

Interview with Chumborn Apisuk at Nonthaburi on 6.1.1993

JC: John Clark

CA: Chumborn Apisuk

Interview conducted in English

On editing, tenses have been altered for fluency

JC:

What did our parents do?

CA:

My father works as a researcher on malaria for the Health Ministry. He is not a doctor, what he does is catches mosquitos in the forests and looks through the lens at them.

JC:

Is that what your father did when you were born?

CA:

Yes, so I didn't see much of my father. He was always away in the jungle and when he came back he was always busy with mosquitos in the surgery. My mother was just an ordinary housewife, a villager with little education. She was born in one of the biggest families in Nan, almost everyone in downtown Nan is my relative. Her father was from Chan State. He was an elephant merchant so he caught, trained and sold elephants. I do not know how many wives he had, but my grandmother was from Laos, she was a Thai-lee from Saiburi in Northern Laos. It is very close to the border with Nan and people are relatives. I am the youngest child.

JC:

When did you start showing an interest in art?

CA:

I don't really know, actually. My interest was always in reading and writing. I think my father had a lot of influence on my reading and writing. He has collections of books and reads a lot about Buddhism. He is always interested in literature and Buddhist philosophy.

JC:

Being a scientist, did he expose you to all kinds of rationalist thought?

CA:

No, I don't think so. I don't think he had much influence in those terms because he was never at home. So my relation to my father is through books, through his notebooks, his desk. We were allowed to sit at his desk when he was not home.

JC:

Do you remember anything visually from your childhood?

CA:

The caravan of merchants who sold herbs, salt, rattan, lots of herbal medicines, cloth, silverware, which they put on the cows backs and carried through. Sometimes they come from Southern Yunnan but usually from Laos.

These people are travellers, they came to town and bought things in the market in Nan. They never stop until they finally get to somewhere that they feel they should return, so they get the stuff, they return and sell things on the way. Our house was the first house from the river where the route of this caravan came to. So my parents made the space outside our fence near the water wells for them to stop before they went to the market. Every morning at four or five o'clock you would hear all those sounds, cows, and smell the cow-shit. I think that was the most fascinating memory I had.

JC:
Did that effect you later, like in travelling?

CA:
I think so. It was always my dream to see these people travelling. I think my father's life was so fascinating because he was never home. He was always in the jungle, and when he came back he had little animals with him, sometimes beautiful flowers or things for the family.

JC:
He was like a magician who disappeared, then arrived with strange things? Did you ever talk with him?

CA:
When I was ten he moved from my home town to work in the other cities and then at twelve the whole family moved with him to the South. I stayed with my family only one year in Thrang. I moved to Songkhla by myself for high school. Songkhla was quieter than Thrang and laid-back, small, a resort area for government officers before they retire. My teachers in high school told me that I shouldn't continue with my studies there and should go to art school. I didn't quite understand why. They said at some point that I would end up doing a lot of work for friends, drawing maps and other school projects, and doing performances. I formed groups in school to do drama works, I did books, newsletters, school bands.

JC:
When did rock music hit Thailand?

CA:
When I was in Songkhla we were playing Beatles who were most popular at that time, while in Bangkok it was still Elvis Presley. We organized a group from Bangkok to play in order to raise funds for the school band, and they were surprised we were playing the Beatles, whom they'd never heard of. That was back in 1962.

JC:
I'm quite surprised how deep-rooted Western rock music is in Thailand.

CA:
We received TV programs from Malaysia, because they broadcast bilingually, some stations were in English. We liked the English-language station because it had rock music and good movies. It became a culture later. In the [late] 1960s the Progressive Movement took over Bob Dylan-type things, Woodstock. Not earlier than that when people took Elvis Presley or the Beatles as more

for fun or fashion. I think [the use of rock by the progressives] came from intellectual society rather than started from musicians. When I was in Silpakorn I was involved with the student movement in Thammasat which was doing a lot of underground one-baht newspapers. We sold it for one baht and distributed it on the streets. It was quite popular among the students. We dealt with underground music, underground movies. That was around 1968, 1969, 1970.

