

The Artist's Trajectory: An Interview with Piyarat Piyapongwiwat



*A desire to find answers brought Thai artist Piyarat Piyapongwiwat
from the luxurious Bangkok advertising offices to the factories of*

Myanmar. Today, she tackles socio-political themes through both her installations and video.

Text: Naima Morelli

Images: Courtesy of the Artist.

The life of a successful artist can often seem convoluted, rife with struggle. The initial suffering however leads to lessons learned, yielding in some form of triumph. In conversation with us in Chang Mai, emerging Thai artist Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, imparts her thoughts on the idea of the artist's path. When Piyarat boldly made her move to leave her well-paid job in the film industry to become a full-time artist, without a clue as to how it would turn out.



Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, Fabric.

It took a lot of trust in herself and the mysterious workings of the universe to rebel against her conservative upbringing and her family, pursuing what she deeply wanted in her heart. The trust paid off as Piyarat Piyapongwiwat is now one of Thailand's most promising talents.

“In my late twenties, I was working in the advertising industry as a film producer,” she explains. “I had a great salary, but I was also overworking. Also, while in that role, I could see all the injustices that are inherent in the capitalist system. It was my job to cut the costs to stay within a certain production budget. These cuts often affected the workers, who were already paid very little.”

Social injustice and marginalized groups are today the preferred subject of

Pirayat's art. Her body of work questions contemporary issues, such as gender, the notion of margin, cultural change and globalisation. Her artistic research is informed by theories of social science, anthropology and philosophy. Because of her strong socio-political commitment, her work 'Fabric' has been a centerpiece of the celebrated show [DIASPORA: Exit, Exile, Exodus at MAIIAM](#)



Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, Fabric.

At a certain point in your life, when you were 28, you decided to leave a safe, stable job to become a full-time artist. Can you tell us about the moment when you had this realization?

I remember it well. One day, I was sitting in the meeting room on the top floor of some office building in Bangkok. I looked outside the window and something suddenly popped into my head. I asked myself: "What am I doing here? What is my future?"

I was 27 or 28, and I thought about what I really wanted to do for a year, and finally told my dad that I wanted to go and study art. Everyone in my family disagreed with me, but I didn't listen to them; I decided to go anyway. Eight months later, I left for France. I went to Dijon first and then Montpellier, and started to study art. It wasn't all plain sailing, however. I felt like an outcast at times in France. I was looked down on for my provenance and my imperfect command of the language. However, in the end, I reaped so many rewards that gave me satisfaction and repaid me for all the hurdles I had to face.

You did one of your first works, 'Routine', in 2011 when you had just returned to Thailand. Can you tell us how that came about?

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I came back to Thailand at the end of 2010 and didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't have anything, with no concept of an art practice of any kind. I just knew I wanted to work with video. I decided to use my camcorder, a small camera, and went to the local market that's close to my place. The market was very familiar to me because I used to go there all the time when I was young with my mother. When the national hymn started to play, everyone stopped and stayed still until it was finished. I reflected on the fact that I used to find this Thai custom so normal, but after living abroad for four years, it suddenly seemed so strange. The only way I could elaborate on this feeling was through film. So I took my camera around Chiang Mai and started filming.



Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *The Routine*.

Can you tell me a little bit about the genesis of your work 'Fabric'?

In 2013, I did a work where I brought pieces of cloth from some factories in a Special Economic Zone of an industrial estate in Mae Sot District, Tak Province. Almost all of the workers from those factories are from Myanmar and are paid so cheaply for their labor, and there's no labor union cover. I asked a sewer in Chiang Rai province to sew the pieces of cloth into one piece of quilt. That project investigated the effects of post-capitalism. I presented the quilt with sound, text printed on large volume and one photograph.

Years later, I decided to repeat that kind of work again, but on a larger scale. With 'Fabric', I didn't want to talk just about Thailand, but the whole region. 'Fabric' addressed the reality of the global fashion industry, which employs many individual producers in developing countries. They work long hours under forced conditions for pennies, far less than the living wage. For the project I travelled to the neighboring countries of Vietnam Myanmar

project, I traveled to the neighboring countries of Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Japan, since the grant came from the Japan Foundation.

It seems quite important for you to see the situation that you are tackling through art with your own eyes. What is the importance of field research for you?

It's my intention to create work that will make the audience question things. So during my working process, it is really important that I understand myself and my own convictions. So as not to get stuck in my own head, I need to move around and interact with people. It's hard to explain why but this is what makes me fulfilled. Sometimes I can do my research just from books, documentaries and the news, but most of the time, I need to travel to the place. That's how I can connect with a perception which is different from mine.

I can imagine the picture of the final artwork in my mind. But I often find the outcome is not what I'd expected. It has not changed totally, but it has changed nonetheless. The message that I would like to express might stay the same, but the form changes, according to the different circumstances and the interactions I have. So it is important to go out, see other people, talk, interview and observe. I love to travel too, and as an artist, it's easier to travel!



Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, Mute.

One final question. What would you say is your primary motivation for making art?

I don't want to be too dramatic, but art and creation are what gives meaning to my life. When I can't speak in a language, I can still have my opinions. The first

my life. When I quit my job in advertising, I actually had two options. The first was to become a hermit, a vagabond, wandering in the forest looking for spiritual truths. The second was to become an artist. I chose the latter because I felt moved back then to explore the world. But I have always looked for answers, and if I'll find that art cannot provide them, I can still become a hermit!



Piyarat Piyapongwiwat

About the Artist

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat (b.1977, Phrae, Thailand) is a multidisciplinary artist working with various media including video, photography, text, sound, mixed

media and installation. Her work usually reflects her surrounding experiences, including questioning of contemporary issues such as gender, notion of margin, cultural change and globalisation. Her artistic research is informed by theories of social science, anthropology and philosophy.

Piyarat holds a BA from RMIT University, Australia and a BFA from Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Montpellier Agglomération (ESBAMA), France. She has presented works locally and internationally. She currently lives and works in Chiang Mai.

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.