



Ralph Kiggell

SACRED SHAPES

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Solo Exhibition by

Ralph Kiggell

25 July – 31 August, 2015



Published 2015 by
Thavibu Gallery Co., Ltd
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Layout by Wanee Tipchindaikul, Copydesk, Thailand

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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition SACRED SHAPES by the British artist Ralph Kiggell (b. 1960). The exhibition takes place in Bangkok on 25 July – 31 August, 2015 and features a series of woodblock prints, collages and standing forms. In this exhibition, the artist explores the shapes of both sacred and temporal worlds.

In ***Sacred Shapes***, Ralph Kiggell continues a series of works that reinterpret common decorative elements and forms in Thailand and Britain. Through various media, he reshapes and recolours objects of cultural and national identity, such as pinnacles, mandalas, flags and stupas. The exhibition includes three versions of six standing forms rendered on **paper**, on **screen** and in **clay** through the varying processes of **woodblock print**, **3D computer graphics** and **porcelain**. Also exhibited are five prints describing the five elements through common mathematical shapes, as well as a large double-sided accordion book featuring 12 prints of shapes based on the flamelike Thai *kranok* motif.

In ***Sacred Shapes***, Kiggell uses image and form to assess the presentation of Thailand and Britain as 'other' to foreign eyes, as well as the historic assimilation of foreign 'things' into Thailand. His works also offer a commentary on changing notions in a computerized world of what is craft and what is art.

I take this opportunity to thank Ralph Kiggell for his collaboration.

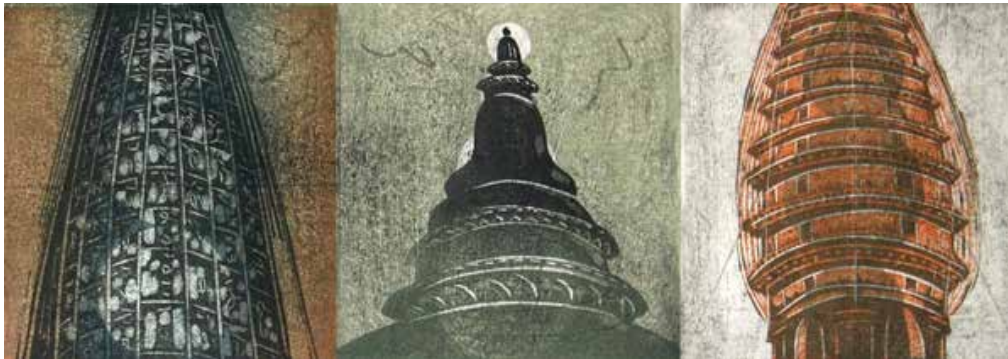
Sacred Shapes

Ralph Kiggell

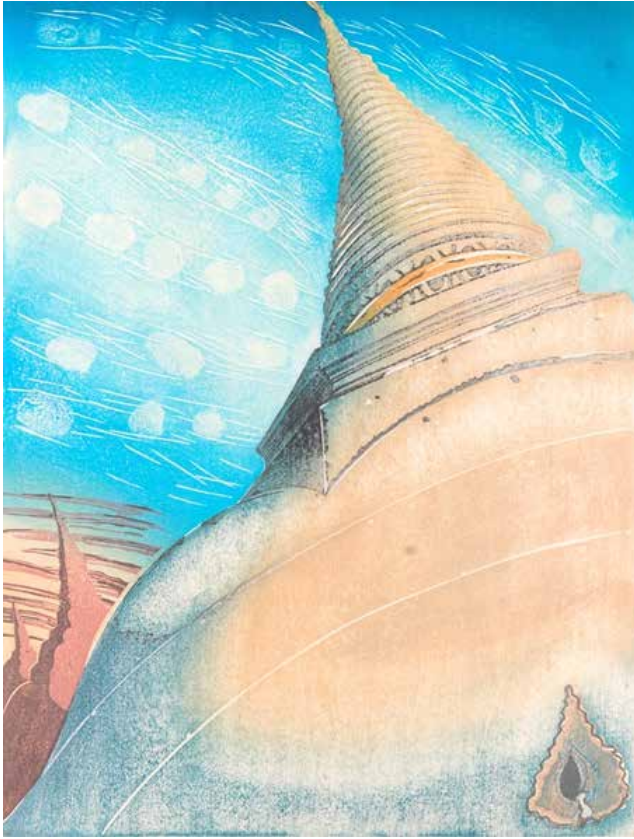
This exhibition *Sacred Shapes* draws together three recent groups of works (2012–15) that explore visual encounters between me – a British artist – and east and southeast Asia, where I have lived for over 30 years. Through an evolving series of woodblock prints beginning with *Sacred Sites* (2006–7), and new work in other mediums, I describe two-dimensional and three-dimensional shapes adapted from several cultures.

