

# VIPOO SRIVILASA

## ROBYN PHELAN

It was an exercise in extremes and contrasts for a man from the tropics to move to Australia's southern-most and coldest state. Vipoo Srivilasa was born in Thailand and his development as a professional artist began when he moved from Thailand to Australia in 1997 to undertake a Master of Fine Art and Design (Ceramics) at the University of Tasmania. Srivilasa is a Melbourne based artist who has established a lively international presence through his unique, collaborative projects and his playful and whimsical sculptural practice.

*Happy Land*, 2015. 50 x 20 x 20cm



*For the Future II*, 2008. 45 x 40 x 23cm

Srivilasa hand builds porcelain clay and has a vivacious approach to glaze, is a dexterous painter and accomplished at relief decoration. At first glance, his hectic surfaces are appealingly humorous. However, dig below the fantasy and you will find a sensitive personal symbolism and keen observations about environmental, social, and political issues.

Srivilasa's adopted home shirks its duty of care for the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef and this proximity adds to his grave and longstanding concern for the global degradation of coral reefs. Past exhibitions such as *Fortune Teller* and *For the Future* both in 2008 and *Colonies* in 2009, use symbols of greed and consumption alongside images of tropical plants and marine animals that the artist is drawn to. Srivilasa identifies with the mythical mermaid. She is felt to be an alter ego for the artist, which was first imagined through stories told by his grandmother in Thailand about a creature who '...leads her life in-between the two worlds. Just like me. I live my life between two worlds, the East... and the West.' <sup>1</sup>

In his most recent solo exhibition *Happy Land*, at Scott Livesey Galleries, Srivilasa continues his interest in environmental issues, namely the disastrous effects that the rabbit has wrought on the Australian landscape through soil erosion, the decimation of native plants and frequent plagues in pastoral areas. In 1859, The Victorian Acclimatisation Society released twenty-four rabbits on Christmas Day to hunt for sport and to help settlers feel more 'at home'. By 1886, rabbits had invaded four million square kilometres of Australia, making it one of the fastest colonising mammals anywhere in the world. *Happy Land* features fifteen statuesque rabbit/human figures. The rabbit motif can be seen as an overarching

metaphor for the colonisation of Australia and, more intentionally, Srivilasa subtly places images that represent current Australian and global debate and concern. In the work *Feral*, a belligerent rabbit-form is covered in beautifully hand-painted native flora and fauna. Srivilasa has then obscured his delicate cobalt painting by a fecund covering of seemingly benign flowers of the lantana plant. Lantana is another introduced pest that grows weed-like, choking any native flora in its path.

In the sculpture *Land of Peace*, Srivilasa recreates a Buddha-like statue, evoking those found in Thai temples. Instead of beams of enlightenment, lantana flowers radiate from the rabbit-figure. Initially, one is seduced by the charm of the floral decoration and the familiarity of the blue and white painting. Delve deeper into the motifs and more poignant stories are revealed. Images of Australia's Commonwealth Coat of Arms are placed 'tattoo-like' beside images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, a pastiche copied from the naïve and ignorant paintings by early colonists. This figure is 'unseeing', blinded by a mask in the shape of a heart, which incites contradiction and unease about this seemingly endearing creature.

*Land of Peace*, 2015. 51 x 22 x 15cm



*Feral*, 2015. 31 x 20 x 18cm

Above all, this exhibition shows Srivilasa at his storytelling best. Esteemed Australian potter Stephen Benwell has shared a studio with Srivilasa for years. Benwell describes Srivilasa's narrative style as '...fluent, opinionated, varied and flamboyant. He has a free-flowing and non-didactic style that is just as insightful as any more theoretical analysis of contemporary culture.'<sup>2</sup>

The raw data on Srivilasa's exhibition practice are impressive. Since 1997, he has held twenty-three solo exhibitions in Australia, Thailand and China, and participated in over one hundred curated exhibitions across seventeen countries. To really know this artist's *oeuvre* one must also appreciate his project and participatory work.

I relish the memory of Srivilasa's 'performance' for his presentation on *Culture and Identity* for the 2012 Australian Ceramics Triennale, *Subversive Clay*. Bounding to the front of the lecture theatre, Srivilasa immediately shifted the speaker/listener dynamic by asking, 'Who got lucky last night? Hands up!' After curiously checking responses, he replied, 'Oh, just like me, I didn't get lucky either'. He then proceeded with a comedy-fueled PowerPoint presentation that highlighted what was common and different between Thailand and Australia. Some simple themes were *Food* where an image of rice was contrasted with bread and *Animal* where kangaroo was set against elephant. These oppositional binaries were interspersed with more ambiguous images such as: *Drag Queen*, *Smile*, *Beach* and *Coral*. These memorable examples gloriously revealed how slippery the task is of pinning down cultural identity.

Srivilasa clearly thrives both personally and artistically on the input of others. Inherently social, he passionately pursues mentoring, artist in residence, cultural exchange, and collaborative and public projects. In the last two





*Contemporary Culture*, 2005. 50 x 20 x 20cm

Thai meal, engaging guests with the full range of sensory experiences. Many artists have used the giving and sharing of food as performance, conscience raising or for the relational drive of the participant. *Roop-Rote-Ruang* was an early indicator of two of this artist's core themes. Firstly, his commitment to social engagement as creative process and secondly, his significant concern with environmental degradation of tropical marine areas.

