

ICONS

Cambodian Art Rises From the Ashes

BY ROBERT TURNBULL

IN THE EARLY 1970S, the mother of Cambodian artist Leang Seckon saw American parachutes carrying flares and pouring down from the sky, to the amazement of villagers.

She was pregnant with the artist at that time of war and deprivation; some of the villagers used the parachutes to cover leaky roofs. Mr. Leang's installation "Parachute Skirt With Flowers" gathers detritus from Cambodia's succession of wars, including a French rifle and shoes made from rubber tires and worn by guerrillas of the bloody Khmer Rouge regime.

This month, Mr. Leang is in residence at New York's Bronx Museum, where he will make a presentation as part of "Season of Cambodia," a seven-week arts festival taking place at 30 cultural institutions around New York.

During the Khmer Rouge years of 1975 to 1979, a whole generation of Cambodian artists was more or less wiped out. (One of the few who survived was the late Van Nath, whose eyewitness paintings of Khmer Rouge brutality have been used as evidence in the continuing trials of former regime leaders.) Today, out of a national population of 14 million, there are probably only some 50 working artists.

But a handful of Cambodian artists are now being showcased at galleries such as New York's Tyler Rollins Fine Art and London's Rossi and Rossi, as well as at art fairs such as Shanghai and Singapore's Art Stage.

A commission in 2009 for a university in Saudi Arabia netted \$50,000, a record for a Cambodian artist, for the sculptor Sopheap Pich. Then came acquisitions by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and others. Mr. Pich, now 42, was given a solo show at the prestigious Documenta festival in Kassel, Germany, last year—the first Cambodian to be so honored.

Mr. Pich, a refugee who graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is represented by Tyler Rollins, which is hosting his Wall Reliefs to coincide with the festival. The reliefs use burlap, beeswax, charcoal and earth pigments on bamboo and rattan grids. Among the 10 Pich works on view at the Met is "Buddha 2," one of a series of Buddha torsos in rattan and bamboo, that have

been fetching up to \$45,000 on the open market. Mr. Pich returned to Cambodia in 2003 to launch Sala Art Space to facilitate shows for over a dozen painters and three photographers.

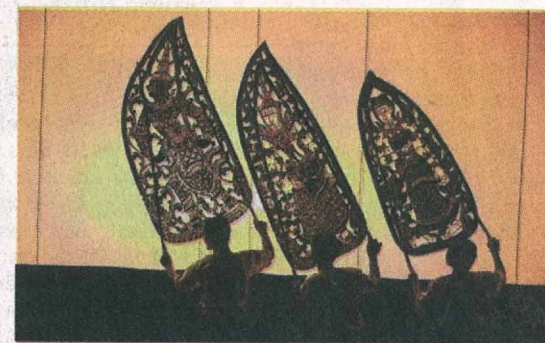
The older generation of artists combines traditional symbolism with autobiographical imagery.

Mr. Pich's broken Buddhas and undetonated bombs allude to a childhood wandering war-strewn countryside. The multimedia collages of Mr. Leang, also 42, reveal both a difficult childhood and multiple enthusiasms, including a deep love of his country, from the Cambodian pop idols of the 1960s to a nearly obsessive focus on nature and the environment.

The younger generation of Cambodian artists grew up in a world with

less vivid memories of the Khmer Rouge and are more experimental, working with photography and video, sometimes in documentary form, and largely within a conceptual framework. They often use cheap, everyday materials, as do three artists in residence at various festival venues: Khvay Samnang works with human hair (from barber shops); Tith Kanitha, with wire and mosquito nets; and Than Sok, with incense sticks.

A New York festival brings in wall reliefs and a Buddha torso.



THE WAT BO Shadow Puppets will perform for four days at the World Financial Center. Left, Sopheap Pich's "Upstream," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

These younger artists have their own strategies to cope "with ruptured histories and a present-day situation that offers very little support for their choice to be an artist," says Erin Gleeson, the curator of the visual arts component of Season of Cambodia.

The festival will also include art venues at the World Financial Center, the Asia Society Museum and the New York Public Library.

