, Ithipol Thangchalok, Pishnu Supanimit, and Roong Trirapichit—represent pure abstraction.

An important outcome of the Bua Luang exhibitions was a revival of interest in traditional Thai painting. Prior to this period, traditional Thai painting, with its emphasis on iconography, was regarded as old-fashioned, and few artists were interested in reviving and redefining it in a modern context. But by offering this category in the contest, the Bangkok Bank stimulated the blossoming of new works in the traditional Thai style. Indeed, the policy of the bank was so

effective that a few years later a Department of Thai Art opened at Silpakorn University. This department was to produce several painters who have won prizes in the field of traditional Thai art, among them Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijnthanasarn, and Somyos Trisanee.

Paintings in the 'new' traditional style are extremely eclectic and wide-ranging. Chalermchai's *A View of Thai Life* (1977), a first prize winner, shows the artist's technical virtuosity as well as his desire to express national identity. Devotees (mainly women) in traditional costumes are depicted in a pavilion next to a temple. They are common folks who go to temples to attend the sermons and religious ceremonies as well as to join in the social gathering. Placed in a frieze-like setting, the people are depicted

117. Panya Vijnthanasarn,
World Crisis, 1979,
tempera on rice paper,
154 x 213 cm, Bangkok
Bank, Bangkok.
(Photograph courtesy of
the Bangkok Bank.)

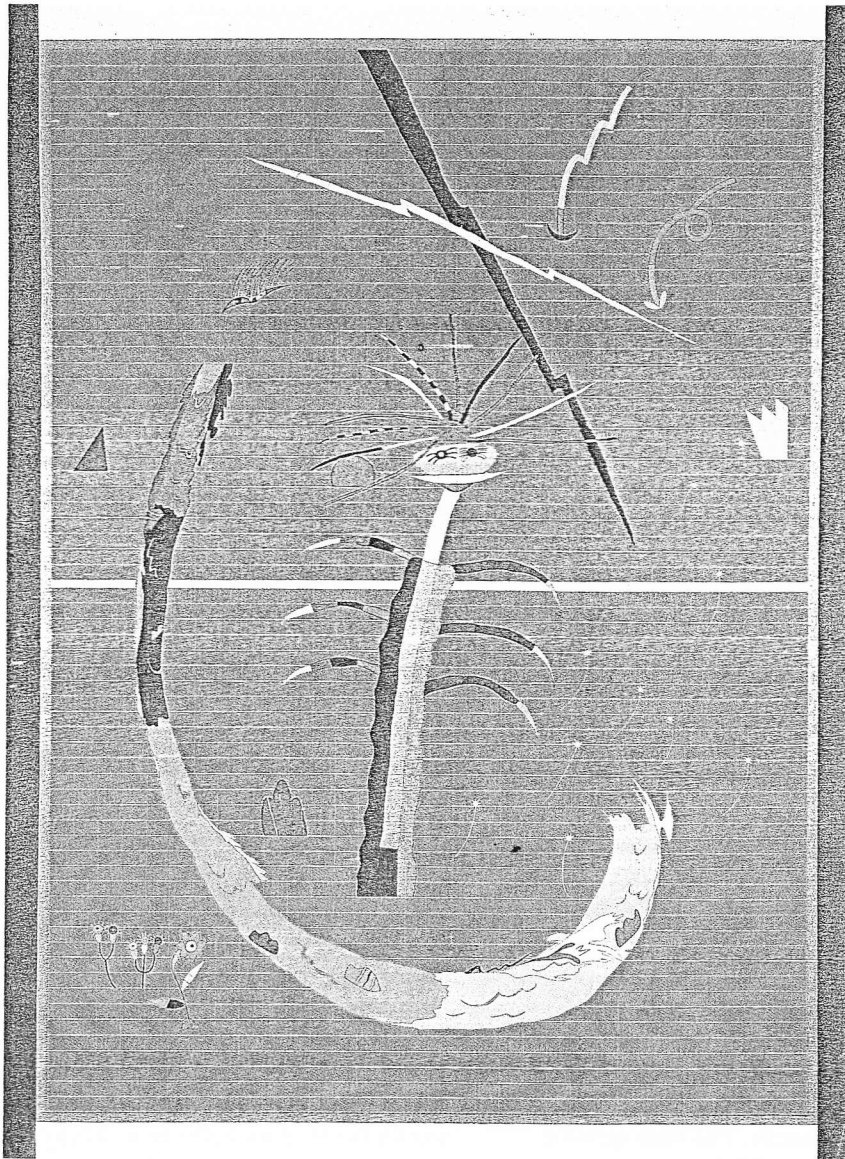


chatting, drinking tea, and chewing areca nuts and betel leaves. Removed from the material world, they seem to be suspended in time. In contrast, Panya's *World Crisis* (1979) (Plate 117), which also won the top award in one of the Bua Luang exhibitions, displays striking mythological beasts full of sharp fangs, claws, and twisted serpentine bodies. The figures are in battle. The blue ground represents the world as the arena of massacre and catastrophe.

Apart from its annual painting exhibitions, the Bangkok Bank arranged, in 1990, an exhibition to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of the Princess Mother. One of the prizes was awarded to Jumnun Sararak for his painting *Impressions of Her Royal Highness's Activities* (1990).

The Thai Farmers Bank is another corporate institution that has consistently patronized modern Thai art. In 1979, the

bank, the International Association of Art (IAA), and the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art co-organized the Contemporary Art Exhibition as a major stimulus to modern Thai art. The grand prize went to Preecha Thaonthong's painting of interiors in a Thai temple. The competition provided an opportunity for the Thai Farmers Bank to acquire works for its own collection. Many of these works are noteworthy for their technical virtuosity and beauty and, as objects of class and value, do much to enhance the walls of the bank's headquarters. Examples can be seen in Roong's *Painting 80 No. 2* (1980), Surasit Saowakong's *Serenity* (1981), Prinya Tantisuk's *Me* (1981) (Plate 118), Yanawitya Kunchaethong's *Modern Time No. 4* (1982), Pishnu Supanimit's *Paper in the Cabinet* (1983), Charoon Boonsuan's *Colours in Landscape 1/28* (1985), Rawadhi Chaichum's *A Feeling*



118. Prinya Tantisuk, *Me*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 110 cm, Thai Farmers Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph Kittti Amornpatanakul.)

of Thai Architecture 1/86 (1986), Noppong Satjiviso's *Gathered from the Streets* (1986), and Chatchai Puipia's *Oom* (1988).

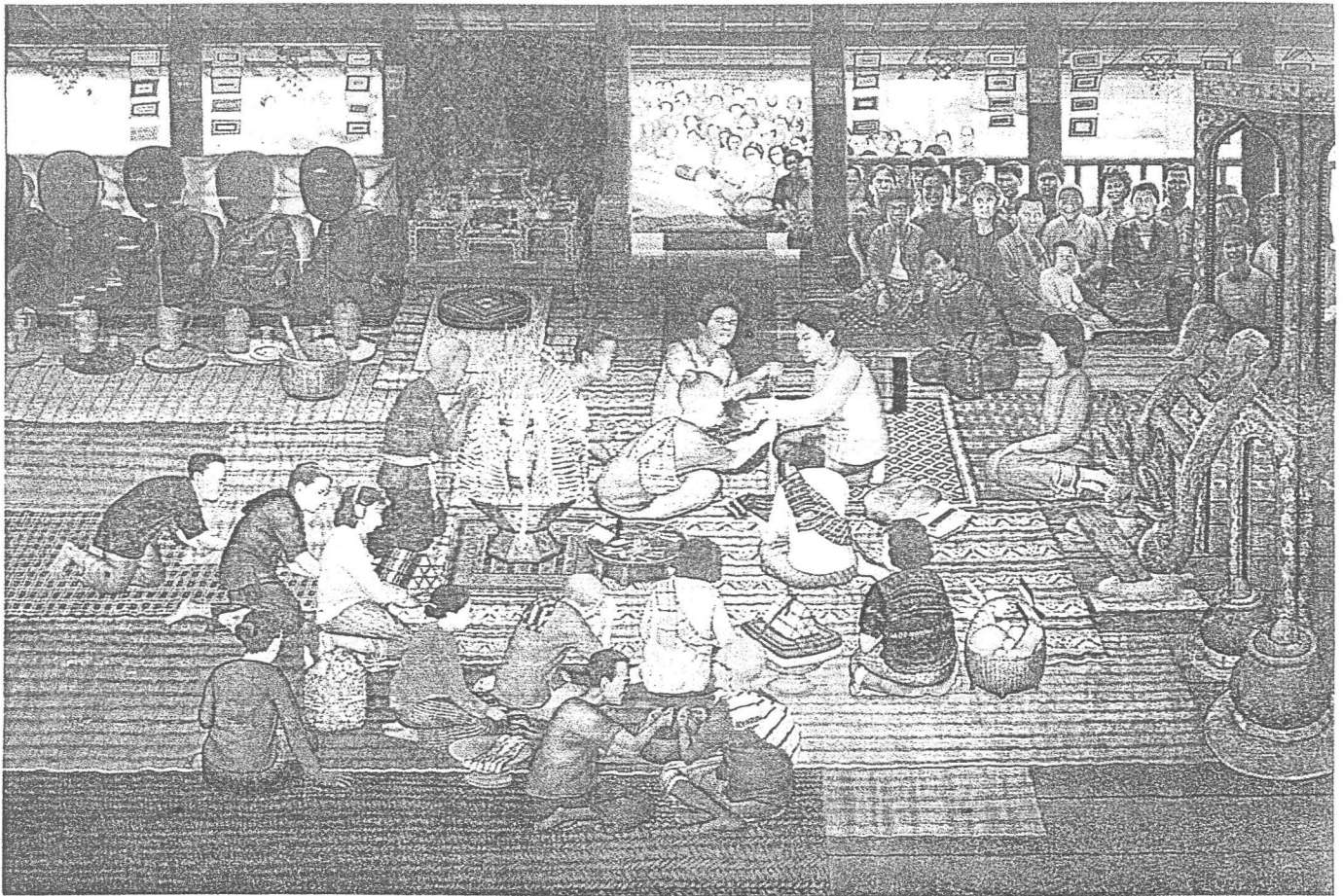
On several occasions the Thai Farmers Bank has also sponsored art contests to coincide with special occasions in the country such as the celebration of Bangkok's bicentennial anniversary in 1982, King Bhumibol's sixtieth birthday in 1987, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's thirty-sixth birthday in

1991, and Queen Sirikit's sixtieth birthday in 1992. Artists who participated in these competitions had to work in accordance with the themes given, such as royalty, religion, nation, and activities relating to the royal family.

In 1982, Hatai Bunnag was awarded first prize with a painting called *Palace Garden* (1982) (Colour Plate 54) which envisaged the artistic garden created inside the Grand Palace in the time of King Phutthaloetla (r. 1809–24). Hatai painted the King and the royal family enjoying water festivities on an artificial lake dotted with islets and Chinese pavilions.

In 1987, Somyos Trisaneewas awarded the grand prize for his work, *The Radiance of Royal Charisma* (1987) (Colour Plate 55). This painting clearly reflects how art patronage supported by the Thai Farmers Bank was designed to promote the feeling of patriotism and nationalism among the Thai people. Somyos captured a scene of the royal procession in which the King, Queen, and Princes advance with lanterns to pay respect to the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace. Radiating light glows like a halo reflecting on the glittering gold and mosaics on the temple walls. In the foreground, rows of devoted citizens gather in the shadow; some bow on the ground to pay respect while others snatch a glimpse at their beloved royal family. Like a stage set, the viewers witness this spectacle as the deity-king in the modern era continues his role as a figure of devotion and worship.

Another 1987 contestant was Surasit Saowakong with his *Our Great Royal Father* (1987) (Plate 119). This is a symbolic work using deities to heighten King Bhumibol's divinity. Surasit said that he elaborated on the meaning of 'kingliness is godliness' by consolidating various symbols sacred to the Thai people (deities, Thai flag, royal accoutrements) into one single entity. At the same time, mythical beings from



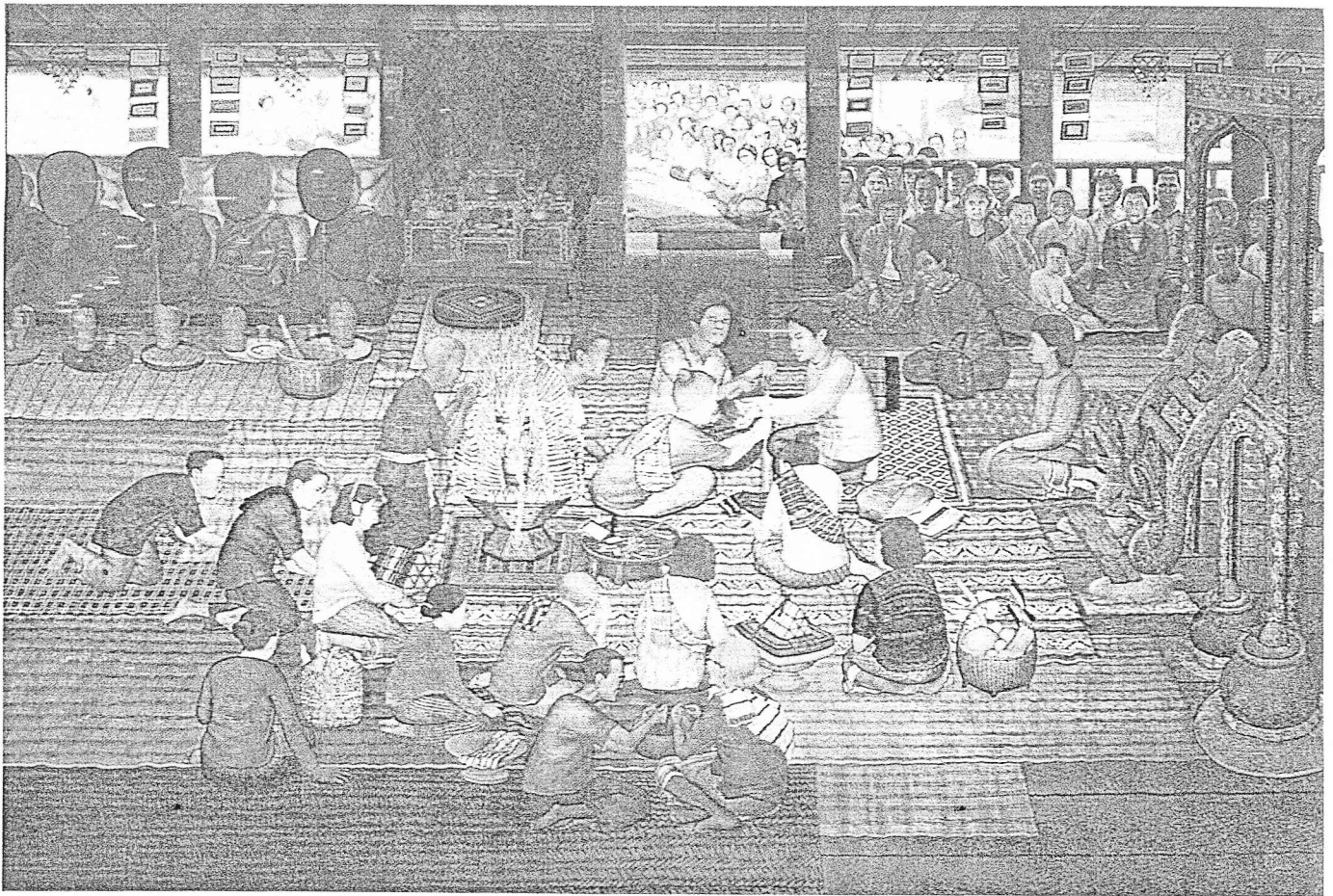
120. Teerawat Kanama, *The Blessing*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 290 cm, Thai Farmers Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Thai Farmers Bank.)

Hotels, Galleries, and Shopping Malls

The art market in Bangkok is volatile and unpredictable. Commercial galleries and art dealers play a crucial role in the complex art system. However, there are few people who really know the profession of the dealer's craft and few art dealers who lead rather than follow the public taste. Thai artists are beginning to appreciate the importance of art dealers and high quality galleries. Nevertheless, there are still many who are wary of the persons who act as the intermediary between the art-makers and the art-consumers. They would prefer to deal directly with patrons and collectors.

The Central Department Store and the River City Shopping Complex have

regularly organized exhibitions of modern Thai art at their premises with the aim of bringing art to the people, albeit to a sophisticated, urban well off section of society. In large-scale exhibits, such as 'An Art Exhibition of 14 Great Artists: The Greatest Art Exhibition of the Year', 'The Power of Beauty '91', and 'Power of Truth' at the River City Shopping Complex, sales exceeded the seven-figure mark (baht), testimony to the burgeoning interest in art, both as an investment and for its own sake. High-class hotels like the Oriental, the Hilton, the Montien, the Landmark, the Imperial, and the Hyatt Central have given support to artists to display their works in their lobbies or exhibition



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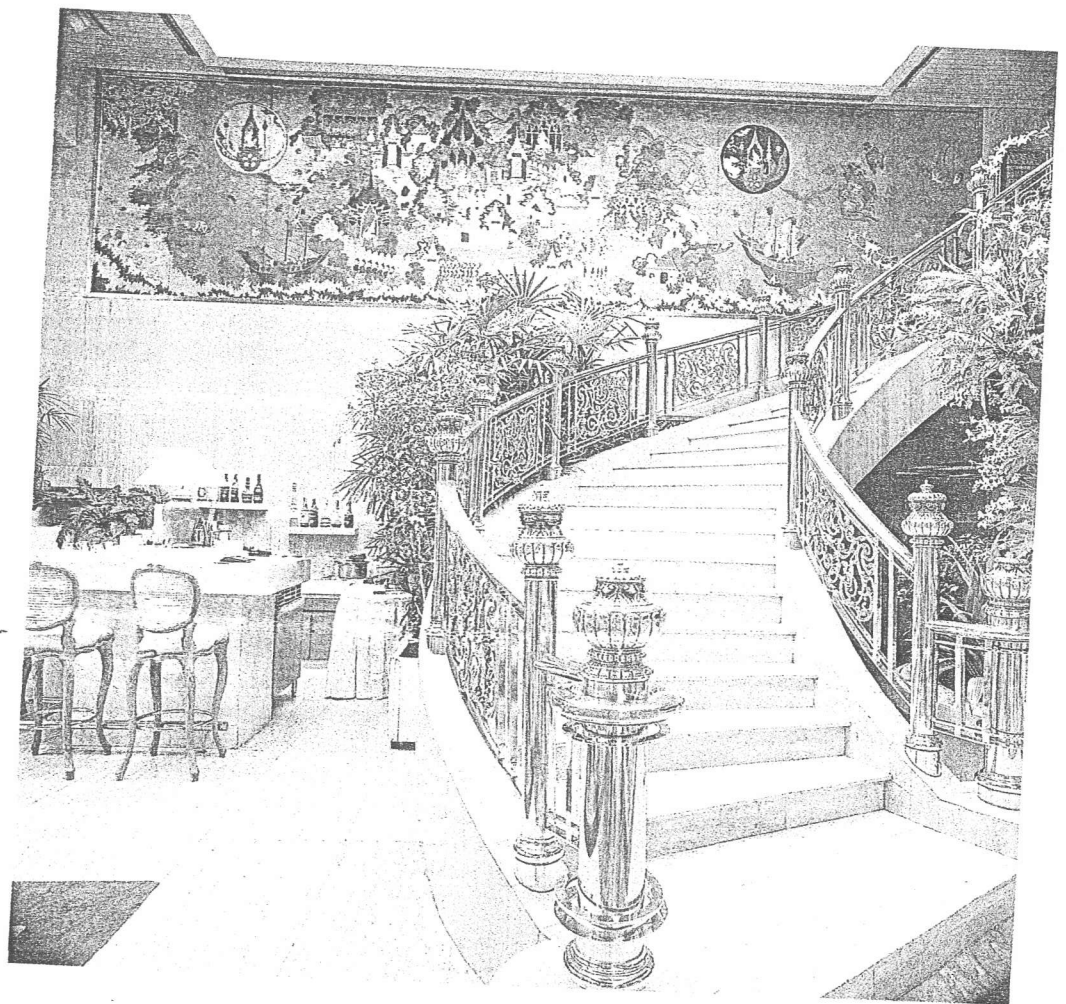
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rooms. The Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel has invested heavily in building up an outstanding collection of modern Thai art.

One such artist to benefit from the patronage of hotels was the late Paiboon Suwannakudt who adapted traditional painting to suit modern techniques and surroundings. Paiboon had studied temple art in depth (especially in Ubon) and was to become well known for his murals in lobbies and reception halls at various hotels, including the Montien, the Dusit Thani, the Regent, and at the Phuphing Ratchniwet Palace in Chiang Mai. The original function of mural painting—to instruct the devout and the

illiterate—was thus transformed to serve a decorative purpose. Of his works, the scenes painted in the Montien Hotel—in the coffee shop (now destroyed), the Montienthip Rooms, the reception halls, and on the upper wall near the grand staircase—are the most famous (Plate 121). In these, Paiboon adapted and invented compositions related to various aspects of life and the cosmos. For instance, mythological scenes, palatial residences, angels, and sun and moon chariots are painted with a superb skill that emulates the artisans of the past. The image of Thailand is also depicted at the centre of the painting on the grand staircase surrounded by sailing



121. Paiboon Suwannakudt and assistants, *Thailand in the Past as an Imaginary Symbolic Place*, 1976, tempera on silk and board, 220 x 900 cm, Montien Hotel, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Montien Hotel.)

ships which bring foreigners to this nation. Through the patronage of hotel owners, Paiboon's revival of traditional art thus became known to the public even though his work had to be appreciated in a modern setting instead of on temple walls. Paiboon's followers and his daughter, Pharpawan, have continued to work under the name of the Than Kudt Group.

On certain occasions, exhibitions shown at hotels caused more controversy than publicity. For instance, the 'Four (Great) Rattanakosin Artists 1991' exhibition, co-organized by local entrepreneurs and artists at the Imperial Hotel in October 1991 to coincide with the annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, received severe criticism. Publicized as a magnificent, once-in-a-lifetime exhibition representing the most interesting forces in the contemporary art of Thailand, many art works on display were loaned from private collections of Bangkok's prominent personalities (Kanjana, 1991: 33, 50). It was announced that the purpose was to let foreign visitors see at first hand the high standard of works by leading Thai artists (Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, Pratuang Emjaroen, Thawan Duchanee, and Chalermchai Kositpipat). However, Angkarn vehemently criticized this exhibition as superficial and insincere, because he felt that the organizers only wanted to please foreigners and delegates at the World Bank conference. He said that he was not honoured to have his works presented, because such a show only served the greed of bankers, hotel managers, and artists. He stressed that Thai artists should have more pride and not behave like 'prostitutes whose flesh trembles with joy when they see the arrival of foreigners and tourists at Pattaya Beach' (*Phu jud karn* 2, 1991: 25–6). For him, the 'Four (Great) Rattanakosin Artists 1991' should have been called the

exhibition of 'Four Chuchoks' (symbolic image of greed).

In Chapter 4, various galleries which had mushroomed in the 1960s but petered out by the end of the decade were discussed.⁴ Gallery owners then, as in the 1970s and 1980s, faced the perennial problem of selling enough paintings to cover their overheads. They were often forced to compromise on quality, selling a mixture of high-quality art works, souvenirs, tourist art, and postcards. It was up to the buyer to differentiate between class and junk which was often placed side by side. Despite this difficulty there were—and are—some art galleries which specialize in quality art.

