

All That Surrounds Us:

New art from Cambodia

EDUCATION KIT

STAGE 5 & 6



Sao Sreymao, *Left over* 2017, digital print and illustration 60 x 90 cm

All That Surrounds Us

Art that questions the experience, materiality, and the growing consciousness

All That Surrounds Us: New art from Cambodia profoundly presents themes pertinent to young and emerging artists, particularly in regions that have historically experienced disruption and conflict. Casting off a history of colonialism and military conflicts, Cambodia is now undergoing a period of transition as it finds its way in the complex geopolitical environment of southeast Asia. Nearby political and economic interests pose opportunities and pressures on contemporary social and cultural constructs. While determined to maintain the country's rich cultural heritage, all sections of society are finding new ways to respond and progress. The 12 artists exhibited take a position of urgency within their works, demonstrating an intrinsic relationship between their material practice and message. The exhibition includes works in diverse media and from many parts of the country, but unified by a shared concern with materiality and collective consciousness. The artworks selected in this education resource bring to the forefront of student enquiry the complex relationship between artist and world, unpacking artists' ideas on social hierarchy, environmental issues, urbanisation and cultural lineage. Questions and activities invite students to engage with individual artworks and the exhibition in its entirety, to consider themes that emerge from the artists' subjective exploration. Students are encouraged to make significant connections between these artists and the wider study of art history.

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Thang Sothea, *Disruption* 2020, natural hemp, iron, copper, wooden resin, 150 x 150 cm

THE EXHIBITION

All That Surrounds Us presents contemporary works by 12 younger and mid-career artists from Cambodia. The new art emerging provides Australian audiences with an opportunity to experience the key issues of today's Cambodia. Speaking to the country's rapid urbanisation, ecological destruction and political and economic position, the art provokes crucial questions about Cambodia's future and place in the broader community of the region.

Collectively, the works create a dual themed dialogue through the exhibition, with the title *All That Surrounds Us* further emphasising the discourse. The emerging and younger artists create a conversation about their physical surroundings and the rapidly changing built and natural environment. Layered in this complex dialogue are themes of a growing rural and urban divide, economic corruption and ecological decline. This new generation of artists establishes a voice of advocacy and makes a call to action from both national and international audiences. The older artists use their works to connect with the spiritual and metaphorical surroundings, drawing on themes of childhood, belief, heritage and the importance of remembering that which has come before us. This communicates the country's deep roots in Buddhist spirituality and the non-linear relationship between past, present and future.

SA SA ART PROJECTS



Sa Sa Art Projects space during *The Sounding Room* project, 2011

All That Surrounds Us is an exhibition in partnership with Sa Sa Art Projects. Sa Sa Art Projects is an experimental mechanism which addresses Cambodia's lack of infrastructure for contemporary art education and engagement by creating space for critical discussion. They believe that by not being bound to a rigid organisational structure, Sa Sa Art Projects is able to evolve organically to adapt to the changing context and needs of the communities with which artists work. Sa Sa Art Projects is a Cambodian artist-run space dedicated to experimental and critical contemporary art practices. It was founded in 2010 by the Cambodian arts collective Stiev Selapak and operated from the historic and vibrant apartment complex known as the White Building until 2017, when the building was demolished for new development.

When holding a cross-borders exhibition, partnerships can play a significant role in the authenticity, progression and purpose of an exhibition. Individually, in groups or as a class consider the following questions in relation to a curator's role:

- What are the social benefits of inviting partnership and collaboration in exhibitions?
- How do curators ensure they follow customs, laws and social expectations of a foreign country?
- Why is it important to 'listen' when curating a cross-borders exhibition. What could go wrong?
- Make a list/timeline of how and what a curator does to organise a cross-borders exhibition.

