

“THE ‘FIRST’ CAMBODIAN CONTEMPORARY ARTIST”

Pamela N. Corey¹
Cornell University

In 2012 and 2013 Cambodian artists were showcased in some of the most prominent cities for contemporary art in the world.² Works by sculptor Pich Sopheap, photographer Vandy Rattana, and the late painter Vann Nath were exhibited at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in Kassel, Germany. Pich enjoyed solo exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and at his representative gallery, Tyler Rollins Fine Arts, in New York City, and in the group show *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology / Contemporary Art and Urban Change*, hosted by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute of Foreign Relations) in Berlin and Stuttgart. The Season of Cambodia Living Arts Festival occupied numerous center stages in New York City during the months of April and May of 2013, organizing performances of dance, music, and theater, and through its Visual Arts Program, residencies and exhibitions for ten visual artists and one curator. Within its program, a symposium titled “Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry” took place at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Cumulatively, it seemed that the oft-cited phrase “the rebirth of Cambodian art,” which presumed a nascent status for the arts, and symbolically, for Cambodia, had been rendered obsolete. The “rebirth” had transcended to a global declaration of the full-fledged and active state of the arts in Cambodia and its diasporas.³

In the context of the symposium at MoMA, of which I was a co-organizer with curators

¹ This article is developed from a paper presented at the symposium “Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry,” held at the Museum of Modern Art, April 21, 2013. I am particularly thankful to Ashley Thompson and David Teh for their comments during the revision process.

² These were metropolitan sites in Europe and the United States, thus marking a change in the circuit of visibility beyond the cities in the Asia-Pacific region where Cambodian artists since the 1990s have been shown in exhibitions sponsored by ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), biennales and triennales (including the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Singapore Biennale, and Asia-Pacific Triennial), and gallery exhibitions.

³ This catchphrase was reiterated in promotional materials and press surrounding the Season of Cambodia festival, organized by the Cambodian Living Arts organization, but the notion of “emergence” has been used in English-language media through the last decade. See, for example, Schneider, “Think Again,” and Weaver, “Cambodia’s Trauma, Rebirth Reflected in Khmer Sculptor’s Work.”

Leeza Ahmady and Erin Gleeson, a concern over its discursive objectives was raised at an early stage of planning. As historical inquiry into contemporary art practices was at its core, we asked whether one of our aims was to produce a timeline of “firsts.” For example, did we want to put forth propositions regarding the origins of performance art in Cambodia? What were the conceptual contours of the fields from which these historical origins could be located, e.g. tradition, religion, vernacular culture? Given the predominance of post-war chronological frameworks for contemporary art in the Southeast Asian region, was Year Zero the implicit baseline in the Cambodian case, thereby categorizing contemporary art as part of post-Khmer Rouge cultural developments? In recognizing the necessity of understanding historical trajectories, it seemed inevitable that the task at hand was to propose some kind of historicization of practices identified as contemporary art. Yet, in acknowledging the potential narrative biases in such projects, often predicated on assessments of universal values and notions of progress, it was recognized that such an endeavor be presented with transparency, self-reflexivity and a sense of its contingency. These questions and issues prompted the figurative query presented by the title of this paper, which interrogates the notion of the “first” with reference to such claims about contemporary artists in Cambodia. The project here, therefore, is to delineate particular priorities of attribution, turns in language, and patterns of reception surrounding four particular artists: Leang Seckon (b. 1974), Pich Sopheap (b. 1971), Svay Ken (1933-2008), and Vann Nath (1946-2011). I will elaborate on this selection shortly.

The project of historicizing contemporary art has often been undertaken with particular attention to developments in language, and shifts in localized terminology denoting the modern and the contemporary. As Reiko Tomii has noted,

when studying modern and contemporary art in Japan, one quintessentially local factor is language. In recent scholarship, attention has been directed to the words, such as *bijutsu* (art), which were coined in close relationship with the institutional development of Japanese modern art. Language, however, is also created or shaped through living experiences, such as the kinds of discursive practices engendered by those on the forefront of contemporary art: critics and artists.⁴

Perceptions of the “contemporary” in Cambodian art have been produced through an exchange of local and international criteria; it remains an amorphous conception, shaped through transnational flows of information vis-à-vis media and language in the era of globalization. In spoken Khmer, for an artist to be “contemporary” is a multivalent concept expressed by various forms of terminology implying a categorical range of artistic practices.⁵ Yet these terms still contain references to temporality, institutional training, or internationalism. These include “contemporary art” in English, សិល្បៈសម័យ *silpaḥ samăy* (modern art, connoting an institutional formation), សិល្បករទំនើប *silpakar daṁnoep* (modern artist, connoting non-institutional formation), សិល្បៈសហសម័យ *silpaḥ sahasamăy*

⁴ Tomii, “Historicizing ‘Contemporary Art,’” 614.

⁵ Deeper consideration of the nuances of expression related to the “contemporary” is provided in Roger Nelson’s essay in this issue.

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(loosely understood as art of the new millennium), as well as the French phrase, *l’art contemporain*, used by artists who trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) and abroad in the Soviet-Eastern bloc in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶

In addition, the conflation of styles associated with artistic modernism and contemporary art expands the purview of practices considered “contemporary.” Both local and international audiences generally associate contemporary art with new media forms, in tandem with the growing presence of Cambodian artists in global biennials and triennials at the turn of the millennium. This identification parallels regional perspectives that the division between modern and contemporary is relatively straightforward. Indonesian artist, curator, and scholar Jim Supangkat cited Filipino artist Charlie Co’s observation that the use of locally-sourced materials denotes the turning point from modern to contemporary. Co stated that “The modern era, in my view, was when I was still using western materials. In this contemporary era, I use local materials.”⁷ Setting aside the perceived temporal distinction between “modern” and “contemporary,” painterly experimentation continues to inform the work of an active generation of Cambodian artists who trained at art academies in the Soviet-Eastern bloc and at RUFA in Phnom Penh in the 1980s and 1990s,⁸ and ideas of modernity and modernism have been emphasized in descriptions of works by Pich Sopheap and Svay Ken after 2000. A correlation to the use of local materials in being “contemporary” can be made with two of the artists discussed in this essay, literally illustrated through Leang Seckon’s collages using found print media and photographs and Pich Sopheap’s bamboo and rattan sculptures, both forms of work respectively exhibited by the artists for the first time in 2003 and 2004.

Given these complexities in the context of Cambodia, the aim of this article is to discern and interpret a pattern of discourses focused on “Cambodian contemporary art,” in relation to the figures of Leang Seckon, Pich Sopheap, Svay Ken, and Vann Nath.⁹ Each was valued for distinctive attributes: Leang Seckon for the theme of re-use in his work as an artist/activist; Vann Nath for emblemizing survival, reconciliation, and artistic perseverance; Svay Ken as the forerunner of the archival project; and returnee Pich Sopheap as the transnational practitioner who became the face of “Cambodian contemporary art” for the global art world. These artists were at the core of

⁶ My understanding of these terms and their uses are derived from interviews and conversations with artists, organizers, and interpreters from 2010-2012.

For more information on the generation of artists trained at RUFA and in art academies in the Soviet-Eastern bloc during the 1980s and 1990s, see Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 366-474.

⁷ Comment made at the discussion “Asian Modernism,” at The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, in October 1995, held in conjunction with the exhibition *Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand* (Tokyo, October 28 to December 3 1995). Cited in Supangkat, “Contemporary Art of the South,” 24.

⁸ A broad spectrum of these artistic engagements is demonstrated in the works shown at the exhibitions *Communication* (1998) and *Visions of the Future* (2001) at Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture.

⁹ I choose not to include Vandy Rattana (b. 1980) in this discussion despite the fact that his photographic practice deserves in-depth treatment, as well as his role in establishing the *Stiev Selapak* (“Art Rebels”) collective and the Sa Sa Arts Projects space in the White Building (see Vuth Lyno’s contribution in this volume). However, his “emergence” as a prominent Cambodian artist fell after the specific moment discussed here, which is concentrated from roughly 2003 to 2010. Vandy’s practice received growing international attention beginning in 2010 with his series *The Bomb Ponds*, first exhibited at the Center for Curatorial Studies Bard Galleries at the Hessel Museum of Art in New York City in 2010, and subsequently shown in venues including the Singapore Art Museum’s *Signature Art Prize Finalist Exhibition* in 2011, *DOCUMENTA* (13) in 2012, and at the Asia Society in New York in 2013.

an expanding discourse on contemporary art, itself woven together from discussions of aesthetics, biography, community, history, and oscillating emphases on being modern/contemporary. As such, I suggest that from roughly 2003 to 2010, in the art world largely centered in Phnom Penh, there was a shift in the reception and discourse of contemporary art in alignment with growing international interest. These discussions would build upon earlier frameworks of Cambodian art established during previous periods of “cultural restoration,” to use Ingrid Muan’s phrase.¹⁰ However, the nature of these artists’ diverse material practices, in tandem with overlapping uses of language drawing on ideas of modernism and contemporaneity, would broaden – and thicken – perceptions of contemporary art from Cambodia.

