



A glimpse of artist Leang Seckon's most recent work, which looks at the mighty Mekong River. CLAIRE KNOX

## Man in the mirror: the many sides of Leang Seckon



Fri, 30 August 2013 [Claire Knox](#)

At sundown, the riverfront temple of Preah Ang Dangkeu is heaving with devotees, weaving through a choked Sisowath Quay, holding lotus flowers and lavish offerings of fruit, and leaving a trail of musky incense in their wake.

Artist Leang Seckon makes his way through them towards the Royal Palace, where he sold his first-ever painting for \$350. They are now worth some \$20,000.

"Bong, you're from TV," a young vendor yells. Seckon smiles awkwardly, as we make our way back to his studio, several blocks south of the palace.

There, he is preparing to ship a large painting to Bangkok for the ASEAN exhibition and symposium "WE=ME" at the city's Silpakorn University, running until September 11.

One of the country's leading contemporary artists – some say the country's first – Seckon, 44, is a man of contrasts. At times an extrovert, he seems to slip into gregarious performance with ease. When speaking, he spontaneously launches into flamboyant singing and contorts his body in contemporary dance moves.

And yet he's also humble, private and at times fragile, uneasy with his presence on the international art stage and at gallery soirees, he says. "I'm much happier when I dance or sing in my studio, in my house [of which the lounge is decorated with violet disco lights, there, he says, for parties with '60s starlets such as actress Dy Saveth] or just back in the countryside."

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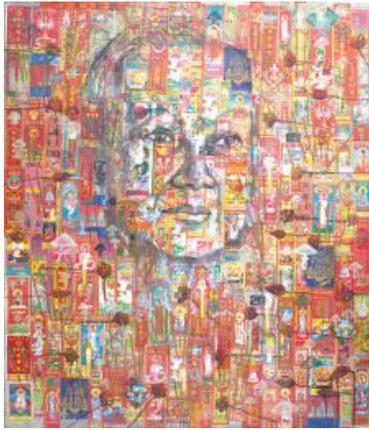
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Seven Days Mourning, part of Seckon's exhibition. PHOTO SUPPLIED

The contrasts are equally apparent in both the textures and concepts at play in his artwork. There are scratchy threads, glittering, shimmering fabrics, thick pools of paint, discarded scraps of paper, clippings of celebrities, folk-art-ish renderings of pandas and tigers.

At the same time his work discusses poverty and power, development and the environment, spirituality and capitalism, the US and China.

"When I picked up the wrapper and got to work, somehow.... it was a release."

Seckon's last body of work was exhibited in January's Art Stage Singapore – a series of rich and vivid collage and mixed media paintings inspired by the death of the late King Father Sihanouk and a nod to the legacy of Cambodia's royal family.

It was a collection he channelled his grief into, spending the early hours of the morning wading through the palace lawns, sifting through offerings and blown up portraits of Sihanouk, collecting the hundreds of glossy, glittery red incense wrappers left discarded on the floor.

While Seckon's collection, which he coined "Goodbye Cambodia", received much acclaim from international publications, it was also criticised by some in the art world for being a homage, and not as critically engaging as his other work.

Yet Bangkok-based curator and art critic Brian Curtin, who worked with Seckon on another joint Singapore exhibition in January, "Gentle Matter" (this time with six of the artist's pieces – intricate, stitched collages from previous exhibitions – alongside fellow Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich's rattan and burlap grids), said while the Sihanouk collection carried a more conventional rhetoric than previous works, they were iconic and reverential, "and worked well in that regard."

"I would never expect that an artist has to be critical to be interesting," he said.

"You know, I really could not care if people do not think it is 'contemporary,'" says the artist.

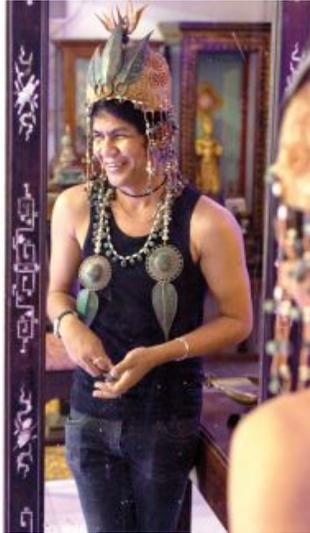
"I make art for myself, and for Cambodia, and I'm just happy and content because of this. For me, it was a way to get through his death, and a historical snapshot of that moment in time. Whether they think it is good or bad, people are engaging with my work....trying to understand it and that makes me happy.

For Seckon, like many Cambodians of his age, the life, and death, of the monarch had marked significant chapters of his life, and he says prints of the paintings are still in high demand, at \$300 each (the original, two by two metre pieces were snapped up swiftly at the fair).

Seckon's friend and assistant, Fleur Bourgeois, knows him better than most.

"He follows his own voice, and seeks to make art that is truly his own expression," she says.

"His work always contains messages or comment about life, society, struggle, family, current events, and his love of Cambodia."



On the eve of Sihanouk's death, during Pchum Ben, Seckon had been in his Prey Veng village, speaking with women of the village who had survived the destructive American bombing campaign during the Vietnam War and endured the brutal Khmer Rouge dictatorship from 1975-79. They discussed the life of Sihanouk, which he captured on film for a performance piece in New York the following year.

Seckon, says he identified with Sihanouk, an aficionado of the arts, who was overthrown by Lon Nol's coup in 1970, the year Seckon was born. He recalls nostalgic conversations between his grandparents of the former King's "golden age". He met Sihanouk, who came to see his painting of Princess Bopha Devi in 2004.

He sold his first work inside the palace when he was visiting with his mother in 2001 and struck up a conversation with a tourist from Hong Kong, who later bought a mixed media painting of a Buddha, decorated and stitched over with gold leaf strips from cigarette packets.

