

Skydancers: *Thai Women Artists Who Dance Across Cultural Borders*

Sue Morgan

In the catalogue *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, Joan Kee asks the question “Is the notion of a “contemporary Asian women’s art” necessarily feminist in nature?” My explorations into Thai women artists have found that there is a split between what westerners called feminist art and how Thai women artists wish to be represented in the global art world. Life in a Buddhist country is filled with mystic, and the power of ones karma plays a daily role in the direction one will take. It is one’s karma that had led me to live in Chiang Mai, Thailand for the past 20 years where at times I participated in the art scene, but like many woman artists I struggled with balancing motherhood, earning a living and creating works of art. For those of us from the west who cross over to eastern borders, there is an unexplained spiritual factor that pulls us between reality and fantasy. However, it was from reading Whitney Chadwick’s book, *Women, Art, and Society* that I decided to find out more about Thai women artists, and if their cultural beliefs helped them to create works of art in a male dominated society. Through interviews with artists such as Pinaree Santipak, Yupha Mahamart, and Skowmon Hastanan, I discovered that each of these women have turned to their inner self to explore new ideas for expressing Thai culture, feminist views or spiritual beliefs. In addition, recent works by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook give us the opportunity to relook at well-known male artists such as Manet in cultural context outside of the

western world. This paper explores the works of Thai women artists over a period of time with a concentration for who they are as women, mothers and artists.

Skowmon Hastanan, a Thai artist living in New York City, is quick to call herself a feminist artist and felt that it was through meeting women artists from ethnic backgrounds that formulated her feminist beliefs. Skowmon draws inspiration for her work from her childhood in Thailand in order to create social statements. As a young child, Skowmon grew up along the Thai-Vietnam border during the Vietnam War where her parents were stationed as medical physicians during the war. At that time Skowmon was exposed to the American life through US servicemen, Playboy magazines, American music and food, along with fighter jets that would do flyovers above her home. As a daughter of medical physicians, Skowmon would hear horror stories told by her mother of Thai sex workers who had become casualties of the war. Skowmon states that “my mother’s daily work included mending uteruses of bar girls injured from having sex with American soldiers” (*Talk*). After the Vietnam War, Thailand became known for its elaborate sex industry through tourism and in the early 1990’s it was declared the epicenter of the AIDS crisis. Thailand is still perceived by many Westerners as the center of the Asian sex industry, and Thai women are constantly faced with the stigma that they are prostitutes. It is these issues along with a language that Skowmon found through her awareness of the western feminist movement that gave her the vision to create works that portray the women from her home country. While becoming a young adult in America, Skowmon came face-to-face with the American male fantasy of Thai women.

During the 1990's and into 2000 the economic growth in Thailand brought on a new commodity that was marketed to the west, i.e., Thai mail-order-brides, escort services and massage therapists. Ads placed in the classified sections of newspapers such as the *The Village Voice* displayed images of Thai women as exotic beauties with pseudo names. In her series of work —*Prostitutes and Goddesses & Other Mystiques*—Skowmon has taken these images of Thai sex workers and transformed them into goddesses “using horror and humor found in both Himalayan religious paintings and Asian horror cinema” (*Talk*).



Skowmon Hastanan
Dakini – Red Cloud 2006
Mixed media collage on kraft paper
9 x 12”

In work entitled *Dakini-Red Cloud*, which means Skydancer, Skowmon has taken a classified ad image of a scantily dressed Thai woman and transformed her into a

goddess. The headless woman whose robes have fallen on to the floor seems to be moving towards enlightenment while her head appears to be consumed by flames. This could be seen as the young woman's rebirth. The head has been replaced by a red orchid flower with a yellow center that can be related to a monk's robe. Behind the goddess is a black moon surrounded by fire. This does not depict a negative symbol but perhaps a quiet darkness on the deity's road to enlightenment. In many Himalayan Buddhist *tanka* paintings the breast of the female deity is exposed and female deities can be seen on the lap of a God. Furthermore, the exposure of a woman's breast is used to symbolize "mother earth," or creation, while the attention of the female deity to a male god signifies a man's use of a woman for his own pleasure. Skowmon has successfully taken the female prostitute figure and transformed her from a prostitute into an enlightened goddess.



