

New art, new Cambodia

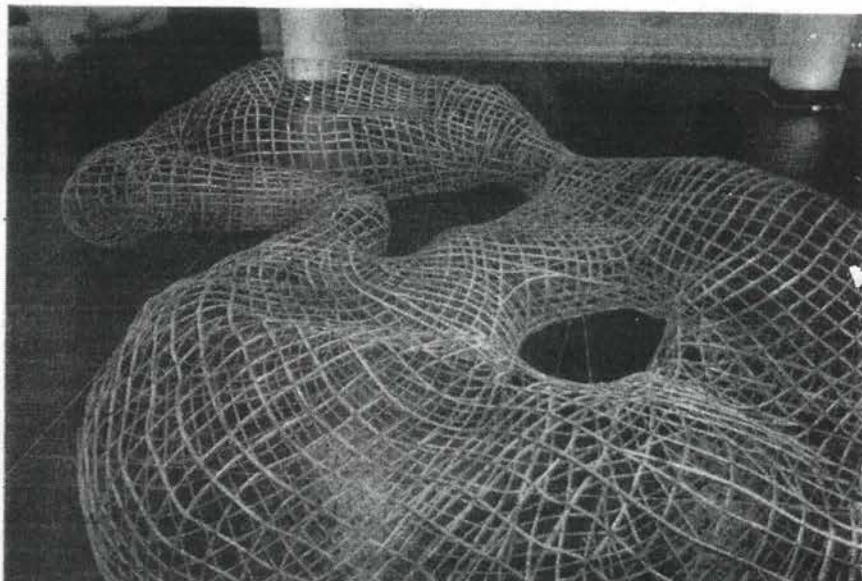
Suzanne Spinner at Visual Arts Open, Phnom Penh

Think Cambodia and a puzzle box opens: a country called Kampuchea of killing fields, land mines, B52 bombing raids and behind it nom de Cambodge, a French colonial outpost of Indochine, of wide boulevards lined with flaming poinciana trees shading pastel stucco villas with shutters, the world of Marguerite Duras' memory and the purported and convincing setting for two of Tintin's adventures. Far, far behind that, the early medieval Kingdom of the Khmer centred on the vast complex of Angkor Wat, and the thwarted attempt to sack much of its best statuary by no less than Andre Malraux to fill the museums of Paris. Then come forward again to the 90s and you find a United Nations controlled country, UNTAC, awash with pale blue berets and overwhelming Americanisation, which has led inexorably to the creation of a parallel economy conducted in US dollars in the reopened hotels for the internationalists—the peacekeepers and the non-government organisations—the other for the shattered locals conducted in riel at the markets.

In Cambodia now, all these nomenclatures exist simultaneously in a country that has been transformed through a violent revolution which saw it regress to the year zero. Today it is full of ghosts but is vibrant, quietly thriving and radiating hope. I can only speak of my impressions of 2 weeks in Phnom Penh and the imperative 3-day pass visit to Angkor Wat. Cambodia is the only country whose national flag features a man made structure, the distinctive silhouette of Angkor Wat, the country's most dependable treasure which survived the ravages of Pol Pot despite being a Khmer Rouge stronghold. Unlike the Taliban, the KR did not blow up their country's monuments but instead razed the French hotel built within the park precinct. My tuk tuk driver Mr Chhu, who told me this, agreed it was one of their few better moments.

Angkor is a vast gated manicured park with stone causeways across wide moats or barays leading to surprisingly intact and comprehensive ruins of temples and the fortified city of Angkor Thom which at its peak supported a population of a million people at a time when the population of London was 50,000. Today it supports a similar number of people, paying their admission and respects and listening attentively to the local guides conversing in French, Japanese, German, English and Korean. Amongst the tourists are the Cambodian pilgrims for whom Angkor Wat is a source of pride and national identity. Almost every time you come through yet another Escher like stone doorway there are monks making offerings and burning incense before statues swathed in saffron cloths.

Along the road leading to the park and in the art streets surrounding the National Art School in Phnom Penh are



Pich Sopheap, *Cycle*

Linda Saphan

shop after shop selling luridly painted images of Angkor at sunset, sunrise and by moonlight, and masonry workshops awash with copies of Angkorian statuary and bas reliefs. In the city and the countryside there is a rich vernacular naive tradition of sign art, known as *chook tip* (viz perfect or realistic painting), a legacy of a preliterate society overlaid with socialist realism, pictures to advertise services and wares and broadcast warnings and the recent weapons amnesty is depicted in gory detail on large painted billboards.

The legacy of UNTAC is the plethora of NGOs—amongst a population of 13 million, there are 2,000. However they have been instrumental in the revival of all forms of art and craft, in particular a completely hand made fine silk industry. The leader in the field is Artisans D'Angkor, based in Siem Reap. In their painting workshop tables of artists sitting in rows copy the great works of ancient Khmer art onto silk with fine brushes in meticulous servitude to tradition. Obviously there is a place for such crafts but, combined with the hegemony of The Royal School of Fine Arts still dominated by teachers who studied in Europe in the 60s (sent by the Communist regime to refine the propaganda) and now locked in a time warp, the space for contemporary art is limited and tenuous. But it does exist and was recently revealed at the Visual Arts Open or VAO.

