



Home of spirit and memory by Dianne Janes

The exhibition space at Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre is filled with fragrance, as incense smoke wafts about the room.

The sweetness is a counterpoint to an unsettling narrative of death and destruction. The spirit houses on display are burnt and in varying degrees of destruction, with five houses featuring stains of Cambodian artist Than Sok's own blood, representing his family members.

Than Sok used thousands of incense sticks in the construction of his latest sculptural installation, *Tragedy*, in which 100 small spirit houses line the walls of the gallery.

Many Cambodians have spirit houses, known as *ktome*, inside their homes. They are used for offerings to the spirits of family members and ancestors who have passed on. The larger spirit houses outside Cambodian homes can be dedicated to *Neak Tha*, grandfather of the natural world.

"When I was young, we didn't have a *ktome*, but our community had one made from bamboo," says 26-year-old Than Sok, explaining that spirit houses in rural homes are often made from simple materials.

The artist has applied complex layers of historical and contemporary metaphors to these simple objects, beginning with notions of destruction and the Khmer Rouge. "People like to pray. They dedicate offerings and food to the *ktome*, but if their prayer doesn't come true they destroy it," says Than Sok. This attitude of smashing a *ktome* once it is considered of no value reminds Than Sok of the way the Khmer Rouge devalued human life.

The rows of tiny houses also evoke contemporary references to the casual destruction of homes and lives caused by ongoing land grabs and evictions. Than Sok witnessed friends living near The Building face eviction when their home was torn down.

It is a strong statement from such a young artist. Than Sok was born after the Khmer Rouge regime ended, but approaches his work with a mature ethic. He studied traditional and contemporary art at the Reyum Institute under Ly Daravuth and has exhibited in group shows in Cambodia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Curator Erin Gleeson felt Than Sok was ready for a solo show. "Sok has very clear, refined ideas and is very uncompromising," says Gleeson.

He meticulously constructed each house with assistance from family members including his sister, a nurse who helped to extract his blood. At first the family couldn't relate to his sculptures, says Than Sok. "They ask why am I buying so many incense sticks," he says. "If they don't know it, they don't understand it." But with the opening of the exhibition, Than Sok's family gained an appreciation for his work.

To support himself and his work in future, Than Sok is studying architecture at Norton University. "It's a really nice marriage," says Gleeson, of the two fields of art and architecture. Artists working in this style include Charles Rennie Mackintosh from the early 1900s to Maya Lin, whose commissions include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC.

Than Sok looks set to join this niche group that brings an understanding of sculptural form and creativity to building design, and structural sensibility to their built artworks.

The exhibition will be at Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre, No 64 Street 200, until February 11.