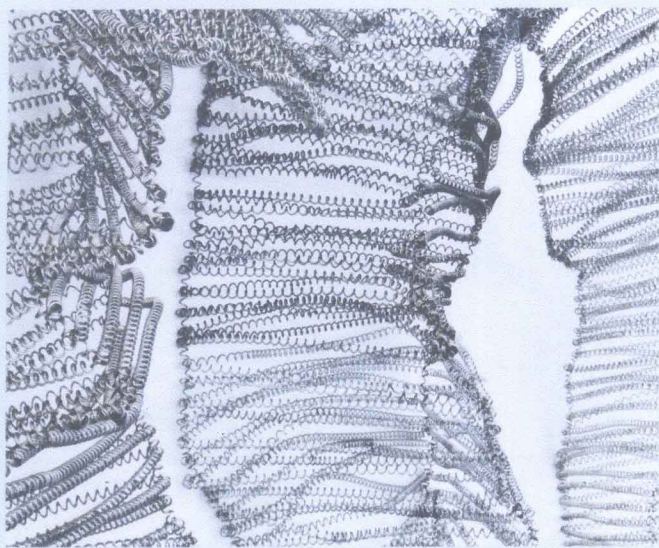


# Healing the Wounds

FEMALE ARTISTS AND CURATORS ARE MOVING TO THE FOREFRONT OF CAMBODIA'S ART COMMUNITY  
BY JANE INGRAM ALLEN



**TITH KANITHA** *Close Friends (detail)*, 2011, wire installation, for the exhibition "SurvivArt - Arts for the Right to a Good Life," at Mikael Andersen gallery, Berlin, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

With the weight of a troubled political history stemming from the murderous Khmer Rouge (1975–79) and a still-nascent commercial art market, being an artist in Cambodia is a struggle for anyone. However, it is even more difficult for women than their male counterparts. Living in a traditionally patriarchal society, young women have few role models and little encouragement to become contemporary artists. Yet a visit around the country in January revealed that this has been changing in recent years, as female artists gain support from organizations at home and abroad.

At present, contemporary art in Cambodia is concentrated in Phnom Penh, the bustling capital on the Mekong River; Siem Reap, the northern gateway city to the ancient Khmer temples of Angkor Wat; and Battambang, in the western, rice-growing region, home to a strong art school, which started as a place for training former street children in visual and performing arts. The art school in Battambang, Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS), now produces some of the most noteworthy emerging artists and runs the Romeet Gallery in Phnom Penh, which mostly showcases the work of alumni.

Among PPS's graduates is Sokuntevy Oeur, who was born in 1983. In 2007, Tevy, as she is known, moved to the capital to pursue a career as a practicing artist, and since then has been exhibiting her artwork with Java Arts, a nonprofit art gallery and café. There, in mid-May, she had a solo show of her newest painting series, "Ping Vey," which she was working on in January when I visited her second-floor apartment and studio. At the time, a number of new paintings were ready, as well as several works that were still in progress. With hybrid animal-plant-human forms surrounded by colorful, detailed depictions of common household interiors and symbolic motifs such as the serpent, Tevy's paintings have a surrealistic and mythical content that reflects her interest in traditional Khmer art and spiritual beliefs. Yet her work also mixes humor with the darker side of Cambodian history. Her attention to detail and technical skill, as well as her ability to evoke strong emotional narratives, gives her work a powerful appeal with feminist overtones.

Tevy has also begun to exhibit overseas. Her first exhibition abroad was in 2008, when she was an artist-in-residence in

Lijiang, China. In 2009 she was selected for the Incheon Women Artists' Biennale in South Korea, the only artist from Cambodia among 101 others from around the globe. There, she showed a group of mixed-media sculpture works, "Something in the Signs" (2008), hybrids of humans and beasts based on the traditional Cambodian signs of the zodiac. This year, in March, her paintings were featured in "Half the Sky: Five Leading Female Contemporary Artists from Southeast Asia" at the East Gallery, in Toronto, as well as in "Me Love You Long Time" at Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, New Jersey, in February.

Initiatives to specifically encourage young women have also been established. Linda Saphan, an artist who now lives in the United States, founded Selapak Neari as a new and experimental venture in Phnom Penh in 2005. Although the gallery no longer exists, its influence persists, as female artists who got their start there continue to advance their careers. One young woman who was a part of Selapak Neari is Kanitha Tith, born in 1987. Kanitha attended the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, majoring in interior design, because it seemed a more commercially viable field for a young woman at the time. After graduating, and with the encouragement she gained at Selapak Neari, Kanitha decided to pursue a career as a sculptor and installation artist.

In February, Kanitha traveled abroad for the first time, to Berlin, as part of a group show developed by SurvivArt with artists from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar, who developed a project reflecting on "the right to a good life" and based on interactions with the artists' own cultures. Kanitha transposed to Berlin the collaborative community-art project she had been working on with her neighbors, and re-created part of her house, including photo collages and mixed-media sculptures with fabrics, personal objects and pillows, to conjure the flavor of her Phnom Penh residence. Kanitha's installation in Berlin spoke to universal themes of home, gender roles and the struggle to protect and preserve a personal space.