Near universal digitisation in the developed world suggests that a global society follows and is moved by the same trends and thoughts. Yet *of course* each culture's taste, etiquette, sense of duty, moral system is different. Away from my homeland for many years, my sense of identity is reasonably fluid. I feel distant to structures that once shaped me, yet often displaced among the structures and living patterns that surround me now. I'm used to this in-between world, however, happy to lie between the gaps, nurture my skewed orientalism and puzzle over nationalism. These are some of the themes in my work, presented here in the exploration of shapes.

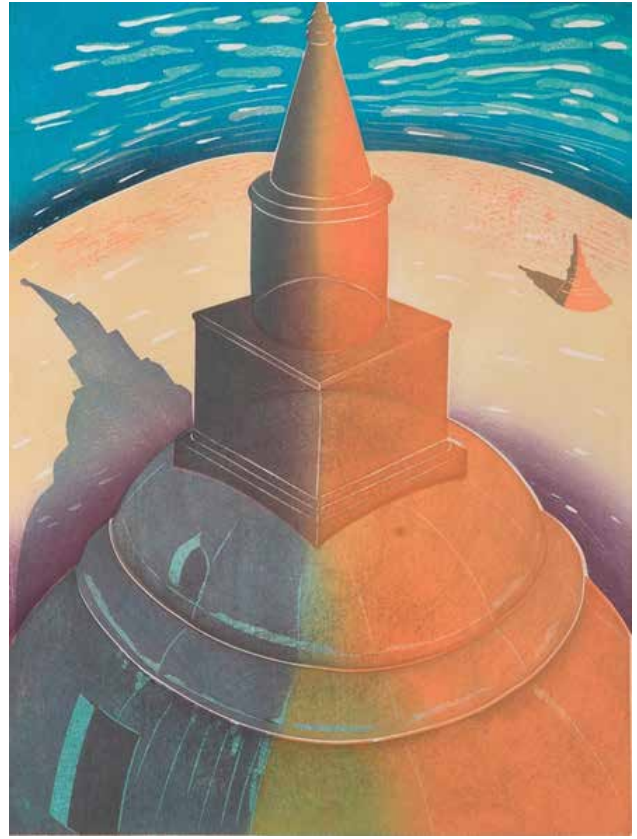
All art is about distributions of colours and shapes into arrangements that please us or challenge us. The eye interprets these shapes and the mind and body respond. Different cultures credit different shapes and colours with varying powers and taboos. A shape sacred to one culture may not be sacred to another. Sacred is a subjective quality applied to an object, a person, a thought, or a law according to the value system of that social group.



Towers, 2007 | woodblock print | 17 x 45 cm



Pale Dagoba, 2006 | woodblock print | 60 x 45 cm



Orange Dagoba, 2006 | woodblock print | 60 x 45 cm



Black Stupa, 2006 | woodblock print | 45 x 45 cm

Five Elements

That all living things in the macrocosm are combinations of five elements is a concept that appears in ancient belief systems across the world. The elements vary between earth, water, fire, wind and ether in ancient Greece, for example, or earth, water, wood, metal and fire in China. The five elements may be interpreted as energies, changing states or qualities of solidity, fluidity, temperature, mobility and spirituality.

A group of prints made on a residency near Mount Fuji¹ form a visual essay using colour, shape and abstraction to describe the five elements according to a blend of concepts from east and west. The format loosely interprets the flat-to-pointed shape of Mount Fuji, earth to ether, which ancient Japan – pre-Shinto, pre-Buddhist – first identified as sacred.² This hierarchy of spiritual attainment was adapted in the shape of Japanese temple lanterns, or *tōrō*, which follows the order of the five elements in Buddhist cosmology, beginning with the cubed lantern base touching the ground and moving to the finial, which is the jewel. Stupas and pagodas follow a similar telescoping of shapes from base to finial.

In this visual essay of the five elements, each description contains several shapes and motifs that float on the neutral background of the paper. For example, the descriptions include interpretations of mathematician Marcus du Sautoy's discussion of five important mathematical shapes: cube, sphere, pyramid, torus and unshape (or 'blob' as he calls it);³ and use five colours traditionally ascribed to the elements: yellow, blue, red, green and white. Additional forms that I carve into the woodblocks are based on shapes cut out from paper, or inked strokes made with a calligraphy brush. The wide format of the five elements prints mimics horizontal *emaki* scroll paintings read from right to left. On the other hand, the print *Five Elements: Black to White* shows the elements in ascending vertical order from earth to ether.

