

CAMBODIA

BY ROGER NELSON

For Cambodian contemporary art, 2013 was a highlight and sign of things to come. While sales remain low compared to neighboring Vietnam and Thailand, major museum and biennale exhibitions in USA, Europe and Asia intensified growing international attention. Significant works by Sopheap Pich were acquired by New York's Metropolitan and Guggenheim Museums, and prospects for continued market growth are strong.

Much Cambodian work attracting curatorial and collector interest is photography, performance, video, collage and installation. These practices rose to prominence within the last decade; a 2005 Phnom Penh exhibition titled *Visual Arts Open*, co-curated by artists Sopheap Pich and Linda Saphan, is widely regarded as a turning point. The influence of Pich and Saphan—both returning diaspora, educated abroad—is considerable.

Alongside newer media, painting remains a robust tradition. Graduates of Cambodia's largest art school, Battambang's Phare Ponleu Selpak, mostly exhibit figurative paintings, often recalling expressionism. The government-operated Royal University of Fine Arts teaches figurative painting alongside ancient ornamental forms. The University was established under French colonial rule; its curriculum remains largely unchanged.

Phare Ponleu Selpak was co-founded by refugees in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. Under that regime, one quarter of Cambodia's population died between 1975 and 1979, including an estimated 90% of artists. Nhek Dim (1934–1978), who exhibited his romantic paintings of women and landscapes internationally during the 1960s, was one of the casualties. During the 1980s, several dozen artists received Soviet educations. Upon return, most resumed painting realist images of Angkor Wat for the tourist

market. Some, such as Pech Song, went from producing propaganda for the Khmer Rouge to designing posters for the Vietnamese authorities who occupied Cambodia throughout the 1980s.

Cambodia's reentry into international art markets was spearheaded in the 1990s by the late Svay Ken (1933–2008), a self-taught figurative painter. Svay was included in the 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial in 1999, along with sculptor Prom Sam An. Other artists to exhibit internationally in this period include Soeung Vannara (b. 1962), who undertook a residency in Fukuoka. Neither Prom nor Soeung have actively exhibited in recent years. Like Svay, they received key support from Phnom Penh's Reyum Institute, an important publisher, school and gallery established in 1998.

While Reyum is not currently operating, 2013 saw significant developments in other key venues. Phnom Penh's JavaArts established a residency programme—hosting artist Anida Yoeu Ali and curator Yean Reaksmeay—and expanded its annual *Our City Festival*. Meta House initiated the *Free Your Minds* festival. Romeet Gallery continued to provide an exhibition platform for graduates of Phare Ponleu Selpak. Sa Sa Bassac intensified offsite curatorial projects, and hosted visitors including prominent curator Ute Meta Bauer. Artist-run spaces Sa Sa Art Projects (in Phnom Penh), Make Maek and Sammaki (both in Battambang) also played vital roles hosting exhibitions, residencies and events.

The international profile of Cambodian artists was unprecedented. New York's *Season of Cambodia* festival included eleven residencies; artists also exhibited in galleries, museums and biennales in Europe, Asia and USA.

ESTABLISHED AND LEADING ARTISTS

Many senior artists including Suos Sodavy, Chhim Sothy, Duong Saree and Prum Vichet, highly respected locally, have lower profiles internationally. Below are some better-known artists exhibiting locally and abroad.

Anida Yoeu Ali (b. 1974), raised in USA, returned to Cambodia in 2011 as a Fulbright Fellow. Alongside her performance and new media practice, Ali is co-founder of media lab Studio Revolt. Exhibitions in 2013 included USA and Hong Kong.

Khvay Samnang (b. 1982) exhibited at 2013's Singapore Biennale and Taiwan's Asian Art Biennial, and in Australia, Cambodia, Germany and South Korea. Nominated for Prix Pictet and awarded a yearlong residency at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Khvay is co-founder and teacher at Sa Sa Art Projects.

