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NEW DIMENSIONS

How will 3D printing
change design?

CAMBODIAN ART

A new generation rises

A black and white portrait of Toshiyuki Kita, a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a checkered shirt under a textured blazer. He is looking slightly to the right with a subtle smile.

Toshiyuki Kita
THE GLOBAL REACH OF
JAPAN'S STAR INDUSTRIAL
DESIGNER



Khmer Rebirth

CAMBODIA IS UNDERGOING AN ARTISTIC REBIRTH AS A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS TURNS THEIR ATTENTION FROM THE COUNTRY'S TRAUMATIC PAST TO ITS PROMISING BUT CHALLENGING PRESENT.

WORDS YIN KHVAT

When Cambodian-born artist Anida Yoeu Ali returned to Phnom Penh from the United States, it was a homecoming 30 years in the making – the last time she had crossed the Cambodian border was in the dying days of the Khmer Rouge. What she encountered was a nation transformed. “I was so deeply moved,” she says. “They had rebuilt from annihilation.”

Yoeu Ali, now settled in Cambodia with her young family, is contributing to a country in the midst of an artistic renaissance. “It is a dream come true, being part of this unfolding narrative,” she says. It’s a story being told by a new generation of artists exhibiting in the

country’s major art spaces, including institutions like the French Cultural Centre and private galleries like the Java Gallery in Phnom Penh and the Sammakhi Art Space in Battambang.

Though many of the artists were born after the devastating rule of the Khmer Rouge, or were very young at the time of its atrocities, they still find themselves living in its shadow. “There is a general frustration if they can’t be recognised beyond [the Khmer Rouge era],” says Dana Langlois of JavaArts, which supports and provides a platform for the country’s artists. “There is a push to have Cambodian art recognised for its contemporary value.”

Still, adds Langlois, “some can’t escape it.” Em Riem was five years old when he was sent to a Khmer Rouge rural labour camp. The long walk of freedom back home in 1979 took three days on foot; along the way, Riem saw things a child should never see. “Skulls, blood in rice fields,” he recalls. “People died from starvation before my eyes.” In his haunting collection *Tenderness*, huge family portraits are painted in black acrylic using burlap rice bags as canvas, producing the effect of charcoal drawings.

“Before the Khmer Rouge, there was happiness,” says Riem, a wiry 42-year-old with



(ON THE RIVER) IMAGE: MASAHITO SUGANO, COURTESY OF STUDIO REVOLT



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)
 "Human Build" (Charcoal etchings)
 by Vollak Kong; "On the River," (2013,
 C-Print) from The Buddhist Bug
 Project, concept and performance by
 Anida Yoeu Ali; "Tenderness" (Acrylic
 on burlap, 200 x 170 cm) by Em Riem;
 "Tenderness" (Acrylic on burlap, 150 x
 100 cm) by Em Riem.

a sculpted face. The actual photos were taken in the watershed year of 1975; one person in each of the portraits died over the next four years. *Tenderness* is a nostalgic ode to a Cambodia untouched by genocide; it is a theme Riem keeps returning to in his quest to develop "Khmer Art" and to tell the world what happened "so they don't walk that path again."

In Theanly Chov's *Survival*, which will be exhibited at JavaArts at the end of May, it is tempting to see a link to the wars, though there are no ostensible references. As a child, Chov was fascinated by the realist paintings of Nhek Dim, who was killed by the Khmer

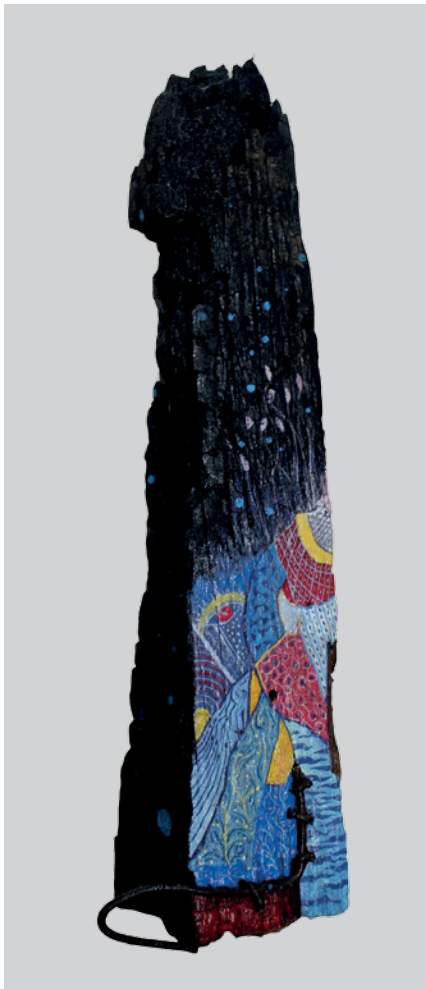
Rouge – simple portraits or rural landscapes that survived their creator. *Survival* pays heed to this with unusual portraits of ordinary people; each of its subjects stretches dramatically forward and upward, their bodies representing the human spirit, defiant, irrepressible and instinctive.

