

A NEW NAGA RISING: CAMBODIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

Darryl Collins

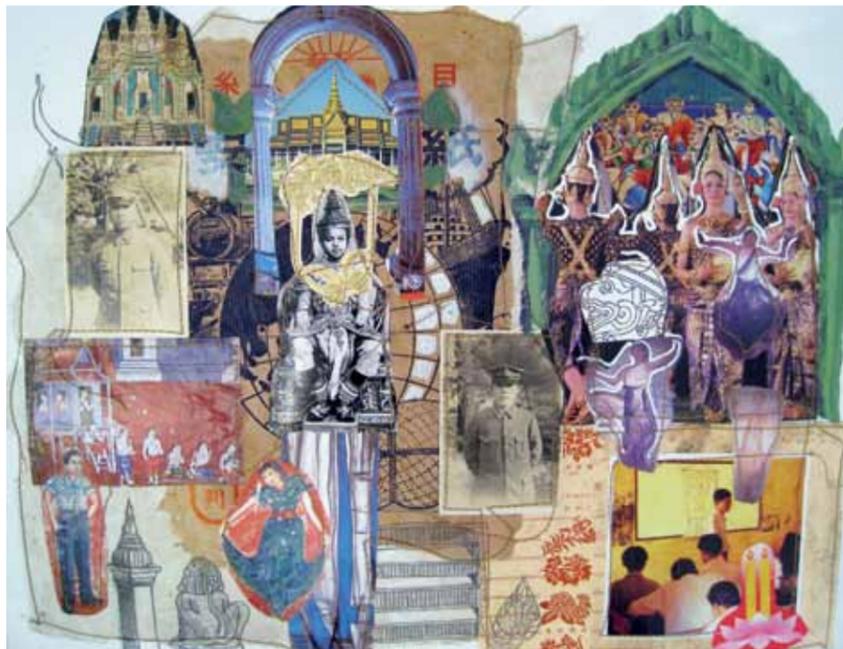
By all measures, contemporary art in Cambodia is a young and vibrant offspring, rising Naga-like from the chaos of the 70s and 80s. A first glimpse was provided by New Art Gallery (now under new management), whose inaugural exhibition 'New Style for a New Subject' was held in January 1994, featuring self-taught artist Svay Ken (1933–2008). Within five years, Svay was to be one of the first internationally recognised Cambodian artists featured in the prestigious Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, Japan.

Whether by neglect or intention, there are few avid Cambodian collectors of contemporary art works and little government interest shown in young emerging artists, with no public museum or national gallery spaces dedicated to forming permanent collections. Collectors who purchase from local exhibition spaces tend to belong to the international expatriate community and important modern works of art inevitably leave the country when members return to their countries of origin. The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) is a leading institutional collector of contemporary Cambodian art, as is the Queensland Art Gallery through the on-going 'Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art' – the most recent showing included four Khmer artists (Svay Ken, Rithy Panh, Vandy Rattana and Sopheap Pich). Hong Kong collectors also snap up Cambodian works from commercial galleries.

Acting as a counterpoise to the neighbouring popular Cambodian painting shops in 'Art Street', Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture (established 1998), comprising a gallery and research centre, was founded by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (1964–2005). Several survey shows titled 'Visions of the Future' and 'Through Our Eyes' featured contemporary artists; while 'Painted Stories' was devoted to paternal figure, Svay Ken. Svay was at every show in Phnom Penh he could manage to attend: first with his walking stick and at his last public appearance in a wheelchair at the Bophana Centre tribute exhibition. His quiet presence offered assurance to countless artists from a new generation. 'Sharing Knowledge' was dedicated to his ambition – to record his memories of what his friend Dana Langlois fitfully dubbed, 'a life less ordinary.'

Java Arts (established 2000) by Dana Langlois, has proved to be an important venue for both emerging and established Khmer artists.

SOLDIERS ARRIVE AT THE PALACE, 2010, LEANG SECKON, COLLAGE, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER. IMAGE © COURTESY THE ARTIST



Dana recently observed that local artists are growing in stature. In the past she nurtured emerging artists by covering exhibition costs and by not charging commission but since 2008 her prices reflect commercial interests, the quality of mature artists' work and an added influx of international buyers. A number of Phnom Penh curators and gallery owners now support artists on contract.

Popil Gallery (now closed) with founding photographer-director, Stéphane Janin opened its doors in 2005 to provide access to photography through classes, an elegant gallery and reference library space for interested gallery goers. Photography as a medium with immediacy quickly found favour with young Cambodian artists and an important component of Janin's legacy are members of the Sa Sa (Stiev Silapak) group. Robert Turnbull writing for the *New York Times* in June 2009 reported on the history of recent photographers in an article entitled 'Cambodians Take Back the Lens'. He noted: "The other significant change has been the advent of photo festivals. Following the Angkor Photography Festival in Siem Reap, PhotoPhnomPenh was inaugurated in November 2008."

The VAO or Visual Arts Open was inaugurated in 2006. Besides showcasing artists throughout the capital, this event, which developed links

with the 2008 Architecture+Urban Design month and is involved with ecological issues in relation to development projects, is now a lively multifaceted arts event.

Artist Leang Seckon has commented that artists are 'growing' and finding their way with increasing experience. He noted that the interest shown by international collectors contributes to a rise in professional standards and observed that Cambodia is still 'a sometimes exciting taste' for visiting collectors of contemporary art. Seckon is an extremely committed artist who is concerned for the fragile balance between the past, development and the environment. Since 2006 he has instigated several incarnations of the 'The Rubbish Project' with Fleur Bourgeois Smith, featuring everything from creative fashion (apparel created from recycled plastic), to a highly acclaimed installation of a 225 m long Naga serpent which 'appeared' in the Siem Reap river to herald World Water Day in 2008.

