

ศิลปะไทยร่วมสมัยเชิงจิตวิญญาณ
Spirituality in Contemporary Thai Art :
Incorporating Buddhism and Its Philosophy

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

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ศิลปะไทยร่วมสมัยเชิงจิตวิญญาณ Spirituality in Contemporary Thai Art : Incorporating Buddhism and Its Philosophy

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Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Curator's Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to many people who provided me the opportunity and the support to curate this exhibition. My first and deepest appreciation goes to Associate Professor John Teschendorf, the supervisor of my Doctoral degree in Creative Arts, to Dr Ann Schilos, the chairperson of my thesis, and the authorities of the Curtin University, Perth, Australia for continuous support. I shall take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Assistant Professor Preecha Thaothong, the Dean of the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Dr. Krisana Daroonthanom, the Gallery Director, and other Silpakorn University staff as well as those participated artists and contributors, listed elsewhere in the catalogue, for their eminent support, without them, this exhibition would not be successful. My special thanks go to Acharn Panya Vijithanasarn and Acharn Apichai Piromrak for their kindness, generosity and constant collaboration. Khun Thawatchai Somkong, Khun Alongkorn Lauwattana, and Khun Buncha Hnongsue (Catalogue Designer) were of great help in the preparation of this exhibition.

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Above all, without my parents who gave my life and dedication along this long period of research, my thinking and writing would be impossible. I must say the success of my work all along, has been thoroughly due to the support of my dear father, the Emeritus Professor Dr Somchai Bovornkitti, who smoothened my way to complete lifelong studies both spiritually and financially as evident in this exhibition outcome and its consequences.

Lertsiri Bovornkitti

Contributors

Khun Surind Limpanonda
Khun Boonyalit Pinyosophon
Khun Surapol Boonyapamai, Surapol Gallery
Khun Prakrob Todsapornsutham, PJR Gallery
Khun Piyaporn Laithong, TV Thunder 9 company, Ltd

Foreword

This has been a long and occasionally difficult journey. Lertsiri Bovornkitti came to Curtin University School of Art as an international student intending to complete an MA degree in painting. It soon became evident that his interest in the development of contemporary Thai art and a deep commitment to the spiritual power of Buddhism would change the direction of his research. For the past four years this search for the spiritual in contemporary Thai art has evolved into a major study that now proposes a new context for the examination of the multi layered influences of Buddhist spirituality and philosophy on art practice in Thailand. This exhibition, its attendant catalogue and the major research exegesis compose Lertsiri's submission for the award of the Curtin University Doctor of Creative Arts degree; the first, it must be said, to include a curated international exhibition.

A research project of this nature is by definition complex, and many individuals and organizations in Australia & Thailand have contributed to its success. In Australia, Dr Ann Schilo Coordinator of Graduate Studies in the Curtin School of Art provided valuable opportunities for Lertsiri to present his research in a number of seminar & workshop settings, and also contributed generously to the development of the exegesis. In Thailand, Assistant Professor Somporn Rodboon has been a wonderful associate supervisor, and Acharn Panya Vijithanasarn a constant supporter. The early advice given by Associate Professor Apinan Poshyananda was critical to the formation of the research proposal. The project would not have been possible without the willing involvement of so many leading Thai artists, especially Acharn Apichai Piromrak & Thawatachai Somkong. The support of the Dean of the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Assistant Professor Preecha Thaothong, Gallery Director, Dr. Krisana Daroonthanom, and staff in the Faculty of Painting Sculpture & Graphic Arts at Silpakorn University is gratefully acknowledged. I am delighted that the Australian Ambassador to Thailand, His Excellency Mr. Miles Kupa has consented to open the exhibition, and hope that there will be future opportunities to bring this exciting and important artwork to the attention of Australian artists, scholars and collectors.

There is no doubt that much of the academic & artistic success enjoyed by

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international students in Australia, particularly through the long years of graduate study, has its genesis in the sacrifices made by families and friends. Accordingly, I must acknowledge the supportive presence of Lertsiri's parents during his time at Curtin University, and join them in congratulating him on his achievement.

