

The Contemporary Art of Nitaya's Inner World



Regarded as one of the most prominent female contemporary artist in Thailand, Nitaya Ueareeworakul recently presented 'Manosareh', another of her intimately personal exhibitions.

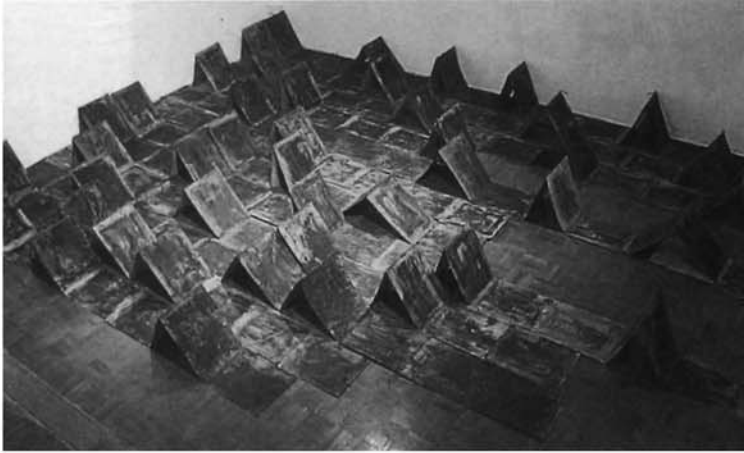
Walking on a sunny afternoon down Bangkok's narrow Sansuk Tai soi (street), encroached on by the atmosphere of the Klong Toey slum close by, I found Si-Am Art Space gallery appearing by the sidewalk. The experience seemed to be one of stumbling into something unexpected and intriguingly incongruous.

Mildly stumped, I stepped into the gallery and experienced feelings of being in a Kafka-esque scenario - entering a completely different environment and unexpected circumstances through an innocuous-looking door. Inside, the art gallery was simple and somewhat as unpretentious as the back alleys around this area are. On display in a solo exhibition entitled, "One's Private Affairs" (January 2002) were art works of Nitaya Ueareeworakul, considered to be "one of the few consistently productive local female painters".

Glancing about, I was drawn to an installation, '**Dedicated to the Declination**', which was laid on the floor and about the size of a ping-pong table. It evoked impressions of undulation, the relentless and unstoppable rising-and-falling waves of changes, the ebbs and flows of sensations, birth, decay, death



'Dedicated to the declination', 2001, mixed media, variable size



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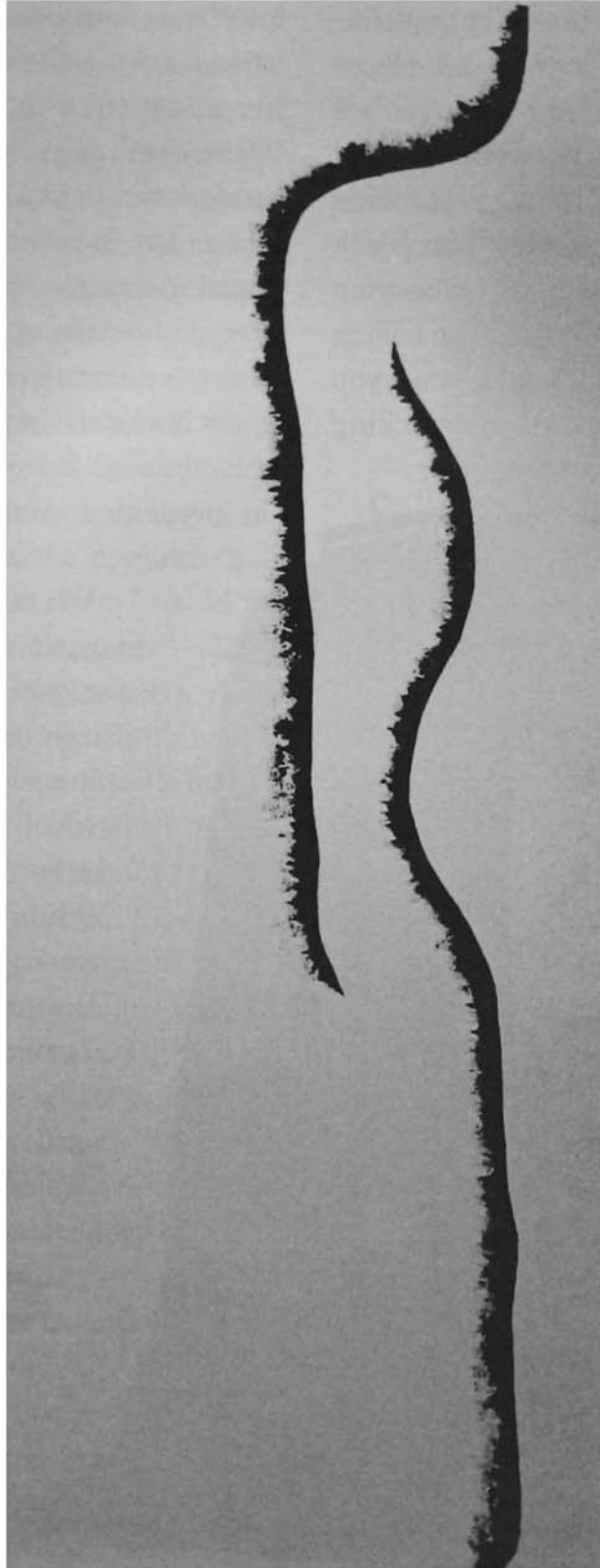