Leang Seckon (b. 1974) is the best-known artist inside Cambodia. His paintings and collages are rich with codified imagery. In 2013, a series commemorating the death of King Norodom Sihanouk exhibited in

Singapore, and a large-scale collaborative work, made from a parachute dropped on Leang's village, was a highlight of New York's *Season of Cambodia*.

Female Cambodian artists have a markedly lower profile than men, locally and abroad. Sokuntevy Oeur (b. 1983) is one key exception. Her figurative painting draws playfully on surrealism and expressionism, increasingly focusing on autobiography and transformations in Cambodian culture. In 2013, Oeur exhibited in Singapore and Canada.

Sopheap Pich (b. 1971) is Cambodia's highest-profile artist internationally. Raised in USA, Pich returned to Phnom Penh in 2002 and works mostly in bamboo and rattan. In 2013, he held solo shows in Sydney and New York, including at the Metropolitan, exhibited in USA, Germany and Singapore and in biennales in Russia and Japan.

Srey Bandaul (b. 1973) is co-founder of Phare Ponleu Selpak, and a senior teacher there. *Digestion*, a 2013 installation exploring tensions between local and global influences, exhibited in Cambodia and Hong Kong.

Vandy Rattana (b. 1980) is known for classically composed photographs documenting remnants of war and Cambodia's rapid transformations. Included in the Guggenheim's acquisitive *No Country* exhibition, in 2013 Vandy also exhibited in Cambodia, Germany, UK, USA, Thailand and Turkey.

EMERGING ARTISTS

Photographer Kim Hak (b. 1981) depicts sites of tradition and upheaval. In 2013 he published *Unity*, a monograph documenting mourning of the late King Sihanouk, and exhibited in Cambodia, Hong Kong, Netherlands and France.

Lim Sokchanlina (b. 1987) works in photography, video, installation and performance and in 2013 exhibited in Australia, Cambodia, Germany and the US. His practice considers environmental issues, including urban change. Lim is co-founder and teacher at Sa Sa Art Projects.

Mao Soviet (b. 1982), co-founder of Make Maek art space, is prominent in Battambang's burgeoning art community. Exhibitions in 2013 included Cambodia, Hong Kong and UK. Mao's practice encompasses figurative painting, installation and performance.

Pen Robit (b. 1991) recently relocated from Battambang to Phnom Penh. His figurative painting features a distinctive drip technique. Exhibitions in 2013 included Cambodia and Canada.

Amy Lee Sanford (b. 1971), raised in USA, relocated to Cambodia in 2009. Working in several media, her recent practice focuses on performance, exploring lasting effects of war. In 2013 Sanford exhibited and performed in Australia, Cambodia and USA.



Svay Sareth (b. 1972) is co-founder of Phare Ponleu Selpak. In performance and installation, his practice considers memory and reflects on present-day tensions. In 2013, Svay exhibited at Singapore's Biennale, and in Germany and New York.

Tith Kanitha (b. 1987) weaves industrial wire into organic shapes, also working in installation and performance. In 2013 she exhibited in Germany and New York, and continued collaborations with local cinema collective Kon Khmer Koun Khmer.

Yim Maline (b. 1982) explores childhood and memory in large, finely detailed drawings, ceramic sculpture and installation. In 2013, she exhibited in New York and Canada.

OTHER NAMES TO KNOW

Chan Dany (b. 1984), Chath Piersath (b. 1970), Kiang Hei (b. 1968), Kong Vollaik (b. 1983), Loeum Lorn (b. 1982), Meas Sokhorn (b. 1977), Neak Sophal (b. 1989), Séra (b. 1961), Than Sok (b. 1984), Thang Sothea (b. 1983), Vuth Lyno (b. 1982).

FAR LEFT Anida Yoeu Ali, *Campus Dining*, 2012, Digital C-Print, 330 x 310 cm. Image from *The Buddhist Bug Project*. Concept and performance by Anida Yoeu Ali, Photography by Masahiro Sugano, *The Buddhist Bug Project* is a project of Studio Revolt with co-production support by JavaArts, Courtesy of Studio Revolt.

ABOVE Khvay Samnang, *Air*, 2011, Digital C-Print, 80 x 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

