

ARTS

Cambodian Art Emerges From Horrors of a Murderous Past

By ROBERT TURNBULL DEC. 29, 2010

PHNOM PENH — Slowly but surely, Cambodia's visual arts' scene has been emerging from the shadow of the Pol Pot era, nurtured by a clutch of mostly Western-owned galleries dotted around the capital. Years of faith and investment are finally paying off. Moreover, among Phnom Penh's 40 or so professional artists, two are fetching handsome prices in New York, London and Hong Kong.

Born in 1974 and 1971 respectively, Leang Seckon and Pich Sopheap were infants when civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime combined to kill nearly three million Cambodians. Mr. Pich remembers the chaos that followed Pol Pot's retreat in 1979, sheltering in ruined pagodas amidst the scarred rice fields of northern Battambang Province.

Mr. Leang hails from the southern region of Svay Rieng, a place that was carpet-bombed by U.S. aircraft during the Vietnam War. His foremost memories as a boy tending buffalo are of his mother repairing clothes with fragments of material and of bathing in water he now believes was polluted with Agent Orange.

Mr. Pich and Mr. Leang share their generation's concerns about the worrying speed of Cambodia's development — both are being made homeless because the lake around which they have lived and worked has been drained for construction — but there the similarities end: They are wildly different stylistic and aesthetic characters.

Pich Sopheap left Cambodia in 1979. After a spell in France, he graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 1995 and received a masters of fine arts from the

School of the Art Institute of Chicago. On his return to Cambodia in 2003 he and his partner at the time, Linda Saphan, formed Visual Arts Open to encourage local artists and organize an exhibition — the first group showing in Cambodia since the 1960s.

The rediscovery of his country catalyzed a move from painting to sculpture. Using bamboo, wire and rattan, Mr. Pich “weaves” his pieces into a web or grid, a technique that is deceptively simple and, he says, rich in metaphor. “These indigenous materials have concealed strength,” he said, “not unlike Cambodia. One can see through my works and yet they are almost indestructible.”

These personal narratives hover between abstraction and representation, with suggestions of fishing-baskets and other staples of Cambodian life alongside allusions to organs like the stomach and lungs — symbols of strength and fragility for Mr. Pich. A series of “broken” Buddha heads emerged from childhood memories of the destruction of the nation’s religious heritage. At his show “The Pulse Within” at the Tyler Rollins Gallery in New York in 2009, many people were “blown away,” Mr. Pich said. “Some were crying and touching my head. They saw my art as transcending all the usual negative associations, the poverty and all the baggage of Cambodia.”

Here Mr. Pich touches on a sensitive issue. For all the talk of reconciliation and “moving on” after the murderous Khmer Rouge era, some complain that others are still milking the tragedy for what they can. Mr. Pich’s work speaks directly to those who have experienced trauma and loss, but is generally devoid of overt references to the Pol Pot era, images that make Cambodian art “too loud,” he said. He added: “Symbols and references cannot be avoided” in sculpture, “but a degree of abstraction allows more layers of interpretation.”

Mr. Rollins agrees. “Some of Pich’s work refers to the body or bodily organs, so they affect the viewer on a visceral level. Yet however raw the emotional content, it is woven into the structure of the works and never on the surface.”

Interest in Mr. Pich’s work is gathering momentum. The larger pieces at the New York show were sold for as much as \$40,000, while a commission for a university in Saudi Arabia netted him \$50,000, a world record for a Cambodian artist.

Works by Mr. Pich are in museums in Singapore and Brisbane, Australia, and there are plans to show his work in two U.S. museums next year, starting with a group show at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum in April. His large piece “Compound” will appear at the Singapore Biennale in March.

In contrast to Mr. Pich's classical exactitude, Leang Seckon wants his work to express "all his feelings about life." It is quirky and audacious, and in a peculiarly Asian sense, baroque. Traditional symbolism is fused with autobiography in collages and installations that overflow with references to his childhood years, the environment and a pantheon of personal gods and icons, sometimes painted, sometimes glued or even sewn on.

Mr. Leang graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 2002 and has shown his work in the United States, Japan, Hong Kong and Myanmar. He will be represented at Singapore's Art Stage next month. Not all viewers will be familiar with the national and personal references in his work, but there is a joy in the execution, and a freedom of fantasy and eccentricity that is ultimately disarming.

In "The God of the Ricefield" (2007) he combines the bodies of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and miniatures of her six children — one of them Cambodian — with the most prominent features of Cambodia's topography. "From her six breasts and 'holy navel' the milk of life flows into Cambodia's Tonle Sap lake, which in turn brings sustenance to the rice fields," Mr. Leang said. The only Hollywood star to extend a hand to Cambodia, he said, Ms. Jolie represents a kind of ideal, an "earth mother" who will "take care" of Cambodia. "Cupped in the couple's eight hands are objects that their children and many young people desire, cellphone, limo, computer factory and some Kentucky fried chicken."

Among about 20 pieces at the Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London in March, most attention was given to "Heavy Skirt," an installation named after the skirt his mother wore during pregnancy. The garment adorns a maquette of a soldier assembled from a skeleton and the paraphernalia of Cambodia's numerous wars, from French rifles to U.S. Army helmets and Khmer Rouge shoes made from tires. At the gallery, Mr. Leang said that the genesis of the piece was an exorcism of his childhood fears, illustrated by a performance piece in which he plays himself as a baby emerging from the skirt.

Mr. Leang has a Buddhist's empathy with the natural world. He was the first among his contemporaries to take the environment as an issue, with the "Rubbish Project," a naga snake 225 meters, about 740 feet, long, that was made from recycled plastic, mostly discarded bags dumped in the Siem Reap.

Now his work focuses on mourning the loss of the lake and its inhabitants. Eight pieces "giving thanks" to the 19 years he lived there will be shown at Singapore Art

Stage in January. The next month the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh will stage a solo show of his work.

Mr. Pich and Mr. Leang remain focused on their native land, but are equally comfortable with the surge of international interest. As someone schooled in the United States, Mr. Pich has a keen awareness of global art trends. Mr. Leang says he prefers at this stage to remain independent, has yet to sign any binding contracts and, like his beloved Mekong, seems content to go with the flow. But then he has little to worry about — almost everything he produces sells.

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