

## Fervently Innovating: Somboon Hormtientong's Laconic Turn

The present exhibition by Somboon Hormtientong is of particular significance to me. It has answered a secret wish of mine. I have spent these past few years trying to persuade the Thai artistic circles to desist from a tendency which I call "the loquacious turn". I have dealt with this problem systematically in my essay, "The Loquacious Turn or the Importance of Being Secondary".<sup>1</sup> The gist of my argument is that we now tend to restrict the freedom of the work of art to "speak" directly to the public. Artists explain their works at great length, expounding on the philosophical profundity that underlies their artistic products, which, at times, turns out to be mere extrapolations or afterthoughts. This is not a recent phenomenon. I recall vividly an exhibition of contemporary Thai art at the British Council at Siam Square around 1968 at which a dialogue between the artists and members of the public took place. The artists were undeniably eloquent – or even loquacious – on that particular occasion, and one member of the public stood up and made a critical pronouncement that still rings in my ears: "*The Emperor's New Clothes* again?" I knew that person, a brilliant young lecturer in English from Chulalongkorn University by the name of Rattana Skulthai. She and her colleague Kamol Keemthong went on a field work to help the rural people and were killed by Communist insurgents. (Communists or non-Communists, left wing or right wing, progressives or reactionaries, we seem to share one common talent, namely that of bumping off, or at best excommunicating, people of real merits and virtues, and that is why we are where we are today!)

The Loquacious Turn infests also the intermediaries between the artists and the public. I have criticized the rise of "the middle man", notably curators, organizers, impresarios and managers, who over the years have become more and more powerful, while many of them resort to PR stratagems to promote artists' works. In academic circles, the theoretical craze, which I consider as a "secondary" discourse, has usurped the rightful place once occupied by the work of art itself. May I be allowed to quote the final paragraph of my essay: "The extreme confidence in the supremacy of the *secondary* discourse has led us astray. We need to temper the *loquacious turn* with a *laconic shift*."<sup>2</sup> In my contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition, *Raj Loesuang and the Schoolboy Somboon Hormtientong* (2013), I could already sense this tendency in Somboon's creative process, especially in connection with his

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<sup>1</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, *Bridging Cultural Divides*. Nakorn Pathom: Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, 2014, pp. 73 - 84.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 84

installation of the pillars from a Northern Thai temple: "The artist acted as a modest man whose role was to acquire the treasures of yore, theretofore dismantled and neglected, and to open up an opportunity for the public to find its own spiritual message. His intervention was, in consonance with his modesty, kept to a minimum. But in this case, less is perhaps more". The exhibition *Fervently Yours: 504 Years of Luso - Thai Friendship* is perhaps a very good example of the principle of "Less is more".<sup>3</sup> Somboon has staged a *Laconic Turn* which I myself have called for: namely expressing himself visually in the most economic and concentrated form.

It is at this juncture appropriate to discuss the basic principles underlying the present exhibition. Invited to visit Portugal for a period of 6 weeks, Somboon naturally imbibed the cultural riches of the host country – of course, in his own way. Having seen much, imprinted much on his mind and reflected much on his experience, he has to find his own expressive mode. If he had been a writer, he would have indulged in a lengthy narrative that should do justice to this unique exposure to a foreign land. As far as writing is concerned, Somboon did write *postcards* to his family from Portugal, but as a visual artist he does not attempt to retell the *content* of those postcards, but it is the *form* that lingers on in his mind and does find expression in his works. At home with abstract art – and he has produced many distinguished works in this genre – he chooses not to go the traditional way of recording pictorially the places and the people he encountered during his Portuguese sojourn. His concern is to *depersonalize what is personal*, as I have pointed out in my contribution to his previous exhibition in the essay, "Transcending the Bonds of Time and Place: Raj Loesuang and the Schoolboy Somboon Hormtientong".<sup>4</sup> Yet it would have been a pity not to narrate *visually* what he did see in Portugal and which inevitably must have impressed him. But he would not revert to the traditional *realistic* mode, at least *not with his own hands*. So why not set up a kind of "The School of Somboon Hormtientong" and direct his pupils to come up with realistic representations of his Portuguese experience?

His pupils did not know Portugal first-hand, but that was not to prove to be an impediment. He provided them with photographs. Let them start off from these reproductions of the real things, let them use their skills as well as their imagination to give life to this *second-*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp. 209 - 220.

