

Phaptawan Suwannakudt: Wakeful Moment
Catching the Moment: Each Step is the Past
4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 21 May – 3 July 2010

'I do not easily feel at home in places' is indeed a poignant observation by Phaptawan Suwannakudt for those in a diaspora. The feeling for 'at homeness' may rest in a place – where a possible aggregate of experiences may naturally fall into an authentic comfortable union. But assume for one moment that the 'at homeness' rests not in a space or a place, but in a series of experiences or texts, and that the texts were those that we once read and felt all things ring true within. The memory of such a text accompanies us to the present moment, wherever one may be – with such a way of looking at 'at homeness' we may come closer to Phaptawan Suwannakudt's title for this exhibition, *Catching the Moment: Each Step is the Past*.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt's childhood is indeed one of an illustrious inheritance. The textual inheritance includes the legacy of the Thai Buddhist epic *Traiphum Phraruang* (Three Worlds, according to King Ruang), which refers to the Pali text from *Traibhumikatha: the Story of the Three Planes of Existence*. Not only is this epic the oldest known full-length text in Thai, but it also describes a cosmology based on the Thai Buddhist transformation from desire to form to formlessness – the founding myth in Phaptawan's experiences.

The second text equally seminal is *Kiew Mu Pah*, a series of short stories and semi-autobiography written by her father, Paiboon Suwannakudt, from whom not only did Phaptawan inherit a poet's vision of the world, but also the techniques, references and endurance of a Buddhist mural painter – Phaptawan spent twelve years of her youth amongst the Sangha community of monks practicing, and in the end directing the painting team. It may even be a real possibility that she was the only female mural director in Thailand. Thence she spent the next fifteen years covering thousands of metres of walls and ceilings with active devotion.

Of late, these foundational texts and experiences have been added to, by historical and social-political concerns. With the two texts *Local History* and *Krungthep 226: the Art from Early Days Bangkok to the Imagined Future*, Phaptawan had found great empathy in the sufferings of political life – thus bringing us to the present: - the conditions of recent Thai political conflicts.

The installation *Catching the Moment: Each Step is the Past* invites us to engage in nine zones of articulations. These nine zones make up a perspicuous mapping of Phaptawan's philosophising. Two floors of works at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Art are connected by the work *Pillar disrupted*. We enter on the ground floor with a perceptual guide or a key. *One Step at a Time* is a new work that interplay and partially conceals an older group of wall works entitled *Grey wall of the World, fragile as the sound of golden bell*. We experience at first a delicate scribing of Thai texts on the surface of the fabric cylinders, and only on closer inspection and intimate observation do we discover the outline of drawings within. The drawings, intimately executed are a synthesis of visual images from Thai Buddhist iconography and Australian vernacular imagery. The

two works and their subtle interrelationship first remind us of the significance of the veiling and unveiling nature of memory and scribing, secondly they unfold their significance and echoes at the same time the experience of reading a protracted narrative of a Buddhist mural. Thus the key to Phaptawan's work – that *duration* is paramount in this unfolding, as if a permission needs to be granted before the world of history may be reverently revealed through the care of intimate observation. A work of art is *approached*, not consumed. We are asked to ponder this first experience; our moods change from a pedestrian spectacle of street consumerist life to a respectful interrogative relation.

