

Vandy Rattana — Can Time Cure All the Atrocities? | COBO Social

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Rattana Vandy, Bomb Ponds, 2009





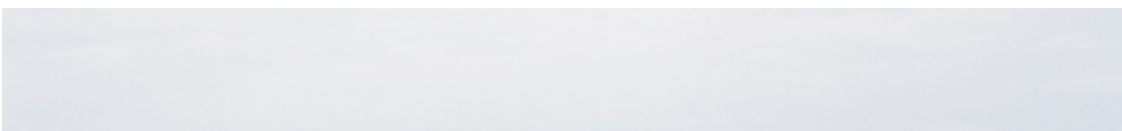
Vandy Rattana at the opening of Today of Yesterday, Yamamoto Gendai.
Courtesy of Emma Ota.



Vandy Rattana, Funeral



Rattana Vandy, Bomb Ponds, 2009





Vandy Rattana, Bomb Ponds, 2009



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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 second instalment of our CoBo's series on Cambodian photographers, Naima Morelli talks with celebrated artist Vandy Rattana, who gives us a critical viewpoint on the art scene in the country.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist

Culture is the physical expression of the way people think. In this sense, artist Vandy Rattana doesn't see a huge difference between the particular shape religion and mythology express themselves in Cambodia, and the art scene: "We have a lot of myths in Cambodia, where problems are always fixed by divine intervention. It's the same in the artcommunity, where we don't come together to have discussion about life or what we are doing because Cambodians do not take criticism."

"For hundred of years part the Cambodian mentality didn't comprise mutual understanding and was geared towards going to the neighbouring country for help whenever there is a problem," says Rattana. "We have a long history of this behaviour. Sometimes we looked to Thailand for help, other times to Vietnam or France. Now we look to China. We never tried to help ourselves. It's steeped in our mentality."

The lack of community is to Vandy one of the main obstacles hindering the growth of the local art scene. "We don't have a sense of freedom in common. In Cambodia I tried to do my part in making people engage in conversations, but after a few years I gave up and walked away of everything."



Vandy Rattana at the opening of Today of Yesterday, Yamamoto Gendai.

Courtesy of Emma Ota.

Indeed, before leaving for Taipei first, and for Tokyo later Rattana founded the art collective Stiev Selapak with his friends artists Heng Ravuth, Khvay Samnang, Kong Vollak, Lim Sokchanlina and Vuth Lyno. The group went on starting a number of initiatives, including the art space Sa Sa Bassac.

Among the reasons for him to start the collective was eliciting discussion within the culture world: “We have this habit of not questioning what someone says, especially we deem him to be an important person. It’s a feudalistic mentality. When someone’s talk he’s always right. Cambodians believe that criticism will make someone lose face.”

He contrasts this attitude with a more Western mode of thinking, which is about asking questions and have continuous discussions. Vandy himself has been deeply influenced by Western thought, and he has even founded a publishing house which translates Western works into Khmer.

“For a long time a huge problem in Cambodia was education. However, in the era of access, whoever has an internet connection can access books from authors from around the world and develop their own personal thinking. Perhaps they can’t find works in Khmer, but they can find the English or French version, and they can read it. Unfortunately I see no willingness to do so.”



Vandy Rattana, Funeral

Rattana declares he learned everything from the internet, from making and editing films: “To learn anything you just need to google it. Cambodian schools are under a very limited agenda, but now you have a way to educate ourselves.”

Since an entire generation of artists, intellectual and cultural figures was wiped out by the Khmer Rouge, the art scene is today very much in the process of being built from the ground up. “There are very few artists in Cambodia, so if you do one painting you are already considered as an artist. I had a friend who once bought a photograph and called himself a collector.

That is not serious for me! I'm not interested to be part of that and taking advantage of being from Cambodia. It has no meaning for me."

In his personal journey that led him to become an artist, Rattana started as a photojournalist. Though he was self-taught he met Erin Gleeson at an art history course. It was her eliciting him to start taking pictures as he noticed from his writing that he had a very particular point of view.