Commercial galleries which became active in the 1970s, such as the Ploenchit Gallery (now closed), exposed works by established painters such as Pratuang Emjaroen and Somchai Hattakitkosol to viewers and shoppers in the Ploenchit Arcade. The owner, Sathien Sathiensuth, was also able to sell numerous surrealist paintings by Somchai to galleries in France and Japan. The Phetburi Gallery, which opened in 1971, is still in business. Its owner, Anek Khuanchaiphruk, has filled three spacious floors with various kinds of modern Thai art including folk scenes by Chalerm Nakiraks, charcoal sketches by Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, seascapes by Sawasdi Tantisuk, bronze sculptures by Khien Yimsiri and Chamruang Vichienkhet, portraits and still lifes by Uab Sanasen, and landscapes by Noparat Livisit. There are also pieces which are moderate in price and mediocre in quality for buyers with a limited budget. The CVN Gallery, which has been in business for almost two decades, is owned by Chaleaw Watthana.

⁴It should be pointed out that the word 'gallery' in the Thai context has numerous definitions. It covers large exhibition spaces, art shops, as well as gift shops.

Situated on Sukhumvit Road, this gallery concentrates on the works of Sawasdi Tantisuk, Preecha Thaonthong, Pichai Nirand, Anand Panin, and San Sarakornborirak. It also specializes in selling art objects to architects and interior decorators responsible for decorating the numerous office blocks and condominiums which continue to spring up in Bangkok. The Amarin Gallery is one of the many galleries where paintings and prints by promising young artists can be found.

One of the most successful galleries of the 1980s and early 1990s is the Sombat Gallery. Situated in the Dusit Thani Hotel (with branches at the Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel and the River City Shopping Complex), its owner, Sombat Watthanathai, is an astute art dealer who has managed to blend modern art and business to suit the demands of both a local and foreign clientele. In her galleries, viewers may find outstanding works by Pratuang Emjaroen, Thawan Duchanee, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijnthanasarn, as well as lesser known artists, and tourist art. These are only samples of many more in stock. Buyers can also visit a particular artist's studio for a desired piece of art.

The Visual Dhamma, an art gallery run by an Austrian, Alfred Pawlin, opened in 1981, specializing in works by Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, Thawan Duchanee, Pichai Nirand, and Pratuang Emjaroen. As the name implies, the Visual Dhamma concentrated on thematic art with an emphasis on mythology and Buddhism. Despite the gallery's popularity as a meeting place and its lively art openings, a reliance on foreign clients and a diminishing monopoly over the four 'founder' artists forced the owner to open his doors to up-and-coming neo-traditional Thai painters like Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijnthanasarn, and Surasit Saowakong. For a time, the Visual Dhamma became

closely associated with the new traditional Thai art, but with the departure of Chalermchai and Panya for London (to decorate Wat Buddhapadipa) the gallery became less active. Pawlin had to seek new artists: Somyos Trisane, Plaiwan Dakliang, Plaek Kitfuangfoo, Chirasak Pattanapong, Sompob Budtrad, and the Thai Group. This move, plus that of allowing promising artists like Thaiwijiit Puangkasemsomboon, Montien Boonma, Vasan Sitthiket, Kamol Phaosavasdi, and Kamin Lertchaiprasert to show other than neo-traditional Thai art and religious art, allowed Pawlin to mount thought-provoking shows, such as 'The Enneagram Nine into Nine', in 1990. Most importantly, the Visual Dhamma is an example of an art gallery attempting to make Thai artists aware of the importance of the role of the art dealer, of keeping records of art works, of making biographical notes, and of fostering public relations. Panya and Montien have found that through the support of the gallery, their work can be promoted abroad. However, the fact remains that many Thai artists do not feel comfortable with art dealers and associate them with middlemen.

With the rising standard of living in Thailand, a number of other galleries in Bangkok have become a focus for buyers who view modern art as a valuable commodity.⁵ The Masterpiece Gallery (now closed), the Artist's Gallery, the Gourmet Gallery, the Viniruj Gallery, the Seven Seas Gallery, the Art Forum Gallery, the Dialogue Gallery, and the Silom Art Space have shown works that are extremely attractive to art consumers. For instance, the Dialogue Gallery, which is run by the art dealer Namthong Sae Tang, specializes in prints, drawings, and paintings by up-and-coming Thai artists.

⁵There are now a number of young collectors in Bangkok, such as Phet Osathanukraw and Yinglak Watcharapol.

Non-profit Institutions

Apart from hotels, galleries, and shopping malls, a number of other institutions have actively promoted art in Thailand over the last three decades. One of the earliest was the Mekpayab Art Centre, set up by Princess Pantip Chumbhot in 1972 as a way of offering Thai artists exhibition and workshop space. In 1974, this art centre merged with the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art—built in memory of the late Professor Silpa Bhirasri and funded by contributions from artists, corporations, and the public—to become one of the most important non-profit art centres in Bangkok.

Opening on 14 May 1974 with an exhibition entitled ‘Bhirasri and his Students’, the Bhirasri Institute was to play an important role in promoting modern Thai art, organizing exhibitions from abroad, and facilitating the exchange of ideas among artists. Not only did it provide an alternative venue for artists to exhibit their work, as did such well-known groups as the Dharma Group, the Bangkok Dice Group, the White Group, the Vane Group, the Thai Art '80 Group, and the Earth Walker Group, but it was also a place where Thai artists were exposed to travelling shows from abroad, including those by Henry Moore and Alexander Calder, and American, Spanish, Japanese, and German artists.

The Bhirasri Institute rapidly became the most attractive and busiest art centre in town. It organized more than a dozen shows annually, including regular art contests sponsored by the Bangkok Bank and the Thai Farmers Bank. Because it was considered a ‘neutral’ venue, different art groups and camps could express their views and exchange ideas freely. It thus bred an atmosphere of art and culture that was far removed from the profit-making attitude prevalent in the commercial galleries and art shops.

Among several directors who worked at the Bhirasri Institute, Chatvichai Promadhattavedi stayed the longest. Being able to work effectively with patrons, collectors, and artists alike, Chatvichai helped to develop the institute into a prominent centre where creativity and experimentation went hand in hand. One of Chatvichai’s innovations—in conjunction with the artist Chumpon Apisuk—was to organize a series of events called ‘Wethi-Samai’, experimental theatre and workshops where artists exchanged ideas in art, drama, poetry, and music. Sadly, the Bhirasri Institute declined and eventually closed after its patron and principal donor, Princess Pantip Chumbhot, passed away in 1988. Since then there has been talk of reopening and giving the institute, with its deteriorating building, a new lease of life.

In 1977, the National Gallery of Art was established with the conversion of the old mint building. It quickly acquired important art works by modern Thai artists and also provided space for exhibitions by both locals and foreigners. Retrospective exhibitions and one-man shows have featured well-known artists—Khien Yimsiri, Prasong Padamanuja, Fua Haribhitak, Sawasdi Tantisuk, Prayura Uruchadha, Paitun Muangsomboon, Chavalit Soemprungsuk, Somsak Chowtadapong, Kamol Tassananchalee, and Suthat Pinruethai—while important foreign exhibits have featured ASEAN painting and photographic exhibitions and contemporary prints from America, Australia, Japan, and Germany.

Despite the initial euphoria of having a gallery of national status, it soon became clear that insufficient government funds were being allocated to the maintenance of the gallery, housed, as it was, in a few badly renovated rooms, for acquisitions of new works, and for general running expenses. Placed under the supervision of the Department of Fine Arts, the

National Gallery suffered from being administered by civil servants who had little knowledge of or experience in modern art. In 1989, however, the new wings of the National Gallery were opened to the public. These new wings contain spacious white-painted rooms with high ceilings and a large sculpture court, but the ventilation, temperature, and light control remain below standard. Despite this, the venues at the National Gallery continue to be fully booked for numerous outstanding local and international exhibitions: retrospective shows by Pimarn Mulpramook, Tawee Nandakwang, Pratuang Emjaroen, Sompot Upa-In, and Kamol Tassananchalee; solo shows by Inson Wongsam, Ithipol Thangchalok, Montien Boonma, Vasan Sitthiket, Thammasak Booncherd, Thavorn Ko-Udomvit, Somboon Hormtientong, Kamol Phaosavasdi, and Sansern Malindasuta; travelling shows like 'Art-Landscape-Architecture' by German artists, 'Art from Australia: Eight Contemporary Views'; group exhibitions such as 'Print Installation: Seven Interpretations by Thai Artists', '8 + 8' by sixteen Thai and Malaysian artists, the White Group, and 'Recent Works by Chatchai Puipia and Pinaree Sanpitak'.

The Ministry of Culture, founded in 1952, was planned to promote Thai culture as a key dimension in national development. However, the government failed to incorporate the cultural dimension into the national development plan and, in 1958, the Ministry of Culture was dissolved. In 1979, the Office of the National Culture Commission under the Ministry of Education was established to meet the demand of Thai society which faced a rapid increase in economic, scientific, and technological development. To a certain extent, the Office managed to disseminate cultural activities at both national and international levels through exhibitions, conferences, and the mass

media. However, overemphasis is placed on 'culture as goodness and beauty' and something which 'creates order, happiness, prosperity, unity, and solidarity in a community established by our ancestors' (Office of the National Culture Commission, 1989: 139). As a result, the various art exhibitions selected usually project Thai culture as harmonious and beautiful, full of smiling, innocent people. Pressing issues such as crime, drugs, AIDS, racism, prostitution, child abuse, poverty, pollution, and politics tend to be overlooked.

In addition, a division of the Office of the National Culture Commission, the Thailand Cultural Centre, was opened to the general public in 1987. This enormous complex, complete with concert halls, conference rooms, exhibition halls, and a cultural information service centre, was largely funded by the Japanese government, and is officially known as 'The Social Education and Cultural Centre Project'. The main functions of the centre are to serve as a place for cultural and recreational activities and to provide cultural information and learning opportunities to the public. Memorable exhibitions, such as the painting contests commemorating King Bhumibol's sixtieth birthday and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's thirty-sixth birthday, the White Group, 'Frontiers in Fiber: The Americans', and 'Fulbright in Colors', have so far been shown.

When it was announced that the 1991 annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund was to be held in Bangkok, the Thai government allotted 2,000 million baht to build a special convention hall for the prestigious meeting. Completed in record time—only twenty months—the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre (QSNCC), which has since become a major state-of-the-art international centre, houses a prize-winning collection of Thai arts and artefacts from all over the country. To

propagandize Queen Sirikit's enormous contribution to Thai culture, the Centre and the Thai Farmers Bank staged a prestigious painting contest commemorating Her Majesty's sixtieth birthday in 1992. In addition, through 'CON-tempus—the Bangkok Fine Art Centre', Pipat Pongrapeeporn, the director, has organized various contemporary art exhibitions such as 'The New Path' by promising Thai artists including Kamol Phaosavasdi, Sansern Malindasuta, Kade Javanalidikorn, and Suthat Pinruethai.

Among the best of the permanent works at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre is a striking golden sculpture called *Lokuttara* (1991) (Colour Plate 56) by Chalood Nimsamer, which stands gracefully in front of the building. This abstract sculpture challenges the viewer to ponder its symbolic meaning. It is intended to symbolize a higher consciousness. The word *lokuttara* means 'supramundane', 'above worldliness', or 'beyond worldliness' which, in the Buddhist context, is opposite to *lokiya*, meaning 'mundane' or 'belonging to worldliness'. Chalood said that both the choice of form and the underlying message were important for this public sculpture. He experimented with the *kanok* pattern and produced a work with various interpretations: the bulky shape with pointed end could mean a lotus bud; it could be seen as two hands put together to show respect, as well as an abstract shape of flames or leaves. It could also derive from the top-knot of a Buddha image.

Chalood's *Lokuttara* has received both critical acclaim and harsh criticism. On the one hand, it has been praised for its composition and design which fit harmoniously with the architecture. The golden oblong shapes on the sculpture glitter against the sun, symbolizing reverence, goodness, tranquillity, and the pathway to heaven (Vanich, 1991: 78;

Pairoj, 1991: 79–80). On the other hand, some critics feel that this 7 million-baht fibreglass work lacks dynamism and grace. Its form and colour have been interpreted (rightly or wrongly) as deriving from *chapphan rangsi* (a star with six rays, a halo) seen on top of the Buddha's head. Thus, it is extremely offensive to many Thai viewers to see a form reminiscent of the sacred image placed in a lowly position on the ground (Silpayatra, 1991: 52–3). Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, for one, was so abhorred by this sculpture that he said it looks like '*sargabua sone miti* [a pestle with overlapping dimensions] situated at a place full of *lokiya*' (*Phu jud karn 2*, 1991: 25–6).

Another outlet for Thai artists to display their talent is through universities. The Silpakorn University Art Gallery was opened in 1979 as a venue for both permanent displays and art exhibitions by local and foreign artists. It has since become a permanent showplace for the National Exhibition of Art, the Young Artists Exhibition, and works by members of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts. It also collects the work of a large number of award winners from the National Exhibition of Art. Many travelling shows, such as 'The James Bay Project' by Rainer Wittenborn, 'The Inspired Dreams: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia', 'The Book As An Objet D'Art', and 'Norwegian Artist Group 3, 14' were exhibited at this gallery.

In 1989, a spacious room was converted into the art gallery of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts at Silpakorn University. Somporn Rodboon, an art historian, was one of the pioneers who organized artist-in-residence programmes and travelling exhibitions, among them 'Art and Environment', video and works by Joseph Beuys, and mixed-media installations by Junko Suzuki and Tatsuo Miyajima sponsored by the Hara

Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. Australian artists Joan Grounds and Noelene Lucas have worked at Silpakorn University as artists-in-residence through the exchange programmes with the Australia Council of the Arts.

Apart from Silpakorn University, Chulalongkorn University has done much to promote modern Thai art. In 1977, Professor Dr Kasem Suwanagul, President of Chulalongkorn University at the time, instituted a policy of collecting modern Thai art by organizing open exhibitions and buying directly from artists. The collection at Chulalongkorn University has, as a result, expanded to more than 700 works and includes important pieces by Hem Wechakorn, Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, Thawan Duchanee, Misiem Yipintsoi, Irthi Khongkhakul, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijnthanasarn, Prawat Laucharoen, and Kamol Tassananchalee. However, these art works are not generally accessible to the public as many are distributed between the various faculties and offices within the university.

In keeping with its policy of art patronage, in 1983 Chulalongkorn University created a new Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts to promote visual arts, graphic arts, design, dance, and music. It also has plans to build an art and culture complex near the Mahboonkrong Centre, which will include a concert hall, a theatre, and an art exhibition hall. Despite the urgent need for such an art centre and exhibition space in Bangkok, this project has been delayed for nearly a decade.

Various non-profit institutions have played a role in promoting Thai art, albeit on a smaller scale. For instance, in 1982, the Thai Kadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, Silpakorn University, and Kloster (Thailand) Limited co-organized a conference and exhibition of modern Thai art on the occasion of Bangkok's Bicentenary. 'Art in Thailand Since 1932' showed selected

works by modern Thai artists from the era of Silpa Bhirasri to the present day, while the two-day conference discussed topics concerning modern Thai art in relation to the government, the private sector, education, and employment.

In addition, in 1983, Chiang Mai University created its Faculty of Fine Arts, which has rapidly become an important place for art activities outside the capital. The faculty encourages local and foreign artists to work in Chiang Mai as artists-in-residence, and in doing so has set up exchange agreements with other institutions, such as the Canberra Institute of the Arts.

Individuals, too, have left their mark on the Thai art scene. Misiem Yipintsoi, a strong supporter of modern art in Thailand and an artist in her own right, began the Misiem Sculpture Garden at Sampran near Nakhon Pathom in 1981, although she did not live to see its completion in 1989.⁶ This large sculpture garden displays many of Misiem's famous bronze sculptures, including *Vanity* (1958), *Skippping Rope* (1974), *Voice of Esan* (1983), and *Continuity* (1986). In 1991, the Saeng-arun Art Centre, named after the late Professor Saeng-arun Rattakasikorn, was opened at the Plan Group Building off North Sathorn Road. Set up under a concept similar to that of the Bhirasri Institute, this art centre has encouraged artists of different media to exchange creative ideas and principles.

Through personal contacts, in June 1989, the painter Pharpptawan Suwannakudt, and the art dealer Namthong Sae Tang, organized an exhibition of modern Thai art at L'Espace Pierre Cardin near the Concorde Centre in Paris. More than seventy works by thirty artists were on display.

⁶Misiem became a founding member of the Bhirasri Foundation and the President of the International Association of Art. In 1984, the French government's Ministry of Culture made her a Chavalier des Arts et des Lettres.

To complement the efforts of local non-profit institutions in promoting art in Thailand, a number of foreign embassies and cultural institutes like the Alliance Française, the British Council, the Goethe Institut, the American Universities Alumni Association (AUA), and the United States Information Service (USIS) in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, have been generous in their funding of Thai artists by providing travelling scholarships and hosting exhibitions. Indeed, the Alliance Française has played a major role in nurturing Thai artists for many decades. Despite its small exhibition space, it has put on lively shows by French artists as well as by locals such as Misiem Yipintsoi, Anand Panin, Prawat Laucharoen, Tuan Trirapichit, and Vasan Sitthiket. The Goethe Institut, too, has been very active in sponsoring both Thai and German art exhibitions.⁷ The Institut has always provided a lively meeting place for artists to discuss new ideas at the Artists' Bazaars, concerts, film festivals, and art openings it has organized. Furthermore, it gave them recognition and institutional support that could not be found in galleries and art shops. In 1985, the year in which the Goethe Institut commemorated its twenty-fifth anniversary, memorable shows such as 'Multiple Art', with works of Joseph Beuys, Günther Uecker, and Wolf Vostell, and Thai-Japanese-German anti-war exhibitions were held in Bangkok. In addition, the Institut has given travel and study grants to many Thai artists, including Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Surasi Kusolwong, to visit Germany. In 1989, Dr Johannes Preisinger, the Deputy Consul-General, organized an exhibition called 'Contemporary Spiritual Art in Thailand' at the Goethe Institut in San Francisco, which featured artists such as

⁷During 1969–78, under the directorship of Dr Anton Regeburg, the Institut sponsored numerous Thai artists to display important exhibitions in its small gallery.

Thawan Duchanee, Pichai Nirand, Chalermchai Kositpipat, and Panya Vijnthanasarn. Many of the works on display were collected by Preisinger when he was posted at the German Embassy in Bangkok. In addition, through German contacts, Thawan was commissioned to decorate spacious rooms at the castles of Herman Graf Hatzfeloh and Klaus Brenner in Germany.

Despite its small gallery space and lack of funding, the British Council has made continuous efforts to hold exhibitions by local and foreign artists. Solo shows by Thawan Duchanee, Pratuang Emjaroen, and Damrong Wong-Uparaj have been held there, and it was through the British Council that Thai artists were given support to decorate the Buddhist temple in Wimbledon. The British Council has also facilitated in bringing travelling shows of British art, such as Richard Smith's works on paper and David Hockney's *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, to Thailand.

Thai-American relations in modern art have been close since the 1960s when many Thai artists travelled to the United States to study. In 1982, Kamol Tassananchalee, the well-known Thai artist living in Los Angeles, founded the Thai Arts Council which became an exciting venue for Thai artists to visit and experience the art scene in America. The Thai Arts Council has organized joint exhibitions of Thai works with the Shinno Gallery, the Gallery West, and the Pacific Asia Museum. In 1986, the United States Information Service in Bangkok organized an exhibition featuring Thai artists who had spent time studying or working in America. The aim of the 'Thai Reflections on American Experiences' exhibition was to trace stylistic developments and to record the American experiences of visiting Thai artists. The exhibition, however, ignited controversy as several participating artists objected to the curator's (Piriya Krairiksh) catalogue essay which, they

felt, did not give enough credit to the originality of modern Thai artists (Sanitsuda, 1986). More recently, in 1991, despite delays and a shortage of funding, Dr Herbert Phillips, a professor in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, managed to organize a travelling exhibition called 'The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand' at the Lowie Museum of Anthropology and several universities in the United States. The project was planned to give exposure to modern Thai artists and continue exchanges in modern art between the two countries, although the choice of Thai artists, the selection of their work, and the catalogue of the exhibition were biased towards the study of anthropology.

The Japanese contribution to the promotion of modern Thai art has been most evident through activities organized by the Japan Foundation in Bangkok. Several Thai artists have been awarded grants to work and study in Japan, and in 1989, the Foundation sponsored an important exhibition called 'Inspiration from Japan' at the National Gallery, which consisted of works by Thai artists who had once stayed and studied in Japan. This foundation has also played a part in Thai-Japanese relations as a liaison between artists and institutions in Thailand and Japan. For instance, solo shows by Thawan Duchanee and Montien Boonma in Fukuoka and Tokyo have been sponsored by the Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Centre. In 1992, the foundation also organized the selection of Thai artists to show in the 'South-East Asian Contemporary Art Exhibition' in Tokyo, Fukuoka, and Hiroshima. In addition, the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art has been active in the exchange programmes on contemporary Thai-Japanese art.

In 1988, Australian representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australia Council of the Arts made official visits to various art

institutions and universities in Thailand. Since then, cultural exchanges through modern art between the two countries have flourished. The Australian artists Joan Grounds and John Reid have worked at Silpakorn University and Chiang Mai University, respectively. Contemporary Australian art ('Art from Australia: Eight Contemporary Views') and Aboriginal art ('The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia') have been displayed in Bangkok. In exchange, Chumpon Apisuk, Thammasak Booncherd, Pinaree Sanpitak, Kamol Phaosavasdi, and Vichoke Mukdamanee have participated at the Australia and Regions Artists' Exchange (ARX) exhibitions in Perth, Montien Boonma was selected to show in 'The Readymade Boomérang' at the Eighth Biennale of Sydney in 1990, and Pinaree Sanpitak participated in a cross-cultural art exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1992. The Canberra Contemporary Art Space showed 'Change and Modernism in Thai Art' in 1991, with works by Panya Vijnthanasarn, Niti Wattuya, Suchao Sisganes, and Naiyana Chotisuk. This exhibition coincided with Dr John Clark's seminal conference on 'Modernism and Postmodernism in Asian Art' at the Australian National University in Canberra. Scholars, art historians, and art critics from South-East Asia, Japan, China, Korea, Holland, Germany, Britain, the United States, and Australia delivered papers and discussed issues on modern and post-modern art in an Asian context. In addition, the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane has generated considerable interest among Thai artists with its preparation for a major international event, 'The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Australia 1993'. The Triennial programme will stage a conference and a series of artists' workshops which will bring together leading artists, critics, and scholars in the Asia-Pacific region.

8 From Modern to (Post?) Modern Art in Thailand

Seeing 'Yellow' from a Thai Perspective¹

BANGKOK, with its huge, diverse population, shopping complexes, high-rise office buildings, and cosmopolitan sophistication, is truly a city in the international sense. As a rapidly expanding metropolis, Bangkok, like other capitals in the Orient—Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Manila, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur—has welcomed modernity and modern urban culture. Since the 1970s, the influence of high-tech, computer, and satellite has had an enormous impact on Thai culture. Bangkok, in particular, has succumbed to the international 'culture' in which the same kinds of ice creams and fast food outlets have become as popular as in other city centres around the world. The same multinational corporations supply the same products, values, and technical expertise, which can be charged on the same kind of credit cards. Blue jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers can be spotted as frequently as Nintendo games and mobile telephones. Eclecticism has been, and is, very much part of a contemporary general culture: one listens to rap music and Thai folk songs through Walkmans and ghetto blasters, watches the sequels of *Rocky*, *Robo Cop*, and *The*

Terminator on laser discs, eats McDonald's food for lunch and *som tam* (sliced green papaya) for dinner, wears fake Gucci and post-punk clothes to merit-making ceremonies, and acquires knowledge by punching keys on a computer or fax machine or watching news on CNN and 'Today's Japan' from cable TV.