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1. Mokuhanga Innovation Laboratory residency in Kawaguchiko, Japan, February–March, 2012.
 2. *Mount Fuji: Icon of Japan (Studies in Comparative Religion)* by Byron H. Earhart. University of South Carolina Press (2011)
 3. *Marcus du Sautoy's Five Shapes*, BBC Radio 4 (2005)

Sacred Shapes: Accordion Book

The twelve images in this accordion book interpret and pun the tapering *kranok* shape, a ubiquitous flamelike motif seen in Thai decoration that is derived from organic forms such as buds and leaves. While *kranok* gives a delicate and often glittering appearance to Thai objects, costumes, painting and architecture, it is adapted from decorative motifs that arrived, along with Buddhism, statecraft, literature and art, in a process of Indianisation that spread, with Sanskrit, Brahman rituals and Hindu myths, across southeast Asia several hundred years ago. Rather than being an exclusive symbol of Thailand, *kranok* represents the flow of ideas and cultures from one people to another, and demonstrates that nothing is confined to one place alone.

In *Sacred Shapes*, a group of twelve apparently unrelated international objects from science, geography and nature translates the *kranok* shape. These shapes mimic the upward curving forms and pointy flourishes seen in, for example, temple decoration, Thai script and in the long fingernails of temple dancers, all of which rise auspiciously toward a better, more sacred, place than the earth on which our feet stand. Through *kranok*, *Sacred Shapes* also reflects on the pleasure and discord of being alien, how living abroad leads one to adapt and change. The book further assesses the presentation of Thailand, a popular tourist decoration today, as exotic and 'other' to foreign eyes, as well as the fluid assimilation of foreign 'things' into Thailand.

The book follows an order of twelve images reading from left to right on the front, and then left to right on the back.

The twelve shapes

Front

Land Upside down, Thailand resembles *kranok*. As a political entity, Thailand assumed this shape through negotiation with foreign powers. **Leaf** Many Thai decorative motifs are adapted from scrolling natural forms such as leaves, buds, bamboo and flowering vines. **Radiolarian** The lattice-like structure protects and keeps the single-celled radiolaria buoyant while it drifts through the sea. Its shape is like the Thai headdress *chada*. **Cypress** Van Gogh's Provençale cypress from *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, painted at the mental asylum in Saint-Paul-de-Mausole between 1889 and 1890. **Worm** The convoluting body of a tapeworm recalls sacred Sanskrit insignia and calligraphy, but also royal ciphers. **Fractal** A rough woodblock version

of the Mandelbrot Set, which Benoit Mandelbrot describes as a 'geometric shape that can be split into parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole'.

Back

Pinecone Typical pinecones have overlapping scales that spiral following the Fibonacci number ratio (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21), the same sequence on pineapples, artichokes and ferns. **Topiary** A cut and pruned shrub for a French formal garden assumes its shape mostly by manmade design. **Rock** From a woodblock depiction in the Chinese painting manual *Mustard Seed Garden*, which gives examples on how to paint landscapes, trees, hills and rocks, people and houses, and birds and flowers using ink and brush. **Shell** The empty shell of *murex occa*, a tropical sea snail found among the rocks and corals of shallowish waters along the beaches of Thailand and in souvenir shops. **Windsock** Wind gives the windsock its full shape, while the windsock gives its form to otherwise invisible air and wind. **Potato** An ugly potato reveals the murky shape of Britain, itself a *kranok*. Like *kranok*, the potato has traveled from one part of the world to another. And like a potato, a westerner in Thailand may feel inelegant and lumpy.⁴

Sacred Shapes: Standing Forms, Flags & Mandalas

Using various mediums, this group of works reshapes and recolours objects of cultural and national identity, such as pinnacles, mandalas, flags and stupas, offering a commentary on aspects of historic exchange between Thailand and Britain, as well as cultural slippage, craftsmanship, identity and crossover in globalized times.

4. Sir Anthony Rumbold, ambassador to Thailand (1965–67), said in a diplomatic dispatch concluding his time here: 'It does a faded European good to spend some time among such a jolly extrovert and anti-intellectual people and if anybody wants to know what their culture consists of, the answer is that it consists of themselves, their excellent manners, their fastidious habits, their graceful gestures and their elegant persons. If we are elephants and oxen, they are gazelles and butterflies.'