Associate Professor John Teschendorff
Curtin School of Art
August 2002

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Spirituality in Contemporary Thai Art: Incorporating Buddhism and Its Philosophy Introduction

The concept of spirituality in art has been increasingly evident in contemporary Thai art practice as apparent by the number of major exhibitions displaying artworks under the term of spirituality during the past decade. These so called contemporary spiritual art exhibitions, however, were often based on visual presentation of the practical works, and were only supported with general text on themes and ideas; the theoretical framework of the works was not discussed in detail.

Today, a theoretical study of works of art is widely considered to be an important element in the visual arts discipline, as theory aims to "highlight the thought that is already there" (and) "transform this pre-existing thought into a more organised and coherent form".¹ Often we see works that are informed by the processes of making of material practice but in this exhibition, the artists' practice is united with the theory. The exhibition aims to present works of art that are codified by theory to enable greater understanding of the artists' thoughts and their intentions, particularly with regard to the influence of the spiritual.

Art is the product of an ability to visualise context, meaning and ideas in association with skill and intellect; such intellect transcends time, and is at one with spirituality. In contemporary Thai art, this spirituality often reflects Thainess (khwam-pen-thai) and is thus a mirror of the soul of a nation.

The motivation to present this exhibition of "Spirituality in Contemporary Thai art: Incorporating Buddhism and Its Philosophy" was due to my personal admiration for the works, and an awareness of the significance of the artists' spiritual wisdom. This coincided with an interest in the international discourse on art and spirituality. The exhibition represents the major research project for the award of the Curtin University Doctor of Creative Arts degree and features work of twenty-four Thai artists. The exhibition is not determined by chronological or stylistic considerations, but emphasises the context of expression of thoughts and ideas. In future exhibitions, I hope to include the work of more young artists to widen the perspective of contemporary engagement with spirituality.

The main aim is to review spirituality in contemporary Thai art based on a new parameter for classification of artworks that legitimises their connection with Buddhism.

Overall, this exhibition hopes to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the concept of spirituality in contemporary Thai art, and to the understanding of spiritual meaning that represents Thai cultural values, to a worldwide audience.

Contemporary Thai Art and Spirituality

The main aim of the teaching of the Lord Buddha is to show us the way to liberation, to be free from suffering through understanding the origin of suffering (dukkha), and in becoming aware of the transitoriness (Anjiliang) and the insubstantiality (Anatta) of the self. This is a destruction of ignorance that leads to the end of the cycle of suffering (the Third Noble Truth), thus reaching Nirvana.² Spiritual expression in contemporary Thai art articulates this basic principle of Buddhist teaching. This dimension of expression is associated with many natural inclinations and attitudes.

Spiritual dimensions concerned directly with deep thought in relation to natural responses to the perception of values and meanings also involve a great measure of common sense.

Spirituality in Contemporary Thai art results from visual expression that contextualises ideas related to the term spiritualism. Spiritualism (itself) refers to the state of 'being spiritual'. The term is frequently used to describe the way of thinking and believing that reality is to some extent immaterial, independent of the material world. However, its common association is within the spheres of the religious, and the ecclesiastical, especially in eastern religion and philosophy.

Buddhism is the state religion in Thailand. Its existence is evident in that it is central to the moral and ethical values of the nation. Certainly, Buddhism has underlined Thai cultural identity and its belief system, as demonstrated by Buddhism as source of inspiration for 'spirituality in Thai art'.

Spirituality in Contemporary Thai art reflects the wisdom of Thai artists to express religious faiths and meanings derived from Buddhism and its philosophy as manifested in Thai culture. The expression in this context is also influenced from the long association between art and religion in Thailand. Through a strong manifestation of religious thought in Thai cultural systems, most Thai people comprehend 'spirituality' by way of Buddhist values. Buddhism is a source of inspiration for many Thai artists from the modern and post-modern era, and in the more recent Neo-Traditional Thai art movement.

Thai Art and Buddhism have long been interrelated. Today, Thai spirituality in art continues to emphasise Buddhist values and the ultimate goal of Buddhism, the way to enlightenment. It is Buddhism and its teaching that inspires Thai spirituality; thus many Thai artists have incorporated Buddhism and other spiritual notions directly and indirectly in order to produce artworks that convey Buddhist principles and values which give clearer access to comprehension of Buddhist teaching and philosophy.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, the tendency to exhibit art with spiritual values has become more evident. The search for balance and harmony in life through spiritual values is also a popular alternative to problems caused by economic and social upheaval. The Thai art scene has been enriched with many works that continue to represent Buddhism, as well as to create spiritual values. Artists, old and young, exhibit their works together according to the same principles and ideas. The concept of spirituality (in the Thai religious context) is very much alive in the works produced by these artists, in their exploration of Buddhist tenets and philosophies, and their use of Buddhist symbols, images and iconographies.

