



All images: courtesy of 10 Chancery Lane Gallery

▲
SOPHEAP PICH
Cycle 2, 2008
Rattan, steel wire
205 x 131 x 34 cm
Edition: 2 of 3, Edition of 3

CAMBODIAN ART: OPENING THE BOX

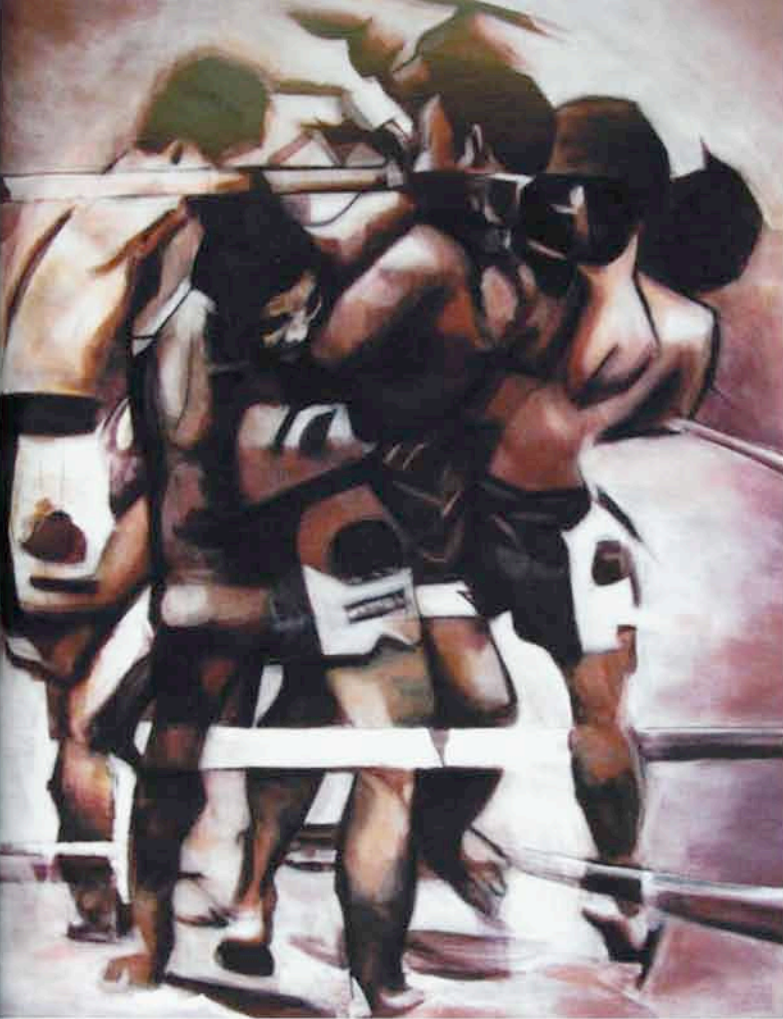
Jill Wong

Take a look at Hong Kong's contemporary art scene and one will surely be impressed by the extensive collection of Chinese works wooing international collectors. However, Hong Kong's role as a hub for Chinese contemporary art has prompted criticism due to the lack of attention paid by galleries to works from other Asian countries. While interest is slowly picking up—with an increasing number of works from Vietnam, India and Southeast Asia carried by several galleries in Soho—exhibitions of non-Chinese contemporary Asian art still proves to be a rare find in the Special Administrative Region.

That is why the exhibition *Forever Until Now: Contemporary Art from Cambodia* (12 February – 14 March 2009) at 10 Chancery Lane Gallery

promises to be as “groundbreaking” as the works—including painting, sculpture, film and photography – that it brings together. The 14 exhibiting artists are Svay Ken, Vann Nath, Duong Saree, Em Satya, Rithy Panh, Pich Sopheap, Leang Seckon, Dennis Min-Kim, Vandy Rattana, Khvay Samnang, Chan Dany, Phe Sophom, Thann Sok and Sorn Setpheap.

Katie de Tilly, director and founder of 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, says, “Cambodian art is just emerging and I feel there’s a need for documentation. I went to Cambodia and checked out the art scene there last June and met curator Erin Gleeson who helped me put together the show. I met the artists and made contact with them and realized somebody should document their



▲
DENNIS MIN-KIM
Duel 1, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 180 cm



▲
THANN SOK
Ktome Neak Ta, 2008
Incense sticks

progress and emergence in contemporary art and so I decided to do this exhibition.

“Nobody has ever shown Cambodian art in Hong Kong. We’re doing this as a survey exhibition to see what is happening in Cambodia. We’re very interested in working with artists through the historical process of the emergence of their contemporary art scene.”

The 14 artists span three generations, with the youngest being Sorn Setpheap, aged 21, and the oldest Svay Ken, widely known as the grandfather of contemporary art in Cambodia, who passed away in December 2008 at age 76.

Phnom Penh-based curator Erin Gleeson says, “A couple of the older artists work with traditional forms, and two of the younger artists (Duong Saree and her student Chan Dany) work with traditional forms. But they’re really innovating the form and their work is quite radical in the context of Cambodia.

“The youngest generation has no direct experience of colonial times or the Khmer Rouge other than stories from their parents or records like those created by their elders. As in any society, each generation has a different experience of their culture as it changes over time. Yet regardless of change, certain perceptions remain shared, as seen in this exhibition.”

