

REGIONAL SHOWS · NAIMA · APRIL 16, 2022

Between Figuration and Abstraction with Cambodian artist Pen Robit



Cambodian artist **Pen Robit's** work constantly bounces between figuration and abstraction. In the unpredictability of his style and subjects, he shows a willingness to explore and expand his understanding of reality through his artistic practice.

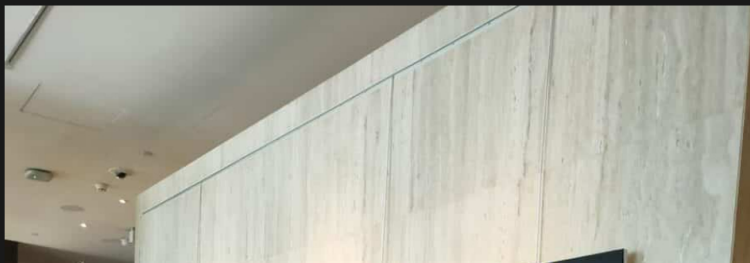
"I paint to discover the world, history, and reality through colour," he tells me from his home studio in Phnom Penh. "I don't care if what I'm doing is seen as contemporary art or not – my approach to painting is very classical, and I constantly look for a way to connect with the history of art."

The artist has currently a solo show titled *The Ontology of Form and Colour* in the art space of the hotel **Rosewood Phnom Penh**. It runs from February 1 to April 30 2022 and features abstract works inspired by the *krama*, the traditional Khmer checkered garment.

Reclaiming symbols of Cambodian heritage

As Robit points out in our interview, Cambodian heritage is something that artists have to reconfigure and reclaim. Just like many other symbols of Cambodian heritage – such as the star, the farmers' scythe, or the Angkor Ruins (which the **Democratic Kampuchea** used in its flag) – the *krama* was appropriated and used by the **Khmer Rouge**, becoming associated with this tragic period in history.

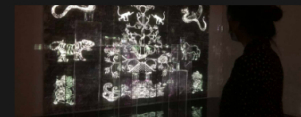
The Managing Director of Rosewood Phnom Penh Daniel Simon, puts it quite formally, "We're delighted to host the debut of this extraordinary new exhibition, which re-imagines a quintessential symbol of Khmer identity," he says. "Pen Robit's artistic vision is a testament to Cambodia's talent and creativity, and it's an honour to support this stirring exploration of heritage and modernity."



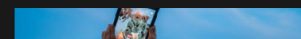
Latest Articles

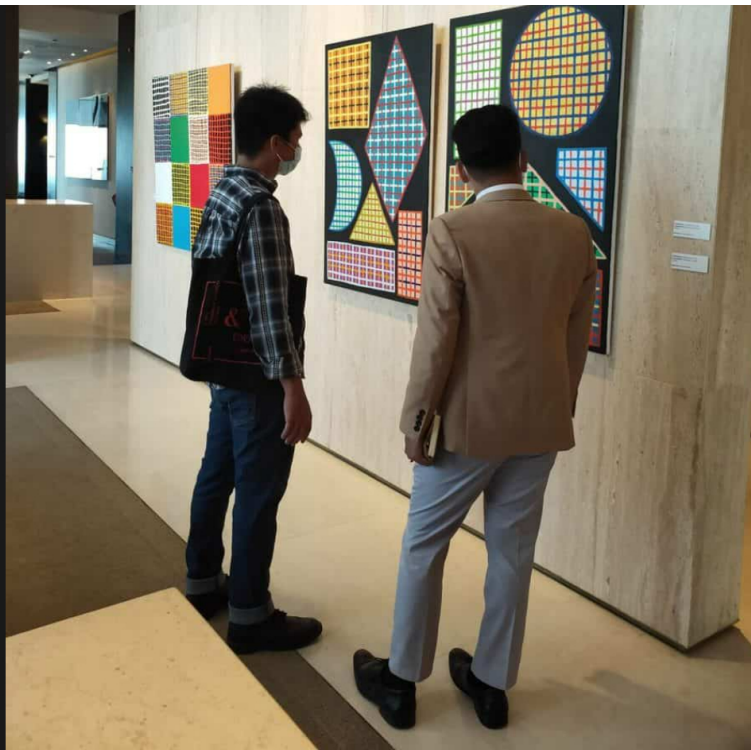


Infusions Into Contemporary Art: Unravelling the world with Indonesian Women Artists



