Mixed media art in Thailand: The case study of Vichoke Mukdamanee

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ABSTRACT: In Thailand, although many artists had already explored the possibility of mixed media art, the history of term *mixed media art* officially originated in the 37th National Art Exhibition in 1981. Vichoke Mukdamanee is among the Thai pioneer artists who had been deeply interested in mixed media. For over 40 years of his art career, Vichoke Mukdamanee has created many mixed media works, originating from his interest in the bonds between the environment, technology, and life. By various materials, including wood, metal, brass, bronze, aluminum, clothes, earthenware, scraps, and ready-made objects, Mukdamanee's mixed media art reflects the artist's perspectives toward the change in external factors. His artwork expanded into more profound concepts related to life, referring to rural life, Buddhist philosophy, and a family's love and bond. The artist attempted to establish a link between his concepts and internal overflowing emotions (love, happiness, suffering, and sadness) and express it through painting, collage-assemblage, and installation.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 *What is mixed media art?*

The terms “mixed media art” or “mixed media” are complicated and confusing. Not only do those outside the art sphere usually wonder “What are artists mixing?” when hearing the terms, experienced individuals in the art circle are sometimes uncertain of the extent of mixed media art. The extent of mixed media sometimes seems to cover various types of creative work. However, at the same time it demonstrates specific characteristics, making mixed media art distinctive and unique.

According to Collins English-language dictionary, the definition of mixed media is “the integrated use of different forms of media, especially within the arts.” In Thai, the term mixed media means a combination of different forms of media under the meaning of art. The British Tate Art Museum defines mixed media as art derived from a combination of various types of media and materials, starting in 1912 based on the Cubist collage art by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque (Tate, 2020). Cubist collage art influenced other artists in their period and has continued to impact others, opening up new horizons for art practitioners to recognize that essentially art can be made of anything or any combination of things. Moreover, another commonly heard term is “multi-media”. Although multi-media is also a combination of various types of media, it is often referred to with regard to electronic media, such as videos, movies, sounds, and computers.

“Mixed media” refers to artwork in a modern sense as it was only coined around a century ago. Formerly, artwork was generally created with only one technique, such as with oil on canvas, color on paper, and rock-carved, wood-carved, or bronze-molded sculptures. Although artists in the past mixed various techniques, no one defined or distinguished the technique. Cubist and Dada artists utilized materials to represent vital contents in artwork. The artists in this era discovered a new way of expressing everyday human life accounts; they put or installed utility objects, including newspaper sheets, magazine pages, furniture, or a television, as parts of artwork. Mixed media

art does not necessarily recount stories through painting; it can also reveal objective qualities and functions of multiple media and materials.

1.2 *Mixed media art in Thailand*

A clear example of the use of the term “mixed media” in Thailand’s art realm is the National Art Exhibition in which a contest in the mixed media art category began in 1981 (the 27th National Art Exhibition). In the contest, Arkom Duangchaona was the first to be awarded a silver medal for the mixed media category (no one was presented with the gold medal). Mixed media art continued to exist in the 28th National Art Exhibition but ceased to be part of the contest for the following eight years until a piece was presented with a silver medal for the mixed media category at the 34th National Art Exhibition in 1991. The name of the awarded work was “New Symbolic from Environment No. 2” by Vichoke Mukdamanee. From then on, mixed media fine arts in Thailand have been organized in alignment with the National Art Exhibition. (In certain years, mixed media art was absent, or no one was received an award; yet, it was not long until mixed media re-emerged in subsequent years.)

The definition of mixed media in the National Art Exhibition is constantly developing. For instance, in an application for the participation of the 61st Fine Arts Exhibition (2016), mixed media was categorized as the fourth type apart from painting, sculpture, and printmaking. Mixed media was defined as “Fine artwork utilizes different art approaches, such as painting mixed with sculpture and/or more than two types of materials like ready-made materials, natural materials, synthetic materials, technological materials and mixed media installation.”

The confusion lies in how to distinguish mixed media from painting and sculpture as mixed media is defined by technical conditions (a mixture of two or more types of media and/ or materials) while painting and sculpture are distinguished by dimensions of work (two and three dimensions). With different conditions, the types of work become overlapped. Some can be classified as both “painting” and “mixed media” at the same time while others may be classified as “sculpture” or “mixed media”.

