

Focus on Cambodian Photographers: Interview with Kim Hak | COBO Social

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Kim Hak, Sandal and Footprint with Thorn, 2014.

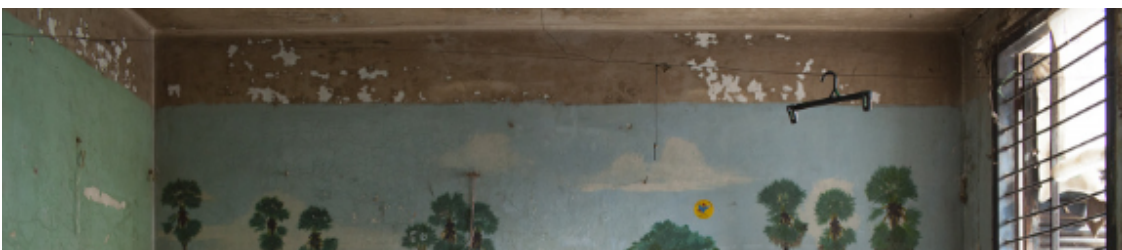




Portrait of Kim Hak. Courtesy of the artist.



Kim Hak, Sandal and Footprint with Thorn, 2014. From the series “Alive”.
Courtesy of the artist.





Kim Hak, from the series “Left Behind”, 2017.



Antoine d'Agata listening to Kim Hak in 2009. Courtesy of Angkor Photo Festival and Workshops.





Kim Hak, from the series “My Beloved”, 2012-Present.

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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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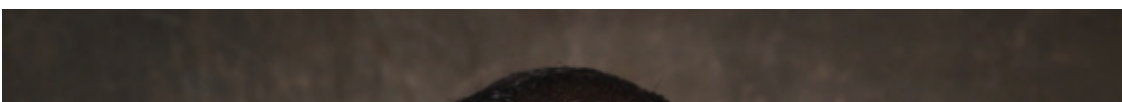
In the first interview of CoBo’s series on Cambodian photographers, Naima Morelli talks with celebrated artist Kim Hak about the special role photography holds in Cambodia for the collective memory.

Text: Naima Morelli

Images: Courtesy of the artist

When was the last time you have printed your photos? For most of us, this wasn’t recently. Never like today we have so many beautiful pictures worth framing, and never like today we have treated them in such a disposable way. No mood, no expression will ever escape the lens of our cellphone or cameras. An yet, we post and forget.

The truth is that no one image holds that sacred, emotional value it used to have for our parents or grandparents anymore. It is hard to conceive a time when an image was something one would risk their life for. The work of artist and photographer Kim Hak (born 1981) remind us that a photograph is not something mundane. Reflecting on the significance of photography in past and modern-day Cambodia, Hak’s work eases us out of our image indigestion. It plunges us in a state which is more mindful, where pictures and memories are something rare and beautiful.





Portrait of Kim Hak. Courtesy of the artist.

Kim Hak's interest for photography started when his family moved from a house in the countryside to a smaller flat in Phnom Penh in 1990. Hak was the son in charge of collecting all the family photos and sort them out. Captivated by the pictures, he started to learn about his parents' lives during the Golden Age of Cambodia between 50s to 70s.

"I saw pictures of my father having fun with his friends when he came to study in Phnom Penh in the 60s, driving an old fashioned motorbike. I also found a unique portrait of my mother when she was 14 years old, taken at a studio in Battambang. She was so beautiful."

Though Kim Hak's father never became a professional photographer, he took a lot of photos before and after the war. During the Khmer Rouge years, between 1975 to 1979, Kim Hak's parents, like other families threw away many old photos in order to hide their background and avoid being killed by the

old photos, in order to hide their background and avoid being killed by the Khmer Rouge soldiers, who were targeting well-educated people, former members of government, army officers, teachers and doctors.

Working on his undergoing project “Alive”, Hak noticed that all the family photos were covered in plastic: “My mother had to bury them under the ground near the place where they were staying during the regime. Time and time again, they went to discretely check if these precious fragments of the past life were still there. They certainly took a big risk to keep some of their photographs. I’m so grateful to my mother who risked her own life to save these memories. She is the mother of my photography life and journey.”



Kim Hak, Sandal and Footprint with Thorn, 2014. From the series “Alive”.
Courtesy of the artist.

I have read that you had a simple life as a kid, which helped you appreciate the little things in life. How did your early years influenced your way of looking at the world as a photographer today?

I was born in the Battambang province and had a very simple family background. My mother was a farmer. My father had a better education in the capital of Phnom Penh before Khmer Rouge; he was a government officer at Otaki village in Battambang before the war. He had become a commander for about three decades, but he also loved planting vegetables and fruits trees, feeding cats and dogs.

Early of 1980s, because of my father’s work, my parents moved to Phnom Penh. We started our studies in the capital. But in 1990, my father had to move back to work in Battambang before heading to live in Siem Reap. My four sisters, three brothers and myself were all in school, it was complicated for us to move. So, my parents decided to let us continue living and studying in Phnom Penh. Since I was a little boy, I have always travelled between

Battambang, Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. I think this was beneficial to me, as it allowed me to experience both the countryside and city culture.