The use of Buddhist spirituality as the subject matter in Thai artworks has continued to spread, creating a philosophical framework for the content of much contemporary art. However, despite sharing their common themes and ideas, the works vary considerably in concept and style.

Buddhist elements have been explored and used with a variety of artistic techniques and styles; some of the artists employ modern techniques, especially abstraction, and sometimes the modern is integrated with traditional Thai artistic

elements. Others employ traditional Buddhist elements and Thai artistic style in a straightforward narrative manner, while some rely on metaphors and symbols to present ideas ambiguously.

Such variation in methodology and presentation leads to a realisation that the connection between visual imageries and the source of subject matter cannot be clearly accessible. Linda Michael (2001: 9), an Australian scholar, discussed the nature of this theory in contemporary Buddhist art:

Their art does not necessarily have literal connection to Buddhism, and its connection to Buddhism may not immediately be recognised. It does not necessarily make sense for them to depict the Buddha - or at least they find new ways of doing so, taking into account their own traditions. At times their work may allude to specifically Buddhist knowledge or use iconography that is not familiar to the viewer. This highlights something that is true for all works of art, though more so for those from cultures other than our own - that we can have no clear access to the intention behind the work, in this case a religious or spiritual one.³

Such a problem mainly occurs in examples of Thai art with abstract elements or in non-figurative art. The most effective way to comprehend expression in the spiritual context is to theorise the context of both the abstract and the visually recognisable elements of the subject matter that has been depicted.⁴

Through interpretation of the key elements that are used in the artworks, there is established an intellectual framework hypothesising what connections the works might have with their source (subject matter) thus giving clearer access to the artists' intentions, and possible spiritual meanings. Although this uniform methodology may not clarify all hidden intentions within the work, at least it is possible to make connections to the spiritual content of the works, and have a clearer view of the artists' intention based on the framework of their expression.

Spirituality in contemporary Thai art can be framed into three major categories based on criteria which sets up a new parameter for interpretation. The first takes a straightforward and traditional approach to key elements of the works through the framework of direct representation of Buddhism in the context of its history, its stories, the Lives of the Lord Buddha, and their significance in the present day world. The second category is more abstract and philosophical, defining works within the

context of Buddhist tenets as ideas and values. In this category, there are both recognisable and unrecognisable visual elements, so the connection to Buddhism may not immediately be recognised. Finally, the third looks at artworks that have no visual connection to the spiritual framework of expression but respond to indirect influences through philosophical and spiritual inspiration.

1. Representation of Buddhism, Stories and Lives of the Lord Buddha

This category of artworks is framed by the contents of the works that relate to traditional Buddhist iconographies in the context of the narrative and allegory elements of stories telling, i.e., the lives of the Lord Buddha and Buddhist myths and epics.⁵ Thus, the connection of artworks with Buddhism can be established in a straightforward manner by way of the content that displays traditional Buddhist themes and ideas.

Such works often use old religious themes and ideas in a newer setting of concept and style. The works are highly innovative and metaphorical, based on personal interpretation and expression of the individual artist. Usually, the depiction of the original context of the Buddhist themes has been avoided. Connection to Buddhism is direct, straightforward, and clear in this category, often articulating Buddhist faith, its history and sacredness, and its significance in the present day world.

Commonly identified themes are from the Ten Lives of the Lord Buddha (thotsachat), Parinirvana (Passing away of the Lord Buddha), Nibbana (Enlightenment), and Victory over Mara. Buddhist iconography and symbols such as Traiphum (Three Worlds), the Wheel of Dhamma or the Wheel of Law (thammachak), and Bodhi Tree (under the Lord Buddha was enlightened).