For more information on Sa Sa Art Projects please visit their website: <https://www.sasaart.info/index.htm>

FOR TEACHERS

All That Surrounds Us presents diverse opportunities to integrate new works by contemporary Cambodian artists into existing curricula and case study investigations. The exhibition gives insight into practising artists and how they can use contemporary techniques and methodologies to create that call to action attention on social, environment and political experiences by exploring the past, present and future through both a physical and metaphysical perspective. Collectively the artists identify significant changes and challenges to their country as a product of national and global intervention and disruption. Individually the artists use their unique education and training to explore cross-disciplinary practices. There is a strong focus on art as a way of reimagining what 'could be'.

Consider examining the exhibition as an in-depth focus study within a broader investigation of Art & Contemporaneity, Art & the Physical World, Art and Materiality, Art That Questions, or Art & Peoples' experience.

Through these lenses students investigate the exhibition to examine artists as representatives, truth-tellers, environmentalists, and questioners. Each artist speaks to an aspect of their experiences as a young Cambodian and uses subjectivity and the imagination to share their perspectives and beliefs with the audience. Therefore, teachers and students are encouraged to focus on the Subjective Frame throughout the case exploration of this exhibition. Additionally, there is a diverse use of materials and processes used by the artists, which derives from an eclectic disciplinary education. As such, teachers and students are encouraged to question artists' choices and intentions by examining their Practice and the relationship between material and message.

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CURRICULUM LINKS AND SYLLABUS OUTCOMES

Teachers are encouraged to adapt this education resource for their curriculum, in and outside NSW. This education kit makes the following connections to:

Visual Arts NSW Stage 6 Syllabus:

Art Criticism/Art History Focus area:

- Practice: Artists, curators, art practitioners and architects/material choice and intentions/contemporary processes
- Conceptual Framework: the ways in which the world is communicated through art by the artist
- The Frames: Cultural history/Structural significant/Subjective and the use of imagination/Postmodern techniques and mediums
- Curators and the exhibition context
- Urban and rural environment as Subject Matter.

Art Criticism and Art History Outcomes:

Stage 5 Course: 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.10

Stage 6 Year 11: P7, P8, P9

Stage 6 HSC Year 12: H7, H8, H9

International Baccalaureate Diploma Syllabus:

Theoretical Practice

- *Visual Arts in Context: Students examine artists working in different cultural contexts and seek to understand the limitations and possibilities to discuss historical events through artmaking.*
- *Visual Arts in Methods: Students look at different techniques for making art. Students investigate and compare how and why different techniques have evolved, and the processes involved.*

- *Communicating Visual Arts: Students explore ways of communicating through visual and written means. Students make artistic choices about how to most effectively communicate knowledge and understanding.*

Curatorial Practice

- *Visual Arts in Context: Students develop an informed response to work and exhibitions they have seen and experienced.*
- *Visual Arts in Methods: Students consider the nature of “exhibition” and think about the process of selection and the potential impact of work on different audiences.*



Roeun Sokhom, *Old building at street 1* 2023, watercolour on paper, 37.5 x 55.5 cm

CASE STUDY: ART AND MATERIALITY

Students investigate how artists use materials and imagery to create layers of meaning to communicate ideas. As an exhibition *All That Surrounds Us* carries dual-themed dialogue within the 12 artists' works. Both themes are strongly reliant on the concept of materiality. Therefore, an appropriate place to start within the case study is to understand the definition of materiality and discuss what that may mean within an artist's practice and the wider arts ecology. As a class have a brief discussion about the definitions, ensuring all students understand both aspects of the word materiality.

Materiality:

The quality or character of being material or composed of matter.

OR

The quality of being relevant or significant.

Students are then invited to take a step back from the exhibition to explore the wider context of Cambodian history. While the exhibition doesn't specifically speak to Cambodia's genocide or colonialism, an understanding of conflict, social structure and international intervention is important to understand the themes discussing the current challenges of a rapidly developing country. This can begin with a brainstorm of 'what we already know' but should lead into a short investigation into the political and historical context of the country. Some suggested eras of investigation are listed below, and resources can be found in the References (useful links) section.

