

## Leang Seckon: The Buffalo Boy Who Became King | COBO Social

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# Leang Seckon: The Buffalo Boy Who Became King



Portrait of Leang Seckon



Installation View of Leang Seckon's Studio





Leang Seckon, *World Born*, 2013. Painting, Mixed media and collage on canvas, 200.0 × 200.0 Size (cm), 78.7 × 78.7 Size (in). Courtesy of Rossi Rossi and the artist.





Installation View of Leang Seckon's Studio



Leang Seckon with his draft painting



Naima Morelli

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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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*Leang Seckon is a leading Cambodian artist of international fame. Naima Morelli visited him in his house/studio in Phnom Penh and discovered a deeply human and wise spirit.*

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Portrait of Leang Seckon

"When I was young, I mostly liked to be alone. I loved to climb trees because I could see everything from there. I felt free like a bird and I could sing," the artist Leang Seckon told me, sitting on a wobbly chair amidst his paintings. "When I had to take important decisions, I would always climb a tree. Things didn't look quite as unfathomable from such a high-up perspective."

The image of Leang Seckon I had seen before I actually met him was mostly of an aristocratic artist dressed as a Khmer king from ancient times, looking golden and shining. This was how he appeared during his performances at the Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London. But when we actually met, I was faced, instead, with a friendly, unassuming man in a T-shirt, shorts and plastic flip-flops.

These two contrasting dimensions of the regal and the mundane are found both in Leang's work and his persona. If he was wearing his everyday attire, his strong features and brows would make him look almost surly. However, looking more deeply, I saw that his face was just like the calm and charismatic figures of the kings who are carved into the rock in the Bayon temple.



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His refined, yet modest character is clearly reflected in his multi-layered, highly symbolic paintings, where he bares both his own soul and that of his country. He does not try to hide the pain, but rather transfigures it in a symbolic manner. I was surprised at Leang Seckon's humility, openness and willingness to share. Completely trusting, he wasn't afraid to show his human vulnerabilities – but



never dwelt on the terrible, unspeakable things he saw and experienced when he was a child survivor of the Khmer Rouge atrocities.

You would expect a famous artist such as him to shelter himself away from the world in a comfortable house, outside the noisy city. He could have decided to make only sporadic trips downtown, preferably to the airport for the next international show. After all, no one could have begrudged him the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of his work after a life of hardship. However, he made the choice to live among the people and become their voice.

Leang lives in a tiny home on top of the studio. Dark and golden, it is a mixture between the tent of Alexander the Great on his way to India, and a small, quirky home full of memories of your favorite friend. Memories, pictures, little agrarian objects, such as the typical Khmer scythes, are framed like artworks, for the past has never been forgotten.

Mesmerized, I kept on listening to the story of Leang's childhood and younger years. "I used to be a buffalo boy. I slept on the back of the buffalo and looked up to the sky. I'd look at the big birds, so small in the sky. I'd tell them: 'Dear bird, you are luckier than me. I'm tied down to the earth. Every day I have to come to the rice field, take care of the buffalo. I cannot say no, it's my duty.' Sometimes, I'd cry, asking myself: why does it need to be this way? I felt so stuck at times, all I wanted to do was study. I longed to have wings and fly like a bird."



Leang Seckon, *World Born*, 2013. Painting, Mixed media and collage on canvas, 200.0 × 200.0 Size (cm), 78.7 × 78.7 Size (in). Courtesy of Rossi Rossi and the artist.

### **How did art first come into your life?**

Art has always been part of my nature. It's a gift of sorts. You could say that God gave me the talent and ability to create art. Since I was young, I was lucky to have arms to paint and the ability to make different things. I could play with objects, organize them and sew. I have always felt the universe was a beautiful artwork in itself. The sky is a beautiful painting that can change all the time.

When I was only 6 or 7 years old, I used to draw on the ground. We didn't have any materials, so it was all I could do. Back then, all culture had been destroyed. In my childhood, I did not see any paintings, carvings or decorations anywhere; all the Buddha statues and temples had been torn down, and my entire village too. We survived everything and started again. That's when I began to make



paintings, using the colors of nature and trees. Later on, I was able to join the school, and the teacher gave us color pencils that UNICEF had provided us so that we could draw.

**How was the situation in Cambodia when you were old enough to join the art school?**

When I was 15 to 17 years old, I decided I wanted to further my education in art and the only option was to study in Phnom Penh. However, I couldn't figure out how to get there, as there was no road and I didn't have a bike. When they signed the agreement in Paris, Cambodia became a free country and they started building roads and bridges. Thanks to the help of a teacher, I got the information and permissions necessary, and did the entry test. I was the first one to join art school after the war.

