

Lived abstractions

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I don't understand 'abstractions' until I concretely fit them into my life.

I grew up and spent part of my childhood with my brothers and sisters in a Buddhist temple in Thailand in which my father conducted his mural painting project. My father worked for the temple voluntarily and in return he got free lodging and food for his team and for his own children. Although training the new generation was part of my father practice he never trained his own children. It was during the few last years of my father life when he was terminally ill that he started including us in his team. In 1982 my father died. I took over the team and carried out mural project in Buddhist temples and hotel spaces throughout Thailand for the next fifteen years. I called myself a Thai mural painter when I married an Australian and settled down in Sydney in 1996.

Once I arrived in Sydney I had to work on a series of canvases on the same theme instead of over the whole wall. I struggled to adjust my way of working without a painting team, and also to shift from working up and down scaffolding into sitting still with an easel. Moving round with paint and brushes under layers of clothes was a tussle. There was also a communication problem. With a degree in English, I speak, read and write English fluently but there were times when I was lost after a fifteen minute conversation. It took me a long time before 'Kirribilli' the 'ACT' and the 'GST' would make any sense to me. I lost my pace when walking along with local people. I stopped when people walked, I hesitated when they rushed. I tumbled in the city and I mumbled a lot to make myself understood. One day I found myself crying in front of Fish & Chip shop in Queensland. I had culture shock, but didn't know if they just found my English strange, or had some deeper prejudice.

Within days after arriving Sydney I found myself strolling along the lane and started giving name to trees around the suburb where I lived. I counted the trees that looked familiar to me and gave them a Thai name each. I collected about twenty names or so which matched the trees. Looking back I think it was to reassure myself to make this new place home. I continued thinking of more Thai trees and counted up to seventy names. I have written down these names in my sketchbook and made it a landmark of my history here. This form of getting acquaintance with a new environment not only soothed my homesickness. But once I had done this naming, I found it was very attractive as whenever I went out and trees were the first thing I looked out for. It did not take me very long before a gum tree appeared in my work. In fact it appeared in my first painting in Sydney. In the *Nariphon* series, I unconsciously painted a gum tree bearing its girl-shape fruits to tell a story of an incident happened in a province in Thailand when a twelve year old girl was sold by her own parents.

Seven years on, my work seems to proceed in a spiral pattern which goes round backward and forward between my past and present from my experience of the two cultures. The *Nariphon* series tells the story of more recent and more direct

contact with me than earlier works before moving to Australia. Soon after that there was a form of reminiscence as in the six-panel screen of the *Buddha and his Enlightenment* since I wanted to maintain my mural project work. Then there was the *My Mother was a Nun* set that I painted at the birth of my first child when my mother came to visit. At the same age of my giving birth to the first child in Sydney, my mother had given birth to her last child and then become a nun for a short period. When I decided to work on my new environment, I wanted to use the four elements my father referred to in his work. I finished the *Earth Wind Water Fire* series, which I intended to approach the new environment in Australia, but then I noticed the absence of figures in this work. When I had my bag stolen out of the pram where my seven-month old baby was asleep at a street in Dulwich Hill, I painted myself and my two children depicting a story in *Vessantara Jataka* when the Bodhisattva sacrificed his own children for his enlightenment. It was the scene that I had used several times in my mural projects. Only this time I put a real character into it. Yet again it was not relevant to the way people think here. After all these years, did I not feel myself in the culture? Was the habit of looking at trees the habit of avoiding contact with society, or the other way round? Was it the introverted personality in me that made it hard to adjust? Somehow this questioning reminded me of when I went to France in 1989. I had carried my works to show at art galleries and I was advised to go to galleries for oriental art, who sent me to galleries for antique art, who sent me to galleries for naïve art, who sent me to galleries for miniature art, who sent me back again to the oriental art galleries where there showed only Chinese and Japanese art. Perhaps I should stop thinking any more about other people's categories in which I cannot find myself.

My recent works of the *Elephant and the Bush* series completed after four weeks' residency at the Arthur Boyd properties in the Bundanon Residency program. In this series I put together the Australian flora and fauna and the Thai elephant. 'Chang' or elephant in Thai is my nickname which my father gave me at birth. Actually it was from his own nickname which he got when he worked with the elephants his uncle kept for foresting in his hometown. Think of it, and I will draw the whole history of myself which would go on and on. But the *Elephant and the Bush* series was only intended to reflect my moving to the Australian society which I am yet to understand. In this I am certain, I am not the only one from outside who is trying to find a place.