

A Coming of Age for Cambodia Artists

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In this crucial year for Cambodia, a show in Hong Kong -- entitled "Forever Until Now: Contemporary Art from Cambodia," and running until April 25 -- is a rare and thoughtful cultural survey exploring the country's journey from tragedy to hope, seen through the evolution of its art.

The show, at the 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, along with several other events, marks a turning point for an international affirmation of Cambodian artistic life today. In December Cambodian artists will be represented for the first time at the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia, and a few weeks before, the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial in Japan will again showcase the Southeast Asian nation.

As the United Nations conducts its trials in Phnom Penh to seek justice for atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge, it seemed fitting -- though it was not deliberately timed -- that the international art world should be giving special recognition and visibility to Cambodia now. Under Pol Pot's rule in the 1970s, up to a fifth of the population of eight million perished -- including 90 percent of the country's artists.

Because organizers are playing down the commercial side of the art, the Hong Kong show is left to focus more on the themes present in Cambodia life.

The gallery's owner, Katie de Tilly, worked as a fund-raiser with Médecins Sans Frontières and visited Thai refugee camps holding Cambodians in the 1990s.

The exhibit takes over the Chancery's Central District gallery and a space in the Chai Wan factory building, 25 minutes away by taxi. "Forever" features video, photography, painting, sculpture and installations by 14 of Cambodia's most important artists. It has something for everyone: decorative, serious, escapist and sophisticated.

"When I went to visit in June, I could feel Cambodian art was at the beginning of something," said de Tilly, and so she decided to document it. A longtime Hong Kong resident, she represents luminaries like Huang Rui, a leader of China's 1980s avant-garde movement, and the American painter Julian Schnabel.

At about the same time Russell Storer, the contemporary Asian art curator at the Queensland Art Gallery, a government museum that organizes the Asia Pacific Triennial, took his own research trip to Cambodia, and came back "very excited about the artists," he had met, he said. "Forever" includes the three artists selected by Mr. Storer for Brisbane.

Erin Gleeson, an American historian of Asian art who lives in Cambodia, curated the Chancery exhibit, conscious that it needed to go beyond what she called "the two Ts" -- temples and trauma -- that most people reflexively associate with the nation. Though those themes provide a starting point for some of the pieces, making them accessible, Ms. Gleeson keeps it all interesting by highlighting the merit and context of each work.

At the entrance of the main gallery, to set the mood, she hung "Pray for Peace," an eerie but optimistic 2008 oil-on-canvas by Vann Nath portraying Cambodians worshipping under a stormy sky. Now very ill and in his 60s, Mr. Vann Nath is one of only seven survivors of Tuol Sleng, the notorious camp where Pol Pot's functionaries killed up to 20,000 people.

Next to the piece, on a continuous loop, is "S-21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine," the 2003 multi-award-winning documentary on Tuol Sleng, by a film festival favorite, Rithy Panh. The painting is for sale for 55,000 Hong Kong dollars, or about \$7,100; the video is not, though it is widely available from DVD retailers.

Seven paintings by the late Svay Ken (from 75,000 to 100,000 Hong Kong dollars) occupy a place of honor in the Chai Wan gallery. They are scenes from daily life, made in the na?, folk style for which he became known. Mr. Storer, who chose him for the triennial, said that "Svay Ken was a senior painter, self-taught, who lived through the turbulent history of the country and represented it through his work." He died in December at age 75. "Forever" also includes three amateurly rendered canvases by his 25-year-old granddaughter, Ouk Sochivy, who only began painting last year.

Back in Central, four colorful collages by Leang Seckon, who was born in 1974, are memorable for their crowd-pleasing appeal. Leang Seckon is the best-known artist of his generation, and Cambodians recognize him for his art collaborations with a 1960s pop icon named Dy Saveth, as well as for his solitary work. In "Prison Guard," he narrates the life of Duch, the man in charge of Tuol Sleng who, while awaiting trial, converted to Christianity and became the only Khmer Rouge leader to publicly repent.

Perhaps the Hong Kong show's most intriguing work -- though not for sale -- is by Than Sok, born in 1984. He constructs houses out of bright yellow incense sticks as installations, and then burns them, a commentary on how people become disposable commodities -- once to the Khmer Rouge, now to eviction enforcers and factories.

Ms. Gleeson estimates that there are only 40 working artists in Cambodia and that this is a special, nearly innocent, moment in time because they seem to make things almost purely out of a need to express themselves. "There is no art market because this is just the beginning. Artists do not produce for the market," she said.

Yet validation happens. Sopheap Pich was born in Battambang in 1969 and left Cambodia after 1975, passing through a Thai refugee camp. His family resettled in the United States, and he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, finishing a Master of Fine Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999.

Returning to Cambodia in 2003, he switched to sculpture. His rattan and bamboo pieces made an impact among the video and high-concept installations at the prestigious Best of Discovery section at Shanghai's "SHContemporary" art fair in 2008. Mr. Sopheap Pich was chosen for Fukuoka and Brisbane this year. He is also finishing a commission for a university in Saudi Arabia and preparing for a November solo exhibit at the Tyler Rollins Fine Art gallery in New York.

Ms. Gleeson credits him for helping raise international interest in Cambodian culture. "Sopheap is an icon for the younger artists," she said. Childhood memories of woven local baskets and handcrafted toys inspire works made out of natural materials, like "Cycle" and "The Duel." Yet he employs a very contemporary approach Mr. Storer called a "highly sophisticated yet a deeply grounded response to place and personal experience."

Vandy Rattana, another artist in the show, has a series of large, documentary photographs of a Phnom Penh slum as it burned down last April. Of his art, he said simply, "I need to tell a story."

Before financial bubbles and busts, this was the reason artists lived -- for art's sake.