This regime of representation of “Cambodian contemporary art” is founded upon a relationship between audience expectation and artistic production that governed numerous exhibitions of contemporary Cambodian art from the 1990s through the first decade of the new millennium. These tended to follow a model of themed commissions for artistic projects animated by the significantly growing presence of NGOs in Phnom Penh following UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) from 1992 to 1993. The support provided by NGOs and other development-based platforms for the arts was critical in the 1990s for supporting artistic production, exhibition, and sales. The artistic practices promoted by cultural workers and curators in Cambodia from the mid-late 1990s through the following decade encouraged creative expression – particularly in regards to addressing historical memory and reconciling with a traumatic past – in the name of social rebuilding, to serve the larger purpose of what Muan described as cultural restoration.¹¹ Venues for exhibition consisted primarily of small commercial shops, café-galleries, and foreign cultural centers.¹² The Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture took on a significantly expanded project that included exhibiting contemporary art. Reyum was a non-profit space run by American art historian Ingrid Muan and Cambodian-born Ly Daravuth, who functioned in multiple capacities as curators, teachers, artists, ethnographers, and historians.¹³ Furthermore, Muan and Ly

¹⁰ Muan, “Citing Angkor.” See also Gabrielle Abbe’s article in this volume.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The French Cultural Center, popularly known as the Alliance Française, was established in 1990; its name then changed to the Center for Cultural and Linguistic Cooperation, and then the French Cultural Center of Cambodia in 1992. In 2011 it changed its name again to the Institut Français. Bophana Audio-Visual Resource Center was opened in 2005 under the directorship of French-Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh. Metahouse was founded by German filmmaker Nico Mesterharm in 2007 and became a branch of the Goethe Institut in 2010. A Japan-Cambodia Cooperation Center was also established in 2004 with the purpose of improving human resource development, with less involvement in cultural development and the arts. Early gallery spaces and café-galleries include New Art Gallery (opened in 1994) and Two Fish Gallery Café (opened in 2006). Dana Langlois founded Java Café and Gallery (opened in 2000, re-named JavaArts after 2008) and managed Sala Artspace from 2006-2007.

¹³ Reyum itself was founded partially in response to a request by the curators of the first Fukuoka Triennale to see Cambodian contemporary art. Ingrid Muan (1964-2005), an American doctoral candidate in art history at Columbia University, had partnered with recently returned Cambodian-born Ly Daravuth (b. 1968), who had studied visual art and art history in Paris, to provide a venue to show the works prepared by the artists, many of whom were professors at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA). After the first exhibition in 1998, titled *Communication*, the directors expanded the direction of the gallery space to drive a larger long-term project that would entail extensive research, documentation, exhibition, and publication of local cultural and aesthetic practices largely drawn from the realm of the vernacular. A critical analysis of Reyum’s establishment and cultural project can be found in Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember Again,” *Diacritics*.

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produced exhibitions and catalogues that have contributed to the construction of a Cambodian modern and contemporary art history.¹⁴

The multifaceted discourses emerging from the larger project of cultural rebuilding and restoration would paradoxically also relegate the practices of contemporary artists into uneasy territory. The overarching emphasis on memory projects and the restoration of the traditional arts – the cultural sphere in which a focus on Cambodian identity and authenticity was concentrated – became the primary basis for curatorial projects and larger institutional endeavors to engage artistic production in tandem with psychological healing and societal reconciliation. This speaks to a paradigm of patronage outlined in Ashley Thompson’s argument that “much of Cambodian art of the past decade has been produced, in one way or another, in response to more-or-less external demands that Cambodians assume responsibility for the Khmer Rouge as both a historical-political event and traumatic experience.”¹⁵ By 2010, in recognizing the marked shift in contextual presentation from Reyum’s *Legacy of Absence* (2000) to exhibitions like Metahouse’s *The Art of Survival* (2007), it became apparent to many observers in Phnom Penh that “trauma art” had uncomfortably become a predominant curatorial framework at the local and international scales in representations of Cambodian art.¹⁶

Given this context, I use the phrase “the first Cambodian contemporary artist” not in a literal sense, but rather as an entry point into a vignette of Cambodian socio-cultural history, in which contemporary art began to develop within a critical regime of representation that emerged from and yet diverged from previous frameworks. “Cambodian contemporary art” began to attain further dimensions of discourse that would set the stage for developments at the end of the first decade of the new millennium, and for a younger generation of artists delving into practices self-consciously described as conceptual and experimental.¹⁷ Drawing upon T.J. Clark’s analysis of Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*, this essay similarly endeavors to understand the social and artistic impact of artworks at specific moments in time and place.¹⁸ Paralleling Clark’s concern with the

¹⁴ Reyum is noted for several landmark exhibitions that ultimately would serve in historicizing visual art, as in *Cultures of Independence* (2002), using visual art to historicize, as in *Painting History* (1999), as well as building on the discursive introduction of contemporary art, such as with *Visions of the Future* (2002). Muan was cognizant of the impact that Reyum had in generating attention to contemporary art in Cambodia, suggesting that *Communication* may have been a first foray into contextualizing these artists’ works as “contemporary” following the Euro-American model of display, public engagement, and textual presentation: “We printed invitation cards on a computer printer and put up posters publicizing our opening. In other words, we produced ‘contemporary art.’ Visitors came and newspapers wrote about ‘modern Cambodian art’” (“Musings on Museums,” 274).

¹⁵ Thompson, “Mnemotechnical Politics,” 225.

¹⁶ Erin Gleeson comments on this condition at a specific moment during her own formation as a curator working in Cambodia: “...I became more sensitive to curatorial approaches that seemed to cultivate a wide range of negative effects, such as a perpetuation of ‘speechlessness’ by exclusion in South East Asian group exhibitions both regionally and internationally, government-sponsored and therefore censored inclusion, a sensationalizing of Khmer Rouge history by foreign curators, and more generally misrepresentations or siphoning of local artist’s [sic] concepts, capacities, or narratives” (“Mutualism for the Future,” 61). It is important to note important shifts in this exhibitionary impulse, and Ashley Thompson speaks to the specific context in which *Legacy of Absence* took place. See Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember, Again,” *Diacritics*.

¹⁷ See Vuth Lino’s contribution to this volume.

¹⁸ Clark, *Image of the People*.

“categories of experience” that would have born an impact on Courbet’s art-making, I present here examples of artists who, at a particular moment, played formative roles in a shifting the discursive production of “Cambodian contemporary art,” in their respective attributions as “firsts.” To borrow from Clark, the question to consider is, what made these artists’ work distinctive and effective at a certain moment?

LEANG SECKON

In 2003, with the assistance of Java Café and Gallery owner Dana Langlois, artist Leang Seckon and Cambodian-American artists Pich Sopheap and Chath Piersath established an artists’ collective titled Saklapel, an anagram of *silpah* (art), commonly transcribed as “selapak,” with initial aspirations to collectively provide resources on the local art scene for an international audience through a website, as well as to promote their own artistic practices and initiate community-oriented projects, namely in the form of workshops and exhibitions.¹⁹ Saklapel attempted to embody the ideal of an artists’ cooperative that could both fulfill the individual creative needs of its members, however these might be seen to vary between the returnee and local artist members, and also to explore how such a concept could be adapted to the prevailing climate, and gain appeal amongst the local artist community. Pich, Piersath and Leang temporarily shared a house, with individual studio spaces, and also exhibited together at Cambodian Living Arts and the French Cultural Center between 2003 and 2004. The group’s residential collectivity was flexible; cartoonist John Weeks and senior painter Svay Ken also lived in the house at different times, and Linda Saphan joined the group after Piersath left for the U.S. in 2004, when Leang moved his studio



Figure 1: Leang Seckon, *Stuck-In-The-Mud Skirt*, 2009, mixed media on canvas, 150 × 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

¹⁹ Author’s interviews with Pich, Saphan, and Piersath, 2011. Chath Piersath first came to Cambodia in 1994 for social development work, and then returned to Lowell, Massachusetts for the next seven years. In 2001 or 2002 he returned to settle in Phnom Penh and began exhibiting artwork. His first show, titled *Outsider Art*, was with Svay Ken in 2003. Linda Saphan, a Cambodian-born Canadian citizen, returned to Phnom Penh for the first time in 1995, with later visits for anthropological fieldwork related to her graduate studies, and finally settled in the city in 2003. She later became a prominent figure within the arts community in the early and mid-2000s with her work on the *Visual Arts Open* and with the *Selapak Neari* (“Women’s Art”) group.

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Figure 2: Leang Seckon, *Parachute*, 2012, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

to Boeung Kak Lake.²⁰

The decision to establish an informal artists’ collective lay in the promise that such an endeavor might seem to hold in the artistic landscape of Phnom Penh at the turn of the millennium, when themed projects commissioning artworks on the subjects of memory and trauma were the dominant curatorial framework. Leang Seckon has vocalized criticisms of what he considers an exploitation of trauma through the context of exhibition, citing as an example the museological dimension of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. In criticizing the spectacle enacted through the exhibitionary function of the prison-turned-museum and the dimension of visitor – largely touristic – engagement, he described how the museum serves an important educative function for foreigners, but serves no useful purpose for Cambodians, who have no desire to relive their trauma and see their worst memories depicted literally.²¹ He considers the display of human bones within a glass case to be sacrilegious, because the bones need to be cremated or properly buried so that the souls can be at rest, according to

Buddhist belief. Reconciliation and transcendence are themes that have driven Leang’s practice and also elevated him to the ranks of one of the country’s most prominent artists. Having experienced the Pol Pot regime as a child, he often describes how his artistic practice serves as a means of personal healing. In *Stuck-In-The-Mud Skirt*, Leang paints the grimly iconic photographic portraits from Tuol Sleng with smiling faces (Figure 1), which he described as representing the hope that the souls can be at peace and soar above the ground, floating away to a better place. Aside from the meditative process of artistic labor, this notion of psychological transcendence is visually enacted through a recurring perspectival vantage point in his work, such as in the form of a bird’s eye view in his mixed-media painting, with the artistic gaze cast from above upon planes flying in formation or parachutes descending upon a landscape (Figure 2).

In my conversation with Leang, he displayed no hesitation in asserting that he was the first true Cambodian contemporary artist, a claim supported by the fact that his work originates from life experiences unique to Cambodia, and is grounded in his life-long residence and artistic formation in Cambodia.²² Therefore his education at RUFA, where he studied Plastic Art and Design for ten

²⁰ Pich Sopheap’s conversation with the author, June 24, 2011.

