

## ALL THAT SURROUNDS US: NEW ART FROM CAMBODIA - EXPLORING THE VOICE OF CAMBODIAN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Lauren Barlow

That which surrounds us, be it metaphorical or physical, greatly informs our perception of self and society. The land that provides us with nourishment and the air that gives us breath. The stories we are asked to respect and those we are not reminded of and therefore forget. The spaces in which we carry out our daily lives and mark with celebrations. Collectively these conceptual and tangible spaces provide a framework for people to understand time and place.

Materiality and a country in transition were captured in *All That Surrounds Us: new art from Cambodia*, an exhibition held at Sydney's 16albermarle Project Space. The exhibition presented the 'now' of contemporary art in Cambodia, its artists, their disciplines and how they address and discuss their nation's political, social and environmental spheres.

*All That Surrounds Us* showed in partnership with Cambodian-run contemporary art space Sa Sa Art Projects. It presented new art by 12 young emerging and mid-career artists providing an overview of the contemporary Cambodian art scene. All had strong exhibiting experience in the region but were mostly unknown at an international level. The curatorial team comprised an Australian and three Cambodians, who together provided voice for young Cambodian artists as well as introducing new artistic and contextual dialogue to an Australian audience.

As the Australian curator, I had the opportunity to work directly with grass-root organisations and artists from a country I knew to be culturally and socially fruitful but often misrepresented internationally. Fundamentally, the partnership with Sa Sa Art Projects - Vuth Lyno, Chum Chenveasna and independent curator Moeng Meta - established the exhibition's strong Khmer voice. The artists shown in *All That Surround Us* were a diverse representation of rural and urban; male and female; young and older; established and emerging artists that captured an authentic snapshot of the themes, concerns and agendas important to Cambodian artists today.

With one overarching theme of materiality, the exhibition invited conversations on Cambodia's rapidly changing built and natural environments, depicting a country experiencing ecological stress, urban and rural divide, and poorly planned and rapid

ALL THAT SURROUNDS US: NEW ART FROM CAMBODIA 2023 EXHIBITION VIEW - PEN SEREYPAGNA, NEAK SOPHAL AND PRAK DALIN (LEFT TO RIGHT). IMAGE CREDIT: JENNI CARTER



urban development. Through the artworks the audience explored the relationship between art making and physical environment and the Khmer peoples' livelihood, spiritual practices and social experiences.

The artists employed another lens to materiality to examine what is significant and enduring. Through subject matter and symbols, the audience gained insight into the bond that Cambodian contemporary art has to its traditional roots, highlighting the importance of transforming and reimagining culture to further social and artistic progression. Works drew on themes of time, childhood, belief, heritage and the importance

of remembering that which has come before us. The exhibition communicated the country's deep roots in Buddhist spirituality and the non-linear relationship between past, present and future.

Mao Sovanchandy, Prak Dalin, Chea Sereyroth and Yim Maline used industrial, found and organic materials to drive a conversation on the rapid urbanisation crisis of Phnom Penh and the equally concerning ecological decline of rural areas. Pen Robit, Thang Sothea, Than Sok and Roeun Sokhom asked the audience to reimagine aspects of Cambodian culture and history to create a future of new perspectives and outcomes. The emphasis by Cambodian



DISRUPTION 2020, THANG SOTHEA, INSTALLATION VIEW. IMAGE CREDIT: SA SA ART PROJECTS



artists working on community-based projects to create visibility of vulnerable and marginalised Khmer communities was thoughtfully represented by Neak Sophal, Sao Sreymao, Eng Rithchandaneh and Pen Sereypagna. The exhibition included a strong series of public educational programs running over three weekends. These targeted an audience drawn from a range of disciplines including educators, students, architects, art critics, enthusiasts, collectors and curators. They heard first hand talks from visiting artists Yim Maline and Mao Sovanchandy.

On opening weekend, a symposium was held which included a detailed analysis of the Art Ecology of Cambodia by curators Chum Chenveasna and Moeng Meta and a panel discussion on art topics of common concern across Australia and Cambodia with curators Lauren Elise Barlow, Moeng

Meta, Tarun Nagesh (Curatorial Manager, Asian and Pacific Art, QAGOMA) and Melanie Eastburn (Senior Curator of Asian Art, Art Gallery of NSW). Also included was a workshop by Eva Lloyd (lecturer), Vuth Lyno and Pen Sereypagna on a local community project currently running in collaboration between Cambodian artists and The University of New South Wales' School of Built Environment.

A key objective identified by 16albermarle Project Space and Sa Sa Arts Projects was to promote visibility and support of contemporary art at the local level in Cambodia. Several Cambodian newspapers ran articles promoting the Khmer artists' presence in an Australian exhibition including The Phnom Penh Post (Raksmeay 2023). It was covered by Southeast Asian media platform Art and Market (Barlow 2023).



MAO SOVANCHANDY, IMAGE CREDIT: THE ARTIST

To document *All That Surrounds Us: new art from Cambodia*, the 16albermarle Project Space produced a comprehensive catalogue summarising the nuanced and positive development of contemporary art in Cambodia. The exhibition shared insight into an arts ecology led by an arts community that understands that the Khmer people have the agency and strength to influence great change and movement within their nation. But a powerful takeaway from the exhibition was an understanding that this Cambodian arts ecology needs governing structures and support to further consolidate the nation's artistic progress and future.

