



# Cambodia

# Sareth Svay

Erin Gleeson, along with photographer Prum Ero, examines the remarkable work and story of Cambodian artist Sareth Svay, in anticipation of *The Vessantara Jataka* being part of the exhibition *Gods, Heroes and Clowns: Performance and Narrative in South and Southeast Asian Art* at the NGV.



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**The space Sareth Svay is soon to call his first personal studio is currently a 200-square-metre forest of wooden scaffolding sandwiched between two concrete slabs – a common sight in the rapidly industrialising Cambodia of today. The space brings to life a transitional moment in the artist’s career, pointing to particular circumstances that inform his context, history and practice.**

Svay’s work responds to themes in his life, and is as critical as it is cathartic. The artist’s first eighteen years were spent either amidst war or in refugee camps near the Thai-Cambodian border. Born into an anti-communist aligned military family in 1972, during the post-Independence era of the Khmer Republic, in the north-western provincial capitol Battambang, the year of Svay’s birth saw the sharp escalation of a civil war during which the United States dropped more bombs across politically neutral Cambodia than they did during both World Wars combined. After surviving the civil war and Khmer Rouge era by the age of seven, Svay and his family were transferred to the barren lands of refugee camps, where he spent the next decade. In a camp called ‘Site 2’, Svay joined the small and historic group of children who studied drawing and painting under a French volunteer. Learning to render everyday and imaginary landscapes became a therapeutic outlet, leading the group to establish the arts-based non-governmental organisation Phare Ponleu Selpak in 1994, which continues to thrive today.

Svay describes refugee status as ‘a void nationality, a time and place you imagine escaping from ... a middle world, a waiting room’. When he shares stories from this period, he speaks of his body, and in verbs. Without context, the long-distance walks, tree climbing, hunting and rebelliousness he recounts sound like so much child’s play, but in reality are all associated with dreams of escape, transfer and survival.

The artist’s foundational years of life directly inform his studio-less practice centred on the body as a material to test personal and political notions of freedom. His itinerant and durational approach to performance engages a sculptural practice, appropriating materials and processes intentionally associated with war, including metals, uniforms, camouflage and actions requiring great physical endurance. While Svay acknowledges that history requires constant confrontation, he refuses both historical particularity and a voyeuristic approach to violence. Instead, he layers past and present with notions of adventure, power and resistance.

For the sculpture and performance *Mardi/Tuesday*, 2009, Svay handcrafted a 200-kilogram boat without consulting plans, as a deliberate gesture of solidarity with refugees worldwide who must take risks and persevere to survive. Wearing military garb, Svay pushed the sculpture for eleven hours in public, from his alma mater the École des Beaux Arts in Caen, France, to the historic Sea of Normandy where Allied troops entered Europe during the Second World War. Discovering that his boat could indeed float, the artist paddled out to sea in a symbolic return home. Svay found an affinity with Daniel Defoe’s character Robinson Crusoe who, while shipwrecked on the Island of Despair, found a companion in a character he named Friday, and after ten years studying in France shipped his ‘companion’ *Tuesday* back to Cambodia along with his other belongings. The sculpture will soon take a special place in his new studio.

*Mon Boulet*, 2010, Svay’s first major work made in Cambodia, was a personal test in Sisyphean futility he refers to as ‘moveable sculpture’. The five-day performance saw the artist drag a cumbersome 80-kilogram reflective metal sphere 250 kilometres, from the ancient capital of Angkor to the present-day capital Phnom Penh, with the action

documented on video. Intended to publically confront conditions of his artistic past as a cathartic move towards the future, the journey opened a space in which Svay could focus on his present. *Mon Boulet* is currently on display at the Singapore Art Museum, until 18 October 2015, in their permanent collection exhibition *After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Contemporary Asian Art*.

Svay has spent the past five years adjusting to a different Cambodia to the one he left. Together with his wife, artist Yim Maline, he continues to develop their sizeable plot of land outside central Siem Reap, only a few kilometres away from the ancient temples where the couple regularly enjoy picnics with their two daughters, Maryanne and Amrita. Step by step they have built a home, vegetable garden, dipping pool and Maline’s drawing studio.

While Svay’s individual performance practice continues – his most recent work, *Measure*, 2015, is included in the exhibition *Secret Archipelago* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, until 17 May 2015 – his renewed sense of place has inspired what might be called ‘unmoveable sculpture’. His recent large, figurative soft sculptures in camouflage approach the present as a context in which to reconsider the virtues of Hindu and Buddhist mythologies, narratives and monuments. In 2013 Svay’s commission for the 4th Singapore Biennale, *Toy (Churning of the Sea of Milk)*, was a monumental seventeen-metre long and four-metre high work. The ancient epic it references, famously depicted as a stone bas-relief in the temple of Angkor Wat, warns about the trickery of the omnipresent master of the universe, Vishnu, who mediates a collaborative tug-of-war between Good and Bad. Taking the form of a gigantic camouflaged toy, the hulking presence and its cartoonish ornamental stitching perversely reframed this honoured power struggle as a game, mocking the illusion of cooperation throughout time.