²¹ Interview with the author, September 2, 2011. Unless noted, all subsequent references to the artist are from this interview.

²² The residencies Leang spent at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan in 2009 or in New York City for Season of Cambodia in 2013 are not considered part of this lived experience in terms of his permanent residency in Cambodia.

years, and the absence of influences or references to non-Cambodian subject matter, is indicative of what he – and others – consider to be an authentic Cambodian artistic formation. In addition, his work grapples with cultural and historical topics in literal and symbolic ways – most notably through the medium of collage – that attests to his autobiographical perspective as witness to local change, demonstrating the “Cambodianness” of the content. Leang said that he was the first Cambodian artist to have a solo exhibition at Java Café and Gallery in 2002, which is a revealing distinction as he was preceded the month before by a French-Cambodian artist, Marine Ky (b. 1966), who would represent Cambodia, along with Reyum co-founder and artist Ly Daravuth, at the 3rd Fukuoka Triennale of Asian Contemporary Art in 2005.

Leang’s self-articulation has drawn support from the successful international reception of his work, and is reinforced through artist statements and curatorial writing that firmly establish the culturally-specific historical and spiritual dimensions of his practice.²³ The artist also asserted that he was the first Cambodian artist to use collage, a medium bearing significant weight due to its pivotal role in modernism through its deployment by Cubists Picasso and Braque. If modified to state that Leang was the first Cambodian artist to demonstrate a commitment to the medium and its innovation, and to exhibit those works in Cambodia, this is true. After several years of collaboration with American mixed-media artist Chris Lawson, Leang exhibited collage works for the first time for the *Mekong Jitney* group show at Java Café and Gallery in 2004. However, one precedent of a collage work by a Cambodian artist includes *The Edge of the Sea*, by Moscow-trained Long Sophea (b. 1965), which was exhibited at *Communication* in 1998.²⁴ Long was one of the few Cambodian women who had gone to study in the Soviet-Eastern bloc, and she spent seven years in Russia training in textile design. Another like precedent in collage could be considered Suos Sodavy (b. 1955), Vice-Dean of the Plastic Arts at the Ministry of Culture, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest for ten years, and who exhibited what is likely the first assemblage shown by a Cambodian artist in the context of a contemporary art exhibition in the country, in *Visions of the Future* (2002). In a similar methodological manner to collage, *The Peaceful World* relied upon careful composition of found materials.²⁵

²³ See for example Tara Shaw Jackson, “Heavy Skirt,” and Anne Elizabeth Moore, “Flowers Come From My Mouth,” in the exhibition catalog *Leang Seakon: Heavy Skirt*, 3-17. Leang’s reputation as a prominent Cambodian contemporary artist grew as he participated in regional exchanges, such as 2+3+4 (Java Café and Gallery, Phnom Penh, 2006), *Strategies from Within: an Exhibition of Vietnamese and Cambodian Contemporary Art Practices* (Ke Center, Shanghai, 2008), and the Fukuoka Triennial (2009).

²⁴ This work was exhibited in the *Communication* exhibition at Reyum in 1998. However, like many artists of that generation who worked with Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth, other career or family demands have led to alternative commercial paths for art-making, and very few have sustained independent artistic practices or exhibited in venues for and international circuits of contemporary art. This is revealing of the establishment of discursive and market mechanisms that enabled artists to gain purchase on non-ASEAN or states-sponsored cultural exchange-related international exhibition circuits after many artists from the 1990s generation had already withdrawn from pursuing publicly-exhibited artistic practice as a career path. An image of this work can be found at “Communication: Photo Gallery,” *Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture*, <http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit1/exhibit.html>.

²⁵ An image of this work can be found at “Communication: Photo Gallery,” *Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture*, <http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit1/exhibit.html>.

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Figure 3: Leang Seckon, *Soldiers Arrive at the Palace*, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 42 x 52 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.



Figure 4: Leang Seckon, *Goodbye Cambodia*, 2012, Mixed media, collage on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

Leang's articulation of being the "first" correlates to the fact that his work with collage was the first example of sustained formal engagement with the medium, in the manner of locally-relevant innovation with an emphasis on the critical and conceptual content of the work via its narrative capacity to provocatively comment upon history and contemporary events. The medium itself retains the ability to both disrupt and enhance the perception of what Christine Poggi has termed "pictorial unity" with the composition of found materials referencing everyday life, most notably printed matter.²⁶ Therefore the careful assemblage of these elements on and as the picture plane enhances both the autonomy and porosity of the collage's objecthood, serving the artist's desire to exceed formal experimentation and direct the reading of the work through locally-specific frameworks (Figures 3 and 4). Aside from his individual art-making, Leang would become known for his collaborative community projects focused on environmental concerns and that further emphasized the concept of re-use; these included *The Recycled Fashion Show* (2007) and the *Naga Installation* on the Siem Reap River (2008).

Leang's attraction to meticulous manual labor – including sewing and embroidery – as an artistic and meditational method is rooted in childhood memories of crafting natural materials, such as leaves and vines, while attending to his duties as a "buffalo boy" in Prey Veng province. The acts of sewing and collaging thus constitute a fundamental material methodology in his practice, both an instinctual and cultivated attraction to working with found materials and textiles. Here too he claimed that these skills were accomplished through self-training, as no one ever taught him how to sew. The pride manifested in this attestation of being self-taught also pertains to popular perceptions of Svay Ken and Vann Nath, speaking to their independence from institutional formation and to the appeal of the "imperfect," a kind of value used to describe the aesthetic properties of the two senior artists' painterly techniques. In a similar vein to the stated motivations of the two late artists with regards to the autobiographical dimensions of their work, Leang also emphasized that the most important objective of art-making is to express feelings and share knowledge, speaking to a form of ethical work that further pushes the understanding of artistic production as – along the lines of Foucault's work on moral subjectification – a technique of the self.²⁷

PICH SOPHEAP

The artist embraced by the global art world as the most "contemporary" Cambodian artist is Pich Sopheap, who is frequently featured at international biennials and triennials, and was the

²⁶ Poggi, "Frames of Reference," 312.

²⁷ According to Foucault, the relation between the care of the self and the knowledge of the self is one way of approaching the historical and philosophical connections between the subject and truth, and these relations employed techniques of discursive and meditative self-reflexivity. If artistic labor can be perceived as a technique of the self, encompassing a means through which one cares for the self in order to gain knowledge of the self, Foucault suggests three forms of reflexive technique which allow for this knowledge to emerge: memory, meditation, and method, which may be considered universal attributes of the artistic process. See Foucault et al., *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.

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principal artist representing Cambodia for the first time at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012.²⁸ I suggest that the international articulation of Pich’s sculptures as pioneering “Cambodian contemporary art” was catalyzed at a time in which this conception had begun to be circulated discursively, not only within international and largely Euro-American publics, but also within the local urban context of cultural production in Phnom Penh. The fact that Pich’s artistic predecessors – chiefly the artists who had trained at RUFA and abroad in the Soviet-Eastern bloc in the 1980s and 1990s – had *not* experienced similar forms of international recognition, though their work might also find a similar degree of local, popular aesthetic appreciation, may be in part explicated through the fact that prior to 2000, an emerging discourse on contemporary art, together with the market mechanisms of the global art world, had not yet achieved a certain degree of circulation within Phnom Penh. It took several ambitious projects and exhibitions, in which I would argue that diasporic returnee actors played a key role in utilizing and expanding existing transnational networks, to draw Phnom Penh and its resident artists into the global art map and to heighten the profile of Cambodian contemporary art.

It was upon this emerging platform that Pich’s sculptures could be said to have triggered modes of recognition of “Cambodian contemporary art,” glossed through certain material and formal signifiers, including the locally-sourced materials and figurative and abstract rendering of forms narrativized through the local references (such as Buddhist sculpture, utilitarian objects, and human organs) (Figures 5-8). In addition, the appeal of Pich’s sculptures draws in large part on a modernist aesthetic whose formal qualities resonate with the perceived balance of East/West celebrated in the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi, or, within the more immediate field of perception in Phnom Penh, the New Khmer Architecture Movement pioneered by Vann Molyvann. At the same time, this identification of Pich’s work as “Cambodian contemporary art,” was particularly effective at a certain time because of the representational frameworks that had already emerged as a result of localized linguistic negotiations of “contemporary art” and its semantic properties. These discursive utterances were often enacted within the context of exhibition-making - public endeavors typically organized by transnational and diasporic actors, such as Pich himself in the case of the *Visual Arts Open* in 2005 - and within spoken circulation in interviews and artist talks.



Figure 5: Pich Sopheap, Buddha (from 1979 series), 2009, rattan, wire, dye, 220 x 70 x 110cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

²⁸ Pich Sopheap, Vandy Rattana, and Vann Nath were represented at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012, but whereas Pich and Vandy had individual exhibitions of their work, a painting by Vann Nath was curated into the space of Pich’s exhibition.

