

Transcript for Object: Stories of Craft and Design

Season 3, episode 1: MAKE Award Winner Vipoo Srivilasa, ceramic artist

[music]

Vipoo Srivilasa: I work in series. Each series has a different theme and concept.

Sometimes about queerness, sometimes about spiritual meaning, and sometimes about loneliness.

But, even though the subjects seem kind of depressing, the work is really positive. I find joy in all these places.

[theme music starts]

Lisa Cahill: This is Object. A podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia.

I'm your host, Lisa Cahill, from the Australian Design Centre.

In this series, we'll go behind the scenes of Australia's richest award for contemporary craft and design, the MAKE Award: Biennial Prize for Innovation in Australian Craft and Design.

Lisa Cahill: This episode is a special one. You'll meet the winner of the Inaugural MAKE Award, ceramic artist Vipoo Srivilasa.

You'll hear from the judges, and Vipoo's strategic approach to making his award winning work.

[theme music fades]

Lisa Cahill: Hello, Vipoo. Thank you for joining us for Object Podcast. Wonderful to see you.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Hi, Lisa. Thanks for having me.

Lisa Cahill: So, Vipoo, for listeners who are unfamiliar with your work, could you tell us the kind of work that you make?

Vipoo Srivilasa: I make ceramic sculptures. I usually like to make work that accessible, positive and beautiful.

Lisa Cahill: What are the key themes in your work?

Vipoo Srivilasa: The key themes in my work because I make so many works.

But the prominent one is queerness, like marriage equality. I did quite a few projects with that. One of them is called Love Life.

People come to my show and fill in the questionnaires about their love life. For example, what kind of energy do you have in you? It could be more female, even though you're male. Or more male, even though you're female.

And then from that answer, I turned into ingredients and then make finger food for them, especially for it. So they can actually taste their love life.

Vipoo Srivilasa: And sometimes talk about the culture change, like migrations, for example, like the project I'm doing now called Rejoy. They talk about the migration, from people who were not born in Australia, like myself, you know, overseas born Australian, give them the opportunity to tell a story of how moving to Australia affects them, both positive and negative way.

Vipoo Srivilasa: And spiritual meaning. The one that I'm thinking of right now is the wellness deity. I did it during the pandemic when I asked the online community to send me a drawing of COVID deity. And then I translate that into ceramic sculptures. And then I commissioned a freelance writer to write about each of the deity. So the connection between the sketch, the ceramic sculpture and the writings.

Lisa Cahill: Amazing. And your work is quite colorful and joyful... It's really beautiful and it makes you feel happy when you see your work.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Also, it's easy for people to understand my work when I present it in an accessible and positive way. Otherwise sometimes it could be too much and people just don't look at it at all.

Lisa Cahill: It's interesting that you say that you want to make your work accessible for an audience. What is it about your work that you think is accessible, what aspects?

Vipoo Srivilasa: I think first of all, people can just enjoy my work as it is. Like the beauty of it, or the cuteness of the work, without reading my artist statement at all. They could just connect to the work. But if they want to find out more detail, then they can read the statement and then go deeper into the work.

I think that's one thing. The size of it. It's a domestic kind of size.

Also the beauty of it. That people could just relate to it without, "Oh, what is this happening? I don't understand this kind of work."

It's not abstract. It's very understandable, I guess, in that way. Yes. Just like me. Yes, the work is just like me.

Lisa Cahill: Well, I was going to say, you know, the humor in it is accessible as well, and evoke a sense of joy and happiness around some quite serious subject matter as well.

So I can see that, yes, as you say, you can enjoy it on one level for its beauty and as objects and you can enjoy it on another level for the way it makes you think.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yes, totally.

Lisa Cahill: There is an interesting cross cultural element to your work too. You being born in Thailand and living in Australia. Do you bring much of your background from Thailand into the work?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yeah, I thought about it so many times. I didn't want to bring Thai culture sometimes, but it's in my blood. So it just comes out anyway, no matter what I do!

Also now, like with Australia, living here for over 30 years, it's also come anyway. Even though I just don't want to make 'Australian work'. But it's part of my life.

Lisa Cahill: Exactly, yeah.

Lisa Cahill: And congratulations on being the winner of the inaugural Make Award for Biennial Prize for Innovation in Craft and Design. Amazing,

Vipoo Srivilasa: Thank you, yes. I'm really happy too., yes.

Lisa Cahill: Good, that's great. How does it feel?

Vipoo Srivilasa: How does it feel? Amazing and it was a surprise. I didn't know that I would win.

