

FASHION



Santichai Srisongkram wears his “Thaiger-Man” jacket at a retro outdoor market in the north of Bangkok. Photo: Tibor Krausz

EXPLORING THE WILD SIDE OF EMBROIDERY

Thai designer believes the elaborate animal motifs that adorn most items in his clothing line have a shamanistic power to transform their wearers

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They say you are what you wear, and for Thai fashion designer Santichai Srisongkram, the adage is something he takes to heart.

The founder of label Season-calm, believes the shimmering animal patterns that adorn most items in his clothing line can have transformative powers for the people who wear them, in a shamanistic sort of way.

“If you wear a tiger, you may feel like a tiger,” says Santichai, 38, a cordial man who sports ribbed stonewashed jeans, a black denim jacket and mirrored shades. “I do believe that.”

His cool-as-a-rock-star outfit cloaks a man of shy disposition. Presumably, the pair of sumptuously embroidered gold-and-silver tigers – snarling and ready to pounce – that cover the back and half the front of his jacket are giving him some extra power.

Called “Thaiger-Man” (by way of a pun), the jacket, which costs 18,990 baht (HK\$4,870), is part of Santichai’s streetwear line, which runs to 116 styles, including T-shirts, sweatshirts, jackets, hoodies and nightgowns.

Most are lavishly embroidered and sequined. Many boast stylised images of growling tigers, gazing cheetahs, preening peacocks, swooping eagles or slithering serpents. Each of the animals is embroidered by hand by skilled Bangkok housewives

who work part time for Santichai.

The Thai designer launched his clothing line two years ago and has been harnessing the power of online marketing via Instagram and other social media.

“Our designs are purposefully unisex so anyone can wear them. It does not matter if they are men, women, straight, gay or trans,” Santichai says. “But most of our customers are male, gay and under 40.”

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SANTICHAIR SRISONGKRAM, DESIGNER

The ostentatious embroidery is the handiwork of Amornthep Jithnak, an up-and-coming designer who started out honing his needlepoint skills by creating wedding dresses. On the side, he was selling grilled pork from a street cart. “I had to make a living,” he says, almost apologetically.

His schoolteacher parents were happier with him selling pork on the street (which is widely seen as a lowly occupation in Thailand) than designing clothes,

especially dresses. Amornthep, 29, is boyish looking with close-cropped hair, which at times he dyes platinum blond. He is openly gay and his effeminate mannerisms did not please his parents.

“They are conservative and could not accept the way I am. My father was especially against it. I am his eldest child and he wanted me to be more macho,” Amornthep says.

Even in freewheeling Thailand, there is a stigma attached to being gay or transgender in certain social and professional milieus. “Many gay men lead double lives – straight by day, gay by night,” says Narongchai Nateewanaphun, an accountant who works for Santichai and leads a double life of sorts himself, having stayed largely in the closet.

In Thailand’s ethnic Chinese community, many people tend to look askance at openly expressed homosexuality within close-knit family circles. “It depends on the family. With mine, we do not talk about it,” Narongchai says.

A youthful 48-year-old with a bookish mien, Narongchai has never married, which, he says, is unusual for a Sino-Thai man like himself. “I try to stay in my comfort zone. That’s why I have decided to work for these two gay guys,” he adds, referring to Santichai and Amornthep.

Plenty of artistically inclined gay men gravitate towards Thailand’s fashion industry where they can give free rein to their creative urges. “There’s something

about embroidery that lets me explore,” Amornthep says. “I like to create lots of fine details.”

He produces each design painstakingly, taking weeks or even months. Although he draws inspiration from paintings of animals printed on mass-produced T-shirts that are sold at Thai markets, he is a stickler for minutiae.

Every stripe of a growling tiger on a jacket and every feather of a peacock on a shirt has to be just so, or creases and folds caused by wearing a garment could ruin the overall effect, he says.

“We’re trying to create designs that are unique, imaginative and eye-catching, not just something that looks mass-produced,” Amornthep says.

The “Thaiger-Man” creation has been selling well, especially on the mainland and in Hong Kong. People from as far away as Colombia, Dubai and Russia have ordered customised versions of the denim jacket after seeing pictures of it online.

The jacket certainly turns heads, with its tiger stripes shimmering in the sunlight as Santichai walks around a retro outdoor market in north Bangkok. He runs a shop there, furnished with an antique leather armchair. Decorative leather-bound books are piled beside it on the floor.

Pride of place in the market goes to a vintage, World War II-era American military plane mounted overhead beside a steampunk coffee house.

Santichai does not mind the attention his tiger jacket is getting. “I think you dress up not just to impress other people but to impress yourself – though you do want to stand out in a crowd.”