

Modern Art in Thailand :

An Outline of its Development (Part II)

by Helen Michaelsen

Because of the Cold War, and the looming spread of communism in Asia during the 50s, the USA started to support pro-western countries in the Asian region. The US support for Thailand in 1951 and 1957, came in the form of military aid amounting to \$149 M. This aid steadily increased, especially after the USA's military involvement in Vietnam at beginning of the 60s.

The building up and the restructuring of the Thai economy, as initiated by the USA and the World Bank, prepared the ground for foreign investors. The 60s, marked a tremendous economic growth, with relative stability and greater liberalism. These all led to socio-cultural changes.

From this economic development other fields such as education in Thailand, profited as well. Furthermore, foreign cultural institutes like AUA, British Council and Goethe Institute assumed their activities in Bangkok through which Thai



Water by Thawan Duchanee, 1983.

artists gained new exhibition venues.

The economic boom was therefore the postulation and the consequences resulting from it formed the frame for the enormous rise of activities in the field of modern art, in the beginning of the 60s.

The University of Fine Arts and the Arts and Crafts School, in 1960,

still continued to be the institution "only" awarding academic degrees. There was no art-conscious public, no museum for modern art and no appropriate venues for artistic exhibitions.

The annual National Art Exhibition and the exhibitions occasionally organized by foreign embassies for foreign artists were, more or less, the only exhibitions of modern art. The spectrum at the National Art Exhibition covered neo-traditional to modern western expressions. It was mainly influenced by artists from the older generation, from whom the younger artists got their orientation.

The group exhibition presented by one Thai artist, in June 1961, attracted a wider public for the first time. Princess Chumphot of Nagara Svaga presided over the opening. She was a well-known figure deeply interested in art. Her presence at the exhibition drew interest to a field that needed more public support.

Because of her presence, quite a number of foreigners came to the

exhibition. British Michael Smithies came and wrote an art review about this exhibition. He wrote many articles on modern Thai art. And, through his regular writing, he was able to reach at least the educated Thai public.

The Thai press did not publish any art criticism, only photos. Works in the June 1961 exhibition did not show any innovation. Except for the National Art Exhibition, which did not receive much interest, there was no other exhibition in 1961.

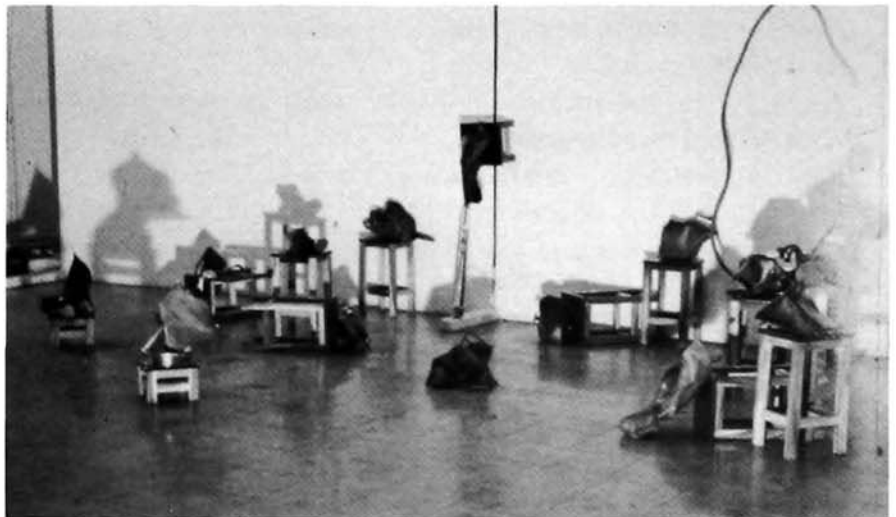
In the beginning of 1962 several exhibitions were organized, such as the ones by Princess Chumphot, the British Council and the Tourist Organization of Thailand (TOT). The TOT exhibition primarily aimed at the presentation of paintings and drawings to be intended for sale to tourists. An exhibition was also organized by the Australian Embassy and held at Silpakorn University in April 1962. This gave many Thai artists, the opportunity to see oil paintings in original by western artists for the first time.

In May 1962, Silpa Bhirasri died. His death, however, did not have an immediate negative effect on the artists and the art scene of Thailand, because they had already found new mentors. In the middle of 1962, the first private gallery, "Bangkapi Gallery" was opened. Because of its location, an area inhabited by foreigners, it had good market opportunities.

In the 60s, foreign residents were the prime supporters and collectors of modern Thai art. These foreigners provided exhibition space and began to own private collections of Thai paintings.



Left : Position and Civilization by Kamol Phaosavasdi, 1989.



Below : The Story of Metamorphosis in the Farm by Montien Boonma, 1989.

Owing to the initiative of some private foreigners, two exhibitions of modern Thai art were organized and shown abroad. One was in Milwaukee, USA, and the other in the Alpine Club Gallery in London. Participating artists gained prestige in Thailand through these exhibitions. In addition, a number of exhibitions by foreign artists were organized. This brought Thai artists in touch with the art tendencies abroad. This exhibition certainly encourages people to see and appreciate modern art.

The English language newspaper 'Bangkok World' started at that time to print works of modern Thai artists. Artists were featured on the cover of their Sunday Magazine,

with short information about their works. They also published essays on modern Thai art. For the first time, the contents and ways of representation were discussed. But the only magazine in Thai which dealt with modern art and printed relevant articles was the 'Social Science Review.' It was published by a Thai intellectual, Sulak Sivaraksa, and had its first issue in 1963.