That shared perception described by Gleeson is seen in Khvay Samnang’s *Remember*, a slide show of portraits of his students who agreed to pose for the project, a grim reminder of the mug-shots from S-21, or Tuol Sleng, a former high school that became a torture centre under the Khmer Rouge. Posing against a passport-blue backdrop, the students are dressed in their school uniforms and are seen wearing hand-written name-tags. Although it is certain that the 32-year-old Samnang does not have any personal recollection of the Khmer Rouge, his work directly and intentionally stimulates the memory of Khmer Rouge rule.

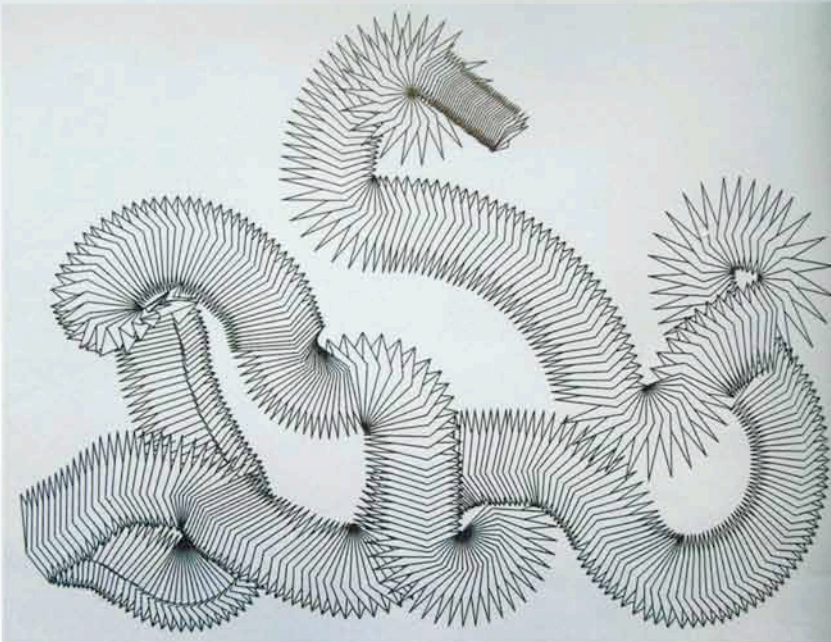
Thann Sok’s *Ktome Neak Ta* is an installation of small houses made of incense sticks on the floor, with the audience looking down at them, resembling the scale of high-rise buildings replacing simple traditional structures throughout Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. The 24-year-old Thann Sok graduated from the Reyum Art School in 2005 and was engaged in the experimental Reyum Workshop for two years.

A highly familiar name is Sopheap Pich, whose *Cycle* was exhibited by 10 Chancery Lane Gallery at shContemporary 2008. A child of the Pol Pot regime who later fled to the United States where he graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago, Pich is known for his abstract rattan and wire sculptures referenced to body organs that also remind one of traditional weaving baskets and fishtraps. Gleeson says, “*Cycle 2* (2008) is a smaller and more controlled version of *Cycle 1*. *Cycle 1* (2004) was Sopheap’s first large work in rattan and wire. It measured over four meters in length. It defined his direction for his first solo sculpture show of four large works that referenced the body: *Cycle*

the stomach (in Khmer the word for stomach is snake, and the mythical snake, or naga, is the protector—its likeness is pervasive throughout the country), *Echo* was the womb, *Hive* was the liver and another the name I forgot was phallic, like the ancient linga form. Sopheap is primarily concerned with form, as he manipulates the material – and as it manipulates him—the meaning of the work takes shape. In the case of *Cycle* there are many references including the naga and more simply the reincarnate cycle of life, or cyclic pattern of life.”

Pich says of his work, “The materials used—bamboo, rattan and wire—take shape and become sculpture after an initial process of resistance, adjustment and surrender. Its meaning lies in its ability to resonate with its environment and the stories it tells of its past journey and its process of coming into being.

“In that respect, my sculptures are reflections of past and present moments in the making. No doubt, they also reflect the condition of my life and my own process of coming into being—my childhood spent in Cambodia in the 1970s, my life in the United States, my travels and my return to the country of my birth seven years ago



▲
SORN SETPHEAP
Naga, 2008
Computer drawing for wall installation
300 x 240 cm

have all been informed by constant physical, mental and emotional resistance, adjustment and surrender.”

In his new *Duel* series, Dennis Min-Kim depicts fights as bas-reliefs on the stone temples of Angkor, alongside battle scenes known as Pradal Serey. In the Khmer language, pradal means ‘fighting’ and serey means ‘equal’ or ‘free’. By painting multiple fighters and stances in the same ring, *Duel* (which began as an exploration of Min-Kim’s interest in the historic narrative of the fight in *The Reamker*, the Khmer epic based on the Hindu tale *Ramayana*) references the ancient art form that is unique among Southeast Asian martial arts practices, and also portrays Min-Kim’s personal experience of adjusting to the complexities of contemporary Cambodia.

Gleeson notes, “Strangely enough, the only non-traditional form to Cambodia that was taught at the fine arts school was painting. Many of the younger contemporary artists don’t paint. The reason I wanted to include Min-Kim was because he’s a painter, and also he represents something very important for the young artists because he has a very prolific practice. He works through ideas that are very hard, very solitary, when a lot of young artists are very busy and work in different spaces. One can see an evolution of work ethics from him and the theme he is interested in is the concept of fighting and what it means for him, and living and choosing to move here.”¹⁴



▲
KHAVAY SAMNANG
Remember, 2008
Installation of projection at Bophana
Audio Visual Center, Phnom Penh, 2008
300 x 240 cm

Jill Wong is an economist-turned-writer. She lives in Hong Kong where she contributes regularly to arts and culture magazines, and also writes on business and finance