

A NATION'S MEMORY



VANN NATH AND HIS LEGACY FOR CAMBODIAN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

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Prisoner shower.



Night Cart.



Vann Nath depicting Pol Pot.



Photo set within the prison.



Facing page, top:
Statue of
Vann Nath.

Current page,
top to bottom:
Vann Nath outside
Tuol Sleng; Group
picture with Vann
Nath; Vann Nath's
family; Vann Nath
in the courtroom.
Images courtesy
Add Editore and
the Extraordinary
Chambers in
the Courts of
Cambodia.

Vann Nath was one of few prisoners who survived the S-21 Prison under the Khmer Rouge regime and is renowned for painting his experiences under the regime. Unlike the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge did not leave any photographs of the genocide behind. Instead, the only visual testimony are in the form of the infamous mug shot portraits of the prisoners. It was Vann Nath who took up the role of illustrating what happened during this period of senseless tragedy in Cambodia. His paintings are hanging in what is known today as the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, which was built on the site where the artist both witnessed and suffered the Khmer Rouge atrocities.

The art of Vann Nath and the importance of his figure are increasingly recognised around the world. His memoir, 'A Cambodian Prison Portrait', has just been published in Italy by ADD Editore accompanied by images of his paintings. Such global recognition is important for three reasons. First, it spreads the knowledge about this very dark chapter of Cambodian history – serving as a powerful reminder for the international community to never allow this to happen again. Second, its message has the potential to resound with people who have experienced trauma, whether on an individual or collective level, since it reminds them that art can indeed help heal the scars of tragedy.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it provides a model for young artists, proving that it is possible to speak of the unspeakable through art. Vann Nath's story has thus far been told from the perspective of immense courage and strength. More poignantly however, he represents a necessary point of reference for the following generation of Cambodian contemporary artists to tell their own stories. It guides them to produce art that is sensitive to and aware of the pain stored in the collective body of their nation. It is a pain that needs to be expressed in order to be released.

Contemporary artists have experienced the Khmer Rouge in a very different way from Vann Nath, and it is pertinent that they express their own truths from their perspectives. Among the older generation of contemporary artists, Leang Seckon urges the public to acknowledge all the different stories which belong to the Cambodian narrative, including its bloody past. In his paintings he speaks of the Khmer Rouge through symbolism from different periods in time. In some canvases he equates that period to the apocalyptic prophecy of the sacred text Buddh Damnyat.

The artist does not shy away from being direct. For instance, in his mixed media work, 'Future of the New Generation', he pays tribute to Vann Nath by using his picture. Another artist whose work is often exhibited abroad, Svay Sareth, is also concerned with remembering the past of his country. He uses symbols in his installations too, as a cautionary tale against present occurrences in the country.



Vann Nath in isolation.



Hanged man.



Room in which they were spread en masse.



Woman and daughter.



Slaughter.



Prisoners in chains.

Younger artists experience the suffering of their elders not as direct ordeals, but through the indirect means of growing up with the brutal regime still fresh in their nation's consciousness. As such, their focus is on keeping the memory alive and learning about what happened. While these stories remain firmly stamped on the collective psyche, they are hardly, if ever, recounted within familial circles. Through the use of various mediums, these young artists find ingenious ways to preserve the history and carve out new accounts of the Cambodian story.

Vandy Rattana, who photographed the late Vann Nath, decided to reconcile himself with the pain present in his own family through his video work, 'Monologue'. Alluding to the deep-seated grief of Cambodians that is hidden beneath the veneer of present-time peace, the video is set against the backdrop of a quiet Cambodian countryside, where the trees conceal a mass grave site in which his sister lies.

Photographer and artist Kim Hak started the series, 'ALIVE', spurred by the gradual disappearance of living witnesses of the Khmer Rouge regime. In attempting to rescue the memories of these witnesses, his project engages in a race against the clock to document tales of the regime through photography before expanding to other kinds of stories throughout Cambodia.

It is not easy to hold one's gaze when encountering Vann Nath's paintings. The scenes of the Khmer Rouge are depicted with such painful realism that they seem almost surreal and unimaginable. By pushing past the initial discomfort, his works also reveal a sign of hope, that there are individuals like Vann Nath who were able to survive these horrors to become compelling advocates against the repetition of such crimes.

This is precisely the message that is being passed on to contemporary artists globally. The figure of Vann Nath continues to symbolise the importance of art that is not removed from society, but on the contrary, is a necessary tool for navigating contemporary times with better awareness of the past. In this manner, Cambodian artists have also found in Vann Nath a giant of humanity whose shoulders they can safely stand on. 🇰🇲