Six Standing Forms

The six standing forms began as a flat two-dimensional watercolour sketch, and took me across several mediums: from 3d computer-generated (CG) graphics, to porcelain to wood-block. As with *kranok*, the six standing forms are also based on sacred shapes, part stupa part pinnacle, that merge Thai and English decorative features presented as flanges, knobs, chilies, spikes and crockets that suggest both Buddhist and Gothic motifs. The basic idea was to create six spires that incorporated aspects of pinnacles from my hometown of Oxford⁵ with Asian stupas.

The simple watercolour sketch I had became the basis for working with two different Thai craftsmen: one a potter at a benjarong workshop outside Bangkok; the other a computer graphics designer at a 3D print studio in Bangkok.⁶ Both craftsmen interpreted the flat pencil lines and brushstrokes of my design into three-dimensional forms, real on the one hand and virtual on the other. The process and the materiality allowed them some leeway in interpretation.

The rendering of the objects in clay involves a hands-on, full sensory experience, in which the object emerges from a formless mass in a process almost unchanged over millennia. The clay is first modeled, then dried, fired, glazed once then glazed again with added colours before reaching the finished result. In the case of these pieces, a mould was made so that the forms could be repeated.

The rendering of the standing forms on screen involves a different coordination of eye and hand skills, one that is less haptic, less messy, less fraught. With Autodesk 3ds Max, a system more often used for modeling architectural visualization, the designer creates the forms by first establishing a wire-skeleton structure over which coloured planes are stretched. On completion, the forms can be printed out on a 3D printer. On screen, the forms can be rotated and viewed from any direction, including from below. Viewed from above, the forms become delicate mandalas. Actual stupas and dagobas also appear as mandalas in aerial views.

5. In tourist brochures, Oxford is known as the 'city of dreaming spires', after Matthew Arnold's poem *Thyrsis: A Monody, to Commemorate the Author's Friend, Arthur Hugh Clough (1865)*: 'And that sweet City with her dreaming spires, She needs not June for beauty's heightening.'

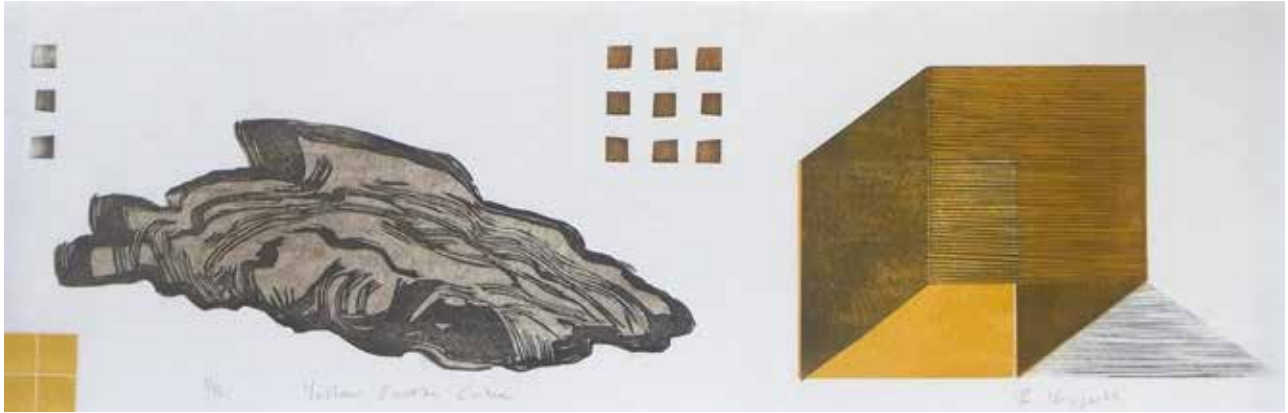
6. The craftsmen, otherwise anonymous, are the potter Singpol Namthip from Ratchaburi, and Pirat Jobit, a graphic designer based in Bangkok.

The processes of working with clay, wood and on screen here form a comment on art and craft in the last 20 years. With the rapid digitization of many aspects of our lives there has been a corresponding growth in 'nostalgia' for craft. The notion of craft is changing, too. Creative processes that are hands-on, dirty, smell and involve physical effort—even oil painting—become bracketed as craft, as more and more artists, and artschools, opt for computerized or digitized methods to create art. While woodblock printing is seen as old-fashioned, on the one hand, it is increasingly embraced as an antidote to machine-made art, on the other. Working in CG, woodblock and clay involves interesting interplay between these mediums.

