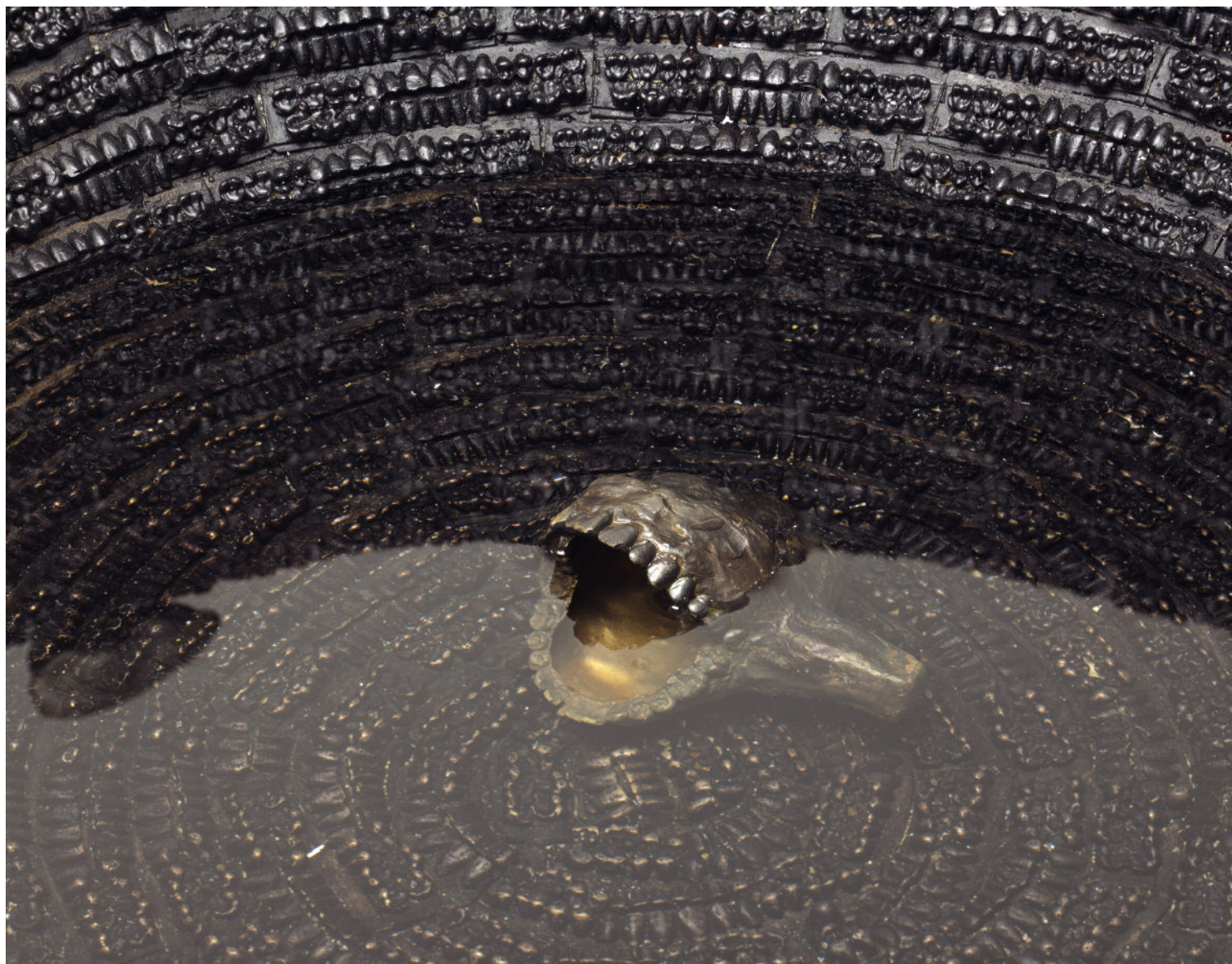


MONTIEN BOONMA UNTITLED: TWO ACTS II



MONTIEN BOONMA
THAILAND 1953–2000

UNTITLED: TWO ACTS II 1996
brass, 33 x 90 cm
Purchased 2002
© Montien Boonma Estate
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The Art Gallery of NSW started collecting modern Thai art in the 1960s. At the time, works by well-respected artists who were exhibiting in Thailand, such as Chalood Nimsamoe, Prayad Phongdam, Manit Pooakee and Praphan Srisouta, entered the collection. These artists, who primarily created images of Thai daily life, are seen as the forerunners of modern Thai art. Their influence can be seen in the work of internationally renowned Thai artist Montien Boonma, which was already being shown at the Gallery in the early 1990s.

Boonma's early works were observations on Thai life, culture, politics, the environment and Buddhism. He was extremely religious and spiritual in his outlook, and his spiritual beliefs not only impacted on his life, but also influenced his art practice and artworks. A devout Buddhist, he was inspired by Buddhist teaching, transcendental meditation, faith healing and cleansing with medicinal herbs.

Much of Boonma's adult life was marked by pain and illness – his suffering expressed quite personally in his work – yet with such sensitivity came beautiful and compelling art which affects us today.

