

THE FABRIC OF MEMORY

Thailand's Jakkai Siributr endows his stitched, embroidered and sequined works with a deeply serious sociopolitical import.

by Gregory Galligan

AMID THE GLITZ of the Art Basel Hong Kong fair last spring, visitors encountered a mysterious black fabric cube, 11½ feet on each side, its surface bearing 13 scroll-like strips of Thai-language script (stylized to resemble Arabic) hovering near countless rows of stitched gold tubing.

Entering the metal-scaffold framework of Jakkai Siributr's cryptically titled *78* (2014), one was surrounded by multi-tier bamboo bunk beds, each holding a single white *kurta* (Muslim tunic), draped so as to display a number between one and 78 embroidered on a sleeve in shimmering gold thread. While never quite claustrophobic, the structure evoked the spiritual gravitas of an ancient Middle Eastern tomb tower—or even Islam's holiest shrine, the Kaaba in Mecca.

Over the past two decades, Siributr, who was born in Bangkok in 1969, has produced hand-stitched textiles, drawings, prints, paintings, resin sculptures, videos, installations and performances. This solemn new piece explicitly references a particularly haunting event: a 2004 incident in which upwards of 1,000 Muslim antigovernment protesters in the town of Tak Bai, in Thailand's perpetually troubled South (comprising several provinces hugging the northern border of Malaysia), were summarily rounded up and stripped naked by Thai security forces, and then stacked like lumber in a flatbed truck for transport to a regional military camp. Seventy-eight of the detainees perished in the hours-long trip to a neighboring province, purportedly having suffocated.

Siributr's Hong Kong installation implicitly criticized the policies of Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's prime minister from 2001 to 2006, who is said to have summarily excused the deaths of the Tak Bai prisoners as being due to their physical weakness from fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The Thai script on the exterior of *78* names those victims who were later identified; the tunic numbers designate those who remain anonymous. The golden tubular forms refer to the *takrud*, a type of protective talisman commonly used by Thai soldiers, whether worn around the neck or sewn into their uniforms.

THE TOWERING *78* is not the only Siributr work to reflect the now widespread phenomenon of contemporary artists taking up archival methods and eulogistic themes. (One thinks of exhibitions like Okwui Enwezor's 2008 "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" and such well-known figures as Christian Boltanski, Walid Raad, Vivan Sundaram and Thailand's own Montien Boonma, as well as more recently noted artists like Minouk Lim or the team of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.) For example, Siributr's spring 2014 exhibition "Transient Shelter," his third solo show with Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, updated a Siamese tradition rooted in the royal circles of the late 19th century.

At Thai Buddhist funerals it is now common to distribute an album commemorating the deceased's worldly accomplishments via photographs of the newly departed in earlier times wearing a

Jakkai Siributr: *78*, 2014, steel scaffolding, bamboo, fabric and embroidery, 11½ by 11½ by 11½ feet. Courtesy Yavuz Fine Art, Singapore.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW Works by Jakkai Siributr in "Thai Charisma: Heritage + Creative Power," at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, through Nov. 16, and in "Roving Eye: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia," at Arter, Istanbul, through Jan. 4, 2015.

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Interior view of 78, showing embroidered tunics. Courtesy Yavuz Fine Art.



military or civil-service uniform, reprints of published writings, personal mementos (including coveted kitchen recipes) and written testaments to his or her meritorious endeavors. Mimicking the funeral book's element of personal mythology,¹ "Transient Shelter" took the form of 10 mannequins garbed in civil-service uniforms ponderously bedecked with fictitious medals, ribbons and commemorative sashes, and embroidered copiously with passages of text: Buddhist chants relating to the impermanence of all things, oaths of allegiance taken by the nation's army and police forces, and recitations for the sick and dying. Accompanying the uniforms were 10 portrait photographs of the artist wearing each jacket, his poses loosely based on actual ancestor portraits from his own household.² In some shots, the artist has donned numerous *palad khik* (phallic talismans promising fertility or bodily protection) and amulets bearing the effigies of revered Thai monks, a gesture satirizing spiritual claims and suggesting their origins in hollow sorcery.

