



K R A D À A D :

CONTEMPORARY THAI WORKS ON PAPER

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Rama IX Art Museum Foundation



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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Kradàad, an exhibition of contemporary works on paper by eight artists currently living and working in Thailand, is the first in a two-part project of international exhibitions entitled Distant Perceptions. It is the culmination of eighteen months of dedication, effort and support of numerous people and organizations.

The Helen Jones Foundation, the Lubbock Arts Alliance, and the Texas Commission on the Arts provided funding for the exhibition and catalogue. I would like to express our gratitude for their confidence and support. To Glen Brown, co-curator for the exhibition, I want to express my appreciation for his expertise and unflagging perseverance in the production of *Kradàad*. Without the faithful, enthusiastic help of Thana Lauhakaikul, University of Texas at Austin, as liaison, interpreter and co-curator, this exhibition would not have come to pass. I would especially like to thank him for his ever ready and cheerful cooperation.

The production of *Kradàad* has also required several months of hard work and long hours of the FOVA staff. To Jennifer Garner, Sophie Knee, and Shawn Holz goes my deepest appreciation for their steadfast efforts. Special thanks must be extended to Prashant Agarwal for the donation of his time and skill in designing our catalogue.

In conclusion, I would like to thank 'the exhibitors in *Kradàad*—Preecha Thaonthong, Pishnu Supanimit, Noppong Satjaviso, Kanya Chareonsupkul, Ithipol Thangchalok, Chatchai Puipia, Pinaree Sanpitak, and Luxmi Thangchalok—for their talent and vision. Co-curating this exhibition has caused me to ponder the multi-faceted yet tenacious strengths of the Thai people and their art. They have allowed us to build a bridge of cultural communication through the creative process, the common denominator of all cultures.

Kathy Whiteside
Director of FOVA



INTRODUCTION

Thai Artists and the West: The Middle Path
Glen R. Brown

*Be careful to choose the good,
Choose poetry as your guide,
Be a good citizen, work hard,
And Thailand will be honored as a bright jewel.*

—King Vajiravudh¹

The twentieth century has witnessed perhaps the most significant transformations in Thai art since the emergence of the classical Siamese style from its Khmer precedents in the fourteenth century. Over the past hundred years, Thai classical and folk art traditions have passed through alternating stages of decline and renewal in response to an increasingly international outlook that has carried with it fluctuating attitudes toward Western aesthetics. The unique character of contemporary Thai art is attributable to the Thai artist's ability to seek and finally open a middle path, to synthesize from classical Thai style, elements of indigenous folk art and Western art history an effective expression of a changing Thailand.

Nationalization and Westernization:
Toward a Contemporary Thai Art

The varied fortunes of Thai classical and folk art in the twentieth century have corresponded fairly directly to transformations in Thai attitudes toward their own heritage, especially early in the century when it became fashionable among the younger members of the upper class to disparage traditional Thai culture and pursue a Westernization in which sophistication was equated with a taste for European habits.² The tendency of "Young Siam" to turn away from its roots was especially strongly felt with regard to Thai classical art, which not only embodied ancient belief systems through its almost exclusively religious subject matter but also—because of its anonymity, repetitive imagery and conventional stylistic traits—seemed to reinforce an artistic conservatism. Vestiges of this uneasiness toward tradition prevail in some

contexts today; at Chulalongkorn University, for example, dedication to the ideals of a progressive international art has led to the requirement that all faculty hold terminal degrees from foreign institutions.³ In general, however, contemporary Thai art is characterized by an active dialogue with both classical Thai art and traditional belief systems.

The oldest of these belief systems, a form of animism recognizing *phi* or spirits and a vital essence called *khwan*, was largely incorporated into Buddhist thought during the conversion of the Thai by the Buddhist Môn some 1000 years ago. Traces of animism still exist, however, in rural areas of Thailand. In addition, the influence of Hinduism, particularly through the Brahmanical ritual practiced among the Siamese elite, left its mark on the Thai world view.⁴ Christianity and Islam have had a small following, and more recently some interest has even arisen in astrology. (In a well-publicized instance in 1977, prime minister Thanin Kraivixien solicited the aid of fortunetellers to help him—unsuccessfully—to retain power.)⁵ Despite these varied influences, however, Buddhism—usually in a very pragmatic form—remains the belief system most prevalent among contemporary Thais.