As Thailand rapidly becomes one of the leading developing countries, several perplexing questions arise. Is her orientation towards material prosperity and quantitative growth, with its emphasis on economic development based on science and technology, having drastic consequences? Clearly, several negative results, such as social and health problems and environmental problems like pollution of soil, water, and air, face the Thai government despite the increase in the country's material wealth. This dilemma has caused the notion that extravagance and excessive consumption result in the decline of traditional culture and spiritualism of the Thai people. It has been observed that 'the more production, the more poverty. The more economic growth, the more economic problems and concurrent devaluation of human qualities. Morals and ethics are forgotten and both the natural and human worlds are running the risk of

¹Apinan (1991b).

destruction' (Office of the National Culture Commission, 1989).

Further, what effects have the new changes and the disruption of cultural continuity had on Thai artists? What do terms like 'modernism' and 'late capitalism' mean to them? Can we study Thai art in parallel with the post-modern art movement in New York, Rome, Paris, and Berlin? The paradoxical or dialectical combination of decolonization and neo-colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s in South-East Asia can perhaps explain in part the meaning of modern (and post-modern) Thai art. As Fredric Jameson pointed out, the wave of 'wars of national liberation' of the 1960s was an altogether mythical simplification. Decolonization went hand in hand with neocolonization, and the graceful, grudging, or violent end of an old-fashioned imperialism certainly meant the end of one kind of domination and the invention and construction of a new kind (Jameson, 1988: 178–208). In the case of Thailand, her people have always boasted of their independence at times when most of their neighbours have been colonized by Western powers. The Thai government has used various means of propaganda through the mass media, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and the Office of the National Culture Commission to inculcate a spirit of national identity among the people. Despite the claim of having escaped colonialism, Thailand has constantly looked towards Western culture as a prototype. Such process has been catalysed by modernization and development programmes whose aim is to build the nation into one of the newly industrialized countries (NICs).

Inevitably, ideas, concepts, and artistic creativity have been affected by the rapidly changing conditions of Thai life. We have seen that since the Bhirasri and post-Bhirasri periods, modern Thai art has faced a dilemma. On the one hand, it has striven to catch up with the international art of the First World.

Many Thai artists believed that there should be a universal modern art that can be appreciated by all classes and nationalities. On the other hand, some artists felt obliged to maintain their sense of national unity and racial homogeneity. This dual purpose—trying to be international as well as expressing Thai-ness—has been extremely difficult for artists to reconcile.²

At the present moment in the international art world, there is a widespread intimation that the principal energies of modernism are either waning or are already spent, and that some significant shift is discernible in art. In short, modernism, as Habermas wrote, seems 'dominant but dead' (1981: 3–14). A variety of movements (literature, criticism, art, and architecture) now employ rhetoric that is self-consciously 'post-modernist'.³ There is some question whether post-modernism is a reaction against earlier tendencies or merely an extension of them. Does it represent a radical break with modernism, or is simply a revolt within modernism itself against certain forms of high modernism?

In the current intellectual debates in the West, there are few questions as vexing as the meaning of post-modernism. Often post-modernism refers to the plethora of contradictory definitions associated with a certain constellation of styles and tones in cultural works: pastiche; kitsch, a mixture of forms and styles, cultural recombination, a relish for copies and repetition, revivalism as well as a

²Panel discussion on 'The Thai-ness in Modern Thai Art' at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 19 June 1989. The speakers were Chulathat Phyakhranonda, Preecha Thaotong, Kamchorn Soonpongsri, and Apinan Poshyananda.

³Notable 'post-modern' writers include Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Andreas Huyssen, Hal Foster, Charles Jencks, Rosaline Krauss, Craig Owens, Michael Newman, David Harvey, and John Roberts.

rejection of history, and a combination of high and low art. The confusion of the definition of post-modernism, whether as a style or as a structure of feeling, can be traced to several causes. First, the word 'modernism' does not have the same range of meaning in English, French, and German (not to speak of other languages) and therefore its 'post-modern' extensions diverge as well. In every language the term is employed in a different sense, depending on its application to history and culture. Furthermore, a theory of history on modernism and post-modernism may be quite unrelated in a theory of art. The term post-modern is unfortunate for obvious reasons: if modern is used to describe that which relates to the present, how can anything (except the future) be post-modern? As Gaggi observed, modern is as new or recent as anything gets, and to declare anything in the present to be post-modern is to embrace the term that is self-contradictory, and some would say pretentious (Gaggi, 1989: 17–21). In contrast, Huyssen and Kaplan have argued that there is a cultural break in the post-modern and the word indicates a substantial move beyond or away from modernism (Huyssen, 1986: 160–77; Kaplan, 1988: 1–9). There is a noticeable shift in sensibility and practices, which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions and experiences from that of a preceding period.

Faced with such a situation, how do we discuss post-modernism in the context of 'other worlds' and 'other voices'? Can we talk about post-modernism in terms of South-East Asian or Thai art? Is South-East Asian or Thai art truly beyond the modern, truly in a post-industrial age? Is there a post-modern condition in Thailand; if so, is it pre-what? Can we apply Euro-American terms with the same meaning or is post-modernism yet another piece of jargon

introduced by Western scholars to be studied from a Western point of view? Is it a concept or practice, a passing fad, or an entirely new art style resulting from a reaction for or against the condition of consumer society and NIC culture? Can we translate the term post-modernism as *khuam khid samaimai yuk lang* and apply such a definition to Thai art and culture?

It must be emphasized that these intersecting questions should not be interpreted primarily from a 'Euro-American' (white) viewpoint but from an 'Asian' (yellow) perspective. Things must be made to look crystalline for a moment, before complications and slanting views set in. Progress, speed, and modernization in South-East Asia did not develop simultaneously with Western culture. We are reminded that modernism is not the exclusive property of the West. Therefore, it is not possible to apply the Western fine art tradition as the self-certifying domain of white men to art practices in the non-Western world. In the Orient, tensions between internationalism and nationalism as well as globalism and parochial ethnocentrism are never far from the surface.

High modernism, as it is often seen in the context of formalism, was a Western phenomenon which became widely accepted in the 1950s and 1960s when the American art critic Clement Greenberg promulgated the idea that art should be rendered 'pure' by being confined to the effects specific to its own medium. The Greenbergian view, with its insistence on the purity and autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday, has been described as a distortion of the history of modernist practice to serve the interest of the international promotion of American Abstract Expressionism (Newman, 1989: 103). This kind of concentration on formal properties encouraged Thai artists

to produce works to be seen as part of the global artistic language, sharing a common ideology that emphasized technical virtuosity, 'purity', and 'self-sufficiency' which strived towards a non-illusionistic flatness. This impact on local art developed at a varying pace according to the intensity of outside influence or degree of internal resistance.

Nevertheless, art movements, such as Abstract Expressionism and colour-field and hard-edge painting, did not carry the same potency and subversive power in Thailand as they did in the West. By the time these Western avant-gardist styles were introduced in Bangkok, often they had already become part of the so-called canon of high modernism. In the early and mid-1970s, colour-field and geometric painting grew profusely as Thai artists explored the potentials of colour and pattern. The desire to create international art at this period can be seen as a time when 'real'/high art was produced solely for aesthetic satisfaction. International art became accepted as institutionalized art and Thai artists working in this style became recognized as 'avant-garde artists' in the local art scene. At the same time, it should be realized that other aspects of modernism, directed more towards heteronomy than towards autonomy, such as Surrealism and Social Realism, were practised widely among Thai artists.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the speed of Western influence on Thai culture increased drastically. New styles and fashions from other sides of the globe caught on as fast as disco dancing and music videos. If Thai society was/is experiencing a post-modern condition, then one of its most significant features or practices is pastiche—the imitation of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles. In Bangkok, we see everywhere pastiches and imitations of Western commodities: reproductions of brand names (Gucci, Guy Laroche, Pierre

Cardin, Yves Saint Laurent, and Benetton) and simulations of commercials and advertisements of foreign commodities. With a special ability to reproduce foreign products, the Thai people have flooded the market with commodities that simulate the originals but which lack creative imagination.

Through the mass media, Thai artists have become exposed to various movements and styles, such as Trans-avant-garde art, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Geo art, and Neo-Conceptual art. However, the impact of Western post-modernism as a fad in Thai culture can be detected most clearly in the new tower blocks and skyscrapers of Bangkok. Well-known Thai architects, among them Rangsan Torsuwan and Sumet Jumsai, have moved away from the International Style glass towers, concrete blocks, and steel slabs inspired by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Instead, they have become influenced by the pluralistic style of using various stylistic modes which appear in so many pseudo-post-modern façades in Bangkok.

It is common to see in a single building in Bangkok a mixture of Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns, Gothic and stained glass windows, and traditional Thai motifs. Rangsan Torsuwan's design of the Amarin Plaza (1989) is an example. This building exemplifies Western-inspired post-modern schizophrenia in which creative tension results from an incoherent and arbitrary shifting of styles. Instead of a single centre, there is cultural recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed with anything else—Roman colonnades, neo-classical decoration, glass panels—to counter the anonymity and muteness of the International Style skyscraper. Similarly, Rangsan's design for the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel (1991) incorporates elements of a local tradition. Its

elongated columns with stylized floral capitals are derived from indigenous traditional Thai architecture.

This kind of classical Thai revivalism does not exclude irony, frivolity, and calculated shock. Hindu shrines or traditional Thai buildings are seen next to or on top of shopping malls, mirror-glass façades, and fast food restaurants. Sumet's design for the Bank of Asia (1989) (dubbed the 'Robot Building') and the Nation Tower (1991) are every bit buildings of the twenty-first century. In contrast, the Suan Phlu Condominium (1989) is embellished with spires and Gothic windows, while the Jareemart Apartment building contains a penthouse in the style of a Greek temple.

These buildings reflect the kind of buzzing enthusiasm for cosmopolitan culture visible in Bangkok's growing consumer society. Yet, despite the apparent novelty for eclecticism, this kind of synthesis in Thai architecture has been going on since the Fifth Reign as evident in buildings like the Chakri Throne Hall, Wat Ratchabophit, and Wat Nivethammaprawat in Bang Pa-In, Ayudhya.

Post-modernism or a Revival of Cultural Traditions?

When discussing post-modernism, art critics and art historians have often treated it in the context of a search for tradition. Many artists worldwide seem to agree that the classical avant-garde or high modernism has exhausted its creative potential. Consequently, these artists look to 'the good old days' for inspiration. They seek to return art to its roots as a regenerative source of energy and understanding. They look back to themes and subjects which relate to the pre-modern era. Similarly in Thailand, many artists turned to traditional Thai art in a search for alternatives to the autonomy of modernism.

In the 1960s, artists such as Chalerm

Nakiraks, Angkarn Kalayanapongsa, Chalood Nimsamer, Manit Poo-Aree, and Prapat Yothaprasert became acutely aware of the dominance of art for art's sake and began to seek an alternative path in artistic expression. Their solution was to emphasize their racial, cultural, and national background. Consequently, the issue of ethnicity (religion, race, class, gender, regionalism) became an important factor in creating what has come to be categorized as art of the mainstream. More recently, Thai artists have returned to the past for revitalization in contemporary culture. Many believe that the cultural resources and creativity of the present have been exhausted. They feel that Thai art of the past contains a wealth of artistic expression that can be utilized by contemporary artists. Emphasis on ethnicity (which can be seen as an inverted form of racism) has thus given a new value to the marginalized and suppressed traditional art of the indigenous peoples of Thailand.

Two proponents of the shift away from abstraction in Thai art are Preecha Thaonthong and Surasit Saowakong. By relying purely on tranquil and decorative images related to Buddhism and ethnicity, their works have become metaphors for the contemporary Thai Buddhists' yearning for the imaginary and fanciful setting as a form of escapism. Their works, which have become much sought after commodities, serve as a psychological band-aid for corporate patrons and collectors who wish for an instant shot of religion and national identity.

Preecha's interest in the effect of light and shade on surfaces moved him to record, at different times of the day, the reflection of sunlight on architecture, and especially on temple walls. Using photographs and sketches, he made careful studies of the intensity of the rays that create light and shadow on solid forms. He then applied these studies on

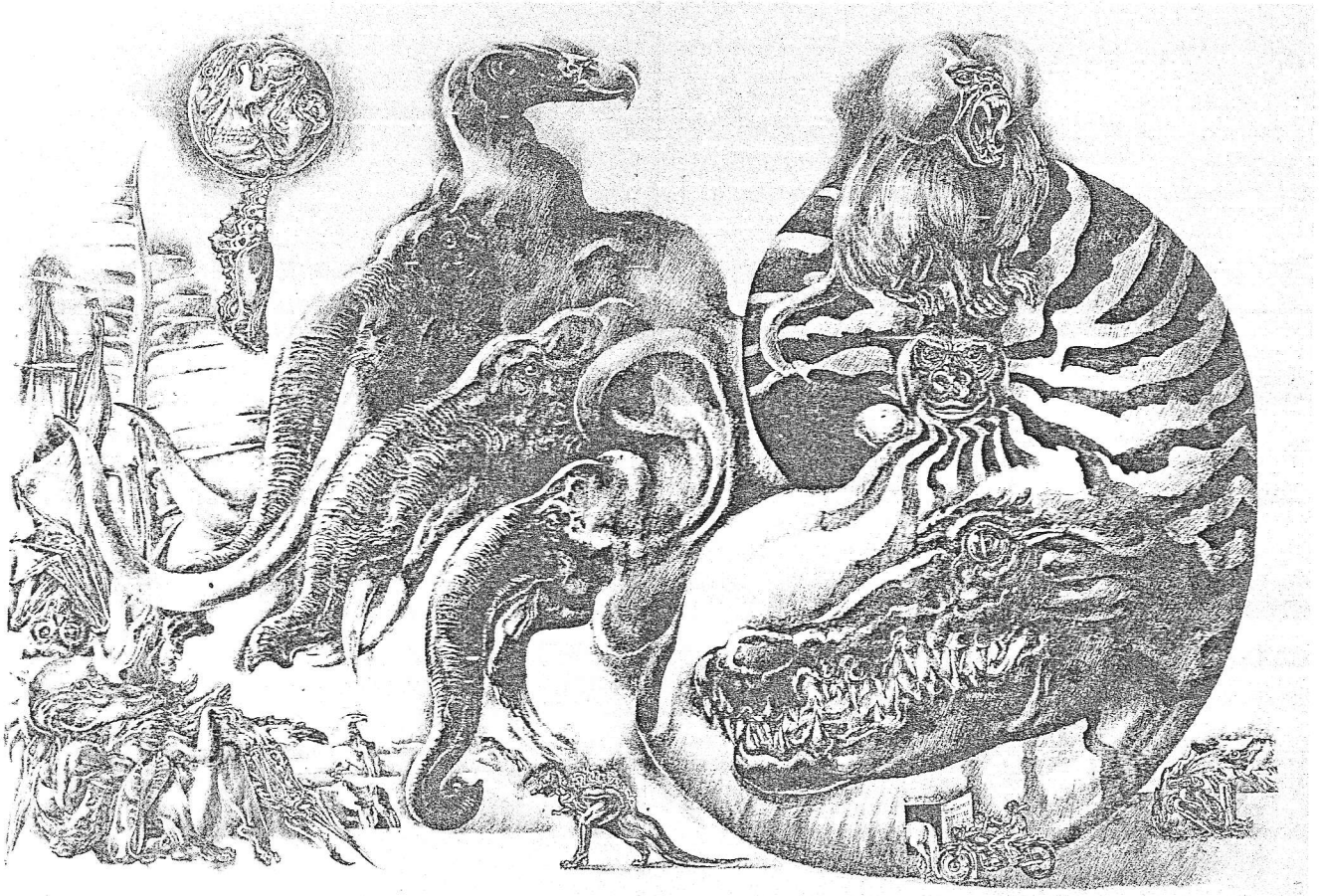
canvas, in oils and acrylic, re-creating areas of the temple wall and utilizing them as part of his *oeuvre*. His series of *Light and Shadow* (1971–4) consists of forms derived from the use of chiaroscuro that create rhythms and harmonies on his large monochromatic canvases. Content is reduced to the minimum, but an illusion of pulsating movement is created by the ambiguous relationship between the subtle changes in tones of the greys, blues, and greens. Only the edges of columns and walls give glimpses of reality and remind the viewer not to treat the works as abstract paintings.

Rather than experiment with hard-edge and geometric painting, Preecha began to add details to his paintings, such as statues, mosaics, and decorative patterns, to enliven what would otherwise be flat areas of colour. As a result, paintings like *Light Form on a Shaded Area* (1977–8) (Colour Plate 57) and *Wat* (1977–8) contain shallow spaces with areas of glittering lozenges and squares, some exposed to sunlight, others hidden in shade. The flat screen-like surfaces create the feeling of an empty stage set. There is a mood of serenity and tranquillity, comparable to the quiet hum of meditation. Preecha intended his contemplative works to point to a reality beyond paint and canvas. That he was successful is indicated by the awards bestowed on the series at the National Exhibition of Art in 1975, 1977, and 1979. In *Temptation of Mara* (1981), Preecha appropriated a scene from a mural painting in the temple as the theme for his work. Sombre colours engulf shaded areas like dark clouds blocking any source of light. They are, according to Preecha, analogous to the darkness symbolic of *mara* (evil force). On the left, a clutter of classical Thai figures seems to come alive when exposed to beams of sunlight that pierce the dark shadows, evoking radiance and peace emanating from the Buddhist teaching.

Surasit also used Thai temples as his subject-matter. Having settled in Chiang Mai, he became fascinated by the serene and tranquil qualities of Chiang Saen architecture, which he portrayed in both nocturnal and daylight scenes. Surasit's oil-paintings like *The Light of Dharma* (1986) are similar to Preecha's works in the sense that light is implied as a spiritual essence that transcends earthly surroundings. Sharp, clarified details are hallmarks of his works which emanate a sense of serenity as well as expectation. They differ from Preecha's paintings in that emphasis is placed on a northern setting where peace and tranquillity can be easily found within the walls of the countless temples in Chiang Mai.

Thawan Duchanee's paintings of the 1970s are sometimes enigmatic and surreal, swerving away from the centre of the traditional style painting related to the Buddhist and Hindu cosmological conceptions. In Chapter 6, we discussed Thawan's reinterpretation of the scriptures to criticize the condition of contemporary Thai life, as well as his ability to blend and conceal multiple sources in a single work. Thawan has revived the theory that traditional Thai painting is not *passé* and can be used as a potent illustrative medium, a point of view against which Thai abstractionists have fought so relentlessly. His Buddhist paintings thus reveal an attempt to break with the abstractionists' endeavour to create and preserve the autonomy of pure and high art. At the same time, his appropriations are intended to remind rather than tell the viewer the stories from the original version. Not all of the images are directly related to the scriptures, thus creating endless opportunity for exegesis. Herein lies Thawan's contribution to post-modern Thai art.

Thawan's allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery. He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured. In his hands,



122. Thawan Duchanee, *The Nemi Jataka*, 1974, drawing, 70 x 100 cm, collection of Dr Anton Regenberg, Germany. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

the image would become something else as Thawan added a new meaning to it. For instance, in *The Nemi Jataka* (1974) (Plate 122), a version of the Lives of the Buddha, Thawan used the subject but reworked it as part of the current mythology. Instead of showing Nemi and Matali on the divine chariot, Thawan depicted a couple on a motor cycle at the entrance to hell with the sign 'Please be careful to keep the royal chariot clean. Indra' (in Thai). Near by, lovers copulate in various positions on the back of a dinosaur.

Thawan's paintings of the *Battle of Mara (The Evil One)* (1989) (Plate 123) are a fusion of mythology and contemporaneity. One version consists of demons and evils in ancient mythology

trying to attack the Buddha with a club and a spear; in another version, the Buddha's head is turned away from temptation in the guise of Rambo, Conan, Superman, Batman, Lone Wolf, Clint Eastwood, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. At the same time, the viewer is reminded that these movie stars and comic heroes are symbols of good over evil. In an article 'Rambo Meets Buddha in a Shopping Mall in "14 Great Thai Artists"', a critic wrote that in these enigmatic paintings Thawan used the images as signs of Western values, materialism, and consumerism (Nanipa, 1990a: Section C1). The celebrities are nothing more than the bloated images of grandeur and their presence in the forms of films and mass media are the result of

123. Thawan Duchanee, *Battle of Mara (The Evil One)*, 1989, oil, enamel, and gold leaf on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, collection of the artist, Bangkok. (Photograph Apinan Poshyananda.)



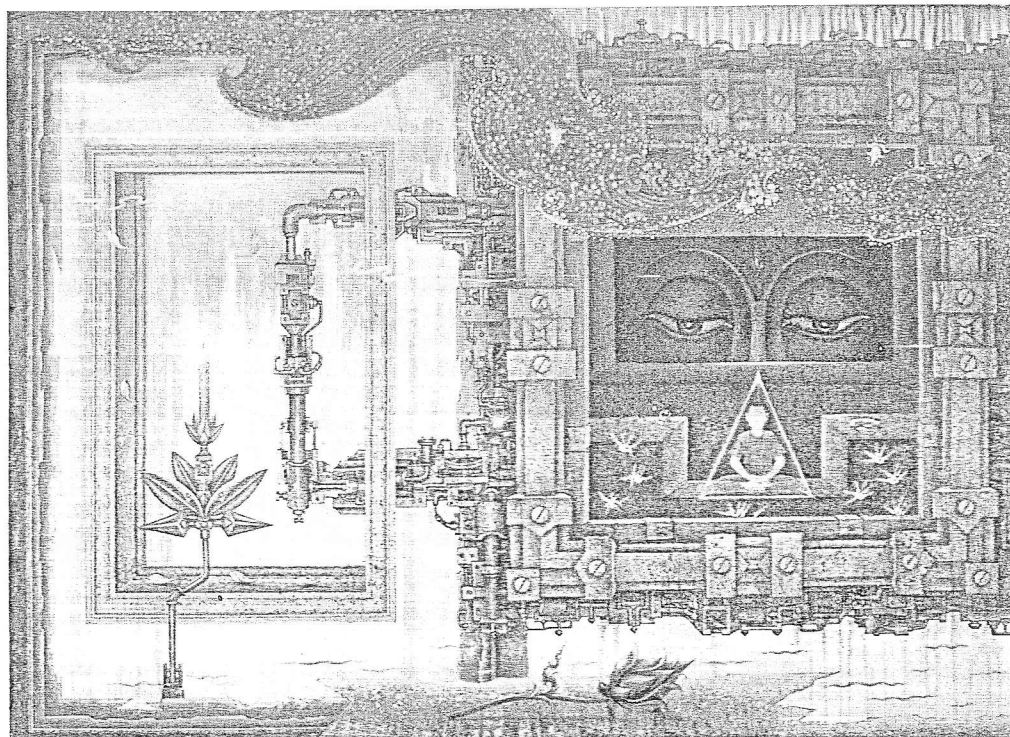
Hollywood culture and Western propaganda. Some viewers have reacted to Thawan's paintings, regarding them as kitsch. If these works are seen as pastiche and Thawan relished in reproducing 'bad art' and motifs borrowed from popular sources, then he has succeeded in moving away from the idea of the autonomy of 'real'/high modern art. Arguably, Thawan's works have shifted into the current trend of what can be called post-modern Thai art.