The Angkor Empire Period

French Protectorate

Cambodian Independence

The Khmer Rouge and Vietnam War

Hun Sen Coup

Begin with Thang Sothea's work *Disruption 2020* as an entry point into the exhibition. *Disruption 2020* depicts a deconstructed Apsara; a spiritual divinity of Khmer history and a tale found on the stone bas-relief of Angkor. The sculpture, made from organic hemp and steel, binds together a narrative of the old existing in the new. The sculpture comments on the interruption to spirituality by humans. The work is separated into six different pieces, the head, body, shoulders, hands and feet which reference the long history of religious sculptures being looted by archaeologists, dealers and collectors.

Discuss the artist's decisions and intentions with consideration to the relationship of artefacts from Cambodia and across southeast Asia as a result of colonisation and conflict. Use the media release *National Gallery of Australia returns sculptures to Cambodia 2023* <https://nga.gov.au/about-us/media/media-releases/2023/national-gallery-of-australia-returns-sculptures-to-cambodia/#:~:text=The%20National%20Gallery%20of%20Australia,Padmapani%2C%20Vajrapani%20and%20Avalokiteshvara%20Padmapani.>

Continue the focus on 'what is significant' by exploring Than Sok's *Kback teuk series* paintings and Pen Robit's *Autocrat (2020)* and *Beautiful Day (2020)*. How are the artists communicating their personal ideas about Cambodia's social, political and spiritual histories? As contemporary artworks, all paintings have elements of making the old new. Prompt students to identify how these works reference the old; and what choices and ideas that artists' have made to introduce the new. Thang, Than and Robit all use strong symbolism to convey their ideas. Identify the symbols and conduct a conversation from the perspective of the Subjective Frame. If desired, use this collection of works as Unseen Images to create a Section 1 question: Analyse how meaning is communicated through the use of symbols (12 Marks).

It is suggested to then shift the focus towards the artworks that discuss more physical experiences through materiality. Eng Rithchandaneh's sculptural work *101 2023*. Through Eng's artworks students can begin to unpack how an artist is influenced by their social and political surroundings to create didactic and suggestive works. Expand student knowledge of exhibition themes and subject matter by looking at Pen Sereypagna's *White Building schizoanalysis 2023* and accompanying films.

- How has the importance of this building shaped the lives of its residents?
- Think about the building through the lens of social, spiritual, economical and environmental impact.

The conversation of rapid urbanisation is heavily present in the exhibition. Students read the Guardian article *My Lockdown fantasy bustling mind blowing beauty of Phnom Penh 2020* which pertains a detailed architectural history of Phnom Penh: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jun/03/my-lockdown-fantasy-bustling-mind-blowing-beauty-of-phnom-penh>

Analyse the works by Pen Sereypaga, Mao Sovanchandy, Rouen Sokhom and Prak Dalin using the following questions:

- How is the artist's work a reflection of their time and place?
- Discuss the ways in which the artist uses materials and processes to convey their meaning?
- Outline the artists intentions and themes.

As a result of rapid urbanisation, Cambodia is facing a drastic rural and urban divide. Compare the works by Sao Sreymao, Neak Sophal and Yim Maline to unpack the ecological themes discussed in the exhibition. Seek to bring forth the concept of southeast Asian art and Australian art has sharing similar themes and concerns. Do this by comparing the above artists with the practice of:

Australian-Japanese collaborative artists, Ken and Julia Yonetani's *The Last Supper* 2014
<https://kenandjuliayonetani.com/en/works/thelastsupper/>

They might also look comparatively at works by artists such as El Anatsui, Maryanto, Surajate Tongchua, Kristof Kintera, Li Gang, Isaac Cordal, Sopheap Pich, Asuncion Molinos Gordo, Vuth Lyo, Pooja Iranna, Sheba Chhachhi.



Eng Ritchandaneth, *101* 2023, fired clay, raw cotton and bamboo, variable dimensions

EXHIBITION QUESTIONS

The questions provided in this resource may be used for written responses, examination preparation, or for open-ended discussions in the gallery or the classroom.

