



RIVERS OF ART

BY CASSANDRA NAJI

Here, hunks of ice bob glistening on the choppy waters of a seemingly endless sea. There, ghostly echoes of life on the river emanate from a Lilliputian house on stilts. And in the centre of the room a family of scarecrows looms, straw heads poking spectrally from patterned pyjamas.

This mildly unsettling atmosphere is appropriate for an exhibition which captures artists' anxieties about the fate of Southeast Asia's iconic waterways. *Riverscapes IN FLUX*, now showing at Sa Sa Bassac Gallery, is a region-wide exhibition aimed at inspiring conversations on climate change and its social implications. Originally containing the work of 17 artists from six countries, the Phnom Penh leg of the exhibition includes six artists from Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand, all of whom use new media to examine the shifting cultural heritage of the region's riverscapes.

The logistics of the ambitious exhibition posed some initial challenges, not least the problems of shipping art works from country to

country, which explains the absence of several pieces at the Phnom Penh *Riverscapes*. Then there was reluctance from some artists to limit themselves to the theme and format prescribed by the coordinating body, Hanoi's Goethe Institut.

"Artists were unsure about working with the topic of the river," admits curator Erin Gleeson. "But I think the curatorial brief forced us to integrate the river into conversations we were already having. The works are very open, very subtle. They open up thinking."

Vuth Lyno, creator of the miniature stilt-house and river soundscape, agrees that his concerns over the show's restrictive structure turned out to be unfounded. "At first I didn't know what to install, but then I was inspired by ideas of the house and the spirit of the river, the specific culture of the people who live with the water."

Interleaving interviews with a Tonle Sap community and abstract river sounds, Vuth's *Rise and Fall* is an oneiric audio piece echoing the ebb and flow of life on the river. Neak Tha, an animist conceptualisation of the spirit of the water, is central to the fragile quasi-mythic world invoked by Vuth. "As I learned about the

community I became interested in the belief in Neak Tha, and how they maintain this belief as their lives change."

Awareness of the tension between tradition and modernity runs through the exhibition. Than Sok's *Middleground* nods to timeless rural habits, but the piece's uncanny scarecrows also stand for the contemporary plight of families affected by flooding. Thai video artist Sutthirath Supaparinya's work is a meditative depiction of changing lifestyles, rendered through the prism of family history. Multimedia artist Phan Thao Nguyen also uses video to juxtapose scenes of the increasing industrialisation of riverscapes with images of a more bucolic way of life.

For Lim Sokchalina it was important to document these changes in action. To do so the Cambodian photographer 'intervened' on the landscape, floating slabs of ice in the Tonle Sap's waters and recording their inevitable disappearance. The quiet 'interventions' draw parallels between the global nature of climate change and its localised impacts.

As Lim says, "This small block of ice is micro, but it's a metaphor for something macro. It captures the complexity of the river, referencing

melting glaciers and climate change, but also the natural rising of the Tonle Sap every year."

The richly allusive image of the melting ice embodies the balance between the ephemeral beauty of *Riverscapes IN FLUX*'s artworks and the real world problems which inspired the exhibition. By juxtaposing elements of the organic and the artificial in the manmade block of frozen water, Lim exposes the anxiety which subtends the relationship between modernisation and established social systems.

Thinking creatively about these anxieties is an integral part of the exhibition's impact. "When you read these things in a report, you don't draw a personal connection," Vuth says. "A report doesn't allow you to understand things from a different perspective – visually, or through a voice, or experientially. Hopefully this exhibition will help people will think about the issue more creatively, and get inspired."

WHO: Artists from across the region.
WHAT: *Riverscapes IN FLUX*: photo series, video and sound installations
WHERE: Sa Sa Bassac Gallery, #18 Sothea Blvd.
WHEN: Until November 11
WHY: Creative takes on climate change

the **Advisor**

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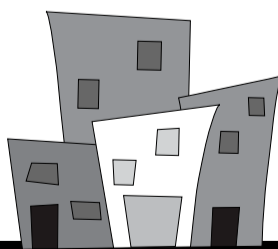
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