This suite of photographic and textile works was complemented by a looped video in which a suit embroidered with references to the artist's ancestors is submerged beneath coursing waters, to the sound of liquid rush or the crackling fires of a typical Thai funeral pyre. It recalls an earlier video, *18/28* (2010), which features images of Siributr's royal ancestors in ghostly, dreamlike sequences.

Siributr traces his bloodline on his maternal side to King Mongkut, or Rama IV (reigned 1851–68), of the modern (and current) Chakri dynasty. King Mongkut is widely recognized in the West for hosting British governess Anna Leonowens (1831–1915) at court as a tutor to his four children from 1862 to 1867. Leonow-

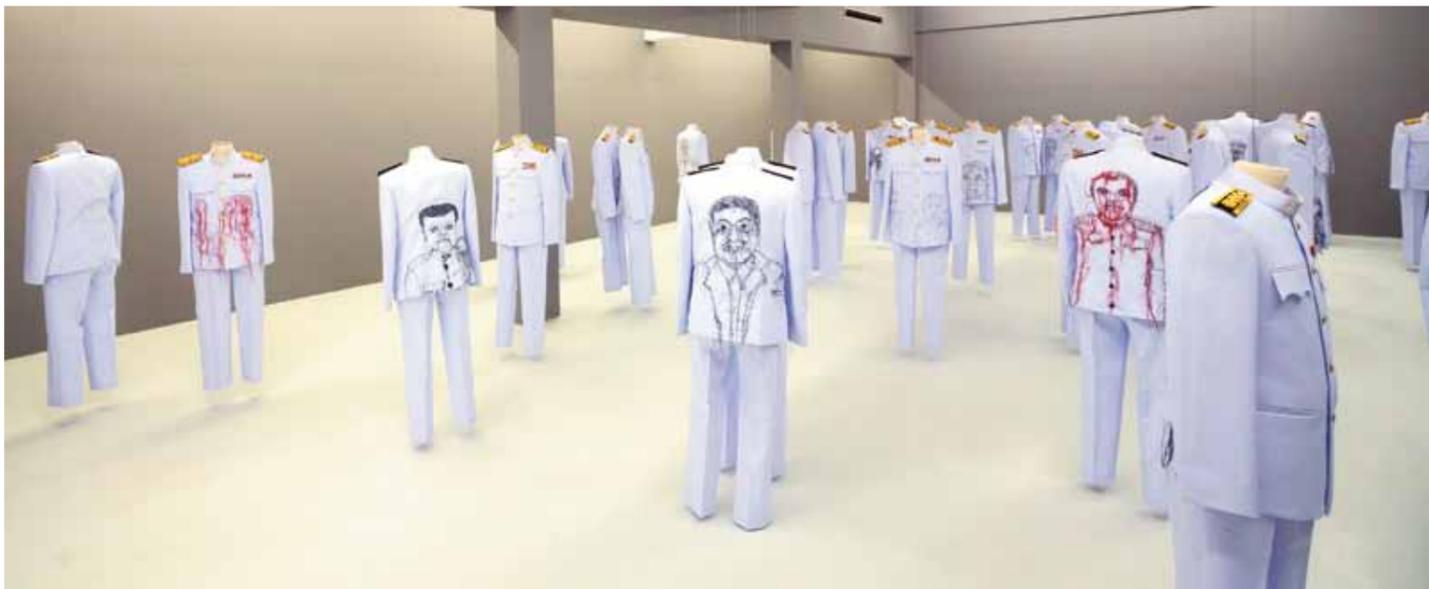
ens later wrote of her court experiences in *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), which was popularized in the 1940s and '50s through various adaptations, among them the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I* (1951) and the Hollywood film *Anna and the King* (1956).