Skowmon Hastanan
Golden Moon 2006
Mixed media collage on kraft paper
9 x 12"

In the piece entitled "Golden Moon," headless female bodies are adorned with jeweled beads to give the impression that the figures are moving towards enlightenment through meditation. The beads represent a "mala," i.e., a rosary. (108 beads is the traditional count for a *mala*). The "mala" is used in meditation and here it could symbolize a desire for purification. It is hard to say why Skowmon used headless female heads amongst the beaded necklaces; however, one might think of these women in a meditative state moving to enlightenment through a mantra. In Gloria Orenstein article, *Artists As Healers: Envisioning Life-Giving Culture* (1990), she states that "when ancient symbols are fused with modern meanings, highly charged energy is generated." We can see that

Skowmon successful takes modern day images of women and fuses them with ancient symbolizes to ignite the charge that Orenstein speaks of. In a summary statement summing up this series of work, Skowman identifies the energy by expressing that “these deities show[ing] their power of compassion in fantastic cosmic battles against obstacles such as hatred, obsession, pride, jealousy and ignourance” (*Talk*).

Kee has categorized Skowmon’s work as diasporic in nature since she is deeply connected to her Thai roots while creating works of art that speaks to the exploitation of Thai women in Western society. While Skowmon, a former member of Godzilla: Asian American Art Network, explored the feminist art movement in New York her female peers in Thailand have had a different experience since their upbringing did not revolve around a western culture. Many of my interviews with Thai women artists living in Thailand began with a personal declaration that they did not want to be referred to as feminist artists. In addition, these women felt that word “feminism” is a Western idea that did not apply to them. Nonetheless, Thai women artists have had to face discrimination in a strong patriarchal society and number them have created works of art that reflect who they are as women, mothers and Thais. The evolution of Thai women artists began over 70 years ago with the influence of the Western art world through invited European artists and artisans. What transpired over the decades was a fruition of women’s work in a male dominated world.

The Education of Women Artists

In Vachatimanont's thesis, *Unthreading Thai Women* (2007), she explores the education of women artists through several decades from the opening of Silpakorn University's doors in 1934 to recent times. From the time that the university opened in the 1930's till the mid 1990's, only a handful of female students could be seen graduating with a degree in art. In recent years this number has increased but still remains quite low. Vachatimanont writes that, "In 2004, the graduating class had seven female students in comparison to 40 male students, though in 2005, eleven women and 32 men graduated (pp. 59, 60)."

It is interesting to note here that most of the women were educated in the area of printmaking since perhaps this was a more acceptable area of study for women artists. When speaking to the artist, Yupha Mahamart, she expressed that printmaking connects her to who she is as a woman. However when talking with other women artists, the idea of going into printmaking was either more for economic reasons, since art supplies such as oil paint are very expensive here in Thailand, or that it was more acceptable with family members. Vachatimanont also discusses the issues of female art students and the stigma around their pursuit of a degree in art along with references made to their works by their male professors or art historians. Female artists would often hear words like "weak" and "feminine" for works created with "lush, sensual pattern or decorative images." In addition, female artists until recently were "discouraged from majoring in sculpture" due to the fact that their professors

thought they were not fit to do heavy work, even though Miseim Yinpintsoi studied with Bhirasri in the late 1950's (pp. 65). Further more, when female artists create works that some might think are of "masculine" nature like the series of breast sculptures created by the artist Pinaree Sanpitak, then they met up with comments from male art historians, such as, Apinan Poshyanonda who wrote "[Pinaree Sanpitak] has got balls (pp. 66)."

Modern Art - 1950s, 60s and 70's

The 1950's and 60's saw very few women studying art, in fact according to Vachatimanont's study in 1964 there was only one woman who graduated in art at the Silpakorn University, and in 1965 there were none (pp. 59).

It is during this time that Bhirasiri's students had an opportunity to study abroad, although it is not mentioned if any of these students were female. On their return to Thailand, these emerging artists brought back with them new ideas in art, such as Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and Performance Art. However for those who did not venture abroad, their exposure to Western style art came in the form of art books and magazines. Thirty years later, we can still see some of the influences this period of western art had on Thai women artists, such as works created by Booyin Emjaroen. In Booyin's *White Flower 2*, one can see the relationship between her work and that of the artist Georgia O'Keefe's in both the image and use of color in her work. (Figure 6)



Figure 6
Boonyin Emjaroen
White Flower-2, 1981
Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm.
Collection of TISCO, Bangkok

The 1970's saw Thailand's first real struggle for democracy with protests from organized groups that included not only left-wing intellectuals but also students. During that time many independent art groups were formed, and both professional and non-professional artists joined forces to create works of art depicting the country's fight for democracy. One noted group was *Art for Life*. "Their works carried messages concerned with rural poverty, social problems, and political suppression using a daring mode of expression (www.rama9art.org);" and in 1976 the fight for democracy was brutally suppressed by the military government in a massacre that occurred at Thammasat University in Bangkok. The *Art for Life* movement and other political art groups continued throughout the 1970's and into the 1980's by creating works that outwardly told the story of suppression and hope. Lawan Upa-In's work entitled *Bangkok 1976, 1981* shows not only the poverty, corruption and the

military massacre but also the hope for the future through the next generation.