Pre-visit Questions for Years 9 – 12

- What do you know about Cambodia and its history?
- Brainstorm political, social and environmental issues arising from rapid urbanisation.
- How can artists use the imagination as a weapon against social and political conflict?
- Research the diverse architecture in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
- Discuss how materials can further an artist's message.
- Does art have the power to disrupt and disturb societal norms and governing policies?
- Use the list of artists on the website to map their home provinces. How does an artist's environment influence their art making?

Questions for Written Response Years 11 – 12

Frames:

Analyse the role of memory and experience in the creation of artworks.
In your response reference artists from *All That Surround Us*.

Compare how TWO artists reflect and document their cultural context.
In your response reference artists from *All That Surround Us*.

Contemporary art can provide valuable yet unsettling critique of society.
Discuss this statement, referring to artists from *All That Surround Us*.

Practice:

Discuss how the materials artists use affect the way their ideas and intentions are communicated.
In your response reference artists from *All That Surrounds Us*.

Analyse the role of the natural and manmade world in artmaking practice.
In your response reference artists from *All That Surrounds Us*.

Conceptual Framework:

Analyse what it is that makes artworks valuable.
In your response reference artists from *All That Surrounds Us*.

Examine how artists have used artworks to challenge social and political views in innovative ways.
In your response reference artists from *All That Surrounds Us*.



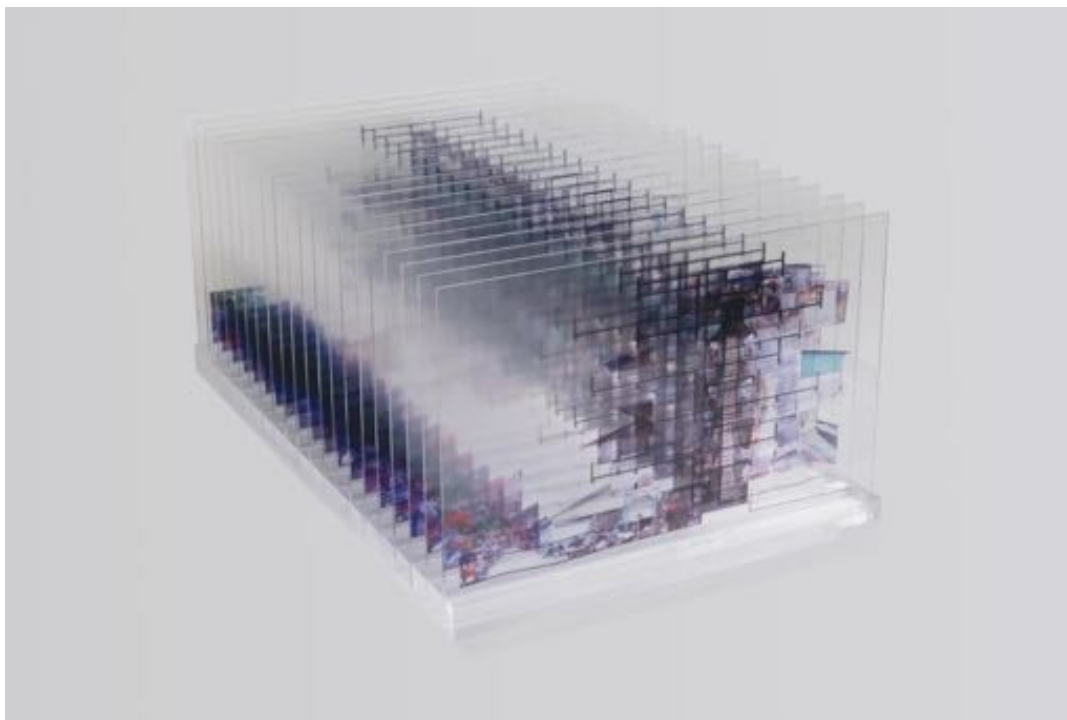
Chea Sereyroth, *Trace* 2023, acrylic on canvas 90 x 120 cm