Such a practice demands not only fixed space, but also many people. As Svay awaits the completion of his studio, the concept of the itinerant artist has taken on new meaning as he travels between various locations and engages teams of Cambodia's most skilled artisans. His embroidery studio in Phnom Penh is led by a warm, gentle woman with forty years of experience in traditional Khmer royal dance and theatre costuming. Her son is second in charge, and the rest of the team comprises extended family. Their studio-home is located in one of the capitol's early modernist apartment blocs, in the centre of the city, via a steep and narrow staircase to the fifth floor. Posters and paintings with Buddhist iconography, cloth and paper flags with *yantras* and ephemeral shrines surround the space where they collectively work. One of the Siem Reap teams is responsible for testing and prototyping voluminous figures stuffed with natural Cambodian cotton named *kapok*. Another team focuses on machine-embroidery, led by stern woman, also named Sareth, who is a national expert in silk and textile production. Recently all of these teams have gathered together at Svay's interim studio in Siem Reap to complete *The Vessantara Jataka*, the artist's commission for the National Gallery Victoria. Coincidentally, their collective workspace could no better symbolise the ideas at play in this work. The large and airy *sala*, or multipurpose

hall, is sited on the frangipani-dotted plot between the impressive Center for Khmer Studies library and the main pagoda at Wat Damnak. During the early twentieth century, during the reign of King Sisowath, Wat Damnak was the royal palace, but has since become a highly respected Buddhist monastery and study centre. The *Jatakas* are stories that describe the previous lives of the Buddha, in both human and animal form, and are meant to exemplify Buddhist virtues. One of the most popular is the *Vessantara Jataka*, which tells the story of a compassionate prince who gives away everything he owns, including his children, is a supposed display of charity. Svay's sculpture, which will measure around four metres at its circular base and more than two metres in height, depicts Prince Vessantara, his wife Princess Maddi and their children Prince Jali and Princess Lanhajina seated together during the meeting when Vessantara announces that they will leave the palace and renounce their power, so that Vessantara can seek enlightenment. The camouflage evokes a disguised violence of divided families and radical ideologies the artist knows all too well.

Erin Gleeson is Curator and Co-founding Artistic Director of SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh.

*The Vessantara Jataka* can be seen in the exhibition *Gods, Heroes and Clowns: Performance and Narrative in South and Southeast Asian Art*, from 1 May in the Asian Temporary Exhibition Gallery, NGV International.

Pages 34–5: *Jataka* reliefs at Preah Palilay temple, Angkor

Previous: Sareth Svay outside his future studio in Siem Reap, Cambodia

Opposite above: Artisans studio, Phnom Penh

Opposite below: Sala at Center for Khmer Studies, Wat Damnak, Siem Reap

Above: Artisans studio, Phnom Penh





## The Vessantara Jataka, 2015

Newly commissioned work  
by Cambodian artist Sareth Svay

Continuing its focus on contemporary art from the Asia-Pacific region, in 2014 the National Gallery of Victoria commissioned a sculpture by Cambodian artist Sareth Svay. The artist, whose practice encompasses sculpture, installation and performance, recently commenced a series of large, figurative 'soft sculptures'. The series began with a fifteen-metre high work displayed in the Singapore Biennale in 2013. Svay's work draws on iconic images from Buddhist and Hindu narratives, questioning their inherent values and exploring themes such as the exploitation of power and the romanticisation and idealisation of tradition and history.

The artist's NGV commission, *The Vessantara Jataka*, 2015, comprises four figures representing the central characters from the *Vessantara Jataka*, one of the most popular Buddhist narratives in Cambodia today. The *Jatakas* are stories that describe the previous lives of the Buddha in human and animal form and exemplify Buddhist virtues, including renunciation, perseverance and charity or generosity. In Cambodia and throughout Southeast Asia the *Jatakas* remain a dominant moral canon and are perpetrated in dance and theatre, on temple walls and banners and in children's books, film and television. The *Vessantara Jataka* illustrates the virtue of charity. In the narrative, Prince Vessantara gives away all that he values, including his white elephant,

his carriage, his children and his wife, and is exiled to the forest. His selflessness and charity are eventually rewarded by the gods and he returns triumphantly with his family to claim his kingdom.

Svay's work depicts Prince Vessantara, Princess Maddi and their children Prince Jali and the Princess Kanhajina during the meeting when Vessantara announces they will leave the palace and renounce all power. The artist has created the crowned figures from a rattan and iron framework stuffed with kapok (cotton) and covered in blue camouflage fabric, referencing war and social upheaval. The camouflage cotton fabric is densely hand-embroidered with a floral pattern worked in bright yellow thread, evoking Khmer gold and silk brocade royal garments, by a team of embroiderers at Svay's studio at Siem Reap. The facial features and the plinth on which the figures sit, representing a royal stage, are also embroidered.

*The Vessantara Jataka* is a commanding, richly decorated work that depicts a seminal moment in the Vessantara narrative. Through the conjunction of fabric associated with war, costume details denoting social privilege and power, and the depiction of Buddhist archetypes, Svay interrogates the inheritance and continued role of stories and ideologies of power, royalty, war, family, charity and ownership. Rather than a story about pure virtue, in the *Vessantara Jataka* Svay sees violence in disguise, his

interpretation stemming from personal experience of the abuse of political power and of war and social revolution that separated families. The moral certainty of the narrative has been contested many times over the centuries, and Svay's exploration of its ambiguities attests to the drama's continued inspiration of art in Southeast Asia.

Carol Cains is Curator, Asian Art, NGV

This commission has been generously supported by the Vivien Knowles Fund for Asian Art.

Opposite: Sala at Center for Khmer Studies, Wat Damnak, Siem Reap

Above left: Artisans studio, Phnom Penh

Above right: Sala at Center for Khmer Studies, Wat Damnak, Siem Reap