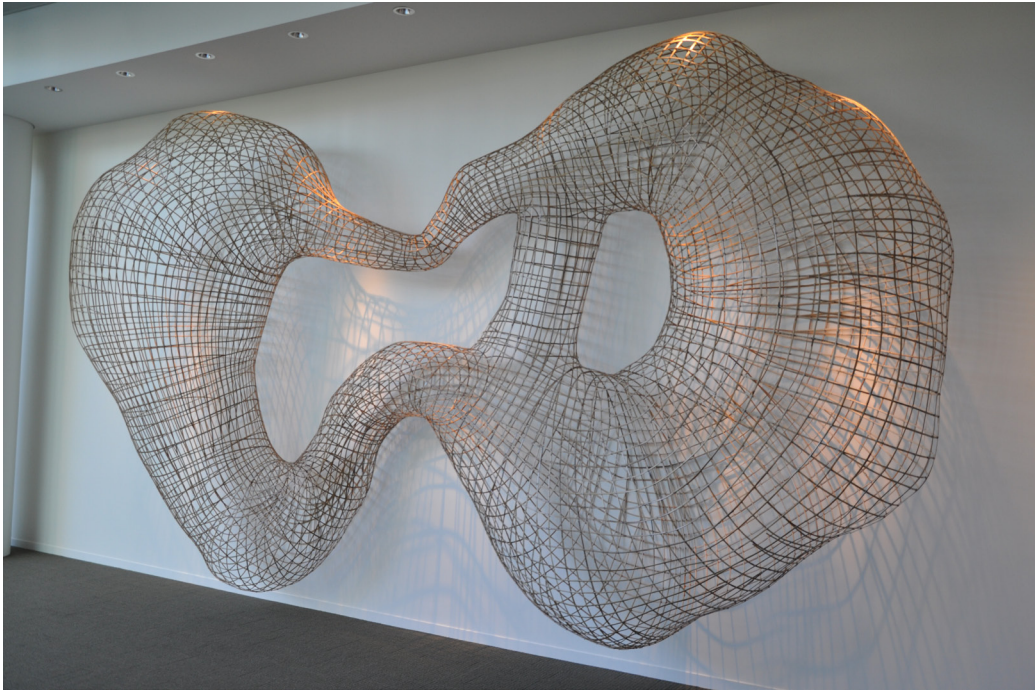


Figure 6: Pich Sopheap, *Cycle 2*, 2006, bamboo, rattan, aluminum and metal wire, 557 x 315 x 103 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

Pich was born in Battambang province in 1971, and left the country with his family as refugees to settle in the United States in 1984. He would go on to study art, with a focus on painting, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and then receive his MFA at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, in 1999. Pich decided to return to Cambodia and settle there in 2002 for motivations including cultural reconnection, artistic development, self-actualization, along with the more practical concerns of the lower costs of living and making work. Pich initially continued with his painting practice for two years after settling in Phnom Penh, struggling to make a living off meager sales of his paintings. His first solo exhibition in Cambodia took place at Java Café and Gallery in 2003, where he exhibited paintings of clay vessels – abstractly-rendered forms that one can perceive as providing a template for later sculptures.

The following year, Pich was preparing for a group show at the French Cultural Center, and he describes having felt compelled to seek an alternative medium to painting, one that would be more accessible to the Cambodian public.²⁹ At an artist talk for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial exhibition *The Mekong*, Pich described this struggle:

I had to find some other way... The thing is – with painting – why it wasn't enough was because it just didn't seem to have any effect. I was making these things on this flat

²⁹ Pich, "Silence and Cycle."

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surface in my studio, and it didn’t make any sense to other people. It was some kind of struggle in my head, because of all the painters I knew, and the history I had in school, and all that stuff, and it was missing something.³⁰

This statement can be read in two ways. First, the artist himself felt constricted by the medium of painting, his material focus throughout his undergraduate and graduate education, but felt at this point in his trajectory as an artist that painting had exhausted its possibilities for expression. Secondly, he considered modern painting to hold less popular appeal among local audiences due presumably to the predominance of dance and theater in the traditional hierarchy of the arts, in addition to the monumental sculptural legacy of Angkorian art history.³¹ Seeking recourse through experimentation, Pich attempted to translate the drawing process into three-dimensional form by delving into sculpture, shaping a grid-like armature of rattan into an abstract pair of lungs (which he then planned to cover with the paper from cigarette packages) for the exhibition (Figure 7). He described the critical shift in his practice occurring when the former director of the French Cultural Center, Guy Issanjou, came by to look at the work, and said that it was the “first modern art sculpture” he had seen in Cambodia.³² Pich recalled how this moment provoked a renewed excitement and trepidation, and how he began working sixteen hours a day without respite.³³

As such, the articulations that foregrounded Pich’s “emergence” as a Cambodian contemporary artist seem to originate in Issanjou’s declaration, which is often cited in interviews with Pich, as he recollects the experience as a crucial turn in his subjectivity as an artist. It brings to light the way a simple utterance can play in first, foregrounding a type of recognition and hence altered consciousness of an artist upon the production or completion of a work, and the ripple effect this will have upon the artist’s subsequent praxis as a more holistic and embodied form of labor. Issanjou’s statement, identifying Pich’s work as the “first modern art sculpture” in Cambodia, would be reiterated in Pich’s subsequent accounts of his shift to sculptural work, producing the channel of interpretation between artwork and public in the form of exhibition reviews, curatorial texts, scholarly articles, and other media forms engaged in the realm of artistic discourse.³⁴ Pich would go on to develop his sculptural practice and investigate various formal propositions, ranging in scale and formal qualities, including abstracted forms indexing body organs, urban architecture, functional objects, and figurative sculptures depicting the Buddha, the Khmer alphabet, and morning glory (Figures 5, 9, 10). In a body of work exhibited at *dOCUMENTA (13)*, Pich pared

³⁰ “APT6 | Pich Sopheap (Cambodia).”

³¹ In his artist’s statement for *Silence and Cycle*, Pich stated “I was painting at that time and was getting ready for the group show at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh. It was my third year back in Cambodia, and I felt the need to make works that were more accessible by Cambodian people. My paintings were too limited. Because health was a major issue of people around me, forms of the human organs as a starting point seemed obvious.” Pich, “Silence and Cycle.”

³² *Asia Art Archive*, “Presentation by Pich Sopheap.”

³³ Interview with the author, June 24, 2011.

³⁴ See, for example, *Asia Art Archive*, “Presentation by Pich Sopheap”; Galligan, “Woven into History,” 141; and Christov-Bakargiev, “Live like a Frog and Die Like a Snake,” 12.



Figure 7: Pich Sopheap, *Silence*, 2004, rattan, wire, 46 x 26 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

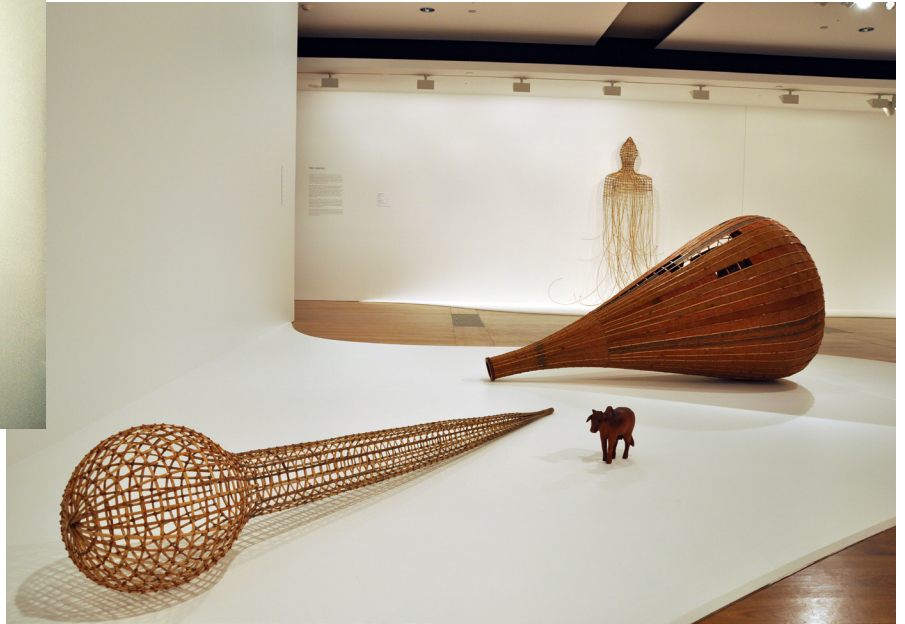


Figure 8: Pich Sopheap, 1979 installation view, 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 2009-10. Photograph: Natasha Harth. Courtesy of the artist and the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

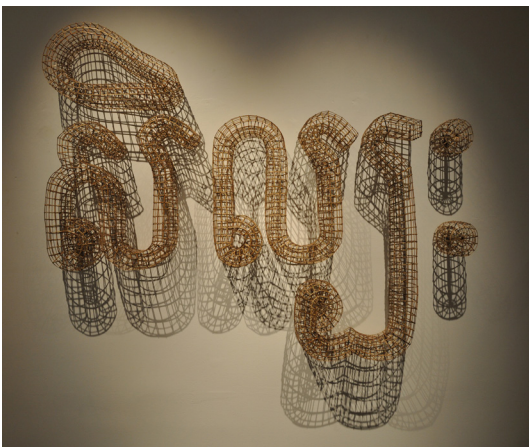


Figure 9: Pich Sopheap, *Selapak*, 2010, rattan and metal wire, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10: Pich Sopheap, *Morning Glory*, 2011, rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood, steel bolts, 210 x 103 x 74 in. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

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away figurative resemblances to construct grids meriting comparisons to high modernism and Arte Povera.

The glossed modern/modernist attribution has been pivotal in formal assessments of Pich’s work. To begin with, one could question the specific choice of words Issanjou used in his declaration that Pich’s sculpture-in-progress was the “first *modern* art sculpture” in Cambodia (emphasis added). Such a description reveals an attraction to the aesthetic of modernist abstraction, largely non-representational and self-referential, a style that appears to lack a preceding period of artistic experimentation in the country’s art history. Pich has described his own attraction to modern European sculpture, namely the amorphous and abstract works of Brancusi and Giacometti, alongside the inspiration found in local utilitarian objects, particularly the woven rattan fishing implements used in the countryside. While Pich’s sculptures fluctuate between the representational and non-representational, his largely “naked” sculptural works expose the process of their making, revealing the material tensions of the rattan and bamboo skeletons and their imperfections. As he has described,

To create a three-dimensional object from the beginning to the end is to take a journey, to discover something new without erasing the footsteps, the evidence. It was not very practical, as my objects tended to be large, and there are other issues that come with working with natural materials – but characteristically, each successful work has a life in it that is somehow a reflection of where it comes from.³⁵

The exposed labor of material manipulation finds some resonance in Clement Greenberg’s treatises on painterly modernism, and the advocacy of elevating the material based on its own possibilities.³⁶ Thus, there is a confluence of modernist inspirations evoked by Pich’s sculptures, which use locally-sourced materials to illustrate subject matter often drawn from the artist’s memories of growing up during the Khmer Rouge period, as in the *1979* series, or to comment upon social concerns in contemporary Cambodia, such as urbanization or endemic health issues.

