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Wuthigrai Siriphon: Highlighting tradition

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Abstract

The innovative output of Wuthigrai Siriphon draws on his Thai heritage and extensive knowledge and practical experience of regional textile craft techniques. But whilst his work often references historical forms and colour palettes, his studio textiles are far from staid, exhibiting a modernist sensibility frequently verging on the spectacular. Securely pigeonholing such a creative practitioner is always problematic, but any attempt at categorization is made even more difficult so once the viewer acknowledges the

layered nature of South East Asian textile practice. This is a region where traditional understandings of fabric and colour still compete with modernist perspectives on design, material selection and colour application and rural craft weavers continue to make a living alongside industrial factories. Wuthigrai and his oeuvre is a product of this complex and vibrant material culture, highlighting tradition whilst retaining its contemporary relevance.

Thailand has a long-standing and varied textile culture. Woven textiles hold a significant place in the national consciousness, with a variety of traditional regional weaving styles being created by craft weavers and bought and worn by local consumers (Amantea 2009; Conway 1992; Gittinger and Lefferts 1996; McLean 2012). Royal patronage has been an important aspect in the development and survival of both prestige and locally made craft textiles. During the nineteenth century, the royal Siamese and Lan Na courts provided patronage for the producers of exclusive and impressive fabrics (Chandracharoen 2007; Conway 2002). The Thai royal family were also fundamental to the revival of Thai national dress during the mid-twentieth century. Queen Sirikit actively promoted traditional Thai dress as Queen consort, wearing modern reinterpretations of traditional Thai styles at formal occasions and public events (Leventon and Gluckman 2013). The SUPPORT Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand foundation, established in her honour in 2004, has continued to assist and encourage Thai craft weavers (SACICT 2018).

The work of textile designer and weaver Wuthigrai Siriphon holds a unique position in relation to this complex and vibrant cultural textile heritage. Wuthigrai's overall output ranges from knitted designs based on impressionist paintings, that were created in 2012 for Elle Fashion Week (Figure 1), to more recent handwoven studio pieces inspired by Thai religious and courtly textiles (Figure 5). A consistent aspect of his practice is a heightened sensitivity to the visual and haptic properties of specific materials, combined with an extensive technical and practical knowledge of weaving practices, enlivened by a flair for innovation and a touch of the dramatic.

After studying fashion and textiles at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Wuthigrai worked for three years as a commercial designer. In 2013, he won a scholarship from the Anandamahidol Foundation to study for a masters and doctorate in textiles at the Royal College of Art in London. During his MA, Wuthigrai explored the inclusion of unconventional materials into his weaves. This included incorporating a plastic 'yarn', created by spirally cutting PET water bottles to produce a long plastic thread. His doctorate studies took a very different direction that focused on Thai textile heritage. In 2016, Wuthigrai became an apprentice under the tutelage of a Master Weaver Jampee Tamasiri. Khun Jampee is a Lao Khrang practitioner living in Ban Rai district in central Thailand and an expert in the supplementary weft weaving techniques typical to this region.

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Figure 1: Piece from the Impressive Impressionism collection, for The Contemporarist by OCAC, created for Elle Fashion Week 2012.

This apprenticeship was an opportunity for Wuthigrai to reconnect with craft weaving practice through the production of a series of increasingly complex apprentice pieces using traditional techniques and symbolism. The experience also enabled him to understand how rural weavers conceived and executed traditional designs without recourse to the supposedly essential planning and design processes typically taught in the academic textile courses in art colleges in Thailand and the United Kingdom. The results of this experience formed the basis of his doctoral thesis: ‘Revealing localised design practice in Thai hand weaving’ (Siriphon 2019a). His thesis complimented a series of woven textiles that demonstrated his profound understanding of the technical, symbolic and colour conventions of traditional Thai weaving. The later pieces also incorporated innovations that explored, and at times challenged, the limits of Thai visual sensibilities.

Through the careful selection of colour variations for the warp threads, Wuthigrai created a piece that subtly changed palette across its surface, shifting from the intense saturated colours found in newly woven Thai cloth to the more muted colours, similar to the faded hues seen in the older textiles popular with many international collectors (Figure 2). Other pieces included colours that occur infrequently in older weave patterns and are not understood as part of the conventional Thai design cannon. Part of his field research involved capturing and reflecting on the responses of local weavers to these exceptional pieces.

Alongside this work, Wuthigrai also reinterpreted the visual language of traditional patterns, isolating individual decorative elements to create striking and very modern-looking designs (Figure 3). His most challenging and obvious visual innovation was rescaling the traditional Naga symbol, taking a repetitive decorative element that is usually only a couple of centimetres tall to create a 2-m-high pictorial image (Figure 4).