Kim Hak, from the series “Left Behind”, 2017.

After your studies you worked in tourism. What compelled you to make such a radical career switch, and were you cultivating photography all along?

In 1998, when I finished my high school, I wanted to continue my study to become a professional photographer, but unfortunately there was no photography course in Cambodia at that time. So, I studied Tourism instead and worked in that industry for about seven years. During that time I got to travel around the country and the region and learned more about lives of ordinary people, histories and geographies.

In 2008, I learned about photography via two main photography festivals in Cambodia, the Angkor Photo Festival and Workshops and Photo Phnom Penh. Photography was a real passion to me, so I started planning to quit my office job. I saved the money for one year as I was sure that I would face difficulty in my first step in changing career. Indeed, I faced so much struggles in this industry when I started.

In the beginning did you ever consider photography in a commercial sense, or did you conceive your photography as art right from the start?

Frankly, my photographic sensibility is not very commercial, I'm more interested in documentary and art. This is why since the beginning I decided not to take any commercial work. Consequentially, I faced financial struggles, so I occasionally started to accept editorial works and different assignments. However, to this day, I am still not comfortable with commercial work. I only do it when I need to support my personal projects.

You attended many workshops with a few international photographers, the

one that you often mention is with Antoine d' Agata. How did the experience impact your way of photographing?

Antoin d' Agata was one of the most important influences in my photography journey. I learned a lot during the workshop with him. He really encouraged us to develop our own style and asked us to look at our photos, and start from there. From one single photo, I have learned how to build stories, series, and projects. I always keep in mind his idea that: "art is something happening." I learned a lot from Françoise Huguier as well.



Antoine d'Agata listening to Kim Hak in 2009. Courtesy of Angkor Photo Festival and Workshops.

Would you say that there is a particular way of working and motivation pushing your generation of artists to create?

I was born three years after the Khmer Rouge, in a period of loss, revival and rebuilding. I often talk with my friends, whether artists or people from other background, and we all agree that it's our generation which is working to fix and heal the psychological illness of our parents' generation and re-build everything again for next generation.

In your most famous series "Alive", you decided to tell a story through objects. What's the idea behind this series?

"Alive" is a story about objects through the war of Khmer Rouge regime and the memories attached to them. Each photo depicts one object and has a clue that relates to a specific memory. All these photographs and objects are deeply significant. They are evidence of the past time in history. Wars can kill the victims, but they cannot erase the memories of the survivors. Memories should be kept alive, known and shared for the living, the heritage should be preserved for the next generations.

I started working on “Alive” in 2014 in Cambodia, and continued to work on it in Australia in 2015, with the survivor refugees who moved to other countries, and brought along their memories. Since I started the project, it was clear that I wanted to collect all these history timelines: before the war, during the war, after the war. 2018 will be an exciting year for me as I will continue the project in Auckland, New Zealand. I am currently looking for new ways to continue the project in France and in the United States.

Besides the aforementioned “Alive”, what else have you been working on lately?

I have been working on another long-term project “My Beloved”. In this series I describe my love and hate relationship with Cambodia. I hate the darkness of my country’s history. But my roots are in Cambodia, a country that to me is so much more than just Angkor Wat and the Khmer Rouge. This is why since 2012, I decided to travel around the country to photograph the diversity of the landscapes before it ends up completely changed by development. So far, I have done only 17 provinces and still 8 more to go before completing the project.

I’m also thinking of publishing a photobook with small editions of my latest series “Left Behind”, which was exhibited at Bophana Centre during Photo Phnom Penh 2017. “Alive” is currently shown at Faux Mouvement, Centre d’ Art Contemporain in Metz from December 2017 to March 2018.



Kim Hak, from the series “My Beloved”, 2012-Present.

About the Artist

Kim Hak, born in 1981 in Battambang City, Cambodia. Hak is a full-time photographer whose work brings together storytelling and artistic aesthetic. Hak has focused on several themes including survivor stories, the funeral of King Sihanouk, architectural documentations and also the changing landscape of his homeland. His work has been featured at art and photography festivals such as Auckland Festival of Photography, Photo Quai and Photo Saint Germain in Paris, Renaissance in Lille, World Event Young Artists in Nottingham, OFF_festival in Bratislava, Ballarat International Foto Biennale in Victoria, Photo Kathmandu, Singapore International Photography Festival, Photo Bangkok and ASEAN Eye Culture in Bangkok, International Multimedia Art in Yangon, Angkor Photo Festival in Siem Reap and Histories of the Future and Photo Phnom Penh in Phnom Penh.

His photographs have been exhibited in Australia, New Zealand, France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Slovakia, The United States, Canada, Nepal, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia.

In 2011, he won prize “Residency Program” of Musée du quai Branly, Paris and second prize of Stream Photo Asia in Bangkok. In 2012, he was designated Best Artist in the “Best of Phnom Penh” issue of The Advisor, a weekly Cambodian arts and entertainment magazine.

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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