Yet, was Pich the first to produce a “modernist” artwork in the perceived absence of a delineated historical stage of modernism in the visual arts in Cambodia? Pich would certainly reject such a notion, as the artist often refers to Vann Nath as a type of modernist practitioner in his assiduous concern with the medium and its unique properties. Earlier examples of sculpture which reflected formal properties reminiscent of modernist investigation include *Air Bridge* by Prom Sam An, exhibited at the inaugural *Communication* exhibition at Reyum (then known as Situations gallery).³⁷ But the appearance of such a work in 1998 was delimited in its reception by the lack of a critical

³⁵ Pich, “Silence and Cycle.”

³⁶ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 100-10.

³⁷ The comparison between Prom Sam An’s sculpture and a work by Pich was made by Daravuth Ly at the symposium “No Country: Regarding South and Southeast Asia,” at the Queens Museum of Art in New York City on April 18, 2013. During his presentation, Ly posed questions and comparisons in order to interrogate the perception and status of “contemporary artworks” in Cambodia, citing precedents and instances of aesthetic contemporaneity with vernacular objects of practical and ritual function. An image of *Air Bridge* can be found at “Communication: Photo Gallery,” Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, <http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit1/exhibit.html>.

regime of discourse and representation that would have served to locally enunciate and further promote contemporary art and its social relevance.³⁸ A literal example of an attempt to emphasize legibility is shown in one of Sopheap's sculptures, in which the letters of *silpah* demonstratively spell out and display a work of "art" in the Khmer script, therefore naming its objecthood and its regime of cultural engagement for a Cambodian audience (Figure 9). In response to art historian Ly Boreth's question as to why the artist chose to render words into sculptures, Pich responded:

I chose these two Khmer words because I am beginning to make work that directly aimed at the Cambodian public. I wanted them to think about questions such as 'What is sculpture? What is art?' It is a way to interact with the general public here. ... Coincidentally, I was invited to put a piece in a group show at the National Museum of Phnom Penh at the end of my exhibit at the French Cultural Center, and I chose to submit the word *Selapak*. One can say that 'Art is beautiful' because it was beautiful on the wall. I think the idea itself was still probably lost on the ordinary Cambodian viewers. I mean, who the hell cares about art in Cambodia anyway, right? But for me it is worth some serious thoughts about reclaiming the potential of the local language, the word's initial ability to provoke the local audience.³⁹

In the local context of Phnom Penh, Pich is regarded not only as an established artist, but also as an organizer with close ties to artists in senior and junior generations. Through his work on the *Visual Arts Open* in 2005, co-organized with Linda Saphan, Pich grew close to senior painters such as Hen Sophal and Vann Nath, and given their transnational connections and bilingual facilities, Pich and Saphan would become representative spokespersons for the contemporary art scene. The two artists mentored different groups of artists, Pich in an informal fashion with artists like Meas Sokhorn and Khvay Samnang, and Saphan with a group of women artists under the umbrella of the *Selapak Neri* project in 2007.

The *Visual Arts Open (VAO)* in 2005, organized by Pich and Saphan, marked a decisive difference from the presentation of the artists in Reyum's *Visions of the Future* in 2002, in which the word "contemporary" had not been used in the Khmer-language title.⁴⁰ It is worth considering

³⁸ Muan's statement that *Situations* (re-titled and re-opened as *Reyum* in 1999) participated in the discursive contextualization of such works as "contemporary art" in 1998 suggests that this process was in its nascent state (Muan, "Musings on Museums," 274).

³⁹ Pich's e-mail exchange and interview with Ly Boreth, June 23, 2010, cited in Ly, "Of Trans(national) Subjects and Translation," 128.

⁴⁰ The *Visual Arts Open* took place from December 9-31, 2005, and exhibited the works of twenty participating artists: Chhim Sothy, Chhoeun Rithy, Duong Saree, Hen Sophal, Heng Sinith, Khun Sovanrith, Leang Seckon, Mak Remissa, Pich Sopheap, Piersath Chath, Prom Vichet, Saphan Linda, Sa Piseth, Suos Sodavy, Svay Ken, Tang Chhin Sothy, Tum Saren, Vandy Rattana, and Vann Nath. Pich and Saphan worked closely with the older generation of artists, while Erin Gleeson curated the photography component. *VAO* was a first attempt to introduce a large-scale arts festival or group show in a biennial format to Cambodia, and utilized various venues in central Phnom Penh to make the exhibition a city-wide event. The two organizers met with a broad range of artists, from the 1980s-90s generation of painters to the young photographers who were receiving growing media attention as the vanguard of an emerging Cambodian photography scene (Callebaut, "Cambodian Photographers;" Turnbull, "Cambodians Take Back the Lens"). The event took eight months to prepare, as Saphan and Pich requested that all the artists create new work, and according to Saphan, rather than follow the NGO model of organizing an exhibition with a particular theme, most

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here the extent to which titles of exhibitions can be considered performative utterances, in terms of articulating and transforming meanings of “contemporary art” for the viewing public.⁴¹ With *Visions of the Future: An Exhibition of Contemporary Cambodian Art*, the English-language term “contemporary art” was circulated among a relatively large urban university-age audience; more than a decade later, “contemporary art” in English is the most commonly used.⁴² For VAO, Pich and Saphan attempted to render the concept of contemporary visual art for a Khmer audience through the literal translation ចក្កសិល្បៈសម័យ *cakkebu silpaḥ samāy*, which referenced the visual through the use of ចក្ក *cakkebu*, meaning “eye” or “eyes.” The organizers attempted to lend coherence to this literal translation in the trilingual catalogue:

When people refer to arts (*silpaḥ*) in Cambodia it generally means performing arts. The word visual art has yet to be recognized in the Cambodian concept. The translation of the term does not exist. We took the word “chakok” which means “eye” alluding to staring to define visual. The word “samai” refer to now or the present. VAO’s purpose from the very beginning was to create a binding relationship between artists of different dimensions, connecting them to exhibiting spaces and vice versa, and to show the public the most creative minds working in the visual arts nowadays in Cambodia.⁴³

It is difficult to gauge the linguistic effect this phrase had at the time in terms of its facilitating semantic access through an optically-oriented approach to contemporary art. If the immediate impact was to provoke an emphasis on the visual, the use of *cakkebu silpaḥ samāy* may have become attached to the exhibitionary model but not necessarily to the work on display, largely featuring paintings by artists who had shown at Reyum since 1998.⁴⁴ In addition, the emphasis on the “visual” revisits the modernist ideology of appreciation of the autonomous art object, isolated from a narrative framing that in Cambodia had been primarily attached to interpretive readings of memory and trauma. As for its long-term impact as artistic nomenclature, one can assess its efficacy by noting that “modern art” or *silpaḥ samāy* has continued to resonate in popular usage. However, even in the time span from *Visions of the Future* in 2002 to VAO in 2005, the discourse surrounding contemporary art had attained new dimensions of appeal, as the organizers and the participating artists all described the event as a major success in terms of drawing local and international media attention to Cambodian contemporary artists. It provided significant exposure for both the organizers, Pich and Saphan, and for the artists, who sold almost all of the works shown. In

notably “peace” or “memory,” they followed the model that Muan and Ly had used in organizing *Visions of the Future*, choosing to have artists work within the broad framework of “the present.”

⁴¹ The concepts of the speech-act and performative utterance derive the basic premise of declaration, performativity, and transformation from a set of complex philosophical and linguistic debates. See, as a primary reference, Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

⁴² This observation is based upon short-term and long-term fieldwork visits carried out from 2007 to 2013.

⁴³ *Visual Arts Open*, 7.

⁴⁴ In terms of offering a different spectrum of “visual art,” VAO played an important role in raising the profile of photography as a growing dimension of contemporary art practice in Phnom Penh. Yet only one of the young photographers exhibited, Vandy Rattana (b. 1980), would continue afterward to seriously engage the medium in its conceptual artistic and documentary possibilities.

addition to his involvement with the Phnom Penh artist community and his role in Saklapel and VAO, Pich's patrons and his own articulate stance on his practice have been important factors in facilitating the artist's growing exposure in solo and group exhibitions in prominent international venues, inevitably drawing global interest in the development of a "contemporary art scene" in Cambodia with Pich as its frontrunner.

SVAY KEN

In attempting to place contemporary art along a spectrum or chronology, the question usually arises as to a precedent of modernism in the visual arts. It is tempting to place Svay Ken or Vann Nath, the so-called "naïve" painters of autobiography, history, and everyday life, as "modernist" practitioners, who, despite their senior standing, developed their painting practice contemporaneously with younger generations of artists. It is interesting to note that these two painters, respectively considered to be pioneering artists in different ways, were posthumously featured with Pich in highly prestigious international platforms for contemporary art. Svay, Pich, and photographer Vandy Rattana were featured in the 2009 exhibition *The Mekong* at the 6th *Asia Pacific Triennial* as the first artists from Cambodia to be included in the Australia-based triennial, and Vann Nath was curated into Pich's exhibition in *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012, also marking the first-time representation of Cambodian artists.

