

ON THEIR OWN TERMS



THE PERSONAL ACT OF COLLECTING ART IN CAMBODIA

By **NAIMA MORELLI**

Top to bottom: Sophiline Arts Ensemble performing: 'A Bend in the River.' Rattan puppets in the background by Sopheap Pich; Sophiline Arts Ensemble performing: 'A Bend in the River.' Rattan puppets by Sopheap Pich. Photos by Neak Sophal. Right: Sophiline Cheam Shapiro Portrait by Patrick You Seen.



In a country with a very young contemporary art scene and a lack of art infrastructure such as Cambodia, the presence of collectors supporting artists' work plays a big role. With that in mind, Java Arts curator Reaksme Yean traced collectorship in Cambodia through the show 'The Object(s) of Collecting', featuring 22 local art owners. The exhibition, held at the Phnom Penh gallery in March this year, started an important conversation.

"In the beginning, Java Arts director Dana Langlois and I thought there were no collectors in Cambodia. Then we realised we were thinking about collectors only in Western terms: as someone who would regularly purchase artworks from specific galleries and go to art fairs," shares Reaksme. "When we started looking at collections in a different way, we began to identify different types of collectors. We saw that a collection could be done through exchanges, or even commissions."

Owning in total 20 pieces of art, Reaksme proudly calls himself a collector. However, he's aware that many Cambodians still reject that term for themselves, as they believe it has to do with art dealing. Indeed, a feature that all Cambodian collectors share, is that they don't conceive art as an investment at all. "To resell work, and to trade it to buy new art doesn't cross their minds. They would rather take a more personal approach," explains Reaksme. "The majority of Cambodian collectors prefer to keep the work for the younger generation, or donate them to museums in the future".

"An art collector would seem to be someone who collects with some kind of intent to accumulate," says Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, a traditional dancer, and director of the prominent dance company Khmer Arts Academy. She lent one work for the 'Object(s) of Collecting' show, a painting by Sokuntevy Oeur, titled 'Tomorrow'.

"It is the first work I ever bought. It's an image of an old woman, sitting in front of her house, whose head is leaning on her hand. She looks worried. There's a halo of white behind her head, which I take to represent the sun," says Sophiline. "I imagine she's worried about how she's going to feed her family the next day, a feeling I've had many times. What am I going to feed my family, how am I going to pay my dancers' salaries next month? That interpretation makes me feel connected to the painting. It's been hanging in my living room for years!"

This personal and emotional approach is very common among Cambodian collectors, who are interested in art that could be directly associated with their memories. "It is what Dana Laglois and I would call the collection of narratives," says Reaksmey. "They wouldn't collect just objects, but stories."

Sophiline began collecting almost by chance. Visual artists eager to learn about Khmer culture asked her for permission to sketch the rehearsals of her dance company, and then offered her drawings to thank her. "The first original works of visual art I hung on my walls were of this nature. But the first time I paid for a work it was a painting by Oeur. I saw it on display at an opening of her solo exhibition at Java Café."


"I usually buy what I like when I have the means to. As a choreographer and director, I get to commission work on occasion too, which is especially rewarding," says Sophiline. This was the case with two large rattan crocodiles she commissioned from sculptor Sopheap Pich for a dance she created titled 'A Bend in the River'. After a bit of back and forth, both the artist and the choreographer were happy with the final work. Sophiline notes, "It is one of my favourite because I commissioned it, because it is beautiful, because it is made by my friend, but mostly because it is a vital part of my own work."

Another work in the exhibition by Sopheap Pich was lent by photographer Neak Sophal, who is an example of an artist who believes in artists' exchanges for growing the art community. Though she is not planning to build an organic collection, with the right budget, she would love to buy from young artists. Her criteria is not their background, but the sheer love and appreciation she feels for their work.

Contrary to other Southeast Asian countries which have a similar lack of institutions or public museums, collecting art in Cambodia is definitely more about the micro-narrative rather than the macro-narrative, such as nation-building: "I believe Cambodian collectors are collecting memories," Reaksmey surmises.

In 2012 and 2016, Christie's held auctions of contemporary Cambodian art. The audience was composed primarily by the expatriate community, visiting foreigners, and Cambodians living abroad, with an absence of local buyers. "Christie's is a well-known auction house," notes Reaksmey. "Our fellow Cambodians do not associate collecting with economics, and they don't want to show off. If they want to, they buy a car."

Furthermore auctions don't give collectors the chance to build any personal connections with the artist. Indeed, collectors in Cambodia tend to buy directly from the artists or from the galleries. Though a direct relationship between artists and collectors is good for the building of a community, Reaksmey calls for the establishment of a stronger and more diversified art system. "We need an art market in Cambodia and in order to make it consistent and sustainable we need museums, art dealers, art critics, magazines, newspapers: all that forms an art ecosystem," he notes.

Sophiline is convinced that the only way Cambodian arts are going to thrive in the long run is if they receive support at home. "It's one thing to show and sell your work overseas, which brings in important resources and gives your work a certain cache, but culture, ultimately, is local. It can't only be for export." She adds, "Local artists deserve local interest. I collect art because I like it and want to live with it. As culture makers, we should be curious about what our peers are doing. If we like it, we should embrace it." 



Clockwise from top left: Sopheap Pich's etching from the collection of Neak Sophal; Reaksmey Yean © SOAS, University of London; Sokuntevy Oeur, 'Tomorrow'.

More information at
javaarts.org.