In 2012, *Thai-na-town – Little Oz* records everyday Australia migrant stories by inviting Thai people to be part of an international project creating sculptural objects that represent a person, place or thing that they miss about their home. The experience began in Sydney's Chinatown and was repeated in Bangkok. The resulting work became part of a major solo show at the Chulalongkorn Art Centre, Bangkok. Srivilasa produced an enchanting video on the *Thai-Na-Town-Little Oz* project<sup>3</sup> that shows the workshop and conversations in progress. The participants are at ease and genuinely respond to Srivilasa's gentle inquiry.

*Thai-na-town – Little Oz*, 2012. Installation views



*Roop-Rote-Ruang (Taste-Touch-Tell)*, 2008.

years, Srivilasa has participated in many significant residencies and exchanges. *The Give Me A Spoon* project was conceived after the Medalta International Artist in Residency in Canada. He was the Project leader, for *artKamp*: a cultural exchange between Australian and US artists and the Project Director and Mentor for *Beyond Limitation*, a four-week mentoring, cultural exchange program between Australian and Korean artists. The program consists of six ceramic artists mentoring twelve early career artists from both countries at the Gimhae Clayarch Museum in Gyeongsang, Korea.

It is interesting to recount this artist's early forays into participatory projects that engage with his Asian/Australian identity. In 2008, Aaron Seeto, Director of Gallery 4a in Sydney invited Srivilasa to stage the *Roop-Rote-Ruang (Taste-Touch-Tell)* project in Sydney. This entailed a series of dinner parties where the artist would cook and serve dinner in individually created ceramic artworks. With boundless energy, and using the technique of *Lai Karm* (Thai blue and white domestic ware), Srivilasa created a 105-piece dinner setting based on a coral reef theme. Srivilasa cooked and shared a seven course



This project caught the attention of the 7th Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale curators who commissioned Srivilasa to respond to the Biennale theme of 'Community - with me, with you, with us' in 2013. The resulting exhibition for the Biennale was entitled, *Home*. Gathering in his Melbourne studio, Srivilasa asked Korean expatriates to precisely identify what objects they miss from Korea which are not available to them in Australia. He then guided the novice ceramicists to make these objects from clay. These objects and the expats' touching explanations inscribed on dinner platters were part of the GICB exhibition.

In the video produced for the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) round table discussion in 2015, Srivilasa elaborates on how he draws energy from people by sharing both art making and meals.<sup>4</sup> This energy sustains him through more isolating production periods in the studio. Srivilasa's absorption and interpretation of his social surroundings sustains his physical practice and is the very essence of his approach to artistic life.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, Srivilasa has honed this exchange experience and is realising the relational benefits of working with others. He explains, 'A lot of (my) art and community projects generate from that idea, of connecting with people and getting people to experience my work in a different way, not just looking at it, but actually be a part of the creative process...by helping them make work, they also help me make my work for exhibitions or projects.'

It has just been announced that Srivilasa is one of the fifteen shortlisted artists to be exhibited in the fifth, prestigious *Basil Sellers Art Prize*.<sup>6</sup> This Melbourne based philanthropist encourages contemporary artists to engage with the many themes within sport, past and present, and to contribute to critical reflection on all forms of sport and sporting culture in Australia. Srivilasa will be exhibiting amongst many of Australia's most engaging contemporary artists and it is with immense excitement and anticipation I wait to see what engaging work he has in store for us.

Vipoo Srivilasa is represented by Edwina Corlette Gallery, Brisbane, Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne, Ferrin Contemporary, USA, Adrian Sassoon, UK and Subhashok Art Centre, Thailand [www.vipoo.com](http://www.vipoo.com)

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1. Owen Leong, Interview – *Vipoo Srivilasa*, *Peril Asian-Australian Arts & Culture*, Online Magazine, 23 September 2011 [www.peril.com.au/back-editions/edition11/peril-interview-vipoo-srivilasa/](http://www.peril.com.au/back-editions/edition11/peril-interview-vipoo-srivilasa/) 2. Stephen Benwell, *Lai Kram: New Works by Vipoo Srivilasa*. *Ceramics Art and Perception*, Issue 65, 2006. pp. 70-71. 3. Vipoo Srivilasa. *Thai-Na-Town-Little Oz Project*, 2013 <https://vimeo.com/57977259> 4. Vipoo Srivilasa, *Clay Culinary and Community*, 2015 <https://vimeo.com/118763013> 5. This video created specifically for National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) round table discussion 2015. 6. [www.sellersartprize.com.au/artists-and-exhibition/2016](http://www.sellersartprize.com.au/artists-and-exhibition/2016)

Photography: *For the Future II*, *Happy Land*, *Feral*, *Land of Peace*, *Contemporary Culture*, *Home*, detail - Andrew Barcham. *Roop-Rote-Ruang (Taste-Touch-Tell)* - Image courtesy of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. *Thai-na-town – Little Oz* - (bottom left and middle) Korakij Chaisirisopon. *Thai-na-town – Little Oz* - Vipoo Srivilasa. *Home* - (top right) Image courtesy of The Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale.



*Home*, 2013. Installation view



*Home*, 2013. Detail