Montien Boonma was born in Bangkok in 1953, the second of six children. In 1978 he graduated with a bachelor of fine arts in painting from Silpakorn University, Bangkok, and participated in a number of exhibitions in Thailand. In 1985, having been awarded a Thai government scholarship, he went to Italy and on to the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris to study for a master's degree in sculpture. Before leaving he spent three months in a monastery, and then proposed to his girlfriend, Chancham Mukdaprakorn, who had been a fellow student. As their beliefs prescribed, before the wedding, the couple sought guidance from a Buddhist monk, who forewarned that their astrological chart suggested difficulties for the two in the future. To circumvent this omen, it was recommended they live apart for ten years. Hence, after the marriage, Boonma left alone for Europe to continue his studies.

Boonma had chosen to go to Italy, in particular, due to his interest in *arte povera*, a movement – most popular from 1967 to 1972 – that literally means 'poor art' but more accurately addresses ideas around the freedom to use materials other than traditional ones such as paint and bronze, focusing on the process of creating the work itself. This had a great impact on him, especially in developing the notion that conceptual art was a valid form of expression. It was this overseas trip that gave Boonma an insight into his art practice that changed, if not his beliefs in Buddhism, then the different ways he could address his art. Thus a significant shift in understanding began to inform his art practice, particularly when he returned to Thailand.

Boonma was also influenced by the artist Joseph Beuys, whose work he initially came across when studying abroad. He was particularly interested in Beuys' use of various materials, and also his theoretical discussions on social issues, his interest in Zen Buddhism and shamanism, and his use of bricolage.

In 1988 Boonma's wife joined him in Paris. It was there, when she was two months pregnant, that she first felt a sharp pain in her breast. After returning to Thailand, the couple continued to live separately: she with her family in Bangkok, while he went to Chiang Mai to work and teach. His experience in Chiang Mai, the surroundings and Thai rural culture were a seminal influence on his work.

During 1991 Boonma began to earn notable acclaim for his Buddhist-inspired works, with solo shows in Tokyo and Fukuoka in Japan and also at home in Thailand. He started to become interested in terracotta vessels and became fascinated with the simple shape of the Buddhist alms bowl, making works inspired by alms bowls that also featured hand imprints. These bowls with their golden interiors, such as *Alm* 1992, induce a spiritual sense of tranquillity.

Certain subjects such as voids and death became more prevalent in his work when his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer and subsequently had a breast removed. The news devastated Boonma yet he still felt it possible to change her fate. However, her cancer spread, her condition deteriorated after she caught measles from her son, and she died in 1994.

In 1999, while in Germany with his son, Boonma collapsed on a street. He was found to have a brain tumour, and the cancer had spread through his body. He died in Bangkok in August 2000.

Boonma's work over his lifetime was quite varied, and his use of many different types of material shows an imagination full of possibilities. He drew not only on his spiritual beliefs but also on his awareness of international contemporary art practice garnered while studying overseas to produce a powerful and emotive body of work. As well as the Art Gallery of NSW holdings, his works are included in other Australian collections, including the Queensland Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Australia.

The imprint of a fist first appeared in one of Montien Boonma's sculptural works, *Stupa* 1990 (a stupa is an architectural monument in honour of the Buddha). On that work Boonma attached a number of knuckle-like objects which were created by using clay and squeezing it in the palm of the hand. The knuckle-like form was initially inspired by the way manual labourers grasped their tools and symbolised the physicality of the workers. It also represented the gruelling lives of the workers themselves who were trapped, unlikely to ever move beyond their social position. Boonma wanted to '... make monuments of stupas for the workers and labourers who are dominated by the rules of society'.¹

In the Art Gallery of NSW work *Untitled: two acts II*, there are similar knuckle-like forms around the bowl he created. Produced in 1996, the work was purchased by the Gallery in 2002. Made of brass, the bowl is similar to an alms bowl, and at its initial showing, Boonma filled it with fermented herbs and Thai whiskey, which was offered to the audience from a scoop modelled in the form of the artist's mouth and teeth. It is the internal part of the bowl, symbolic of the body of the artist, that provides a space that is of comfort and relief from both physical and mental pain, soothed by the medicine within, which separates him from an external world. The work shows Boonma's continued use of knuckle-like impressions in the 11 examples that hang off the rim of the bowl, which here look like human bones. The cavetto (or concave moulding) is patterned on tooth imprints which are modelled on Boonma's own. The alms bowl is a reminder of the practice of meditation and contemplation which can remove the external world of pain. What ultimately arises is the idea of the void as a space in which one can transcend the harshness of fate.