A more recent explosion of Southeast Asian and international art contacts, electronic and print media, artists' networks and art exchanges has resulted in overseas art exhibitions and enabled Cambodian artists to visit Europe, Japan, the United Kingdom, United States, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong, propelling local artists into the international arts arena. In January

2010 Michelle Vachon, arts journalist for the *Cambodia Daily* reported: "Acclaimed contemporary artist Leang Seckon shipped his latest series of art works to London ... for a one-man show... at Rossi & Rossi, a gallery specializing in Himalayan and Asian art located in London's fashionable Mayfair district." The show opened on March 30 and was a spectacular success. Marine Ky has returned from Singapore where 'theatres on the bay' hosted her ambitious installation 'L'Épiderme de la Terre & Mékong (Peace)' - an Esplanade Commission exhibited during March-April 2011 in the entrance concourse.

In May 2011, an exhibition at Java Cafe & Gallery celebrated the work of Meas Sokhorn, an artist focusing on art produced from discarded possessions simply titled 'Pore'. 'Pore', as Natalie Pace, independent curator has noted: "refers to the production of sweat during physical labour; the works acknowledge the declining ability of craftsmanship to provide a sustainable livelihood due to a reduction in demand and motivation ... 'Pore' is a lament to the creativity and physicality of diminished craftsmanship."

In an earlier exhibition, an installation by Khorn at Java entitled 'Contemporary Art Museum' (2010) was created "to highlight the fact that Cambodia has no contemporary art museum despite the fact there are a number of artists creating work now". He continued: "We lack such a place, we're showing in shops and galleries, we need it because we are limited to small pieces."

Private galleries are mushrooming in the capital and elsewhere: an obviously healthy sign for the growth of contemporary arts in all fields. During June 2011 the crop included new spaces at 'Romee' (Phare Ponleu Selpak: arts & performance based in Battambang) and 'Teo+Namfah Gallery', as well as the new Sa Sa Bassac art space, which opened in Phnom Penh on the first floor of a 50s apartment building at a prime location near the National Museum of Cambodia and within sight of the Royal Palace.

Siem Reap, the city adjacent to the Angkor temple complex, has an important growing arts community with contemporary young Cambodian artists' works exhibited in the Arts Lounge at Hotel de la Paix and the newer Thev Gallery under the curatorship of Sasha Constable. Occasional shows of work by young Cambodian photographers are held at John McDermott galleries. The less frenetic life style and pleasant surroundings coupled with the influx of international tourists has given the retro epithet 'cool' to describe some

THOAMADA (17 MAY - 12 JUNE, 2011), VUTH LYNO, INSTALLATION VIEW. IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SA SA BASSAC.



of these architectural forays into new gallery spaces in Siem Reap.

There is a growing tendency for young artists to use installation and performance works to comment on the contrasting past and present, international affiliations throughout Southeast Asia, Cambodian society, disadvantaged groups, heritage and development issues. Discussing the preoccupations of the art collective Stiev Selapak, Francesca Sonara, a graduate from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, NY, has written:

"At the very least, *Stiev Selapak* and the increasing number of concerned and inspired young artists engaging in contemporary practices are creating a record of the community threatened by the New Phnom Penh. Even if this city, like so many others, has lost itself, their art has inherited it and will bear the burden of sharing this story with the world and the increasingly sterile future." ('Stiev Selapak: Retelling Cambodia's Story', posted online at: <http://Interventionsjournal.net>, September 2011).

Erin Gleeson, curator and consultant, said in 'The Presence of the Past: Contemporary Art from Cambodia' for the International Lecture Series, 6th Annual Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2009):

"Deeply affected by war's legacy of absence, the artists express a sense of obligation to preserving and continuing a national and cultural identity. Survivors are often incredibly adaptable and creative with little means. This is exemplified by generations of Cambodians and most recently by a great resourcefulness seen in contemporary art practices."

During an interview in Phnom Penh, she confided that many resident Cambodian artists still suffer from under-exposure in the international market, in the main due to the paucity of documentation outside the country. This should be remedied by the publication of 'Art Watch: Contemporary Art from Cambodia' to be released in mid-2012 authored by Erin with detailed illustrated entries and sponsored by Monique Burger of the Burger Collection.

The rapidly approaching New York, NY salute *Seasons of Cambodia* festival planned for the spring of 2013 will also surely promote co-development of artist, gallery and performance, reappraisals and a whole new international critical eye for what will certainly be an amazing debut – the Naga should certainly rise to the occasion.

Darryl Collins first journeyed to Cambodia in 1994 with a team from the National Gallery of Australia, to assist the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. He has lectured at the Department of Archaeology, Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh and resides in Siem Reap since 2007, where, together with architect, Hok Sokol, he has relocated and restored a number of traditional Khmer wooden houses.

SELECT ARTS WEBSITES IN CAMBODIA:

Phnom Penh
<http://www.canbypublications.com/phnompenh/ppsouven.htm>
<http://www.ccf-cambodge.org/index.php?q=km>
<http://www.javaarts.org>
<http://www.meta-house.com>
<http://www.reyum.org>
http://www.phareps.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=65&Itemid=201&lang=en
<http://www.sasaart.info>
<http://sasabassac.com/about.htm>
<http://www.teonamfahgallery.com/>
Siem Reap
<http://www.canbypublications.com/siemreap/srshopping.htm>
<http://www.the1961.com/>
http://www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com/en/arts_lounge/
<http://www.asiaphotos.net/>