

# CORNER THE MARKET

*Kusofiyah Nibuesa's observations of everyday life*

It's rare to see the daily lives of ordinary people represented in contemporary art—as if quotidian preoccupations like earning a living and putting food on the table were unworthy of attention from artists focused on big, important themes. Interestingly, the pandemic refocused attention on the everyday. Essential workers, it turned out, were those stocking supermarket shelves: delivery drivers, nurses, and teachers rather than the occupants of high status and highly paid roles. In the art world it is often female artists who address themes of the everyday world, many of them from regions once thought of (in the West) as peripheral. One such is young Thai multidisciplinary artist Kusofiyah Nibuesa.

Born in 1992 in Pattani and trained in the rigorous traditions of printmaking in her MFA degree at Silpakorn University, Nibuesa's complex installations and relief sculptures are astutely observed depictions of daily life. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally. A member of the Muslimah Collective, a collaborative group of five female Muslim artists, Nibuesa explores her cultural and faith heritage through works depicting a (perhaps idealised) harmonious Thai society. She says her aim is to highlight aspects of her specifically female experience and her religious and cultural identity as a Muslim in a primarily Buddhist culture. She wants to emphasise hope, honour, integrity, dignity, and goodness an antidote to the bitter culture wars and ethnic hatreds of contemporary society.

Yet there is nothing saccharine or blindly optimistic in Nibuesa's work. Rather, by focusing on the local a micro rather than a macro view her work provides intriguing glimpses into other lives, other realities. She invites us into her world in the far south of Thailand, to bustling local streets and wet markets that challenge tourist clichés of tropical beaches and swaying palm trees. She says, "The harmonious relationship among locals in the setting of the marketplace plays a key role to develop a better understanding about the southernmost provinces. Hopefully, the works would also help dismantle

Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred." Nibuesa's region is sometimes described as a "red zone." Close to the border with Malaysia, it is associated with the religious and ethnic tensions of the south Thailand insurgency. However, Nibuesa's work focuses instead on the possibilities of a harmonious multicultural community in which all Thai citizens—Muslims, Buddhists, Thai-Malay and Thai-Chinese—co-exist peacefully. In the face of the ever-present possibility of violence, she emphasises instead a peaceful multiculturalism.

In a recent exchange of emails, Nibuesa told me: "The strong message from my works is harmony in diversity. The idea actually stemmed from my painful experience of being stereotyped and labelled during a journey to Bangkok. I was treated as if I was an insurgent when I told people that I came from Pattani, the province in which the violent incidents have happened. With the aim of giving outsiders a better understanding about Thailand's southern most provinces, I created these installations to display the real happening the harmonious relationship between people of different races and beliefs in the area. Regarding the Quranic teaching in Surah al-Hujurat, 'God made us races and tribes, so that we may come to know one another'." Based on close observation and photographic documentation of people and street scenes in the first instance, her work is also steeped in her childhood memories of visiting the market with her mother. Nibuesa mostly works with cut

paper, printing and stencilling techniques rather than with textiles, yet it is textile patterns and textures that become markers of identity in her intricately detailed relief sculptures: the saffron robes of monks punctuate a crowded street scene, and veiled women seated behind baskets filled with fish, fruit, and spices wear beautifully patterned robes. She explains her fascination with textiles, and the sources of the designs replicated in her works: "I regard textiles and traditional textile patterns as a reflection of the identity of local people in Thailand's southern border provinces. For me, what people wear is ▶

insight









not just an outfit but it also displays their traditions and ways of life. The textiles I used in my installations are clothes generally worn by local people in the area. Patterns of batik sarong show the traditions shared among people in the Malay Peninsula, and headscarves represent the identity of Muslim women. All clothes are second-hand; I like the way they bring with them wrinkles, stains, fadedness and shabbiness. They truly reflect stories of the locals and what they've gone through in life."

*Cultural Assimilation 02* (2019), for example, shows a Muslim woman in red patterned headscarf, green jacket and flowered skirt in conversation with a man in ordinary Malay attire of loose batik shirt, against the temporary, ad hoc construction of a market stall roofed with corrugated plastic. It's a timeless scene, yet there are subtle pointers of its contemporaneity in the plastic baskets used to measure out produce, and the man's watch. We have a sense of immediacy and of the careful observation the artist devotes to such apparently ordinary encounters between individuals in a culturally diverse community.

Nibuesa's unusual and laborious technique involves multiple layers of timber, cardboard and various printed and stencilled papers. It allows her to create astonishingly detailed works that celebrate the minutiae of the everyday. Often life-sized, her works are built on a timber armature, onto which are layered shapes cut from plywood and cardboard. Her approach to materials is experimental, mixing tissue paper with glue and brown fabric dye to create a textured surface on the cardboard. Applied pigments include mangosteen peel (often used for the faces of her subjects), and ochres made from crushed rocks, clay

and soil, as well as more conventional printmaking inks. The patterns on sarongs and veils, and on the bags and baskets of the marketplace, are created using varied printmaking techniques as well as stencilling, weaving and hole punching.

Using her photographs as a reference, she alters details of clothing, bags and boxes to ensure that the composition is balanced, editing out extraneous detail to focus on particular individuals. For instance, a snapshot of an old man in a patterned sarong, grey jacket and white cotton kufi skullcap pushing a trolley laden with bags of rice against a background of piles of coconuts and market shoppers becomes a tightly edited, pared-back image: *The Cart* (2021) is designed as a trompe l'oeil 3D installation in which the male figure, now wearing a beautifully patterned blue shirt and ornately detailed skull cap, pushes his trolley into the corner of the gallery .

Works such as *Multicultural* and *The Cart* (both 2021) suggest a narrative—tiny vignettes of daily life that might otherwise go unnoticed are enlarged, becoming newly significant. Removing her subjects from their busy backgrounds, overlapping her paper and cardboard forms so they cast shadows against the gallery wall, the artist asks us to focus on individual men and women. They float against the gallery wall, and we think about the lives of the people she selects as her subjects. We wonder about their backstories; about the joys and hardships they encounter, their conversations. Nibuesa celebrates the rhythms of daily life and the hard work of ordinary people in a conflicted region, and in doing so she challenges assumptions of difference and we come to recognise our shared humanity. ...

**Luise Guest. Artist quotes translated by Noona Ajjana. 16albermarle.com @kusofiyahnibuesa**







Image page 25: Kusofiyah Nibuesa, *The Cart*, 2021, Assembled Cut Paper, 120 x 98 cm.

Image page 24: *Poji Jala*, 63 x 92 x 5 cm, 2019.

Image left: Installation shot of *Other Possible Worlds* at Delmar Gallery Sydney, an exhibition curated by John Cruthers and Haisang Javanalikhjikara for 16albermarle Project Space.

Image above: Sholay Eekay, *Paper Cut and Paper Assembly*, 177 x 188 x 18cm, 2022.