The National art Exhibition in 1963, although opened by the King whose works were also exhibited, met very little attention. The exhibition was not successful. It had too much of a national character, which means it did not explicitly refer to foreigners. Moreover the general Thai public still did not have an approach to modern

Thai art. Therefore, the awarded painting, "Faith", by Pichai Nirand went unnoticed, though it showed a new theme for painting on canvas. It represented a symbolic footprint of Buddha which is considered a sacred cult object in Buddhism.

In the second half of 1963, the amount of art exhibitions, mainly one-man shows by Thai and foreign artists, reached its culmination. With up to seven openings a week, it was an indication that art exhibitions had come "into fashion".

Besides the existing Bangkapi Gallery, seven other new galleries established themselves between June 1963 and mid-1964. However, they resembled gift shops more than professional art galleries. But the artists saw the chance to sell their works and tried to be very productive within a short period of time. Moreover, their price expectations went incredibly up as well.

The pronounced styles and ways of representation, however, remained more or less the same. In September 1963, the works of painter, Anand Panin, nevertheless showed a new development towards the direction of pure abstraction. Subsequently, this also became visible in other artists' works.

The great variety exhibition opportunities and the relative success in selling art works boosted the confidence of artists. It also led to an incident in 1964, in which 14 artists heavily criticized and questioned the judging committee of the 15th National Art Exhibition.

The award on the painting, "Festival No. 2", by Prapat Yothaprasert was the main reason for the dispute. The painting shows a rural celebration done in a naturalis-

tic manner. Starting from the assumption that the painting was awarded only because the King had bought earlier works by this artist, the criticism dealt further with the way of representation and the motive of the painting. While the works of artists, which had been rejected by this exhibition, evolved around abstract paintings, the critics found Prapat's work anachronistic. The committee in response argued that it did not favor any particular art style. Despite the reorganization of the

interest in modern art among the Thai public, with a few exceptions, still remained very little. An art interested audience was consequently missing once again. As a result, most of the galleries and participations in exhibitions went down.

At the end of the 60s, most of the Thai artists returned to Thailand from their studies abroad. This greatly influenced the expansion of the spectrum of representation of Thai modern to western or international tendencies with regards to their style,



Untitled by Panya Vijinthanasarn, 1984.

judging committee, the exhibition afterwards lost its meaning for many artists.

At the end of 1964, the activities in the art sector decreased rapidly. The main reason was that many of the leading Thai artists went abroad. They left almost at the same time because of scholarships received. This caused the new generation of young artists to lose their models. Moreover, the foreigners' interest in the modern art scene subsided after the "artboom", from 1962 to 1964

expression, technique and representation. Incidentally, although the term 'international art' is widely accepted, one has to be critical about this term. It can easily be misused and is often, in fact.

Following international art tendencies, artists can be original or mere copies. If only Thai artists make use of these styles, expressions, techniques or representations, and combine them with their own ideas or concepts based on their environment and experiences, they will achieve a

synthesis. Successful examples are Montien Boonma, Kamol Phaosavasdi and Thaiwjit Puangkassomsomboon. Otherwise, even with the term 'international art', they are simply imitators. The development in the direction of international art continued steadily and marked a large field of contemporary art nowadays.

Parallel to this, a representation of specific, spiritual, or Buddhist themes developed in a different way. This marked the second large field in Thai contemporary art. One mainly has to distinguish between four main tendencies.

The first group of artists, whose topics are spiritual and Buddhist, has no reference at all to traditional paintings in their representation. One of the leading artists in this group is Thawan Duchanee. It becomes obvious in his works that he reduces the motives to the essential, which means no decorative or unnecessary figures of motives. In addition, he reduces the form of expression so that his works gain a symbolic character. His style of representation reminds one of surrealism.

Other artists adopted elements from the traditional iconography and its symbolic meanings. But their works emerged in an individualistic manner. Leading this group is painter Panya Vijithanasarn, who reduces his repertoire of forms to the minimum and to abstracts from the figuration. His paintings, to a large extent, also turn out to be symbolic-surrealistic.

The third and largest group of artists, whose works deal with Buddhist themes and life in and around the temple, still stick to a naturalistic or realistic, sometimes super-realistic,

representation. The rest of the artists in this category make traditional representations in an epigonic way.

In the beginning of the 70s, a new tendency became visible. It referred directly to problems and abuses in society. It was an expression of an emancipated political consciousness. Other parts of the population, namely the new middle class, the intellectuals and students as well as certain artists did not want to cope with the social abuses and military dictatorships under the cover of constitutional monarchy. Politically seen, this development led to mass demonstrations in the years 1973 and 1976. Brutal reactions by the military, against the people, resulted in October 1976.

The artists of the 70s attempted to become the people's mouthpiece by means of representations referring to society. For instance, they tried to bring their art to the people by exhibiting their works at the Democracy Monument. But their attempt as a whole, was not successful.

Until today, artists dealing with

political or socio-cultural critical themes are relatively isolated. Vasan Sitthidet or Paisan Thirapongwisanuporn, are examples of those who visualize their social and political awareness in their works. Themes concerning politics, Buddhism and the monarchy cannot be critically dealt with in Thailand.

In summary, it could be said that the interest in contemporary Thai art has increased. Ranging from paintings to illustrations, the productions of artists are as numerous as the media. The expressions of the artists range from figurative to abstract. The representations cover all the known styles. Nevertheless, the interest is still missing in wide parts of the population. There is still a lack of approach to and appreciation for modern art. Works of art that have a decisive decorative character or done in figurative way are the ones that receive recognition in terms of a good market. Each critical approach in art and its presentation is rejected as negative and disturbing harmony.



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