The significance of the Buddhist tradition, even among those Thais who profess a scepticism toward more formal rituals, is the strong philosophical base it provides and the influence it continues to exert over aspects of personality. Deeply ensconced in the Thai world view are the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: 1) life is full of

suffering; 2) suffering is a consequence of desire; 3) suffering can be eliminated by eliminating desire; 4) desire is eliminated by following the Middle Path. Addressing the necessity of the Middle Path, the Buddha told his disciples:

There are two extremes which should be avoided by a man who renounces the world. One of these is the practice of those things related to the passions, and particularly sensuality; this is low, uncivilized, unworthy and unprofitable, and is fit only for the worldly minded. The other extreme is the practice of self-mortification, which is painful, undignified and equally unprofitable.⁶

The Middle or Noble Eightfold Path, the alternative to the extremes of hedonism and self-inflicted suffering, consists of eight rules of conduct: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The influence of these principles on the formation of national traits, such as a propensity for moderation and compromise, has often been noted by foreigners. The Thai themselves place particular value on their even temperament and praise the quality of *cai yen* (cool heart) or emotional restraint.⁷ It was in part the non-aggressive and sometimes even self-effacing nature that Thais traditionally adopted with regard to foreigners that made them particularly susceptible to the growing influence of the West in the modern period. The strength of equanim-

ity which led to the polite acceptance and even adoption of foreign ways became a weakness to the extent that it led to a devaluing of the Thais' own tradition.

It was not until 1910, with the reign of King Vajiravudh, that a concerted effort was made to reverse the effects of acculturation. In an effort to cultivate a spirit of nationalism, Vajiravudh's public addresses frequently touched upon the theme of the individual's responsibility for the reputation and fortunes of the state. Speaking to a body of students about to embark for study at European universities, for example, Vajiravudh admonished:

... I beg to remind all of you students that we are Thai. Don't disparage your nation, for in doing so you are in effect disparaging yourselves. ... We must nurture the merits and the good characteristics of our race and not let it be said that we are inferior and not the equals of others. ... A nation without its own traditional culture is not regarded by outsiders as a nation at all. It is looked down upon by the world and is a subject of derision.⁸

The way back to a strong sense of tradition, according to Vajiravudh, was to consider the unique characteristics of Thailand's history, religion, language and art.

Thai art, which Vajiravudh considered an integral part of Thai identity, was given special attention. The king's personal involvement in the promo-

tion of the fine arts extended to making speeches, publishing articles and even writing poetry in praise of Thai artists. In addition, state funds were provided for the establishment of a Department of Fine Arts in 1912 and a School of Arts and Crafts at Wat Ratchaburana in 1914. In order to encourage the support of Thai artists by collectors, an annual Arts and Crafts Fair was established in 1913, and government-funded exhibitions of Thai art were sent to Turin, Leipzig and San Francisco.⁹

Ironically, while the prestige of Thai artists was certainly raised through the support of Vajiravudh's nationalist program, one of the king's seemingly minor decisions was to lead to several decades of such strong European influence that Thai art would become essentially indistinguishable from its Western counterpart. In 1923, Vajiravudh invited the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci to Thailand to produce a series of monuments to the principal figures in Thai history. Feroci carried out his commissions, but in the process became so enamored of Thailand that he spent the rest of his life there, teaching the principles of Western aesthetics to generations of Thai artists.¹⁰

It was not until after 1962, the year of Feroci's death, that Thai artists began once more to look to their native traditions of classical and folk art for inspiration. Over the past thirty years Thai art has developed as a integration of these traditions with the early modernist aesthetic propagated by Feroci and the later forms and ideas of European and American art encountered by Thai artists while abroad as students

Both form and content have evolved to address the central issue of what it means to be Thai today, to live in a country with ancient traditions and and the modern problems of traffic jams, pollution, and AIDS.