During the late 1970s, Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijnthanasarn spearheaded the movement of neo-traditional Thai art. With a small group of followers—the Thai Art '80 Group—they became vocal critics of Thai art works (especially abstract art) that lacked national character, preferring instead to synthesize the traditional values of 'classic' art of the past with their own cultural milieu. This energetic come-back in revivalist art was clearly a sign of neo-conservative attacks on the culture of modernism and avant-gardism. Chalermchai and Panya emphasized that figuration and allegory are the essence of Thai art, but at the same time, were

prepared to explore new techniques and contemporary issues quite different from traditional art.

Chalermchai, in particular, reacted against international art styles by offering an escape route for supporters of neo-traditionalism who felt that Buddhism and Thai-ness had been threatened by materialism and consumerism. In *Preaching* (1978) (Colour Plate 58), he portrayed a sense of calmness and spirituality as monks preach to a group of common people in the temple. The figures are composed in a comparatively simplified manner. The emphasis in the painting is on patterns (mosaics, tiles, textiles) and a limited range of colours (yellow, green, brown). In contrast, his drawings of *Materialization, Religious Deterioration* (1984), at once a continuation of and a breaking away from traditional Thai art, concentrate on the dilemma which exists between spiritualism and materialism. They reflect the themes of spiritual decay caused by materialistic forces and a desire for spiritual utopia within the serene meditative atmosphere. The globe is enclosed with concrete jungles. Gigantic

124. Chalermchai Kositpipat, *Changing Material World and Stable Spiritual World*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, collection of Song Watcharasriroj, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)



machines symbolizing technology and industry mercilessly crush temples into smithereens. Helpless devotees stand and watch. They can only weep and pray as they witness the growth of materialization and the deterioration of Buddhism. The theme is continued in such paintings as *Changing Material World and Stable Spiritual World* (1990) (Plate 124) which show that the purity of Buddhist values is contaminated in a consumer society. Here, the Buddha, devotees, and lotus are surrounded by skyscrapers and metallic junk.

Chalermchai's work reminds the viewer of the condition of balance between natural law, ethical law, and conventional law. This balance is important in order to maintain good coexistence, social peace, and decency.⁴

Surface decoration, bright colours, and

⁴Despite Chalermchai's subjects on materialism, morality, and spiritualism, his paintings as commodities are extremely expensive, ranging from 100,000 to 300,000 baht.

finicky detail are particularly characteristic of Chalermchai's later works, such as *Peaceful and Restful Mind* (1990). In this painting, images of sacred figures float weightlessly on fish and conch shells, timeless visions of idyllic peace that can never be attained in reality. Often in these parables, which illustrate virtues and vices in a contemporary setting, overemphasis is placed on details in order to reach the ultimate goal of verisimilitude.

In contrast, some of Panya's paintings are composed of sinuous lines, clever touches of traditional motifs, clashing colours which suggest visual expressions of dynamism, intense conflict, and contradictory ideas. His beautifully painted grotesque images, placed in enigmatic spaces, can be interpreted as subversive signs of the artist's desire to rebel against conventions and fixed values in the Thai art world. In *Struggle* (1981) (Colour Plate 59) and *Two Paths* (1982), for example, Panya employs a paradoxical and enigmatic juxtaposition

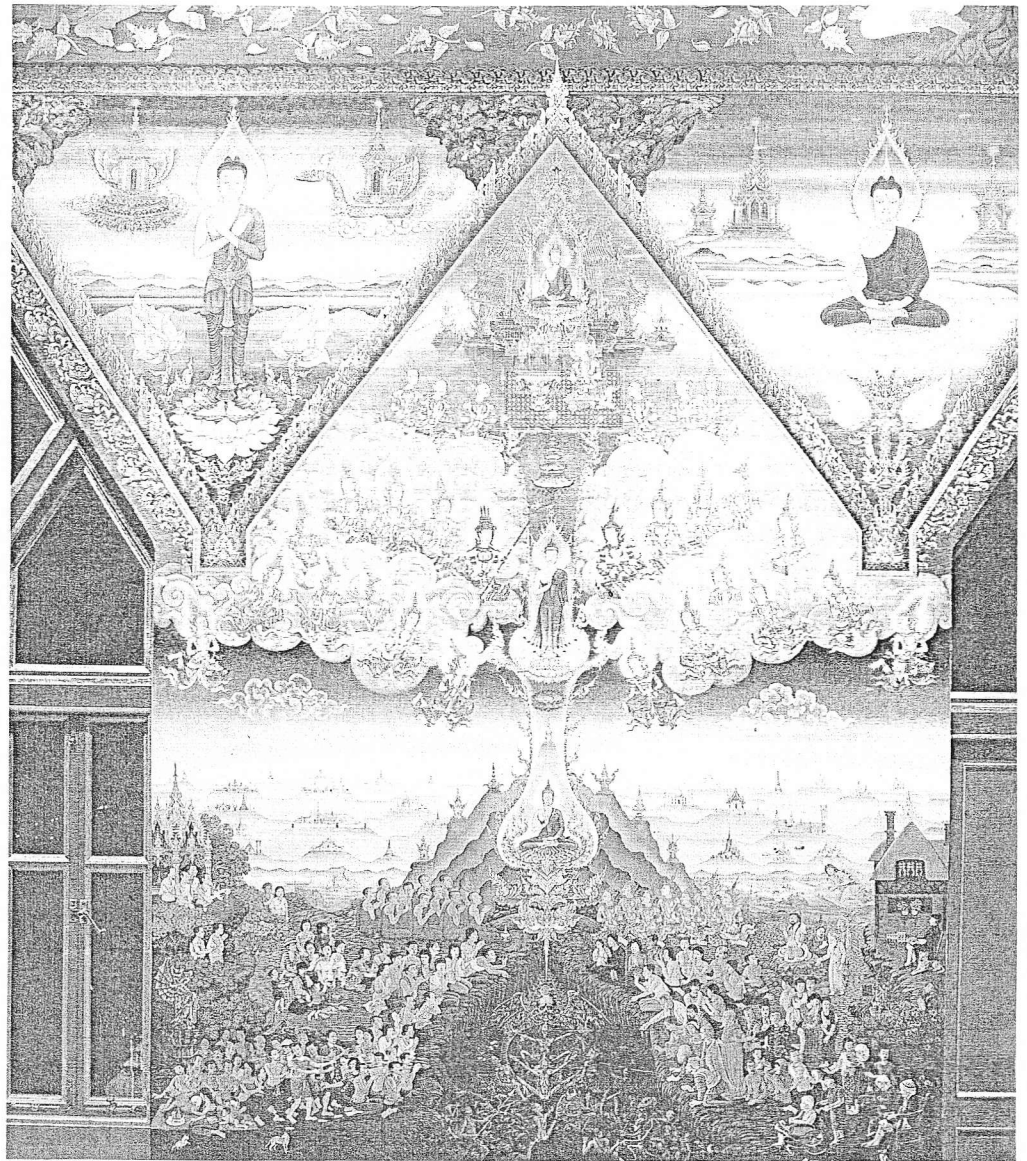
of clashing images to create a labyrinth of speculation. *Struggle*—symbolized by mythological animals (like *naga* and *hamsa*) writhing painfully in a tangle of twisted bodies—is a metaphor of Buddhist teaching to overcome sins and vices by patience and goodness. The work also reveals subtle messages that comment on world politics, neo-colonialism, and societal modernization. The images of raging animals, for instance, symbolize the survival of the powerful: the animals devour one another like Super Powers taking over weaker nations. In *Two Paths*, Panya distorts conventional allegory by depicting the smiling Buddha with feathery hair and large ears. He turns away from vice and evil symbolized by claws, fangs, and piercing eyes.

Between 1984 and 1987, Chalermchai, Panya, and their assistants were commissioned by the London Buddhist Temple Foundation to decorate the interiors of Wat Buddhapadipa (Temple of the Lamp of the Enlightened One) in Wimbledon, London. The project involved painting murals of the conventional subjects of the Three Worlds, the Birth of the Buddha, Nirvana, and the Defeat of Mara. The finished works demonstrated clearly that neo-conservatism reigned supreme, and a sense of revitalization and cultural change was pervasive. The artists managed to replace the idea of ‘the shock of the new’ with ‘the shock of the old’, confirming that the past could be reformed as an ideal to criticize the present. While maintaining traditional concepts and representation in the murals, Chalermchai and Panya nevertheless employed innovative techniques of commentary and exegesis to give allegorical interpretations a multi-layered aspect. In addition, the colours they used are more vivid and clearer than those in ancient temples because acrylic paints and spray colours replaced chalk and tempera. Indeed, the brilliant,

somewhat garish colours create a pulsating rhythm as the viewer is bombarded with areas of vermilion, pink, mauve, cobalt blue, and gold.

To study these murals in the context of post-modern art, one must look at the way allegory is treated, with its implicit suggestion of a contemporary story under the guise of a historical narrative. Chalermchai’s paintings, for instance, usually portray a narrative description in the manner of traditional allegory. However, certain areas suggest dream-like qualities which elaborate on contemporary desire and nostalgic yearning for arcadian fantasy. The scene of *The Buddha Performing the Double Miracle Revealing the Three Worlds* (1984–7) (Plate 125) provides an example. Here, the Buddha is seen performing the miracle by looking in ten different directions, revealing the celestial, human, and the nether worlds. On the left, monks and common people, dressed in Thai costumes, are gathered in a large group. On the right, devotees of different nationalities crowd in front of an English cottage to witness the appearance of the Buddha. Among these attendants are celestial beings, messiahs, rabbis, hermits, archangels, saints, Margaret Thatcher, and punk rockers. In the sky, Indra, Brahma, and angels hover among fluffy clouds to watch the Buddha preaching to his mother in the Tavatimsa Heaven.

In the hands of Panya, allegory becomes a visual labyrinth of reinterpretations: it is neither an outmoded, exhausted device nor an aesthetic aberration. He cleverly reinterprets modern myths, politics, and art through the conventions of commentary and exegesis. Extraneous details, subsidiary images, and the fragmentary are fraught with symbols and messages, both old and new, which typify the incoherent features of art in the post-modern era. His versions of mural paintings at Wat Buddhapadipa are thus



125. Chalermchai Kositpipat and assistants, *The Buddha Performing the Double Miracle Revealing the Three Worlds*, 1984–7, acrylic and spray paint, Ordination Hall, Wat Buddhapadipa, Wimbledon, London. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

full of diverse strategies, including appropriation, hybridization, discursiveness, and allegory. *The Defeat of Mara and Enlightenment* (1984–7) (front jacket illustration and Plate 126), for example, shows Mara Wasawadi, the Evil One, and his army mounted on ferocious animals attacking the enthroned Buddha. As they rush towards the Buddha, their deadly weapons turn into garlands. At the centre, the Earth Goddess squeezes her long hair to

produce water that turns into an ocean, drowning Mara's army. However, Panya does not tell the scriptures and mythologies in a straightforward manner. The meaning is intentionally ambiguous. Certain images are full of parody, irony, satire, and incongruity. Mara Wasawadi, with multiple arms, rides his elephant while his soldiers, on mythological animals, are armed with spears, arrows, automatic machine-guns, and bazookas. Garudas and Yaksa in traditional



126. Panya Vijnthanasarn and assistants, *The Defeat of Mara and Enlightenment* (detail), 1984–7, acrylic and spray paint, Ordination Hall, Wat Buddhapadipa, Wimbledon, London. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

costumes wear gas masks and carry rocket launchers; the two-headed Mouamar Qaddafi and Ronald Reagan ride like the four horsemen from the Apocalypse; the horse from Picasso's *Guernica* screams, while Van Gogh falls off a ladder (Plate 127); Michaelangelo's *Night* is fast asleep while Big Ben is seen in the distance.

Through the works of artists like Preecha, Surasit, Thawan, Chalermchai, and Panya there has been a new focus on revivalist art, a shift which certainly marked the acceptance of neo-traditional Thai art as institution art. This acceptance has been exhibited by the support given to neo-traditional artists by the Department of Traditional Thai Art at Silpakorn University, the Bangkok

Bank, the Thai Farmers Bank, and the Siam Commercial Bank. However, the search for the past is double-edged. On the one hand, the revival of traditions, the revitalization of myths, and the retention of cultural knowledge have offered a way of freeing Thai art from Western influences. The recognition by the new traditionalist painters of a need for deeper comprehension of Thai culture and religion provides a basis for a critique of Thai modern art, which for some decades has been closely linked with Western art. On the other hand, the past can be grossly distorted and made to serve only as an excuse for Thai artists to make decorative simulations of traditional painting.

Painters such as Prasart Seri, Sommai



127. Panya Vijnthanasarn and assistants, *The Defeat of Mara and Enlightenment* (detail), 1984–7, acrylic and spray paint, Ordination Hall, Wat Buddhapadipa, Wimbledon, London. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

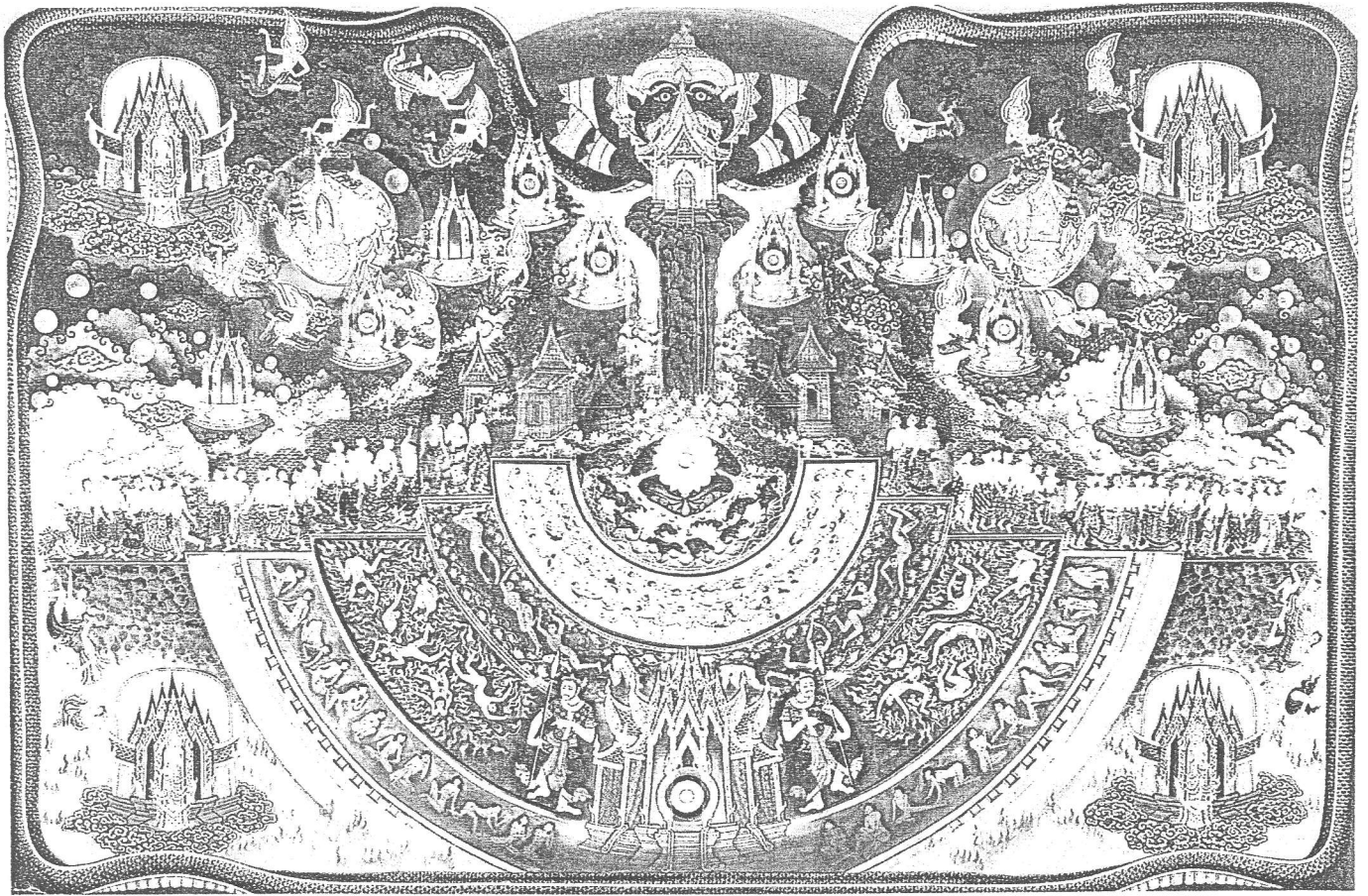
Panbanlaem, and Phayat Chuenyen emphasize old themes, like the Three Worlds of Hindu–Buddhist cosmology, Meru the Axis Mundi, the Eclipse of the Moon, and the Buddha’s Victory over Mara. These painters have no desire to achieve authenticity and originality in the sense of the avant-gardist definition. On the contrary, they are content to

embellish works inspired by the old masters which are revered as markers of national identity. Works by these painters are simultaneously reflections of the anxiety to escape from an industrialized and high-tech society (apart from being beautiful commodities for consumers of Thai art). They embody the hum of Buddhist meditation as well as the numbness of repetition. Today, these painters fit smugly in the niche of institutional art.

Prasart’s *Lotus in the Centre of Trai Phum* (1986) (Plate 128) shows a miraculous scene in Buddhist mythology. The lotus is placed at the centre in relation to heaven, earth, and the underworld. It rises among the mountains, oceans, distant countries, and celestial beings while the damned and demons dwell beneath. Purity is conveyed by the lotus which is not wet by the water or defiled by the mud in which it grows. In Sommai’s *Anantaneta* (1983), a panorama of a landscape is seen as though in the process of metamorphosis. Spiky, thorn-like forms transform into flame-like, threatening serpentine shapes and *kanok* motifs derived from plants. They wriggle and writhe above murky landscape and gloomy sky, symbolizing nature’s threatening force and mystical power.

Some members of the Thai Art ’80 Group have moved towards a new interpretation of neo-traditional Thai art by experimenting with abstraction.⁵ Apichai Piromrak, Thongchai Srisukprasert, and Alongkon Lawwattana, for example, have hybridized traditional Thai motifs and abstract painting to produce some colourful, almost frenetic works. To these artists, allegorical interpretation is consistently associated with the fragmentary, the imperfect, and the incomplete. Apichai’s *26 July 90* (1990) (Plate 129), for instance, shows twisting

⁵These artists formed a separate group called The Thai Group in 1990.



128. Prasart Seri, *Lotus in the Centre of Trai Phum*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 180 cm, Bangkok Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Bangkok Bank.)

mythological images whirling in space. Colourful, fluid lines flow and merge in chaos, invoking unforeseen combinations and unintended images. One may interpret the fragments in this work as symbolizing lust, anger, ignorance, and greed which devour, copulate, and reproduce within life's vicious cycle. In contrast, his series on *The Symbol of Buddhism of Present* (1991) is inspired by the traditional decoration of the Buddha's Footprint as well as modern religious paintings by artists such as Pichai Nirand.

In *The Power of Change in Nature* (1990) and *Zodiac* (1990) (Plate 130), Thongchai used stylized ornamental patterns as metaphors of the twelve zodiacal signs in Thai astrology. The spiral, twisting forms in black, white, and

gold replace the symbolic animals. They vibrate with energy as they struggle in the confined space. However, each abstract ornament has a place of its own: each keeps the other in balance and harmony.

Apart from interpreting cultural traditions in terms of Buddhism and mythology, Thai artists have also interpreted them in terms of regionalism and ethnicity. Many northern artists, Thawan Duchanee, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Kumeye Dechduangta, and Wancharoen Japakang among them, have focused on the revival of Lan Na culture as part of the national heritage. With enthusiastic support from Thawan, the resurgence of Lan Na arts and crafts has taken various forms, including painting, wood-carving, ornamental design, costume, furniture, and architecture. By

129. Apichai Piromrak, *26 July 90*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 300 cm, Bangkok Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Bangkok Bank.)



130. Thongchai Srisukprasert, *Zodiac*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 200 cm, Bangkok Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Bangkok Bank.)



emphasizing the indigenous roots of Lan Na culture, this kind of 'ethnic' and 'folk' art has been rapidly incorporated in the mainstream of Thai art even though in the West it may be categorized as 'community art' or 'marginalized art'.

Prasong Luemuang, a painter from Lamphun and a member of the Thai Art '80 Group, is one such artist who has created invigorating works showing a synthesis of folk art, Lan Na art, calligraphy, automatism, and Western influences. Prasong said that some of his early works were inspired by paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, and Joan Miró. His eclecticism has dissolved the barrier between high art, illustration, and graffiti. *Heaven's Decree* (1987) (Plate 131) and *Festival* (1989) (Colour Plate 60) reflect Prasong's *joie de vivre* of Lan Na countryside far away from the polluted urban areas. Both paintings are

swarming with details as everything is seen equally from the writhing animals to the dancing figures. The subjects are related to fertility, harvesting, and festivities for agricultural ceremonies. Lines and colours are expressed with wonderful freedom, almost childlike in their simplicity. Forms and space are created at will. In *Festival*, a jovial farmer with tattoos, a dancer with extra long legs, and a laughing scarecrow with a scarlet tongue lose gravity and float as if controlled by some omnipotent force. Creatures and writings whirl like hallucinatory visions. At the same time, allegory is treated in fragmentary forms. The laughing fisherman with a huge catch of fish in *Heaven's Decree* can be interpreted as the wrathful god with a red tongue. His flowing red sash may symbolize blood. Like Siva, he dances the song of death while the animals move

131. Prasong Luemuang, *Heaven's Decree*, 1987, water-colour, 180 x 260 cm, Bangkok Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Bangkok Bank.)



rhythmically as though participating in a ritual of destruction. In his solo exhibitions, 'Water Moon' (1990), 'Diary of a Village' (1991), and 'Naam Thip—Pla Thong' [Celestial Water—Gold Fish] (1991), Prasong continued to depict in colourful tempera paintings the whimsical images of upcountry life.

The painters Boonman Khamsaard and Teerawat Kanama, both born in Mahasarakarm in the North-east, have explored themes relating to the indigenous culture of Esan. Boonman's *The Mysterious Belief of the North-eastern People* (1990) is a ball-point drawing of dream-like celestial beings surrounded by mythological figures and scenes from hell. In contrast, Teerawat's *Local Description* (1990) and *Tuleekada* (1991) show idyllic scenes of village life

with its attendant local charms: a wooden hut, rattan, a basket, a sleeping water buffalo, and a mother hen protecting her eggs. A third north-eastern artist, Wichit Apichatkriengkrai, who was born in Korat, depicts melancholic scenes of the North-east in prints such as *The Silent Game* (1988) and *Pre-Festival 06* (1988). In these works, human figures are excluded; instead, objects used in daily activities—waterwheels, stretchers, and wooden toys—are the centre of attraction. These are usually placed on a mound or an island where they seem to take on a life of their own.