Descent from this line of highly decorated military and palace-based civil servants prompted a royal gift of land in central Bangkok to Siributr's family some 80 years ago. Today the property accommodates a leafy compound, where the artist (the youngest of three siblings) resides with other family members. Less documented, but of equal pride to Siributr, is the Isaan region ancestry of his father—until recently a civil servant in the Thai ministry of education—which links him to the northeastern, rice-growing area of Chaiyaphum, a distinctly agrarian region of the country.

If "Transient Shelter" evoked a discomfiting *mélange* of worldly pride and spiritual apprehension, the artist's 2013 solo exhibition "Plunder," at Yavuz Fine Art, Singapore, was hardly as equivocal. Doubtless his most caustic condemnation of human folly to date, the show was Siributr's response to a troubled history of Thai political and social corruption. It contained 39 civil-service uniforms bearing stitched portraits of present and past Thai parliamentarians, all suspended in the open space of the gallery as though simply hovering there, having lost their stuffing.³ At the time, Thailand was experiencing a protracted political impasse, dating from 2006, when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted by the armed forces on grounds of political corruption and other charges. The sustained governmental paralysis was among the causes of yet another military revolt—which took place last May against the exile's democratically elected sister, Yingluck



C-10, 2014, digital print, 40 by 30 inches. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.



View of the installation *Rape and Pillage*, 2013, 39 embroidered Thai civil service uniforms, dimensions variable. Courtesy Yavuz Fine Art.

Shinawatra, Thailand's first female prime minister. The country has experienced 19 coups d'état since converting from absolutism to a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

Both "Plunder" and "Transient Shelter" additionally featured wall hangings, resulting from Siributr's engagement, since the mid-1990s, with stitching, quilting, embroidery, appliqué and other fiber techniques, all of which set his practice apart from painting and sculpture while nonetheless borrowing from both disciplines. Siributr was initially drawn to industrial textile production by the example of an aunt who ran her own batik business in central Bangkok in the 1970s. After completing high school at a United World College campus in New Mexico, Siributr entered the textile program of Indiana University in the late 1980s, where he found himself suspended between the artistic and the industrial streams of the textile discipline. The relationship between craft and fine art was then undergoing close scrutiny by artists working in the shadow of postwar figures like Eva Hesse, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Lenore Tawney, who had carved out a niche, sometimes with distinctly feminist implications, for a sculptural fiber art against the backdrop of 1960s Minimalism and Conceptualism.⁴

In Indiana, Siributr studied under Budd Stalnaker, an advocate of abstraction, whose own "hard edge" fiber work occasionally allows for the integration of found objects as abstruse metaphors for—in his own words—"issues of risk, such as rape awareness, domestic violence, HIV transmission, and things that bombard us on a daily basis."⁵ Stalnaker's insistence that fiber artists (and, therefore, his students) desist from imitating representational painting epitomizes the anxieties of a generation struggling to reconcile "truth to materials" with an urge toward social or cultural critique, all the while steering clear of decorative aestheticism. "I hated his class," Siributr recalls. "We just didn't see eye-to-eye; nothing I had experienced in Thailand had prepared me for nonrepresentation . . . although I can see now that I learned a lot from him."⁶ Stalnaker, an avid collector of African kente cloth, ultimately made an indelible mark on Siributr, who, once back in Thailand, would execute a series of abstract hangings that obliquely reference flags or symbolic chevrons.

Siributr speaks more generously of fiber artist William Itter, who, he recalls, "taught me how to draw properly." Another mentor was Ronald Markman, whose raucous integration of graphic and representational elements of pop culture in his own paintings initially repelled Siributr but arguably would, years later, show up in his own amalgam of emblematic forms with abstract fields of eye-popping pattern and color (both are typical of everyday Thai "street" or folk fabrics).