Flags, Mandalas and Other Shapes

Many of the structures that Thailand in the 19th century used to develop and define itself as a modern nation state were based on British ones at that time, when Great Britain was confident, united and hierarchical. The Bowring Treaty 160 years ago between Siam and Britain drew Thailand into a modern globalised world (then defined by the British Empire). In *Six Standing Forms*, some CG renderings, and other paper cutouts, the forms and images are depicted in red, blue and white—nationalistic colours associated with the flags of Britain, Thailand, France and the US, as well as many others. The black and white flag prints, on the other hand, look back on themes of past glories and nationalism.

Five Elements



Yellow Earth Cube, 2013 | woodblock print | 35 x 96 cm



Blue Water Sphere, 2013 | woodblock print | 35 x 96 cm



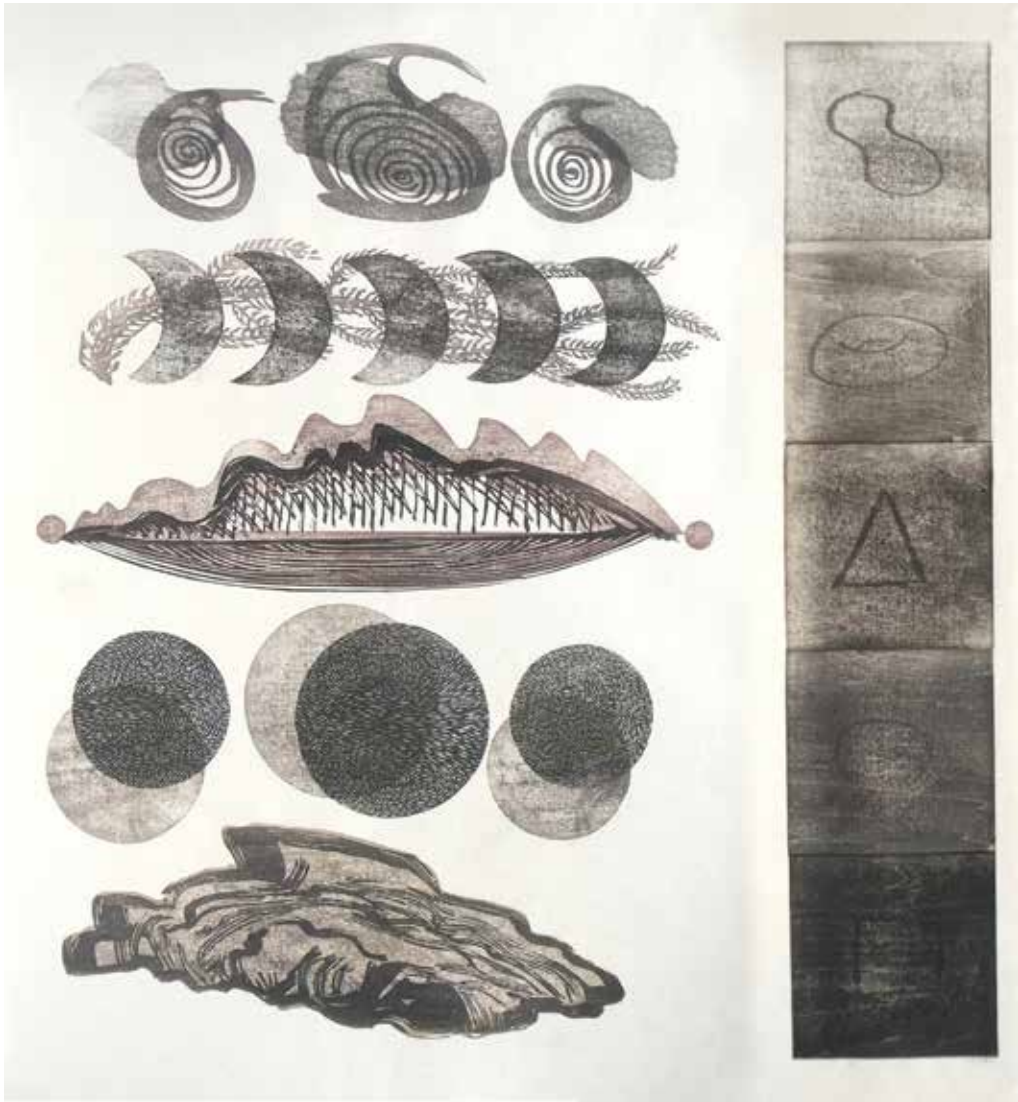
Red Fire Pyramid, 2013 | woodblock print | 35 x 96 cm



