

The rebuilding of Cambodian art

Contemporary artists are gaining recognition on the international scene

For two weeks in April and May 2013 New York City will play host to a festival embracing Cambodian arts. More than 100 participants are due to travel from Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, to attend a series of lectures, exhibitions and performances as part of Seasons of Cambodia, sponsored by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, among others.

In terms of visual art, exhibitions of antiquities, and contemporary group shows and installations are planned for around a dozen spaces ranging from small galleries on Manhattan's West Side to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. The organisers expect around 20 Cambodian artists' work to be shown.

Though it has only recently stepped onto the world stage, this small Southeast Asian country has made considerable headway in the past few years. Cambodian art was virtually unknown until around a decade ago when a handful of international curators and commentators turned their gaze its way.

For its ground-breaking 2009 show "Forever Until Now" at 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong Kong, 14 artists spanning three generations were invited to display painting, sculpture, film and photography for what was the first comprehensive group show of Cambodian art in the region.

At the Singapore Art Museum, curators Charlotte Queck and Patricia Levasseur were instrumental in acquiring more than 20 works of Cambodian art over the past few years, while recent editions of Art Stage Singapore and this year's Singapore Biennale have given prominence to Cambodian work. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the artistic director of Documenta 13 is poised to include a major Cambodian artist in the five-yearly Kassel event—the first in its 56-year history.

Pich Sopheap is one of two Phnom Penh-based artists who have shot to prominence over the past decade. A graduate of the University of Massachusetts who later attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Pich's formal education in the west and articulate manner makes him particularly attractive to gallery owners and curators.

A 2004 commission for a Saudi Arabian university netted Pich \$50,000, a record for a Cambodian artist. He was the first to have his work accepted by the Singapore Art Museum, which in January exhibited *Compound*, 2011, as part of the city's biennale. This bamboo and rattan construction drew particular attention from the *New York Times*. Accordingly, Pich has made a big impact on the US, where he is represented by Tyler Rollins, one of only a handful of galleries in New York to specialise in Southeast Asian art. Pich's work can be seen at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum until 23 October, at Rollins' gallery from 3 November and at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle from 10 November.

Political history

Growing up under the Khmer Rouge regime, Pich's work contains references to the disturbing events of that period. A series of broken Buddha heads in rattan alludes to sheltering with his mother in a pagoda that was close to a killing field. *Raft*, 2009, appears to depict a large shell casing and the detritus of war.

But the power of Pich's use of metaphor lies in the tension between the abstract and representational. According to Pich: "Cambodian artists are sometimes expected to be literal, to dramatise the suffering of the nation. I want my art to work to transcend the baggage of Cambodia, to work on a more intuitive level."

The other artist to gain international recognition is **Leang Seckon**. In 2010 Rossi & Rossi invited him to their London gallery to present 20

mixed media pieces in what became a sell-out show. Quirky and highly personal in content but sophisticated in execution, Leang's complex installations and collages use a variety of materials glued, embroidered or stitched together.

Among them was *Heavy Skirt*, 2009, a reference to the clothing his mother wore during pregnancy. Within the piece, soldiers are assembled from the paraphernalia of Cambodia's numerous wars—French rifles, US helmets and even Khmer Rouge shoes made from rubber tires.

Leang was also the first Cambodian artist to turn his attention to the environment with the "Rubbish Project", an arts movement he founded with Fleur Bourgeois Smith in 2006. The paintings Leang presented at Art Stage this year addressed loss of habitat, including his own. Developers drained a lake in Phnom Penh where Leang had a studio, but rather than provoke the authorities, his response was to celebrate the lake's natural life. Water is a recurring motif in his work: as a child Leang believes he drank water from rivers polluted with DDT from American bombers.

Fourteen years ago the Khmer Rouge, the Maoist revolutionaries who tried to destroy the traditional arts during their four years in power, were still an active force in Cambodia. The artists to emerge after the end of hostilities in the late 1990s were less concerned with aesthetics than survival, which meant embracing commercial activity, in particular tourism.

At the resuscitated Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) artists painted traditional *apsara* dancers and moonlit temples. Oils romanticising court life under 13th-century Khmer kings could

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be bought for a few hundred dollars in a clutch of galleries lining the other side of the road.

In 1998 RUFA initiated tentative reforms. Ly Daravuth and the late Ingrid Muan of the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture developed a curriculum for art students to pitch their work at an international level. Today RUFA's new director, Bong Sovath, is slowly raising the level of training by engaging with international academia and teaching the language skills that enable Cambodians to apply for scholarships abroad.

That being the extent of government involvement, many artists are self-taught or enrol with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other bodies. In Phnom Penh, the Reyum institute began art classes for young children. Phare Ponleu Selpak, an art school in Battambang founded by a French artist in the 1990s who had taught art in a refugee camp, was set up largely to help students from poor villages in the area.

Rising art scene

The return of Cambodian artists Pich, **Piersath Chath** and **Em Riem** from the US and France was a major catalyst in the growth of the Cambodian art scene. Backed by the American gallerist Dana Langlois, Pich and artist **Linda Saphan** launched Sala ArtSpace in 2006 to host a group show of 16 painters and three photographers in nine galleries around the capital—the first in a series of group shows in Cambodia.