*hand* experience, which they successfully did. Contemporary art does not always acquiesce in reproducing first-hand experience, but Somboon's pupils had no difficulty in working at the *second remove* from the real experience. The master is not content with presenting – through the intermediary of his pupils – his Portuguese visit on its own. He is a Thai artist exposed to a foreign culture and is ever ready to enter into a *dialogue* between the two nations. As he is not prepared to stoop to becoming an actor in this artistic repartee, he again commissions paintings of the Thai scenes from his pupils, these too being based on reproductions of real places and objects. In other words, the dialogue is carried out by “actors”, namely his pupils, with Somboon himself performing the role of a theatre director, so to speak. The Portuguese and the Thai scenes are juxtaposed with each other.

And at this point, the dramatic analogy is no longer valid, for unlike a theatre director, Somboon intervenes during the performance – and not only during the “rehearsals”, which in this case take the form of the coaching of his pupils. He intends to allow his presence to be present in the works themselves. We might have to resort to a musical analogy here: like a good orchestral conductor, he communicates with his musicians via minimal gestures and not long verbal directives. He adheres to the laconic mode in the painting of the Portuguese scenes, each being accompanied by one or several small perpendiculars of the shape of a postcard, placed within a space of the same size as the pupil's painting. It serves as a commentary on the painting, but its presence and its prominence, strangely enough, seem to be imbued with a certain significance. On the Thai panel, the same method is used, but he accompanies a Thai painting with a vertical line, which, surrounded by an empty space, seems to exude a certain degree of authority. Towards the end of the series of exhibits, the order is reversed, whereby the straight lines cross over to the Portuguese panel, and the perpendiculars to the Thai panels, thus obliterating the dividing line between the Thai and the Portuguese scenes. The dialogue has now made way for a harmonious chorus of friendship.

Naturally, the impacts made by different works on a viewer may not be of the same intensity. Let us face it, the public is expected to forge on his own a sensorial, intellectual (and even spiritual?) unity amidst the staggering diversity offered by the “realistic” representations of both the Portuguese and Thai scenes. From my personal point of view, the artist does try his best to hint at the need for such a unity. Any viewer will admit that diversity is more on the “realistic” side, whereas the utmost “economy” adopted by the artist himself on the

“abstract” side appears to be an attempt to give the whole undertaking a unifying thread – at the risk of repetition. The fine differentiating nuances among Somboon’s laconic expressions may escape the uninitiated. But even with this help (or intervention) the viewer cannot help being overwhelmed by the realistic representations on the Portuguese and the Thai panels, for the variety of their content is captivating. Nevertheless, any viewer will have to confess that certain juxtapositions engender smooth dialogues, while others may not give that impression. From the aesthetic point of view, the skill and artistry shown by the pupils in some of their charcoal paintings are of stunning virtuosity.

I can cite one specific case, the pairing of a Portuguese church with the face of the Reclining Buddha of Wat Pho in Bangkok testifies to the supreme artistry of their “creators” (a term that Somboon himself might hesitate to use). The conversation between Portugal and Thailand is here at a highly sophisticated level. How do we then accommodate the commentaries by the artist? Their “reception” becomes problematic, because at the level of common sense, the works of the pupils are inclined to usurp the preconceived eminence of the vertical lines and the perpendiculars drawn by the master. It is only through a rigid exercise of intellectual discipline that we can do justice to both the pupils and the master together. It will take time to educate Thai art lovers to appreciate the true value of laconicism.

The relationship between master and pupils deserves further consideration. Transposed to the linguistic domain, we might fall into a trap by associating the pupil with loquacity and the master with laconicism. This could be a dangerous proposition, as it might unwittingly beg the question of hierarchy. Though not hailing from one of those “artistic” faculties – I was a teacher of Western languages and literatures in the Faculty of Arts – I did witness the ill feelings aroused by the ancient distinction between fine arts and applied arts within our own university, which, alas, also impinged on the relations between Silpakorn (formerly known as the University of Fine Arts) and its sister institution near Memorial Bridge, known as the College of Arts and Crafts. As for Somboon and his assistants, I, for one, would be reluctant to look at the former as an *artist* and the latter as *artisans*. Somboon is a benign teacher and treats his pupils well: he identifies the originators of those charcoal paintings by inscribing their names individually. The problem does not arise out of the Thai context, but the Western model can cause some confusion, and I think Somboon sometimes leans on Western models, especially in connection with concepts and theories. I shall be more explicit.

