

Away From the City: 4 Emerging Artists from Battambang



Far away from the bustle of the capital, in the quiet city of Battambang, Naima Morelli looks at the practices of four young and promising Cambodian artists.

Text: Naima Morelli

Images: Courtesy the artists

The contemporary art scene in Cambodia is still very young and in the making. Distinctive stylistic trends and artistic fervour are emerging in the three major cities, creating elements for a dialogue to come.

The hustling and bustling capital of Phnom Penh is home to some of the biggest names in the scene as well as a plethora of emerging talents with a conceptual, video and photo-based practice. Phnom Penh is also where foreign institutions, such as the French Cultural Center, and the more active galleries and independent spaces—for example, Java Arts, Sa Sa Bassac, Sa Sa Art Projects, Kon Len Khnhom—are operating.

Given the proximity to the Angkor Wat temples, Siem Reap is catering to a more touristy scene as well as being a quiet retreat for a few prominent artists. Alongside galleries that have been in operation for many years, new innovative spaces, such as MIRAGE Contemporary Art Space, are beginning to pop up.

For those looking for true solace as well as engaging conversations with artists, Battambang is definitely the place to go. Here time slows down. Artistic practice largely takes a meditative slant, and are more often than not, based on considerably traditional mediums. The younger generations of practitioners have been educated at Phare Ponleu Selpak, a seminal art school founded in 1986 by a group of indomitable artists who met while in the Site II Refugee Camp.

Here, we look at four of the most interesting emerging names in the scene.

1. Sokuntevy Oeur: Independent Élan



Sokuntevy Oeur's work



Portrait of Sokuntevy Oeur

Many young Cambodian artists have a primitive and spontaneous style of expression while favouring bright colours. This is a way of painting that different artists around the world have adopted, pushed by the need to represent an inner landscape.

The work of Berlin-based painter Sokuntevy Oeur (aka Tevy), shows that this modality can be incredibly powered up and enhanced—if connected to Western art history. There is a myriad of references that the artist explores with voracious curiosity, from Leonor Fini to Francis Bacon, and Pablo Picasso to Otto Dix.

All these inputs are not swallowed mindlessly. We can see how the artist is testing the way these expressive possibilities can best attach to her poetics to create a cohesive style. The work she is doing is truly contemporary; she is telling honest, true stories from a feminine point of view, overcoming what writer Elena Ferrante calls “the invention of women by men.”

Indeed, the central thematic of her works is the reconciliation of her search of longing for freedom and independence, and finding one's place and identity in Cambodian culture and society. Contrary to the Ch'bab Srey which advocated modesty, compliance and the domestic sphere as a woman's place of work, Tevy advocates self-expression and individuality.

***About the Artist:** Born in Battambang in 1983, Sokuntevy Oeur studied at Phare Ponleu Selpak art school where she learnt oil painting and watercolour. In 2008, she moved to Phnom Penh to become a professional artist. In 2015,*

Sokuntevy moved to Berlin with her husband to learn about the art scene there. Through her paintings she seeks to show people the culture and Cambodian way of life.

2. Khchao Touch: Natural Union



Khchao Touch's work



Portrait of Khchao Touch

Battambang-born Touch studied and later taught at Phare Ponleu Selpak. She is the co-founder of Lotus Gallery, a lively art space tucked in the alleys of Battambang, where she actively exhibits her works as well as those of other local and international artists.

The artist works in a variety of mediums. From oil painting and watercolour, to printmaking and sculpture. An early bird, she enjoys taking advantage of the pre-dawn early morning peace. Presence and stillness are the ways in which the artist approaches the canvas, the same feelings her art elicits in the viewer.

Nature and its profound, pulsing feminine essence are at the core of Touch's practice, as well as a serene sense of connection with the universe and its creatures. Her art is very spontaneous and heart-felt, an extension of the artist's energetic sense and approach to life.

