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ART

Feminist issues cross cultures through art

Exhibition of Thai-American artist in New York explores trafficking of Thai women

Pattara Danutra

BANGKOKPOST.COM

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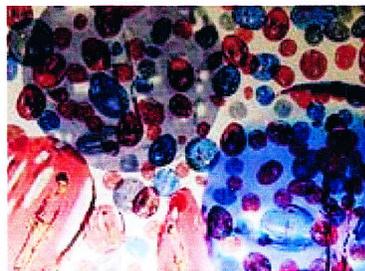
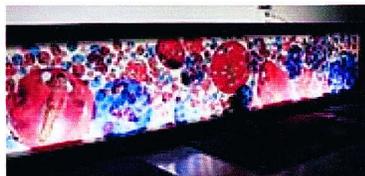
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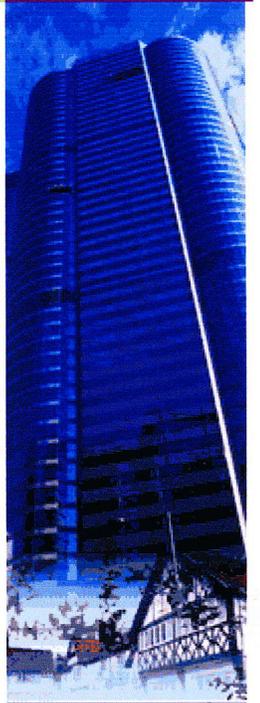
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To be a female artist in New York City is not an easy job. However, Thai-American artist Skowmon Hastanan says that her Thai roots and female gender give her both advantages and disadvantages in surviving the Big Apple art scene.

Like many other artists, one of Skowmon's artistic strategies is to put herself into her work. Her recent work explores the issue of the migration of Thai woman. Her exhibition, "Les femmes en route", is on display at the Monk Gallery in Brooklyn, one of the hottest spots in the art world today.

When visitors step into the gallery's narrow space, they find themselves embraced by artworks depicting repetitive images of a Thai woman. These iconographic images are presented through various visual techniques and mediums including ink-jet prints, nail polish-lacquered images and electronic transparent plexiglass billboards. Some of these images are superimposed on colourful bubble figures of various sizes. Other are geometrically configured, while others appear on unusual everyday objects like an encyclopaedia or world atlas.



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The visual presentation of the same woman in a modified traditional Thai chakri dress directly represents Thai femininity, and the use of the atlas hints that Skowmon considers her theme a global issue.

"This show discusses the issue of the migration and trafficking of Thai women," said Skowmon, who was born in Thailand but moved to the US in 1973. "There are many types of migration stories, especially in America, which is rich in immigrant history from European settlers to African-American slavery experiences.

"The latter is unique because it's about forced migration into the labour industry. My current work tries to argue this issue in the context of modern day," she said.

Skowmon herself is a product of migration as her Thai family migrated to America and settled there. Although she did not come to the US as the result of being trafficked, she is intrigued by the issue that many Thai women experience.

"In high school, I was interested in ethnographic study and American immigrant literature. In college, I was taught by some male art teachers who were 1970s' feminists," she said.

Skowmon graduated in 1985 with a Bachelor's of Fine Arts from the prestigious School of Visual Art in New York.

"After graduation, besides working on my personal art projects, I worked as an art administrator at various museums and alternative galleries. These non-artist jobs exposed me to the realm of multiculturalism. All of these movements influenced me and my art work," Skowmon explained.

The most interactive piece in the show is Les femmes en route: Encyclopedia Britanica World Atlas, in which viewers can flip through pages of the atlas. Skowmon put images of Thai women on many pages as if they represent demographic data as well as marking transportation routes of products.

Like some of her previous work, this exhibition is quasi-biographical connecting her past experiences in Thailand with her experiences in the US. She recreates places and things from her childhood, such as the woman in the chakri that is adapted from a set of 1970s' Thai stamps featuring various images of modified traditional Thai costumes.

"Using cosmetics and nail polish as my material in this set of art work evokes women's domestic craft as a form of high art expression. All the pieces in this show are rather decorative and ornamental. That's because I, as a female artist, like decorative art," said Skowmon.

Skowmon's strategy in creating this collection was to create each piece progressively. She did not determine what kind of materials she would focus on before she started. She started with the concept and gradually developed it with materials she found and let one material or piece inspire the next.

For example, she discovered used atlases at a bookstore while researching her thematic content. The atlases inspired her. She also learned new computer generation techniques.

"Making art is a self-defining process. I make pieces that refer to the politics of self-representation," she said.

- Skowmon Hastanan's "Les femmes en route" exhibition will be on show at the Monk Gallery in Brooklyn, New York until May 10.