JC:

What did you do at Silpakorn [University, Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art]? I find it difficult to conceive you came out of there.

CA:

I didn't go to school that much. I only used Silpakorn as a place to sleep, because I didn't have a home, a place to stay. Sometimes if I wanted to take a shower or have good food to eat I went to my friends house. I slept in Silpakorn most of the time in the classroom or in Thammasat University radio station.

When I had earlier entered Chang Sin, the art school [preparatory to Silpakorn], I didn't know what the place was like. I didn't know that there was a school which allowed students only to paint and draw and nothing else. It was the first time for me in Bangkok so when I was in school, the first year I felt sort of confused because you don't learn anything, and the teacher doesn't teach anything. But I got a very good grade because I had studied high school before that. I thought there must be somewhere after that which gave you more than a practitioner's training, just sitting there and drawing, but they don't teach anything. So I thought that maybe it would be better if I went to Silpakorn. Thus I struggled to pass the exam to get into Silpakorn. When I got in I found it was the same system.

JC:

In the first two years you are supposed to spend time doing different kinds of study, and specialize in the third year? Did you specialize?

CA:

No, I flunked in the second year. I quit the school.

JC:

Did you want to?

CA:

I think so. At that time I was already studying with Tang Zhang, and I thought at that time I read more books than anybody else. I had my art columns in *Chaiyoprit* Magazine. My instructors at Silpakorn like *Ajaan* Lawan also wrote in the same column, so there was some sort of mysterious feeling in the school [Silpakorn] about a first-year student writing in an art column about contemporary art, and *a.jaan* Lawan writing about Michaelangelo, whilst I was writing about Hartung or abstract expressionism in America.

JC:

Where did you get your information from?

CA:

From Tang Zhang's library mostly. He collected a lot of books, mostly in the Chinese language, but some were in English. So I used English art magazines as my first information and then checked with him whether my understanding in English was right, because he can read Chinese.

JC:

Where would you get the English-language art magazines at that time?

CA:

Mostly from Asiabooks, or some book shows. Sometimes we did go to the Alliance Francaise or to the A.U.A. Library [American Alumni Association]. At that time there was no British Council yet. A.U.A. was a good library.

JC:

Did you read *Art in America*?

CA:

Yes. I liked reading art catalogues which they had at A.U.A. When you looked through them you could see when new work was coming out, and they also referred to books and other magazines.

JC:

How long did that period of investigating modern art go on?

CA:

About a year.

JC:

Tang Zhang is a very interesting figure. I hadn't realized that he was such an auto-didact and had read so widely. Could you tell me some more about him? I believe he was close to Pratuang Emjaroen?

CA:

His students during my time were Somyot and Somboon. I think my interest in Zhang was in Chinese philosophy and poems, not much of the paintings. I thought that if I understood poetry and then the philosophy then my painting would be easier. If I tried to be a good painter and didn't understand philosophy or politics then my painting would be meaningless. So I studied quite a lot with him in terms of Chinese philosophy, Daoism, Yi Jing, and sometimes we did comparative studies with Western philosophies. He read the Ramayana and because he asked me to read English and he read the Chinese. We had a very special shop where we could buy Chinese books in Chinatown, and we went there Zhang knew the owners of the bookshop who would recommend books to him. We had quite up-to-date books from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

JC:

That's in the 1960s. The Taiwanese art press started if I remember rightly in 1973. You don't know what it was?

CA:

It could be a magazine of pocketbook size [*Xiongshi Neishu*]. Zhang told me that these were all direct copies from English. The quality of

reproductions were not as good as English-language books, but that was all right because we needed texts more than pictures.

JC:
What was his relation to the art world at that time?

CA:
Very bad. I think partly because of Tang Zhang himself. He always wanted to maintain his own independence, not get involved in art politics, he was not interested in exhibiting the work. I think his belief was to practice art, like mediation in a Daoist methodology. I was only with him for about a year and half, two years at most, and wasn't a very keen student. We always argued. I told him that if I agree with you it shouldn't be a school, it shouldn't be a learning and teaching environment. He agreed with that so I took that to be an agreement [to let me] do a lot of arguing with him.

