

# THE ART OF CULTURAL *F*USION

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## WORKS BY BUNDIT PUANGTHONG

Interview and text by INGA WALTON

In 2000, motivated by a desire for change, new experiences, and a certain restless creativity, Bundit Puangthong moved to Melbourne on a one-year student visa. Previously, after completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts at Chang Mai University, Puangthong worked for six years as an art director for RS Promotions, a film company in Bangkok. ‘I never actually worked as an ‘artist’ in Thailand—like most people, I simply needed a job after uni,’ he relates. ‘While I enjoyed the work and learnt a lot, I wanted to do something completely different. I didn’t know what, but thought learning English was a good start.’ It proved to be a serendipitous decision, the unexpected reverberations from which include an increasingly successful artistic career, and a new family.

Rediscovering his vocation was initially a practical response to the realities of student life in Melbourne. ‘I worked lots of odd jobs and then after seeing artists and painters busking in the city I saw the opportunity to make money from my art skills by painting on the street,’ says Puangthong. ‘I got a good response from the public towards my work, which was very encouraging, and I decided to apply to do a Diploma of Visual Arts at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT). From there I continued my studies doing an Honours year at the Australian Academy of Design, and then a Masters at the Victorian College of the

Arts (VCA).’ Returning to Thailand was always Puangthong’s intention, until circumstances once again intervened. ‘While I had enjoyed living in Melbourne, staying here was dependent on getting into my next year of study; I knew I would return home soon,’ he recounts. ‘My decision to make a life in Australia wasn’t cemented until I met my Australian-born wife Hannah while doing my Honours. In building a life together and planning to start a family the decision to make Australia our home was easy, as the lifestyle and opportunities available here are so much greater than that of Thailand.’

Puangthong’s vibrant and arresting works are still recognisably Thai in their themes, with an interplay of densely layered motifs and symbols. ‘The cultural aspect of my work is very important to me ... it is a way of staying connected to my culture as well as sharing it with my audience,’ he agrees. ‘I guess the traditional elements of my work could be hard for some to decode, but I think that is why the combination of Western and Eastern imagery, language and ideas, works so well. The duality allows viewers to be engaged one way or another.’ Within Puangthong’s practice there is a mergence of the stylistic conventions of traditional Thai art, and his interest in more visceral and dynamic contemporary art forms. Puangthong’s ability to handle these disparate elements so deftly can be traced back to his formative years. ‘One of my earliest jobs, at age twelve, was working as a sign writer. My high school teacher recognised my artistic talent, and my need to make some regular money, as my siblings and I were some of the poorer kids at school,’ Puangthong remembers. ‘I would help him paint billboards and posters for local business or community events, there I learnt to mix colours and all about colour combinations.’

At university, Puangthong discovered American Pop Art, which continues to resonate through his work. ‘I was immediately drawn to it, as there was a familiarity in the icons, style and colour due to my early experiences as a sign writer.’ Another palpable influence was the Haitian-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-88). ‘I loved his use of colour, but also the figurative and cross-cultural aspects, and his use of language,’

Puangthong declares. ‘My love for Basquiat led me to graffiti art which I researched in books until I came to Australia, because graffiti was not happening in Thailand at the time. When I arrived in Melbourne I loved all the graffiti and would spend hours walking around looking at it.’ As a teenager, Puangthong was granted a scholarship to Nakkhon Si Thammarat Academy of the Arts, and was able to rediscover aspects of that experience. ‘At the time [I came here] stencilling was at its peak and I was very inspired by it. Interestingly, I had learnt how to stencil as part of my traditional Thai art training, as stencils are used in temple mural art,’ he explains. ‘I was also one of a select few who were taught how to conserve and restore temple murals. This was a great honour and an experience I still cherish. I enjoyed using this technique again and was soon stencilling around Melbourne and using it in my work.’

In a broader thematic overlay, Puangthong’s paintings act as a vehicle through which he explores the range of experiences and challenges he has encountered as a member of the Thai diaspora. ‘I am also trying to share what it is like for me living in a country where the language and culture are not my own,’ he remarks. ‘There is obviously, now, a lot I do understand, but there will always be elements of the Australian/Western culture that remain a mystery to me. As a migrant living in a new culture there is always a large amount of “decoding” to be done, just in your daily life.’ Elements of alienation, displacement and nostalgia are present in his work as Puangthong confronts the politics of assimilation, and the difficulty inherent in negotiating his dual worlds. ‘In all honesty I struggle to see any similarity between Thai and Australian culture, in my mind they couldn’t be any more different,’ he chuckles. ‘It is interesting that the ‘Thai’ element of my work only started to manifest while living here, and seems to get more prominent the longer I am away from Thailand.’

*(end of excerpt)*



*Gold Inside* (2007), acrylic, oil stick & spray paint on canvas, 168 x 152 cm (Private Collection)