

Earth, Water and Fire by Rebecca Catching

There is something very endearing about collecting – gathering scraps of cloth, discarded bits of plastic and working them into something startling and new. Part of it is the ritual of gathering, and part of it is the phoenix-like transformation of the materials. The idea hunting and gathering forms the central premise for “Accumulations” a recent show of young Cambodian artists on show at the French Cultural center at Phnom Penh in Cambodia until November 21.

Phnom-Penh based American curator, Erin Gleeson, writes in her curatorial statement, “to accumulate is to gradually gather together an increasing number of something, such as objects or memories. Born of need or habit and regardless of culture or wealth, individuals and societies manage to accumulate and order things.”

Here *accumulations* not only refers to the impulse of gathering wealth but also the idea of collecting random scraps – the physical act of it – as well as the building up of little shards of thoughts until they crystallize into an idea.

Even the decorative language of Kbach, has an element of “accumulation” in it as different symbols – bamboo shoots, fish eggs and lotuses – are alternated and combined to create larger patterns in Khmer painting and architecture. Artist Chan Dany, a graduate of Reyum, demonstrates his fluency in this decorative language with two-dimensional works rendered in his medium of choice. . . . pencil shavings. The idea was born of thrift – materials were scarce in art school – and has turned out to be a suitable medium for realizing the elegant designs of Kbach. The silvery blonde shavings are arranged to complement the forms and the small traces of colored paint which fringe the shavings add a delicate hint of color. Chan’s resourcefulness reflects a trend in Cambodian art towards the use of local and often recycled materials.

PheSophon is another example. He demonstrates a prowess with plastics in his “*Tear Drops*” 2009 an installation piece composed of meticulously cut plastic water bottles. Cut into strips with the cap still intact, the bottles are woven into each other to form teardrop-like shapes. The cross-weaving and overlapping nature of the work points to the dense tapestry of meaning in this piece. The tear drop shape is not only indicative of suffering but also points to the relentless drips of water from leaky roofs – a problem that is still a major issue in the countryside during monsoon season. Placed below the teardrops are a series of cylindrical forms made out of water-cooler bottles, sprouting a kind of plastic fringe similar to like cacti. Here Phe is referencing the dichotomy of abundance and scarcity. Cambodia’s agricultural success is in many ways linked to its wealth of water resources. The Angkor civilization was built on a mastery and control over water, through a sophisticated system of reservoirs and irrigation canals; some theorize it was a series of droughts and the loss of that water control that led to the fall of the Angkor Empire.

Today Cambodia has similar issues over water control. Much of the population suffers from a lack of potable drinking water and relies on expensive and often improperly purified drinking water to survive. Phe’s latticed forms are echoed across the room in the work of Peou Sam-An “*My Mother and I*,” 2009. The woven cylindrical shape of the water cooler bottles is reflected in the wire forms of the tree formed out of 2 mm thick dull silver wire. A somewhat squat root system and thick trunk, outlined in scant wire forms, gives way to a series of branches which explode into an uncontrolled cluster of rogue twigs. Off the end of each twig is a small bit of fishing line suspending a single hollow duck egg. The joints of the branches and roots are affixed by angry twists of wire which conjure up ideas of the barbed wire which fringes the walls and fields of Cambodia. This, combined with the eggs, creates this incredible tension – a testament to the fragility of life and strong will for survival. For Peou, the egg symbolizes (as it does in Kbach) the idea of fertility and the work is meant as an ode to his mother who acted as an anchoring figure for her children.

Sitting off to the side of the main exhibition space in a dark quiet room the floor laid with straw mats and flaming orange cushions is a quietly incendiary work by Than Sok, “*Negligence leads to loss; attention preserves*,” 2009. The video features a rustic spirit house made of over 100 sticks of incense. The house is set on fire and slowly collapses as it is consumed by flames. The spirit house (a common feature throughout Laos and Thailand as well) is an ornate shrine shaped like a temple placed on a plinth; believers visit the house daily to place offerings which are intended to appease the spirits so that they don’t cause trouble for the family. Poor families will have simple bamboo spirit houses, while wealthier families have brightly colored spirit houses trimmed in white, red and gold and sometimes adorned with garlands and flowers.

The video installation has a kind of mirroring effect with the video of the incense spirit house being projected from an actual spirit house made of concrete. The spirit house here deliberately has no offerings – something which might shock more traditional Khmers, but which makes a powerful statement – a rebellion against the perfunctory acts, the superficial rituals of religion. The title is a direct reference to this, to the ‘practice of religion’ while turning a blind eye to the selfishness and exploitation abound in Cambodia.

What’s evident in this show is not only a mastery of materials and a deep understanding of traditional culture but also a strident willingness to challenge the orthodoxy. What’s also evident is that we all should be paying much more whole lot more attention to Cambodian art.