

Kawita Vatanajyankur: Awareness of Desire | COBO Social

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Portrait of Kawita Vatanajyankur





Kawita Vatanajyankur's Knit in Bangkok Art Biennale



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Kawita Vatanajyankur's Tools series



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Naima Morelli

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Thai-Australian artist Kawita Vatanajyankur speaks to us about the conception of her intense performances and what motivates her beyond making art.

Text: Naima Morelli

Images: Courtesy of the artist





Portrait of Kawita Vatanajyankur

“I think art is not about creating a product that people desire, it’s about creating something that touches people’s hearts.” This might be a subtle distinction for many, but it is a major one for the Thai-Australian artist Kawita Vatanajyankur. “People need to understand themselves and also what is the source of their struggling, so they can get better. This way, the world would be more peaceful.”

Beyond the colourful, enticing pop aesthetics of Kawita’s work, and her relentless social commitment, you can discover something that is initially not so apparent, but fundamental to understanding the work. Referencing Buddhist philosophy, in particular, the issue of desire and the “wheel of suffering” that follows, Kawita’s work proves to be layered and informed by Buddhism. Although it’s not uncommon for Thai contemporary artists to have this outlook, it’s interesting to witness in this young performer, whose background is influenced by the years she has spent in Australia.

An artist well versed in various artistic mediums, Kawita’s gentle personality radiates kindness, generosity and humility. However, in her performances she allows all her strength, endurance and grit to take over with an unbelievable intensity. She never backs down from the physical and mental challenge of her art performances. Upon speaking with us, she was just recovering from a demanding performance of *Knit*, which denounces the working conditions of labourers in the silk industry. Somewhat ironically, the performance took place in the lobby of the luxurious Peninsula Hotel.

Again, it is not uncommon for many Thai artists to allow their work to exist within such contradictions. The lack of government funding means they grasp any opportunity that comes their way from private entities which will support their work. However, Kawita, who is schooled by “the Western institutions of *higher skepticism*” (as writer Pico Iyer puts it) is well aware of this contrast. She creates meaning out of the contradiction, as millennials often do, incorporating into her work, making her an artist to watch.

“It’s good to create discussion. The organizer at the Peninsula Hotel was brave enough to invite their high-end audience to consume the dessert, the afternoon

tea, wear nice clothes and then confront the issue of labourers. In that particular instance, I represented the producer that created all the materials for the products that were consumed. The work asked questions about whether our inaction makes us complicit. In that sense, the message was very clear and targeted. It reached beyond the typical art audience.”

The performance of *Knit* was produced as part of the Bangkok Art Biennale and is part of your *Performing Textiles* series. This particular work lasted an entire hour where you knitted a thread all the way around your body. When you do a demanding performance like this, are you trying to remove yourself from your feelings or would you rather use these emotions within the work?

My aim is to portray humans as machines and show how our feelings inevitably come out, whether we want them to or not. During the Peninsula Hotel performance, I was weaving fabric around my entire body. My feet, my hands, my muscles, even my teeth, had to work until I was done. Once you are a machine you start becoming very invested in the work.

Half an hour in, I started feeling tired and exhausted. After 40 minutes, I started to get dizzy and my head ached, but I still had to work. After 45 minutes, I felt trapped as the fabric was also around my head, but my hands and feet could still work. At one point, I couldn't control them any longer. I started having vertigo, but kept going until I'd finished. Everybody saw how I felt. In the end, I collapsed, but the fabric was finished.





Kawita Vatanajyankur's Knit in Bangkok Art Biennale

The work must have left an incredibly strong impression on the public. Let's go back a little bit. What was your first art influence or memory tied to art?

The biggest direct influence came from my father, who was the CEO at a production house and the organizer of the Bangkok Film Festival. He brought many independent films to Thailand. He was always inspired by experimental things. I used to watch three or four films a day with him. We always discussed the dialogues, the characters, the background. That really opened my eyes, and I learned to understand symbols and their meaning.

In terms of contemporary art, do you remember any specific work or show that has left a mark on you?

Yes, a particular site-specific work that was projected in a church in Melbourne I saw as a teenager. Everybody was sitting on the church benches waiting for something. The space was completely dark and we suddenly saw a man. It was a projection, but of such high quality that we thought it was real. The man was being lifted, which was symbolic of his spirit being brought up to the sky. It was mesmerizing and it still sticks in my mind to this day. I remember thinking that I wanted to do something like this as well, to touch people's mind and soul in this way. To talk about the cycle of life and the human condition.

Your very first works after graduation were about being an outsider in Australia. How did your work evolve and change after you decided to go back to live in Thailand, having spent ten years abroad?

Even though I grew up as a teenager in Australia, I always felt like an alien there. When I came back to live in Thailand, I also struggled to fit in. It was strange because I realized that I did not belong anywhere. I'm always sort of in between. Coming back to Bangkok, the work shifted. I was learning what life was like in Thailand as a woman, and my work reflected that. The first series I did, from 2012 to 2014, was called *Tools*. It was about social expectations and people's perspectives on what the role of women should be in Thai society. How they should behave and be treated.

The series *Tools* shows powerfully how the identity of a woman is violently suppressed and squeezed by the narrow demands of a society that downgrades women in the home. How was the work conceived?

It started with my observations about what being a good woman means in Thailand. I found out this corresponded to being a good housewife and a good cook who cleans and is always gentle. The woman always supports the family in a practical sense by taking care of the children and serving as an emotional shelter. However, the husband is always the one who is recognized as the leader of the family and the breadwinner. The most demanding chore for women is the housework, which is not usually supported by machines and household appliances here. In the series, I illustrated the relationship between the female body and domestic objects used for household chores. Women lose their identity as their body merges with the objects and becomes their extension until it finally succumbs.





Kawita Vatanajyankur's Tools series



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Labour still remains the main social issue that you focus on, whether it is at home or in the workplace. However, there is also a strong emphasis in your work on the increasingly unsustainable desires which drive consumerist societies. Where does your motivation to talk about this come from?

It's very personal for me. My dad passed away when I was eighteen as a consequence of overworking. He didn't eat or drink water, and that led to his illness and death. He was a celebrity here, and so the story about how he overworked was published all over Bangkok. His story became a wake-up call to everyone who was working too hard. In the immediate aftermath, people were discussing the issue and some changes happened as a result, but now it has already disappeared. The desire to have more leads to more production more and people consuming more, and so this industrialized, materialistic society keeps growing.

Not only would producing less help the laborers' lives, by lifting the pressure and hopefully providing workers with kinder treatment, but taming desire would also free up the consumers from the necessity of continuously working to accumulate more and more. That's what I want to demonstrate through my work, and I have made my own body a symbol.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.