Given the fundamental issue of representation at the heart of curatorship and exhibitionary practices, familiar questions surrounding identity politics and cultural framings arise; such questions have structured debates surrounding the construction of regional artistic identity within the process of internationalization, as Mari Carmen Ramirez has described in the case of Latin American art. She notes the preponderant use of reductive tropes in the selection of particular works to represent a particular region, or imagination of a region, in exhibitions within the U.S, noting that in essence, "a regional version of identity was exchanged for access into the 'universal' community of modern art,"⁴⁵ echoing Muan's observation that symbols of memory could serve as markers of Cambodian identity and as the means through which these artists could gain access to the exhibitionary circuits of modern art.⁴⁶

While I do not wish to treat the works of Pich, Svay, or Nath in a reductive manner by associating them with a regional trope, the fact is that Cambodian artists have very rarely been exhibited in major international platforms, most notably in the biennial or triennial format, without being curated through the framework of art in response to the genocide, and subsequently representative of post-conflict subjectivity.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the issue of traumatic memory is without

⁴⁵ Ramirez, "Brokering Identities," 28.

⁴⁶ Muan, "Citing Angkor," 435, 439.

⁴⁷ The shift in this mode of representation followed a period in which any artistic expression of the Khmer Rouge episode in history was distinctively absent in works by Cambodian artists. Thompson attributes the post-conflict paradigm of representation in part to the 2000 Reyum exhibition, *Legacy of Absence: a Cambodian Story*, which took part in a larger U.S.-based project that commissioned artworks from various countries with histories of war and/or genocide: "The

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question a sincere concern for all of the artists discussed.⁴⁸ The most senior artist within this group, Svay Ken, devoted much of his painting to autobiographical narrative accounts (Figures 11 and 12), with honest depictions of historical and personal tribulation, yet his artistic productivity, experimentation, and development in subject matter (marking thematic and stylistic “periods” in a career span that lasted less than twenty years) is especially remarkable considering he began to paint at the age of sixty. For these reasons, Svay is credited by many in the Phnom Penh community as the father of contemporary art, thereby locating the origins of a particular artistic ethos and praxis in his person, supporting his attribution as the “first.”



Figure 11 (left): Svay Ken, *Weekly Cleaning at Royal Hotel*, 1995, oil on canvas, 20 × 25 ½ in. Courtesy of SA SA BASSAC. Figure 12 (right): Svay Ken, *Vietnamese Planes and Pol Pot Soldiers in Battle*, 1979, 1996, oil on canvas, 28 ½ × 51 ¼ in. Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art

Legacy of Absence Project had some role in opening the floodgates to representation of the Khmer Rouge period by Cambodian artists in Cambodia. Western tourists are no longer left wanting. To the contrary, the past decade has seen a veritable explosion of work on the Khmer Rouge theme. If Muan and Ly hesitated over the aesthetic, ethical and political implications of commissioning Khmer art on the genocide for an American-coordinated Shoah-commemoration-inspired project, they could not have foreseen the extent of the consequences of their gesture as Cambodia moved into the twenty-first century: the creation of an art market driven, at least in part, by production on the Khmer Rouge period. From artisanal billboards advertising thanatourism to carefully crafted autobiographical tableaux, the industry is booming.” Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember,” *Diacritics*, 86.

⁴⁸ Leang Seckon has spent his entire life in Cambodia, and in large part attributes his status as a true Cambodian contemporary artist to the fact of having been witness and survivor. Having left the country in his childhood, Pich is a member of the “1.5 generation” of diasporic Cambodians who retain deep memories, although perhaps not total clarity, of the environment of suffering and violence. Vann Nath is commemorated as Cambodia’s survivor-artist by merit of his role as the official painter at S-21.

Svay was born into a family of farmers in Takeo, and spent a short period of his youth in the monkhood before looking for work in Phnom Penh in 1955.⁴⁹ He found a job as a waiter at the Hotel Le Royal, where he worked for almost forty years in total, not including the period during which the Khmer Rouge forced him and his family to return to Takeo to labor in the fields. He began painting during his last years at the Hotel, and went from selling his paintings roadside next to Wat Phnom to being featured as the first Cambodian artist to be included at the Fukuoka Triennale in 1999, thus attaining international status as a contemporary artist.

Included in the *Visions of the Future* exhibition at Reyum in 2002, Svay may have stood out from the rest of the painters in terms of his technique, which posed a marked contrast to the romantic or surrealist aesthetic of other paintings in the exhibition. His status as a self-trained artist who painted the mundane, the everyday, and the autobiographical afforded him a degree of respect among a younger generation of artists, who were distinguishing themselves from the RUFA lineage. Svay Ken came to symbolize the idea of the “modern artist” expressed by the term *silpakar dammoep*, which can imply a modern sensibility attained through self-training outside an institution, a title which characterizes many of the rising contemporary artists in Cambodia in the last five years. An incredibly prolific painter, he was rumored to have completed as many as two thousand works from the time he began painting at the age of sixty. At the time during which his paintings began to acquire a following of collectors, his style stood apart from the romantic painterly aesthetic associated with the artists trained at RUFA and abroad in the 1980s and 1990s, and for a Western audience, Svay’s visual language was appealing in his raw application of bold outlines and vibrant colors. His engagement with history via direct visual retellings of his life stories began to garner appeal in the late 1990s when international curators and collectors were beginning to take an interest in a contemporary art scene in Cambodia.⁵⁰ Svay’s rigorous practice and Reyum’s 2001 exhibition and subsequent publication of his paintings in *Painted Stories: The Life of a Cambodian Family from 1941 to the Present* spoke to a period in which artistic expression as a form of reconciliation with the traumatic past was a fundamental component of development discourse. Alongside his biographical paintings, Svay also illustrated alternative forms of ethical narrative and moral instruction, such as in the 2008 *Sharing Knowledge* series (Figure 14).⁵¹ He also painted subjects typically perceived as mundane, capturing their objecthood in an embrace of their everyday aesthetic appeal, elevating them to the status of what might be considered urban vernacular ready-mades (Figure 13).

⁴⁹ A more extensive biography can be found in Svay Ken, *Painted Stories*.

⁵⁰ His first exhibition in Cambodia took place at the New Art Gallery in 1994. Subsequently his paintings were exhibited in local group shows such as *The Legacy of Absence* (Reyum, Phnom Penh, 2000), *Visions of the Future* (Reyum, Phnom Penh, 2002), and *Sharing Knowledge* (Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, Phnom Penh, 2008). Internationally he gained exposure through the First Fukuoka Triennale, Japan (1999) and *Forever Until Now* (10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong, 2008).

⁵¹ See *Svay Ken: Sharing Knowledge*.

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Figure 13: Works by Svay Ken, view of 'Things' exhibition at Java Café and Gallery in 2007. Photograph by the author.



Figure 14: Svay Ken, One who is rich and has abundant food but hides delicious food for himself is subject to ruin (from Sharing Knowledge series), 2008, oil on canvas. Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art. Image courtesy the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art.

One explanation for Svay's popularity has to do with his unique style of painting and his choice of subject matter, such as highly personal autobiographical scenes from memory and figures from everyday urban and rural life. His technique was set apart from the work of the Cambodian painters who had studied abroad within the Soviet-Eastern bloc, whose paintings likely appeared recognizably derivative of outdated European styles to international art collectors and curators. For this reason Svay Ken possessed what seemed to be a more unique modernist appeal, drawing comparisons with Richard Diebenkorn and David Hockney in terms of his brushwork and application of color.⁵² At the same time, in *Painted Stories* and other works, one sees recessive planes of perspective in tandem with axial spatial demarcations, which evokes the group formations and angular divisions used in 19th to 20th-century Cambodian Buddhist temple mural painting. These visual devices enhance the narrative strategies in Svay's painting while underscoring elements of both familiarity with and departures from Cambodian artistic traditions. The formal appeal of his paintings was one facet of a larger discursive engagement with the Cambodian person of Svay Ken. The perceived naïveté and honesty of his artworks, his dedication to the craft, and the appeal of his personality were formulated together to relate an artistic conception of "Cambodianness," which found a strong collector base and curatorial following. These perceptions subsequently earned him the titles of "grandfather of contemporary art," "the nation's father of modern art," and "artistic visionary and pioneer of Cambodian contemporary art."⁵³

Svay's *Sharing Knowledge* series was included in *The Mekong* group exhibition at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, along with Pich's sculptural works and a photographic series by Vandy. The *Sharing Knowledge* paintings depicted illustrations of Khmer proverbs drawn from religious and moral texts, with the meaning of these often orally-cited sayings animated through hand-painted text and a minimalistic tableau of characters. The selection of paintings shown were described by co-curator Russell Storer as a message for the future, while clearly responding to the past and the erasure of a moral foundation in society from which such teachings should continue to be spread.⁵⁴ Svay's artistic occupations thus demonstrate a care of the self that is enacted through collective concerns for the future. For Svay Ken, alongside his reputation as the painter of everyday life, an archivist of the present, we can locate his role as a forerunner in the archival impulse that would drive several younger artists who have recently gained acclaim in the international art world for their interest and methods in documenting current social issues and the changing landscape of the country.

Therefore, the fundamental "Cambodianness" of the painter has been discursively reinforced through the work performed by his paintings. His artworks - notably the *Sharing Knowledge* series - can be read as the artist's willingness to take on the burden of the future, in terms of moral education, in addition to the weight of the past, such as in *Painted Stories*. This serves as a counterpart to the reading that artists from developing countries must often bear the burden of self-representation through the visual negotiation of local histories for entry into global exhibitionary circuits. As such, Svay's technique of the self could be perceived as not for the self,

⁵² Blowitz, "Svay Ken."

⁵³ Gleeson, "Svay Ken (1933-2008)"; Hunt, "Emerging from the Shadow of War"; KEAP, "The Paintings of Svay Ken."