2. Expression of Buddhist Tenets as Ideas and Values

This category of works emphasises the expression of themes and ideas related to Buddhist principles and notions such as 'the Cycle of Life' watasangsarn or (samsara).⁶ The Cycle of Life is a Buddhist tenet that clearly reflects many Buddhist concepts - particularly, 'impermanence' (anijjang), 'selflessness' or non-ego (anatta).⁷ The Dhamma stated that everything in this world is subject to change, including our

bodies and minds. Buddhist teaching explains this perspective by way of the concept of 'the Cycle of Life'.⁸

The category is divided into two groups underlined by evidence of Buddhist iconographies and symbols; one is comprised of works which use recognisable Buddhist elements and the other that has unrecognisable (hidden) Buddhist elements.

2.1 The Use of Buddhist Iconographies and Symbols

Similar to the first category, Buddhist iconographies and symbols are evident in the works of this category expressing Buddhism in the context of ideas and values. For example, the Buddha images, the Wheel of Truth (dakkha cakka), the Buddha Footprint, and lotus from traditional representational art of Buddhism have been adopted and depicted by the artist.⁹

This is a group of artworks that is self evident, with Buddhist images and symbols that are recognisable.

2.2 Non-Use of Buddhist Images and Symbols

In this second sub group, the connection of the artworks with Buddhism can not be recognised literally and immediately as they show no evidence of Buddhist iconographies or symbols, though they express themes and ideas from Buddhist tenets and notions.

Artists abstract ideas and themes related to Buddhist tenets such as 'emptiness' (sunnata), 'the Cycle of Life' and the principles of change or 'impermanence' (anijjang), and 'selflessness' or non-ego (anatta). The use of colour, pictorial space, abstraction and distortion contribute to the representational or non representational image.

3. Philosophically Inspired by Buddhism: Non-Buddhist Themes

This category reveals no visual connection with Buddhism in terms of content. The indirect influence of Buddhism is by way of philosophical inspiration acknowledged by the artist.

These artists admitted to being inspired by Buddhism in term of the ideas that influence their thinking and belief. This spiritual intervention in turn influences the creation of their works.

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A Final Observation

Spirituality in contemporary Thai art is a unique mainstream that will continue to represent Thai cultural expression. Incorporating elements and values of both past and present, it contributes to the changing context, style and expression of contemporary Thai art.

Contemporary Thai artists will continue to explore their cultural and traditional values from their own perspectives and inner sense of values. Those whose subject matter lies outside the religious context have occasionally expressed spiritual ideas that can be related to Buddhism, or at least reflect some spiritual inspiration in their works. More importantly, we are able to comprehend Buddhist and spiritual notions, the tenets of Buddhism and the Buddhist visual vocabulary that are interpreted and expressed in their works.

The expression of spirituality will remain significant in Thai art and heighten awareness of the existence of the spiritual in art expression. For as materialism and suffering attach to our physical world, there thankfully remains the promise of the spiritual in the world of the artist. Through contemplation of these works, the challenge and dynamism of contemporary Thai art may contribute to a spiritual reawakening in this material world.

Lertsiri Bovornkitti, Perth/Bangkok,

August 2002

Endnotes

- 1 Michael Carter, *Framing Art: Introducing Theory and the Visual Image* Sydney: Hale & Iremonger PTY Limited, 1990, p. 33.
- 2 For a detail understanding of The Noble Truth, see Ariya Sacca See or the Four Noble Truths, the main principle in Buddhist universal truths. It comprises of four truths, dukkha (suffering), samudaya (origin of dukkha), nirodha (the cessation of dukkha) and magga (the way leading to the cessation of dukkha).
- 3 Linda Michael, *Three Views of Emptiness*, 1992: p.9, Melbourne, Victoria, Monash University.
- 4 "There are many ways to understand Buddhism. And there are many ways to approach and present Buddhism - related art" said Muangthai Busamaro (quoted in Atiya Achakulwisut, Bangkok Post Outlook, Wednesday August 2, 2000).
- 5 See Apinan, 1992 for more details of 'narrative' and 'allegory' terminology in Thai art.
- 6 The Cycle of Life (wattasangarn) is based on the Buddhist tenet that all things are subject to change according to the Lord Buddha's perception that birth, old age, illness, and death are inescapable and are in a continuous cycle.
- 7 Anijang or Impermanence is the Buddhist principle of truth that all things change in accordance to the principle of Cycle, and that the result of ignoring this truth leads to causes of suffering. Anatta or nonself is a Buddhist notion of selflessness that nothing is substantial, even the body and mind do not constitute or contain a permanent or everlasting self or soul.
- 8 See more details of the introduction of this Buddha's teachings in <http://www.nandawon.demon.co.uk/vihara/intro02.htm>
- 9 Lotus is a sacred flower of Buddhism, a symbol of incarnation, growth, birth and rebirth, as it was said in the Buddhist tale that the lotus rose up from the ground and opened up to receive the Buddha as he was born. Most modern and Neo-Traditional Thai artists have used the lotus to symbolise the notion of the reincarnation.