(Figure 7)



Figure 7
Lawan Upa-In
Bangkok 1976, 1981
Oil on canvas, 88.5 x 133.5 cm
Collection of Lawan Upa-In

In the late 1960's the Printmaking Department at Silpakorn University had opened, and during the 70's new techniques had been introduced. At the same time that political art works were being created, a group of Silpakorn University students preferred to "...disassociate themselves from the democracy movement (www.rama9art.org).” These artists created abstract works that had no political statement at all. Kanya Chareonsupkul graduated from Silpakorn University in 1972 and went on to receive a M.F.A. from the School of Art Institute in Chicago University in 1977. Many of her early works depict the free form of abstract expressionism through the printmaking medium. (Figure 8)



Figure 8
Kanya Chareonsupkul
Statement in Chicago, 1977
Lithograph, 57 x 76 cm

Performance Art, Environmental and Installation Works

Through the 1980's and until the present Thailand has seen many artists explore new ideas, techniques and media; in addition a renewal of traditional and regional art was reborn. Also, Thai artists started to enter the international art scene and participate in major art exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale. One of these artists was Araya Rasdjamrearnsook who graduated from Silpakorn University in 1980's, and later went on to study in Germany. In the 1990's Araya's installation works at the Johannesburg Biennale expressed not only how the Western world viewed Thai women but how Thai women are viewed within their own country by foreigners. The installation entitled, *Prostitute's Room*, "...an exploration of the Western tourist's perception of the Asian woman's body as a sexual playground," was created after she became friends with several Thai sex workers living in Germany (Chadwick, 441). In Stephen Pettifor's book *Flavours* (2003), he expresses his thoughts on Araya's works saying that, "The

plight of these women drove her to make art laden with feminist concerns about discrimination and the degrading stereotypes about Thai women abroad." In 1995 Araya went on to create two installation pieces entitled *The Dance of Three Thai Girls* and *Departure of Country Thai Girls*, "...both of which display female legs parted and sticking upright as if anticipating the demands of their customers (pp. 56, 57)," and in 1996 she installed the work *Buang (Trap)* at the Queens Museum in New York. (Figure 9) Chadwick writes that, Rasdjarmrearnsook's sculptural installations and language more aggressively confront gender and social issues that include family loss, female prostitution (itself a culturally taboo subject), insecurity, and identity (pp. 464)." In 1993, Araya created *The Dinner with Cancer*, an "emotional response to watching her father waste away from terminal cancer (Pettifor, pp. 57)." This piece brings to mind works by Hannah Wilke, who photographed her mother's battle with breast cancer and then later her own fight with ovarian cancer, to which she succumbed in 1993 at the age of 52.



Figure 9

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

Buang, (Trap), 1995

Installation with wood, metal plates, stone, clay and fiberglass
approx. 500 x 800 x 450 (H) cm.

Collection of the artist

Another woman artist who was becoming known during the early 1990's was Pinaree Sanpitak. Pinaree's works can be juxtaposed with those of Araya's by way of personal subject matter; however, Pinaree's works express her own experience as a woman and the conflicts that come with motherhood. Many women artists have struggled with the taboos of being a mother and, at the same time an artist, to quote Judy Chicago:

*I, like many women artists of my generation, believed that
maternity was antithetical to the creative life, primarily
because of prevailing attitudes that one couldn't be a woman
and an artist too; how then to be a mother and a painter?*

(Vachatimanont, 71)

Pinaree's earlier works were connected to organic forms such as the gourd, the egg and the squash, and in the mid-1990's Pinaree's work began to depict her own body and her role in motherhood. At that time she produced a series of works entitled *Eggs, Breast, Body, I, Etcetera*. Pinaree later went on to create large-scale works and installations that allowed spectators to interact with her pieces. In *Breast Stupas*, viewers walk through large panels that contained delicately woven images of breasts; and in *Noon-nom (Breast)*, which is a playful installation of a variety of cushion like breasts, visitors were allowed to sit, roll and fall on them, giving the feeling not only of warmth and comfort but perhaps a sexual pleasure as well. (Figure 10) Pinaree's use of the female body is unusual for a Thai artist who may have studied within the conforms of the Thai

educational system, in Vachatimanont's study she writes, "It is unlikely that a woman artist educated in a Thai institution and in Thai art would ever use a sexual characteristic, such as the breast, as the central form of her artwork (pp. 63-64)." However, Pinaree is free from such constraints since she does not belong to any Thai institution. Pinaree does not acknowledge herself as a feminist but her works have addressed issues concerning women and the biases put upon them in a patriarchal society. In her series of works relating to *Merit Memory Muse*, she states that, "I'm trying to put the female into a religious context, because we're so segregated. A nun is considered to have a lower status than a monk. When your son is ordained as a monk then everybody cherishes it, but if your daughter becomes a nun then they think, what's wrong with her (Pettifor, pp. 65)?"