Other artists have made pilgrimages to their home towns in the provinces for artistic inspiration. For instance, Den Warnjing, who was born in Ayudhya, acknowledges in his statement in a catalogue that the theme of his work is



132. Den Warnjing, *Spirit*, 1990, tempera on canvas, 180 x 153 cm, Bangkok Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Bangkok Bank.)

based on rural scenes back home where the sun and the water buffaloes smile and the air smells of soil and grass. In *Spirit* (1990) (Plate 132), Den captures an imaginary scene with lively brush strokes, of a farm full of birds, chickens, and fish. Spirit, in this sense, is not just the soul in the human body; it is the lively force evident everywhere in the trees, streams, rice grains, haystacks, and animals.

In addition, group exhibitions such as 'Thai Spirit' (1991) by the White Group and 'Thai Story' (1992) by the Eastern Group have placed emphasis on the roots of Thai culture. Such 'safe' and 'comfortable' themes seem to attract both Thai artists and viewers.

Multiculturalism, Urbanization, and Alienation

The rapid transformation in Thailand from an agricultural to an industrial society has caused a dilemma in the condition and the way of life of the Thai people. There are many aspects of contemporary Thai art which contradict the ideal of national unity and racial homogeneity which the government so actively promotes. The heterogeneous elements in Thai art can be seen in the multi-layered definition of ethnicity (race, language, class, religion, and regionalism). The meaning of Thai-ness may also vary, for example, from being a Thai with Chinese or Indian parents living in Bangkok to being a Thai from Lan Na or Esan. The variety of responses by Thai artists, whether positive or negative, to the urban condition in Thai society can be examined in relation to their reinterpretation of Pop, Expressionism, Environmental Art, Conceptualism, and Media Art.

Pop art, with its emphasis on the imagery and techniques of the mass media, advertising, and popular culture, can be seen as a pivotal movement in the push towards post-modernism. One of its

earliest Thai exponents is Kamol Tassananchalee, who has lived in Hollywood, Los Angeles, since 1969. The effects of the American mass media and consumerism, as well as the effects of living in a society which is fundamentally multicultural, multilingual, and socially polarized, are detectable in his prints and series of mixed media executed in the 1970s. Kamol's art, though, has evolved in many stages.

Kamol has acted as a bridge for Thai artists to move away from the notion of high, autonomous art by freely mixing garish and artificial colours in his subjects related to folk and traditional national popular cultures. In *Artist's Colors: Self-Portraits* (1976), *Handmade Paper with Rollers, Paint Tubes, and Zippers* (1976-7), and *Artist's Colors: Mona Lisa and Van Gogh* (1978-9), Kamol used popular images from art history as well as banal signs and objects, turning them into elements of satire. Simultaneously, his mixed-media prints parody 'heroes' in Western art history as images of their masterpieces are reproduced in prints and photocopies. Kamol seems to be suggesting that if American Pop artists could use mechanically reproduced imagery to replace the authenticity of the brush stroke, then he could make images or photocopies that simulate the works of European masters as well as Pop artists. Therefore, Kamol's images suggest a reverence of the original that, ironically, subvert the aesthetic principles of the original.

In a perceptive review of Kamol's series of *Artist's Colors* (1976), Tricia Crane wrote: 'One composition brings together a self-portrait of the artist, Michaelangelo's *David*, and Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in a tongue-and-cheek, near Pop take-off on artists and self-consciousness. . . . Tassananchalee's works are amusing visual treats, consistently strong compositions which

are never gimmicky' (Crane, 1979).

Kamol also made projects for a series of installations in galleries. Many of his sculptures, such as *Artist's Colors Series IV* (1979), play on the idea of 'space' inside and outside the art world. In a series of outdoor works, among them *Mojave Desert* (1979–80) (Colour Plate 61), Kamol sprinkled over 100 metres of colour pigments on the dried, cracked soil of a desert. The work, which was left as part of the landscape, was enriched by a series of 'happy accidents', the result of a collaboration with the elements of earth and atmosphere in which the artist allowed 'the wind to act as his paint brush on a desert canvas' (Crane, 1979). In 1980, Kamol reconstructed his 'tubes' and 'desert' by spreading heaps of sand inside the National Gallery of Art in Bangkok, an act that harked back to his outdoor pieces in the Californian desert. His exhibition encouraged many local artists to re-evaluate modern Thai art both in content and technique, especially the formalist emphasis on the work as self-sufficient and autonomous.

Although his home is in Hollywood and not Chinatown, Los Angeles, Kamol realized that terms like 'Asian', 'Oriental', 'ethnic', 'minority', 'yellow', and 'Third World' have placed him in stereotypical categories and hierarchies. As an Asian, Kamol belongs to the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, but instead of being dismissed as an Asian American he has tried to reconnect with his roots and Thai culture.

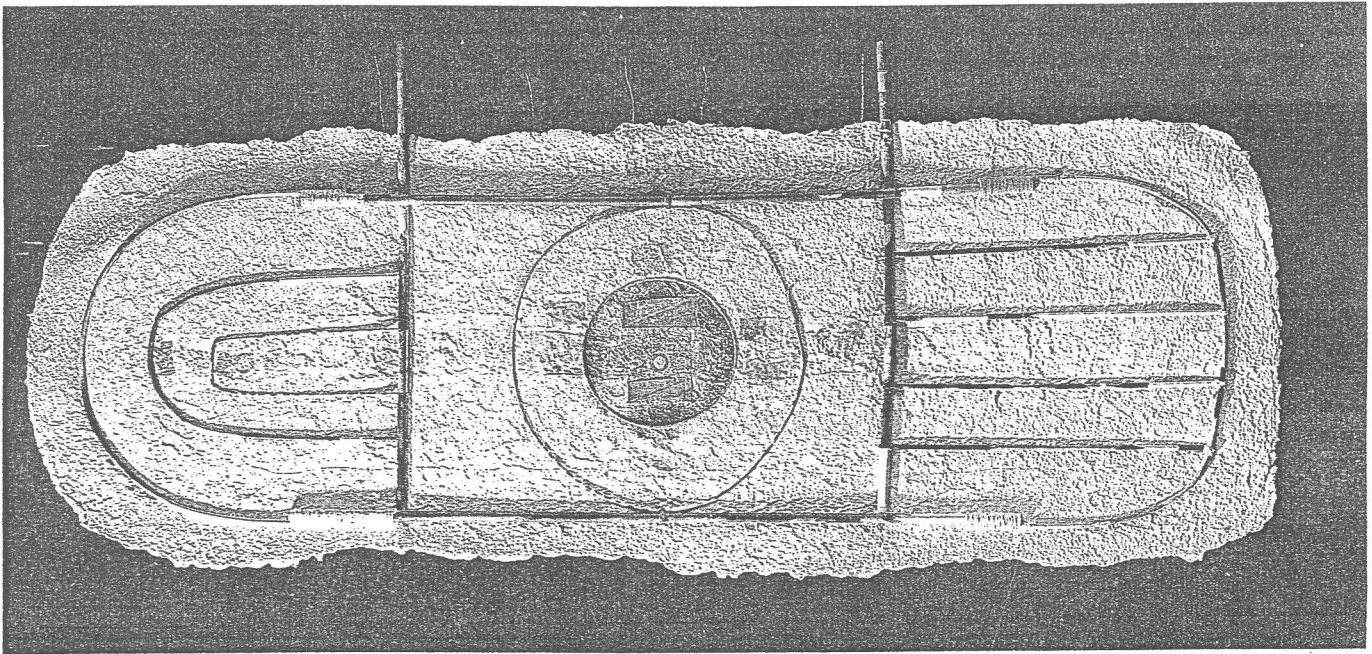
Kamol's *Nang Yai* series⁶ from the 1970s incorporates images of traditional shadow play figures with the *Artist's Colors* series to create a fascinating

⁶Shadow play (*nang yai*, *nang talung*) is a traditional folk art popular in South-East Asian countries, in which political, satirical, and social comments may be hidden in the performance. In Thailand, *nang yai* is performed mostly in the North-east and the South.

combination of new and old, Oriental and Occidental, originality and replication. By mixing traditional images and folk art, he stamped such works as *Artist's Colors with Nang Yai* (1980–1) with a strong sense of indigenous character. Images from epics like the *Ramakien* are printed or glued on transparent fibreglass to suggest 'modern' shadow plays. In *Nang Yai: Self-Portrait*, (1976–84) (Colour Plate 62), a hand-made paper surface is painted in startling colours over a self-portrait print and placed behind a bamboo frame, thus creating a visual pun of the 'shadow play': his face is treated in shadow and light as he stares out from behind the frame. Light shows through in different areas much like a true shadow play. Kamol can be seen as a performer or an artisan whose spirit and magical powers are akin to those of a shaman who makes quotidian objects come to life.

If not for the titles, many of Kamol's mixed-media pieces would be regarded as an interplay of abstract forms and colours. Take for example, *Nang Yai: Buddha's Footprint* (1982) (Plate 133), which consists of an oblong bamboo structure stuck on hand-made paper with two concentric shapes in the centre. Only the words 'Nang Yai' and 'Buddha's Footprint' suggest the double image within this work: the protruding sticks indicate the handles of the shadow play while the group of horizontal sticks on the left are stylizations of the Buddha's toes and the circles at the centre symbolize *dharma-cakka* (the Wheel of Truth).

Kamol has taken a great interest in the pluralist society of America and especially the American Indians. During his frequent trips around the states of Utah and Arizona, he would take time to visit these American (Navajo) Indians as he became fascinated with their culture, arts, and crafts. In *Artist's Colors: American Indians* (1976), Kamol drew an affinity between an American Indian



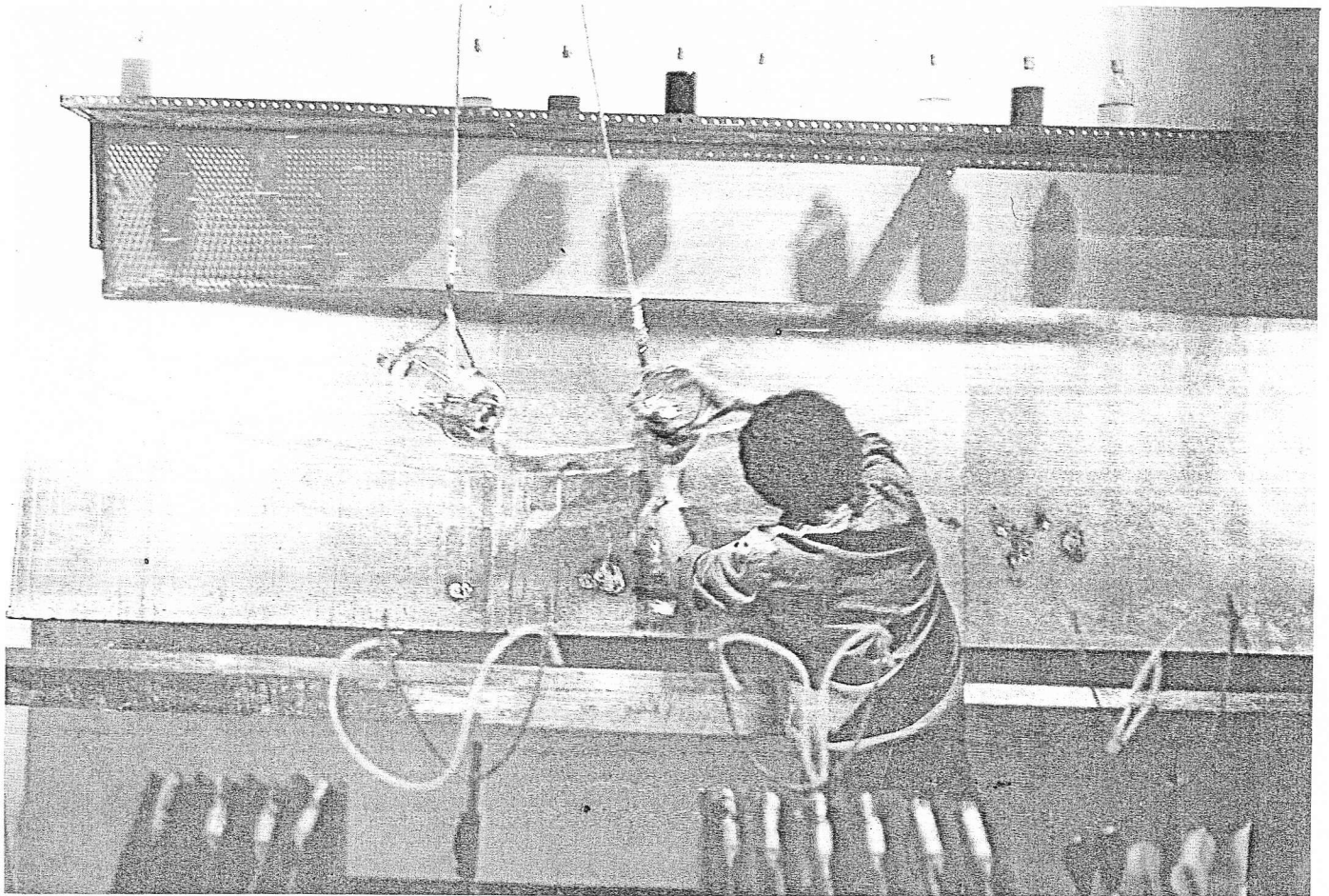
133. Kamol Tassananchalee, *Nang Yai: Buddha's Footprint*, 1982, mixed media on hand-made paper and wood, 67 x 152 cm, collection of the artist, Los Angeles. (Photograph Kitti Amornpatanakul.)

culture and himself by printing his self-portrait with a feathery head-dress next to that of a Navajo chief. An orange question mark placed beside them is designed to puzzle the viewer. Kamol also became inspired by the weaving, stitchery, and sand paintings of the American Indians as well as the great open spaces and mountainous areas in which they lived. In *Arizona-Utah, Nang Yai American Series No. 1* (1986) (Colour Plate 63) and *Turquoise No. 2, American Indian Series* (1989), he created the rough surface of hand-made paper to evoke the cracked soil and craggy rocks of the landscape while feathers, arrows, pictorial signs, and turquoise are used to symbolize the indigenous culture of the American Indians.

Prawat Laucharoen is another Thai artist whose lengthy stay in New York City has made him fully aware of the complexities of race, class, religion, and language in a multiethnic environment. As a printmaker, Prawat has constantly extended the art of printmaking beyond Western traditional formats. In

experimenting with various methods of 'heat stamps' and 'printing without a press', he challenged the conventional notion of printmaking, declaring that he wanted to erase what he knew about it and start afresh.

Recognizing the potentials of fire, chemicals, and mechanical devices in the traditional printing process, Prawat explored the potentials of 'print in space'. He also incorporated performance, happening, and the play of chance within his print installations. For instance, in 1981, Prawat and Dennis Oppenheim, who shared an interest in natural phenomena, accident, and change, collaborated in a print installation called *Launching Station* (1981) (Plate 134). Various chemicals and missiles were 'launched' on to three large printing plates over a period of many hours. In this controversial work, one could see the bold 'act' of artistic creation as Prawat attacked the metal plates with ferric chloride and nitric acid. Drips of acid running in streaks and blotches were regarded as evidence of the process of creativity by chance. The installation



134. Prawat Laucharoen, *Launching Station*, 1981, performance and print installation, New York. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

included acid-bitten copper plates, finished works, proof-states, and photographs of the workshop.⁷

In installations like *Subject To Change Without Notice 1, 2* (1986), Prawat boldly shook the commonplace notions of printmaking. The rigidity and inflexibility of the intaglio technique became a point of departure for the artist to transform the process of printmaking

⁷Prawat's ability to improvise on the spur of the moment may have its source in works by John Cage and Merce Cunningham that also emphasize chance and improvisation. Prawat said that he is very interested in the new poets like John Giorgio and Jackson Marlow and such musicians as Terry Riley, Meredith Monk, film makers Bünuel and Herzog, and South-East Asian folk musicians.

into a sculptural ensemble. Metal instruments of various kinds (burin, etching needle, and roulette) were suspended with strings above copper plates. They were then moved 'at will', every pressure and gesture yielding a different mark on the surface. After numerous 'accidental' marks were created, Prawat made prints from the plates and displayed them as part of the installation.

In 1987, Prawat returned to Thailand to mount a print installation entitled *Japanese Reverse* at Chiang Mai University. In this work, he 'reversed' the tradition of Japanese woodblock printmaking of carving the design in relief. Using intaglio and engraving

techniques, he made deep grooves not on the printing blocks but on chunks of timber from the North, which served as surfaces for printing. Finally, he hand-transferred (rubbing by hand) Japanese characters inscribed on the flat wooden surface to the paper. In the exhibition, these prints were placed beside hand-rubbings of Thai reliefs. The installation was rife with hidden meanings as the word 'reverse' took on multiple layers: it implied a mirror image, the opposite side of the printed image, and cultural differences between the East and the West. A critic wrote: 'Perhaps more to the point, this work epitomizes the reversed side of the artist who is deeply involved in the international art scene but continues his romantic search for the roots and identity (whatever they may be) of his art and culture' (Apinan, 1987a: 31).

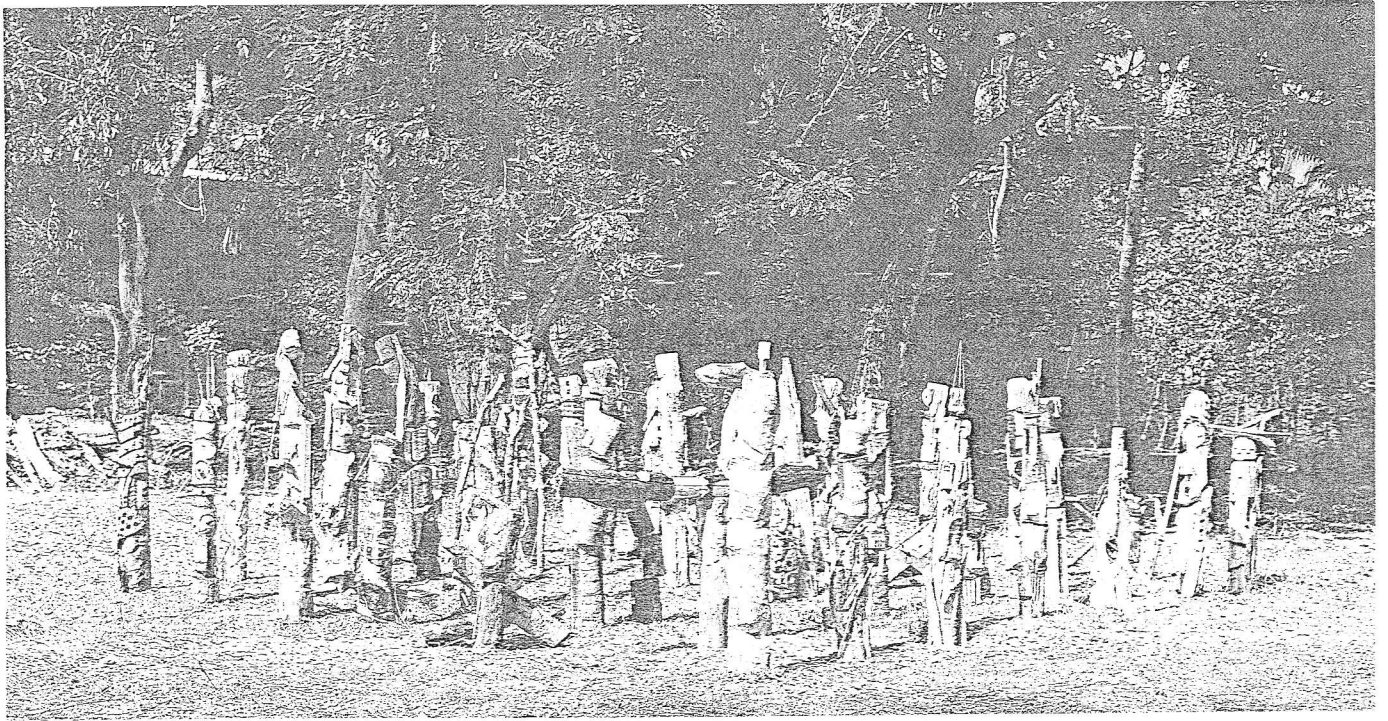
In June 1991, Prawat participated in the workshop and exhibition, 'Print Installation: Seven Interpretations by Thai Artists', curated by Apinan Poshyananda at the National Gallery of Art, Bangkok. Prawat's installation, called *Black + White + Colors (Does Rembrandt Need Colors?)* (1991) (back jacket illustration), which consisted of wood, charcoal, metal, colour pigments, stencils, rubbings, fire, and fume, demonstrated a desire to move away from the dominant Western aesthetic culture. His work became more inward-looking, responding to the local technique of rubbing and the transfer of images without the use of a press. For Prawat, printmaking became like an alchemic ritual (playing with fire, smoke, and coconut oil) with emphasis on process, time, and space rather than on the finished prints.

It should be noted that apart from Kamol and Prawat, there are other Thai artists in the United States who have made three-dimensional works and installations inspired by their roots and

national identity. For instance, Tana Laohakaikul (Austin, Texas) made installations with water, plants, and fish related to the Chao Phya River; Suthat Pinruethai (Baltimore, Maryland) used old scripts and paintings on *khoi* paper in his *Collaboration with the Dead Artists 1, 2* (1988); Rukrit Trivanija (New York City) combined a model of Thai architecture and the first letter of the Thai alphabet in his installation *The First Capital* (1981–2); Wattana Wattanapun (Seattle, Washington) used colourful fabrics from Chiang Mai with hidden images of lust and greed.

By the 1980s, the effects of rampant capitalism were becoming increasingly evident in Bangkok, a city having one of the highest concentrations of population in the world. The latest technologies and the expansion of industry had resulted in congestion, pollution, overcrowding, and a shortage of natural resources. Waves of people from every part of the country continued to flood into the city. The gap between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, had also widened. The more the rich developed materially, the more the poor suffered. To comment on the lack of social co-ordination and integrity, several Thai artists turned to Environmental Art, Media Art, Expressionism, and Conceptualism.