VOCABULARY

- **Call to action:** an exhortation or stimulus to do something in order to achieve an aim or deal with a problem.
- **Cross-Discipline:** Research or creative practices that involve two or more academic disciplines.
- **Disrupt:** Alter or destroy the structure of something by causing radical change through innovation.
- **Ecological crisis:** occurs when changes to the environment of a species or population destabilizes its continued survival.
- **Environmental Art:** Art that addresses social and political issues relating to the natural and urban environment. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/environmental-art>
- **Hierarchy:** a system in which members of an organisation or society are ranked according to relative status or authority.
- **Land/Earth Art:** Art that is made directly in the landscape, sculpting the land itself into earthworks or making structures in the landscape using natural materials. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/l/land-art>
- **Materiality:** the quality or character of being material or composed of matter. **OR** the quality of being relevant or significant.
- **Ownership:** The act, state or right of possessing something.
- **Province:** The whole of a country outside of the capital cities, especially when regarding a lack of equal education or opportunity.
- **The Khmer Rouge:** A name given to the Communist Part of Kampuchea (Cambodia) during the regime ruled between 1974 and 1979.
- **Urbanisation:** The increase in the proportion of people living in towns and cities.

FOCUS ACTIVITIES

Here you will find focus artists and activities from *All That Surrounds Us*. Activities have been designed to complement the recommended case study Art and The Peoples' Experience and can also be completed in isolation through student self-driven inquiry.



White building's schizoanalysis 2023, digital sticker on plexiglass 42.5 x 66 x 28 cm.

Pen Sereypagna (The White Building)

Pen Sereypagna presents an architectural study of the White Building; a twenty-four hectare series of apartment blocks built along landfill and floodplains of the Bassac River in Phnom Penh. Historically, the building was constructed in the 1960s by modernist architect Lu Ban Hap to provide affordable high-density housing adapted to the lifestyle of Cambodian working class people. However, built during a tumultuous political period the building and its inhabitants have experienced five decades of genocide, marginalisation, eviction and mistreatment during ongoing economic transition. The building was an iconic space celebrated by artists, activists, journalists, historians and its estimated 2,500 long-standing residents before its destruction in 2017. The building has since been replaced with a commercial space, private apartments and parking lots funded by international investors.

Think About/Discuss:

Using plexiglass and photographic prints Pen's sculpture captures the unimaginable layers of life experienced by the building's residents. The transparent materials invite the audience to construct stairways, apartment blocks and shops to form the busy everyday of its community. Whilst the work has a strong architectural component as a three-dimensional blueprint to the building, the dynamic and unstaged photography introduces aspects of performance. In the exhibition Pen's sculpture is complimented by five films produced as part of the White Building Project.

The total run time of films exhibited in *All That Surrounds Us* is 15 minutes and can be viewed on 16albermarle Project Space website. Watch each film and discuss the following questions:

- Is the film from an environmental, economic or social perspective? Why?
- What were some visual devices used throughout the film that effectively communicated the story?

To watch all films visit: http://www.whitebuilding.org/en/page/about_the_white_building

Artmaking activity: Using translucent paper, tracing paper or gladwrap map out the layers of your house or school with permanent markers. Depict what happens in each space by considering: the function of the space; the energy and movement of the space and the people within the space.



Beautiful day 2020, oil on canvas 155 x 120 cm

Pen Robit

Through often surrealist scenes, comprising of both utopian and dystopian symbolism, Pen creates imaginative and subjective scenes of what could be. *A Beautiful Day 2020* is a painting based on a photograph of five young artists taken in Pen's earlier career. Reimagining the memory of the scene, Pen replaces the young artists with five military men obscuring their identity with skull masks. The military men remain in comfortable, friendly positions and are all given the 5-star ranking ensure there is no power dynamic between them. Pen's intention with this work is to remove identity and status from power, making the statement that everyone is equal and powerful. He explains 'I want society to understand that when you think of someone in power, you must think of the one not in power. They are the same.' The original photograph was taken in a flower garden, however Pen replaced the flowers with sunflowers, a common symbol used in Chinese Communist Party propaganda.