⁵⁴ Storer, "Svay Ken," 135.

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but for others. At the same time, his teachings through art still enact a care of the future self, according to popular Buddhist idioms: “I know very little about [Buddhist teachings], but I think I must share them with others. In Buddhist terms, we call it dhamma daana. Dhamma means ‘universal laws’ and daana means ‘sharing’. If you spread dhamma, you will be an intelligent person in your next life.”⁵⁵ He is thus often portrayed as the quintessential Cambodian contemporary artist, who bears the weight of ethical responsibility and education through his art. This subjectivity can be productively compared with that of fellow senior artist, Vann Nath.

VANN NATH

If his tableaux of torture scenes were to become icons of the genocide, the image of Vann Nath painting them in his prison studio became an icon in and of itself. In representing the genocide he represented art as a means of resistance, time and again resisting oblivion and co-optation by the powers that be. Even as his work was deemed to fall outside the category of “high art,” he was framed by an international community as the emblematic artist *en puissance*, a locus of autonomous thought, living proof of the empowerment art can bring. As painting, his work was more than documentation. It had been Vann Nath’s focussed self-mastery as a prisoner-painter in Tuol Sleng which had allowed him to escape execution. The post-1979 paintings rendered as much his determination to overcome as they did the torture experienced there.⁵⁶

In this passage Thompson alludes to the paradoxical relationship produced by the high standing of Vann Nath within the Cambodian artistic community and a published exchange between *dOCUMENTA (13)* curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Pich Sopheap in which she describes Vann’s paintings as *not* “high art.” The inclusion of Vann’s painting with Pich’s work in the 2012 Kassel exhibition thus produces a form of historical commentary, or representational “alter ego” in opposition to Pich’s modernist non-representational artwork.⁵⁷ In contrast with the integration of Cambodian artists in the Mekong exhibition at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, a more striking and somber effect was produced by the inclusion of a painting by Vann Nath within the exhibition space of Pich’s most recent sculptural work, a series of grid structures evoking Arte Povera fabrications. Christov-Bakargiev had developed a rapport with Pich over the previous months leading up to her visit to Phnom Penh in 2011, and documentation of their e-mail correspondence was included in a volume of the *dOCUMENTA (13)* catalog as well as a general catalogue of Pich’s work published by his New York gallery, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, in 2013. Revealed through excerpts are the hierarchical categories embedded in conceptions of contemporary art as such formulations are

⁵⁵ *Svay Ken: Sharing Knowledge*, 8.

⁵⁶ Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember Again,” longer unpublished version.

⁵⁷ Correspondence between curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and artist Pich Sopheap, reproduced in *dOCUMENTA (13)*. *The Logbook, Catalog 2/3*, 60-61. The painting by Vann Nath selected for inclusion is titled *Interrogation at the Kandal Pagoda* (2006), and is part of Pich’s personal collection.

disseminated through international exhibitionary platforms and in their accompanying curatorial texts.

Dear Sopheap, ... I have been thinking about our visit to Vann Nath and how moving that was. I think as artworks on their own his paintings are however not really “high art,” and it is therefore difficult for me to include his work in dOCUMENTA directly. I am wondering if by chance you would be interested in including a painting of his inside the space of your own presentation? [...] to have this complete opposite of your work, a sort of alter ego, embedded within a space of modernity as your “non-painting” paintings suggest could be weirdly interesting and generous too. A sort of contradiction in the space itself. What do you think? We could frame it as his own work, but hosted by you. Please feel very free to disagree.

Dear Carolyn, [...] In my mind, Vann Nath and Svay Ken are two very important artists of Cambodia. Both are well-known here but Svay Ken is much more popular with everyday collectors and his works has been shown in many countries and also in commercial galleries such as Java Café and Metahouse while Vann Nath’s work has received limited commercial success for obvious reasons. [...]

I think I understand when Vann Nath says he paints because he wants to tell his story and that what happened should not be forgotten. But for sure, he’s also interested in the knowledge of painting for its own sake too. He’s always very conscious of colors and lines, for example. So he looks up other artists as reference where Svay Ken, to my knowledge, doesn’t. Svay Ken is more intuitive and relied on his emotion in how he used colors. Vann Nath is interested in what makes a “good” painting. [...]

I have been thinking about Vann Nath’s work and I agree that his piece may fit well. [...] As an artist, I think not having had any “real” trauma, which in some ways left me very confused in the United States [sic]. I knew that I was “Khmer” as opposed to being “American” as I was always thinking and having dreams involving Cambodia but I couldn’t make works that people expected to see – “Where is death????” they would say. [...] What sculpture has given me is the ability to quiet most of these issues.⁵⁸

The core of the discussion surrounding Vann’s painting surrounds the notion of the “real” in terms of content and style. Pich’s use of quotation marks to express “real” trauma emphasizes that the powerful yet ephemeral traces of childhood memories prior to his departure from Cambodia are to be contrasted with the lived and persistent experience of suffering, of the responsibility of historical truth-telling with which Vann Nath continued to grapple until his death, and which Leang Seckon alluded to in his self-description as the first true Cambodian contemporary artist. Vann’s desire to illustrate his memories in the most direct manner, in an earnest style of realism, produced

⁵⁸ dOCUMENTA (13). *The Logbook*, Catalog 2/3, 60-61.

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for international curators the effect of relegating his painting to the margins of modernity.⁵⁹ Vann’s perseverance in pursuing the representational project, in a direct manner of personal and historical exposure vis-à-vis realism, and as a never-ending task in terms of constant artistic personal and technical training, distinguished his practice from that of the other artists discussed here, as Pich noted in his exchange with Christov-Bakargiev. However, the curator’s perception of his painting style as obsolete neglected the very urgency of the project at hand, which was to access the real – historical truth as construed through individual and collective experiences – at a time during which that very history was the nexus of contention in spectacularized processes of public reconciliation.⁶⁰

For local and international audiences, it is because of his identity as artist-survivor, regarded with some awe for his safekeeping by the Pol Pot regime (as one of eight to survive detention in notorious S-21 high school-turned-prison) because of his ability to paint, that Vann Nath has in some contexts been perceived as the foremost Cambodian artist. As Thompson points out, “His life literally depended upon his realistic painting skills.”⁶¹ Yet his committed perseverance in continuously refining the painterly illustration of his darkest memories until his passing in 2011 reveals a mindset shaped by two divergent trajectories of artistic formation (Figure 15).⁶² Prior to 1975, Nath had learned to paint from observation during his monkhood from the ages of seventeen to twenty-one, followed by enrollment in private painting courses and a subsequent apprenticeship, after which he began to paint professionally, receiving commissions for portraits, landscapes, movie posters, and large-scale panel paintings.⁶³ After 1975, the act of painting during his imprisonment was a form of coerced artistic labor, as he was directed by the regime to paint portraits of Pol Pot and other leaders, and subsequently the Vietnamese-backed regime of the PRK tasked him with illustrating nightmarish episodes of his imprisonment for the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. With the momentum of cultural restoration projects and the address of Khmer Rouge culpabilities with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Vann became more and more recognizable as a face for the notion of Cambodian reconciliation. Thompson notes that Vann gained international prominence through his role in Cambodian-French filmmaker Rithy Panh’s 2003 documentary film, *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, and “became the most visible representative of the victims, speaking through his painting and through the lens of Rithy Panh, and many other journalists, to the

⁵⁹ As critic Arthur Danto has described, the crisis in painting occurred when photography assumed the task of realism; in response, the work of modernism challenged modes of visual perception in order to effect a paradigmatic change in artistic representation. See Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*.

⁶⁰ Here I refer to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

⁶¹ Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember, Again,” longer unpublished version.

⁶² In a series of workshops conducted by Mexican artist Fernando Aceves Humana, a member of a Oaxaca-based collective that donated an etching press to the Royal University of Fine Arts in 2011, Vann continued to portray grim subject matter drawn from his memories of detention by the Pol Pot regime. In a visit to the studio in August 2011, I observed him run several prints through the etching press, regarding each print with a critical eye for formal imperfections, in search of the desired artistic rendering for the exhibition of prints to take place the following month (Figure 15).

⁶³ “Vann Nath,” *Vann Nath Tribute*, 104. The most extensive biography of Vann Nath can be found in his memoir, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait*.

international community searching for recognizable signs of memorialization.”⁶⁴

For Christov-Bakargiev to desire the presence of Vann’s haunting vision within Pich’s “space of modernity” is indicative of several things. One is the insistence on contextualizing work by an artist like Pich as representative of an “other” modernity, by pairing the abstract object with a signifying accompaniment, which can thus carry a specific burden of history to which the contemporary artwork can allude in an oblique manner. One can observe too Pich’s own iteration of Vann Nath’s artistic preoccupations, articulating the senior painter’s concerns with the formal qualities of the medium: “But for sure, he’s also interested in the knowledge of painting for its own sake too. . . . Vann Nath is interested in what makes a “good” painting.”⁶⁵ In insisting on seeing Vann’s painting as method and not just as representation, Pich described *Interrogation* as a “personal and significant work,” confessing, “It seems wrong for me to talk about how he paints instead of what he paints, but there is something very straightforward about this painting, in terms of color treatment, that is quite different from most other paintings.”⁶⁶ Pich is speaking of Vann as an artistic practitioner, resisting the perception of the artist as documentarian and naïve realist painter. In fact, Pich has been one of the primary advocates for Vann’s standing as Cambodia’s “first real painter,” emphasizing the seniority of the latter’s commitment to painting practice and in his exemplary role as a font of tolerance and spiritual wisdom.⁶⁷

Vann did experiment with other styles, such as surrealism, as with his work for *Visions of the Future*, but he is most celebrated for the direct portrayal of personal memories of the Khmer Rouge experience. His sacrifice of producing art for aesthetic pleasure in order to embrace what is difficult to portray and to look at has earned him a depth of respect from the community for what is considered his tantamount courage in this form of artistic work. Vann’s portraits of historical episodes reveal visual representations of agency and resistance, as Thompson argues,⁶⁸ exceeding



Figure 15: Vann Nath working with artist Fernando Aceves Humana on prints produced by RUEA’s first etching press, donated by La Buena Impresión Tequila Oaxaca. August 22, 2011. Photograph by the author.