And I'm glad I dressed up for it.

Vipoo Srivilasa: I thought like, if I didn't win the prize, at least I might won the best dressed of the night.

Lisa Cahill: What did you wear for the Make Award Awards Vipoo?

Vipoo Srivilasa: I wear a black and white matching suit, jacket and pants. The pattern is really graphic. And I got it from a clothes shop called Yevu, an African company.

Lisa Cahill: Well, it looked amazing. You really looked the part of the award winning artist that night. Lucky for that!

Vipoo Srivilasa: Well that's what is happening to all my friends, as an artist. We have a thing called 'artist uniform'. So we only wear it for the opening. So they know we are an artist.

[laughing]

Lisa Cahill: Tell us a little more about how it feels to be the winner?

Vipoo Srivilasa: It means a lot because it feels like, 'Oh, I still got it.' And it's confirmed to me that, to enter the award with a strategy, it paid off.

I often enter an award because I have some work in the studio, left over from the exhibition.

But for the MAKE Award, I actually make the piece for the MAKE Award.

So I think that's confirmed me like having, not just half hearted, but fully committed to making things, well, you know what, it's paid off. Yes.

Lisa Cahill: It's paid off. Paid off. Yeah. That's wonderful. So describe *Diverse Dominion Deities* for us.

If we look closely, if we touch it, how does it feel?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Oh, if you touch it... [laughing]

Lisa Cahill: Oh, will it fall apart?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yes! It's sculptures of four deities.

In Thailand, each deity has its own animal vehicle, so they can travel around different dreams. So that's the idea of having the animals and little deities sit on top of them.

It's made of mass production animal statues that I found online. And then I paint it with an industrial grade white color.

And then I make lots of handmade flowers with cobalt oxide decorations. Then I put it together using BluTack.

Lisa Cahill: BluTack?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yes, I thought maybe you didn't pick it up, but yes, BluTack. And on top of that, I have a little deity made of air dry clay. Then combine them together. Yes.

Lisa Cahill: So you've really used a variety of materials in the piece.

Vipoo Srivilasa: I did.

Lisa Cahill: And you know, I'm not surprised you used Blu Tack because I did know that, given that I'm one of the judges of the award, it probably would be terrible if I didn't know!

[laughing]

Lisa Cahill: But tell us about why you chose to use Blu Tack and air dried clay and porcelain in the work?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Because when I read the criteria of the award, they're asking for something innovative, something new, something that is pushing the boundary that I normally make work.

So from that, I thought of the diversity of clay. We have hobbies using air dry clay. We have mass production using slip casting techniques. And we have fine art using porcelain, hand painted.

So I combined them together. And in a way it's a metaphor of the diversity in Australia.

Lisa Cahill: Cultural as well as diversity within making. Yes.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yes. The different technique, the different material, the different finish. And I use Blu Tack to join all the bits and pieces together, just to create a metaphor that different cultures come together.

It's really good. It's beautiful, but also very fragile. So you have to actually look after them very carefully. If you don't look after them, it could come apart quite easily.

Also, lots of people see it and ask me like, 'Why can they still see Blu Tack?'

Because I made it deliberately because I want to show that when different cultures come together, then it won't be seamless. There's always bits and pieces that never fit. But because of that, there's room for adjustment.

And room for us to see like, okay, there is something that's not quite right, so we have to be careful, treat it with care. So that's why you can see the Blu Tack as part of the artwork.

[music break]

Jason Smith: Vipoo Srivilasa's work *Diverse Dominion Deities* from 2023 was a work that we came to again and again.

Jason Smith: When one is judging an award, you don't really know where you're going to go until you're in the room with the works.

Vipoo has brought forward a group of four objects that is a total experience. Not only of his practice as a ceramicist, but a new direction in his work.

Jason Smith: The combination of finding the original objects on the internet, disguising them.

But doing so in a way that brings to the forefront everyday materials; a reflection on consumer cultures; a critique of the kind of secular world in which we live; the loss of religions, the promotion of religions.

Jason Smith: The way in which each of the four objects is assembled in a way that creates an incredibly convincing experience of these strange new forms from found objects.

There's humor, there's complexity. We felt that we could stand there and talk for a long time about the undertones of the work as reflections on 21st century culture and consumption and reuse and recycling, artistic vision, a sense of humor amidst the darkness of the world.

Jason Smith: It just presents itself as a total work of art, as an experience of something highly sophisticated, beautifully crafted, completely new in his oeuvre.