Section 1 Written Response Practice:

Question 1: In Pen's artworks he creates conversations on wealth, money, power and politics. How has the artist used visual language and techniques to convey his meanings and ideas. (5 Marks)

Question 2: Artists reinforce themes using symbolism. Discuss the use of symbolism in *Beautiful Day (2020)* and *Autocrat (2022)* to emphasise the artist's themes. (8 Marks)

Question 3: Leader Mao Zedong would often refer to himself as the sun and the citizens of the People's Republic of China as sunflowers, turning toward him everywhere he went. Analyse the following contemporary Asian artists' artworks, how do they use the image of a sunflower to discuss their political perspectives and ideas. (12 Marks)

- Original reference image Chinese Communist Party propaganda - *Beloved Chairman Mao, we are loyal to you forever* 1976
- Pen Robit – *Beautiful day 2020*
- Ai Wei Wei – *Sunflower seeds* 2011 <https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds-video-jingdezhen-mary-boone-gallery/>
- Xu Jiang – *The ode* 2018 <https://www.shine.cn/feature/art-culture/1810143406/>



Treasure Series: Smoke Protection, Dried Rice and Dried Straw 2022, digital print 67 x 100 cm

Neak Sophal

Neak's practice uses portraiture and performance to capture the social reality of Cambodian culture, and the stories and memories of her subjects. At the heart of her work is the question of identity, with the recognisable trait of covering her subjects' faces with physical objects. The five photographs in the exhibition are part of her 2022 series *Treasure* or *Kamnb*. The full body of work comprises 24 portrait photographs, a video documenting the lives of her subjects and an installation of collected objects. In the photographs the farmers gesture their joined hands forward as if offering or showing their product to the audience. Unifying the series is the presence of fruits, rice, plants, animal dung, soil, palm flower, spices and animals, suggesting an abundance of food security for the country. However, Neak's intentional composition within the works delves more deeply into the contemporary challenges of climate change and the tax of economic hardship on the lands. In all photographs the produce held in the subjects' hands fall away to the ground, alluding to their eventual diminishment. This creates a metaphor between the physical produce and the urgency to support and maintain lands for future generations. Behind each subject a stunning horizontal gold strip emphasises the held object and is partnered with an additional gold foil to remove the farmer's identity.

To view the full *Treasure* series please visit Neak Sophal's website: https://neaksophal.com/pages/pro_view/14

Think About/Discuss:

Neak has made intentional decisions in her composition to shift between the removal of identity and a suggestion of strong bond or connection between people. What visual choices has Neak made to emphasise ideas about identity and connection?

- How does a series like *Treasure* record the challenges of climate change?
- What part of the artist's world is getting explored through these photographs?

As a class or in small groups, use the photographs to make a list of descriptive words to describe the communities featured in these photographs. How would you describe their physical environments? What qualities would the communities need to develop to maintain their livelihood in a remote and rural environment?

Compare and contrast Neak Sophal's work with the practice of Burmese artists Min Ma Naing. Her photographic series *Faces of change* 2022 featured in 16albermarle Project Space's 2022 show *Fighting Fear II: It Goes Without Saying* <https://www.16albermarle.com/ff2-education-naing>



Sew Series: Mushroom, 2023, second hand fabric, thread and foam 105 x 75 cm

Yim Maline

Yim Maline's childhood fascination and love of her surroundings has developed into a didactic practice of observation, reflection and artmaking. The artist explores environmental themes on climate change, global disasters and ecological disruption, discussing the impact on both the physical land and human life. Across her projects Yim introduces a memorably diverse range of materials including burnt cardboard, fabrics, found objects and metals. Yim's new series *Sew* is inspired by her research and travel to 'development sites' across Cambodia and internationally. *Sew 2023* references the impact of floods, droughts, wildfires, storms and the countless climate refugees fleeing their homelands for new life. Through the production of intricately sewn and detailed objects, Yim relives the smells, sights, memories and stories from her research. These abstract and ambiguous objects hold qualities of organic nature, like examining an organism, flora or vegetation under a magnifying glass. Yim's choice of earthy, dark colours grounds the objects and references the raw and often disturbed beauty of the sites.

