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Thai textile art making a potent point

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WITH a simple technique and an age-old tradition that's more associated with craft, Thai artist Jakkai Siributr is keen to push textile art to the next level. Not in terms of design, but with the use of textile as a medium for contemporary art. Instead of embroidery for decoration, it is embroidery for change, loaded with socio-political messages.

Siributr was last seen at this year's Art Stage Singapore showcased as part of Project Stage, a curated platform dedicated to young cutting-edge artists and interesting galleries in the Asia-Pacific art scene.

He was presented by Yavuz Fine Art, which is also representing the 44-year-old artist in his first solo in Singapore now. *Plunder* is a continuation of that Art Stage Singapore work, he says. "But what I'm presenting this time is an installation of works done on uniforms so that the work is more three-dimensional."

The centrepiece of the exhibition is *Rape and Pillage*, a groundbreaking large-scale installation that examines Thailand's turbulent political scene. Consisting of 39 white uniforms of the Thai civil service embroidered with the portraits of current and past politicians (including ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra), the work asks audiences to consider and judge the current political system, its representatives, and the latter's effectiveness in giving voice to Thai citizens.

The show at Yavuz also includes five hand-embroidered tapestries which are 2 metres by 1.6 metres. Siributr does most of the embroidery himself, but he does have one assistant who helps him with the beading. It normally takes him 12-18 months to prepare for a show, he shares.

A former university lecturer, Siributr didn't plan on being an artist until just seven years ago. In fact, it didn't cross his mind at all.

"I've liked art and design since I was a child. That's why I chose a subject related to art – textile design – when I went to university in the US. But it was for the commercial aspects. I never thought I could make a career out of being an artist," he says candidly.

But he started creating art pieces in his free time. Siributr's first exhibition was in 1998. Then, in the early 2000s, he quit his teaching job to write for publications. In 2003 he even started to edit a magazine.

He took the plunge to become a full-time artist in 2006, when he stopped all other jobs and concentrated fully on art. "Because I didn't have enough time, I wasn't progressing and evolving as an artist. To create works on a larger scale, I needed to devote more time to it."

Siributr is attracted to folk art – which is expressive and carries the emotions of the maker, he feels. "You see the heart of a person translated into a work of art."

About the political expressions in his art, Siributr says it was inevitable given the happenings in the last few years. "When I first returned to Thailand, politics was the last thing I paid attention to because I found it boring. So if you look at my early works, they were more abstract, focusing on textures and colours for expression," he explains.

But he couldn't ignore the political changes in his country since 2008, so his works quickly evolved. "It's a reaction to what's happening around me. So, of course, these are inspiration. Society, religion and politics – they're all interconnected. Now that I've been back for longer, I see what's going on and understand why Thailand is the way it is."

The reasons why Thailand's progress and development have stalled have become more apparent to him over time as well.

"This is my job as an artist. I have a voice, and these are mainly my personal reactions and viewpoints towards what's going on."

The key problem, he says, is that power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of the elite, and the rich-poor gap is huge. "When I first came back and led student expeditions to villages to learn about traditional weaving, it was an introduction to a Thailand I didn't know," says the son of a civil servant.

As an ex-university lecturer and civil servant, he himself wore the uniform he has now embroidered – using them as a reference to authority in Thailand.

Besides exhibiting in Thailand, Siributr has had two shows in New York. So he's looking forward to the reaction of the Singapore audience – one familiar enough with Thai culture and the recent political developments. "It'll be interesting for me to see how they react to my works."

'Plunder' is curated by Iola Lenzi, and on view from Oct 23 to Dec 1 at Yavuz Fine Art, 51 Waterloo Street, #03-01. Tel: 6338-7900. Opening hours are Tues-Sat: 11am-7pm, Sun: 1-5pm. Mondays and public holidays: By appointment only.

Wearing a message: *(Clockwise from above) 'Rape and Pillage'; Siributr in the uniform he used to wear; 'Download', an embroidery-beading work on canvas*