

## “I ♥ Farang” Transcultural Souveniring

By Sue Kneebone

The Clay Alchemy project gave five Australian artists the opportunity to visit Thailand and six Thai artists to visit Australia as cultural guests under the guidance of Thai-Australian artist and project manager, Vipoo Srivilasa. For the Australian artists in Thailand, it was a jam packed itinerary including visits to many important cultural centres. A major part of the exchange was to give talks and demonstrations at the universities in Thailand. These included King Mungkut's Institute of Technology, Silpakorn University, Chulalongkorn University, and Chiang Mai University. Having worked with both clay and site specific installations as part of my art practice, I was fortunate to be invited by Vipoo to take part on this cultural exchange to work with the Thai students on a collaborative project as part of the demonstrations.



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I did not have a preconceived idea for the student project as I wanted to respond and gather visual information for my ideas while in Thailand. On our first day we were saturated with the visual delights of the Royal Palace. After walking amongst the glitter encrusted temples, my eyes rested on the carefully manicured trees that were trimmed into round shapes on the upper limbs and leaves. I started to draw these in my visual diary to conjure up ideas on the way to our first demonstration at King Mungkut's Institute of Technology. As I drew these Thai trees, the boomerang shape revealed itself to me within the negative spaces of the branches. I decided this simple Australian motif was an easily recognisable and distinct shape that could act as a template to which Thai style designs and patterns could be added. Other observations we made were of the interesting animal topiary such as cultivated elephants along the streets of Bangkok. I was also very surprised to see topiary kangaroos literally growing on the roadside near the town of Ratchaburi; an enjoyable visual and material convergence of Thai and Australian cultures.

Looking out the bus window at the traffic, I noticed a bumper sticker which read “I ♥ farang”, a term used to describe Caucasians or white tourists. I see my own anglocentric heritage as one of souveniring information from other cultures, thereby dislocating artefacts and symbols from their original contexts. Within an Australian context,

the boomerang is an indigenous tool that has been collected as cultural artefact by colonists and subsequently appropriated by the tourist industry to be transformed into novel souvenirs such as plastic key rings and ceramic ashtrays.

Apart from the process of gathering ideas, the biggest challenge was to work out how to achieve an outcome within a limited time frame of only 45 minutes that would involve all the students and be installed temporarily on site. With some careful consideration, I found the solution would be for the students to make their own piece based on a certain theme and motif directed by me. Each piece would then be contributed to create the final installation. A sense of ordered randomness through visual repetition would hopefully yield an



integrated collaborative art work. Alongside my demonstration, there would also be Sony showing her inlaid techniques, Prue and Janet demonstrating their throwing styles and Simon chipping away at his pre-fired ceramic shards; thus there would be plenty for the students to see and do in the given time frame.

Stemming from the idea of creating a visual and cultural confluence I challenged the students at King Mungkut's Institute of Technology to make boomerang shapes and decorate them with their own Thai designs. One student started decorating hers with the lotus flower and before long all the students were contributing a work with their own visual interpretations. Finally we had enough clay boomerangs within the time limit to make the installation. Fortunately the clay was black and the walls chosen to site the installation were white to frame the work. The enthusiasm of the students became more apparent when they were allowed to throw the wet clay boomerangs onto the wall to create a sense of random movement in the final

installation design.

Before our next presentation we visited the ceramic artist Suwanee Natewong at her pottery in the village of Dan Kwein. This was

one of our first visits to a traditional Thai pottery on the tour. The dexterity and application of decorative techniques was absorbing to watch and I began to see the importance of pottery in Thailand as being a major industry and export business. At all the subsequent pottery villages I was enthralled at the seamless skills shown by the artisans. A highlight for me was seeing the young artisans handbuild in clay large and intricate Hindu style sculptures in Sukothai and northern Thailand.

While at Suwanee's pottery I was curious to see some small discarded terracotta tiles with carved patterns on them. I was allowed to take a few with me to use in my next demonstration. Prinda, was also kind enough to give me some rice seed as I wanted to introduce other culturally relevant material and the idea of ephemerality to the students at our next demonstration at Silpakorn University.

On the way to Silpakorn we stopped at a stupa where Won was kind enough to take us through the steps of making an offering to Buddha. I found myself being an uncoordinated and self-conscious farang; first my gold leaf paper caught on fire from the incense stick I was holding, the paper then blew away in the wind before I could put it onto the Buddha, only to be followed by a couple of other cultural faux pas. My Thai friends looked on concerned, but reassured me that Buddha is very understanding and forgiving and that everything would be all right.

Thus I became enlightened on this journey by being openly received through the kindness and understanding of our Thai friends. Making new friendships with the artists through sharing the same passions and experiences is one of the most invigorating and joyful ways to learn and connect. Vipoo's contacts and knowledge of Thailand allowed us to gain far more insights and experiences than we could not have otherwise imagined.

I would like to thank Vipoo and the Thailand Australian institute for creating this incredible opportunity where we have been able to forge close friendships that will lead to new and exciting cultural exchanges and projects.

For more detail of the project visit [www.clayalchemy.net](http://www.clayalchemy.net)

1. With students at Silpakorn University
2. Clay boomerang
3. Installation