So we thought we have to give this the award

Jason Smith: I am Jason Smith, the Director and CEO of Geelong Gallery in Victoria, and I am one of the four judges for the Make Award.

[music break]

Lisa Cahill: And tell me about the animals in the sculptures, the deities.

Vipoo Srivilasa: They used to be recognisable animals. But now they don't because I cover them with porcelain flowers. So it changed the identity of the animals. And that's kind of like me who moved from Thailand to Australia, my identity changed.

So that's part of the work as well. And you saw only four animals in the show, but in reality, I have like about 10 to 12 animals that I sourced.

And then I put it together and see which combinations work best, and these four is the best combinations.

Lisa Cahill: So a lot goes into making a work like that I can see, as you said, you use the award criteria as an opportunity to push your practice in a new direction.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yes

Lisa Cahill: In terms of the process of making a work like that for an award exhibition, how do you start making it work like this?

Vipoo Srivilasa: I have a rough idea of kind of thing I wanted and so I then I go to the op shop and look at the ceramic things.

Lisa Cahill: Do you find lots of ceramic animals in op shops?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Actually op shops have a few, but eBay has a lot.

Lisa Cahill: Really?

Vipoo Srivilasa: But the more you look at it, the more you like these animals and you just keep buying!

And it's very addictive. You know, you click Buy, click Buy and click Buy, and before you know it, like, 'Oh my God, like seven of them already in my basket.' [laughing]

So the animal, the mass production animals underneath the flowers - the first one was a squirrel with a big tail. Squirrel.

Lisa Cahill: Squirrel, squirrel, yeah yeah.

Vipoo Srivilasa: The second one is a dog that's sitting two legs on the ball. The third one is another dog standing on the step. And the last one is a horse. Yes, but they completely changed, they've become mythical animals.

Lisa Cahill: And the color blue that features in your work, the cobalt?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yeah, I have used this since 2005. Before 2005, my work was really colorful. And I had my first solo show in Thailand, in Bangkok. And I just want to make work that connects, where Thai people could connect.

Back then studio potter or studio artist was not a thing in Thailand at all. Not like now.

So to suddenly bring ceramic sculpture to Thailand, it just might be a little too much disconnected.

So I want to at least use color that we all understand.

Vipoo Srivilasa: And blue and white is the color that everybody understands, not just the Thai people. Everybody has blue and white ceramic at home. And it's linked to so many cultural exchanges.

You know, from east to west, from west to east, and then from China to Europe, Europe to Islamic or Islamic to Europe.

And besides, artistically, it's really beautiful.

Because I only use two colors, it makes me think a lot more creatively how to use them, not just the color, but the tone, maybe the patterns.

And, you know, since 2005 and how many years now? Like 20 years almost, I'm still using them, and find new way of using this color palette,

Lisa Cahill: And you've incorporated gold into the work?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Of course, yes. Gold is like ... it's a reference to Thailand, all the temples. It's also a reference to Australia, like the gold country or Ballarat in Victoria, where I live.

And also it looks expensive and sells really well.

Lisa Cahill: [laughing]. And at the end of the day, that's important for an artist, isn't it?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Totally.

Lisa Cahill: It is, quite seriously. I mean, it is really important for artists who are relying on making work to make an income, make a living. It's important that work not only be appreciated, but also be able to be purchased and collected and, enable you to make, then make more work.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Yes, yes. As a full time artist for 20 years, it's really important because I don't have any other job apart from making artwork. So this kind of thing is, yeah, it's part of the making as well to think about it. Yes.

[music break]

Brian Parkes: Vipoo has a deep and constantly evolving practice. And he's always experimenting with both the ceramic medium and the ways in which it intersects with his own kind of cultural background and interest in cultures generally. There's so many things going on in this work.

Brian Parkes: And, as we're looking as a group of judges at these works and understanding The different ways in which he's used the floret form by decorating it in a very simple palette to create all the different features Eyes, nose, different kinds of textures, and it's, but it's the same object reinvented in different ways, and then gloriously blue tacked to these kind of spray painted things.

Brian Parkes: It's provocative in the context of contemporary craft practice, but he's in full command of the process.

Brian Parkes: I'm Brian Parkes. I'm CEO at Jam Factory in Adelaide and I'm very pleased to be one of the four judges for the MAKE Award.

[music break]

Lisa Cahill: I wanted to ask you just a little bit... this is a bit of an aside from the MAKE Award... But I am interested in the work that you do around gathering the ceramics community for special causes.

