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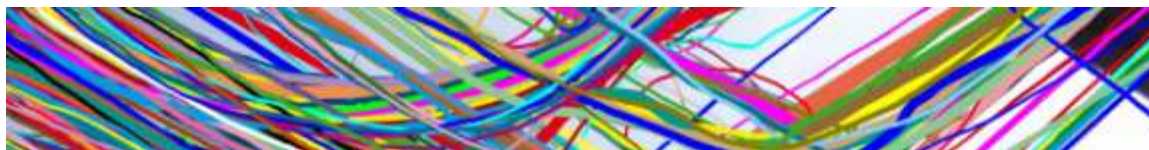
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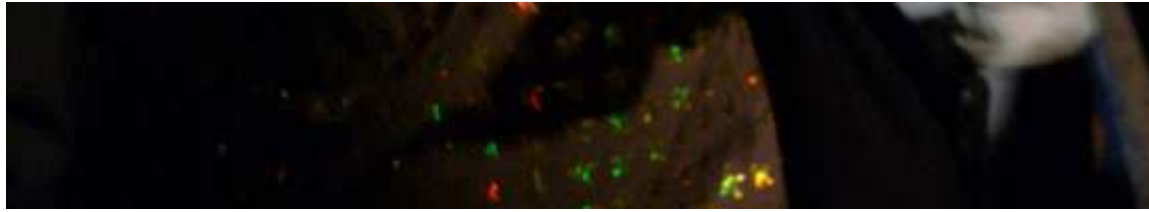
Portrait of Kiang Hei





Power Crossing by Kiang Hei





Khiang Hei at CCF Exhibition in Phnom Penh.



An art trip with Cambodian artists organized by Khiang Hei this year.





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How can we ignite the Cambodian art scene? Here are some solutions proposed by the Cambodian-American artist, curator and collector Kiang Hei.

TEXT: Namia Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist





Portrait of Kiang Hei

“I want some tea, do you want some too? Let me see if they have it!” said Kiang Hei, looking around at the plastic tables of the typical Phnom Penh street corner bar we were sitting in. “They used to have unlimited tea! I like it when you can sit and drink all the tea...” I agreed. There’s nothing like tea to create a space of quiet, deep conversation, and forget about the constant background noise of Phnom Penh’s hellish traffic for an hour or so. And once Kiang had mentioned it, I couldn’t get this idea of *unlimited tea* out of my head. It sounded to me like a metaphor for something that I couldn’t quite get into focus yet.

Besides being a tea lover, Kiang Hei is a Cambodian-American artist, curator, collector and art advisor. As soon as I arrived in the Kingdom’s capital, I was eager to talk to someone who had operated on many different levels in the Cambodian art scene. Kiang’s well-rounded views come from not only witnessing and contributing to the growth of the local scene for many years, but also from being educated at the prestigious

UCLA in Los Angeles. A New York resident, he is constantly in touch with the international art landscape.

We tackled the most pressing issues together in the emerging Cambodian art scene. With an understanding of the local hardships, as well as a very pragmatic spirit, Khiang suggested possible solutions, some of which he has implemented himself over the years.





Power Crossing by Khiang Hei

International Exposure

Being both an outsider and an insider at the same time, Khiang is regarded with either respect or suspicion by the Cambodian art scene. “Some local artists make jokes all the time about me being half-Khmer, but I think they really believe it. They respect me to some extent, but then at the same time, it’s like, ‘You’re really not from here.’ But what makes Khmer? What is Khmer?”

He sees this fixation with “authentic Khmer” as a defense of the local art world, which often feels threatened. Many artists, he said, have the desire to live abroad and travel, but there are few opportunities for this, if they don’t know English or have the financial means, they are prevented from taking the opportunities. While the influences from abroad exist, local artists don’t frequently consider how to deepen their knowledge, via study trips or studying on their own. As a result, these influences are neither really digested or built upon very often.

“Many artists have never travelled outside Cambodia, and they should. They don’t need to go very far. You don’t need to go to France, you don’t need to go to New York. You can just go to Bangkok and see art and it doesn’t cost you a lot of money. And I always

encourage people to do that, but there are very few who actually do, except some of the artists who are lucky to have relationships with foreigners that sponsor them financially to study and travel abroad.”

I asked Kiang Hei if he could see the differences between artists who studied abroad those who stayed in Cambodia, and he agreed there was a huge gap. “The people who study abroad get to see lots of artwork and develop critical thinking. They can give critiques and they both understand criticism and accept it. Conversely, the artists who have not travelled, or been exposed to art outside Cambodia, are limited in their perspective, and tend to be stuck in a circular pattern. So that’s a major issue.”

To help local artists grow and develop, Kiang has worked over the years to bring artists to travel to Thailand with him and helped them to find funding. He also insisted on the artists learning about making art and art history, and expanding their knowledge and learning through reading books and publications.

