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Thinking through Thailand By Simon Lloyd

I remember hearing a fragment of conversation on the radio. It was one of those situations when the radio was on but the room was full of distractions, my thoughts shifted. Two eminent psychologists were discussing the consciousness of vertebrates. As the conversation continued one asked the other what he would really like to achieve within his area of research, the man replied, "to experience the consciousness of another being".

While such a bodily experience is not possible, the experience of another, cultural experience is. Here the feeling is very physical. The wall of heat and humidity that hits you as you leave the plane in Bangkok is quite unexpected. While the airport terminal offers familiar glimpses of life "back home" driving by car through Bangkok reveals a very different world.

Recently I joined with a group of ceramic artists as part of an exchange trip to Thailand. We Australian artists would visit Bangkok and North Thailand and later the Six Thai artists would fly into Melbourne to experience Australian culture. While ceramics was the common focus and passion for our visit, others, namely food and shopping quickly followed. This was my first visit to Thailand, I had been through Bangkok numbers of times before but only in transit from Europe and had no real idea of what lay beyond the terminal building.

As a predominantly visual person working within the design and visual arts field, I become very aware of the environments through which I pass. Fragments of such places inevitably become incorporated in my work, some appearing almost without my knowledge. I also collect things, photographs, objects, things with which I feel some affinity. They sit with me. These environments are very powerful, generating a sense of one's identity, zones in which one can function.

If one were to ask five designers or artists from differing countries to respond to a simple design brief or place, no one reply would be the same. Each would respond with some degree of cultural background bringing this awareness to the task at hand.

What struck me from our meeting with the Thai Artists and later with other local Artists we met was the strong influence traditional Thai culture plays in contemporary arts practice. While I should not be surprised at this, there is it would seem a real celebration of Thai heritage. This continuum of culture may not be present in an overtly historic or crafted way, but even in very

contemporary works its influence was felt.

The textile Artist Jakkai Sikibutr "samples" his work from both the traditional and the contemporary. Fragments of old textiles (including the Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand) are associated freely with nylon and plastic "kitsch" bought from the large local markets. Later he adds his own personal layer by painting figuratively on to the assembled ground of textiles and objects. While the work is painted upon it is no simple canvas. The rich textile ground is skilfully fabricated from hundreds of small material fragments, evolving in geometric patterns the large works are backed with heavy white cotton and hand finished.

This work is anchored deeply in Thailand's textile tradition which it both maintains directly (by utilising old pieces) and advances through its contemporary assembly techniques. Sikibutr is currently working the village textile workers to re generate old skills which may later be incorporated into new works. These assemblages somehow become a metaphor, echoing the make up of contemporary Thai culture, applying change rather than necessarily accepting change.

The idea of "sampling" is by no means a new concept in Thailand. Historically one can see evidence of other cultures being added to the mix while remaining unquestionably Thai. A surprising example of this "cultural expansion" can be seen at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. The first experience on viewing the traditional buildings in the main Palace compound is the intensity of the surface decoration. Here the temples and associated buildings are highly decorated, walking amongst the structures the intensity of the coloured mosaic and gold leaf (to a western eye) becomes almost overpowering. This rich coating extends to the glazed roofing tiles in red and green. The whole effect becoming that "of another world."

During the late nineteenth century King Rama V added a large throne hall to the existing buildings. By this time the influence of European ideas and architectural styles was much in evidence and the new building was planned to be in the "classical" style. However the finished building while recognisably European is roofed very strikingly in the highly decorated Thai tradition. The mix though improbable co-exists, the roofline dominating the bulk of the building.

The sense of a past, Thailand's past seems in

many ways not so distant for it exists today as a very tangible entity. Certainly the craft traditions perpetuated through the centuries remain in part, although in relation to the hand production of

textiles its position becomes somewhat tenuous. Ceramics may fare better with a revival of the local pottery industries to the East of Bangkok prompted in part by tourism. I watched a woman weaving on a traditional loom, one of the last in the area apparently with little interest from the younger up-coming generations to continue this practice. The work of this very skilled woman ranged from fine patterned silk weavings to simple shawls in rich deep colours. One particular intricate textile caught my attention. While the other similar fabrics worked around horizontal and vertical stripes corresponding to the warp and weft, this was patterned with many curving organic motives that seemed to suggest very complicated weaving techniques. Clearly a masterly work with strong aesthetic appeal, I bought it! Later examining the fabric in more detail it seemed even more complex, the dark rich brown background giving way to curving lines of rich pale straw with similar colours on the warp threads. The pattern however was not visible on the back of the fabric, save for the few forms also in straw. It is at this point that my admiration for the knowledge and skill of the weaver became complete. In looking for an explanation to a woven technique I searched a compatible vocabulary of techniques, the "solution", I believe is much more common, household bleach.

As our modern societies rush headlong into seemingly unknown futures the desire to re connect to re think a way of living and re establish our links with society and the environment become important. To be part of a living culture making a contribution through one's skills. During my brief visit and experience of Thailand and through my friendship with the Thai Artists there would seem to be a rich potential for this country. A balance, maintaining strong traditional links while embracing and adapting a culture in balance with its people.

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

1. Vipoo and Simon at Melbourne airport
2. Jakkai and his work
3. Jakkai's work
4. The Grand palace