#### Interview with Artists

Yim Maline (Maline) and Mao Sovanchandy (Chandy) were the oldest and youngest artists respectively shown at *All That Surrounds Us* and were invited to Australia to participate in the opening weekend. Of different locations as well as age, they represent the diverse practices and voices of Cambodian artists today. In an interview conducted by co-curators Lauren Elise Barlow and Vuth Lyno, Maline and Chandy reflected on their practices and shared their experiences. The full September 2023 interview can be read in the exhibition catalogue.

*Cambodia is a country with very condensed urban cities and then sprawling rural villages. Can you share with us your environment growing up and how this informed your artmaking process?*

**M:** For me, I love nature. When I was young, I grew a garden and it actually made me become



very creative in finding and making things. For example, I constructed a house from wood using leaves and clay. Early in my practice my work very much activated those memories and childhood experience and reflection of the society of that time. More recently my interest is more about society today and what I see, not only in Cambodia but in the world. I still love nature, so whenever I go out into nature, for example to the mountain or to the forest I absorb the colours, the smells, the shape and the feeling that I have in those environments. I save and note in my brain, in my memory, and when I come to make a work I use all of this knowledge I have absorbed.

**C:** Moving around my environment and my day-to-day life influenced what I studied at university. I studied architecture, which was hard as a young woman. As I studied, I interned a lot in conservation and preservation projects, including the Rong Kon Project and the Vann Molyvann Project. It was working on these projects that built up a very strong connection with my art practice. I learned a lot about the history of Cambodia; we have a very long history of architecture from the ancient period to French colonisation. Part of my job was to interview people and archive things that were around those old buildings, I developed a very special connection and relationship to structures that hold a lot of historical and cultural value.

*Can you share with us some of the overarching themes and concerns in your works? What do you think is driving this discourse?*

**M:** I am concerned about the issues happening today...In Cambodian society and families, they don't want women or girls to be artists... as we are expected to take care of the domestic work around the house and the family members. [I also talk] about the destruction of the environment and nature because it seems so contrasting to natural human instincts. In my recent textile works, I stitched them and it was like I was stitching different parts of the earth's stories of humans and trees, all being distracted by these issues. That's what my works do; I stitch them together like trying to sew the wounds, like we sew the wounds on our body.

**C:** I see a lot of my peers coming from different backgrounds and it's very interesting. It's like a mixed media practice which works very well, it's a mixture of skills and a crossing of ideas...I think what we are all trying to do is do things that we love and at the same time give a certain voice that is not spoken. We want to raise it up and to show our perspective and transform that into a practice that becomes a space of reimagining, by all



the young artists' thinking. Because it's not only us making art, it's also the audience who participates and creates their own voice and meaning when they see things.

*It's very apparent through the exhibition that material process and practice drive conceptual development and artist intention for contemporary Cambodian art.*

**M:** I do not limit the particular kind of materials I work with. I choose the materials that have a certain relationship and connection to the concept itself, so it varies from project to project. I really enjoy working with different kinds of materials because each material has its own character and physical properties. When you bring them in you discover new layers, and then you are open and accepting to finding new aspects to them, and they become dynamic. I want the materiality of the works to speak with the audience and allow the audience to think and to process, and therefore the audience joins me in reflection.

**C:** Connecting my materials and conceptual process is clear for me, I mainly work with construction materials because of my background. I reuse materials that construct and also deconstruct themselves, and that references all the old buildings that were not very well taken care of because of the new wave of development. I work with pillar structures and use steel, glass, mirror and cement to talk about architecture. I also use light and shadow a lot, I like to cast shadows and reflections from my work. Negative and positive space is important to create abstract forms.

*Can you please share your opinion on how important intercultural exhibitions are as opportunities for both artists and audiences?*

**M:** As an artist I'm very proud to be part of this exhibition and that my work from Cambodia is presented on the international

stage. And in this case I'm very happy that my voice—not just my voice, but my yelling out about what I think about Cambodia or what I think about the world—is heard by audiences in Australia. I think this is very important, it's like a bridge that connects Cambodia and Australia. I hope that the audience can learn about Cambodia today, as opposed to our cultural heritage and legacy being the main narrative. It is so important that people see and learn about Cambodian artists now and what we produce today.

**C:** It is an honour for me as a young artist having a group exhibition with senior artists from Cambodia all the way in Australia. I even had the opportunity to do a residency here to make my work, I am living in my dream! I think it's an opportunity to share and engage with each other across cultures and a way to share ideas.

**M:** It's very unexpected, Cambodian art today, and so I hope the audience in Australia will experience something new and exciting. I hope the recognition we can generate internationally can also be brought back home and a Cambodian audience can start to recognise and value more the art we are producing today. If it could reach the Cambodian Ministry of Culture, hopefully the value and attention would influence the Ministry to improve its focus on contemporary art practices.

Lauren Elise Barlow is an arts educator, content writer and curator in Sydney. *All That Surrounds Us: new art from Cambodia* was her curatorial debut.

## REFERENCES

- Raksmey, Hong. *Contemporary Cambodian artists explore history in Aussie exhibition*, The Phnom Penh Post. 22 October 2023. See <https://www.phnompenhpost.com>
- Barlow, Lauren Elise. *Excerpt Series – All That Surrounds Us: New art from Cambodia*, Art and Market. 3 November 2023. See <https://artandmarket.net>