

Kanitha Tith: Following Your Instinct to Find Freedom

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Tith Kanitha, Heavy Sand, 2012.





Portrait of Kanitha Tith



Tith Kanitha, Heavy Sand, 2012.



Kanitha Tith burving herself in the sand

Kanitha Tith carrying herself in the same

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Emerging Cambodian artist Kanitha Tith tells us about her creative process and what it means to be a multi-passionate creative in Phnom Penh.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist





Portrait of Kanitha Tith

It is always a fascinating experience to meet cross-disciplinary, multi-passionate souls who possess a quiet kind of glamour. Kanitha Tith has the intense stare of the Italian actress Claudia Cardinale when she appeared in Sergio Leone's movies, and her personality is even fiercer. Well-known in Cambodia's independent film industry as being an artistic director, set designer and actress, Kanitha is also one of the most interesting emerging visual artists of her generation.

I met Kanitha at her show at the art space SA SA Bassac in Phnom Penh. Entitled *Instinct*, it is her second solo show, following *Companions*, which was held at the French Cultural Center in 2011. Born in the Cambodian capital in 1987, [Kanitha represented her country at the celebrated show, SUNSHOWER: Southeast Asian Art from 1980s to Today in Tokyo.](#)

Kanitha has inherited both her mother's artistic genes and natural curiosity about all things creative. Her mother was a constant learner, who equipped her kids from an early age with a third language, in addition to Khmer and English. She also gave them a background in Cambodian traditional dance and drawing.

Kanitha studied interior design while at the University of Fine Arts, and had a first inkling of what would later become her passion when she attended a workshop run by the Khmer-Canadian artist and academic, Linda Saphan. Kanitha went there to accompany her sister but remained hooked: "I never knew you could use daily objects and make an installation," she explained. "It felt so freeing for me at the time."

Kanitha started to develop her wire-knitting technique that she used in *Instincts* from that first experience. She found the long, manual process of coiling the wire and creating shapes to be a meditation of sorts that enabled her to reflect on the creative process itself. "When I begin working on a piece, I don't have a sketch to refer to. I just start and see where the process leads me. Having this special time to create is very important, as these are the moments where I can really start to understand who I am exactly in my work."





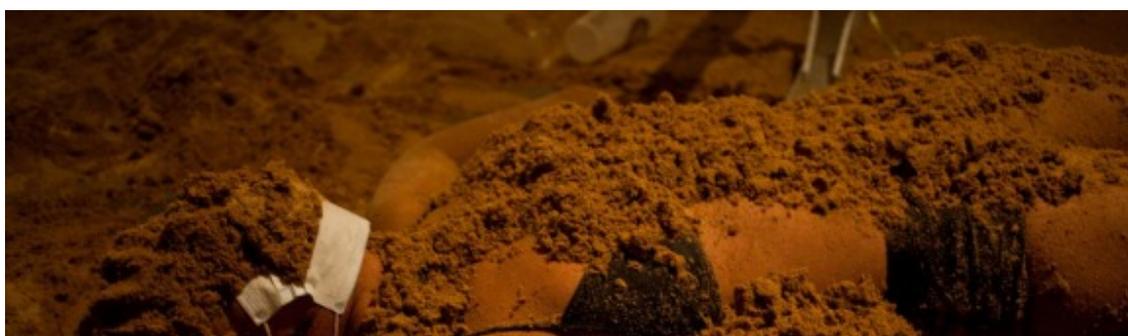
Tith Kanitha, Heavy Sand, 2012.

You are such a polymath in your artistic practices and interests. How did you enter the art world after school?

Yes, I have all these different practices and I sometimes ask myself how they are connected. Since graduating, I have never had a fixed job, so the lines between my different activities have felt very blurred to me. I couldn't even see myself as a visual artist, I just wanted to do the work. I was definitely the starving kind of artist; however, making works and participating in group shows has made me feel very good. In 2009, I realised that I wanted to become an artist. To me, that word corresponds to freedom. But I didn't know much about art, so I started by learning how to paint, and then I realised a series of 3D painting with the same wire technique that I'm using today. In 2010-2011, I started discovering sculpture and then performance art caught my attention later on. At the time, I was already involved in film making but I just didn't make the connection between this and art. I was continuously asking myself what I wanted to do, and this question stressed me out. It's then that I decided to just follow my intuition, which led me to explore performance. I joined a workshop in Burma and learned about it. When I came back to Cambodia, I realised my first performance, Heavy Sand, in 2012.

Heavy Sand was also performed here at SA BASSAC gallery at the end of Khvay Samnang's exhibition of Newspaper Man. In the performance, you climbed a ladder, poured water all over yourself and then buried yourself in the sand. Can you tell me about your approach to this particular performance?

The performance addressed environmental concerns about the area that surrounds my house. The performance wasn't planned, it was very intuitive in the way that it unfolded. Every action led to the next. I started with a social issue and then I interpreted it during the performance through my own personal experience of finding my space. I have always craved freedom but felt there was never enough time. During the performance, however, I felt that space had been freed, and I started asking myself what I should do with it. My body was still interacting with the space, but at the same time, my brain was travelling. I then forgot about everyone watching me. As always, I just went step by step, finding the moment inside the performance. I asked myself: 'Where can I go next? Where is my space?' When the performance ended, I really started to get the real meaning of the performance.





Kanitha Tith burying herself in the sand

It seems to me that following your intuition and instinct is a big part of your way of work. How do you tune into it?

You know, I have always had doubts about my art practice. When this happens, the question I ask myself is, “How can I be freer?” This always gives me clarity. I think I have developed my freedom gradually. In the beginning, I simply rebelled against the rules and just went with the flow. Today, I feel that human beings are a product of the cultural factory, so it’s hard for us to be completely free. Even as an artist, you carry the heavy burden of art history with you, so it is difficult to really do what you want. Every time you start doing something, you ask yourself if it has been done before and how you’re going to respond. For me, being free also means not feeling obligated to learn the history of art worldwide if it feels too overwhelming, as it did for me. Although I’m curious about art history and so always ask my friends about it when I get the chance, my art starts from an inner place of sincerity that is true to my own experience. It starts from what I know for sure and from constantly questioning everything that I do.

Do you conceive art as pure self-expression in this sense?

Yes, art is definitely something that liberates something inside of you. However, art also needs to be communicated to the public. That’s the real test. It starts from my own experience, but also from my observations of how people live, how people are doing things and how they make decisions. I think I try to be an open door so that I can communicate with the audience as much as I can.

In doing that, are you exchanging ideas with the Cambodian art community?

I’m not into the art scene that much, but I have started inviting my friends into my studio lately in order to discuss the work, art and life in general. Here in Cambodia, the art scene is very small, we all know each other, but most of the time we keep doing our own work without engaging in conversation with each other. Having a debate is not something that is part of our culture yet. This is because everyone in the arts tries to protect each other and the art scene in general. As the culture here is very hierarchical, no one wants to rock the boat too much and cause trouble for someone. I feel this can be a good thing, but we also need to be more sharing and have a stronger connection between each other.”

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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