Eight Contemporary Thai Artists

The eight artists selected for the current exhibition—Preecha Thaothong, Kanya Chareonsupkul, Noppong Satjaviso, Ithipol Thangchalok, Luxmi Thangchalok, Pishnu Supanimit, Chatchai Puipia and Pinaree Sanpitak—represent in their work the principal characteristics of contemporary Thai art. Strongly formalist, the work tends toward harmonious color fields and serene geometric arrangements rather than jarringly expressionistic contrasts of color or tone. A sense of moderation and a balance conducive to contemplation are in part the legacy of the Thai classical aesthetic and its reflection of the Buddhist adherence to the Middle Path. It also, however, relates to the influence of Western Post-Painterly Abstraction and Minimalism. (Ithipol Thangchalok, Luxmi Thangchalok and Kanya Chareonsupkul earned their graduate degrees in American Universities in the early '70s).

Seven of the eight artists in the current exhibition share a relationship—either as faculty, alumni, or both—to the principal art school in Thailand, Silpakorn University. Founded in 1934 as the School of Fine Arts, Silpakorn—which changed its title and status in 1943—now employs over 500 faculty in architecture, archaeology, education, technology and the sciences, as well as all areas of the fine arts. As an institution, Silpakorn University has been the single

most important influence on Thai art in the latter part of this century. Its support of Thai classical and folk art in the early '60s, for instance, set the precedent for the study of traditional art styles that has become part of the required curriculum in Thailand's six principal art schools.

Despite stylistic similarities and institutional affiliations, the most significant unifying factor of the current exhibition is the medium it represents. Paper has an ancient history, originating in China in 105 AD and soon after spreading to Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. *Kradàad saa*, or handmade paper, long held a special place in Thai tradition. As with other Thai arts in the twentieth century, however, handmade paper and its associations with ethnicity did not reconcile with the taste for Westernization. As a consequence, the knowledge of traditional techniques died out in many parts of Thailand. It was not until the early 1980s—when a faculty member at Silpakorn University began to incorporate *kradàad saa* in his work and to teach the techniques of papermaking to his students—that Thai handmade paper made a comeback.¹¹ Today, *kradàad saa* is a symbol of the Thai past, of the folk art tradition and of a Buddhist respect for natural processes.

Textured surfaces of handmade paper, play-grounds for subtleties of light and shade, create in Chatchai Puipia's "Paper Works" a strong sense of impermanency, the fragility of the organic world. The ephemeral qualities of soft shadows are complemented by the wispy fibers that trail from the surfaces like delicate root

systems or thin locks of human hair. Against the empty paper fields, the appearance is of almost imperceptible disturbances made by tiny pebbles as a wave recedes from the sand. A slight rippling is the only indication of motion, the sole source of tension. Monochromatic, the works are paragons of neutrality: like the Buddhist Middle Path, they are neither given to inordinate sensuality nor to radical asceticism.

A similar sense of balance is conveyed by Kanya Chareonsupkul, whose three-dimensional collages are painted over in unifying pale tones. Her work—in tune with natural processes such as the changing of seasons, the movement of water and the shifting of earth—employs an abstract format to produce spiritual resonance. Through a technique of hand-embossing, Kanya creates molded-paper stones that embody properties of cosmological structure. Enmeshed in wire nets, these paper forms recall the ancient Chinese relation of the human body to the natural landscape, in which rocks function as bones: “the core of nature.”¹²

Bones, concealed structuring devices, also provide the imagery for Luxmi Thangchalok's colorful layered-paper works “Forms of the Hidden World.” In all-over compositions in which rib and vertebra shapes interact to create patterns rather than recognizable skeletons, Luxmi creates a sense of organic integrity transcending any individual life. The works suggest a process, the Buddhist flux, in which all things are recycled: bones, ossified minerals, break down to their original state after death, or, through fossilization, literally become stones.

From this perspective, the individual is simply a part of a larger being, and to emphasize the primacy of the ego is to misunderstand the true nature of existence.