In 1982, Chalood Nimsamer, a leading exponent of Environmental Art, created a series of outdoor sculptures and assemblages at his residence, 'Suan Pratima' (Sculpture Garden), in Nakhon Pathom, relating to the environment as well as the life cycle. The site-specific works in the rural area show his desire for a rustic environment far from the buzzing urban-based consumer culture of Bangkok. At the same time, Chalood's use of found objects (logs, bamboo, cloth, cans, and plastic bags) reflects the 'residues' discarded after rituals, ceremonies, and parties in the Thai



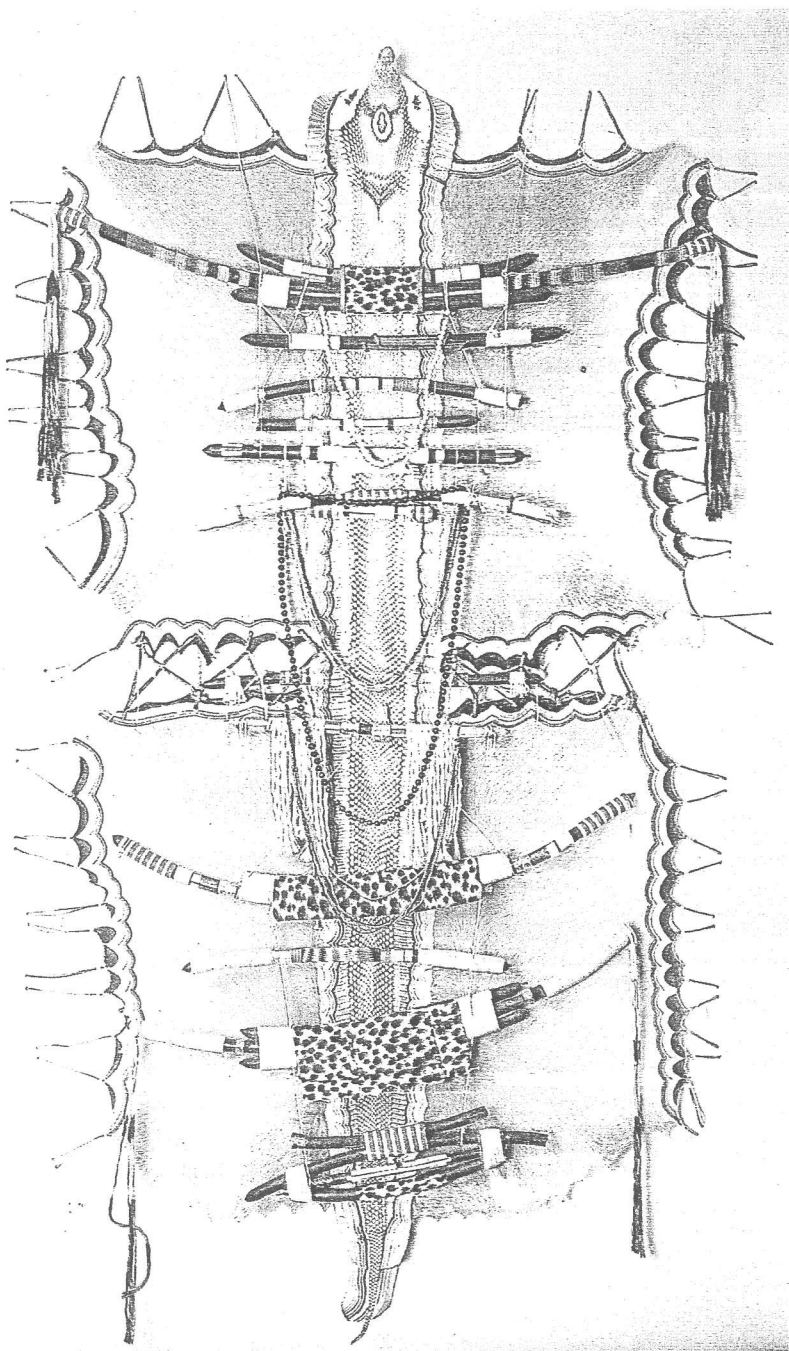
135. Chalood Nimsamer, *Green Sculpture Project*, 1982, mixed media, size variable, collection of the artist, Nakhon Pathom. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

countryside. Chalood's reverence for nature as a life-giving force is particularly apparent in his *Green Sculpture Project* (1982) (Plate 135) where pieces of wood are carved and painted like totem-poles to symbolize the spirits inhabiting the trees. By putting viewers in touch with nature, such works help us to identify with places that would otherwise be seen as provincial and underdeveloped. In *Rural Sculpture 4/2525* (1982), Chalood used his body as part of a living sculpture by standing in the open field, his body tied with bits and pieces of wood, cans, and coconut shells. This work is a statement of the artist's need to participate in the 'pure' rural culture. In contrast, in *Funeral 5/2525* (1982), Chalood added a further dimension by bringing material from the land into the gallery and composing the work within the parameters of that space. Logs and sticks are put together in a neat pile as dolls and 'sacred' objects are placed on top of it to simulate a ritual burning of

the dead. Chalood wished to evoke the idea that sometimes destruction could be creative and death could mean rebirth.

Chalood's use of found objects and assemblages probably did much to inspire artists like Tuan Trirapichit and Vichoke Mukdamanee. Tuan, a painter-printmaker, experimented in mixed media and sculptures in a series called *Outdoor Life* (1983). His *Body 1* (1983) (Plate 136) is a *mélange* of found objects, such as bones, animal skins, plastic, glitter paper, and beads. Tuan freely combined the 'real' and the 'fake' to create an extraordinary mixture of old and new, rural and urban, ritual and commercial. This work can be seen as his depiction of the life cycle where the body after death is nothing more than pieces of bone and dry skin. At the same time, *Body 1* reflects a fetishistic desire of human nature to collect the remains of animals in the forest as hard-to-find commodities in a consumer society.

Vichoke first began experimenting with



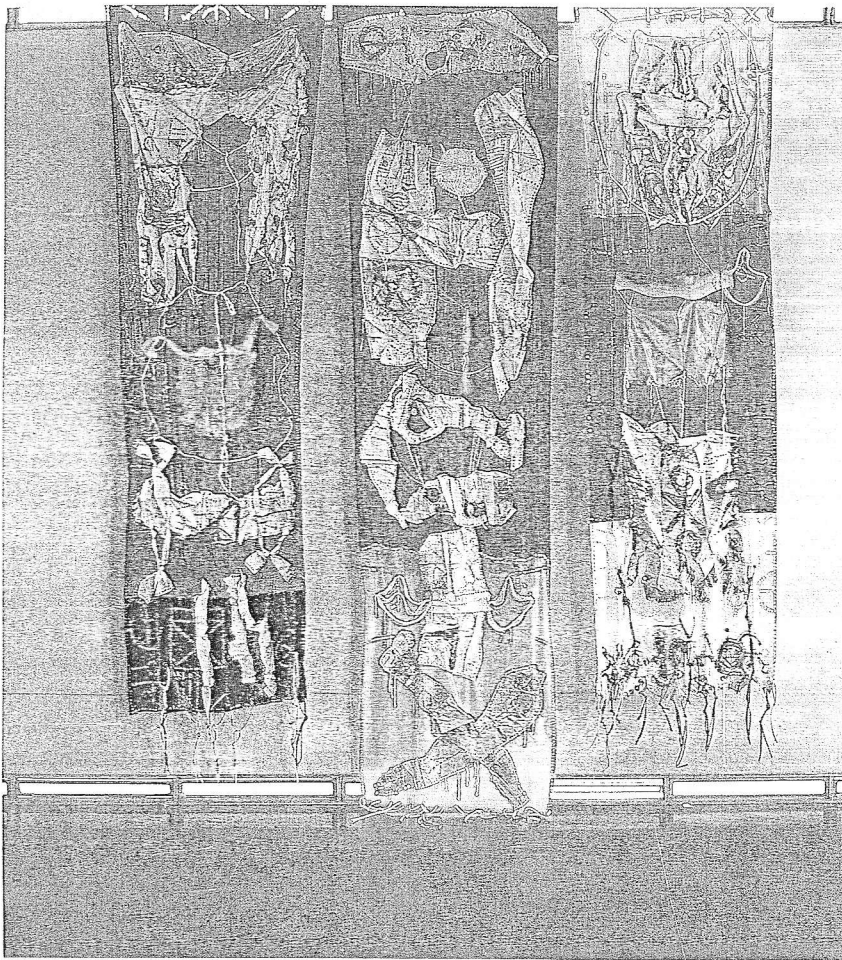
136. Tuan Trirapichit, *Body 1*, 1983, mixed media, 180 x 120 cm, Thai Farmers Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph Kittri Amornpatanakul.)

images of torn rags and rotting plant forms, but his later combine-paintings show a mixture of found objects, synthetic materials, brass, aluminium, and spray paint. His mixed-media works,

Life and Environment (1985) (Plate 137) and *New Symbolic in Modern Existence* (1986–91) exhibit a rich array of man-made textiles that are torn, punched with holes, and burned to symbolize materialism and consumerism. In 1991, Vichoke showed mixed-media works in the 'Art and Environment' and 'Print Installation' exhibitions in Bangkok which are records of events that occurred over a span of time. *Event, Dec 15, 90–Jan 15, 91* (1991) is composed of a wide range of materials—aluminium, cloth, plastic, and pieces of combat uniform—to dramatize everyday situations. Over a period of thirty days, Vichoke recorded daily events by tying and knotting objects on a circular frame. The impact of the mass media on catastrophes such as the Gulf War in the Middle East is reflected in this work. In *Transmutation No. 2/1991* (1991) and *Modern Existence* (1991), Vichoke jolted the viewer into an awareness of the true character of materials too often dismissed as mere rubbish. His eye for seductive colours persuaded us to reconsider objects from which we usually feel estranged.

As an extension to indoor and outdoor installations, some Thai artists have deliberately chosen to work against the forces of the art market by producing temporary and experimental objects that cannot be owned. They also make anti-aesthetic works that show subversive signs towards unique or 'precious' art objects which are considered attractive commodities in art galleries. In this way, Performance, Conceptualism, and Environmental Art by Thai artists can be interpreted as actions against art controlled by the forces of capitalistic speculation. Their work thus takes on some of the indeterminacy of life outside art.

Thammasak Booncherd and Santi Isrowuthakul, activist artists who made images of protest against the American



137. Vichoke Mukdamanee, *Life and Environment*, 1985, mixed media, size variable, Thai Farmers Bank, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Thai Farmers Bank.)

government in the 1970s, are two Thai artists known for their Environmental Art. In one of his various outdoor projects on Samet Island, Thammasak painted his body while lying next to colourful sticks on the sandy beach. He also made projects to paint sections of the woods at Suan Lumpini Park in Bangkok in various colours of red, yellow, and blue. Thammasak wished to take art back to nature by literally colouring the trees with paint. In 1990, he created a site-specific work at the Pramane Ground outside the Grand Palace by sprinkling 20 kilograms of corn and maize in the shape of a peace sign and feeding it to a flock of pigeons

and doves. Although many of his projects are removed from the context of museum and gallery, his ideas have found their way into the gallery through the medium of photography, the written word, and installation. For instance, in his *Free Will* series (1990) at the National Gallery of Art, Thammasak created 'accidental' marks by riding a bicycle along the huge oil-paint splashed canvas while a fellow artist played a violin.

In 1991, Santi made both installation and documentation to fight against environmental destruction. His works such as *Blind Faith* (1991) comment on the many Thai who believe in the supernatural and in spirits inhabiting trees, while others denounce the 'rape' of forests in Thailand. Santi wrapped himself in prints and newspapers against a tree to symbolize the tying of a cloth around the sacred trunk as an act of devotion and worship. In the related installations, rows of nails were stuck on stumps and chunks of wood were carved in the form of *linga*. Santi stated in a catalogue: 'Pains and agony which man has done upon nature can be seen everywhere, with scars and marks left by shameful acts of man. Tree, man's closest friend, has been subject to tortures, cruelty, and shameful acts. This series of work is an attempt to reflect some of the deepest scars of the conscience of those who care for the survival of mankind' (Apinan, 1991d).

Chumpon Apisuk is another artist deeply involved with Conceptualism and Environmental Art. Many of his projects reflect the rapidly changing values of Thai society. In 1984, Chumpon became the Assistant Director of the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, where he and the Director, Chatvichai Promadhattavedi, initiated experimental art shows and concerts under the series 'Waythee Samai' or 'Contemptre' (contemporary theatre). In 1985, 'Waythee Samai' was designed to be an

artistic melting-pot offering Thai artists an alternative work space. The programmes offered opportunities for artists to express both their talents and their frustrations. Writers, poets, artists, and musicians, including Rong Vongsawan, Vanich Charungkitanan, Prasert Chandham, Vasan Sitthiket, Nontasak Panasarathoon, and Surachai Chandimartorn, read and performed impromptu. Performances, happenings, and open-air sculptures prevailed at another 'Waythee Samai' meeting on Kok Sak Island.

During the years 1987 and 1988, Chumpon held three one-man shows called 'Chiang Mai-Bangkok' at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, the Goethe Institut, and the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art. He mixed together genres, techniques, and media in what he called 'happening-pure communication'. Amid an installation of newspapers, rows of chairs, bricks, and junk he performed as a shaman and a mediator, dressed in a red and black cape and mumbling deliriously. During his happenings, Chumpon smashed a mirror, burned objects, and drank pig's blood—all in an effort to communicate that metropolises like Bangkok and Chiang Mai have lost their dignity and pride because of an excessive emphasis on materialism. Chumpon stated that junk pieces and bricks are 'signifiers' and 'communicators' that reflect the deplorable state to which Thai society is succumbing in an age of post-industrialism.

Of Chumpon's happening at the Goethe Institut, a critic wrote: 'Chumpon's "Pure Communication" may not be linked directly with Joseph Beuys's powerful political actions . . . however he has shrewdly adapted Beuys's art-for-society to suit problems nearer to us such as environmental concern about Chiang Mai. In addition, he has maintained the ritualistic characteristics of Thai folk art

in his objects and performance that contrast strongly with the newspaper collages' (Apinan, 1987b).

In 1989, Chumpon participated in the Australia and Regions Artists' Exchange (ARX) in Perth, Western Australia. He also showed at the Perth Institution of Contemporary Art a performance called *Mediact 1* (1989) in which he read blank newspapers while shouting headlines relating to capital investment, social conflict, sex, death, and money. This was Chumpon's attempt to continue his 'happening-pure communication' outside Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Kamol Phaosavasdi, who concentrates on Performance and Media Art, has made installations relating to the deterioration of the environment and degeneration of natural resources such as deforestation and soil erosion. In *Repercussions of the Agricultural* (1990-1) (Plate 138), Kamol made a soil project concerning the imbalance in nature in Thailand caused by capitalist investment in land. Soil and land under cultivation are ruined as property tycoons bulldoze their way to construct condominiums, resort centres, and golf courses. Kamol referred to the soil crisis by appropriating objects like lumps of soil tied in plastic bags with 'for sale' signs, worker's gloves, spades, contracts on land leases, property transactions, and a sign which read 'Thailand is in Your Hand'. The eighteen images of the raised hands (eighteen holes on a golf course) symbolize freedom of speech as well as the power to exploit and overrule.

Prior to his projects related to the soil crisis, Kamol made a site-specific outdoor sculpture entitled *Position and Civilization (Balance)* (1988-9) at the Sixth ASEAN Square Symposium, Liwasang ASEAN, near the Sari Manok area in Manila, the Philippines. The work consists of a half-circular table with six chairs (the number of ASEAN countries) made of stainless steel placed

138. Kamol Phaosavadi, *Repercussions of the Agricultural* (detail), 1990–1, installation, size variable, collection of the artist, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)



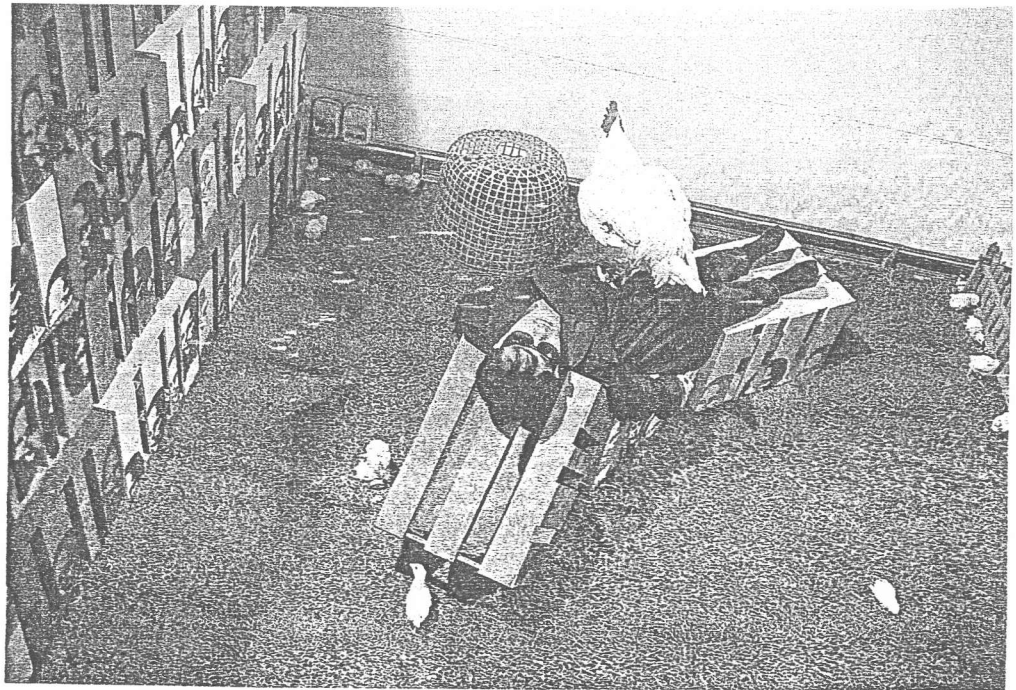
around a tree (later replaced by G. Sidharta Soegijjo's sculpture, *Growth and Prosperity*) providing the shade which makes it possible to sit on the furniture/sculpture. Kamol conveyed the idea that South-East Asian peoples must realize the dangers of industrialization and the need to keep nature (tree) and technology (stainless steel) in balance.

In 1985, Kamol also made happenings and performances to celebrate the anti-aesthetic and death of modern art (Plate 139). This subversive art, which reflected his contrariness and perversity, ranged from shouting in the street to tying himself in a bag. In his *Song for the Dead Art Exhibition* (1985), he installed prints and photocopies of modern Western masterpieces and then obliterated them with slashes of black paint. For Kamol, post-modern art in

Thailand has to start afresh. It has to break with Western art history as well as Thai traditions. He said that post-modernism is against 'classic' modern art that relates to commodities. In his view, Thai artists should be daring and break out of the current art system of galleries, master works, and the idea of artists as 'geniuses' (Apinan, 1985a: 24). Kamol's art, therefore, is never presented in 'neat' packages; on the contrary, his themes are often unpredictable as they achieve the fusion and confusion of life and the daily grind.

Another artist whose talent lies in his use of an unlimited range of materials is Montien Boonma. His works represent different orders of signs and enhance conflicting responses: rural and consumer society; materialistic values and class conflicts; farming community and life in

139. Kamol Phaosavasdi, Happening at the opening of Apinan Poshyananda's exhibition, 'How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock', 1985, Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, Bangkok. (Photograph Apinan Poshyananda.)



urban areas; spiritualism and moral decay; raising water buffaloes in paddy fields and selling sex in brothels. The 'rawness' and paradoxes in Montien's *oeuvre* contain subversive power that undermines the petrified works of 'bank art', 'hotel art', 'lounge art', 'corridor art', and 'lobby art' as a result of commodity production in consumer society. His works comment on the decline of cultural identity and the tensions arising from the urbanization of Thai society and environment determined by technological and material development.

In an exhibition called 'Culture in Danger' Montien wrote, 'My work expresses my feelings towards social life in Thailand which are neither feelings of rejection nor indifference' (British Council, 1982). Despite this comment, his works are filled with dilemmas and paradoxes. *Religion in the Modern World* (1983-4) depicts a row of Buddha images with the heads and upper torsos 'cut off' by corrugated shutters. The dark

shadows that cover the shiny brass surface of the icons simultaneously evoke religion and modern technology. In the paintings *Objects* (1984) and *Life in a New World* (1984), seeds of corn and fruits are metamorphosed into knots and screws. In *A Changing World* series (1984-5), casts of metallic fruits and corn-cobs are placed in a field to evoke the awareness that culture and the natural environment are in danger from pollution and industrialization.

Between 1985 and 1987, Montien's studies at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and the University of Paris 8-Saint-Denis in France allowed him to experiment in Environmental and Conceptual Art. His series called *Symbiose* (*Symbiose d'éléments naturels et de structures esées dans l'imaginaire d'aujourd'hui*) (1986-7) shows the tension between nature (tree) and technology (nuts and bolts). By nailing and screwing metal tips into the bark of a tree, he forces the viewer to confront a kind of 'pain' that

can be seen everywhere in urban life. Furthermore, the meaning of *Symbiose* is enhanced by its location—the garden at the Missions Etrangères de Paris, a Roman Catholic centre for the French missionaries. Montien's assemblages of tree trunks, screws, aluminium, and brass are juxtaposed with religious sculptures of Christ on the Cross, Saint Joseph, and Saint Peter. His junk objects act as catalysts in the environment of a 'sacred' garden, suggesting the enigmatic qualities of both new and old sculptures. However, when interviewed Montien said that he had no intention of making sacrilegious art.

After his return to Thailand, Montien began to explore the power of human activity at a certain stage of social development. The themes of his works focus on the condition of Thai society caused by modern capitalistic production and consumption: the imbalance between production and consumption, labour and capital, and agriculture and industry. Forms and materials that populate both the urban and rural environment are combined to create images that reflect the results of consumer capitalism in the culture of a newly industrialized country.