Almost a decade later, that same tourist, Helen, read about Seckon's first solo show at London gallery Rossi + Rossi and got back in touch.

Seckon's house is an extension of the artwork he creates. Hidden down a bougainvillea lined, quiet ally close to Chaktomuk Theatre, it's brimming with 100 year old Buddhas and decorative vessels collected from travels, antique furniture from Russian Market, painted with golden Apsaras and other icons by the artist; cushions and curtains and quilts delicately sewn and stitched by Seckon.

"I have to make sure my art and my home are very detailed – it's something I really appreciate. My art is like this (runs hand through his impressive head of hair) – you feel every strand, every different texture. Broken ends, course, thick, thinner..."

His detailed, striking timber home in Siem Reap – modelled on the mythological house from the legend of Preah Pisnouka -is a place of refuge and recharging for the artist.

"I go there a few times a year. I make a body of work and then go there to relax. I go to Ta Prohm and the smaller, quiet temples in the jungle. I just sit and look at them, at the stone."

He unveils his latest painting. It's a riot of earthy hues and shimmering fabrics, and aims to make a statement on the effect of development on the Mekong River, what Seckon considers the "heart and soul [of Cambodia], the blood running through Southeast Asia's veins."

It will form one of 15 paintings he will create for his second solo exhibition at Rossi + Rossi in London next year.

Seckon won't discuss any possible political statements his work makes, rather elaborating on the connection between the environment and Buddhism in the country, and the dangers of rapid development in a country like Cambodia.

It's not the first time the artist has turned his attention to the issue –his 2010 Rossi +Rossi show, "Heavy Skirt", in part dealt with the filling in of the infamous Boeung Kak lake, where Seckon lived and worked for over two decades.

“In this work too, is the Mekong, she has been dammed. Fish are turned upside down. The fish are crying, and it's painful.”

“[Boeung Kak Lake]...and the water... it was where my energy came from. I grew so much as an artist there – a very significant time, since I first started at the Royal University of Fine Arts in 1992.”

Seckon speaks with conviction about the rich and varied Cambodian landscape- from the gold flecked rice fields to the tempestuous rain clouds.

“The land, the earth, for Cambodians, is embedded in Khmer tradition. When we sit under a tree, Cambodians open their minds. Why are we cutting them all down?”

In 2006, Seckon and Bourgeois launched the Rubbish Project, to promote art that carried an environmental message. In 2008, Seckon created a voluptuous, 225-metre naga that was installed on the Siem Reap river on World Water Day. The rattan, plastic and nylon serpent then travelled to Nepal for the Kathmandu International Art Festival in 2012.

When Seckon was a child he'd use the leaves in his village, stitching them together with strings of bamboo, squishing berries into a pulp for pigment and creating artwork and costumes. Later, he painted the dead for funeral rites.

Seckon's "Heavy Skirt" works were an ethereal signal to the artist's childhood and the collective trauma of the nation. The "heavy skirt" he references is his mother's patchwork, ragged Sampot that she wore while pregnant with him, as the southeastern belt of Cambodia was bombarded with bombs from US fighter jets. Seckon was a baby when a bomb fell on their Prey Veng village, then enduring the wrath of the Khmer Rouge and the occupation of the Vietnamese.

“I was a buffalo boy. I had no future, I had no opportunity to study, perhaps I was 11. I remember sleeping on the back of the buffalo at that time. I would ask him – why am I like you? Am I an animal too? Would that be easier?”

When he turned 20, his village collated enough money to send him by boat to Phnom Penh, where he attended RUFA.

The act of sewing and stitching are intrinsic for Seckon, and he says it is a way to deal with both his own, and the nation's, traumatic experience.

Curtin says Seckon sets an example for the younger generation of creatives to look up to.

“Seckon includes elements that are endlessly compelling. He also has no fear of decorative, garish elements, and he clearly works in an instinctive manner with little concern for the so-called rules of composition or conventional harmony,” Curtin said.

“[He] explicitly deals with issues of fragmented history, memory, trauma and indigenous beliefs... [using] an advanced and intelligent artistic language that young artists would do well to study.”

Seckon took part in the New York Season of Cambodia festival in April this year, in a residency program, but took the opportunity to arrange a separate performance exhibition at Columbia University, Flowering Parachute Skirt.

Created from a military parachute that fell on his village during the war (a monk had picked up the fabric and strung it up as shelter at a nearby temple), he created a figure and skull rising up from the rippling, billowing skirt. On May 1, the piece was installed on the university's lawns, with female Vietnamese and Cambodian survivors of the war adorning the skirt with flowers made from sampots and sarongs from the women who still live in the Prey Veng village.

Bourgeois said it was a poignant moment for her.

“The head of the Veterans Association spoke at the event, and there were perhaps twenty veterans in attendance, at least one of whom was in the air core during the American War in Vietnam.”

Seckon says he was offered the chance to study at an international university on a full scholarship, but after some deliberation decided against it, to stay rooted in Cambodia, something he had never regretted.

"I want to continue to grow on my own, in Cambodia. I feel I have ears, I have eyes, hands and mind, I think I have enough to explore and continue my art here. I don't want to be moulded. I don't want to be shaped by the outside. Changed. And I forgot all about the scholarship. And then suddenly I was given all of these international exhibitions: Thailand, Japan, Norway, and then Rossi+ Rossi approached me..."

For now, he has had enough of relentless travel, he says.

"Now, I want to make beautiful, quality paintings. I want something left when I die. Beautiful things left for my country, for Cambodia."

"I try the best I can, and then I will die. The best is to help people feel something through my paintings. That is all that is important.

"I feel very full at this time in my life, personal, I am fine. But not for the country. Not just yet."



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