

# Seven

An exhibition of several of Cambodia's most influential artists is held to mark the closing of Siem Riep's Hotel de la Paix

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By MICHELLE VACHON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

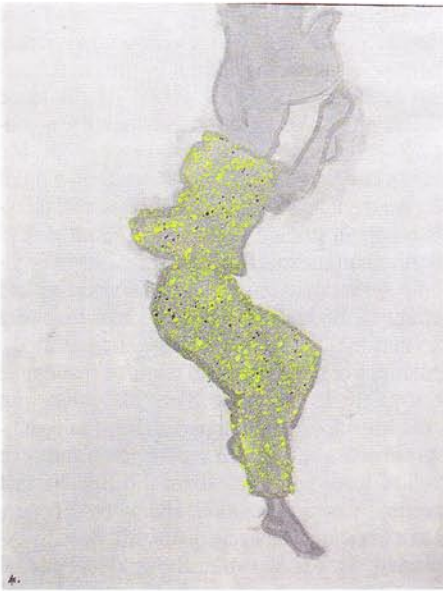
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"Empty," pencil drawing by Yim Maline.

Svoy Sareth





"In Flight with Pajamas," painting series by Vincent Broustet.

Nicolas Josso



"Guide," pencil drawing by Yim Maline.

Svay Sareth

The special exhibition that curator and artist Sasha Constable has organized at Hotel de la Paix as the last show of the hotel before it closes its doors for renovation and reopens under new management truly captures the distance that the arts have traveled in the country since the hotel opened seven years ago.

Ms. Constable named the show "Seven" as the exhibition includes works by seven artists—five Cambodians and two expatriates based in the country for years—whom she had meant to feature over the next 18 months had the hotel remained open. So she set up seven mini-exhibitions as the hotel's last hurrah before it shuts down on July 1. Putting this together in harmony took her three months: "Handling the work of seven artists is not easy," Ms. Constable said.

The result is a mixture of old friends—those whose works created such excitement in the mid-2000s that this had led to the emergence of the first collectors of Cambodian contemporary art—and vibrant younger artists who are among the country's rising stars. Plus two seasoned expatriate artists whose lives in Cambodia are reflected in their work.

The surprise of the show is the paintings of the late Svay Ken, this frail old man with a gentle smile who was telling young artists to dare and never forgot that artists must sell to make a living. This is the first time since his death at 75 in December 2008 and the memorial exhibition of his work at Java Cafe shortly after that his paintings are being exhibited in Cambodia.

Setting up his easel every morning on a street corner near Wat Phnom where his studio was located, Mr. Ken would paint what he had seen, whether it was in his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, the Khmer Rouge regime or a scene from a few weeks prior.

As his 12 paintings in the exhibition demonstrate, he would paint moments that had been special for him or things or events that he felt should be kept in memory. He had done a series on old tools and appliances, and one painting on display depicts a quiet corner in a home with two chairs and a radio circa 1950s or early 1960s. Another painting shows an eternal scene of Cambodia's life: women in traditional white blouses and silk shirts with baskets on





"Khmer Woman," above, ceramic sculpture by Chhan Dina. "Bring Rice to Market," below, acrylic painting by Chhan Dina.

their heads taking gifts to the pagoda. There also is a painting of the telecommunication fiber-optic cable being laid out by men in the forest in the late 1990s and 2000s. All this done in Svay Ken's very personal style that is sometimes referred to as primitive in art books. Mr. Ken's family is now trying to establish a foundation to publish a catalogue of his last 90 paintings kept in storage, his son Svay Pisith said.

Another unexpected pleasure is Leang Seckon's series inspired by his dedication to and study of Buddhism, which he had produced around 2007. These are large, mixed media paintings of rich colors and textures that exude tranquility. In his work "Peacock" done with gold leaves, oil painting and string, the beautiful tail of the bird shown in dark green and deep yellow leads to the hands of the Buddha that are in a teaching position. His work "Success Door" is about the cycle of life, Mr. Seckon explained. This is shown in the gold-leaf and oil painting as an hourglass with Heaven in blue at the top, the Buddhist concept of purgatory at the bottom and the Earth fashioned as the head of the Buddha in the middle.