Therefore, using the term “mixed media” to describe the features of each piece of work depends on the intention of the person classifying the work. To focus on the dimensional aspect of the work, artists, critics, and curators often call their work paintings or sculptures. However, if they want to present the aspect of technical mixtures, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional, all the work can be classified as mixed media art. In addition, there are such words as mixed media painting, mixed media sculpture, mixed material painting, mixed technique painting, and mixed technique sculpture. These represent important evidence of the flexibility and complexity of mixed media art created and disseminated throughout today’s art world.

2 METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the author tries to observe and analyze the art pieces made by Vichoke Mukdamanee. The progression between artworks, and how it influences art in Thailand. Art criticism methods were used to analyze the artwork. In general, art criticism could be used to responding to, interpreting meaning, and making critical judgments about specific works of art. In this case, the artwork mentioned is related to the case study of mixed media artist, Vichoke Mukdamanee.

3 THE CASE STUDY OF A THAI MIXED MEDIA ARTIST: VICHOKE MUKDAMANEE

3.1 *About the Artist*

Professor Vichoke Mukdamanee is an artist who created contemporary artwork. He began creating his early fine artwork in 1973 from human figurative shapes and accounts. He developed mixed

media art based on the stories, nature, and environment found the Thai society under the influence of modern technology, and thereafter installation art using various materials, including wood, metal, brass, bronze, aluminum, clothes, earthenware, scraps, and finished materials. In that period, mixed media work creation was done with painting processes, of which the contents dealt with life, society, and environment along with traditional philosophy, scientific progress, and current beliefs influenced by Buddhist ones as well as the future world (Department of Cultural Promotion, Ministry of Culture, 2002).

After his solo exhibition “Modern Existence 1992” at the National Gallery in February 1992, Vichoke’s image as a “mixed media artist” became known in the spheres of artists, art theories, critics, collectors, and the public interested in art in Thai society. The artwork in the exhibition was created with many forms of materials, such as twigs, metal sheets, clothes and nylon ropes, ceramics, newspaper sheets, plastic sheets and tubes, gold leaf, spray colors, oil colors, watercolors, acrylic colors, and so on. Art materials were mixed with natural, industrial, and ready-made ones to show colors and shapes that yielded “symbols” reflecting the artist’s perspectives toward the changing circumstances of the era which impacted people’s lives. The artist stated in the exhibition catalog that “Life, mankind, nature, environment and all other things are influenced by modern technology and material prosperity. The modern existence consists of both conflicts and relationships in the forms of hidden beauty, completeness, and power. The said circumstance and atmosphere has given me concepts and driven me to express them through fine art creation, which focuses on contents of shapes with structures and symbols that convey and reflect the current modern existence” (Mukdamanee, 1992).

3.2 *The Artworks*

For over 40 years in his art career, Vichoke Mukdamanee has created many mixed media works, originating from his interest in the bonds between the environment, technology, and life. The used materials reflect the artist’s perspectives toward the change in external factors. The artwork expanded into more profound concepts related to life, referring to rural life, Buddhist philosophy, and a family’s love and bond. The artist attempted to establish a link between his concepts and internal overflowing emotions (love, happiness, suffering, and sadness) and express it through painting and collage—assembly and installation. The artist was able to manage the materials to present the contents without losing the materials’ original objective value and at the same time express his identity. Whether a particular piece of work was made of paper, wood, metal, or plastic, its certain identities explicitly conveyed the artist’s signature. Vichoke stated “I usually started many pieces of work by drawing to generate shapes, movements and compositions. Afterwards, I gradually added techniques onto the work again and again till I was satisfied: patching, coloring, painting, perforating, and adding textures. Some criticized me that my additions were too much, but I think individual moderation is different, depending on individual tastes. As an artist, I added details till I was satisfied and felt that the materials in front were well managed and belonged to me. The big picture should be able to represent myself...” (Mukdamanee, 2007).