If Kanya Chareonsupkul and Luxmi Thangchalok focus on the bones of the world, Pinaree Sanpitak might be said to examine its skin. The three-dimensional forms in her installation *Breastworks* have the frailty and eerie beauty of the American sculptor Kiki Smith's representations of the human body. Pinaree's work, however, seems directed not toward the body's physical properties but rather toward its dematerialization and connection to a feminine principle or spirit often neglected in the Buddhist tradition.¹³ Her molded-fiber breasts, oriented horizontally across the gallery floor, create a microcosmic landscape with the austere features of a Zen garden, promoting contemplation of the place of birth and nourishment in a continuum greater than any individual life.

This greater continuum, a perpetual recombinatory process metaphorically represented as a stream of life, is also suggested by the non-objective collages of Noppong Satjaviso. Like the *tachiste* works of Nicolas de Staël, Noppong's textured all-over compositions set irregular rectangular forms against one another to create an undulating surface that precludes the dominance of a spatial center or any individual form. Reference to Buddhist conceptions of the non-self is made through the combination of red and gold in patches across the surface. In Thai tradition, colors often have supernatural associ-

ations with a place or time of birth and can become personal attributes.¹⁴ Red is sacred, and gold—the most radiant of colors—is always associated with the Buddha, who in Hinayana Buddhist scripture is described as “golden-skinned.”

References to traditional Thai art and beliefs are also strong in the work of Ithipol Thangchalok, who incorporates in his paintings a modern version of the *raa-la-iad*, or fine-lined, style of folk art. Through black grounds—sometimes divided vertically into rectangular sections by pale bands of horizontal lines—Ithipol scratches out wavy patterns to reveal a multicolored surface beneath. The effect is of curling wisps of colored smoke—the kind of burning incense—or the shimmering ripples on the surface of flowing water. Out of this flux of lines loom geometric forms—rectangles and triangles—creating an effect reminiscent of Robert Motherwell's Open series, in which sharp lines representing Western analytical philosophy were set against a shifting colorfield of the Eastern void.

Strongly geometric compositions also characterize the work of Preecha Thaothong, whose stepped-frets and rectangles relate to Buddhist temple forms while evoking the warm serenity of Robert Mangold's Manila paintings. A frequent form in Preecha's work is the triangle, with its references to such aspects of Buddhist trinity as the Three Jewels of affirmation: “I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the law; I take refuge in the community.” Another strongly geometricizing trait is the use of the grid, a compositional device common both to

Modernist movements such as De Stijl and Minimalism and to classical Thai arrangements such as the 100 pedagogical icons on the feet of the colossal nineteenth-century reclining Buddha at Wat Pho. In Preecha's work, reference is made to such icons through the inclusion of small embossed gold-leaf Buddha and Lotus images among regular patterns of squares.

Perhaps the most overt use of traditional Thai forms is found in the work of Pishnu Supanimit, who weaves—between horizontal strips suggesting rolling bands of pixels on a video screen—elements of Thai furniture and architecture, with their flamboyant leaf-and-tendrill designs, and *nangyay*, or shadow puppet forms. The traditional arabesque patterns adorning stuccoed gables, carved-relief lids or richly articulated surfaces of cabinet doors have in recent years found only a dull echo in objects mass-produced for the tourist trade, while traditional forms of entertainment such as the *nangyay* have been abandoned in favor of modern video games and television.¹⁵ Pishnu's use of traditional forms in a contemporary context—the creation of what he calls a “sandwich”—seeks the regenerating, “making-strange” effect that the best of art can produce. In their fresh guise, emblems of the Thai past are recovered as a reminder that taking the Middle Path in a changing world means neither resisting the new nor renouncing tradition but seeking the harmony between.

Lubbock, January 1995

NOTES

¹Quoted by Walter F. Vella in *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1978), p. 237.

²Ibid., p. 179.

³Herbert P. Phillips, *The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1992), p. 35.

⁴Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 178-9.

⁵Elliot Kulick and Dick Wilson, *Thailand's Turn: Profile of a New Dragon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 98.

⁶H. Saddhatissa, *The Life of the Buddha* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 35.

⁷John Paul Fieg, *A Common Core: Thais and Americans* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1989), p. 11.

⁸Quoted in Vella, pp. 178-9.

⁹Ibid., pp. 232-33.