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These paintings were done before Mr. Seckon embarked on his "Heavy Skirt" series during which he revisited his memories of the civil war and the Khmer Rouge years and before he painted his series to salute Boeng Kak lake when he left his lakefront studio as the lake was being filled in. He spent the last few months recapturing the serenity he had expressed in those paintings around 2007, and is about to start on new works, he said.

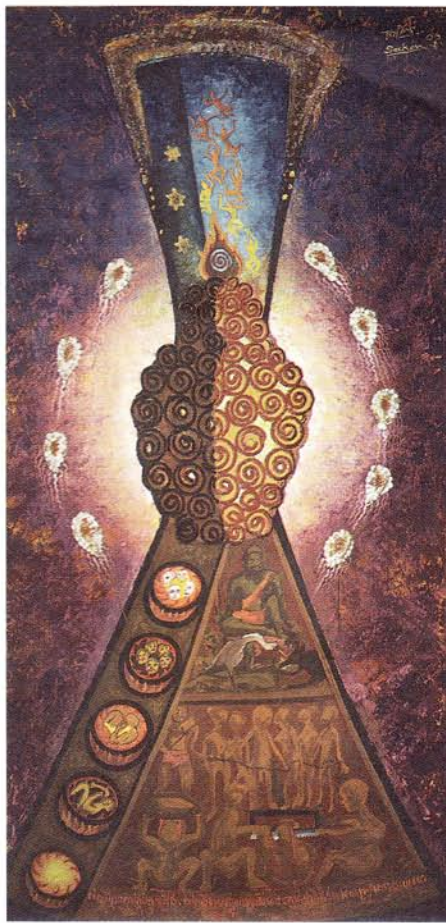
Another artist featured is Meas Sokhorn. A designer by training, this visionary artist is exhibiting some of his sculptures of objects—from an old-fashioned scale to an aging motorcycle's handlebars—slowly turning obsolete in Cambodia and which he encased in metal mesh. In his work "Ancestor" for instance, he created the silhouette of a person, using an audio-tape cassette in lieu of the head with parts of a clothes drying rack, electrical cord and wood seat for the body.

These works of Mr. Sokhorn—which should be among the first pieces put in Cambodia's contemporary art museum when the country gets one—are part of the series called "Pore" of objects "frozen in time" he created last year. "There still is a lot of life in them: They have and could continue to be used from generation to generation," he said. Unfortunately, the skills required to put them to use are not being passed on as they should to young people, and this knowledge is about to be lost, rendering those tools obsolete, he added.

Two of Cambodia's rare women artists are also taking part in the show.