⁶⁴ Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember, Again,” longer unpublished version.

⁶⁵ *dOCUMENTA (13). The Logbook, Catalog 2/3*, 60-61.

⁶⁶ Christov-Bakargiev, “Live like a Frog and Die like a Snake,” 11.

⁶⁷ Galligan, “Woven into History,” 137.

⁶⁸ In considering his subjectivity as an artist and as a survivor, Thompson characterizes this resistance as a form of Buddhist agency: “Vann Nath’s artistic power was profoundly Buddhist. His was a passive resistance of the most en-

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the act of documentation, and as Pich suggests, a mode of artistic practice committed to painting as method. Two paintings in particular are telling of the artist’s negotiation of self as subject within these tableaux of recollections from S-21 (Figures 16 and 17). As pictorial fields whose compositions seem more like architectural constructions, these paintings deliberately portray sophisticated spatial relationships connecting and containing forms and figures. Through these compositional devices, Vann thus enables a triangulation of vision through literal and figurative acts of mirroring in both *The Commandant* and *Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror*. The artist is at the nexus of intersecting gazes, the object of surveillance and forced labor, yet at the same time he inserts an enunciation of selfhood as artist and as witness, while attending to his own subjectivity through the act of looking at himself or at the object of his gaze. What Ly Boreth has termed the Khmer Rouge scopic regime is thus destabilized, as Vann upsets the hierarchy of vision and subjugation enacted by the regime.⁶⁹



Figure 16: Vann Nath, *The Commandant or Painting Pol Pot for Duch*, 1996, oil on canvas, 150 x 102 cm. Collection of Peter O'Neill. Photograph © Philippe Bataillard 2008, courtesy of Le Cercle des Amis de Vann Nath.

during sort. Like a master meditator, Vann Nath thoroughly controlled himself. And this self-mastery served to efface the ego, or perhaps more precisely put, to eliminate attachment to the self as a psycho-material entity” (Thompson, “Vann Nath”).

⁶⁹ See Ly, “Devastated Visions.”



Figure 17: Vann Nath, *Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror*, undated, oil on canvas. Collection of Katie de Tilly. Photograph © Philippe Bataillard 2008, courtesy of Le Cercle des Amis de Vann Nath.

This group of Cambodian-born artists is disparate in terms of their generational affiliations, biographical experiences, and modes of artistic formation, which respectively symbolize divergent micro- and metanarratives of history and art history: Leang Seckon as artist/activist and local pioneer of the collage medium; Vann Nath as ever-striving to perfect his painterly craft while persevering to illustrate the traumatic episodes of his Khmer Rouge detainment; Svay Ken as the painter of modern life vis-à-vis autobiography and his elevation of the urban vernacular; and Pich Sopheap's own modernist sculptural praxis and his embodiment of the transnational artist in the global contemporary art world. However, each has been considered a "first" in his own right, and the attributions of value that have placed them in these positions of esteem reflect criteria imbricated in historical Euro-American artistic discourses concerning modernist avant-gardes, while demonstrably resituated by local historical and social inflections. Ultimately, this undermines the notion of timelines as necessarily construing social and artistic meaning through tangible historical anchor points. At the same time, this illustrates their use within the project of historicization as a method of self-reflexive value. The discursive illuminations revealed through the construction of timelines undermine their function as a gauge of chronological firsts, yet provide a rich lens onto art worlds comprising diverse scales of production, enunciation, and reception.

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I have focused on this group as representative of a certain moment of transition in the Cambodian art world, in what seemed to be a point of convergence from around 2003 to 2010, when these artists gained a level of international exposure through various platforms of reception, including art exhibitions, film, art writing, autobiographical publication, and scholarly work. A shift in the discursive regime and representation of “Cambodian contemporary art” was effected in large part through the profiles of these artists and readings of their artworks. Art became increasingly enmeshed in narratives produced not only through preceding frameworks of memory, history, and rebuilding, but of the stories and relationships that the materiality of the object and the various dimensions of individual artistic praxis held in relationship to the artists and to Cambodian society. Such connections were often drawn through the language of being modern, modernist, and/or contemporary. In the absence of a comprehensive historical narrative of Cambodian modern art, these terms overlapped and found both dissonance and resonance in describing the art world of Phnom Penh at that point in time, ultimately demonstrating how the meaning of “contemporary” by necessity took on different valences. The attribution of being the “first” simultaneously situates concepts of modernism, modernity, and contemporaneity in time and place, illustrating the necessity of contextualizing biographies, material approaches, and ideas about community to understand what could be considered ultimately a vital interlude in the social history of art in Cambodia.

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ABSTRACT*“The First’ Cambodian Contemporary Artist”*

Pamela N. Corey

Given the recent attention to Cambodian contemporary art as one of the latest phenomena to expand the perimeters of the global art world, this essay considers the historicization of “the first Cambodian contemporary artist.” By analyzing the artworks produced by and the discourses surrounding Leang Seckon (b. 1974), Pich Sopheap (b. 1971), Svay Ken (1933-2008), and Vann Nath (1946-2011), this article suggests that these four particular artists were integral to a shift in the critical regime of representation of “Cambodian contemporary art” from roughly 2003 to 2010. I focus on this group as representative of a certain moment of transition, when these artists gained a level of international exposure through various platforms of reception, including art exhibitions, film, art writing, autobiographical publication, and scholarly work. Tracing the diverse criteria through which each of them came to represent “the first Cambodian contemporary artist” reveals the extent to which these artists were at the core of expanding discourses on aesthetics, biography, community, history, and oscillating attributions of being modern/contemporary.

RÉSUMÉ*“Le ‘premier’ artiste contemporain cambodgien”*

Pamela N. Corey

L’intérêt nouvellement porté à l’art contemporain cambodgien, positionne celui-ci comme l’un des derniers phénomènes permettant d’élargir le périmètre du monde de l’art global. Cet essai relate l’historicisation du “Premier artiste contemporain cambodgien”. Partant de l’analyse des œuvres de Leang Seckon (1974~), Pich Sopheap (1971~), Svay Ken (1933-2008), et Vann Nath (1946-2011), ainsi que des discours les entourant, cet article démontre à quel point ces quatre artistes ont été au cœur du bouleversement d’un régime critique de représentation de “l’art contemporain cambodgien”, entre 2003 et 2010. Je porte une particulière attention à ce groupe, comme représentatif d’un certain moment de transition pendant lequel ces artistes ont atteint une reconnaissance internationale à travers différents modes de réception, notamment au fil d’expositions, films, essais artistiques, publications autobiographiques, et recherche académique. Retracer les différents critères selon lesquels chacun d’eux fut amené à représenter “le premier artiste contemporain cambodgien”, révèle l’importance de ces artistes dans le développement des discours portant sur l’esthétique, la biographie, la communauté et l’histoire ainsi que les oscillations de l’être moderne / contemporain.

សង្ខេប

ខ្មែរ "ទីមួយ" ដែលប្រឡូកក្នុងសិល្បៈបច្ចុប្បន្ន

Pamela N. Corey

បរិបទទូទៅនៅទីនេះ គឺប្រទេសកម្ពុជាដែលទើបនឹងចាប់អារម្មណ៍ទៅលើសិល្បៈបច្ចុប្បន្ន ជម្រុញឲ្យវិស័យនេះវាតទីជំនួញទៅលើលោក។ សំណេរនេះជាការតាមដានការករកើត "សិល្បករខ្មែរទីមួយ ក្នុងវិស័យសិល្បៈបច្ចុប្បន្ន" ដោយចាប់ផ្តើមវិភាគលើស្នាដៃសិល្បករបួននាក់ពោលគឺលាង ស៊ីកន (១៩៧៤-), ពេជ្រ សុភាព (១៩៧១-), ស្វាយ កេន (១៩៧៣-២០០៨), វណ្ណ ណេត (១៩៤៦-២០១១)។ គឺអ្នកទាំងនេះហើយ ដែលនាំអាទិ៍ធ្វើឲ្យការយល់ពីសិល្បៈដែលធ្លាប់មានពីមុនមក មានការកម្រើករំជួលនៅចន្លោះឆ្នាំ ២០០៣ និង២០១០។ ខ្ញុំមើលទៅឃើញថា នាំមុខចរន្តសិល្បៈថ្មីក្នុងពេលមួយដែលអន្តរជាតិចាប់ផ្តើមទទួលស្គាល់តាមរយៈទស្សនាពីរណ៍, ភាពយន្ត, ស្នាដៃបង្កើតនានា, សំណេរពីជីវិតផ្ទាល់ខ្លួនព្រមទាំងការស្រាវជ្រាវ។ ពេលព្យាយាមតាមដានថាម្នាក់ៗនោះចាត់ទុកអ្វីជាគន្លឹះទ្វារបើកទៅរកស្ថានភាពជា "សិល្បករខ្មែរទីមួយ ក្នុងសិល្បៈបច្ចុប្បន្ន" យើងនឹងឃើញពីសារសំខាន់នៃការយល់ឃើញពិចារណាអំពីសោកណភាព, អំពីប្រវត្តិរូប, អំពីសហគមន៍និងប្រវត្តិផ្ទាល់ខ្លួន ហើយទីបំផុតទៅគឺការអន្ទោលទៅមករវាងស្ថានភាពជាមនុស្សសម័យថ្មី/ មនុស្សបច្ចុប្បន្ន។