I wondered if you might tell us a little bit about what your motivation is in, in doing that?

Vipoo Srivilasa: I think when natural disasters happen, the whole world wants to help.

But I feel like as an artist, I couldn't donate so much money and I feel helpless. I want to help, but I don't know. So I thought, 'Oh, maybe I just, you know, put it online and see what happened.'

And ask a few friends to donate pieces.

I started a lot of charity projects called 'Clay For'. 'Clay For Nepal', 'Clay For Australia', and 'Clay For' so many different things.

Vipoo Srivilasa: And then it's become bigger and bigger. With the Australian bushfires a few years ago, that's like blow up the whole project because so many artists, not just Australian, but around the world want to donate their work.

And they kind of feel the same way as I am. As an artist, so we donate the work and then people buy it. And then we can use that money to help out other people.

And with social media, it's helped connect people from around the world to the project. Yes.

Lisa Cahill: Oh, that's fantastic. Yeah. You started a movement. Congratulations. The Clay For Movement.

Vipoo Srivilasa: [laughing] Oh, I'm not sure, but yeah, it would be great to see more of these happening.

Lisa Cahill: So tell me also... Ceramics is very hot right now, Vipoo.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Oh God, yes, if you don't do ceramic, you're so yesterday. [laughing]

Lisa Cahill: Why is that the case? Tell me, why is that the case? Why do you think.. ?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Because it's sexy.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Sexy, like you're touching clay. Oh my god, so sensual.

Vipoo Srivilasa: It's because you have to let go of everything because you're putting in the kiln and you just don't know what happened.

In other art forms, you actually can see the finish when it is finished, but with ceramics, even though you finish it, but then you have to put in the kiln and that could completely change everything.

Vipoo Srivilasa: And I think it's quite addictive. It's just like gambling. But instead of money, you spend your time and energy making work. And if you open the kiln and then the whole thing collapses and now you've lost.

But most of the time you open the queue and it's come out really nice and you win.

Lisa Cahill: Mm hmm. Interesting. So what are your chances?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Well for me, every year, at least lost two pieces in the kiln, because I forget to put hole in it, so it's exploding in the kiln.

I'll fire it too soon, too fast, before they were completely dry. So, that keeps me on the edge.

Lisa Cahill: Okay. Fantastic. Going back to the MAKE award... What do you hope the judges saw in your work?

Vipoo Srivilasa: I hope the judges see that I actually look at the criteria. That I actually make the work for the award.

[music break]

Hyeyoung Cho: What we looked for was completion in the composition. And it just felt very complete. This particular piece that he submitted really had a pronounced voice.

Hyeyoung Cho: And then his concept behind the found objects and so on was very appropriate for the composition.

Hyeyoung Cho: My name is Hye Young Cho. I've been chosen as the jury member for the 2020 Through Make Award.

I'm currently the chairlady of the oldest academic association known as the Korea Association of Art and Design, and also an expert panel at the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize.

[music break]

Lisa Cahill: Do you think that awards make a difference for a creative practitioner's career, and why?

Vipoo Srivilasa: Oh my God, yes!

First of all, it pushed me to do something different. It pushed all the participants or all the entries to think outside what they normally make and what they can do differently.

And that little thing, that flip in my head, could actually turn out into a whole new series of work and move my work to a next level.

Vipoo Srivilasa: Not to mention the extra prize. I don't know. I don't know what to do with the prize, actually.

Vipoo Srivilasa: That's why I think this award is quite unusual from other awards. And also, it's one of the little awards that actually state what they want. Most of the awards, it's just like, just send the work in, but you have no idea how, how the judge looks at your work.

Vipoo Srivilasa: So I think it's nice and clear for all the next participants to look at this criteria and create work especially for the award.

Lisa Cahill: Fantastic. Thank you very much.

Vipoo Srivilasa: You're most welcome. Thank you, Lisa.

Lisa Cahill: That's ceramic artist Vipoo Srivilasa. You can see Vipoo's work on our website, along with all 30 finalists in the Make Awards.

Go to Australian Design Centre dot podcast slash podcast.

Lisa Cahill: In the next episode of Object, you'll meet the Foong sisters - also known as High Tea with Mrs Woo.

Rowena Foong: We make clothing, essentially. Women's clothing. There's not really a category there for what we do. We sit somewhere in the middle of fashion and clothing design and craft practice.

Lisa Cahill: Object: Stories of Design and Craft is an Australian Design Centre podcast, produced by Jane Curtis with sound engineering by John Jacobs.

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