Green Wind Torus, 2013 | woodblock print | 35 x 96 cm



White Ether Unshape, 2013 | woodblock print | 35 x 96 cm



Five Elements: Black to White, 2013 | woodblock print | 96 x 9 cm

Sacred Shapes: Accordion Book



Sacred Shapes, 2013 | double-sided accordion book, 12 woodblock prints | 63 X 33.4 cm, extends to 225 cm |
binding by Phantipa Thanchookiet at Likay Bindery, Bangkok



Sacred Shapes: Fractal (left) and colophon (right)



Twelve Sacred Shapes, 2013 | woodblock print | each 60 x 33 cm

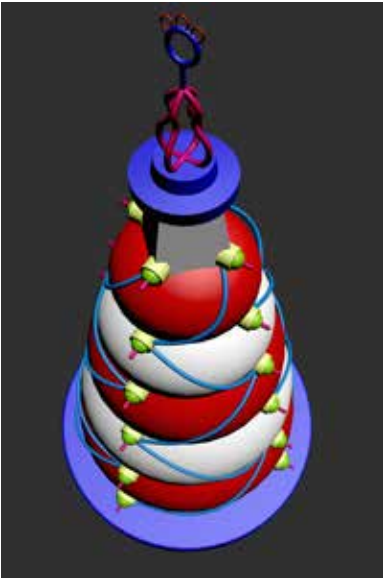
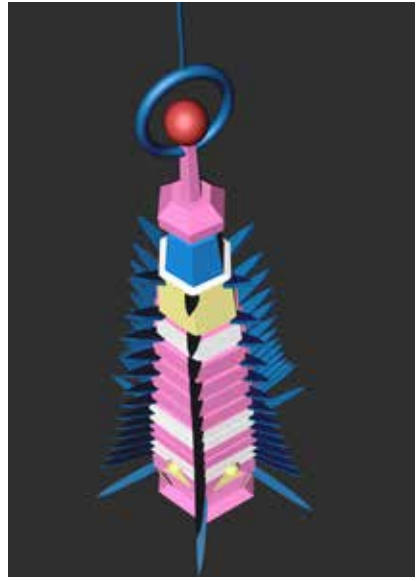
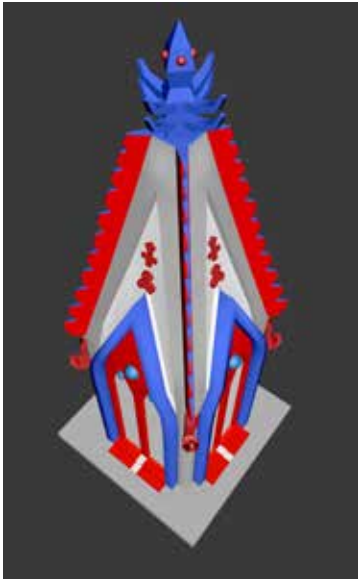
Six Standing Forms