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Panya Vijinthanasarn

The Defeat of Mara and Enlightenment (1984-87)

Inkjet reproduction of the Mural painting at Wat Buddhapadipa, London

Based on the theme of virtue versus vice, Panya uses Buddhist symbols such as Buddha images, the Buddha's footprint, classical Thai motifs, and characters from classical Thai episodes to express his ideas and spiritual thoughts. In this mural painting, he used both the old and the new elements in conjunction with the contemporary issues depicting a Buddhist historical scene of Mara Wasawadi (the evil one) and his army mounted on ferocious animals in threatening to stop the enthroned Buddha from enlightenment.

Loaned by the artist



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Thawan Duchanee

Untitled, 1972

enamel on white cotton, 200 cm x 150 cm

This painting serves to reveal those who haunt behind the religious institution to corrupt and commit bad deeds. Thawan displays erotic figures set against religious architecture, reflecting continuous desires, ignorance and all kinds of evil that cause uncertainty and turmoil in the Buddhist society.

Loaned by Khun Surind Limpanonda



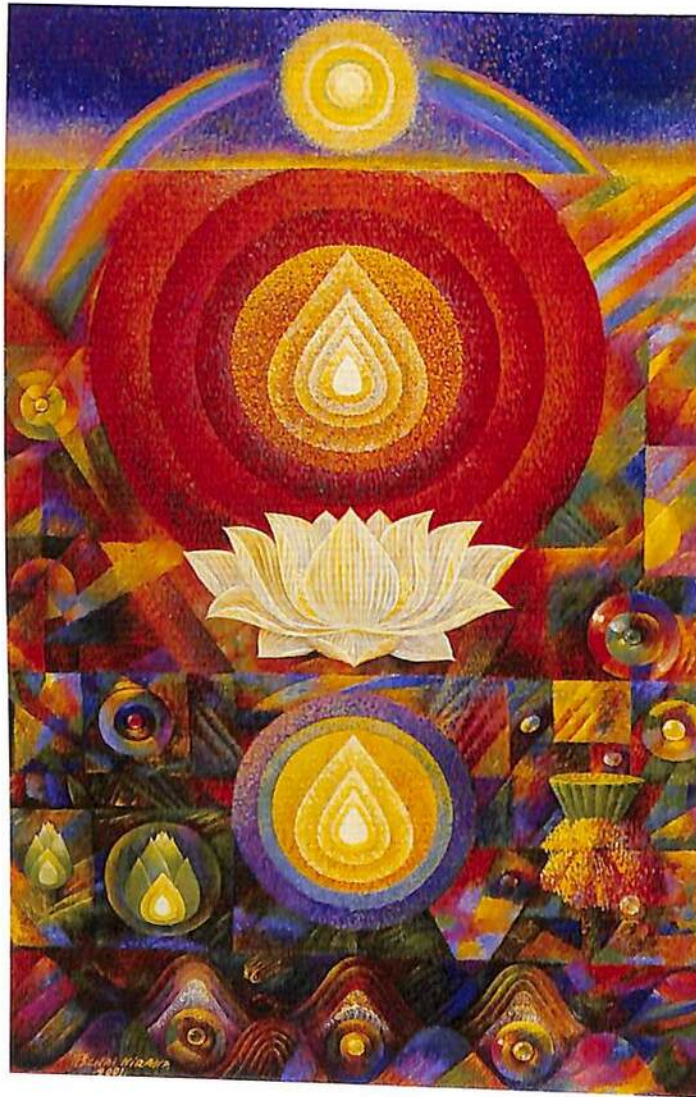
Chalermchai Kositpipat

Khao Phra Sumeru (Mount Meru), 1987

acrylic on canvas, 93 cm x 116 cm

Mount Sumeru is a central axis of the universe and the dwelling place of gods so expressed in the Buddhist cosmology or Triphum (Tribhumi). Chalermchai displays Mount Sumeru from the Buddhist manuscript symbolically and stylistically Thai using Buddhist elements such as the lotus and the full moon to create the dream-like and surreal qualities to portray spiritual beauty and purity.

