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# The Phnom Penh Post



Lim Sokchanlina's Urban Street Night Club. LIM SOKCHANLINA

## An artistic tale of two cities

Sat, 26 July 2014 Ezra Kyrill Erker

*A six-month project of exhibitions, symposia and workshops is set to bridge the creative divide between Bangkok and Phnom Penh, showcasing some of the region's cutting-edge artists*

The two cities lie only an hour apart by air but have a wealth of cultural similarities – and differences – rarely explored through artistic exchanges. This weekend, however, six months of public programmes, meetings, residencies and exhibitions get under way that may go some way towards bridging the artistic worlds of Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

The main guest at Saturday's launch event in Phnom Penh is Thai artist Pinaree Sanpitak, who will host a cooking demonstration using aluminium moulds that combine the shapes of breasts and Buddhist stupas. Local cooks will be invited to prepare dishes using the moulds and prahok, the fermented fish paste central to Khmer cuisine.



Virak Roeun's untitled work of urban Phnom Penh. PHNOM PENH VISIONS

"My inspiration comes first from a personal perspective and then wanting to share and connect," Pinaree said. "The breasts stand out but it is the 'body' that has been my focus, not necessarily the female body."

Pinaree's cooking exhibition begins Rates of Exchange, Uncompared: Contemporary art in

Bangkok and Phnom Penh, an ambitious collaborative project involving artists, galleries and curators from the two capitals.

Thematically the exhibitions may involve some comparing and contrasting of history, geography and national identity, but co-curators Brian Curtin and Roger Nelson have focused the exchanges on method, letting the artists mine their own interests without tailoring their work to this particular context. Curtin, based in Bangkok, explained how the project began.

"I'd known Sopheap Pich's works for a number of years and was curious about the art scene in Phnom Penh," he said, referring to the Cambodian artist known for his rattan sculptures.

"I finally started to visit in the last few years, did some writing about Khmer artists and got to know people in the art scene."

When he met Phnom Penh-based Nelson, they discussed the dearth of cultural relationships among Southeast Asian countries and set the groundwork for a joint project that would involve more than just an exhibition. Funding from the Australian Council for the Arts arrived through Nelson's affiliation with the JUMP mentoring scheme, an initiative to support young emerging artists.

"The artists and guests are people at different stages of their careers and contribute a sense of diversity to the project," said Curtin. "We want to facilitate dialogue and exchange as the discursive basis for future projects.



Pinaree Sanpitak's Breast Stupa Cookery with aluminium moulds. KIYUYUKI SAWAI

"While much hangs as a tacit backdrop to the project – social iniquity, urban development, etc – the idea of 'un-compared' insists on surprising outcomes, not a determined path. Speaking personally, art is often instrumentalised for 'greater' issues, but here the artists speak first."

The Cambodian artists in the project will pursue a variety of interests.

Khvay Samnang will join the exhibitions in both cities, showing a series of photographs that will take inspiration from the Reamker, "involving professional Khmer boxers and iconic, highly charged locations around Phnom Penh", according to Nelson.

Samnang recently participated in biennales in Singapore and Moscow and a year-long residency in Berlin. He has worked a lot with sand, rubber sap and other natural materials to create symbolic criticisms of untempered development.

Photographer Lim Sokchanlina will undertake a six-week residency in Thailand, dividing his time between Chiang Mai and Bangkok. "The purpose of the residency is exploratory – he's encouraged to meet people, form his own connections, undertake experimental research, and . . . seek new inspirations," explained Nelson.

Sokchalina will also speak at a symposium in Bangkok in October, talking about his work and his involvement with Sa Sa Art Projects, Phnom Penh's artist residency spaces located in the White Building. He has previously covered urban issues and socio-political themes in his work.

Other Phnom Penh-based artists include Sovan Philong, long involved in the annual Phnom Penh Photo Festival, who will work on new non-lens-based artwork. Other artists are Tith Kanitha, who will create a new installation exploring folk tales that have been turned into popular horror movies, and Amy Lee Sanford, who will speak at the Bangkok symposium about her own work, offering insights into diasporic experience and identity.

While development in the two capitals is at different stages, the pace of growth and issues faced through urbanisation are similar. Pen Sereypagna, an architect who has been involved in the Vann Molyvann Project and a study grant in New York, speaks about his own involvement on the topic.

"I interview people to talk about urbanism, create collages to recreate the



Thlang Chhairath's work which will be exhibited in the Phnom Penh Visions series. PHNOM PENH VISIONS

idea and show it to other people," he said. "The collages include drawings, interviews, videos, in order to give shape to the person's ideas."