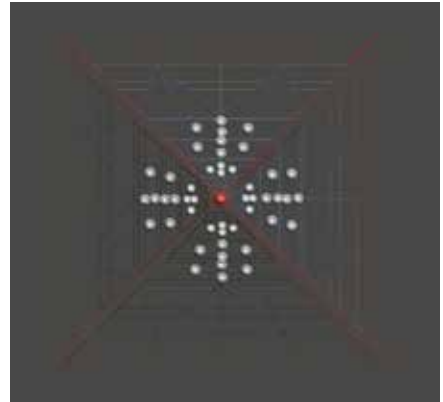
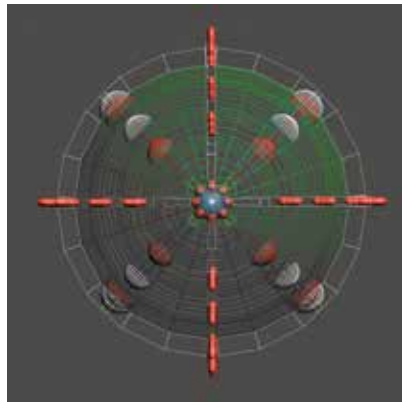
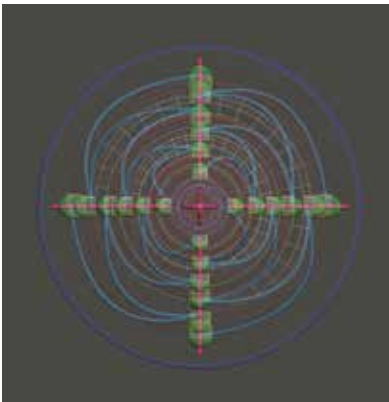
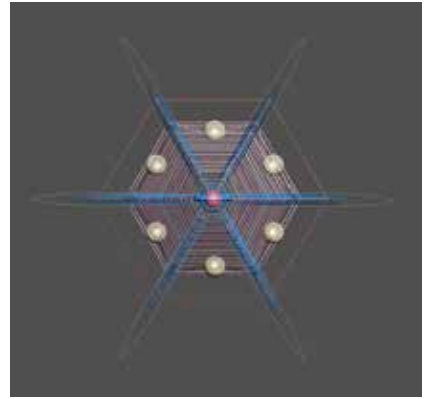
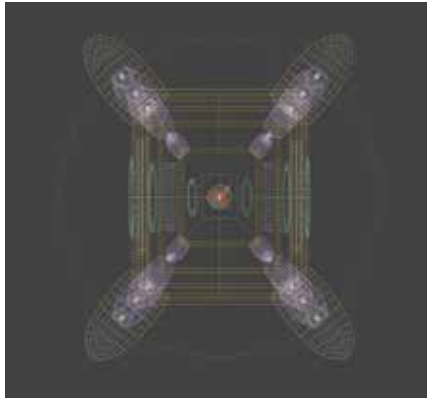
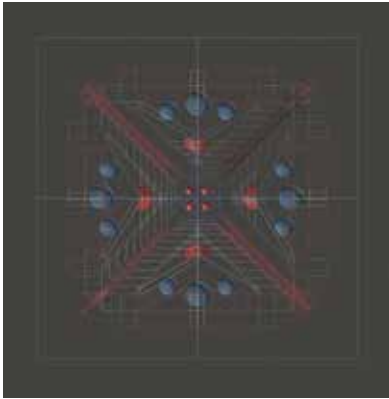
Six Standing Forms, 2015 | porcelain with neutral glaze, variable heights from 33 to 37 cm |
Left to right: Pinnacle, Pagoda, Spire, Chedi, Obelisk, Stupa