In 1992, after graduating from Indiana, Siributr made an eight-month sojourn in Italy. Visiting Naples, Rome and Siena, he was drawn, above all, to fresco painting and the work of the Italian primitives, especially Giotto. Siributr's fascination with what he calls "naive figures on flat, gold-leafed backgrounds" is evident in his work of more recent years, even though many observers are intent on positioning his work solely and securely within the Southeast Asian context. Certainly parallels can be drawn with traditional northern Lanna textiles and Hmong story cloths, as well as Thai temple mural painting.

Siributr's graduate studies at the Philadelphia College of Textiles & Science (since renamed Philadelphia University) brought him into the classes of renowned textile historian Joyce Storey, whose *Manual of Dyes and Fabrics* (1978) served as one of his principal textbooks. She ultimately nixed his career plans. As the artist recalls, "Storey taught me how to pay attention to details, and she always encouraged me to paint, but she finally told me I was never going to be a designer." With the deadline for his thesis approaching, Siributr—a canine enthusiast since early childhood—churned out a series of iconlike dog portraits against patterned fields that evoke high-end wallpaper. He subsequently printed presentation yardage derived from the mutt pictures, "when everyone else was repeating flowers."

While in Philadelphia, Siributr made frequent trips to regional galleries—especially the pioneering Fabric Workshop and Museum—as well as New York's SoHo district, Metropolitan Museum of Art, American Craft Museum and American Museum of Folk Art. When the Met hosted the traveling "Picasso and the Weeping Women" exhibition in mid-1994, Siributr found himself newly admiring Picasso's *The Studio* (1934), a picture with which

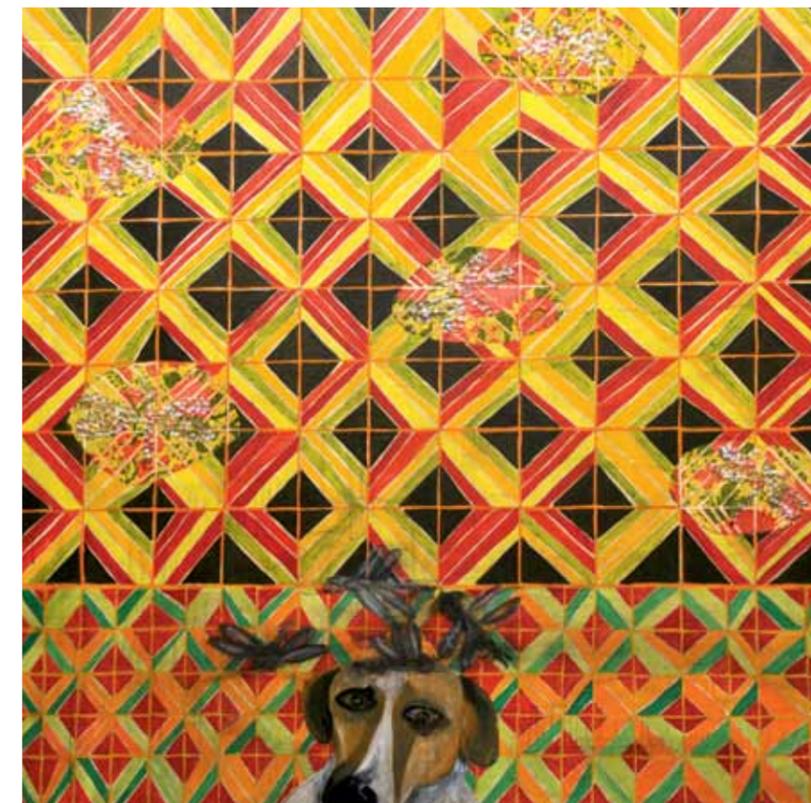
he was already familiar from Indiana (it belonged to the university's art museum). In retrospect, Picasso's canvas probably, if only subliminally, tutored Siributr in how to harmonize bold patterns and emblematic motifs across the picture plane.