The paintings have primitive and organic features, full of intricate patterns and details rendered in bright colours. Looking at Touch's straightforward, almost tribal expression of the power of the feminine, the art of late Balinese artist Murni comes to mind. Meanwhile viewing it from the perspective of a Western-trained eye one may certainly be reminded of the esoteric figures of the late Australian artist Vali Myers, or the mysterious characters of Italian artist Luigi Ontani.

About the Artist:

Khchao Touch was born in Battambang in 1982 and trained at the Phare Ponleu Selpak art school from 1998-2003, thereafter taking on a teaching role

there until 2008. She has had solo exhibitions at the French Cultural Centre and the Art Café in Phnom Penh, The Hotel de la Paix , Heritage Suites Hotel and The French Cultural Centre in Siem Reap as well as participating in numerous group exhibitions in Cambodia and abroad. Touch has participated in residencies in Bordeaux, France and Long Beach, USA, and was a nominee for the 2009 Sovereign Asia Art Prize and the 2010 You Khin Memorial Women's Art Prize.

3. Loem Lorn: Perpetual Flow



Loem Lorn's work



Portrait of Loem Lorn

In his writings Leonardo Da Vinci suggested artists to look at humidity stains on the wall to spot shapes and create their compositions from there. So even before becoming a way of expressing oneself, art is first and foremost a result of observation.

This ethos in where the art of Loem Lorn takes its departure point. The artist presents the viewer with a heightened sensitivity which reveals the hidden folds of reality. While he started from paintings like many other Battambang artists—mastering the watercolour technique—after the discovery of Vipassana meditation, he turned to photographic work.

In “Yesterday, no more” at Java Arts in Phnom Penh, he created contemplative, quiet images. These are magnification of ice blocks dripped with different types of ink, and occasionally enriched by paint strokes on the print.

By capturing a perpetual flow of all living things, Lorn highlights a molecular view of reality and its impermanence. This feature, in his view, is the only law of nature which we are all subject to.

About the Artist: Loem Lorn studied Visual Art at Phare Ponleu Selpak, graduating in 2005, His multi-disciplinary practice works across photography, video and performance. He volunteered at the Phare Ponleu Selpak school and

the Sammaki Arts Association and has been involved in producing various video and performing arts events. He is the co-founder of Tep Kao Sol Gallery.

4. Chov Theanly



Chov Theanly's work



Portrait of Chov Theanly

Chov Theanly's art is intensely personal. To him, the intimate element is to be found in connection to other people. That's why he strives to connect with the people who are around him, from his own family to those who are unseen or at the margins of Cambodian society. Painting from photographs, he adopts a hyperrealist technique, infused with a deep empathy and sensitive use of symbolism.

Living in a book store as a child, his imagination was heavily influenced by posters and paintings by the Old Masters. He started painting with his uncle, a calligraphist and sign painter, and started copying old photos and paintings. After working in Phnom Penh for a long time, he decided to move away from the busy capital city back to Battambang, and started being involved in the local gallery and festival scene. For one rendition of Our City Festival, he made huge neck tie installations titled *Urban Ties*.

His early painting works showcased isolated working-class figures with a flat-coloured background, caught in the act of keeping their head above water. Meanwhile in his personal exploration of Buddhism, he depicted a Prince Gautama in the hardest phase of his fasting, the time when Buddha renounced the goods of the world. In Theanly's depictions these included things that are considered positive in our current society, like travel or physical exercise. Transcending societal norms, Theanly seems to be interested only in a truth of the heart.

About the Artist:

Chov Theanly was born in Battambang in 1985. He worked in Phnom Penh and moved to Battambang in late 2011. He has held solo and group exhibitions both in Cambodia and internationally including France, Singapore and the US. Recently, he was one of the leading artists of two group exhibitions: “Phnom Penh” at the Museum of the Hospice-Countess of Lille, France (September 2015-January 2016) and “Cambodia: Looking back at the Future” at the Flinn Gallery in Greenwich, United States (May-June 2017).

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.