Looking back at Vichoke’s work between 1974 and 1984, when the artist graduated from the Department of Painting, the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, until he received a scholarship to continue his study at the Faculty of Art and Design, Tokyo Gakugei University in Tokyo, Vichoke showed his interest in the study of a human’s structural shape through the creation of oil paints on canvas. The influence of the art of Cubism led by Pablo Picasso and Georges Barque, which was spreading to the contemporary art sphere in Thailand, inspired Vichoke to analyze and curtail the shapes and movements of human bodies to become an overlapping area, yielding a semi-abstract monochrome work in a solemn atmosphere. The flat plate shapes appearing in Vichoke’s painting were adjusted to show weight, depth, and complexity, yielding a seemingly living, moving structure, aligned with his explanation in the catalog of the exhibition “Modern Existence.” The artist himself talked about his work in the period “...I used shapes derived from architectural structures and human bodies to create paintings. The shapes were to move in accordance with the movement of human bodies under an architectural structure of a

Figure 1. Structure with internal planes (oil on canvas, 116 x 100 cm, 1974).

definite volume. I also used light and shade to control zooming in and out of the deep, shallow, and lateral aspects of my work. My work is of definite structures, showing stillness and firmness” (Mukdamanee, 1992).

4 CONCLUSIONS

When observing Vichoke’s work over a ten-year period, we can see the development of his techniques in many ways, which were still present in his later work. Almost every piece of his work relies on line drawing techniques to create the main structure of the work. Some are geometrical shapes—squares and circles put together—while others are distorted to become independently moving shapes. Afterward, the artist added details, using painting and material management techniques linked to and developed from the said structure. He resorted to pounding and perforation to make holes in linear directions, scratching to make deep and shallow incisions, and patching and tying materials to make shapes and textures, all teasing with the styles and movements of his painting strokes and paintbrush traces. He utilized a line drawing process and composition to fix directions, shapes, and movements to create the relative rhythms of lines and spaces.

The materials Vichoke used to create artwork were transformed—twisted, pulled, burned, and pierced to make new shapes. Some were painted or sprayed to have different colors and textures. It is noticeable that the artist’s techniques aligned with the objective nature of each type of material. For instance, paper was folded, or hand pressed to create texture or sealed with glue. Wooden materials were burned, sawed, and pounded. Metal materials were twisted. Cloths were tied. The artist inserted his ideas into the processes and materials, expressing his identity by transforming the meanings of the materials which became part of the artwork. In addition, he managed to make his various materials coexist. The natures of oil color, acrylic color, and spray color blended with gaudy colors and shiny, slippery, and reflective textures of scientific materials. Some were mixed with wood, cloths, and baked clay, yielding natural gentleness, warmth, new aesthetic harmony, and unity.

From the beginning of painting aiming to curtail the shapes of living things, Vichoke’s paint strokes became so acute and solid that he could simply present essential structures. We can even understand the origins of his strokes and linear perforations, coming from the shapes of humans, animals, trees, flowers, the surroundings, or certain objects. The artist intended to use lighter paint strokes and abandon his preliminary concrete inspirations, keeping only abstract contents. The

curtailed structures were left with just visible lines and dots connected to one another like symbols or signs invented to convey certain messages. When Vichoke used plastic, laminate plates, and aluminum plates, the symbols and signs derived from his strokes were deeply engraved on the surfaces of the materials. We can compare these characteristics with pieces of wood or rocks used by ancient tribes to communicate their accounts or record happenings. Sometimes the letters were conveyed in the forms of incomprehensible pictures or illegible symbols. We can study the origins of the materials, colors, and shapes by comparing the attitudes of the people and the events in the era. If the letters symbolized spoken voices, the traces in Vichoke's mixed media work resembled symbols that conveyed his perspectives and thoughts. They were from his imagination and the artist used them to represent nature, living things, the environment, and the existence and awareness of his identity amid the volatile circumstances of prosperity and the decay of - era-.

Vichoke Mukdamanee is an important case study of mixed media artists in Thailand who pioneered work by using various types of materials in his paintings, sculptures, and installations. The artist has been developing his concepts and work processes continuously for over 40 years, focusing on mixing natural materials, scraps, industrial materials, and creative ideas from his awareness of the impacts of the new social matters on the environment, local cultures and traditions, ways of life, and beliefs.

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