

Svay Sareth: Creating Experience by Making Things | COBO Social

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Installation view of Svay Sareth's show





Svay Sareth, Mon Boulet , 2011. Durational performance, 5 days, Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, Cambodia Single-channel video with sound, 8' 25" looped courtesy SA SA Bassac



Svay Sareth, Prendre Les Mesures, 2015. Courtesy of Svay Sareth and Biennale Sydney.





Svay Sareth, Bouclier (Shield), 2008, documentation photograph of durational performance. Asia Art Archive America

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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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Leading Cambodian artist Svay Sareth opens up about his early life and how it has influenced his expansive modus operandi and his vision of art as a catharsis

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Installation view of Svay Sareth's show

We get to choose the way that we tell our story every single day. And the way that Cambodian artist Svay Sareth has chosen to recount his own is by seeing the world with fresh eyes and always being open to the possibilities of the imagination. "I have done many different things in my life without having any experience of it. However, by making the thing I am already creating the experience. And I believe that whatever obstacle I encounter, I can learn how to overcome it."

This approach to life is evident from looking at his house, which is a Tuk Tuk ride away from Siem Reap. The place has been entirely designed by himself, from the floor plan to the furniture. Dressed in an unassumingly plain, clean shirt and black pants, he proves that being an artist is an attitude rather than the attire you wear. What counts is the creative *élan* that you show, whether that be high or low art, or any other activity for that matter.

It is natural for someone who grew up in the refugee camp Site II on the Thai-Cambodia border while fleeing the Khmer Rouge with his family, to have an anti-elitist attitude to art. Just like the inherent tension of looking for more, exploring more, learning more. With eight other young Cambodians, he began taking drawing classes with Veronique Decrop, a French Humanitarian worker at the refugee camp. He felt he had finally found an outlet for expression.

Looking back today, he can understand the dynamics that were played out in terms of the negotiations that took place between countries and the mechanics of the war that shaped his childhood in such a tragic way. "I look at war as an investment that countries do to make a profit later. I couldn't understand back then, but I can see it now. We refugees were the real victims. We were robbed of our power to dream, to make things out of our imagination and share our knowledge with the world. The camp felt like a waiting room

for me.”

Today a big part of his art practice is based on this re-telling of his experience with a newfound awareness, connecting the personal to the larger socio-political realm. This emerges clearly in his 2011 performance *Mon Boulet* – meaning my burden – where he hauled a two-meter-wide, 80-kilogram silver sphere from his Siem Reap home to Phnom Penh. Along the six-day journey, Svay ate only food offered to him by strangers and slept on a blue tarpaulin—the kind used as shelter by refugees worldwide. To the artist sharing his story means also processing it.



Svay Sareth, *Mon Boulet*, 2011. Durational performance, 5 days, Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, Cambodia Single-channel video with sound, 8' 25" looped courtesy SA SA Bassac

When Svay Sareth was 19, he was finally allowed to go back to Cambodia. In the three months that followed, Svay Sareth spent time just discovering the nature that he saw around him. “The sun, the wind, the smell of the trees and the river. Touching and feeling all those things that I’d never known before. It was like I was reborn. It was a rebirth of my imagination and a rebirth of my thinking. But most of all, it was a rebirth of my energy, an energy that I had kept inside me for so long and could now explode.”

At the same time, he started thinking about how he would rebuild his life again. “We had no prospects. We had no land, no house. Imagine: you have lost a lot of your family, and you have terrible memories in your mind. How can you move forward?” The United Nations gave out 50 dollars for adults and 25 dollars for children. “Can you tell me how do you rebuild your life from that? Sure, the UN tried to take care of the refugees, but why let this happen in the first place? Shall we ask the countries who produced the guns? Shall we ask the countries who produced the bombs? Cambodia didn’t produce the guns or the bombs, and we called it a civil war – but was it really? This is the question I’m trying to address through my artwork.”

At the recent 21st Biennale of Sydney he presented one video work that exemplifies that

critical outlook on the consequences of political decisions taken over time. In *Prendre les Mesures* (2015), the artist performs at the famous Angkor Wat temple complex. Using a large needle, a tool traditionally used to mend damaged rice sacks, Svay measured the length of the causeway at the entrance to the temple. The title of the work, which means ‘to take measures’ in French, is a double entendre. The literal interpretation is ‘to measure something’, but it can also be understood as ‘to take necessary measures to address a situation’.



Svay Sareth, *Prendre Les Mesures*, 2015. Courtesy of Svay Sareth and Biennale Sydney.

In 1993 a big shift happened for the artist. The French volunteer Veronique Decrop came back to Cambodia to find the kids from her drawing class so that they could create an art school together. She bought a piece of land in the countryside where the poorest people of the Battambang province lived and created the celebrated art school, Phare Ponleu Selpak.

“When the school was finished, we started to teach. We had to figure out how, since we had no experience. At this time, I was also developing my own art practice, as well as organising exhibitions as a curator. But one day, I felt I’d arrived at the limit of my knowledge.” Thanks to his contact with Veronique, Sareth moved to France in 2002.

At the art school in France, his professors were not particularly impressed by his paintings, which were quite traditional. One day, a professor he was very close to took him aside and told him: “Sareth, I learned about your story. I can’t teach you about the experience of life, but what I can tell you is that you must put more of yourself into your art. You must do something different.” This observation threw Sareth into despair. He couldn’t sleep for a week and he eventually got sick. But he refused to go to the doctor and take the same medicine as everybody else as he felt it would “normalise” him. This is a strong metaphor for his art practice, as he had to dig into his disease to understand it and come out through the other side.



Svay Sareth, *Bouclier (Shield)*, 2008, documentation photograph of durational performance. Asia Art Archive America

After that realisation, he created his first performance called *Bouclier (Shield)* in which he carried around a metal shield on a bicycle from Normandy to Paris. “I didn’t conceive it as a performance in the beginning. I just did something I’d never done before. You can call it an installation or a performance, you can even hang it up as a painting. It depends on how do you want to tell the story. It’s my own story and it follows me everywhere.” That year he also decided to burn his paintings and carry the ashes around with him, and started doing a number of impromptu performances and generally experimenting. These included *Tuesday*, where he built a boat from scratch and tried to sail it, marking the moment that he felt ready to go back to Cambodia.

Today, ten years later, his studio is full of the works that he’s most recognised for, namely the camouflage installation that depicts figures inspired by Khmer mythology and the statues in Ankor

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