

An Independent Mind

Artist Svay Sareth is at the cutting edge of the Cambodia's art world. The artist speaks to Hannah Sender about his upcoming exhibition, *The Traffic Circle*.

Experimental artist Svay Sareth seems inexhaustible. After dragging a large metal ball across Cambodia and pushing a hand-made boat to the French sea-board, the artist has assembled a formidable structure in Phnom Penh's Sa Sa Bassac Gallery.

The sculpture shows industrial water pipes tangled through a soaring wooden pyramid. Accompanying the work is a photograph of the artwork under a stormy sky. In the image, Svay's pyramid has replaced Independence Monument at the junction of Sihanouk and Norodom Boulevards.

The artist is unwilling to give away too much about the meaning of his latest piece, instead leaving the audience free to think independently without fear of being proven wrong.

"I tell people different things," says Svay, who co-founded Battambang-based art school Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS). "I do not want to explain to the public the concept behind my work."

He does, however, relate the location of the pyramid in the image to the idea of connection. "When we think about the environment, we are thinking about how it connects," he explains.

The idea is echoed in the blue piping used in the piece. Tuyo, the Khmer word for pipe, is a common synonym for a relationship or link to a person in power.

The structure is also made from both new and reclaimed wood, which lends the work an unfinished quality. The incomplete nature of *The Traffic Circle* implies the possibility of evolution. "The new structure stands on top of the old base, which might all collapse at any moment," observes Svay.

Though the new exhibition, on show at in the white exhibition

space at Sa Sa Bassac until Jul. 27, evokes a sense of danger, the artist does not mean to make the audience feel helpless.

The show is an evolving one that involves rather than isolates the audience. Visitors can walk on the sculpture if they choose and are invited to bring their own photographs of Independence Monument to the gallery. Each image will be copied and manipulated to feature in an archive that will be taken, along with the artwork, to Germany in 2013.

The Traffic Circle also marks a shift from the artist's early work, which dealt with both his past and Cambodia's recent history. Following the 1975 to 1979 Khmer Rouge regime, Svay spent his formative years in a refugee camp on the Thai border where, at aged 14, he began experimenting with art as a way to express his feelings.

"I wanted to find another way of telling people about my experience," says the artist, whose first

performance involved coining the bare ground in a nod to traditional medicine.

Svay went on to found PPS, before studying for a Bachelors and Masters in Fine Art in France. While in Europe, he built a boat as part of a work entitled *Tuesday* that echoed his early paintings, made in the refugee camp, of vessels that could bring him home. He then pushed the creation 27-kilometres through the French province of Normandy until he reached the sea.

Inspired by Robinson Crusoe, *Tuesday* dealt with issues of self-awareness and perseverance. Svay's long walk and isolated working process yoked his own endeavour to the fictional experiences of the famous literary character.

A year later, he returned to Cambodia where his creativity continued to make an impact, with similar themes resurfacing in a later work, *Mon Boulet*.

The artwork saw the artist

drag a large metal sphere from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh in a journey that took eight days and nine nights. The 80-kilogram ball, currently being exhibited at the French Institute, bears the scars of the journey and scrawled questions from members of the public who Svay encountered on his way.

The object of the journey was to turn a mirror on his own experiences, a goal Svay believes he did not achieve. But though *Mon Boulet* did not throw light upon his past, it has contributed to a discussion on Cambodia's the trials of mankind and recent history.

"We are all part of the same story," he says. "You are already a page in history. I am too. I need to adjust the story."

Now, Svay is looking to both the present day and the future. "I don't want to make something people have already. My present is dangerous, but it's when you can make changes." ❏

