

In orb of futility, reminders of the country's brutal past

Lashed to a giant metal sphere, Sareth Svay, a performance artist from Battambang, struggles to escape the burdens of his fate

BY HANNAH SENDER

Great artists push boundaries, expanding the definition of art until it becomes indefinable. Cambodian artists are no exception. Not long ago, Sareth Svay undertook a journey from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh which lasted more than eight nights and nine days, dragging behind him an 80kg metal sphere measuring two metres in diameter and carrying only basic food, water and a blue tarpaulin. His extraordinary feat of endurance art was called simply *Mon Boulet*.

Sareth grew up in the Site 2 camp on the Thai border, and it was there he first studied art (he later went on to found the Phare Ponleu Selpak art school in Battambang). His earliest memory is the blue tarpaulin on which he slept: his rudimentary bed on the floor of the forest. Decades later, the brightly coloured tarpaulin is still a significant motif among his childhood memories.

After studying in France, Sareth returned home to confront the traces of Cambodia's recent history, and this is where the immense sphere figures into his work. "The ball is a souvenir from the past. The ball and harness allude to the European phrase 'ball and chain'." It signifies personal baggage, entrapment and restricted movement: *Mon Boulet* was a task of continual resistance against the dragging force.

The project isn't just the metaphorical



conception of a man dragging the past behind him; *Mon Boulet* refers to the efforts of the men, women and children who endured forced labour under the Khmer Rouge: "Men would be harnessed to carts and made to drag things behind them in the fields."

Over the course of its journey, Sareth's ball has been inscribed by many different hands. "People have so many questions they want to ask. I cannot remember them all, there are so many. So I have asked people to

write their questions on the ball." The sphere is thus marked by individual voices, each asking their own questions regarding the civil war; each using *Mon Boulet* to satisfy their need to have those questions addressed. They do not expect a verbal or written answer; they seek release from the question itself through the enduring movement of Sareth and his multifarious ball.

For those critics who continue to question the point of Sareth's labour, there is none.

That is the point. Like Sisyphus, Sareth's journey may never have an end. He's working through questions posed by history but probably won't find an answer. Albert Camus, the French philosopher, considers that Sisyphus, being conscious of the futility of his struggle, can draw victory from his captors. That Sisyphus trundles back down the mountain to push the rock back up to the summit again, that Sareth bothers to harness himself to a metal sphere, confirms that man has not been exhausted. To make the endeavour "makes fate a human matter, which must be settled by men". Sareth claims man's fate from Cambodia's tragic history and from his own past simply by enduring *Mon Boulet*, his self-imposed task.

Sareth prefers work that moves across great distances, which makes seeing him rather tricky. His journey was, however, filmed – and it is about to take on a different life as a film and exhibition. *Mon Boulet* remarks upon history by mimicking its evolution from event to museum, giving us the chance to consider Sareth's work and the changes it is about to make to art history.

WHO: Sareth Svay

WHAT: *Mon Boulet*

WHEN: May 31 to June 23

WHERE: Institut Français du Cambodge, St. 184

WHY: Catch a glimpse of man's eternal struggle