WHEN SIRIBUTR RESUMED his life in Thailand in 1996, he initially worked as an illustrator. (A colorful chronicle of his own overseas travels, published in Thai, was a best seller). In the studio, he worked on a series of abstract fiber-based wall pieces but soon felt unsatisfied by their cool detachment from everyday life. Turning once again to painting, he produced, in 2002, a series of whimsical canvases that depict a set of characters—towering rabbits, street hounds and a single male figure—interacting mysteriously in tight, Vuillard-like interiors. By the time of his solo show "Strange Land" at H Gallery, Bangkok, in 2005, he had developed a personal mythology in which human personages play in an upside-down world, their costumes signifying alter-egos of depraved character, or—at the opposite end of the spectrum—moral enlightenment. As one of Siributr's early supporters, H Gallery founder H. Ernest Lee recalls, the work "seemed uniquely Southeast Asian, and yet like nothing else we had seen here; at the same time, he seemed in no way 'inspired' by the West."⁷

Since then, Siributr has addressed a number of social and political issues dogging Thai society, including the rise of a hyper-consumerism that not only threatens the ascetic ideal of the Thai Buddhist *Sangha* (monastic order) but collides rudely with broader Siamese traditions. Indeed, the explosion of Western-style marketing and luxury-brand obsession within a society traditionally schooled in Buddhist principles of modesty and social discretion—lessons customarily drawn from *jataka* tales, fable-like stories recounting former lives of the Buddha—is a source of continuous collective tension.

A practicing Buddhist himself since returning to Thailand, Siributr was initially critical of Thailand's syncretic strain of Theravada Buddhism, which accommodates Dhamma, or the essential teachings of the Buddha, as well as animist and mystical traditions (some deriving from Hinduism), numerology, fortune-telling and other vernacular practices.⁸ While having recently grown more tolerant of this dizzying quality of Thai Buddhism, Siributr remains critical of its more apparent excesses. He describes his own practice as a continuous search for "mindfulness" and the "middle way" in all things, as well as the cultivation of compassionate behavior free of righteousness and sanctimonious ritual. Siributr recognized much of his lifelong sense of Buddhist mores in Sogyal Rinpoche's *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1992), and cites the Thai reformist ascetic Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) as a deep influence on his search for spiritual equilibrium.

In exploring these themes in fiber-based tapestries since the early 2000s, Siributr has portrayed emblematic figures cavorting in Hieronymous Bosch-like dispersal among montaged and appliquéd amalgams of colorful Thai street fabrics, many displaying their stitching. His New York debut, "Temple Fair," at Tyler Rollins in late 2006, offered a panoply of wall pieces poking fun at corrupt monks and their gullible laity. In 2010, his second solo at Rollins, "Karma Cash & Carry," featured a host of sequin-encrusted wall hangings, again parodying decadent Buddhist monks and the crass,





Somdet, 2010, amulets and thread, 36½ by 34½ inches. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

materialist society that supports their trafficking in amulets and *yantra* cloths (fabrics printed with cabalistic designs and allegedly invested with powers to ward off bad luck or bodily injury).

At about this time, Siributr began his “Somdet” series—its title referring to Somdej Phra Puttajarn Toh Phrom-rangsri, a revered 19th-century monk whose amulets are currently the most coveted among Thai collectors. Mesmerizing for their visual incarnation of Buddhist chants, “Somdet” wall pieces comprise multiple rows of unbleached clay amulets, each impressed with the image of a spiritual master encased in a threaded frame. Ironically, a “Somdet” work that the artist recently sold to a boutique hotel in Thailand

had several amulets crudely hacked out of the larger weave and spirited off by superstitious opportunists.

Such themes reached a crescendo in Siributr’s 2011 solo exhibition “Shroud,” at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University. Only months before the show opened, the artist had been following nightly news reports of street protests by “red shirts” (largely rural supporters of the recently overthrown government of Thaksin Shinawatra). The collective hysteria grew over months of demonstrations and finally culminated, in May 2010, with widespread rioting and arson in the Thai capital, which led to a lethal crack-down by the government of then-prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.