The ground floor and the top floor are interlinked by a large bisected fabric cylinder, measuring almost eight metres in length. Yet it is not the scale of this object that holds sway, but the intense, rhythmical care that the weaving of the fabric which draws our attention. The fabric of unbleached yarn is simple yet clearly and attentively woven, and this is not without an interesting history. Fifteen years prior, Phaptawan co-founded *Womanifesto*, a series of bi-annual activities in Bangkok in which international woman artists were invited to participate. The first exhibition brought five Thai woman artists and writers to exhibit at the *Concrete House Art Centre*, an NGO activist group in Northern Bangkok working with prostitutes and AIDS victims. Later and under the same program, Phaptawan worked in the rural province of Sisaket in the North East of Thailand. There she learnt to weave on a handloom by the elder craftsperson Mae Pan. The result was a simple mesh cloth, though charged with layered symbolic significance – for during the days of weaving a synchronic appearance of a cast-off reptile skin appeared in the farm that they stayed - Phaptawan noticed the resemblance between this reptile skin and the mesh she weaved. This skin-mesh came to signify for her the mythological serpent deity Naga, a half-demon, half-anima figure found in Thai mural allegories. Yet for Phapatwan, the deity Naga and Thai women shared a point in common, that they are disqualified from ordination - for they are considered as the non-human in the Thai Buddhist tradition. This nascent point draws attention to an existential inequality deep within Thai belief. Yet with the skin-mesh also holds the potentiality of transformation, through its shedding, a possible salvation. On this particular fabric Phaptawan inscribed texts of the history of Bangkok, and within, the intimate imagery of Australian and Thai icons.

The top floor of the gallery maps six different works, of six different modalities. These works maintain the same commitment to the potential transformative character of the skin-mesh, as well as her continued exploration of the wakeful moment in Buddhist meditation via Thai calligraphy on silk. The six works make use of the skin-mesh as 1) creating a condition, boundary or foundation in *Building up a Brick Wall*, 2) creating a diarised containment for past experiences through travel in *Rebirth Mandala*, 3) creating a containment for free association thought forms in the *Cast off series*, 4) the exploration of the process of wakeful calligraphy- adding, erasing, layering and distilling of texts (epic, mythological and socio-political) in *Unravel*, 5) a calligraphy in empathetic expression, resolution and coming to terms of present political conflict in *Un(for)seen*, and 6) an intended relational activity for creation and awareness of intra-personal spaces and inner energies in *Conversational Room*, yet this has now been changed due to the emerging tragedy of present political unrest in over twenty provinces in Thailand –

the intra-personal creative activities initially encouraged from participants are now at a temporary moratorium.

The recent decision taken by Phaptawan to pause our participation with the relational work *Conversational Room* makes apparent a conflicting sentiment those in a diaspora are often familiar with. It is a sentiment of dispossession on the one hand; of abandonment by one's original homeland (Phaptawan has elsewhere expressed that she was considered a *farang* (foreigner) on return visits to Thailand) – yet on the other hand, one's fidelity to one's past and homeland is always unquestionable - thus her intense sense of empathy for the present political conditions in Thailand is all the more heightened.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt's reworking of her inherited art making processes within the Australian context is thankfully not one of assimilation. The process of transforming her methods has always been a generous gift in the face of secular Australia. To artists working in the last two decades in multinational late capitalist cities, together with its speed of migration of people amongst those cities - also bring apparent necessities to call into question the relevance of the pre-modern and modern values in a postmodern condition. Yet often, a potential lack of philosophical and geopoetic resolution in artistic production sees artists opting for simplistic yet short termed opportunistic trajectories. Short termed trajectories based on cultural spectacle, tourism, branding, celebrity and avatar driven endgames, quite often, merely result in the production of commodities in service of the function and survival of art institutions rather than the hopes of an artistic-philosophic vocation. It seems all too easy to conclude that that finite set of pathos-laden endgames are indeed all that is available for us in a secularised Australia, regrettably dominated by tabloid mass culture. It is from this sort of perspective that Phaptawan's art may well be stigmatised with the term 'ethnic', with implications that the values and intent imbued in the works bear no relevance to a materialistic, secularised society. Yet I would like to argue that her transformative intent and processes are precisely what is needed in our abject cities on the move. Within her intent is a refusal and an offering, a refusal to give ground in the face of institutional brutality and the flat-finiteness of late capitalist cosmopolitanism. And then, there is a spiritual offering, offering processes that she explores that preserve mnemonic, mythological and cultural resonances and values; it is an offering of a *weltanschauung*. Her art is a careful and necessary maximalism that delivers a complexity of the migratory subject and its values - not the authentic, nationalized subject, nor the evacuated trans-national avatar, but the subject-in-transformation, which ultimately allows us to continue to make art, and to philosophise our present condition through art making.

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