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A Magical Mystery Tour By Sony Manning

Early in the year, Vipoo rang and I remember saying I was depressed because of a firing. After he described the idea of this project to me, I was inspired by visions of a journey to another land and seized the opportunity with great excitement. I called it a Magical Mystical Tour.

My first response was wanting to learn about Thai culture and mythology, their values and their gods... and to see their landscape... and their elephants. Then other things came into it like the thought and challenge of demonstrating the essence of my inlaying technique in just one hour. I was excited about exchanging ideas with other artists, with the element of earth as the common denominator. Then there were thoughts of friendships, inspiration and fun. Due perhaps to living a fairly solitary existence, I was worried that I would not be outgoing enough but it did not matter - we are all different, but very complimentary and seemed to bring each other out. Our bus trips started quietly but by the end were noisy and animated. It was wonderful to discover Thai artists in their own environment and to share this journey with five other artists from home.

We landed in the heart of Bangkok's red light district which was colourful bustling and hair-raising. I kept noticing the tangle of knots of black cables and electrical wires above street level, the dogs draped over things in the heat and the food cooking in every spare space. Vipoo managed to take us to the most meaningful places that reflect the people and their values, their King and their art and rich ceramic history. This was all punctuated with marvellous authentic culinary experiences and shopping sprees in markets and night bazaars.

It was also punctuated by amazing electrical storms and a downpour once a day. Early in our stay in Bangkok, Vipoo treated us to a world famous performance called Siam Niramit which took us on a wonderful journey back in time through the realms of their history and enchanted kingdom of Siam. There was fire, lightning and rain, the music was haunting and evocative of the East and part of the cast were two beautiful black elephants... it kind of swept me away.

Our demonstrations were really enjoyable and fulfilling. The universities have big art faculties with mostly large airy studio spaces which seem to foster a certain freedom of expression. The students were extremely interested and helpful so we felt rewarded and grateful for their generosity. I felt good with familiar clay on my hands (and on my clothes) and the time went so quickly. After seeing each other's images and presentation a few times like we did, it gave me an understanding and insight into part of each other's life and story and that was special for me.

A highlight was when we headed north to the old city of Sukhothai (Dawn of Happiness) which was the original capital. We visited excavated 11th Century celadon kiln sites along a river flat and stopped at towns where most people are involved in pottery making and firing and it is a family affair. We loved our experiences in Chiang Mai, visiting potteries and artists in their working or home environment, driving into the mountains past teak plantations and rice fields and experiencing the markets and wonderful northern-style food. Another highlight was a lovely encounter with some elephants up close, I got lost in three trunks for a moment, stroked a cheek and his lined soulful brown eyes which are kind and gentle looked right into mine. I loved them and have preserved the marks their trunks made around my T-shirt. The elephant is sacred in Thai mythology and life. We encountered images of elephants everywhere - from the Ganesha, the Hindu God of Wisdom and the remover of obstacles, to paintings, frescoes, bas-relief and sculpture. They are timeless architectural motif and frequently, a temple or stupa is surrounded by elephant caryatids or pillars.

It was apparent that Thai people have valued

their artists through time and still highly respect creative practice. It struck me how often their artists express a certain symbolism or allegiance to a philosophy or proverb, or just tell of aspects of the human condition... greed, compassion, love. I found Thai people to be generous, good-natured and gentle, and happy which may reflect their Buddhist values.

A lasting impression was Vipoo's prowess for structuring and organising us, his energy and talent for good ideas and encouraging interaction, his flexibility, consideration and positive thoughts about the resolution of any debated subject - the Alchemist.

The times we spent in Australia with the Thai artists were reciprocal in experience and enjoyment. It was wonderful to welcome them into our life and show them the essence of Melbourne. We spent a night in Shepparton for an open lecture at the Gallery where Vipoo and I spoke. The Thai artists demonstrated their techniques and it was marvellous being a spectator. A wonderful weekend for all of us was spent in the lighthouse cottage at Aireys Inlet. We cooked, relaxed and had three structured meetings to put our thoughts and ideas together. Before leaving we had come up with a future collaboration between us and there is a certain promise of things to come.

There are many impressions that won't fade and all my earlier thoughts and hopes have come true, and more. As time has passed I realise it has been a journey that has affected me greatly, it fostered exchange of ideas between the twelve of us and I also realise how like-minded we are, how we share the same passions and how Thai culture and symbolism may affect my work.

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

1. With an elephant
2. Demonstration at King Mungkut's Institute
3. Demonstration at Silpakorn University
4. Ceramic work in Chaing Mai

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