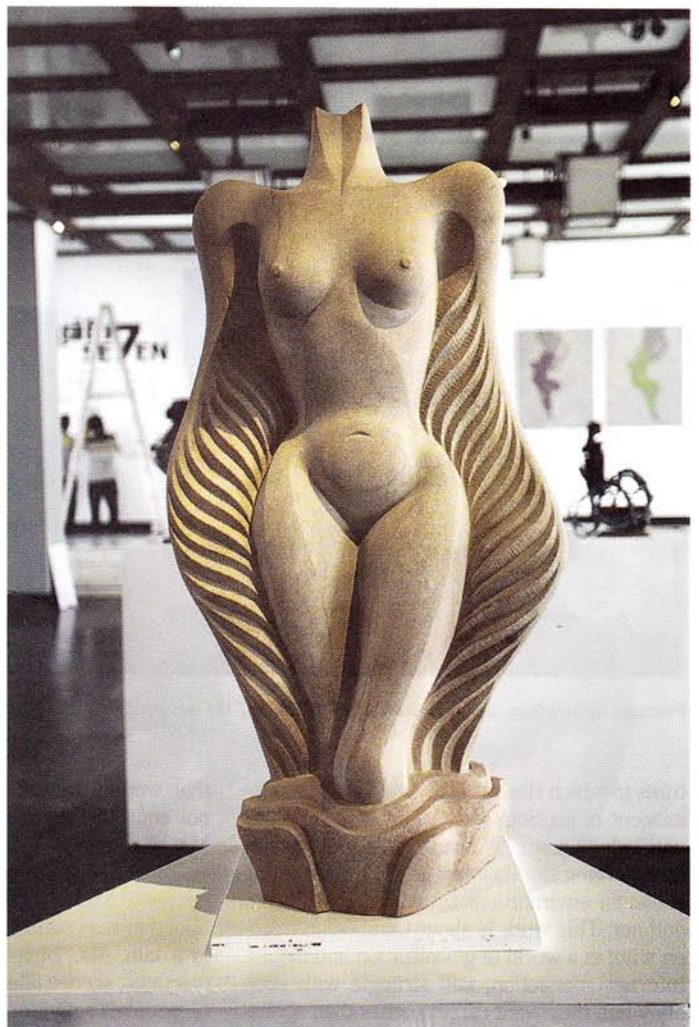
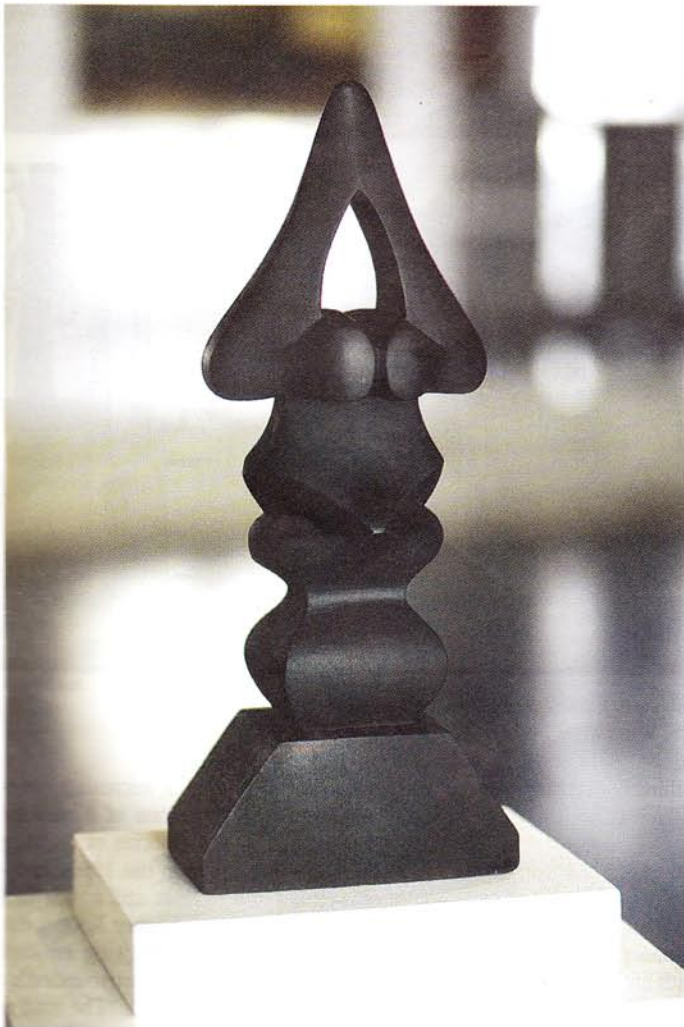
And in a country with few sculptors, one of them, Chhan Dina, is showing clay scul-





Paintings by Leang Seckon, from left to right: "Hand of the Buddha," "Success Door," "Peacock."

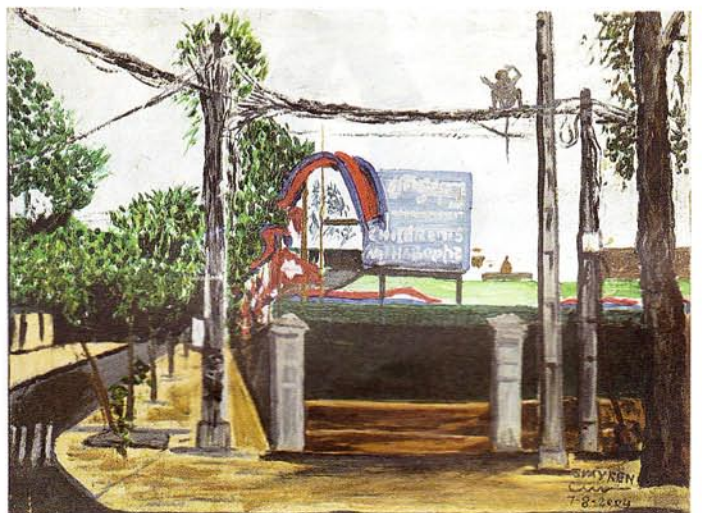
Fleur Smith



"Double Expression," left, sandstone sculpture painted black by Sasha Constable. "Kiniri," right, sandstone sculpture by Sasha Constable.