Figure 10
Noon-nom, 2001-2002
Organza, synthetic fiber
93 sq. ft, 200 pieces of variable sizes
Site: Bangkok University Art Gallery



Figure 11
Pinaree Sanpitak
Merit memory muse, 1999
Acrylic, oil pastel, silver leaves on canvas
200 x 80 cm

Merit memory muse, 1999
Acrylic, oil pastel, silver leaves on canvas 200 x 80 cm.

In recent years, Thailand has seen several women artists who work with traditional temple art; however, the forerunner in this area is Phaptawan Suwannakudt. Phaptawan Suwannakudt, spent part of her childhood growing up in a Buddhist temple while her father, a well-known temple painter, painted murals in exchange for free food and board. Phaptawan's father not only created murals but also taught the art of temple painting in order to pass it on to a younger generation; however, her father did not teach Phaptwan and her siblings when they were young. It was not until her father was terminally ill that he started to include them in his work. After her father passed away in 1982, Phaptawan took over the role of leading his team in painting not only projects for Buddhist temples but also murals for hotels throughout Thailand. She later moved to Sydney, Australia and started to work on a series of narrative paintings based on the mural work she learned from her father. In the piece, *My*

Mother was a Nun, Phaptawan painted her own mother's story of becoming a nun after the birth of her mother's last child which coincided with the birth of Phaptawan's first child. (Figure 12) She has also included herself and her children in a Buddhist based story entitled Vessantara Jataka, which is the story of "...when the Bodhisattva sacrificed his own children for his enlightenment (Suwannakudt, www.rama9.org)."



Figure 12
Phaptawan Suwannakudt
My Mother was a Nun I, 1998
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm

In the late 1990's, Southeast Asia had seen a movement towards creating an awareness of women's issues through their creative art works and held a collective exhibition of work to coincide with the 1992 global awareness campaign entitled, *The Year of the Woman*. In 1997 Thailand held its first "Womanifesto" exhibition which opened up a new venue for woman artists to not only exhibit their work, but also to come together to share experiences and stories. Somporn Rodboon writes, "These women artists are fully aware of

placing their art in relation to their cultures, societies and the world. They are also increasingly conscious of their own contexts; localized or globalized, personal or social, psychological or sexual, political or environmental.” (Voices of Womanifesto, 1997) Womanifesto has continued to bring together women artists from different countries and conducts an artist in residency program in the Northeast of Thailand where women are invited to explore not only the local surroundings but themselves in relationship to others.

The artist, Nitaya Ueareeworakul, helped promote the Womanifesto I and II through Studio Xang where she was one of the principle organizers. In Nitaya’s earlier works, such as *Body and Mind* and *Naked 94-99*, we can see a struggle within Nitaya herself and her role as a female artist in a patriarchal society. However, in recent years her work has moved beyond both her own conflicts and those involving feminist issues to focus more on human behavior. (Figure 13) She speaks about her feelings between herself and the Western concept of feminism in Pettifor’s book; “I don’t adhere to the aggressive Western concept of feminism. I’ve had a very gentle upbringing in Thailand. My outlook and opinions are generally soft, so I don’t want to make art that attacks anyone (pp. 103).” In many of my interviews with women artists here in Thailand, I find Nitaya’s feelings of the Western ideas of feminism repeated many times. The women artists here have concerned themselves more with finding a personal balance within themselves and nature, and perhaps this is enough for us to see who they are as women within a global society.