Traditional practitioners of Thai art, whether you call them “artists” or “artisans”, value practical skills. Intellectual capacity means nothing, if not complemented by skills. A master musician must possess performing skills that he can impart to his pupils. A visual artist, who contents himself with the role of an architect or a designer, is not held in high esteem. It is expected that he must be adept in the whole creative process. Of course, this is not to belittle imagination, inventiveness, innovativeness and intellectual prowess: they are prime conditions that can be taken for granted. The idea of an artist commissioning colleagues or assistants to do basic work for him, while he only does the supervising, is alien to traditional Thai thinking (concessions being made in recent times only to media art that requires highly sophisticated electronic or computerized design and construction). Having gone through advanced training in the West, Somboon is definitely at home with revolutionary ideas propounded by some Western artists. Take, for example, the case of Marcel Duchamp, who professes that a work of art arises out of the artist’s *choice*, and even goes so far as to assert that ready-made objects (which he terms *readymades*) can serve to buttress his belief that “an ordinary object (can be) elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.”<sup>5</sup> A Thai artist, conscious of his own roots, will never go as far as that. Somboon makes his choices: those photographs are chosen by the artist, but he does not perform the magical act of christening them “works of art” by his own authority; rather, he has them recreated by his pupils, an assiduous task that requires skills as well as imagination and intellectual capacity. He humanizes those radical oracular pronouncements by Western artists and their overseas epigones by way of forming a community of art workers who, under his guidance, relive his Portuguese experience and accompany him on a search for a dialogue of friendship. That not all the steps taken are his own, that the contributions of his pupils are recognized, that a collaborative undertaking brings forth a set of highly innovative works of art – all this bears testimony to a profession of faith *in the middle path* that relives the age-old harmonious teacher-pupil relationship.

It may be appropriate for me now to hark back to traditional Thai culture by way of a musical analogy which underpins my theory of the *Ranad Thum Culture*. I have, in my earlier

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<sup>5</sup> en.m.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Readymades\_of\_Marcel\_Duchamp (accessed on 22 January 2015)

publications, dealt with this “theory from the native soil”<sup>6</sup> and shall only briefly touch on the subject. Two xylophones (called *Ranad* in Thai) are placed at the front of a classical Thai orchestra: one is called *Ranad Ek* (literally first xylophone), the other is called *Ranad Thum* (literally a xylophone with a soft tone). The *Ranad Ek* carries the main melody and the player is encouraged to exhibit his virtuosity to the full. Traditionally, the best pupil of the master is privileged to assume this role. The *Ranad Thum* accentuates, syncopates, varies the main melody with rhythmic irregularities. The player is expected to improvise along the way. At times, the *Ranad Thum* takes over the role of the buffoon of the orchestra. But prominence is not its chief characteristic. Apparently, it seems to be playing a secondary role. This is the task of the master himself. He leads and conducts the orchestra from that deceptively subservient position. It would be a grave mistake to liken the traditional Thai orchestra to a Western classical ensemble, comparing the *Ranad Ek* to the first violin and the *Ranad Thum* to the second violin, for in the Thai context, the master is not playing “second fiddle” at all. I have on earlier occasions demonstrated how the structure of a Thai classical orchestra reflects the Thai mentality and how this way of thinking pervades Thai culture, such that we can speak of the *Ranad Thum Culture*.

Unmistakably, Somboon Hormtientong is playing the *Ranad Thum* by allowing his pupils to shine out and by espousing himself an aesthetics of reticence. But let us not forget it: those laconic statements in the form of lines and perpendiculars do exert an authority over the entire compositions. The present exhibition represents a great innovation on the part of this artist who never stops striding forwards and making us think deeply along with him. He is persuading us to build up a hermeneutic society, a society that knows how to interpret. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” belongs more to the past. Somboon challenges us with a new credo: “Meaning – and wisdom – are in the eye of the beholder”.

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<sup>6</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, *Fervently Mediating: Criticism from a Thai Perspective*. Bangkok: Chomanad Press, 2004, pp. 323 - 344.



Fervently Yours: 504 Years of Friendship