¹⁰Phillips, pp. 6-7.

¹¹Ibid., p. 22.

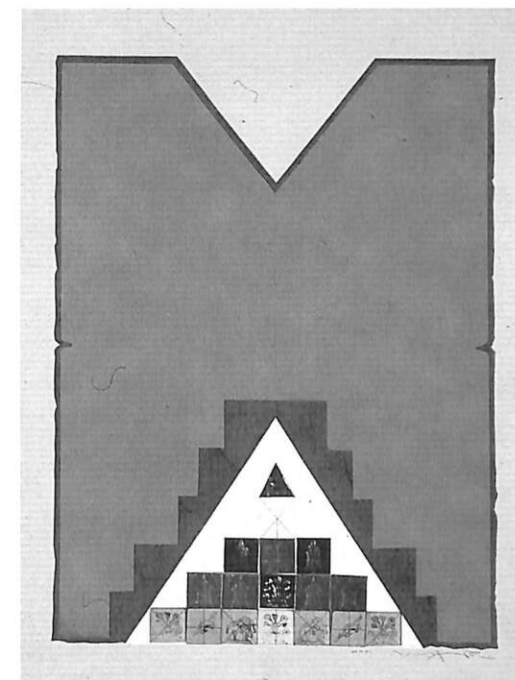
¹²See Tani Arata, "Toward an Asian School of Contemporary Art" *New Art From Southeast Asia* (Exhibition Catalog, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space, 1992), p. 103.

¹³On feminist perspectives on Buddhism see Chatsumarn Kabilsingh *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).

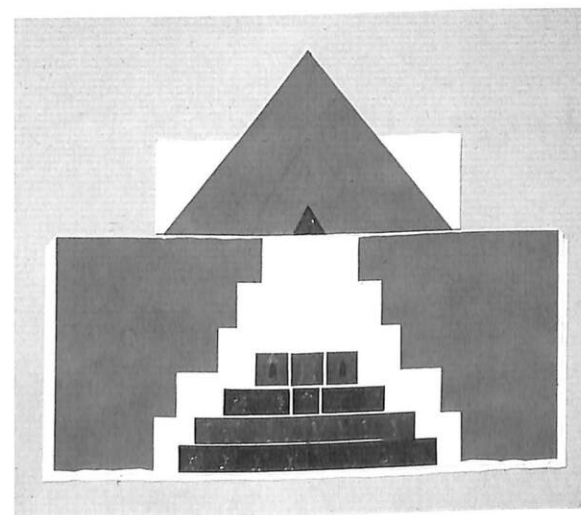
¹⁴Phillips, p. 28.

¹⁵Keyes, p. 197.

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Preecha Thaonthong, *Born*, Collage, 27" x 15 1/2", 1994

