

A WALK IN THE RICEFIELD

The Embroideries of Somporn Intaraprayong

The textiles of Somporn Intaraprayong take us on a walk through the rice fields. Heavy stitches through hemp create an undulating surface, reminiscent of a rhythmic landscape, shaped by paths and contours of thread. Organic rows of stitches create maps, like enlarged cellular drawings or currents in an indigo ocean, with hidden clues to the place and people that created them. Embroidered spider webs, picnicking ants or numbers from a child's maths book all give a sense of rural life in Thailand and tell the stories of the local seamstresses that work under Somporn's guidance.

As we look closer the textural terrain reveals slubs of raw cotton, splitting hemp fibres and the uneven stitches of a human hand. Somporn's work is locally produced. It begins with found or cultivated fibres such as cotton, hemp or linen then dyed using local indigo plants, abundant in the hills of Northern Thailand. Somporn describes how the work begins; 'Every tiny piece of cloth has a long history. In the case of cotton, for example, the plant had to be foraged or cultivated, picked, spun, and then dyed and woven, or woven and dyed – all this before the cloth is turned into something else. To throw out even a scrap of material, therefore, is painful, so we keep everything.' This understanding of how the cloth is made has led to a deep appreciation for the irregularities of natural fibres, which are celebrated through her textiles.

Next, the raw cloth is stitched by many hands. Local women are taught how to become seamstresses to create densely stitched pieces

that are sold at the best international craft markets. Somporn dedicates a lot of her time to sharing her sewing skills with anyone who wants to learn, creating work in areas where employment is scarce. There is a beauty that radiates through Somporn's entire creative practice from the raw materials to the final stitch. She describes empathy as the most valuable tool in her process, which has encouraged her to reach out to those who may be struggling with poverty or lack of education.

Somporn is a self-taught artist, whose embroidered textiles are now coveted by collectors around the world. An influential moment in her professional development was meeting Vichai Chinalai of Chinalai Tribal Antiques, whilst working selling jewellery in Bangkok. With an instinctive trust and shared passion for Thai handicraft, the pair began sharing sources and collecting unique and rare textiles. Together they have exhibited eight times at the Sante Fe Folk Art Market and have gained an enthusiastic following, including trend forecaster Li Edelkoort who featured Somporn's work in last year's New York Textile Month publication.

Lee Chinalai, Vichai's wife and collaborator, explains a pivotal moment for the pair when they first came across the International Folk Art Market; 'With the prospect of an outlet for the now piles of new cloth, with Vichai's guidance Somporn, who had been sewing since the age of 13 and is an artist in her soul, began to teach women to sew. She started with 3 women and now has close to 50, mostly small farmers and day labourers who have little opportunity to make money between planting and harvesting or when the work simply isn't there'.

Part of her teaching is encouraging creative thinking, allowing women to develop their own motifs or specialise in styles that are best suited to their skills or interests. Through developing motifs the women are able to include their personal stories in the work. By educating local villages in traditional techniques, Somporn also helps to revive some of the rich heritage that has been an integral part of Thai culture. Indigo dyeing and embroidery are skills that have been practised in Thailand for centuries and can be forgotten in the modern world.



Lee explains how reverting to old techniques was not easily accepted; 'At first the women viewed sewing as a source of shame... as sewing was only out of necessity and symbolised a certain level of poverty. Bit by bit they have learned and are learning from Somporn that needle and thread can be connected to the heart and their use is not something shameful. As the seamstresses receive respect from their spouses because the work is income' ▶

Dhani Chinalai Srinola





-producing, admiration from their children because it is beautiful and adds to the family well-being and praise from their peers, they are beginning to become proud of what they do. Suddenly their children, especially daughters, want to learn to sew'. Word of this inspirational teaching continues to spread and The Ministry of Agriculture and the Thai Government invited Somporn to hold free 5-day workshops in rural villages teaching more and more women the creative techniques required.

Chinalai Tribal Antiques and Somporn continue to work together developing new ways to effectively help the community, particularly in Takhil where Somporn grew up. Since 2013 they have been sponsoring a local school with the belief that education is the only way out of poverty. Following this experience they have gone on to sponsor a second school, refurbishing computer labs, repairing property and assisting with school supplies and uniforms. They have also added a scholarship program with the hope of helping the children beyond primary school.

This hard work has not gone unnoticed and last year Somporn was nominated for the Community Service Award from the Folk Art Alliance. As well as her stunning textiles Somporn is now famed for her dedication to the community. She was invited to speak at Sante Fe Folk Market to provide insight into her unique way of working. Marcella Echavarría explains; 'This year she was invited as a panellist where she spoke from the heart about her community

of seamstresses and sewers who use stitches to tell stories of the rice fields and their daily lives. She includes everyone who needs and wants to work, they all have a chance and get the most important teaching of all: there is also beauty in imperfection, beauty in every process, beauty in every stitch.'

From community engagement to her emphasis on foraged materials, cultivated yarns, natural dyes and minimal waste, Somporn has created an inspiring business model, interwoven with beauty and sustainability at every stage. At a moment in time when fashion corporations attempt to shoehorn sustainable practice into their production, so much can be learnt from her honest and empathetic approach. Her ability to understand and connect with the people around her has allowed her work to cross international boundaries whilst supporting her community, creating employment and empowerment for individuals in need.

On closer inspection, these densely stitched landscapes reveal something else of daily life in rural Thailand. Amongst the lush hills of hemp and indigo plants there can be hardship, lack of education and economic struggle. Through her creative practice Somporn depicts life in the rice fields complete with all the beauty and imperfections. ... Sophie Vent

Special thanks to Chinalai Tribal Antiques. www.chinalai.net Somporn will be exhibiting her work at IFAM 12-14, July 2019 and The Selvedge World Fair July 2020