Ros Sambol





Paintings by Svay Ken, clockwise from top: "Bathroom," the inauguration of the Kantha Bopha IV hospital for children in December 2005, "Kathentean."

Ros Sambol

tures to which she has given a rich patina reminiscent of precious wood. Her striking work entitled "Khmer Woman" depicts a woman emerging from a whirl as if she was rising above an environment that threatened to engulf her. This work is about Cambodian women who, in a world of globalization and instant Internet connection, still struggle with society when they want careers other than spouses and mothers, the 27-year-old artist said. Some people in society, she said, "still think

that women cannot do things...that they are not equal" in abilities. Which is not the case, Ms. Dina noted.

For her sculptures, she mixed clay with paper paste to give it strength as clay tends to be fragile in the country, and then fired the works in a kiln. Ms. Dina is also exhibiting acrylic paintings, scenes filled with life and movement on people's activities at the market to sell the rice they grow.

Yim Maline's pencil drawings are subtle and

yet quite powerful scenes of surrealist imagery reminiscent of illustrations of a century ago. They express her memories of growing up in the Battambang area in the 1980s, lacking of everything in a country still at war and trying to recover from the Khmer Rouge, the 29-year-old artist said. Her drawing entitled "Guide" shows a young woman surrounded by ducks with a cartwheel as a head. "The road is impaired and so is she," Ms. Maline said.

In her work "Empty," a young woman is pull-



ing in her hair stretching several meters numerous boxes that are attached to it with cords. "It's as if she was pulling her memories woven into her hair: It's very heavy, very difficult," Ms. Maline said. "It's like the road of life."

One of the two expatriate artists exhibiting is Vincent Broustet, a Frenchman who has lived in several countries before settling in Siem Reap in 2004 and Kampot in 2007. An illustrator by profession, his paintings exude all the energy and liveliness one often notices in well-illustrated books.

His series "In Flight with Pajamas" is a wink at Cambodia where young women like to wear pajamas in the daytime while Westerners usually keep them for sleeping. His paintings done with a mixture of industrial paint and oil paint are of young women sleeping in colorful pajamas, their bodies in various poses. While traveling throughout Asia, he often noticed people sleeping in train stations or on the street. "I have a slight obsession with people sleeping,"

he said. "I find this beautiful and also strange: People are there, but they are not there."

Mr. Broustet is showing the sleeping figures vertically as if one was looking at them from a higher floor.

And, since this is Hotel de la Paix's last show, Ms. Constable has decided to exhibit some of her own works. A sculptor by training, she went back to her favorite medium: stone. But being in Cambodia since 2000 and wishing to reflect her time spent in the country, the British artist turned to sandstone that the Khmer have sculpted for more than a 1,000 years.

Her sculptures on exhibit demonstrate how well classical Khmer styles can be adapted to contemporary concepts. Her female silhouettes in the sculptures "Fertility" and "Kiniri" may have been inspired by the sculptures of women on the walls of Angkor Wat, but they are definitely contemporary and, at the same time, timeless.