Infusions Into Contemporary Art: Unravelling the world with Indonesian Women Artists

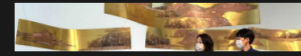




Visitors at *The Ontology of Form and Colour* at Rosewood Phnom Penh. Image courtesy of the artist.



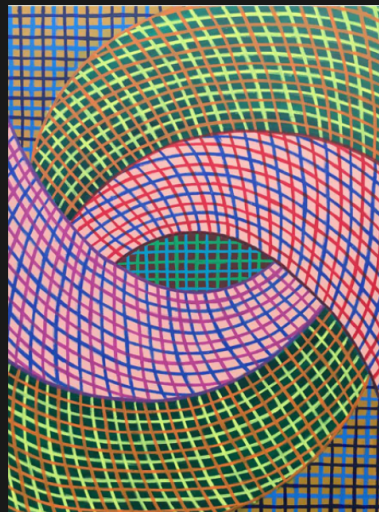
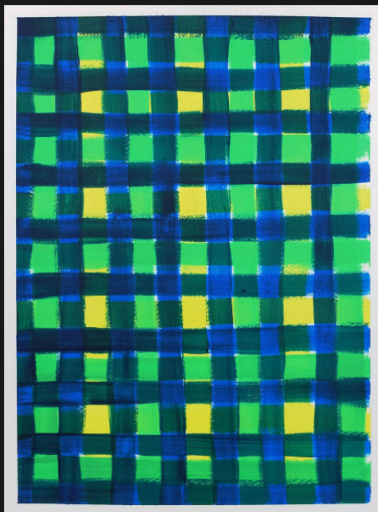
Rethinking war, history, and anime with Ho Tzu Nyen's *Language*



While the title *The Ontology of Form and Colour* alludes to philosophical concepts of existence and being, the artist didn't appear burdened by too many concepts. Instead, he seemed to prefer an instinctual approach to the big canvases presented in the show.

The knitting motif of the *krama* features shapes that reminded me of works by [Joan Miró](#), while other paintings appeared to be exercises of style. The works on show boast a more detailed approach, compared to earlier canvases from 2019 when he just started working with the imagery of the *krama*.

We can see this by comparing the works on show with earlier ones like *Thread #8*, which shows a much more straightforward and textured representation of the *krama*. In another earlier work titled *Movement #2*, the artist depicts a sense of dynamism within the rigid grid of the *krama*.



(Left) *Thread #8* by Pen Robit, 2019, Acrylic on paper, 37 x 26 cm. Image Credit: Richard Koh Fine Art. (Right) *Movement #2* by Pen Robit, 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 120 cm. Image Credit: Richard Koh Fine Art. Image courtesy of the artist.

In his process, Robit uses the 'drip method,' which Jackson Pollock introduced. He uses oil and enamel to create colourful patchworks and modernist shapes. He also paints on the floor – similar to the methods of abstract impressionist artists.

Robit's works have been described as metaphors for the rampant urbanisation of Cambodian cities – a theme that remains relevant to Southeast Asia. Some of Robit's biggest canvases have patchwork compositions, with sinuous shapes that remind viewers of rivers and squares reminiscent of an aerial view of fields or housing blocks.

However, by speaking with the artist, I got the impression that he approaches the works as more of a formal experiment, rather than referencing specific Cambodian geography.