'My mother's heart', 2001, mixed media, 150 x 43 x 26 cm

(a real cockroach remained lifelessly at an obscure end of the art piece, which I later pointed out to the artist herself, who laughed and said, “No, that’s not part of the work!”). The undulating rolls were made mainly of used pieces of paper stitched together with threads, and dyed with cotton, water, glue, and colour powder of a murky brown that suggested old wood or dirty parquet. It was obvious that a labour of love had been involved (“meditation, really,” Nitaya countered).

As if at first subliminally charmed, then captivated, and finally enchanted by a warm sense of familiarity to it, I found my attention riveted to ‘The Absolute Body’ on the wall, a long vertical painting consisting only of two stark chinese-ink black lines on white canvas, that revealed the sensual shape of a woman’s body. The image was simple yet spontaneously sensuous. I was mesmerised by the thought process behind it, admiring the bold, expressive strokes; and resisted moving on. Nitaya’s deep appreciation of the aesthetics of the female form was evident.

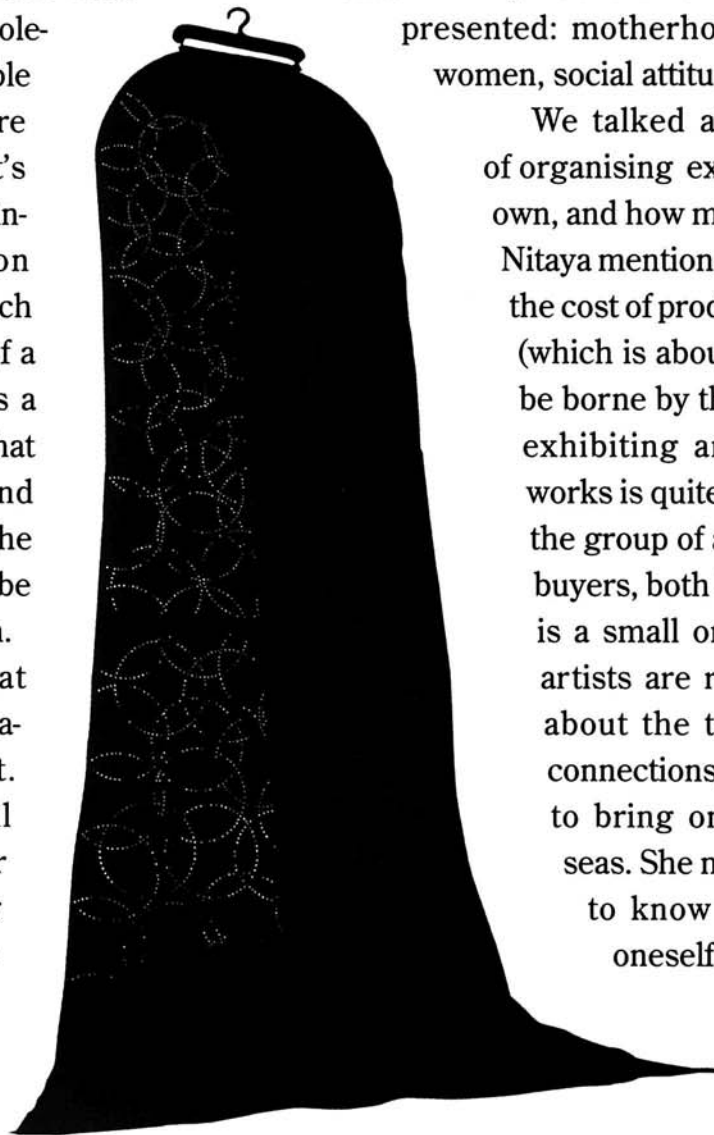
By the time the artist joined me on my tour, I was at ‘My Mother’s Heart’, a mixed-media installation that the artist doubtlessly had much affection for. She explained that she wanted it to exude respect for women by applying objects that, inversely, symbolised traditional reverence for the male (particularly the cascade of bowls - in bright orange wrap - used by Buddhist monks). Referring to the shapes of a woman’s womb and breasts, Nitaya said, “These are formed by stickers, bus tickets, receipts, etc. with plaster and glue.” I was impressed by her resourcefulness and the let’s-waste-not environmental message somewhere in there, including the use of a chair. “I have become very interested in chairs, and furniture, in general,” the diminutive Chulalongkorn University arts graduate said, “the fascination with them sparked when I was in Kenya, and also in India where I was provided with old, broken furniture to work on; as a domestic item, the chair is so recognisable and useful but is such an often-neglected detail of daily life.”