In a sense, *Survival* demonstrates the progression from trauma to rebirth in modern Cambodia, albeit a rebirth not without complications. "You can't see, but you can feel it," Chov says. "I saw my friends [and] myself struggle in this abstract water. This is not just Cambodia, it is about



(THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)
 "Neang Neak" (Serpent Goddess), (2012,
 HD Video, 3:50min) featuring dancer
 Kuntearom Keo. Directed by Masahiro
 Sugano, choreography by Sophiline Cheam
 Shapiro, and co- produced by Khmer Arts
 and Studio Revolt; "The Black Wood" by
 Soviet Mao and Tim Robertson; "After The
 Black Wood" by Soviet Mao.

(OPPOSITE, FROM TOP) "Behind 1"
 (2012, Digital chromogenic color print on
 Fujicolor Crystal Archive paper, 60 x 85 cm)
 by Sophal Neak; "Survival" by Theanly Chov.



humans, about life. The line in the paintings represents life pressure."

That pressure—the stresses and strains of modern life—have created a new frame of reference for Cambodia's artists. More than just dealing with the past, they cope with the Cambodia of today, a country searching for identity as it undergoes urbanisation, social upheaval and dislocation.


"We grow, evolve [and] start to present the moment, not the past," says Yoeu Ali. Her Studio Revolt projects *The Buddhist Bug*, a performance, and *Neang Neak* (Serpent Goddess), a short film dance collaboration with Khmer Arts, are infused with the themes of dislocation, identity and belonging. In *The Buddhist Bug*, Yoeu Ali wears a 30-metre-long "bug" costume whose orange silk skin represents the garb of Buddhist monks. Meanwhile, a hijab covers her head, representing Islam. This synthesis of her personal religious values—Yoeu Ali is Muslim, while the vast majority of Cambodians are Buddhist—reflects an internal complexity, and public reactions to the bug—amusement, fear or rejection—cleverly recreate her own journey and sense of self. Yoeu Ali says *Neang Neak* is about "cultural displacement and one's ability to overcome such dislocation," finding symbolism in the traditional Apsara dancer set against a tide of black business suits.



Displacement is also found in Sophal Neak's recent *Behind* series, stark photographic portraits of Cambodians now living on the streets or in substandard housing; in each photo, the subject faces a wall with his or her back to the camera. Neak—who is just 23 years old—says she spends time walking the streets of Phnom Penh collecting people's stories. What emanates from her photos is a sense of shame, punishment, and censorship. But these sympathetic portraits cleverly target not the subjects themselves, but rather the society that marginalises and silences them.

In *The Black Wood*, Soviet Mao, the founder of Battambang's leading Make Maek Gallery, and collaborator Tim Robertson, also give voice to families who were evicted for new development. The work deals in violence, intimidation and loss, challenging our deep-seated concept of "home" as a safe and secure place. In some cases, family homes are torched in order to force their inhabitants out for redevelopment, a practice that finds tangible form in Mao and Robertson's work through pieces of burnt wood that are transformed into beautiful, colourful, totemic art. An intact door with Khmer writing etched on it and family photos taken directly from burnt and demolished homes provide people with what the artists say is "a sense of proximity to the loss felt."

The end product of redevelopment is tackled in the charcoal etchings of Vollaik Kong's *Human Build*, which depicts high rises as unsettling, spectral and angular, sounding a warning note about the built environment and human consumption. "I want to remind the people who live in the city to think to the future," says the 30-year-old artist, who is currently in an art residency in New York. Discord and alienation pervade his dark landscapes. Without careful consideration he says, "humans build the city and they will break down the city too."

Though their work may be critical, the future is bright for most of these young artists. Khiang Hei, a lecturer at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, says there is a sense of excitement and energy in Cambodia's art scene. "It is still in the infancy stage," he says. "The art scene is developing and growing and it will flourish." Langlois concurs. "[The artists] are all pushing each other forward, putting their work into question, experimenting, working together." 



(THE BOY IN THE SURVIVAL SERIES) IMAGE GEODY HAY