Building a career as an artist

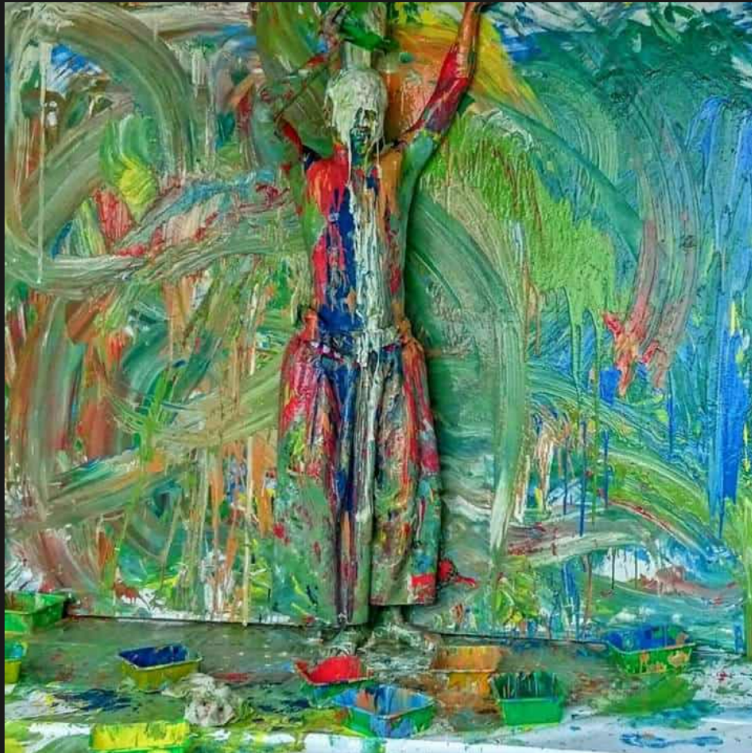
Born in Battambang in 1991, Robit was first exposed to art in his childhood, as his father was an artist himself. After spending time in the military, Robit's father devoted himself to painting movie posters.

Robit moved with his family back and forth from Battambang to Phnom Penh, finally settling in Battambang with an aunt. There, he graduated from **Phare Ponleu Selpak, School of Visual and Applied Arts**. It was founded in 1994 and led by a group of artists who grew up in the refugee camps at the border with Thailand. It became a seminal institution for the development of contemporary art in Cambodia, as well as for educating younger artists.

"I used to be part of a group that performed and produced live paintings on the riverside of Battambang, to get the general public interested in the arts," says Robit, thinking back on his lively time at art school.

OPEN FOR APPLICATIONS
FROM NOW TILL 16 MARCH 2022, 5PM

APPLY NOW



Pen Robit's early performance work. Image courtesy of the artist.

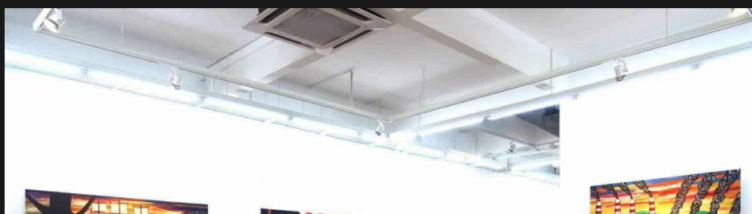
After that fruitful time, he then moved to Phnom Penh in search of a more active art scene. Phnom Penh's art scene proved to be bigger than those in Battambang and Siem Reap. Here, he could build more relationships within the art world and receive focused feedback on his practice.