*'The Absolute Body', 1999, acrylic
on canvas, 193 x 78 cm.*

Among the combination of large three-dimensional works and canvas-based pieces (some of which were created and exhibited between 1997 and 2000), a few works involved painstaking detailed embroidery, stitching and perforation; for example, 'The Black Skirt', huge, dark and ominous (measuring 317 x 123 cm and dangled from the ceiling with a clothes hanger). Lit from behind, you step back, and a pattern of interlocking concentric circles (made with holes from a leather hole-puncher) becomes visible on the entire piece; here you realise the artist's commitment, and the intensive concentration required to achieve such effects. This spectre of a bell seemed to possess a raw, primal sensuality that filled me with awe; and interestingly for me, the 'skirt' also appeared to be a phallic representation.

Afterwards, I sat down to have a conversation with the artist. Nitaya Ueareeworakul has been creating art for over ten years. Among the several shows she participated in, seven have been solo exhibitions. Initially working mainly in oils and acryl-



'The black skirt', 2001, mixed media, 317 x 123 cm

ics, Nitaya is now exploring the art of installations and mixed-media creations. I asked her about the title of her current show, 'Manosareh', and she explained that in Thai, it refers to the small, minute episodes of a human life; in reflecting upon her own, she hoped to express some of the complex and everyday details of our experiences which we were unaware of changing us. "All the works here also show miscellaneous aspects of femininity. Several different issues are presented: motherhood, religion and women, social attitudes," she added.

We talked about the matter of organising exhibitions on her own, and how much this entailed. Nitaya mentioned that, first of all, the cost of producing catalogues (which is about \$465.00) would be borne by the artist; and that exhibiting and selling one's works is quite complicated. As the group of art collectors and buyers, both local and foreign, is a small one, she said that artists are required to learn about the trends, and with connections, one may be able to bring one's works overseas. She noted that one has to know how to present oneself and one's work, and here politics are involved too "to get to the point when the value and

price of your art go to where it is beyond your expectations.” Nitaya said she was following her own instincts: “I’m not making art because I want to be among the top. Before I taught art to children, but now I’m only surviving with no other income apart from what I made from my art work, I don’t mind.” The engaging and friendly artist told me that she will be returning to her roots, the province of Sisaket (Northeast Thailand) where she was born. “I’ve chosen to work there because the cost of living is very low. I can get everything from the land, all kinds of vegetables, fish from the river. I would not spend money as I do in Bangkok.” Nitaya will be establishing a workplace on a plot of rural land where she will work with natural materials, with the locals, and with inspiration from the idyllic environment. “I don’t know yet what materials to use for creating my works there, but I’m going to experiment with what is available. There’s much to learn: if the resources of different values are fragile, stable, and durable or not; taking the time to explore the possibilities, and study waste and re-cycleable materials (which I’ve already started on).” She mused, “It’s funny, I like the situation because for decades I had been using paper, plastic, etc., and now I’ll be back to my roots, and managing materials of a very different nature.”

It will be interesting to follow the experience of this artist in her experimenting and creating from an environment she had been born into. I asked Nitaya if she, having lived in the city for almost twenty years, would be bored there in her home

village. “I think this problem can be solved ... I will return to Bangkok every one or two months, to view other exhibitions, to communicate, and prepare my own shows which will be in the city,” she answered, “I’m going to spend time building my work



'Endless's woman', 2001, mixed media, 108 x 120 x 84 cm.



'The spiral', 2001, mixed media, 121 x 63 x 73 cm



'My mother's heart', 2001, mixed media, 150 x 43 x 26 cm
'The black skirt', 2001, mixed media, 317 x 123 cm

environment in the countryside, speaking with the local villagers, and writing the project to propose to a foundation for support.”

The artist now collects fibres from tree trunks because her mother explained that “in the old days, people made paper with these fibres.” As she has been travelling back and forth between Bangkok and Sisaket, she has already been collecting. “There are a lot of big trees, and big leaves fall from them - they are beautiful! – and at first my mother asked, ‘What are you going to do with them?’ but she knows now.”

While Nitaya is going to be living a life of slower pace in the countryside, letting ideas rise in her creative mind, she has already made projections of a few shows in the future; chief among them will be an exhibition at the end of year 2002. “It will involve furniture, installations; I have completed several pieces. It’s very fun.”

Nitaya is now establishing herself and her studio in the rural northeast of Thailand.



*'Beliefs', 2001,
Black crayon on newspaper*