Still, most exhibition spaces are managed by foreigners, reflecting the large presence of international NGOs in Cambodia, not to mention the funding realities of a culture ministry with scant resources for cultural development.

Since 1992, the French government's Centre

Culturel français Cambodge (CCF) and its head of cultural services, Kor Borin, has used its sizeable gallery on Phnom Penh's Street 184 to mount professionally curated shows. Meta House Phnom Penh, the German-Cambodian cultural centre run by Nico Mesterham, supplements exhibitions with lectures and events and recently opened a new site on Sothearos Boulevard to facilitate projects with established and undiscovered talents under the curatorial direction of Lydia Parusol.

Langlois remains a major player on the Cambodian art scene. Her Java Café and Gallery was the first to provide moral support and financial help to increasing numbers of artists showing potential; Langlois will be the visual arts curator for Seasons of Cambodia.

At Java, she regularly launched vernissages and through curator Christine Cibert organised unprecedented exchanges between Cambodian and Vietnamese artists, accompanied by roundtable discussions on the market and political issues. Conscious of a vacuum in conservation and research, Langlois is donating a ten-year archive of Cambodian art to the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh and Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong.

New supporters

The awareness of a nascent market has attracted new investors. In May, Brad Gordon, the owner of Teo and Namfah Gallery in Bangkok, opened a gallery with the same name on Street 214 and is currently working with two Cambodian artists, **Denis Min-Kim** and **Dina Chan**. While adopting a wait-and-see approach, he expects Cambodians to "feature more and more on the world stage and attract more collectors."

Minneapolis-born Erin Gleeson moved to Cambodia on a Humphrey-Fulbright fellowship in 2002. An independent teacher and curator, she founded a gallery and resource center, Sa Sa Bassac, on Sothearos Boulevard opposite Phnom Penh's National Museum. While Sa Sa Bassac focuses on solo shows by emerging and established local artists, it is linked to Sa Sa Art Projects (located just down the river on the same street), an experimental, non-commercial space founded in 2009 by photographer **Vandy Rattana** and five other Cambodian artists. Significantly, the original Sa Sa is the first of Phnom Penh's galleries to be managed by Cambodians.

Gleeson, who was the curator of the 2009 Chancery Lane show and is the author of a forthcoming book on Cambodian artists, works closely with 12 artists. She is energising Cambodia's rapidly expanding art scene with lectures and events and has established with the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center the Cambodian Visual Art Archive (CVAA) as a research tool for the increasing number of people investigating visual art in Southeast Asia.

The supportive environment provided by Gleeson, Langlois and Saphan, among others, has been the catalyst for a number of private sector initiatives. Today Cambodian artists such as **Than Sok**, **Yim Maline** and **Svay Sareth**, are reaching out into new territory that includes conceptual work negotiated in a wide variety of media.

For those working in traditional idioms, the late painter **Svay Ken** still serves as a role model. One of the first Cambodians to be shown in Singapore, along with **Chhim Sotthy**, Leang and **Suos Sodavy**, his paintings of everyday objects have been labelled "naïve" but embody the essence of Cambodian life and the tenacity of its spirit. Something of his style has been kept alive by his granddaughter **Ok Sop Chhy**.

Controversial issues such as poverty, corruption, sovereignty and the loss of cultural heritage are recurring themes. **Khenn Chanthas**' 1990 painting, *Economy Government*, which pits



wealthy government officials against depictions of poverty, caused jitters in diplomatic circles. In 2001 the Canadian government tried to ban the work from being exhibited.

The legacy of Pol Pot

Dealing with Pol Pot's genocide in artistic terms is a subject of intense debate, given the pressures within Cambodia to face up to the past and the often prying interest from abroad. The painter **Vann Nath**, who died in September, was one of only seven survivors; 20,000 were killed at Tuol Sleng torture centre, a former high school known as S-21. His depictions of the brutality inflicted there constitute an unparalleled first-hand account of genocide and as such he commands a unique position among Cambodia's artists.

Though better known as a designer of furniture and quirky *objets d'art*, Em famously reimaged mug shots of S-21 victims. A Cambodian-born

artist trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in St Etienne between 2002 and 2009, Em has restored victims' identity (and dignity) by imagining them as normal members of society, beyond their context as prisoners.

The same imagery resonates with the current generation. **Khvay Samrang**'s slide show *Reminder*, 2008, featuring his students posed with handwritten name tags around their necks, makes an obvious reference to S-21 and protests the fact (little known outside Cambodia) that the Khmer Rouge era, until very recently, had been removed from the national education syllabus.

The consensus today, however, is that Cambodian artists no longer want to live in the spirit of that era and to maintain demand for Khmer Rouge-related work only serves to deflect the focus from the country's more pressing problems.

Piersath uses art to reconnect spiritually with lost family members. An empathy with those who suffer informs his work, exemplified in his signature expressionist portraits, not to mention his more recent process related work, which deploys new narratives with collages of current news media, advertising and photography.