VAO

Curated by key artists Linda Saphan and Pich Sopheap, VAO ran for 3 weeks in the capital, Phnom Penh. It was the culmination of 7 months work—to bring

the artists together, hold a fundraising auction, produce a tri-lingual catalogue (Khmer, French, English) and create an excellent website—to show Cambodians doing it for themselves without an NGO in sight. The VAO began with a group show in a Vernissage Khmer style at the New Art Gallery followed by 2 weekends of openings at 6 other spaces, 2 of which were galleries (Sunrise Gallery and Popil Photo), the others smart restaurants, a bakery, a garden bar and a jewelry store situated in the older up-market area of the central city. The VAO was recognized by the artists and the public as a success—hundreds attended the openings and over US\$15,000 worth of work sold, making the artists happy and affirming their trust in the vision of Saphan and Sopheap.

The 19 artists exhibiting represented greatly varied backgrounds, generations and historical experiences. Two are venerated old men, Vann Nath and Sway Ken; to be old is a rarity in itself. Vann Nath is one of only 7 people to survive the notorious Khmer Rouge Tuol Sleng prison. He paints over and over again recurring nightmares of the horrors he witnessed: the instruments and methods of imprisonment, torture and execution obsessively detailed but with an individual expressive quality that has developed over time. Sway Ken is of the same generation, a self taught artist who paints still life of everyday things invested by deep care with an iconic significance: arm-chairs, oil lamps, rows of rubber thongs, a power box—in soft, buttery pastels—simple things that are in danger of being forgotten in the rush to build the new Cambodia.

Amongst the younger generation of established artists born in the 70s: Leang Seckon, Linda Saphan and Sopheap Pich grew up under the Pol Pot regime. Seckon was educated at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and has crafted an idiosyncratic mixed media approach: paintings incorporating stitching and padding and collages using documents and old photographs to express his family history and challenge notions of gender and sexuality. Seckon has already established a strong profile in the region and is sought by collectors and aficionados in the local foreign community.

Saphan and Pich became part of the refugee exodus to Canada and America and were educated in Montreal, Massachusetts, Chicago and Paris. They personify one of the most dynamic elements in Cambodia now, the returning diaspora. Saphan's work is explicitly postmodernist and addresses ethnicity and history. In her series based on Cambodian sign art of the 60s, she has repainted celebrities with black faces to draw attention to the whitening of faces in received imagery, and to return to Cambodians a sense of the beauty within themselves. She also works in other media and her *In the beginning* is an elegy for a lost time. In a simple wooden box tray filled with rice, flattish round seed pods are arranged to form the numerals 1970, the year the Americans began the carpet bombing of Cambodia. On the face of each pod Saphan has fixed a portrait photograph of an individual surrounded by a frame of white paint, the Buddhist mourning colour. The seed pods are used in a traditional children's game, *Angkun*, played at New Year.

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It reminded me of a Japanese raked memorial garden. The photographs are all celebrations of the good life in the time before—the Sihanouk era—which, for Saphan's family, the patrician Khmer Chinese was the Golden Age when Phnom Penh was "the pearl of Asia."

After working as a painter and sculptor, Pich has found his *métier* and materials in using bamboo and rattan to create exquisite 3-dimensional abstract forms which recall the living local tradition of weaving baskets, hats and fishtraps. The interest in a sensuous vessel form was evident in some of his earlier paintings and when he began working in collage papier mache over a bamboo armature he reconnected with his own past in the remote rural provinces, and the improvised artisanship learnt from his father who had taught himself metal casting from first principles to make simple cutlery. Pich shares that passion for primary making, testing the limits of these structures in often large scale works that hold their shape, as if they might have grown that way.

Vandy Rattana, a young law student and novice photographer was born after Pol Pot. His series of intimate interiors, shot mostly in a condemned building returned individuality to the marginalised people

who have made this building their home. Other photographs are of his family and, in the portrait of his mother, you can just discern one of those paintings of Angkor Wat hanging on the wall behind her. According to Pich Sopheap, the neocolonialists don't expect to pay more than US\$30 for modern Cambodian Art, the going rate for Angkor Wattage and idealised scenes of life in the countryside—watercolours of diligent farmers and busy fishermen in their picturesque boats, faces unidentified, shaded by their reassuringly timeless conical coolie hats. The VAO challenged this and asserted the position of the Cambodian contemporary artist; it eschewed the merely exotique, resisted a nationalist agenda and provided a space for the artists to declare themselves as individuals.

Visual Arts Open, curators Linda Saphan, Pich Sopheap; Phnom Penh, Dec 9-31, 2005

Suzanne Spinner visited Cambodia as the guest of her good friend, Larry Strange, Director of the Cambodian Development Resource Institute.