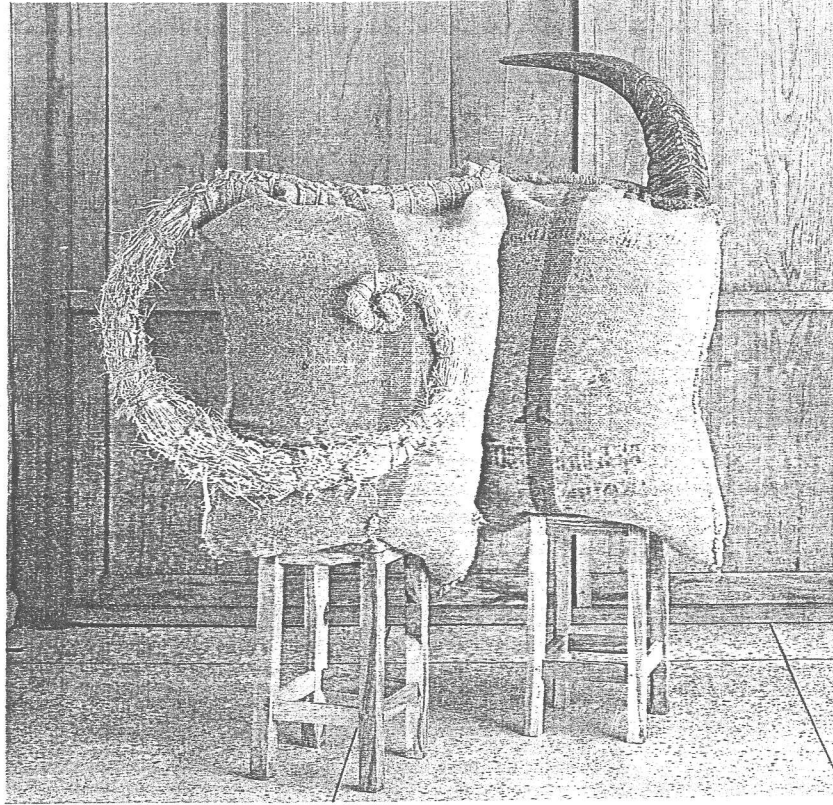
Montien has maintained an uneasy balance between art and junk, aesthetic and kitsch. His solo exhibitions, 'Story from the Farm' (1989) and 'Thai-iahT' (1990), comment on the discrimination and inequality of prosperity between the city and the countryside which leads to social discontinuity. Found objects that are partly integrated into his work challenge the viewer to seek their underlying meaning. These works also act in the gap between art and life. Often the found components are fully appropriated and cease to be that which they originally were and become materials of art or take on other forms. At other times, they are used to relate directly with primary sources and raw

materials such as dry straws, soil, wax, cement, and buffalo hides.⁸

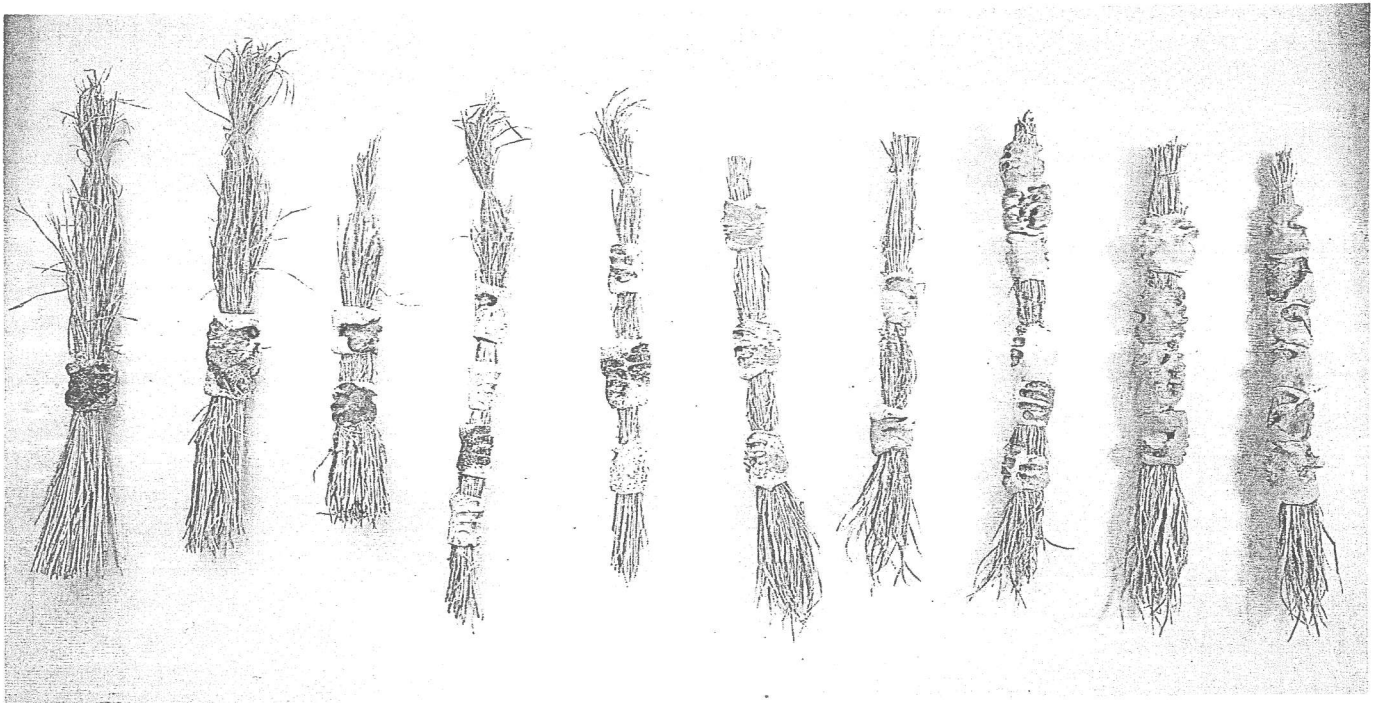
In works like *A Pair of Water Buffaloes* (1988) (Plate 140), *The Story of Metamorphosis in the Farm* (1989), and *Group of Primary Forms* (1989), energetic assemblages of materials—feathers, unhusked rice, horn, leather, and baskets—are tied, sewed, and knotted together to give a new meaning to everyday objects. Associational and metaphorical concerns in Montien's works are conveyed through simple forms such as two sacks of rice, straws, and a horn balanced on two stools to suggest a pair of water buffaloes. The subject further reminds us of the favourite animals used in agriculture, especially in rice production, which is one of Thailand's leading exports. In *Manual Activities: Handprints and Straws* (1989) (Plate 141) and *Stupa* (1990) (Plate 142), tension is established between the reading of a single fragment and the reading of the whole image. Moulds of hands symbolize the labour of farmers and labourers who are the backbone of the country—the instruments of production which repeatedly accumulate into labour. (Other instruments used by Montien include hand thrashers, ploughs, spades, and scoopers.) The manual activities of the hands change roles as farmers give up their land and move to the metropolis in order to become labourers at building sites. At the same time, the hands and the metal rods—bent in the shape of a stupa—show the unifying power of the masses who believe that serving Buddhism is a form of merit-making. Moreover, the moulds of hands—made individually in baked clay and cement—emphasize the potential of

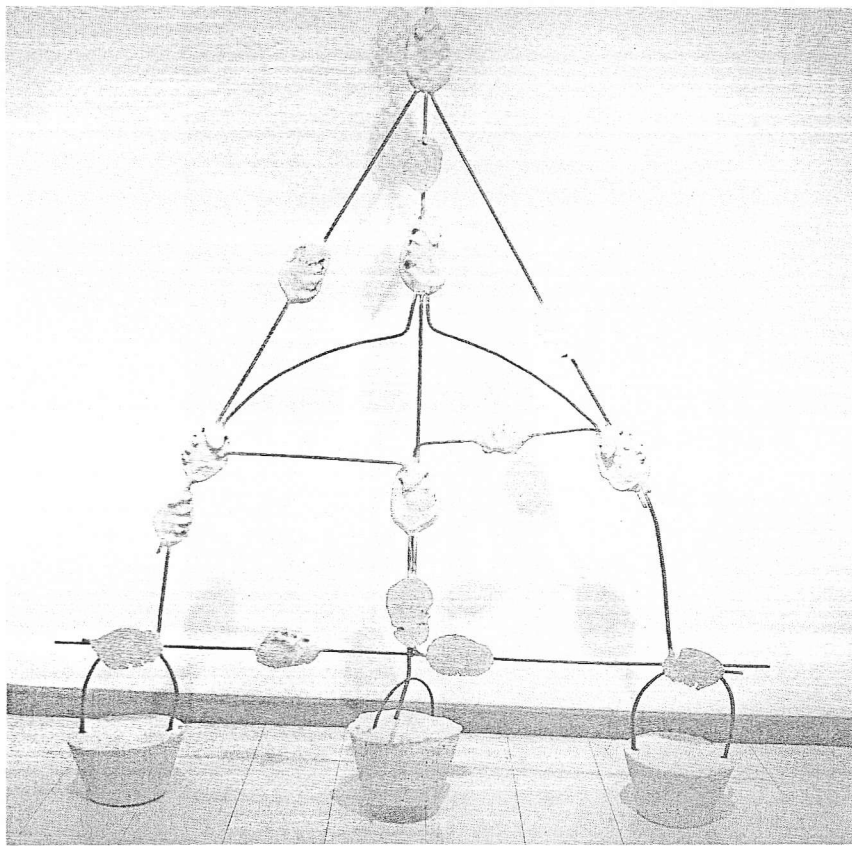
⁸It is possible that Montien was inspired by European artists such as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Mario Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Giuseppe Penone, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, and Bill Woodrow.

140. Montien Boonma, *A Pair of Water Buffaloes*, 1988, unhusked rice, sacks, straw, horn, stools, 140 x 100 x 70 cm, Visual Dhamma Gallery, Bangkok. (Photograph Kitti Amornpatanakul.)



141. Montien Boonma, *Manual Activities: Handprints and Straws*, 1989, white cement, straw, 117 x 355 cm, Visual Dhamma Gallery, Bangkok. (Photograph Kitti Amornpatanakul.)





142. Montien Boonma, *Stupa*, 1990, cement, metal, 150 x 60 x 30 cm, Visual Dhamma Gallery, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

manual activities in an age of mechanical reproduction.

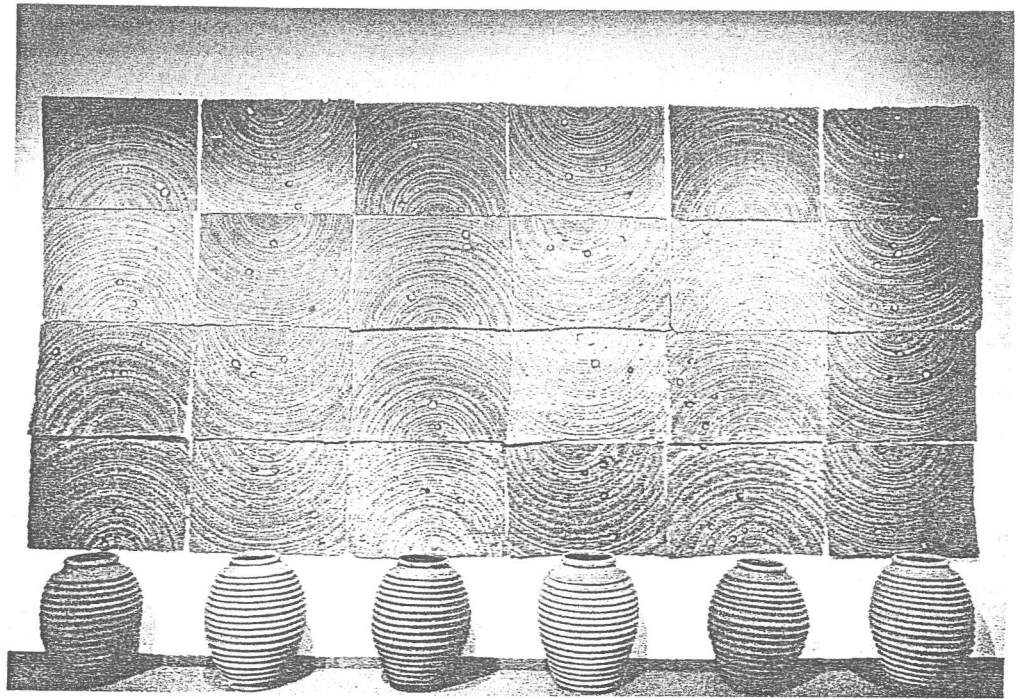
In works such as *Stupa and Boxes of Washing Powder* (1989), *Candles Paintings: Full Moon* (1991), and *Water 1991* (1991) (Plate 143), Montien has experimented with various kinds of materials, including soil pigment, sand, charcoal, wax, indigo, washing powder, and containers of 'Breeze' and 'Fab'. The use of the Buddhist architectural forms (*stupa*) stemmed from his distaste of the growth of concrete jungles which have rapidly replaced religious and historical sites in urban areas. In contrast, the series of *The Greats from the West and the East* (1990) aims at the metaphor of the fundamental East-West polarity and its dissolution. Such work implies that the antithesis between the 'Western man' and the 'Eastern man' should be eliminated in

order to create greater unity and understanding in the world.

Venus of Bangkok (1991) (Colour Plate 64) shows Montien's sharp and witty deployment of found objects to comment on the social problems of the fast-growing 'City of Angels'. The migration of masses from the provinces to Bangkok, in the hope of finding better work, has caused an increase in unemployment, crime, drug-taking, disease, and prostitution. *Venus* is symbolic of a virginal girl from the countryside led astray by the bright lights of the big city. From working in slums and building sites she upgrades her profession to maid, manicurist, waitress, barmaid, go-go dancer, call girl, masseuse, and prostitute in rapid succession. Finally, she ends up in a heap like shattered debris. The bucket of cement is the symbol of her sexual organ. It is dry, rusty, and battered; inside it is painted red and shocking pink.

In a society full of loneliness, anxiety, and alienation, other Thai artists (apart from Montien) have taken an interest in expressing the theme of estrangement. They have interpreted Bangkok as a devourer of souls, a place of faceless people and of artificial distractions. They have turned to the human body as the vehicle to reflect sorrow, loneliness, anger, and suppression. The Thai woman painter, Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit, for example, has created a series of paintings and prints on the theme of city life wherein the faces of city dwellers are presented as masks lit by jarring contrasts of red, acid green, and brilliant yellow. In *City Life* (1983), *Lonely People* (1984), and *Bangkok by Night* (1989) (Plate 144), she captures the rapid pulse and jerky beat of Bangkok by night: its disposable and superficial style, its fleeting social encounters, and its impersonal transactions. In the nervousness of big city culture, people chat at parties without listening, men

143. Montien Boonma, *Water* 1991, 1991, soil pigment on *sa* paper, terracotta jars with smoke and soil pigment, 380 x 450 x 40 cm, collection of the artist, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)



144. Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit, *Bangkok by Night*, 1989, oil on canvas, 100 x 150 cm, Sombat Gallery, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the Sombat Gallery.)

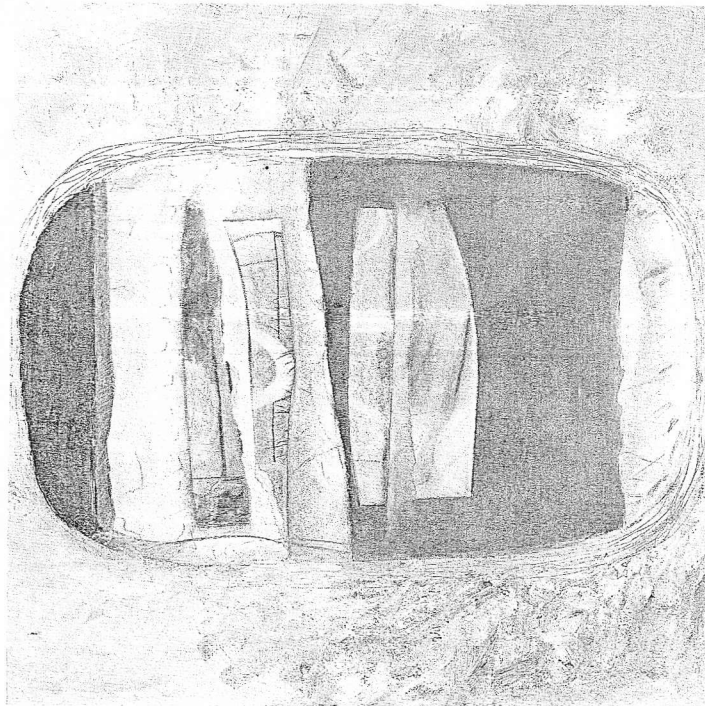


look and women look back with the tell-tale gaze of watchers. Sriwan is also concerned to reflect the status of women in Thai society, where sex and gender have become increasingly important social issues.

In the Thai art scene, which is dominated by male artists, the use of lush, sensual patterns and decorative images is often regarded as 'weak' and 'feminine'. Apart from Sriwan, few Thai women artists explore the potential of the female body and feminism as subject-matter. Pinaree Sanpitak is known for her mixed-media works which often include a combination of paint, crayon, ink, photography, collage, fibre, and pattern. Innovative and adventuresome, Pinaree has explored the symbols of nature, gender, and Oriental pattern. In her solo exhibition at Silom Art Space, Pinaree wrote: 'Women have basic roles—as a daughter and/or wife and/or mother. I do not yearn for the greater glorification of womanhood, though I do think every

woman has the right to enjoy such yearning.' One of her favourite motifs is the egg, an explicitly female symbol. In *Being Imposed Upon* (1988), an egg is seen embedded in the bloated belly of a pregnant woman. In *The Egg That Wouldn't Hatch* (1990) (Plate 145), the oval shape symbolizes fertility, womanhood, and sexuality. Both works direct the viewer's attention away from the 'male gaze', where women are often contextualized as possessions or sex objects. At the same time, Pinaree confronts the urgent social issues which concern Thai women today: Why wouldn't the egg hatch? Was it misogamy, misandry, misopedia, birth control, sexual perversion, or fear of Aids?

Another woman painter who is well known in the Bangkok art scene is Somboon Phuandorkmai. Somboon has exhibited with the Vane Group and the International Women Art Exhibition where she concentrated on the theme of

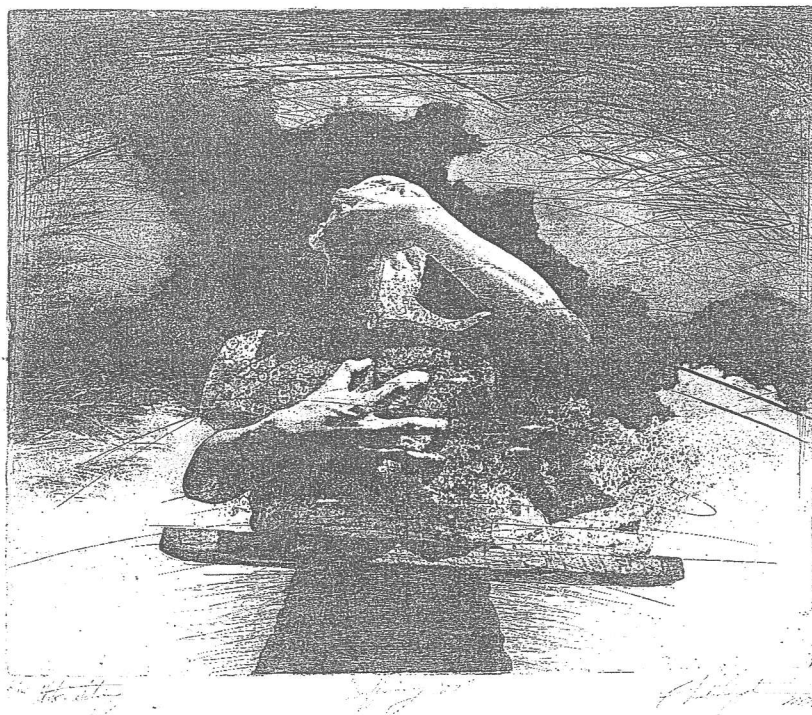


145. Pinaree Sanpitak, *The Egg That Wouldn't Hatch*, 1990, mixed media, 70 x 70 cm, Silom Art Space, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

social injustice and sexual discrimination. Many of her paintings relate to social protest as they portray tragic figures, frequently women in mourning or children screaming in pain. For instance, *Dinner for Men, Tears for Women* (1991) shows a nude female reclining on a plate waiting to be devoured by lecherous men. In *The Have-nots* (1991) and *The Faith We Share* (1991), Somboon paints a starving mother and child begging and scavenging for food by the high-rises in the city of Bangkok.

The use of the artist's self to stamp his personality on the anonymity of society has often been grotesque and violent. Kamin Lertchaiprasert, for one, has used photographs and etchings to portray self-portraits and contorted images in a dream-like setting. His photographs, like *Pressure No. 3* (1983) and *Alone* (1983), evoke a sense of isolation as a lone

figure (sometimes with a mask) is depicted in front of an empty townscape. His prints, such as *Suffering No. 7* (1985) (Plate 146), *Self-Portrait* (1985), and *One-Self* (1985), reveal the schizoid and depressive personality of the artist—his aloofness, nervousness, and emotional distance—as a vulnerable figure full of emotional pain depicted against the dark surrounding area. Kamin said that he was inspired by the Austrian artists Egon Schiele and Arnulf Rainer, both of whom had produced self-portraits: 'The feelings of loneliness, However, he managed to convey in his works personal experience of loss and pain. Kamin wrote about his self-portraits: 'The feeling of loneliness, painfulness, and depression have always been buried in my mind all the time, owing to the environment and the experiences gained in the past such as



146. Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Suffering No. 7*, 1985, photo etching, 75 x 88 cm, collection of Somporn Rodboon, Bangkok. (Photograph Kitti Amornpatanakul.)

the loss of my mother due to [an] accident . . . these experiences have deeply affected my attitudes and imagination, given impetus to the recording of love, grievance, and suffering, which seems to be the only way of expressing that which I cannot express in words' (Silpakorn University, 1987).

In the etching *1990–2990* (1990), the image is easily read. It is Kamin's self-portrait in a Superman T-shirt and underwear being crucified. Next to him is the ape man who symbolizes the primordial force of creation. Kamin has intimated that the work (ape-artist) illuminates what the artist (represented by the suffering Superman-Christ) stands for. This narcissistic portrayal of the artist also reflects the urge to be reborn with fresh creative imagination. After his solo show, 'Gaw Ery Gaw Gai' (1991), Kamin produced a series of photographs and poems about himself seen as an isolated figure wandering aimlessly in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and New York.

Chirasak Pattanapong and Paisan Thirapongvisanuporn, both graduates of the Thaiwichitsilpa Vocational College (Thai Academy of Fine Arts), began to exhibit in the 1970s with a group of friends who became known as the Vane Group.⁹ They showed surrealist-inspired paintings and poems that were both fearsome and macabre. Their philosophy departed from both the 'art for art's sake' camp and the new traditionalist painting. Their works, instead, are characterized by a combination of images of absolute disorientation inspired by Giorgio de Chirico, the Surrealists, Käthe Kollwitz, as well as the political upheavals besetting Thailand. The result is a synthesis of what may be termed Social Surrealism. The Vanes aimed to reflect a

society in which human lives are sunk in distress. Consequently, their works lack beauty and show the side of life that Thai people avoid: inhabitants in various states of self-destruction, estrangement, suffering, and sorrow.

Chirasak's *Sad Song of the War* (1981) and *The Outcry of Time* (1982) (Plate 147) draw on surrealist devices, especially Dali's nightmarish scenes, by juxtaposing images of rotting human forms and carcasses in enigmatic space with distorted perspectives. The subjects relating to torment, wounds, and death are reminders of the massacres during the October Revolutions of 1973 and 1976. The emasculated figures are beginning to lose their human form. In the intense state of anxiety and despair, they become less real than the environment and the loss of identity becomes death. In *City Life and the Have-Nots* (1982) and *The Breath* (1986), Chirasak depicted corpses peeled and hung to dry, foetus-like figures in cocoons wrapped against metal, and suffocating faces (sometimes self-portraits) gasping for air with others using oxygen masks in the city of rot and pollution. In the same vein, Paisan painted cut up torsos of screaming peasants, beggars, and urbanites in such works as *I Can't Take It Anymore!* (1982) and *Music, Lives and Peasants* (1982).

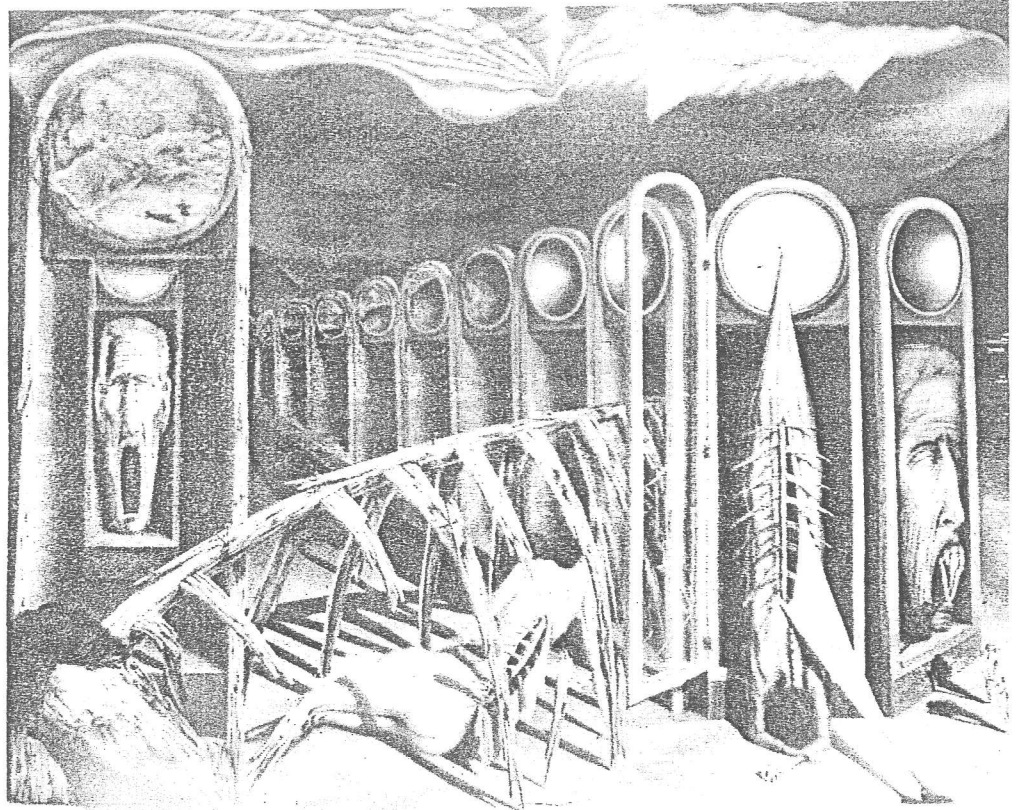
Apart from the Vane Group, members of the Earth Walker Group have experimented in performance, happening, and Media Art to reflect suppression, corruption, and anxiety.¹⁰ In a paradoxical way, these artists see the negative aspects of their art as providing a positive response to a negative, entropic situation in Thai society and its art scene.