¹ Apinan Poshyananda, *Montien Boonma: temple of the mind*, Asia Society New York & Asia Ink, London 2003, p 16

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- Montien Boonma was a devout Buddhist. Discuss the ways in which his spiritual beliefs informed his life and artistic practice. Examine the relationship between Buddhism and the materiality and symbolic meaning of Boonma's artistic processes.
- Analyse the sculptural elements of *Untitled: two acts II*, in particular the tactile qualities of the work. Consider how Boonma has powerfully expressed his personal experiences of pain and suffering.
- Boonma once described the 'bowl' as a place of refuge. Observing the relationships between scale and space in *Untitled: two acts II*, uncover ways in which he has used this vessel as a psychological metaphor for comfort and protection.
- The alms bowl has an important place in the practice of Buddhism. How has Boonma expanded this symbol to express his spiritual beliefs? Find other artworks in the Art Gallery of NSW collection and elsewhere that also incorporate the symbol of a bowl. Compare and contrast the feelings, thoughts and ideas being expressed by the artists. Research the ways in which other religions use vessels as sacred objects in spiritual practice.
- In what ways has Boonma incorporated the senses of sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing to engage the memory and imagination of the audience? What aspects of personal experience might the viewer bring to an appreciation of this artwork?

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BENEDICTION NO 2 1991

three sheets of photographs with eyelets on board, candle burn holes, gold foil; 50.0 x 61.5 cm
Purchased 1994 © Montien Boonma Estate 362.1994

PERFUMED PAINTINGS AND STOOLS 1995–97

paper, wood, herbs, plasticine; 2 paintings: 95 x 45 cm each; 2 stools: 20 x 40 x 22 cm
Purchased 2002 © Montien Boonma Estate 217.2002.a-d



OTHER MONTIEN BOONMA WORKS IN THE COLLECTION

Benediction no 2 1991

three sheets of photographs with eyelets on board, candle burn holes, gold foil
50.0 x 61.5 cm. Purchased 1994 © Montien Boonma Estate 362.1994

Benediction no 2 1991 was the first piece of Montien Boonma's the Gallery purchased, in 1994. The work evokes Buddhist rituals of blessing involving holy water and burning candles. It consists of three sheets of photographs on top of one another, joined together by rivets. The artist has used candles to create holes, which are scattered over the sheet and penetrate the top two layers, leaving positive and negative spaces. A waxy residue is left in some places along with the black singeing of the photographic paper. Gold foil mixed with wax blot some holes.

Viewed from a distance, however, the work is transformed; one can discern an image among the confusion – a scene directly from a television screen, which looks to be a view of a Thai temple.

'Gazing at the TV monitor was similar to gazing into alms bowls. Alms bowls, for him [Boonma], induce meditation and contemplation. In contrast, the TV traps the viewer in worldly conditions with images that transmit joy, greed, anger, sadness and horror.'²

² Poshyananda 2003, p 75

Perfumed paintings and stools 1995–97

paper, wood, herbs, plasticine; 2 paintings: 95 x 45 cm each;
2 stools: 20 x 40 x 22 cm Purchased 2002 © Montien Boonma Estate 217.2002.a-d

In 1995–97 Boonma produced *Perfumed paintings and stools*, which engages with his sense of nature and awareness of our fragility in relationship to the environment. Part of the Gallery's collection, it consists of two 'paintings' and two stools, one placed in front of each painting. Made of monochrome pieces, the work looks quite fragile when examined closely. Each component, slightly askew and not at perfect right angles, perhaps relates in some ways to human imperfections, particularly in our interactions with nature. Each stool has a pair of footprints on top of it. Approaching near the work, the aroma of herbs – relating to the idea of healing and meditation – becomes quite strong. This type of medicinal scent is part of a number of Boonma's works of this period. Much of the surface of these paintings is not fixed and needs to be replenished with herbs, not only for the aroma, but for the surface to stay 'alive'. In a sense they need to be given medicine in order to live, otherwise they may slowly fade into a void. The idea of healing seems to be prevalent in this work, but it also suggests that we must continually look after our environment as it also needs our help.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Books and journals

The Asian Collections: Art Gallery of New South Wales, AGNSW, Sydney 2003

Clark, John. *Modern Asian art*, Craftsman House, Sydney 1998

Contemporary: Art Gallery of New South Wales contemporary collection, AGNSW, Sydney 2006

Poshyananda, Apinan. *Montien Boonma: temple of the mind*, Asia Society New York & Asia Ink, London 2003

Thai-Australian cultural space, AGNSW, Sydney 1994

Traditions/tensions, Asia Society Galleries, New York 1996

Wongchirachai, Albert Paravi. 'Montien Boonma: interviewed by Albert Paravi Wongchirachai', *Art AsiaPacific*, vol 2, no 3, 1995, pp 74–81

For further resources, information and programs related to Montien Boonma and his work see also:

- Art Gallery of New South Wales collection search www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection
- Asian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales www.asianart.com.au
- Collecting and Exhibiting contemporary Asian art case study www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/ed/resources/case_studies
- National Gallery of Australia, *Montien Boonma: temple of the mind* 23 July – 10 October 2004 www.nga.gov.au/Boonma/edu.cfm

Acknowledgements

Essay and notes by Natalie Seiz, assistant curator, Asian art; Issues for consideration by Leeanne Carr coordinator, secondary and Asian education programs; and Lisbeth Star, museum educator, with assistance from Adele Maskiell and Alacoque Dash, Gallery interns

Produced by the Public Programs Department
pp@nsw.gov.au

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

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