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Jakkai Siributr



# Jakkai Siributr's 78

By now the details have been burned and blurred into a collective consciousness. On October 25 2004, a large group of demonstrators gathered in front of a police station in the southern Thai town of Tak Bai. They were there to protest the detention of six men charged with stealing weapons from village defence volunteers in order to arm Muslim separatists. Police emerged, a fracas broke out and the police fired into crowd, killing seven. 1,300 protestors were then overpowered by military personnel, ordered to strip and crawl to nearby trucks where they were stacked and driven for five hours to a military camp. 78 died en route. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra initially claimed that the deaths occurred because their bodies were weak due to fasting for Ramadan and a number of revenge killings were carried out in the following months, including the beheading of a prominent Buddhist deputy police chief.

However grotesque we can immediately recognise Shinawatra's claim to be, the potential plausibility of his claim depends on a social context where it is remotely possible that one can defer to traditions, beliefs or any overarching system in order to deny the culpability of individuals. In Thailand, such a social context is often acute. But, here the revenge killings destroyed any possible pretence about why people died, and it was with perverse irony that Shinawatra was soon to be exiled for attempting to alter entrenched beliefs and thereby revealing their political expediency.

Jakkai Siributr's practice as a visual artist explores conflicts of traditional beliefs, sacred ritual and political realities. His works in tapestry, installation and, most recently, photography, segue Buddhist, animist and vernacular references with secular and consumerist imagery, decadently reflecting the inevitable conflicts of our own desires and morality; and how we shape and are shaped by a fragmented contemporaneity with no welcome dreams of the future. As Guy Debord famously wrote: In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.



Protestors being transported, 25 October 2004  
Image courtesy of <http://princehardy.blogspot.sg>

78 is an installation that is at once a commemoration site for those who died at Tak Bai, a reverential resting site for their spirits, and an eerie chamber that evokes the bunks of the Nazi concentration camps. Each of the bunks contains a Kurta – traditional Islamic clothing – which is numbered in Arabic script, from 1-78; and the names of the murdered are stitched in Thai script with Arabic stylisation on the exterior. Visitors experience a claustrophobic and disconcerting relationship to death as the passages of sky above are reserved for these proxies of human bodies.

The form of 78 is based on Ka'ba, the cuboid structure in Mecca that functions as the destination of the Hajj, an annual pilgrimage prescribed by the Qur'an as necessary for all Muslims once in their lives. The Ka'ba is also a unifying focal point for the Islamic world during prayer. Believed to have been built by Prophet Abraham as the first site for the worship of Allah, other traditions claim it descended from Paradise as pure white, its current black colour the consequence of our sins.



78 (interior view)

In a second body of work reflecting the main installation, Siributr created three large-scale tapestries of Buddha amulets held together by tiny stitched shrouds. These objects seem both devotional and disturbing as they are trapped higgledy-piggledy in a condensed arrangement, so we lose sight of their individual details and potential potency. A current cult of amulet worship in Thailand is believed to cheapen the image of Buddha through superstitious ritual and an underground economy of financial exchange. Shrouding as a metaphor is an ongoing interest of Siributr's. While shrouding is not practised locally, cloth is often blessed by monks as part of an animist practice. Siributr explores the tensions of concealment and protection and, most urgently, ambiguity about what we are looking at and how we might contemplate; standing amidst 78, there are no moral assurances about what side of history we are standing on. And the artist's rich and enigmatic methods – an animist aesthetic, if you like – perhaps allow us to conjure the presence of ghosts. Here the cool, repetitive qualities of the installation are greatly offset by the compelling nature of the details.

A writer on Thailand's famed filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul perceptively commented that in Thailand 'the spiritual is political'. As an animistic culture that also places a high social premium on the production and maintenance of 'good' images, superstition and myth-making



78 (detail of embroidery on Kurtas)

can inform the narratives and images of state-sponsored representation (reaching a macabre apotheosis in Shinawatra's response to the Tak Bai massacre quoted above). And it is on these terms that some of the more interesting contemporary artists in Thailand begin to unsettle received understandings, such as Weerasethakul and Siributr.

Siributr's innovative methods in the use of craft and decoration refuse, following the insights of the critic Julia Bryan-Wilson, a stable ideology. As we know, art historical relationships between fine and decorative arts and craft have been vexed as practitioners sought to challenge hierarchies and re-figure cultural attitudes to ornamentation and the more seductive objects of our everyday life. Moreover, while western Modernism vilified decoration, Asian cultures have created an entirely different currency for the structural and symbolic function of pattern, beauty and purported excess. The contemporary range of artists who employ craft are diverse, from Ghada Amer to Grayson Perry to El Anatsui.

The art of Jakkai Siributr is situated at many of these interstices as his works resist categorical domestication. And while sharply political and disruptive, they are also remarkably subtle. The seductions of surface give way to social commentary; and esoteric, personal and contemporary references segue in an unholy alliance. We no longer understand the world and its metaphors in the comforting way we did.

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Brian Curtin  
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Brian Curtin is an art writer and curator based in Bangkok, Thailand. He writes for a number of international art magazines and teaches at Bangkok University.

Notes:

Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black and Red, reprinted 1983

Dennis Lim, 'Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Artforum*, September 2011

Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Sewing Notions', *Artforum*, February 2011

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Jakkai Siributr (b. 1969) received a B.A. in Textile and Fine Arts from Indiana University in 1992, and a Masters in Printed Textile Design from Philadelphia University in 1996. Siributr has exhibited in solo and group shows in Asia and the USA, including the 2009 Asian Art Biennial in Taiwan. His works are collected by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (USA); Asian Civilisations Museum (Singapore); National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (Taichung, Taiwan); the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (USA) and the Vehbi Koc Foundation (Istanbul, Turkey). He currently lives and works in Bangkok, Thailand.



**Pim Somdet I** (detail), 2014, crocheted amulets, 165 x 135cm



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