*The exhibition "Seven" runs through June 27.*

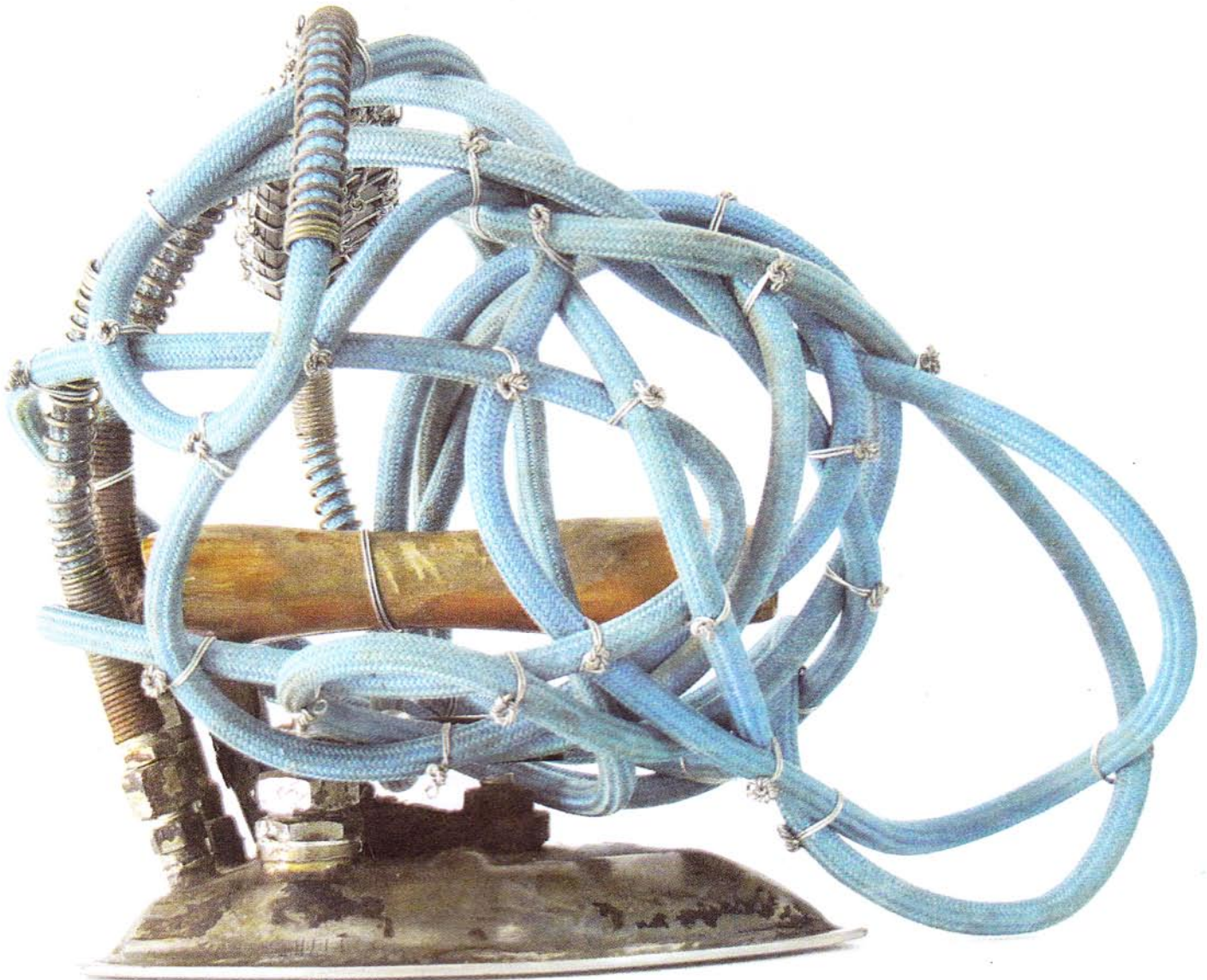
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## The Renovation

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Hotel de la Paix will close on July 1 for renovation work estimated at \$10 to \$15 million, Arthur Hollinger, the hotel's general manager, said. The project will be handled by Bill Bensley, the original designer of the hotel, so as to maintain the property's character, he said. While the Cambodian-Thai ownership of the hotel will remain the same—the hotel belongs to Hotel de la Paix Co. Ltd—management will be taken over by the international firm Hyatt Hotels Corporation based in Chicago. Plans are to keep about 90 percent of the current staff when the hotel reopens in the first quarter of next year under the name of Park Hyatt Siem Reap, Mr. Hollinger said.

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"Mate - Spouse," sculpture made of a steam iron and mobile phone encircled in wire by Meas Sokhorn.