JC:
What made you go to America?

CA:
Everybody wants to go to America.

JC:
I don't.

CA:
No, at that time.....

JC:
Everybody in Bangkok might have wanted to.

CA:
America is a dream. You think of going to New York city, you think of seeing those good buildings. You think of Rauschenbergs and Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollocks and Abraham Lincolns and Jack Kennedys.

JC:
When did you go?

CA:
1973.

JC:
Just as the democracy movement started in Thailand.

CA:
I went when all my friends were still on the streets. My plans to go were very weak as well. I wasn't very sure whether I should go or not. My wife insisted that I should go because she didn't want me to get involved in politics. In 1971-72 I did lot of writing and reporting from my home town where we had gone back and stayed for two years. [They were] a lot of controversial reports from communist-influenced areas, and some conflicts between the government and the people. We were half acting as an

underground, half not knowing what to do. But I did write a lot of poetry, articles and short stories.

JC:

Was the artistic and cultural anti-establishment, rock music and so on, very different from that of the Communist Party, or did they kind of overlap at that time?

CA:

I didn't know. I didn't know what was the Communist Party. I was very naive, but I knew that there were some problems. There was some fighting. I didn't believe people who told me that there were Communist Party in my home town. I thought it was the government making it up in order to get control in the forest, and in order to control the people. There were a lot of conflicts between local villagers and officers. The development plans of the government at that time was only cutting roads through villages. That meant that people would lose their land for development, they would lose the forest that they used to hunt for their herbal medicines. Because almost every Thai village would have their own protected area around or near the village where they can collect herbal medicines or mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and things like that. They don't kill anything in those areas. But when the roads and development started to come, all these villages' forests were gone, because the road had to go as near as possible to the village. People and government officials always had confrontations in my home town and a lot of my friends, and friends' families were killed by the officers. In my home town I grew up with this class of about forty to forty five of us, and when I went back in the 1970s there were only about twenty of us left. The rest were killed by the government. I was sort of searching to see what was really behind it. I was well protected because my family is quite well-known and respected. One of my close relatives' brothers also works for the police radio and the communications' radio, so he knew what was going on. I would get news all the time, and know what was going to happen. If some danger was coming, he would take me somewhere else to hide. It was sort of fun. Closer to October 1973 everyone else felt like my life was in danger. I wasn't. I thought of coming to Bangkok and help my friends organize things. But it didn't happen; my father put me on a plane and sent me to America. My wife and my father.

JC:

Why did you end up at the Boston Museum School?

CA:

I got a visa to go a school in Florida, the I-20 forms, my brother was there, he still is, but I didn't like him very much, and I don't like Miami. It's a touristic place. It's a southern beaches area. I didn't like to see a place that I was quite familiar with, and an atmosphere like at Songkhrai by the ocean. I wanted to go some place different with snow and cold. One of my best friends was there in Boston, Manophat Naorangsi, who has since died. He died when he got his Ph.D. in America. He always told be to study hard and try to get my degree since I had studied hard to, and since my grades were very good in the Museum School, but I didn't want to. I wanted to spend my life in seeing what I hadn't done. I dropped out, partly because I felt I was working so hard to make money and then pay the school.

And I had got enough grades that if I wanted to, I could go to a tough university. I thought why should I go on studying, why go on paying the school so much. Even though I got a scholarship I still had to work for the school for two or three hours a day. Then I had to go and work in a bar. I had to get up early in the morning, come to school and study, and try to be a good student. I thought I was too old to learn, and people shouldn't study that much. My belief at that time was people should only spend ten years in school. They shouldn't spend more than fifteen years in school studying. I thought there were enough books in shops that people can read, there are enough things happening that people can go and experiment by themselves. Why do people have to get all this graduate paper to make sure their future, their life will be secure, by only this piece of paper. So what does life mean if you are setting your life when you are born, that you can tell what your life's end is going to be? That's meaningless. Life does not end because you are planning your life. Life ends because you don't plan your life.