Min-Kim's Chinese ink drawings of elderly Cambodian survivors of the genocide threw a welcome spotlight on this overlooked minority and the burden of memory they carry. His recent paintings, however, reflect a preoccupation with the tensions of the kick-boxing ring. Cambodia's most prominent female artist, **Oeur Sokumtey** attaches ironic, pithy captions to her work, which explores romantic relationships with startling frankness. The sexuality, role play and deception of her 2011 show, "Love, Lust and Loathing", has invited comparisons with Paula Rego. Other female painters gaining a name include Yim Maline and **Kho Touch**.

Meas Sokhorn's 2010 video *The Hawks Song*

Em prepares a bird nest chair; Min-Kim, *Fight Scene No. 4*, 2011 (centre); Leang, *The Reputation of a Good Person Lives On*, 2011

was presented at the Melbourne International Arts festival in 2011. Leang often uses found objects as metaphors: his bicycle stuck in concrete was an allusion to Cambodia's erosion of civil liberties, while his barbed wire sculptures provided commentary on the new Cambodian bourgeoisie and their use of barbed wire both outside and inside their homes.

All this work has generated considerable excitement over the past few years but at the same time makes Cambodian art difficult to categorise. One of the few trends linking much of this work is the ingenious use of cheap materials. Pich's bamboo, Khvay's use of human hair collected at barber shops, **Tith Kanitha**'s wire and mosquito nets or Than Sok's use of incense sticks are all examples. The other factor uniting

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this work is, paradoxically, its extraordinary diversity.

Of the more experimental artists, Khvay's *Untitled*, 2011, for example, documents the more ominous changes affecting Phnom Penh, among the most egregious being the filling in of the public lakes and the displacement of the people to make land available for development. According to Gleeson: "With subtlety and humour, Khvay uses art to document and question cultural habits and conditions surrounding him."

But opinions differ on how to promote this work. "Prices have to ascend if artists are going to enjoy more resources," says Langlois. "But presenting Cambodians as hot new artists won't necessarily help their careers. Very few Cambodians have even a cursory understanding

of the global art market, so their promotion on the international scene requires sensitivity to the context and a different kind of strategy."

The current consensus is that given Cambodia's tragic recent history and its retiring character, emotional and educational support should precede commercial considerations. The result is that artists are often indulged, while the written rhetoric suggests a nascent art market that is trying to confer on itself a certain legitimacy. But if some artists won't stand up to international scrutiny, it can't help that Cambodia lacks a culture of art criticism. The foreign press is invariably supportive, as are a handful of bloggers and increasing numbers of curators visiting Cambodia. Rarely is anyone negative about the work.

"There are several factors making art criticism less appropriate here than in the west," says Parusol. "Cambodian art has yet to attain the standardisation and international recognition that is usually the prerequisite for such developments. Cambodian culture is strongly linked to hierarchy, so to criticise something is often to lose face."

Local collectors

Although there are a handful of serious collectors of Cambodian art abroad, the collector base is weak at home. There is little of the interest shown in, say, India, where the Tata group (a conglomerate company) has continued a tradition of arts patronage formerly undertaken by royal families. In Cambodia such patronage ended with the demise of royal power in 1970, while the new breed of political and business oligarchs show little interest in contemporary art.

Vuth Lyvo and **Khin Muoy** (widow of **Khin You**, an important but little known painter from the 1970s) are among the handful of occasional local collectors. A number of expats with longstanding connections to Cambodia have built up collections usually revolving around big name artists

Pich Sopheap with his bamboo and rattan constructions

such as Svay Ken, Pich Sopheap, Leang Seckon and Vandy Rattana. Em Riem, who has exhibited in France, Spain and the US, has an unlikely collector in the form of Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone.

In what is becoming a stronger professional relationship between artist and art dealer, gallery owners looking for a return on their investments have begun formal contractual arrangements with a handful of top artists. The prices are edging up, although the pay gap is widening. Pich's work fetches five figures inside Cambodia, as in New York, but the vast majority of Cambodian work sells for well under \$1,000.

It's a structure of support that varies from looking after an artist's entire output to as little as one exhibition. "In an ideal world they can then stay in their sacred space to focus on their work, while I can deal with the nitty gritty," says Langlois, who represents a handful of artists but has shown the work of at least 80.

If the art world in Cambodia is still far from being market-driven, there's good reason. "It is important that artists have strong platforms at home and don't need to depend on far-away systems," says Gleeson. "The exciting art we are seeing is born out of the unique set of circumstances that is Cambodia today. The view that this art is neither ready nor good enough is one that prioritises the market as validation over an investigation of and support for what is."

The next few years look promising. Gleeson is involved in an exhibition of Cambodian art that travels from Berlin to Stuttgart between October 2012 and January 2013, courtesy of Ifa Gallery. Parusol will be working with the Heinrich Böll Foundation as curator for a Myanmar-Cambodia art exchange, also due to open in Berlin. She has also been assigned a research project on contemporary Cambodian art by London's Tate. ■ **Robert Turnbull**