Siributr channeled his frustrations into sociopolitically inflected wall hangings, stitched handkerchiefs, freestanding assemblages and resin sculptures. Several of these works also provide a window onto the artist’s sexual escapades. In the sequin-encrusted wall hanging *Love* (2011), Siributr muses over the fickle nature of the affections offered by go-go-boy sex workers; in two sculptures, he depicts himself as a successful, “smart casual” artist armed with cell phone and fashionable hand luggage. To some observers, Siributr seemed momentarily knocked off his creative center. Yet as Singapore-based curator Iola Lenzi has recently commented, “Examining the different conceptual and thematic strands in that show, it is clear to me now that if the exhibition was difficult to read. . . . The various works it presented were the foundation of the next decade of [Siributr’s] development.”⁹

In recent years, Siributr has participated in many important museum shows, among them the Asian Art Biennial (National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), “Here/Not Here: Buddha Presence in Eight Recent Works” (Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2011), “Phantoms of Asia: Contemporary Awakens the Past” (Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2012) and “Exploring the Cosmos: The Stupa as a Buddhist Symbol” (Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore, 2012-13). In each case, Siributr’s work has been acquired by the host institution. Such acquisitions have allowed his art to take its place on the global scene alongside the stitched, feminist-inflected paintings of Ghada Amer, the embroidered intimacies of Tracey Emin, the story quilts of Faith Ringgold, the hand-woven tapestries of Sheila Hicks, the woven bamboo and rattan forms of Cambodian sculptor Sopheap Pich and the monumental, wall-hugging assemblages of El Anatsui.



Far left, *Shroud*, 2011, crocheted hemp and wax, 78¾ by 78¾ by 63 inches. Courtesy H Gallery.

Left, *Health*, 2011, textiles, sequins, embroidery and hand-stitching on canvas, 41½ inches square. Courtesy H Gallery.

These artists and others have prompted today’s art theorists to come to terms with the resurgence of craft as a fundamental aspect of much 21st-century art.¹⁰

Perhaps a stranger in his own “strange country,” Siributr is, one suspects, ultimately more the itinerant poet than the political pundit, the tireless peripatetic in search of spiritual equilibrium precisely where quotidian shopping, the saving of souls and political wrangling all vie for our attention simultaneously. Coming upon 78 at Art Basel Hong Kong last May, one couldn’t help thinking that this foursquare cube of fabric decisively put to rest any reservations about the use of fabric and the “simple” act of stitching as a potentially sublime artistic gesture. Unquestionably, Siributr had set before us a milestone. ○

1. Siributr’s preoccupation with Thai funeral albums is shared by Chatchai Puipia (b. 1964), who adopted the format for his self-published artist’s book *Chatchai is dead: If not, he should be*, Bangkok, 2010.

2. It is not uncommon for Thai households to devote considerable space to ancestor portraits as a tribute to the spirits’ enduring habitation of the family premises; a similar sentiment underlies the *saan phra phum* (spirit house) found on many private and commercial properties, paying tribute to unrelated former occupants of the property.

3. See Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2004; second ed., 2009.

4. The topic is currently examined in the exhibition “Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present” at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, Oct. 1, 2014–Jan. 4, 2015. Curator Jenelle Porter generously shared her framing essay with me well prior to its publication in the exhibition catalogue (Munich and New York, Prestel Publishers, 2014).

5. Budd Stalnaker, “Safety, Danger, Relationships” (1996), artist’s statement, Indianapolis Museum of Art, online catalogue.

6. All Siributr quotes are from conversations with the author at the artist’s Bangkok studio, July 30 and Aug. 7, 2014.

7. H. Ernest Lee, telephone conversation with the author, Aug. 26, 2014.

8. See Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

9. Iola Lenzi, e-mail to the author, Aug. 4, 2014.

10. For a sampling of the burgeoning literature on the resurgence of craft-based practices, see Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, London, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2007; Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Sewing Notions,” *Artforum*, February 2011, pp. 72–75; Jessica Hemmings, ed., *The Textile Reader*, London, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2012; and Maria Elena Buszek, ed., *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2011.