

Cambodian Contemporary Art

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WHEN PICH SOPHEAP takes his place in the vast exhibition halls show at dOCUMENTA 13, in June, it will be the first time a Cambodian artist will have enjoyed any presence in Kassel, let alone a solo show. It will also be a testament to how far Cambodian art has come since a civil war destroyed a third of the population and virtually its entire infrastructure.

Fifteen years ago practically the only art emerging from Cambodia depicted moonlit Angkor Wats and *apsara* dancers with gilded headdresses. For the few artists returning from Pol Pot's Killing Fields the priority was survival — which meant appealing to the first wave of tourists or indeed anyone willing to part with a few dollars.

In Phnom Penh's Street 178 one can still find such traditional iconography emblazoned on every inch of wall; but venture out a couple of blocks to the 'white-cube gallery' of Sa Sa Bassac and you will get a very different picture of this country's burgeoning art scene. You are more likely to find installations using human hair, incense sticks, wire and mosquito nets, than oil on canvas. Images of ponds created by bomb craters or the human costs of building development reveal a determination among the younger generation of Cambodian photographers to introduce social and ethical issues.

So what happened? The return of diaspora Cambodians from France and the US was a major factor. Pich, trained at the Chicago Institute of Art no less, and returned to Phnom Penh in February 2001 to create Sala ArtSpace, showing around 20 artists; this laid the foundations for an art scene. His own work set a powerful example. Labour-intensive sculptures, 'woven' from simple, traditional materials — fine strips of bamboo and rattan — make abstract forms that resonate with contemporary metaphor.

Leng Seckon — Pich's compatriot but a very different artist — makes handicraft collages, stitching materials such as silk and brocade onto canvas. Self-taught, his work relates most to his memories of the Khmer Rouge era and his country's struggle with this legacy. He also makes *naga* (snakes) from recycled plastic, usually discarded rubbish, the first Cambodian artists to address environmental issues.

Meas Sokhorn, who distorts *objets trouvés* as social commentary, heralds the arrival of conceptual art. A bicycle stuck in concrete alluded to Cambodia's erosion of civil liberties, as barbed-wire sculptures did to the Cambodian new bourgeoisie's barbed-wire protected homes.

Khvay Samnang, though primarily a photographer, has embraced performance art. For *Cow Taxi*, reprised on the streets of Tokyo last year, he donned a pair of buffalo horns to offer wooden rickshaw rides to bemused locals. He wanted to show that in low-tech Cambodia these animals are still used as transport, but his point in Tokyo was to evoke places in which the environment is compromised. This gives a picture of the variety of Cambodian art today. In Phnom Penh, and the smaller cities of Siem Reap and Battambang, there are probably 50 artists out of a population of 14 million. The work is difficult to categorise, but a common feature is the tendency to make visceral statements to engage viewers directly — there is after all none of the critical context of debate or ideas that one finds in India or even Vietnam. Some find it naïve, others brave and incisive. Whatever it is, a handful of artists have merged as exciting young talents able to command solo shows in top international galleries and to have their work featured in biennales. Pich for example showed *The Pulse Within* at the Tyler Rollins Gallery in New York in 2009, which was followed by shows at museums in San Francisco and Seattle; his epic *Compound* appeared at last year's Singapore Biennale and his work is found in museums in Singapore and Brisbane.

Having sold out a solo show at London's Rossi and Rossi in 2010, Leng joins Pich for exhibitions at the Richard Koh in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur in December, while Lim Sokchanlina will be showing alongside Vandy Rattana and Khvai Samnang in shows of Cambodian photography in both Toronto (East Gallery) and Singapore (Institute of Contemporary Arts). Vandy will be featured in a group show at dOCUMENTA 13, while Khvai was also featured in a show of contemporary art of Southeast Asia at Tally Beck, in New York, entitled *On the Threshold of the Senses* (21 March to 29 April) and organised by the Bangkok-based curator Brian Curtin.

Initially galleries were exclusively run by Westerners. The American Dana Langlois opened Java Café and Gallery to showcase the work of young artists such as Chat Piersath, Sotheavy and Meas Sokhun. Langlois co-founded Sala ArtSpace with Pich in 2006, creating 'a scene' that involved other Asian artists and roundtable discussions on art, the art market and political issues. Cambodians began creating their own art spaces, however, with Sa Sa Art Gallery, opened in 2009 by a 'collective' of six artists and photographers, namely Heng Ravuth, Khvay Samnang, Kong Volland, Lim Sokchanlina, Vandy Rattana, and Vuth Lyno calling themselves Stiev Salapak, or 'Art Rebels'. The aim was to create a community able to support each other by sharing knowledge and resources — and opportunities.

The most active has been Lyno Vuth, a young photographer who, the following year, opened Sa Sa Art Project within the White Building, a 1960 structure consisting of 48 mainly dilapidated apartments. The building is both symbolic and significant as the place where many artists took shelter after the fall of Khmer Rouge in 1979, but behind the dilapidation is a vibrant community of artists, musicians, activists and everyday city dwellers. Here artists can experiment with new ideas free of any of the limitations normally encountered in commercial galleries. Residencies end with short exhibitions and the venue can accommodate experimental art practices, talks, classes as well as community participation. In 2010, the Stiev Salapak was then joined by Erin Gleeson, a former photographer who had curated the Asia's first large Cambodian show in 2009 at Chancery Lane in Hong Kong. Her Sa Sa Bassac gallery, opened in February 2011, has energised the Phnom Penh scene with an ambitious curriculum of events, including public lectures, residencies, workshops and classes, all impeccably curated amidst a level of PR more familiar in New York, Hong Kong or London.

In 13 months, Gleeson's Sa Sa Bassac has mounted 10 solo shows. But for all its entrepreneurial spirit, within Cambodia there is very little that could be called a market. Sa Sa has secured grants from private sponsors such as Arts Network Asia and the British Embassy, but the collector base is small and the big world of auctions, museums and roller-coaster prices has barely impinged on their imagination. As Curtin put it, 'Cambodian artists work out of necessity and are socially-engaged: the wonderful thing is that they demonstrate that art can flourish well without a market and with minimum resources'. That said, international interest in the Cambodian art scene is growing. While few Cambodians have even a cursory understand of the global art market, they are gradually acquiring professional skills. 'There's a very positive energy at the moment,' says Vuth. 'Business people starting to collect and gradually beginning to see the value of what we are doing. Many people are coming to openings, questioning and writing about the work and expressing an interest'.

That is the strongest local start. And a presence at Kassel is a perfect next step in this exciting international evolution. BY  
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