Loaned by Khun Boonyalit Pinyosophon



Pichai Nirand

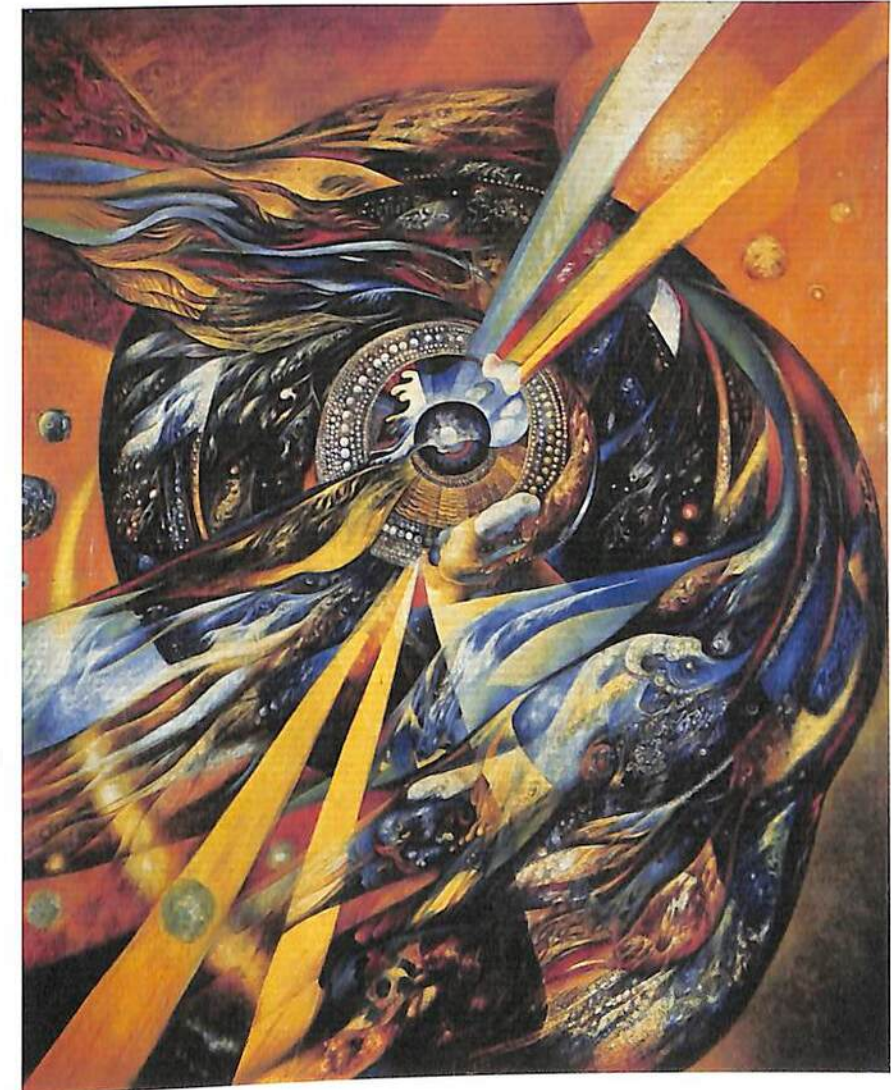
Land abound with Dhamma, 2001

oil on canvas, 150 cm x 190 cm

Lotus is a symbol of birth and rebirth in Buddhism. In this painting, the lotus with more simplified shape adorns the top emanating aura of spiritualism portraying the Buddhist teaching as the universal truth.

Loaned by the artist

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Pratuang Emjaroen

Dharma, 1970

Oil on Canvas, 97 cm x 119 cm

To convey the universal truth that lies in the teaching of the lord Buddha, Pratuang painted an eye of the Dhamma (a metaphor of the dharma-cakku) or 'Eye of Truth', which generates energy or power to living things in the universe. This reflects as well symbol of the preaching Buddha, who is the Cakravartin (the Turner of the Wheel), or the Dharma-raja (Lord of the Dharma, ruler of cosmic order), who observes with his "Eye of Omniscience".

Loaned by the artist