



About a Gallery

Established in 1990, Akko Gallery is a house of exquisite art and framing service, with a collection of fine original paintings. We visited the gallery, and interviewed Atsuko Suzuki Davies, the gallery owner who has been living in Thailand for over thirty years. Petula Masako, one of her two daughters, was also there to receive and talk with us.

Madam Atsuko, why did you start an art gallery?

Atsuko: I had to do something and I wanted to do what I liked while supporting my family. My daughters encouraged me, at that time, and we rented this shop-house. In the beginning, I was not confident to make enough money by only selling art, and so we sold crafts, Asian souvenirs (which I like also because I had been helping for about 6-7 years with the Hill Tribe Sale which The Women's Club of the International Church organised), and also began to put up paintings of artist friends and present a gallery shop. It was a small gallery, without any exhibition space.

Petula: "In the beginning, a lot of people helped, and my mum realised that she had more connections with the art circle than she had thought. Friends who were artists contributed paintings ("see if they sell"), and assisted in work on improving the shop. My mum became more involved in the local art, even with her limited knowledge of Thai language - I guess it came with the hippy generation - she has been getting along well with the artistic crowd. She was



Atsuko Suzuki Davies

interested in helping both famous and lesser-known artists, and making more friends. Several artists, even the popular ones, prefer my mum rather than dealing with other gallery owners. Gradually, we created more space, and began to organise exhibitions."

Atsuko: Akko Gallery was started because I love art. However, I am always shocked at contemporary Thai art works. First of all, religious works are numerous. This can be a liability at times. This is because if the subject is religious, then it is difficult to criticize it. There are some artists whose skills leave much to be desired, and they

find escape in religious art. It is true that some of these artists have turned to religious subjects and have been successful in winning international acclaim. However, this is a sly way to become a true international artist. It is my wish that artists who have a certain degree of technique and creativity will use non-religious subjects, and hurl themselves into producing work with an international perspective. That is not to say that there are no religious works that are artistically pleasing; some are individualistic and creative. In this sense, Thailand is sure to monopolize the scene for a while, with works such as those by artists, Mr. Panya and Mr. Apichai. The reason for their success may be that they learned



foreign techniques while studying overseas, returned to Thailand, applied them to Buddhist themes which are part of their lives; but those who turn to Buddhist themes just to draw attention do not produce good works.

Can you talk a little bit about yourself as a curator?

Atsuko: I often go to art exhibitions and artists' meetings. Not many gallery owners do that. I participate. I like Thai arts and I want to understand artists, and am always curious to follow developments in Thai arts. Maybe because I'm female, and Japanese, and I'm interested in their art and themselves, they regard me as a friend. I like their individualism. I care enough to criticize their work (sometimes quite sharply) - many of them young artists - and, surprisingly, they continue to seek my opinions and advice. Unlike artists in other countries, it does seem that there are many artists in Thailand who can survive on solely being artists, even if they do not have a wealthy background. One of the reasons for this is probably because the cost of

living is low and, therefore, artists can survive even on a low income. However, it still stands that there are people who buy art works in Thailand. Even if it is a piece that art critics deride as "chocolate box style" paintings, there are people who will buy them. In this sense, perhaps Thais are more cultured than the Japanese.



Can just any artist exhibit work at your gallery?

Atsuko: NO, not any, but arts which I like or I judge as to be good for Akko's customers. We do not advertise our

gallery in newspapers or magazines but we send information about art exhibitions to the media. It's quite often word-of-mouth that brings the visitors here. As for the artists, normally, those interested in exhibiting at my gallery are invited to come and discuss. They are always welcome, and I like to help them. We can accommodate six shows a year, each lasting an average of three weeks, and taking four to five weeks to organise. We discuss and work with the artists on how to place and set up the exhibition. Also, we do the framing here. As for selecting the works, it's not possible to view all of the artist's work intended for the exhibition before the show. I would prefer to, but often the paintings are transported to my gallery shortly before the exhibition.

What are your views on Thai and Japanese art?
Atsuko: In my involvement with Thai art for the past twelve years, there were times when I was confused. This was due to the fact that I had received all my education - including my appreciation of art - in Japan, and therefore brought a Japanese-slanted critique to the art works. On top of that, as the curator of a commercial art gallery, it was necessary for me to take the buyer's point of view when selecting art pieces. Therefore, this is the eye I bring in my appraisal.

From a Japanese perspective, when one is looking at a painting, before one considers whether it is a good painting or not, there is a tendency to make other considerations such as whether it has been finished thoroughly and if the colours and the frames are balanced. As far as sizes are concerned, unless the artwork is for a contest, most Japanese paintings are small.

What Japanese collectors often like are small but carefully finished art pieces. It is nearly impossible to request this of Thai artists. Thai artists state that they cannot be concerned with sizes and details when they are inspired to produce. However, if the artist wants to become



a professional artist on an international level, then surely it is necessary to make many considerations including the size and the quality of the canvas or paper, and the teachers should direct the artists in these matters. Japanese people measure

in millimeters and if there is a difference of 5mm, then it is considered an enormous mistake. However, Thais think that it is only a 5mm difference. Starting with size, Thais are free to express their art or they produce art with no discipline, it can be looked at in two different ways. Nevertheless, if the international market is considered, then the size of art works should also be restricted.



Until quite recently, there were frequent political revolutions in Thailand. The victims and their families and friends continue to remind us of these events; and the artists, whether they want to or not, cannot help being influenced by ongoing societal problems (including pollution, urban stress, prostitution, to name a few). Fortunately, compared to nearby countries, there is much more tolerance for the expression of social issues by artists, and in terms of art relating to this, there is much to look forward to.

What do you see are some of the local trends in contemporary art?

Atsuko: As far as abstract works are concerned, Thailand is still weak compared to the Western world. However, this is due to the short history

of artists participating in such works, and time may help resolve this. There are many artists here who are improving by leaps and bounds. In general, Thai artists

are not afraid to try new things in the contempo-

rary art world, and there should be many who will soon be at a world standard. My heart often goes out to Thai artists as they hardly have an opportunity to see real masterpieces. Those who do get to study abroad are the privileged few. Original works of an international standard should be brought into Thailand so that artists and citizens of this country could have an opportunity to feel and see these works directly. Many large companies in Thailand are helping to support the Thai art world by buying Thai art; however, it would be interesting if some of these companies could sponsor showings of, for example, a Matisse Exhibition here.

In Japan, a museum specifically for foreign art works was created more than forty-five years ago, so that both artists and the public could view original works of high quality.

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