Vasan Sitthiket is a poet-painter-happening artist whose anti-institutional

⁹The Vane Group held four group shows in 1978 (Ratchburi), 1980 (the Goethe Institut), 1982 (the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art), and 1983 (the Visual Dhamma Gallery).

¹⁰The Earth Walker Group held four group exhibitions at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art and Koh Sak in the period 1985–7.

147. Chirasak Pattanapong,
The Outcry of Time, 1982,
 oil on canvas,
 120 x 200 cm, collection
 of the artist, Bangkok.
 (Photograph courtesy of
 the artist.)



work has made him a strong protagonist of the deprived and marginalized in Thai society. Inspired by the Dadaists, the German Expressionists, the Fluxus, the Neo-Expressionists, as well as local socio-political events, Vasan has consistently portrayed man (sometimes himself) as an existentialist outsider. In his powerful poems and short stories, he invariably characterizes a profoundly insecure schizoid personality in an alien environment indulging his tendency to isolated anti-authoritarianism. To him, Bangkok is just a big melting-pot of anxiety and alienation. Reacting to a sick culture that breeds apathy and nausea, Vasan made works that drew on the negative aspects of life. He depicted anonymous crowds in air-conditioned department stores, malls, and fast food outlets. In 1984, he wrote his 'Neo-Dada' manifesto, which accompanied the

installation of newspaper cut-outs and paintings of starving, emaciated figures at the Ruang Phung Gallery. A section of Vasan's poem in this show, called 'Fate of the Urbanites' (*Chatakam khong khon muang*) (1984), translates:

A city with many faiths
 A city where monks speak Pali
 A city where *dharma* is reciting by heart
 A city which is advised by brahmins
 A city where law is written by criminals
 A city which is full of beggars
 A city where people only work to survive
 A city which is full of beautiful people
 A city which is full of high-rises
 A city where women show their upper legs
 A city where the aged are forgotten
 A city where art belongs to the genius

A city where garbage covers the
footpaths
A city which is full of impossible
dreams

A city where deception flourishes
A city where truth is a lie.

Vasan's subjects of alienation in a consumer society have been published in booklets such as *Khon mai mee samong* [*The Brainless Person*] (1984), *Chotmai thung chone* [*Letters to Criminals*] (1985), *Khon miti deaw* [*The One-dimensional Person*] (1988), and *Khon na seed* [*The Pale-faced Person*] (1988), with such Nietzschean themes as anti-institutionalism and the view that anarchy is creative and death is rebirth. In 1985, he and Paisan Thirapongvisanuporn of the Vane Group, mounted a joint exhibition called 'Sickness Age'. Vasan felt that people were so tied up with the insecure social system that they no longer appreciated the meaning of life. He wrote: 'In this "age of sickness", we maintain silence, bottling the expression, but to relieve the feeling through reading or watching violence and sex. . . . In a world in which material provision means security, we are chasing our own shadows' (Vasan, 1985).

For Vasan, in this day and age the topic of discussion is not about sexual roles, but rather, how to get sexual satisfaction. He presented controversial prints, paintings, and painted wooden constructions of erotic couples copulating like grappling dogs. He wrote poems on the increasing number of gays, lesbians, transvestites, bisexuals, and prostitutes in Bangkok. He commented on a society where sex is freely bought and sold, by writing sarcastic rhymes such as *khon chon kin khuay khon ruay kin hee* (the poor eat cocks, the rich eat cunts). Although the sentence was intended to be offensive, he believed it reflected the status and mentality of a large number of Thai men and their treatment of women

during their nightly adventures and escapades in bars, cocktail lounges, massage parlours, brothels, and motels.

Vasan also created a series of woodcuts on the theme 'Alienation and Melancholy', and made happenings that included screaming in the street and walking up and down the escalator in the shopping arcade at Mahboonkrong Centre with the signs 'up' and 'down' and commodities attached to his body—until he was removed by security guards. Such an act was a total rejection of social values, the world at large, and even himself. His reaction to poverty, malaise, cruelty, and violence, stemming from the economic enterprises and aggrandizement of the Super Powers, have led him to write nihilistic poems blaming the leaders of both capitalist and communist camps (Vasan, 1988a: 40). One poem, written in the style of haiku, translates:

Take a hydrogen bomb
Mould it into a dildo
Stuff it up Reagan's ass
Gorbachov groans tremulously
The head of a nuclear pushing in-out
in his mouth
Thatcher jerks in spasms
Napalm spreading inside her womb
A sexual desire.

Although Vasan expressed a wish to make art that was pleasing to the public, he felt that as long as the social structure was riddled with inequality, corruption, and injustice, his work would necessarily remain a reaction against those elements. To portray his feelings, he used the anguished human figure in various disturbing moods, often depicted in a coarse, expressionistic manner. The figure is not a universal man but a symbol of a Thai who is full of rage, distress, and moroseness. Sometimes words are incorporated to add specific meaning and emotion to the work. His 1990 solo show at the Alliance Française, entitled 'Beautiful Nightmare', comprised

paintings and woodcuts depicting images of a man under extreme pressure. The titles of the works—*Nothing in a Man's Head, but Shit!*, *All of Us like to see a Fucking Show*, and *What kind of Cock do You like?*—fully express Vasan's oeuvre. In the woodcut *Man Who Loves to Kiss His Feet* (1990) (Plate 148), the artist does not imply a fetishistic habit, but rather, man's irresistible impulse to 'kiss', 'lick', and 'suck up' to those in power in order to achieve some goal.

In 1991, Vasan filled four enormous rooms at the National Gallery with large oils on canvas in a solo show called 'Inferno'. Although Vasan said his inspiration for the show came from reading the *Trai Phum*, which describes in detail the horror and suffering of sinners in hell, his inferno is not a place that resembles hell in the past or future but is the present hell on earth. These iconoclastic paintings (Plate 149) reveal a nexus of bad deeds, violent acts, and *karma* of all sorts of sinners, including

soldiers, monks, police officers, ministers, mafia members, bankers, billionaires, teachers, students, artists, journalists, lawyers, judges, tyrants, racists, social workers, merchants, disc jockeys, village scouts, advertisers, and doctors. The ragged, pin-headed figures, painted with bold outlines, jerk and collide in an arena of violence. The following are some excerpts (translated from the Thai) which were scribbled on the canvases:

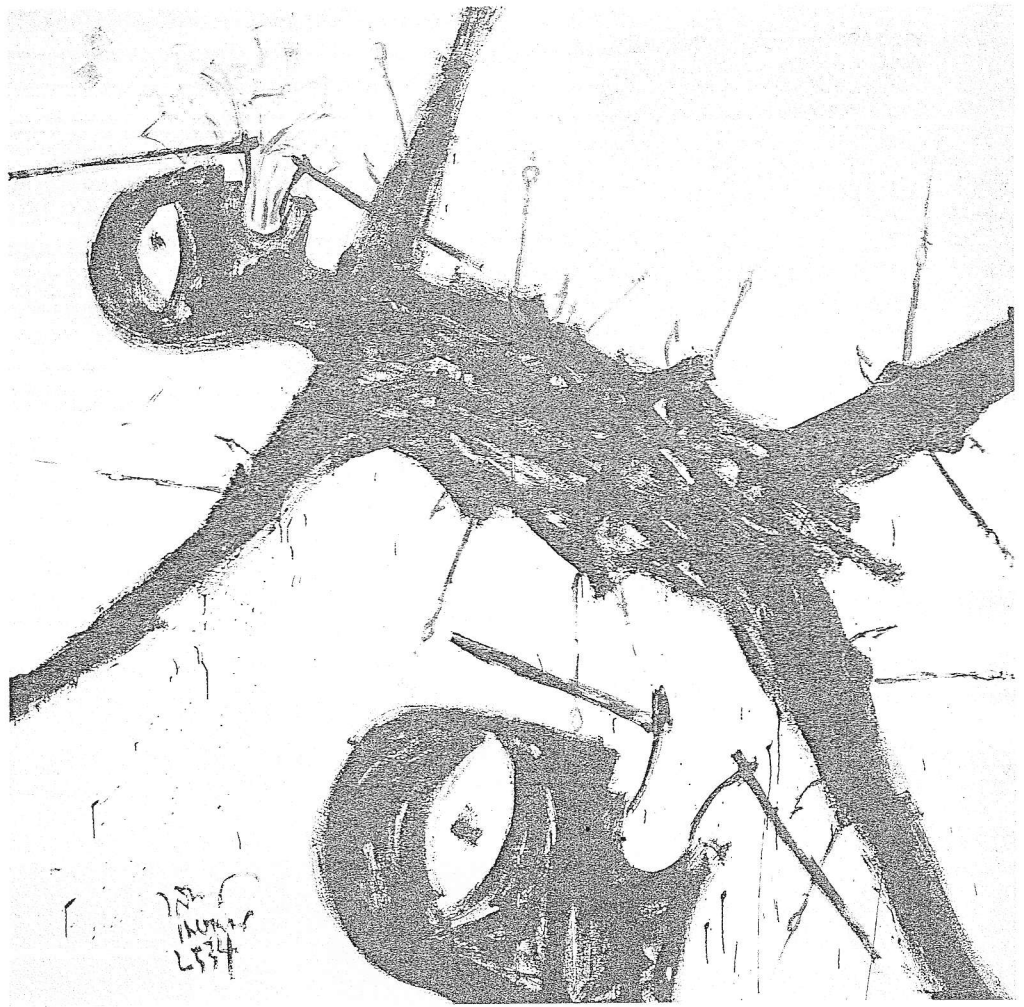
Sinners are narrow-minded soldiers, untouchable. No one can either criticize or be allowed to be patriotic. They will eat their own mothers, fathers, and relatives until their bellies are broken by death.

Sinners are commanders who kill students—farmers—workers—freedom fighters, protecting their power, doing all kinds of cruelty. They will swim in salty currents, having lotus and sharp leaves cut them into pieces, hotly pained with torment until death.



148. Vasan Sitthiket, *Man Who Loves to Kiss His Feet*, 1990, 50 x 60 cm, collection of the artist, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)

149. Vasan Sitthiket, *Sinners are stingy billionaires, never enough, never full, stir destroy mother earth by their business, desert other livings. Their bodies will be hooked and hanged in the sky. Rapidly devouring money until death and reborn for thirty kalpas*, 1991, 210 x 210 cm, private collection, Bangkok. (Photograph courtesy of the artist.)



Sinners are monks who get stuck in fame, *dharma* ignorance, lack of essence, admiring faked world-happiness, crazy for power. Their mouths will be poured with shit, they will be hit to death by cudgels.

Sinners are representatives, corrupting the country, swallowing lands, ruining forests. They will be cut into pieces, fried in boiled oil and their flesh eaten till they die. The wind blows them to be born again and again.

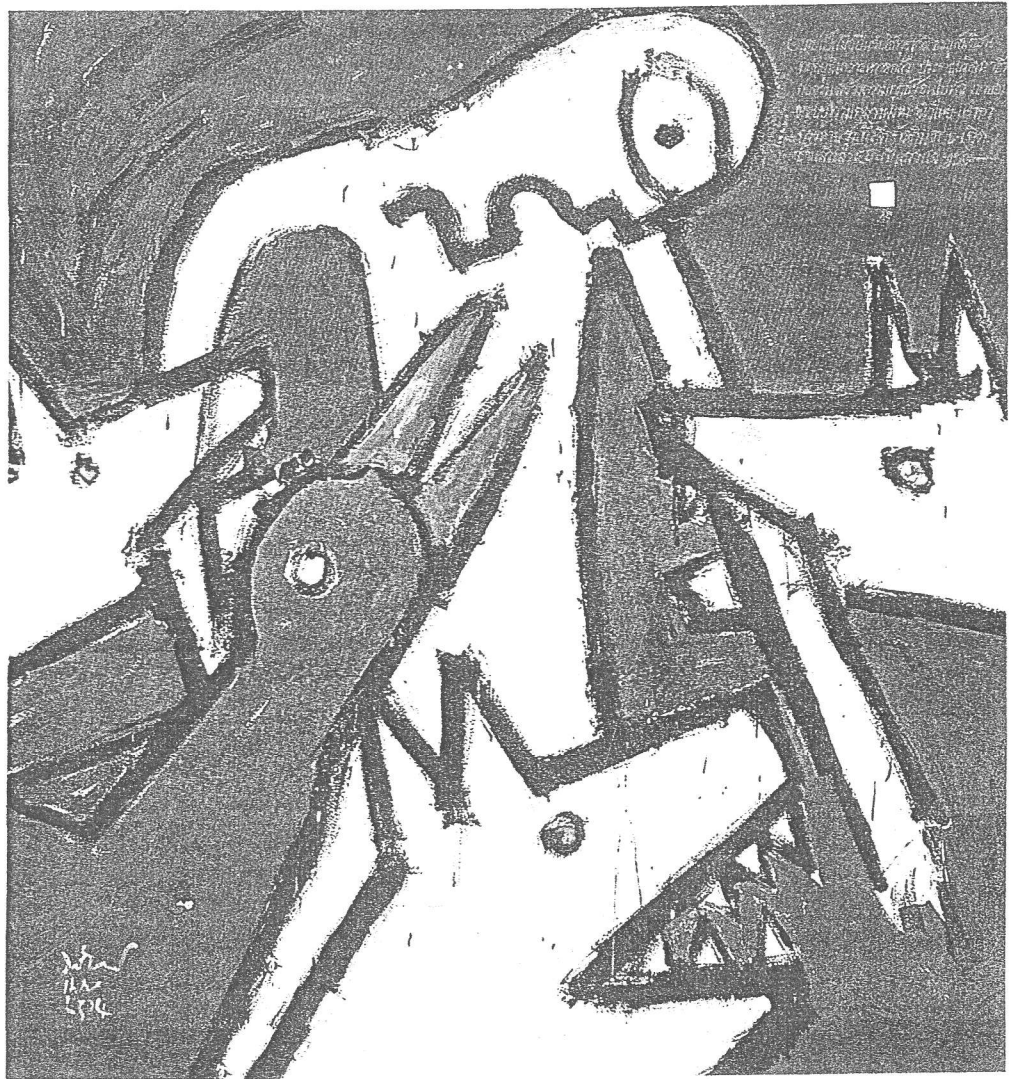
Sinners are idiotic artists, know nothing but to be money-makers; super

selfish; talk too big; boast of being intellectual but never in the head; mislead ego. They will be in a narrow cage of supreme stench farting, cannot breathe unto death.

Vasan's gruesome and convulsive subjects emphasize the repetitive pessimism of one aspect of the human condition (Plate 150). The paintings vehemently criticize various sectors and institutions which make up the social fabric of Thailand.

'Inferno' was a daring exhibition that came at a time when the political situation in Thailand was precarious and

150. Vasan Sitthiket, *Sinners are gunmen who serve the mafia and tyranny, oppressing peaceful men to be afraid, doing unlawful business, making trouble everywhere. They will be surrounded by flocks of hungry dogs and crows gatheringly eat them, they will die and reborn again and again for five hundred light-years*, 1991, 210 x 210 cm, collection of the artist, Bangkok. (Photograph Apinan Poshyananda.)



uncertain following the overthrow of General Chatichai Choonhavan's government in February 1991. Many of the works seemed to reflect the confusion, chaos, and unpredictability of the Thai socio-political climate. For instance, his paintings against corrupt politicians and military leaders reflect the transitional period under the shadow of the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC) which included the Assets Investigation Committee to examine the 'unusual wealth' of selected individuals

(including General Chatichai Choonhavan himself). Such works anticipate the 'vicious cycle of Thai politics': after a *coup* and the accompanying new constitution, political parties, elections, legislature, and a 'Honeymoon' period, sooner or later another crisis would erupt. Vasan's pessimism remained the same: the sinners and oppressors still came from the same sectors while the oppressed and sufferers stayed weak and helpless. Surprisingly, many of Vasan's paintings which directly

challenged the authorities did not create an uproar, nor were they subject to censorship.¹¹

Vasan continued to make provocative works in his series called *Unbalance* (1991) and *The Cobra and the Farmer (A Tale)* (1991). In the latter, print installations depict the faces of the Thai farmers who were murdered between March 1974 and August 1975. As a monument to the dead farmers, Vasan

¹¹Ironically, in June 1991, coinciding with Vasan's show, a controversial censorship occurred at the Alliance Française when an exhibition by a French woman artist named Chagnon was closed down (by the Alliance Française) because of her bold, satirical works relating to religion, racism, sexism, war, prostitution, and politics.

wrote the following next to his print: 'Thai peasant leaders who were assassinated at the time when they organized the fight to protect their human right. All Thais eat rice. Thai peasants feed them. But peasants are the lowest class being exploited from everywhere, their land lost, sold all their tools (water buffaloes). Nothing left but their life. So they move to the town selling their labour, producing everything (food, clothes, shopping complexes, houses, condominiums, government houses, military offices, and big hotels). But they are poor still. Consequently, some become robbers, criminals, drug addicts, and rape men. Alas! Is this civilization?'

9 Conclusion

THE evolution of modern Thai art has its own genesis and turning-points. Its course since the mid-nineteenth century has followed a network of divergent paths, rather than a single road. Numerous art styles have been adapted to suit the specific needs of Thai expression. Accompanying this exploration of new subjects and new materials, has been a social change in the status of the artisan, now fully recognized as the artist. This transformation was made possible by changes in patronage and public support.

Thai painting and sculpture in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of this century show a fusion of different styles, materials, techniques, and subject-matters. At times, the results looked awkward and unrefined by Western standards, and reflect tensions in an intermarriage of indigenous and foreign styles. Works from these formative years of modern Thai art demonstrate a commingling of traditions to suit the Preferred Royal Style.

The status of artisan-artists shifted with the social and political changes in the 1930s. Many became artist-civil servants who played dominant roles in the art programme and construction of public monuments during the new regime under Thailand's third Prime Minister, Phibun Phibunsongkram. Their art served as a means of propagating

national identity and patriotism among the citizenry.

Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasri) became a leading force in the development of modern Thai art when he founded the School of Fine Arts, later to become Silpakorn University. Feroci and scholars such as M. C. Ithithepsan, Phra Sarotrataniman, and Phraya Anumanrajadhon introduced the concept of modern art to Thai artists. However, to these pioneering figures, modern art was confined to particular styles, such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Cubism. They regarded Abstraction and Surrealism as the results of insufficient skill and concept. Only in the late 1950s and 1960s did these styles become fully appreciated and accepted in the Thai art milieu.

Many Thai artists regarded Western art as the catalyst that quickened the development of modern Thai art. They were obliged to pursue Western methods wholeheartedly and tried to accommodate them to local themes. Happily, Thai artists seemed to have a gift for synthesizing several styles into their own quintessential creations. Diversity and eclecticism thus became the hallmarks of modern Thai art.

The annual National Exhibition of Art, which began in 1949, became an arena for Thai artists to make a name for themselves. It also defined the type of

modern art that was acceptable to Thai audiences. During the 1950s, the Impressionist method, which was novel and fascinating to Thai painters, was adapted as a style for subjects like cityscapes, landscapes, and floating market scenes. Thai artists showed their expertise in the handling of quick brush strokes and complementary colours. Others chose a cubistic technique for exploring volumes and multifaceted surfaces. The control exercised by members of the jury in the National Exhibition of Art had enormous influence on the direction of modern Thai art. This prestigious art competition helped promote new artistic concepts that would later become part of the mainstream. Simultaneously, it served as an equivalent of the art academy that stood for tradition and technical virtuosity.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Thai artists took on the task of creating their own version of avant-garde art by experimenting with the idioms of abstract and Pop art. Abstraction permitted Thai artists to demonstrate their command of the concept of formalism, regarded as part of the mainstream of international art. At the same time, many local artists, disenchanting by society and politics at home and abroad, became engaged in a conflict about the place of art in society under the opposing banners of 'art for art's sake' and 'art for life'. Surrealism merged with Buddhism to create a 'Surr art' *à la Thai*, allowing artists to fuse freely subjects from society, religion, and politics.

As the political upheavals of the 1970s were replaced by a decade of explosive industrialization and urban growth, many new problems, including deterioration of the natural environment, pollution, crime, drugs, prostitution, and moral decay faced the Thai people. With rapid changes in society due to science and high-tech industry, many felt that

man's civilization was already at a dead end. Consequently, Thai artists looked to the past—to tradition (religion, myth, folklore)—as a way of resisting submergence in the new, imported styles. They drew on their philosophical, aesthetic, and spiritual links with pre-industrial Thailand in order to avoid Eurocentric domination, and to create their own Thaicentric artistic norms. Thus, their representational art concentrated on themes of national identity, ethnicity, regionalism, and religion. At the same time, there are artists who have chosen to create innovative works by synthesizing the concepts of Expressionism, Conceptualism, Environmental Art, and Media Art with local subject-matter. The themes in these works contain images of isolation, anxiety, and alienation as well as intensifying degrees of violence resulting from the imbalance between rural and urban development.

Corporations and non-profit art institutions have played a major role in the development of modern Thai art, and the continued importance of relationships between Thai artists and patrons bears testimony to this. Prizes, monetary awards, publicity, and other corporate and institutional policies are the main factors that determine the status of artists, who are rewarded for pursuing a formalist direction or reviving traditions. The sky-rocketing price of art works by some Thai artists, for instance, has resulted from the patronage of a small group of art collectors and entrepreneurs whose collections help to give consensus to the quality and taste of 'good' art.

The opposing forces of traditionalism and internationalism bearing upon modern Thai artists have been examined in this book. At times, the fluidity allowed a cultural interchange that resulted in new styles and genres. Modernism (*khuaam khid samaimai*) is a complex expression that reflects the

diversity of Thai society. Although sometimes the power of art institutions has constrained and restricted feelings and impulses of the creative imagination, many artists have been able to transcend the confines of artistic repression and to produce work that re-examines and re-evaluates the norm of 'safe' and 'non-risky' institutionalized art.

The question of post-modernism has raised much confusion in intellectual debates about contemporary art in the West. The discussion of post-modernism has also caused many Thai artists to re-evaluate and redefine the condition of the art scene in their own nation. An attempt has been made here to place the term 'post-modernism' (*khuaam khid samaimai yuk lang*) in a Thai context. It is shown that the resurgence of traditions, the turn to nature as well as mythology and allegory, and the attempt to get away

from the severely restricted range of materials by various groups of artists, all indicate a reaction to the high-pressured, consumerized society of the metropolis of Bangkok.

This book concludes with the state of Thai art in 1991 which looks bright and promising. Thai artists have become respected in their profession. They no longer have to work for private institutions or the government to be recognized. Many have made their mark on the art scene in Asia, Australia, Europe, and the United States. Thai artists are still faced, however, with the recurring dilemma of traditionalism and internationalism. The urge to synthesize elements from the past and the present as well as from indigenous and international sources characterizes the eclecticism which remains the trademark of modern art in Thailand.