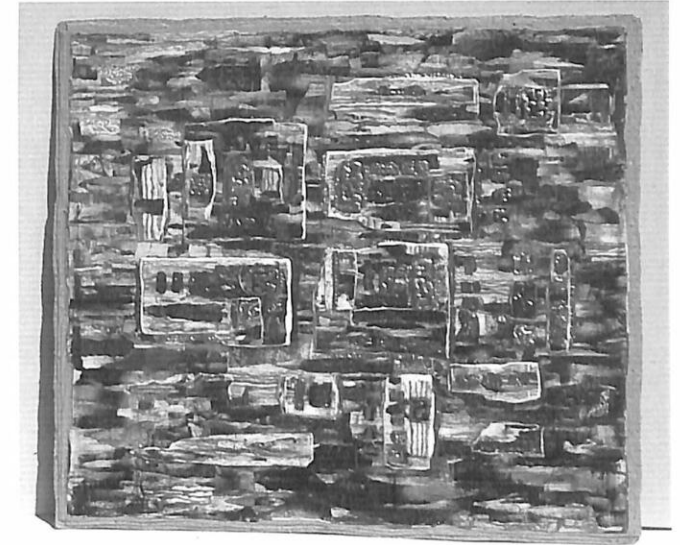


Preecha Thaonthong, *Final*, Collage, 17" x 19", 1994



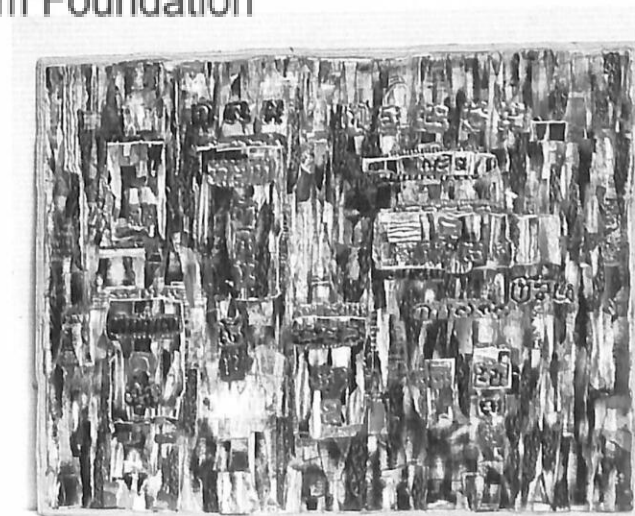
Pishnu Supanimit, *Bookcase Sandwich #2*, Mixed media collage, 15 1/2" x 15 1/2", 1994

Pishnu Supanimit, *Cable Sandwich #2*, Mixed media collage, 15 1/2" x 15 1/2", 1994

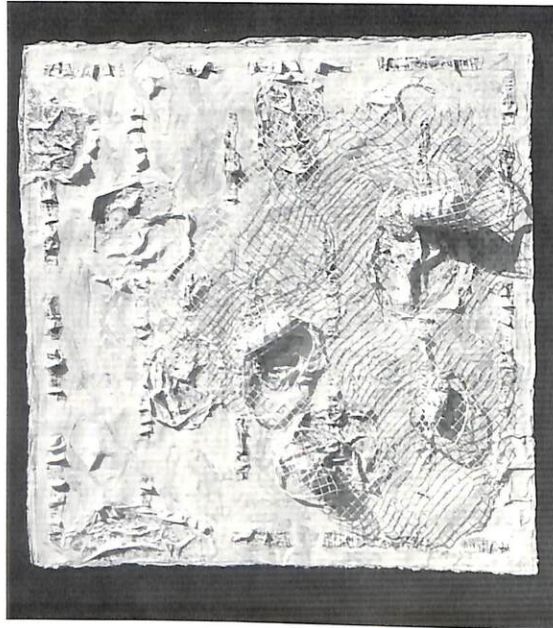


Noppong Satjaviso, *Old Languages; New Languages #1*, Mixed media collage, 17 1/2" x 20", 1994

Noppong Satjaviso, *Old Languages; New Languages #2*, Mixed media collage, 15 1/2" x 20", 1994



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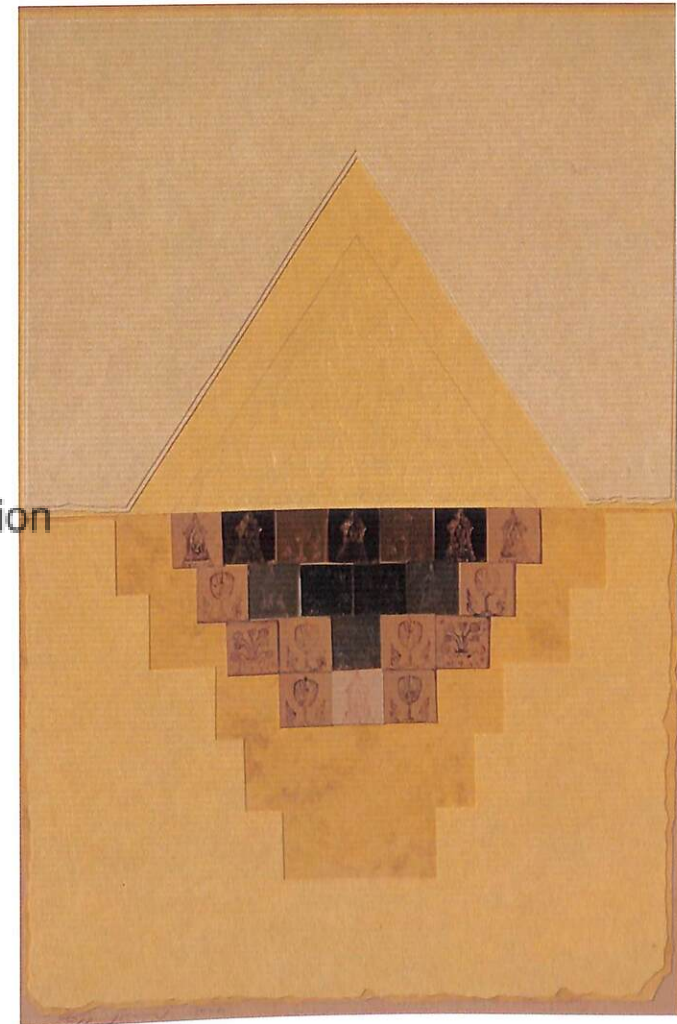