**What were your first impressions when you were confronted with a bigger reality?**

As I started learning more and more, I realized art wasn't easy. I had wanted to do art since I was 3 years old, but felt uncertain. I felt my hands couldn't execute what my mind was imagining. But now my mind can plan it and my hand is able to execute it, without stopping and doubting. Not all the time, of course, as there is still a conflict between what I think and what I can do. However, when the mind aligns with the skill of the hand and works with the heart, the work can come together and the imagination can materialize.



Installation View of Leang Seckon's Studio

**You put it beautifully. I was wondering, how did you push through the initial obstacles?**

When I was younger, I had not yet realized the power of art to explore and show ideas, change things and talk to society. What's more, I didn't speak any English, which frustrated me because I had a hard time learning art history. I became a bit discouraged at times, but then I'd remembered how art felt when it was just like playing as a child. I also recalled my experiences during the time of suffering; the bombs and the killing fields. This gave me the determination and strength to keep going.

I just kept experimenting through trial and error, until my first collage show at the end of the '90s, which I exhibited in a group show at Phnom Penh's art school. My second show was a solo at Java café. The media was interested in my work, which surprised me a lot. I started getting commissions from magazines who needed covers. This job allowed me to learn English.

**Your paintings and works are very rich in symbolism. How did you develop your wide knowledge of mythology and traditional symbols? Did you start researching it at a given point in your life, or was it something that you already had from your own background?**



I have a lot of respect for those who study history and the history of Cambodia. It is very important and I'm studying it too. However, I tend to learn more through experience. For me, it is interesting to learn about people, different countries, and nature. My generation is the army, the bombs, the suffering. I feel a strong urge to talk about my generation and learn about the previous one. And showing it all to this new generation.

For example, I wrote a poem on one of my canvases about how we are like crocodiles when we are born. We come out crying, hungry, angry and full of wanting. But as we learn about life and nature, we push away strong desire, so that we can share peace and happiness. We become like the Naga, the multi-headed snake – soft and gentle, but strong. His poison does not destroy, it protects. This is a symbol that I keep in my mind to find a balance in life.

### **Does art help you with that?**

Art helps me a lot. I can find a new role and a way that I can be for the Gods. When I was a teenager, I never liked who I was. I saw myself as wrong. But through art, I can now talk about the reflection in the mirror without judging it. I can combine the politics, the personal, the mythology. So what I have now is perfect. There is no confusion anymore, I know my identity now. Art allows me to work with what I have. I am not pushing, but simply joining.



Leang Seckon with his draft painting

**Consumerist culture, in both China and the West, is becoming more and more prevalent in Cambodia. Is this a theme that's prevalent in your work?**

Globalization arrived in Cambodia a bit later, but now that it is here, everything is moving very fast. The new generation manages to keep up, but the older generation who don't have good English are confused. Development is putting them in danger. Some are selling their land – the land of our grandfathers – and buying into the competitive mindset, which is a bad decision. No one seems to care anymore about our roots and culture. The only important thing now is selling and making a profit to build a new building or buy a new car.

**How do you personally deal with this shift in values?**

I'm still doing my own thing and looking to the future. I learned this when I survived the war. Back then, we had nothing to eat, but we managed to save some grains of rice so that we could make it grow again. We knew that, eventually, better times would come. Life is very short, so it's important to be balanced. The mind wants everything, but cannot have it. You need to make the mind very humble.

You know, I live here in Cambodia, even though I have the opportunity to live in a more comfortable and organized place. And yet I don't. I choose to stay here because I already have one life and my own country. Here, I feel I have an inner connection. Desiring something else is fine, but we need to use it for the right purpose. For me, I try to leverage it to make art, materialize things from my imagination and enable people to see more clearly, and maybe also to accept. I want to share our suffering with the world, how I am suffering, and then change it into something beautiful. Art is not just something I do for fun, but something I do for the purpose of healing. This is what I'm interested in sharing with the Cambodian people and the world.

**About the artist**

**Leang Seckon** was born in Prey Veng province, Cambodia, in the early 1970s at the onset of the American bombings of Indochina and grew up during the rise of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime.

A 2002 graduate of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh, his works have appeared as illustrations throughout Cambodia and the United States. Noted exhibitions include the artist's participation in the 2012 Shanghai Biennale,



and the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8) held at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia, in 2015, 4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in Japan in 2009, the ASEAN New Zero Contemporary Art Exchange, Yangon, Myanmar, also in 2009, and his Rubbish Project (2008) a public project in Phnom Penh. He has exhibited widely in his home country as well throughout Asia. In 2010 Rossi & Rossi hosted his first solo exhibition in Europe.

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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 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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