

Australian-Thai Alchemy: the Clay Alchemy project

By Prinda Setabundhu

I got to know Vipoo Srivilasa through our ceramic website when I was living in the US, and we have become good friends since. Naturally I was very excited when he invited me to join Clay Alchemy, an exchange project aiming to strengthen cultural relations between Australia and Thailand through



ceramic art. In September 2006, we hosted six Australian clay artists in Thailand, getting to know them and their work and sharing our experiences. In October it was our turn to visit them.

The six Thai artists – Amornthep Mahamart, Dusadee Rumanee, Surojana Sattabutra, Phiphat Chit-arirak, Worawut Suteeweeraakajorn, and myself – left Bangkok's new Suwannabhumi airport for the city of Melbourne early morning of October 7. Around midnight we arrived at the Victoria Hotel, our new home for most of our trip during the next ten days.

Melbourne is a beautiful city. Our schedule on the first day is free enough for us to have a chance to look around the town. The Sunday Craft Market by the river not so far from the hotel offered us not only a spectacular view but also a glimpse of local artwork in the outdoors near the arts precinct. No wonder Melbourne is known as a city of art.

David Ray's studio was our first destination. The garage-converted studio also housed five other artists, including Vipoo Srivilasa. An apparent advantage of sharing studio with other artists is that you will always have good, objective critics in-house. I noticed as well that each artist here responded and reflected to the work of others, a kind of energetic dialogue back and forth across the working space. David is working on his Master-Slave Dialectic, creating "a dog a day" over months from different types of clay. The series would be exhibited in the Melbourne International Arts Festival during the next few days.

The Ian Potter Centre at the Federation Square, our next stop, is a work of art in itself. The building design is outstanding. The ground floor contained works of Aboriginal art and highlights included beautiful totems and pattern designs with earthy tones. The second floor housed the permanent collections including work from the time of the European settlement and late 19th century work. The timeline continued on the third floor, which displayed work up to the contemporary time, including interesting photography work.

That night we met with Prue Venables, Simon

Lloyd, Sony Manning and Sue Kneebone; the Australian artists who visited us in Thailand and are now our hosts. Unfortunately Janet Mansfield could not join us because she was in NSW. The temperature was very cold that night and we went out for Korean food which was good and tasted even better with good company.

The next day we visited the Northcote Pottery, Australia's number one exporter of quality



terracotta garden ware. The staff kindly demonstrated the production processes for us. The clay bodies used by the factory are very fine, with high level of plasticity. The kilns were designed so that the top and the side walls was lifted over and you could load them from any direction, instead of from the front like regular car kilns. As a nice touch, they converted an unused old kiln, big enough to walk in, into a small gallery. The factory also offered small display shelves for rent to artists.

After we stopped at Prue Venables' house, a beautiful Victorian style house with giant roses decorating the front lawn. We had a wonderful lunch and got a chance to see her home studio – a clean working space with two kilns and many of her work-in-progress projects.

The first lecture we gave was for Ceramic Victoria, a delightful group of about thirty ceramic makers and enthusiasts. Our next lecture was at Monash University, a large institute with a beautiful campus. We also gave lectures and demonstrations at the Shepparton Art Gallery which has a largest public collection of historical and contemporary ceramic art in Australia. Here we were also confronted with many cow sculptures around the gallery entrance and in the park nearby, each with its own decoration on them. This is one of many public art projects around the city of Shepparton.

On October 12 we visited the RMIT University where Prue Venable teaches in the ceramics department. After our presentations and demonstrations we had a chance to talk with a group of very active students who did not hesitate to ask many interesting questions. If anything, these students represent a good sign of the future Australian clay artists.

The next day we were in Bendigo to give lectures and demonstrations at La Trobe University. The Ceramic department at La Trobe had excellent facilities. We also learned surprising news that many of the faculty and students here have already visited Thailand. That evening we visited a ceramic artist Andrea Hylands at her home gallery/studio and saw her minimalist porcelain series along with her paintings. We arrived in Melbourne in time to attend the opening of David Ray's Master-Slave

Dialectic. The presentation was excellent as we expected and reflected the relationship between dogs and human being in an interesting way.

The official Clay Alchemy meeting took place the following day in a beautiful heritage cottage at Airey's Inlet. We agreed that the project should be continued and planned for the co-exhibition



between Thai and Australian artists in 2008 where each would create 12 new works, capturing characteristics and responses of each artist participating in the project.

We visited Simon Lloyd's and Sony Manning's studios on October 16. Simon surprised us with welcoming Thai flags followed by a delicious lunch. Sony's place was very lovely and full with her artwork. Then too soon it was time for a goodbye party. While cooking our barbeque dinner by the beach, I had time to reflect on the city, their artists and the Thai artists. As I mentioned earlier, Melbourne is a beautiful and lovely city of arts. The city's public art projects thrived everywhere – in the parks, by the rivers, even in the mailboxes. Admittedly around the world only a small group of people go to galleries. Therefore to bring art out for public is always "the right way" to do, and I can see the city plays an important role in this area in a very near future.

The differences between the Australian and Thai environments, societies, and cultures, as well as the similarities in many things, helped shape and strengthen the bond. All the 12 artists look forward eagerly to the next time we can help creating something useful for the art communities of the two countries and beyond.

Speaking of something excellent, the Australian preference for the word "fantastic" has become the main theme of the trip. So I believe it is appropriate to summarize that the Clay Alchemy project has turned out to be fantastic indeed.

I would like to thank the Australia Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Thai Airway for make this wonderful project possible. Last of all a special thank to Vipoo Srivilasa for organizing this project.

For more detail of the project visit www.clayalchemy.net

1. Lunch at Prue's house
2. David Ray Studio
3. Cow sculpture at the Shepparton Art Gallery