Like Tevy, Kanitha's studio is located in her home. She lives alone in a neighborhood of traditional multi-family buildings that was until recently under threat of being torn down by the government as an unwanted slum; developers had won support to transform the lakeside area into hotels and luxury apartments. However, Kanitha and her neighbors have fought to keep their homes by refusing to move and petitioning the government. Secure for now, she has space to make works on the ground floor, which also doubles as a community center and exhibition space, to introduce neighbors to contemporary art. There is a loft upstairs, accessible via a wooden ladder, where she



**MEAS SOKHORN**, *Cooked Currency*, mixed media on paper, 65 x 90 cm. Photo by Timothy S. Allen. Courtesy the artist.

sleeps and also works on some of her larger mixed-media installations and sculptures.

In her sculptures, Kanitha bends and weaves wire by hand, creating multiple units that she then puts together on site, to make into installations. These organic, tubular forms are intertwined and suspended from the wall or ceiling. Her use of shadows and negative spaces, as well as the complex relationships between the parts, gives her wire sculptures dynamism. Since the installation Kanitha showed in Berlin is quite different from her sculptures, it will be interesting to see how the experience of traveling and interacting with international artists affects her development.

Women are also the leading forces behind several of the important alternative spaces and galleries in Phnom Penh. Java Arts, where Dana Langlois is the director, has regularly changing exhibitions in the downstairs coffee shop area, and a small gallery upstairs adjoining the restaurant space. In 2010, Java Arts hosted the inaugural You Khin Memorial Women's Art Prize, named in honor of the late female painter, which was won by established painter Doung Saree. Langlois is also the coordinator of "Our City Festival," which has been held in Phnom Penh in September for the past four years. This festival highlights public-art projects and focuses on urban issues, with the participation of many contemporary art spaces, galleries and artists. One notable project in the 2011 edition, curated by Kate O'Hara and Natalie Pace, two Phnom Penh-based curators, was a site-specific wall drawing at Sa Sa Bassac gallery by young Cambodian artist Vollak Kong. The artist continually drew expansive gestural marks with charcoal, which became an almost solid

mass by the close of the festival.

Kong's drawing was created during a one-month residency at Sa Sa Bassac, which started as an alternative art space run by a group of artists known as Stiev Selapak ("Art Rebels") under the artistic direction of Erin Gleeson (*ArtAsiaPacific's* Cambodia desk editor). In April 2011, the new gallery's second exhibition showcased Yim Maline, whose graphite drawings from the "Scar" series (2010) depict exploding rice clusters, and whose installations of dirt and ceramics recall her childhood.

Some of the most active spaces in Phnom Penh are those sponsored by foreign governments, including the German Cambodian Cultural Center (known as Meta House), and the French Cultural Center of Cambodia. These organizations encourage equal gender representation in their exhibitions and programs. Meta House—also the place to see contemporary film in Cambodia—is directed by Nico Mesterharm, who works closely with the center's art manager Lydia Parusol. Parusol curated an important exhibition for female artists "Hey Sister, Where are you Going?" in 2010, held at the Sovanna Shopping Mall, with funding from the Heinrich Böll Foundation. In January, Meta House showed Chhim Sothy's dark, brooding paintings, which reflect childhood horrors experienced during the Khmer Rouge regime.

The French Cultural Center runs a lively program of contemporary art that features indoor and outdoor exhibitions. There are two indoor gallery spaces, one traditional gallery space in the main building and another open public space across the street, in the lobby of the building used for classes and meetings. Kanitha Tith showed her work in the public space in 2011 and also had

some outdoor sculptures in the garden area. On view in January, in the public gallery, were mixed-media paintings that reflected Meas Sokhorn's humorous take on common Cambodian themes, as well as a large sculpture installation, *Untitled Pile* (2012), an avalanche of blank stretched canvases joined together and stacked up high in the center of the open space.

In Siem Reap, the Hôtel de la Paix has an "arts lounge" and a curated space named Thev Gallery, programmed by artist-curator Sasha Constable and her assistant Savann Oun—a young artist and PPS graduate. The February 2012 exhibition, "Endangered Nature," had an environmental focus and, among other works, featured paintings by children from the Green Gecko Project and the Cambodian Landmine Museum Relief Fund, which are programs educating street children in the arts and in environmental awareness, to develop their confidence and powers of self-expression. Through the programs, around 90 children studied painting for three months with Savann Oun. Though now closed for renovations, the hotel will reopen in early 2013, as the Park Hyatt Siem Reap.

Despite ongoing societal difficulties, the contemporary art scene in Cambodia is lively, with many young emerging artists. At the same time that the country struggles to ensure equal-rights and combat police and judiciary corruption—which often ignores gender-based crimes and domestic violence—young women artists and curators play an important role in the increased presence of contemporary art. Gaining attention domestically and abroad, Cambodia's art scene continues to grow as it speaks to universal concerns of equality, tradition and history.



**OEUR SOKUNTEVY**, *Untitled (Sitting Figure)*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. Courtesy Java Arts, Phnom Penh.