Since completing his doctorate and returning to Thailand to lecture at Thammasat University, Wuthigrai’s work has continued to amalgamate traditional imagery, practices and materials with a contemporary design sensibility. His unique studio piece *Davarapala*, exhibited in Chiang Mai in December 2019, referenced Buddhist imagery and incorporated bamboo strips, echoing the construction of Asian sacred scrolls (Figure 5).

Wuthigrai has also continued his research on traditional practices linked to weaving. Supported by the Arcadia Foundation and British Museum’s Endangered Material Knowledge Programme, he led the visual ethnographic project: ‘Wooden reed making of the ethnic Lao Khrang in Thailand’ (Siriphon 2019b). This involved recording the endangered practice of making reeds (an essential piece of the locally used handloom) using strips of bamboo, a practice that has been usurped by the introduction of industrially produced steel reeds.

Wuthigrai has also drawn on his technical knowledge in a partnership with staff at the RCA in the Thai Textile project (see RCA 2021). This project has created, recorded and archived a multi-sited and digitized collection of woven samples, produced at Thammasat University using locally sourced

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Figure 2: Ethnic Lao-Khrang tube skirt with new colour composition.



Figure 3: Handwoven linen jacket with Lao-Khrang textile motifs.



Figure 4: Naga, woven panel created in collaboration with master weaver Jumpee Tamasiri.

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yarns and natural dyes. Whilst overseeing the production of this series of conventional samples, Wuthigrai has also been experimenting with using dazzling iridescent jewel beetle wing carapaces in his latest one-off studio pieces (Figure 6).

Considering this apparently diverse body of work raises interesting questions. A superficial reading might associate the utilization of a traditional visual language with the postmodernist appropriation practiced by many contemporary western craft practitioners. But this would be to ignore the different trajectories of the visual arts in the West and Southeast Asia. In the West, postmodernism approaches were developed in antagonism to the once-dominant modernist project of industrial mass production and formalist-based aesthetics, as exemplified by the output of the later Bauhaus designers. But across Southeast Asia, textile designers, like other creative practitioners in the region, are working in a milieu where the modernist project and its ideals have always coexisted alongside indigenous traditions that have retained their social relevance.

In contemporary Thai culture, textile imagery and textile colour conventions still embody specific cultural values and retain an essential vitality, rather than being interchangeable formal elements readily available for selection, rejection or manipulation. This is exemplified in the continued association of a specific colour with each day of the week and an individual's defined lucky and unlucky colours, based on the day (rather than date) of their birth.

Textiles are frequently the medium through which these complex Thai understandings of colour are expressed individually and *en masse*. Perhaps the most overt and widespread recent demonstration was the almost universal adoption of black clothing by the general population for a year, following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The ubiquity of the practice exceeded the requirements of the government decree (which had attempted to define a wider range of acceptable colours for mourning). To facilitate this communal expression, publicly accessible dyeing stations were set up by conscientious citizens in factories and public areas to enable the poor to participate as social equals in grief (ITV 2016; Kyozuka 2016). But there are numerous, less obvious manifestations of the same perspective towards colour as an essential thing, rather than a fugitive optical experience (e.g. Amantea 2009; Lefferts 1996). Thai textile designers, such as Wuthigrai, have to negotiate the local symbolic implications of their colour selections, as well as respond to the potential of formal visual qualities, contrasts and harmonies.

The second aspect of Wuthigrai's work, his choice of sometimes startling materials, also has a subtle relationship with Thai material cultural heritage. His use of bamboo strips as an inherent element of his studio woven pieces, and the utilization of beetle wing carapaces as decorative elements, both refer to traditional practices within textile arts. The former is evident both in the construction of locally produced Buddhist manuscripts and occasionally in the textile wrappings woven to protect them (see Smutkupt 2007). Despite the difficulties their brittleness causes for artisans, jewel beetle wing carapaces have been used as accents in Southeast Asian courtly dress for



Figure 5: Davarapala, woven panel depicting Buddhist angelic door guardians.

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Figure 6: Gleaming Decay, woven panel incorporating jewel beetle wing carapaces.

centuries. Iridescent beetle wings were also in vogue amongst fashionable Europeans as part of a wider naturalistic trend during the nineteenth century (Soth 2020). However, only the most exceptional or ambitious of the surviving historic pieces from either context carry the same visual impact as *Gleaming Decay* (Figure 6).

This dual aspect to Wuthigrai's oeuvre: a relationship to the formal experimentation of western design effortlessly aligned with a distinctly Thai sensibility towards colour and local material heritage, is what gives his output a visual freshness and cultural depth. His work is distinctly modern but remains grounded by traditional practices, without becoming staid or complacent.

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