

Wrapped Future

Photographer Lim Sokchanlina captures the shrouded metamorphosis of Phnom Penh

By COLIN MEYN • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Looking at images of metal barriers, fences and walls that go up, come down or remain standing around building projects in Phnom Penh, one can only imagine what is, or once was, within the enclosures.

Lim Sokchanlina's exhibition "Wrapped Future" documents a half-decade of such enclosures in Phnom Penh.

"I felt like I was entering another world," Mr. Sokchanlina said of his initial encounters with

the barriers as they began to obscure swaths of the capital, and which remain a permanent feature of the city today.

"Impossible seemed to happen—these fences were another landscape in the city... I wanted to remember them, to archive them," he said of his photographs, which are now showing at the SaSa Bassac Gallery on the corner of Street 178 and Sothearos Boulevard.

In one image, the arm of a yellow excavator, rising above a bright blue barrier, suggests earth has been moved. In another, creeping vines, the same dark-green color as the rusting blockade they have grown over, expose an unexpected permanence to the temporary en-

closure. But in most of the images, all that can be seen is a metal wall, photographed at eye-level, framed by the sky above and the ground below.

The repetition in "Wrapped Future" is intentional, and the influence of contemporary German photographers who also employ consistent angles and symmetry in their work is apparent.

Thomas Struth made his name as a photographer capturing desolate streets in Dusseldorf, which he presented in a grid of 49 images, each adhering to a nearly identical central positioning. The streets had different names and the buildings different numbers, but Mr. Struth showed that they were remarkable in their conformity.

Like Mr. Struth, Mr. Sokchanlina aims to show how the city's development tends toward duplicity, but also how it erases history, replacing it with corrugated metal and steel frames. Each photo is captioned with the address of the place no longer visible, or perhaps no longer there.

"The former Dey Krahorm, East Wall, between Sothearos Boulevard and National Assembly Street, 200," "Former Preah Suramarit National Theatre, National Assembly Street, 2009," "Olympic Stadium, East Wall, 2012."

In conjunction with the photographs, in which people are conspicuously absent, these notes of places past compose a conceptually moving—if, at times, monotonous—portrait of a city where development is obscuring its past and marginalizing its people.

A rather frustrating feature of Mr. Sokchanlina's images is their flatness, which is rather unsurprising given his subject matter (fences). But the fact that he has enhanced this feeling by shooting only in the middle of the day, when the sun imposes an equalizing glare on all elements in the frame, suggests that this is a purposeful manipulation.

"I think the brightness gives life to the landscape," said Mr. Sokchanlina, explaining that he wanted to shoot the barriers as if they were a landscape on their own—"like an alien world."

Considering the length of time that went into Mr. Sokchanlina's four-year project, and the important message buried within the work, the exhibition itself is rather disappointing. Rather than allowing the photographs to speak for themselves, the main space in the SaSa Gallery is blocked off by a three-sided green barricade made of the same corrugated metal that appears in many of Mr. Sokchanlina's photographs.

Though initially vexing that one cannot enter the blocked-off space, which is presumably the point, it is also a shame that Sokchanlina has chosen to allow a gimmick to overshadow a collection that amounts to powerful documentation of the metamorphosis of Phnom Penh.

A printed collection of "Wrapped Future" can be purchased at the SaSa Gallery



Dragon Bridge Street, Diamond Island City, West End, 2009

Lim Sokchanlina



Opposite Plaza Cambodia, Russian Confederation Boulevard (1), 2011

Lim Sokchanlina