

MEKONG COUNTRIES MARKET REPORT

BY PAYAL UTTAM

The Mekong River courses through the heart of Southeast Asia plunging from the heights of the Tibetan plateau into the deltas of Vietnam. In the last decade, the countries bordering this waterway have transformed rapidly. As their economies develop and ideological conflicts subside, the region has given rise to a burgeoning contemporary art scene.

Today a new wave of artists from Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam have entered the world stage. Shrugging off the weight of history, their work is a heady mix of performance, large-scale installation and traditional media. Connecting artists from this diverse region are shared interests in storytelling, materiality and vernacular tradition. Much of their art unravels national narratives raising new questions about memory, migration and identity.

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While the Mekong countries have a vibrant history of art activity, it is only recently that they have come to international attention. Thai artists

have been at the forefront with exhibitions in major museums and a pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 2003. Lately, however, artists from Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam have been gaining ground in biennales and triennials worldwide.

Growing confidence in the Southeast Asian economy has been paralleled by heightened demand for art from the region. The secondary market for Southeast Asian art began with Christie's and Sotheby's holding inaugural auctions in Singapore in 1994 and 1996 respectively. Over the years, Indonesian and Filipino artists have dominated the market but things are shifting with both auction houses now broadening their sales categories to include contemporary art from Vietnam and Thailand.

In 2011, Christie's integrated Southeast Asian artists into their Asian 20th Century and Con-





temporary Art sales taking them out of their regional silo and onto a larger platform. Auction houses such as Larasati, Masterpiece and Borobudur have also become increasingly active and the number of foreign galleries representing Southeast Asian artists has risen.

Two years ago, the Singapore Art Museum held a landmark exhibition titled *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991–2011*, held in tandem with the Singapore Biennale, featuring a number of Mekong artists. In 2009, the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art devoted a special platform to the Mekong region including artists from Cambodia and Myanmar for the first time.

With institutional infrastructure still developing in the Mekong, the Singapore Art Museum, Queensland Art Gallery and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum have played a critical role in collecting and exhibiting artists from the region. In 2012, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation announced the *UBS MAP Global Art Initiative* which will involve museum acquisitions of artwork from Mekong river countries as well as a travelling exhibition opening at the Guggenheim Museum this year. Within the region, development continues of The National Art Gallery, Singapore—devoted to 19th and 20th century Southeast Asian art—which is due to open in 2015.

RATTANA VANDY (B.1980, CAMBODIA)

Rattana Vandy's photographs venture into the dark underbelly of Cambodia's past. From fire ravaged towns to bomb scarred landscapes, Vandy documents the wounded terrain of the coun-

try. Raw and unabashed, his photographs ask probing questions about politics, the aftermath of war and contemporary Khmer culture.

SOPHEAP PICH (B.1971, CAMBODIA)

A leading artist of his generation, Sopheap Pich recently returned to Cambodia after fleeing the country in 1979. Reviving childhood memories from the Khmer Rouge period, he weaves tactile sculptures from bamboo, rattan and burlap, materials associated with Cambodian craft and farming. His subjects include oversized human organs, military equipment and architectural forms.

AUNG KO (B.1981, MYANMAR)

Performance artist Aung Ko was born in Htone Bo, a small village outside Pyay. Deeply influenced by his birthplace, his practice is centred on rural life in Myanmar. Recently, he worked with villagers to build an unusual 3-seater bicycle. Composed of a mixture of old and new parts, the piece tackles the country's past and the direction of its future.

TUN WIN AUNG AND WAH NU (B.1970S, MYANMAR)

Artist couple Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu are two of Myanmar's most talked about artists. Producing bold performance, installation and video works, they confront the limitations placed on cultural practitioners in their country. Among their newest works is a poignant series of photographs titled *Blurring the Boundaries* showing maquettes for artwork that have little hope of being realised.

PINAREE SANPITAK (B.1961, THAILAND)

One of Thailand's most celebrated women artists, Pinaree Sanpitak creates evocative sculptures and installations that explore the female form. Employing materials such as silk, glass, rice and paper, Sanpitak invites viewers to touch her work and activate their senses. A central motif in her oeuvre are breast-shaped stupas which touch on the place of women in religion.

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA (B.1961, THAILAND)

Widely recognised for his food-sharing performances, Rirkrit Tiravanija dissolves boundaries between art and life. Inviting viewers to inhabit communal environments, he interrogates ideas of public service and the function of art. In object-based works like his recent *Untitled 2008-2011 (the map of the land of feeling) I-III*, Tiravanija created an 25m scroll tracing his journey as an artist.

BÙI CÔNG KHÁNH (B.1972, VIETNAM)

Bùi Công Khánh is one of the most compelling artists to emerge from Vietnam's post-doi moi generation. Working across a range of media including sculpture, installation and performance, his art challenges ideas of progress in his country. Recently, Bui painted a series of traditional blue-and-white porcelain vases with contemporary street scenes and advertisements capturing the shifting values of his society.

JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA (B.1968, VIETNAM)

Based in Ho Chi Minh City, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba is known for his hauntingly beautiful video works. Filming men plunged underwater dragging cyclos along the ocean floor, he grapples with the plight of refugees and the Vietnamese boat people. For his latest performance piece, *Breathing is Free*, the artist plans to run the diameter of the earth paying homage to the refugees' struggle for freedom.

Other Names to Know

Manit Sriwanichpoom (Thailand), Sutee Kunavichayanont (Thailand), Leang Seckon (Cambodia), Than Sok (Cambodia), Dinh Q. Lê (Vietnam), Tiffany Chung (Vietnam), Aung Myint (Myanmar), Nge Lay (Myanmar)

ABOVE Bui Công Khánh, *Saigon Slum*, 2012, multi-media installation with photography and video, digital print, 55 x 70 cm, Image courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.

OPPOSITE Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Breathing is free 12, 756.3: JAPAN, Hopes & Recovery, 1,789km*, 2011, 176 runners, 33 navigators, video installation with binoculars, Commissioned by Yokohama Triennale 2011, Image courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Art Gallery.