

Khvay Samnang

WEDDING AND HAIR

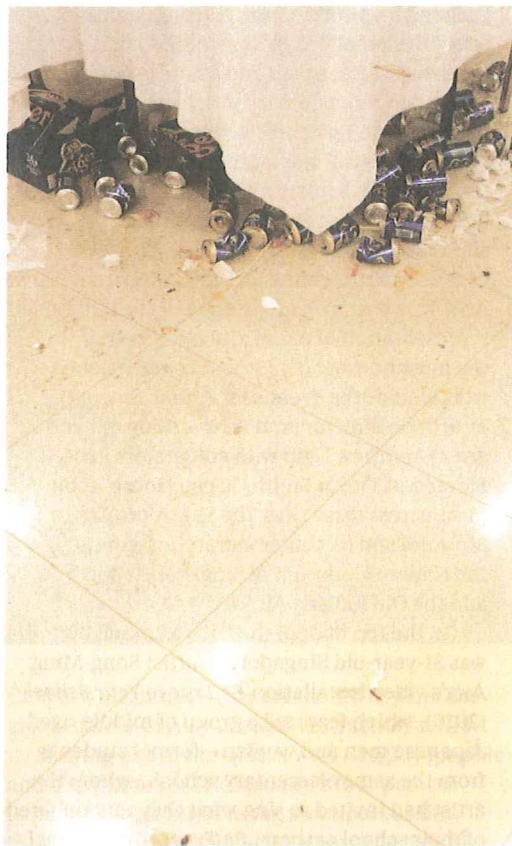
Since graduating from Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts in 2006, 28-year-old Khvay Samnang has developed a body of work encompassing sculpture, photography, video and installation, participated in group exhibitions in Cambodia, Hong Kong and France and co-founded the young Cambodian artists collective Stiev Selapak in 2007. Two years later, the collective, comprising six artists and photographers, established Sa Sa Art Gallery, the first artist-run experimental exhibition space in Cambodia.

Following Samnang's first solo exhibition, at Java Café and Gallery in Phnom Penh in 2010, "Wedding and Hair" opened in January 2011 at Hotel de la Paix in Siem Reap. The exhibition, which featured color photographic prints and hirsute sculptures, represented a male artist's fascination with the beauty rituals of Cambodian women, as well as with alternative representations of the Khmer wedding ceremony.

The digital photograph *Wedding Series – Untitled 07* (2009) shows a young woman's bedroom, rich with details: The dressing table is laden with bottles of beauty products. The bride, coiffed, made-up and in wedding costume, is seated on a plastic chair and looking into the distance with a distracted expression. The image engagingly reveals a private and intensely candid "behind the scenes" moment. Similarly, *Wedding Series – Untitled 06* (2009) captures a group-photo-in-the-making with the wedding's many participants looking in different directions, adjusting their clothes and shoes, as they prepare for a formal composition. To the side, relatives and guests sit on the floor and talk among themselves. A camera lens protrudes into the corner of the frame.

Traditional Khmer weddings are elaborate and festive celebrations, often lasting three to five days. They include numerous ceremonies and expensive dowries presented to the bride's family for the purpose of honoring the parents and passing on blessings. Samnang's images differ from the typical photographic record of Cambodian weddings sanctioned by families—in which the goal is formality and visual perfection—by providing insights into the spontaneous and genuine moments from the event. These are the memories that will live on in stories passed among family and friends, and are precisely the things that remain out of view in a formal portrait. One such moment is the aftermath of the wedding party depicted in *Wedding Series – Untitled 02* (2009), in which Samnang focuses on a tablecloth overhanging a table and a pile of discarded beer cans on the white-tiled floor below.

The artist's sculptures, created from hair collected from roadside barbers in Phnom Penh,



are more ambiguous and suggestive. A work titled *Peacock* (2010) features hair molded into a form resembling a human face, while a surrounding set of strands are plaited into long pigtailed tinted blue and green, alluding to the feathers of a peacock. Positioned on a plinth, *Snail* (2010) is similar to a hairdresser's mannequin with a large and fantastic hairdo sitting on top of a head form, also crafted in hair. From one angle, the ensemble resembles the shape of a snail. The sculptures possess a surreal presence in their combination of the anthropomorphic and the grotesque—they also suggest the process of transformation that occurs with the application of hair color and beauty treatments.

Following the end of the Khmer Rouge era and the increased impact of globalization on urban life in Cambodia, Western cosmetics have become more available to consumers, while the number of cosmetic surgery businesses has doubled in recent years. "Wedding and Hair" presented an original, thought-provoking and humorous male perspective on female beauty and Khmer weddings, at a time when Cambodian traditions are being influenced and challenged by global representations of beauty and romance.

CATHERINE WILSON