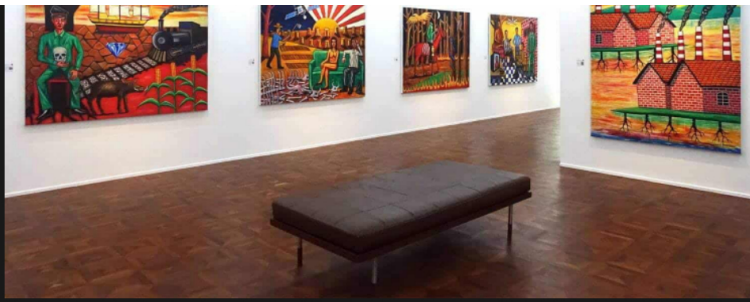
One of Phnom Penh's most notable art spaces is Silapak Trotchaek Pneik, which hosts artist residencies. Most recently, Pen Robit was invited there for a three-month art residency, during which he produced the 21 paintings for *The Ontology of Form and Colour*.

Socio-Political Dimensions

"I did figurative work before tackling the socio-political dimension, but I feel figuration is the best way for me to explore the history of my country," Robit told me, acknowledging the power of a narrative art style.

A 2020 exhibition *Out of This World* at **Richard Koh Fine Arts** in Kuala Lumpur marked the beginning of his socio-political explorations on corruption, and personal and collective identity. Robit carried on with these ideas in the exhibition *Wings of Tomorrow*, which was on show in February 2022. It explored the correlation between power, the military, governmentality, and subjectivity.





Out Of This World at Richard Koh Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Image courtesy of the artist.

In the paintings from his *Out of This World* series, the artist looked at different symbols of power, the Cambodian military, government, and subjectivity. "My interest in figurative work could be a return to realism or a real world instead of abstraction," writes the artist in the catalogue. "While realism may be a premise in this series, it is not my attempt to have my works obtain a realistic or naturalistic appearance. The real and the imagined dimensions informed my creative approach to the twenty-four canvases, which in and of themselves scrutinise what is real and what is not."

Using stark colours to create surreal scenarios, Robit depicts the struggle for survival, researching one's personal identity and freedom in the rigidity of a guarded Cambodian political landscape.



The artist with works from *Out of This World*. Image courtesy of the artist.

I told him that the colours in his figurative work remind me of those in works by French painter Henri Rousseau and the Mexican Muralists — but I asked if he has references from his home country.

"In Cambodia, because of the cultural erasure of the Khmer Rouge, we didn't have many artists to look up to, besides the seminal Nhek Dim, Svay Ken, Vann Nath. However, for my own figurative political work, I looked more at Western art. I remember at school we had books on Picasso, Klimt, Monet, all the main artists from 1800s Europe," he explains.

These days, the artist is in the process of creating new works without following a set routine. "I really don't stick to habits, it depends on the day," he shares. "The only constant is to devote a few hours to art daily — and if I don't put brush to canvas, I would research using books or the internet. Art is a constant in my life."

The Ontology of Form and Color runs until May 31, 2022 at the Rosewood Phnom Penh Art Gallery. Click [here](#) to find out more.

SHOP **PLURAL**

for exquisite limited edition art and art objects
by Southeast Asian artists

Support our work on Patreon

Diventa
sostenitore



A field guide to collaborating: Zen Teh and Wyn-Lyn Tan on creating art together



WHAT KIND OF
GIFT-GIVER ARE YOU?

[Click Here to Find Out!](#)



WHAT'S YOUR
PANDEMIC PERSONA?

[Click Here to Find Out!](#)



WHICH SINGAPORE
ARTWORK ARE YOU?

[Take our Fun Quiz Here!](#)

You May Also Like...

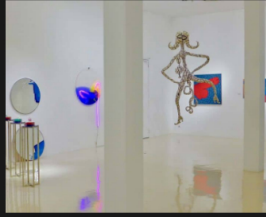
Exhibitions · Regional Shows



Pauline · March 5, 2017

**Migrant, Alien, Stranger ...
Friend?**

Exhibitions · Regional Shows



Nicolette · June 26, 2018

The Fault In Our Stars?

Exhibitions · Regional Shows



Usha · January 13, 2018

**Brave New World : The
Museum MACAN**

Exhibitions · Regional Shows



Layla · February 16, 2021

**Remapping Memories and
Encounters: Connecting
through Ise**

[Load more](#)