He feels that Phnom Penh needs, as does any other city, an arts center where artists can come together to drink tea or coffee, share ideas, debate about style and technique, collaborate on projects and offer a critique. “There is a need to have a sense of community where the artists receive support. As of right now, there is none.”





Kiang Hei at CCF Exhibition in Phnom Penh.

Criticism

The fact that Cambodian artists don't read, by default, is a major hindrance to them developing their critical thinking. "To be fair, their English is very limited," Kiang said. "So, what I try to do is to get people to write, and translate art writing into Khmer."

However, when you translate it, they don't often take the critique part very well. In fact, Cambodians are not really good at taking criticism."

Khiang believes the main reason why artists tend to push back when they hear negative criticism is found in the socio-political realm. "In society, criticism is not allowed, and if you look at the system now, they don't take the criticism from the opposition, they have banned it totally."

With an attitude which is not prone to accepting negative feedback, it becomes hard, if not impossible, to develop art discourses. Khiang experiences this when he meets with artists and attempts conversations with them. "I try to have this environment, where we sit at this table and have tea together, like we are doing now. But the thing is that you can't get local people, artists, to come and meet you. Here, it is very hard to engage people. This is also because there is competition. When people don't like each other, that's the end of it."





An art trip with Cambodian artists organized by Kiang Hei this year.

Community

In order to develop within the local scene, it is vital for artists to interact with each other. “Visiting other people’s studios would help them to understand how each person creates their space, how they paint and what they use,” observed Kiang. “You bring people to look at someone else’s work, and they might comment on it. And if they have a good point, artists should accept criticism and improve their work from there.” As part of this process, he urged major local artists to engage more with young and emerging artists.

The feeling I got from exploring the Cambodian art scene is that it is divided into camps and there is not really an overarching community or many channels of communication between these camps. This was confirmed by Kiang. “In the past, I tried to cross-connect those people, but if the gate is closed, I’m not gonna jump over. Because I learned my lesson not to do anything like that. People here don’t take it very well when you do it.”

Many artists groups have gathered around figures of expats or foreigners. On the one hand, these figures have brought knowledge, organization and given a substantial boost to an otherwise sleepy art scene. On the other hand, they keep on pursuing their own agenda. “The feeling is that no one should question what they do, because what they do is better for Cambodian people,” said Kiang. “So I think they don’t want people like me because they feel threatened. And, of course, there’s no reason to be threatened by me. If you have a business agenda, then make an investment with those artists. I find that in terms of taking criticism, expats are actually worse than the local people.”

Khiang believes that locals with the initiative and stamina to get an education as curators and art managers are really lacking. “It’s a very good idea to start an artist’s group or a gallery, but the question is: what is your vision? Once you have the idea, you also need to follow-up on it and gather motivated individuals around you. Then, since Cambodia doesn’t have public funding for the arts, you need to deal with your finances yourself.”



Educating Collectors

The lack of an art market within Cambodia is an important factor, which means the majority of artists cannot make a living only out of art. As an art advisor and collector himself, Khiang Hei finds it very important to educate the taste of people who want to start collecting. With many potential contemporary art collectors orientating themselves

towards kitsch and replica painting, it is difficult to make them understand there is value in investing in contemporary Cambodian art. “You need to understand your taste first, and then calculate how much money you want to spend on art. I also try to make them understand that art is an investment. If you invest in the right artist, the value can grow one day. This is still a new concept in Cambodia.”

Khiang has relentlessly fostered the local scene and admits that he has taken some steps back compared to previous years. He planted the seed, so his strategy is now to wait for artists to come to him. “I don’t want anything from them, I’m not getting money from them or selling their work or anything like that. I’m not a businessperson, I’m an artist myself. I realized some time ago that I just need to back off, let them come to me. And some of the really good ones do and we meet when I’m in town.”

I stopped and drunk some more tea and asked Khiang: “It seems you are really committed to making the art scene grow. What is it that makes you do that?” He replied with energy: “Me? I get inspiration from getting involved with people! I think it’s exciting, seeing Cambodian artists learning about artists from different countries, and seeing it reflected in their work, and the conversations they are having. How does this impact the way they look forward and what is their vision of the future? That is what is driving me.”

When the creative spirit of a country is deeply wounded by its tragic history and is restricted, it is understandable that its artists would operate out of fear and fight amongst each other for what is perceived as a limited opportunity. I feel that the best gift that one can give to Cambodian artists is to make them realize that there is indeed an unlimited creative imagination which lives inside them, and then help them understand how to nurture it in their own limited circumstances. This is the key to growth and that’s precisely what people like Khiang Hei are striving for. Watching the artist being swallowed up by Phnom Penh’s swarm of motorcycles and tuk-tuks, I took my last sip on the unlimited tea and suddenly felt so much lighter.

Naima Morelli is an arts 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.

[#Khang Hei](#)[#Naima Morelli](#)

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