JC:

Sounds like you were a bit of a rebel against the American Way of Life by this time. Were you against intellectual consumerism?

CA:

Maybe, yeah. I don't believe in the teaching system. I don't believe that people can go as a group and learn from one person and become somebody else. There are so many people on the streets and in universities and they think that the success of their life is when they get the paper from the School. We are trying to tell them that the paper is not so important. I mean its important if you want to get a job, but that's all it is. If you don't want to get a job, if you don't want to work, why do you have to force yourself into that situation where you have to rely on a piece of paper, and telling people that I'm a graduate here, a Masters here, a Ph.D here and so on. I want to be a person that doesn't contain any knowledge, and any certificates of my knowledge.

JC:

That's not just reacting against the American system. It's obviously reacting against a very Thai notion of people having certificates on their walls alongside their badges and medals. Was there something about your experience of America which made you feel more critical than you might have been about that aspect of Thai society?

CA:

In America I was more of a consumer than anything else. I bought books, when I was in Boston I spent more time in the Cooper Union than in my school. I spent my time in the bookshop reading books. I didn't spend much time in the Museum.

JC:

Where you doubting whether you were an artist?

CA:

Yes. I thought I was an artist.

JC:

Were you influenced by conceptual art and the kinds of political issue which surfaced inside that?

CA:

I think I was, but I wasn't sure how really it affected me. The latest would be Josef Beuys, but I don't think Beuys is the most influential [artist] in my life. Tang Zhang was the most, because we studied a lot of philosophy. I liked Jim Dine. I don't like Rauschenberg very much. I think his work is so messy.

JC:

Did you have any teachers or were there any artists in the Boston area who influenced you strongly?

CA:

Don Martin maybe, he did the apple things. I stayed in Boston. There were two reasons why I quit the school. The first was that I was going to drop out for a while so my wife could go to school. Then in 1976 the coup d'état happened in Bangkok. A lot of students got killed and a lot of my friends fled to the jungles, to join the Communists at that time. So I moved from Boston to join the Thai students in New York city and do political work there. WE formed the students' movement in the States.

JC:

Is that how you met Chalachai Ramitanon [a Cornell-trained anthropologist then at Chiangmai University] ?

CA:

No. We had heard of him. I think he was in Georgetown or in Cornell University. I met a lot of people from Thailand, not over there. I heard of many people but I never met them. I think they were scared to come to events. I'm not sure. I did a lot of talks, at least four times, at Cornell University in Ithaca on the Thai political situation, and only a few Thai students showed up.

JA:

Were they afraid of being identified?

CA:

Maybe or maybe they were too busy studying [laughs].

JA:

Did you continue your art at this time?

CA:

I sort of put everything together. I don't divide my time as to what I'm going to do next. I do a lot of little things, playing, little sketches like this. Or writings, sometimes when I'm going out I do something. Everything is really together. If I travel, at that time I thought if I wanted to feel something different during my travelling by taking the soil from my front yard, my lawn, and to stop every now and then to see the texture, the colour difference of the soils; each place is so different. So I did that in a circle, and also collected materials around, when we set up the exhibition in Chiangmai [in late 1992]

JC:

That's a recent activity, but what did you do in the States?

CA:

In the States I painted, I did paintings, a series of fists which was a continuation of my work when I was in Nan. I did quite a lot of things on the fist, as symbol of the struggles, of survival, and so I think that painting got me in the school. I had sent them the slides and they accepted me, and also gave me a scholarship. And Don Martin also told me that he really liked the symbol that I chose, and he thought that I should try to study three-dimensional things. He thought that my work was a very narrative type of work because it was symbolic and if I tried to do three-dimensional work I might be able to find new dimensions in my presentaiton. I didn't quite understand what it was, I went to see a show - I don't remember the name - by some experimental artists in Boston. It dealt with paintings, installations, boxes, broken materials. I thought I can do this. It doesn't mean anything. It is only collecting soime beautiful things, so I started to do work as expansions of my fist series by including sculpture. This was like a performance. I only did this once when presenting my work in the school. I then I got so involved in politics, in activism. I dropped out from painting, I stopped all the art.