Kanya Chareonsupkul
Four Sides of a Heart/Right, Mixed media, 34" x 32", 1994

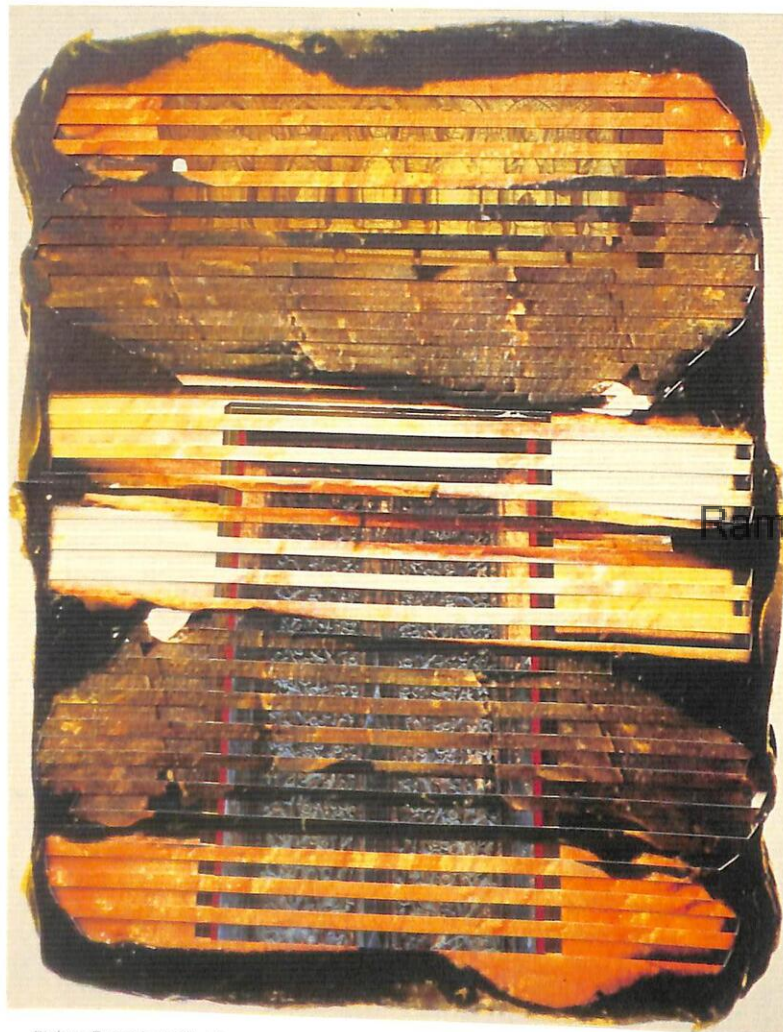


Kanya Chareonsupkul
Four Sides of a Heart/Below, Mixed media, 34" x 32", 1994

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Preecha Thaonthong
Educate, Collage, 23" x 15", 1994



Pishnu Supanimit, *That Art Sandwich*, Mixed media collage, 16" x 15 1/2", 1994

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Noppong Satjaviso, *Old Languages, New Languages #4*, Mixed media collage, 18" x 18", 1994