Rattana Vandy, *Bomb Ponds*, 2009

An example of this is his visit to the Teung Sleung Genocide art museum, a very moving experience for him. He needed to write an assignment for Erin. He started off by imagining the birds as witness to the Khmer Rouge atrocities, and compared the bird songs of today and in the past. "I started off by asking if the birds sing the same songs. Of course, she found it very strange, but I don't really find it that different from the way people think here in Cambodia!"

Erin encouraged him to start photographing and lent him a few books. In the beginning Rattana looked and analysed what was going on in Cambodia at the time and the rapid changes the country was undergoing in series like *Khmer Rouge Trial* (2009) or *The first High-Rise* (2008). However, from straight-up photojournalism, Rattana gradually evolved into a more evocative kind of work, where the back story isn't explained, but only hinted at. This led him to create one of his most celebrated series *Bomb Ponds* (2009).



Vandy Rattana, *Bomb Ponds*, 2009

“We only deal with the dark side of history. When I saw the bomb craters for the first time I asked myself why I didn’t know about this. The series *Bomb Ponds* is my personal journey inside the trap of the history, so I decided to take photographs in a very simple way, just placing the camera in the road or in the path where people normally pass by. I didn’t look to find the best angle at all. The presence of the bombs is not apparent, it’s beautiful nature, water in a perfectly round crater.”

The new film Rattana is working on right now is called *Funeral*, and it is part of the Monologue trilogy. The work came into shape when Rattana asked his parents to tell where her sister was buried during the war time, and the father drew a map for Rattana to find the grave. He travelled to Battambang and find the spot of the grave inside a rice field, under a mango tree.





Vandy Rattana, Funeral

“*Landscape of Time*, the second part of *Monologue*, is about how Cambodian perceive time, as they believe time can cure everything. Since Cambodian are very pragmatic, their conception of time is very concrete. In the film I ask if this is really true, because I don’t think time can cure all the atrocities. Time is a human framework, and you can’t just wait for it to heal all the wounds.”

Here again emerges a polarity between the Western way of thinking, which is all about doing and making, and efforting one’s way into something to shape it, and the Cambodian way, which is more about letting things running by themselves.

“The last part of the film is very mythical, everything is happening in the forest. It’s about the primitive nature of man and how civilisation destroyed us, and it has many absurd elements. It was actually influenced by Albert Camus’ idea that every day we are trapped into a meaningless routine. To get out of it we must start asking questions.”

About the artist

Vandy Rattana (B. 1980, Phnom Penh) lives and works between Phnom Penh, Paris, Taipei and Tokyo. In 2007, he was one of the co-founders of Stiev Selapak / Art Rebels, and in 2009 he was also one of the co-founders of Sa Sa Art Gallery. He contributed, in 2011, to establish SA SA BASSAC, the first dedicated exhibition spaces for contemporary art in Cambodia. Vandy Rattana began his photography practice in 2005 concerned with the lack of physical documentation accounting for the stories, traits, and monuments unique to his culture. His serial work employed a range of analog cameras and formats, straddling the line between strict photojournalism and artistic practice. His recent works mark a shift in philosophy surrounding the relationship between historiography and image making. For Vandy, photographs are now fictional constructions, abstract and poetic surfaces, histories of their own. He began interested in film-making in 2014. The short-film [MONOLOGUE](#) is one of his first video works. He is now working on the short-film [FUNERAL \(excerpt\)](#). In 2014, he also co-founded [Ponleu Association](#), which aims to provide access to international reference books, through their translation and publication in Khmer. It also publishes its own books, focusing on various fields of knowledge (philosophy, literature, science, etc.)

Select solo exhibitions include *MONOLOGUE*, Jeu de Paume Paris and CAPC Bordeaux (2015), *Surface*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh (2013), *Bomb Ponds*, Asia Society, NYC (2013) and Hessel Museum of Art, NY (2010). His group exhibitions include *dOCUMENTA(13)*, Noorderlicht International Photo Festival

(2012), Kassel (2012), 1st Kiev Biennale (2012), Institutions for the Future, Asia Triennial Manchester II (2011), 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane (2009).

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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