At a city festival, he spoke to 52 people about their ideas on urban development, and formed 52 collages in cooperation with two other artists. These works merged

art and architecture, part of an ongoing series called Phnom Penh Visions.

The launch for Rates of Exchange at Psar Kap Ko Restaurant is based around Pinaree's Breast Stupa Cookery: Prahok/Plaa Raa event. Pinaree has explored the cookery concept at major museums and biennales in Asia, Australia, Europe and the US, and explained what brought it here.

"When Roger [Nelson] mentioned the project and doing Breast Stupa Cookery [in Phnom Penh], I agreed right away," she said. "I stayed three nights in February and it was meant to be a survey trip on how to do the cookery project. Roger took me to eat in various places, the artist Samnang took us to the sand lake. We went around on an architectural tour and had a good time."

"Somehow the prahok dishes struck me and it seems that it is a food which relates to all Cambodians, something like nam prik does to Thais. So everything fell into place quickly. The day before I left, we had a brainstorming lunch with a group of artists, dancers. Everybody seemed enthusiastic and we had a good discussion about breast stupas and prahok."

Pinaree's work often includes elements of the human form, Buddhism, food, traditions and transcendence.

"They include matters of contemplation, understanding, perspective through the senses," she said. Exhibitions with forms of clouds, flying cubes and hammocks made it easier to understand her trail of thoughts through the years, and the breast stupa concept crystallised during an installation of unthreaded silk hangings in 2001. "It was when I felt the breast forms became more sacred and grounded. It is a concept threading the sensual and sacred."

Since 2000 she has been working on large-scale, often interactive installations, exploring different perceptions such as touch, scent, movement. "Of course, the sense of taste was just waiting around the corner," she said. "One day I was working with ceramics and then it clicked and I got the idea to make cooking moulds. In that way I can invite people to use them. The project has proven fulfilling, a lot of work but fun, though at times emotional. Food becomes the perfect medium and connection."

Also involved in the launch event are Cambodian artists Seng Simouy and Sok Chanrado, who will be documenting it on video. Active members of the White Building community, they have made a number of short films in collaboration with the Aziza's Place school and Sa Sa Art Projects.

At a subsequent symposium at the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre on Sunday, Pinaree will speak with two other artists, Orawan Arunrak and Tada Hengsapkul, on "Contemporary Art in Bangkok: Some Divergent Views".

They will elaborate on their art practices and give an overview of their work. Curators Curtin, Nelson and Gridthiya Gaweewong will also provide input. Since the aim of the six-month Rates of Exchange project, through its workshops, exhibitions and residencies, is to explore relationships while keeping similarities or differences between artists and their cities deliberately "uncompared", those associations will have to be interpreted

by the viewer.



PHOTOGRAPH BY EZRA KYRILL ERKER

## RATES OF EXCHANGE, UN-COMPARED: CONTEMPORARY ART IN BANGKOK AND PHNOM PENH

**July 26**

**Pinaree Sanpitak's Breast Stupa**

**Cookery Project: Prahok/Pla Ra.**

**Psar Kap Ko Restaurant, Street 9, Phnom Penh. Free admission**

**(4pm)**

### July 27

Public symposium: Contemporary Art in Bangkok: Some Divergent Views. Speakers include Orawan Arunrak, Brian Curtin, Gridthiya Gaweewong, Tada Hengsapkul and Pinaree Sanpitak. Studio visits follow. Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre, #64 Street 200, Phnom Penh. Free admission. (10am-4pm).

### August-October

Bangkok-based artist Orawan Arunrak's six-week residency in July-August at Sa Sa Art Projects in Phnom Penh will culminate in an open studio in August. Phnom Penh-based artist Lim Sokchanlina's six-week residency in September-October at the studios of Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Sudsiri Pui-Ock in Chiang Mai and Toot Yung Art Centre in Bangkok will end with an open studio in October.

### October 4

As public symposium Contemporary Art in Phnom Penh: Some Divergent Views at The Reading Room in Bangkok. Speakers include Lim Sokchanlina, Roger Nelson, Pen Sereypagna (pictured above) and Tith Kanitha. Studio visits follow the symposium.

### October 4

H Gallery Bangkok to host Rates of Exchange, Uncompared: Contemporary Art in Bangkok and Phnom Penh, with newly commissioned works, publication launch and artist talks. Other participating artists include Makha Sanewong Na Ayuthaya, Jakkai Siributr and Imhathai Suwatthanasilp.

### January 2015

Sa Sa Bassac in Phnom Penh to host the Rates of Exchange, Uncompared: Contemporary Art in Bangkok and Phnom Penh exhibition.

Visit [ratesofexchangeuncompared.wordpress.com](http://ratesofexchangeuncompared.wordpress.com)



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