Think About/Discuss:

The sculptures are made from found second-hand fabrics, with Yim using the materials to draw attention to victims of climate change and her concerns with the trade industry.

'While I was sitting in the studio, I felt that I had saved some evidence of climate change victims.'

Discuss how the material choices are integral to Yim's communication of ideas. In your discussion ensure you consider both the ecological and psychological concepts behind the work.

Artmaking activity: Independently or in pairs go for a walk around your environment. On your walk mentally record the smells, textures, visuals and sounds around you this will require you to stop and listen, observe objects at a micro level and use senses like smell and touch. When you return to class use mixed media such as paper fabrics and foam, clay or other sculptural materials to reimagine your walk in object form.



SARSAR (Pillar) III 2023, cement, plaster, steel wire, sand and mirror, 210 x 30 x 30cm

Mao Sovanchandy

'SARSAR (Pillar) III's vertical hollow pillar is a symbol of the human who causes daily construction and destruction of buildings.' – Mao Soavnchady 2023

The sculpture presents Mao's ideas on the cycle of construction and destruction of everyday life. As a graduate of Science Architecture from Paragon International University in Phnom Penh, Mao's practice parallels her surroundings as her city undergoes rapid urbanisation. The sculpture communicates the cultural and environmental impact of adopting neoliberal metropolitanism and the fast-growing consumerism of modern development. She explains that architecture and buildings play a role in the value and histories of place, while the mirror encourages the realisation that buildings can reflect and shape our society. Mao uses this emotive experience to encourage her audience to reflect on urban identity and our responsibilities toward these structures that bear so much cultural and historical value.

Think About/Discuss:

Mao Sovanchandy's material practice is the pillar to her wider experience as an artist. The meanings of her work cannot be considered without a deep appreciation and understanding of the materials she uses and why. Breakdown each material and the possible meanings behind each one. Consider their physical qualities but also their historical, social and cultural contexts. This may require research into the various materials.

- Cement
- Plaster
- Steel wire
- Sand
- Mirror
- Broken mirror
- Light Projection and shadow

Consider Mao's sculpture in the wider context of southeast Asian art and artist experience. Investigate Mao's experience as an urban artist in conjunction with:

Chinese artist Yu Ji, *Jaded Ribs*, 2019-21. Rope, fishnet, fabric, breeze-block, plasterboard, metal, wax, cement in *Wasted Mud* exhibition, <https://www.studiointernational.com/yu-ji-wasted-mud>

Chinese-Vietnamese artist Kien Situ, *Shanshui (Portal Glacier)*, 2023. Chinese Mo Ink, gypsum cement in *Holding Patterns: Kien Situ* 2020 <https://4a.com.au/exhibitions/holding-patterns-part-1-kien-situ>

REFERENCES (Useful Links)

<https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds-video-jingdezhen-mary-boone-gallery/>

<https://www.shine.cn/feature/art-culture/1810143406/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jun/03/my-lockdown-fantasy-bustling-mind-blowing-beauty-of-phnom-penh>

<https://www.sasaart.info/>

<https://nga.gov.au/about-us/media/media-releases/2023/national-gallery-of-australia-returns-sculptures-to-cambodia/#:~:text=The%20National%20Gallery%20of%20Australia,Padmapani%2C%20Vajrapani%20and%20Avalokiteshvara%20Padmapani.>



A 16albermarle Project Space resource to support Australian teachers and students in the education of Contemporary South-east Asian art.