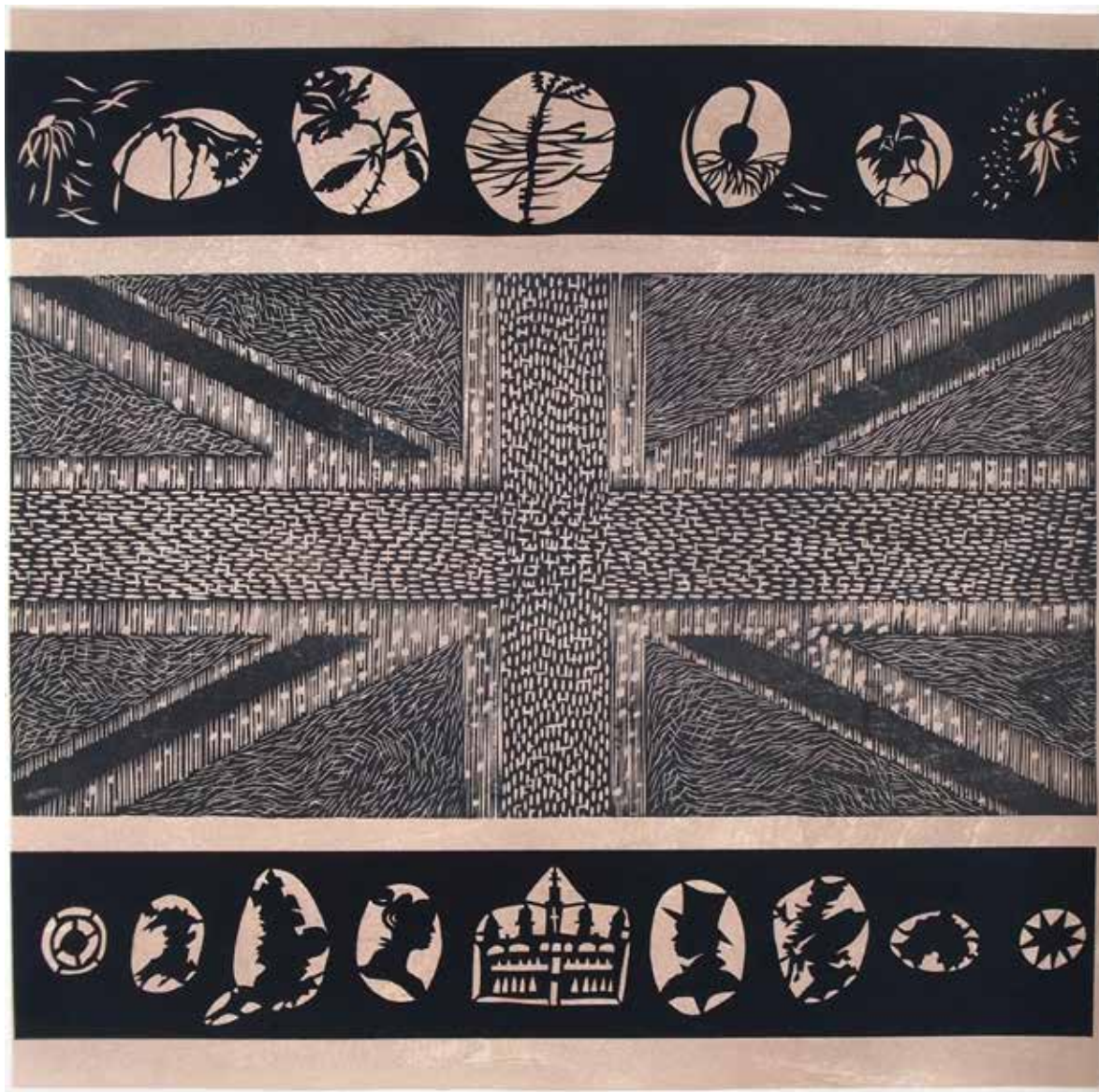
Six standing objects dry before glazing



Six Standing Objects, 2015 | computer-generated rendering



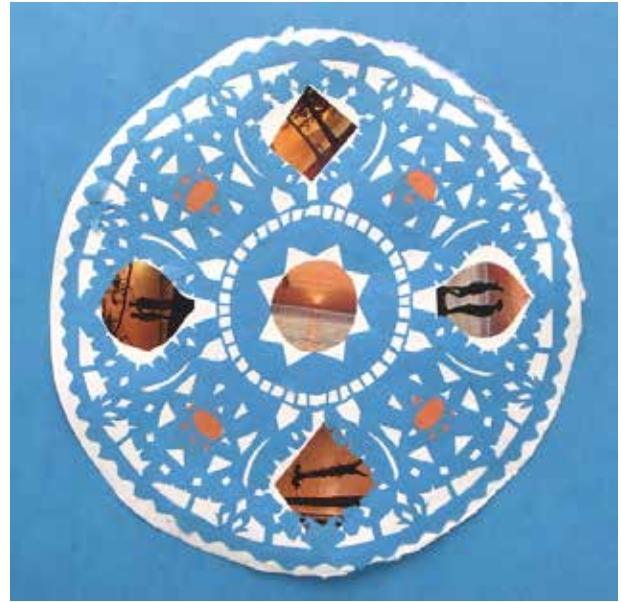
Six Mandalas, Standing Objects Aerial View 2015 | CG wireframe rendering | 25 x 25 cm



Black Flag, 2015 | woodblock print and papercut | 60 x 60 cm



White Flag, 2015 | woodblock print, collage and papercut | 60 x 60 cm



Four Mandalas, 2015 | collage and papercut | diameter 30 cm

RALPH KIGGELL



Ralph Kiggell is based in Bangkok, Thailand, where he practises and teaches water-based woodblock printing. He has a BA in Chinese Studies from SOAS, London University (1983) and an MA in Printmaking from Tama Arts University, Tokyo (1999), for which he received a Japanese Government Scholarship. He is a member of the Royal Society of Painter Printmakers in Britain and exhibits widely in UK and Asia. Two recent bookworks include 'Leading the Cranes Home' and 'The Third Thing' with the Old Stile Press. The first was exhibited at the British Library in 'From East to West: Traditional Asian and Contemporary European Printing' (2008), and the second recently won a British Book Award in the category Book Design and Bookbinding (2014). Kiggell was visiting artist at Bangkok University, Thailand (2001-02) and at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, China (2004). Residencies include Mokuhanga Innovation Laboratory, Kawaguchiko (2012) and Papworth Cardiothoracic Hospital, Cambridge (2013). He has lived in Thailand since 1999, and been guest lecturer at the Department of Communication and Design, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, since 2012. His work is in private and public collections including the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Guangdong Museum of Art, Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, London, and United States Library of Congress.

Ralph Kiggell would like to thank the following for their help with this exhibition:
Pirat Jobit, Jorn Middelborg, Singpol Namthip, Ken Somboon,
Wasinburee Supanichvoraparch, Loredana Paracciani,
Vipash Purichanont , Wanee Tipchindaichai and Rose Townsend



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