Figure 13
Nitaya Ueareeworakul
Who I am? 2003
Wooden Chair, plastic bags
55 X 57 X 123 cm

One artist who creates this balance is Yupha Changkoon. Yupha's works have a narrative base in which she retells stories based on her childhood experiences, in her religious beliefs, her feeling for the environment and the love for her culture. Yupha is also a very sensitive artist, and you can feel from speaking to her and seeing her work that she becomes one with each piece that is created as though she has left a part of herself in the work. One of Yupha's recent prints relates to a saying about Thai farmers who are considered the backbone of Thailand, "Your back always faces the sky, your face always sees the dirt," it tells a story of her past and her connection to her mother's yearly

ritual of honoring the rice goddess Mae Po Sop. (Figure 14) As a young girl growing up in Kanchanaburi, Yupha would go with her mother to their rice field to give offerings to Mae Po Sop. The offerings to this goddess would take place four times in the year, i.e., during the plowing season, at the time when the rice bears seeds, after harvest and then final at the storing of the seeds. Most of these ceremonies would be done by women because in Thai folklore it is said that if a man would lay eyes on the beautiful Mae Po Sop he would not be able to control his sexual appetite and rape her. (Satsanguan 95) Yupha would follow behind her mother occasionally looking up to see her mother's long hair braided and fixed with a comb. It is in these simple images that we remember our childhood, find peace with personal conflicts; and as women, bond with our mothers. When speaking with Yupha I asked her if any women artists from the west influenced her work, she mentioned the works of Kathe Kollowitz. For Yupha, it was not only Kollowitz's work in printmaking that she admired but also connected with Kollowitz's personal life.



Figure 14
Yupha Changkoon

Untitled, 2008
Hair & saa paper

Thai Traditional Art

In 1977, Professor Bhirasri established the Thai Art Department at Silpakorn University in order to continue the works of traditional Thai art and crafts. It is rare to see Thai women artists choose a course of study in the Thai Art department as a graduate student, and in 2006 only two women graduated in a class of seven men. Hatairat Maneerat was one of these artists who chose to study Thai Art since she had a love working with traditional techniques and media. In addition, the department also teaches beyond the concepts of Thai art with courses in Thai culture and the Thai way of life. Hatairat's works may lean towards ideas of contemporary art through the images she portrays; however, she uses techniques that place her firmly within the constraints of Thai Art, i.e., by having naturalistic tendencies, the weaving of Thai silk, and the religious meaning of the stupa. (Vachatimanont, pp. 61). (Figure 15)



Figure 15
Hatairat Maneerat
Mother's Weaving 2006
Mixed media
130 X 200 cm

Conclusion

After many years of working under the structure of Western art, Thai women artists have moved beyond and created works that not only speak of themselves as women but as mothers, daughters, and naturalists in a global society. Their struggle to be recognized in a male dominated society may give way as more women enter art programs in Thai universities where gender issues are openly discussed. Recently Silpakorn University has established curriculum that contains courses in both Asian and Female art which was designed by Professor Somporn Rodboon. In addition, as Southeast Asian artists turn the tables on us by creating works that change our point of view of Western masters, such as the recent works by the artists Araya who has successfully removed predetermined ideas by placing copies of Western masterpieces

amongst Thai villagers in order to record their interpretation of the image, we as Westerners may relook at our own history of Modern Art. In her work *Luncheon on the Grass and Thai Villagers*, Araya records a group of Thai villagers having a conversation as they sit in front of a copy of Monet's famous painting. At one point in the discussion we can hear the villagers commenting on why the woman is nude in the painting, as the dialogue unfolds a suggestion that perhaps she is hot is made bring the female image into natural thought process amongst the villagers. Rathsaran Sireekan writes in the Bangkok Post that, "Araya's latest attempt is, thus, seeking to de-contextualize and de-historicize the process of art appreciation and radically, but in a very serene, admirably quiet, feminine way, question the very ontological value of a European masterpiece (Outlook, 2008)." (Figure 16)



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook
Manet's Luncheon on the Grass and Thai Villagers, 2008
16-minute video

What I have learned in this process of looking at the evolution of women's art work in Thailand is that one must remove oneself from western

ideas in order to understand not only the visual images that are presented but also the processes that these women explored in creating their work. I have also discovered that there is an undertone that weaves them together; they are all individuals who have strong feelings for their country, their culture and their religious background. In addition, many of these artists are naturalists, and seek harmony within themselves with nature, and with the world around them.

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Yupha Changkoon, courtesy of the artist

Interviews

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Rodboon, Prof. Somporn. Retired, and currently Guest Associate Professor at Chiang Mai University. Chiang Mai, Thailand. March 2009.

Mahamart, Yupha. Artist, Chiang Mai, Thailand. March 2009.

Santipak, Pinaree. Artist, Bangkok, Thailand. March 2009.

Women's Study Center at Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand. March 2009.

Links

Skowmon Hastanan Talk

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/skowmon_hastanan.php?i=215

To View Works by Thai Women Artist
www.rama9art.org