

To Remember

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When the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia in 1975, they emptied the cities and towns and forced the populations into the countryside. They declared Year Zero to mark the end of history and the start of a new society devoid of intellectuals, artists, schools, hospitals, anything and anyone with ties to the former regime and ways of life. No one was allowed to have a memory.

To survive, one had to forget.

In his analysis of the photographs at S21, the high school turned into a torture camp in Phnom Penh, Boreth Ly argues that the Khmer Rouge used visibility as a mechanism for controlling people. The guards systematically photographed thousands of prisoners, and surveyed them from morning to night, severely punishing anyone who moved without permission.¹ Of the estimated 14,000 people brought to the center, seven survived. One of them was Vann Nath (1946-2011), an artist whom the prison leaders kept alive so he could paint portraits of them. In the years after 1979, he painted dozens of scenes of what he witnessed at the camp—scenes of people tortured, people shackled and lying like sardines on the floor, people blindfolded and marched to the killing fields where they were shot.²

He refused to forget.

In this article, I propose a reading of contemporary Cambodian art as a site of reconstructing history and narrating the present. I discuss the work of five artists who use portraiture and representational modes as a means of reconstructing a history forcibly taken from them. As acts of remembering, these projects collectively work to reclaim history and the right to see.

Artists born in the 1960s, 70s and 80s came of age in a society with a devastated social, economic and political infrastructure. Many had to flee the country as refugees. Some went back to Cambodia as adults; consequently the country's contemporary art scene comprises artists who grew up there and those who grew up in the diaspora. Travel between multiple locations of home is an integral part of the work of many artists.

Amy Lee Sanford left Phnom Penh in November 1972, at age two, with her stepmother Barbara. Her father, a professor of art history and aesthetics at Université de Phnom Penh, had asked his wife to come for the baby. Barbara asked him to go with them to Boston. He didn't. He left

¹ Boreth Ly, "Devastated Vision(s): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia", *Art Journal* 62:1 (Spring 2003): 66-81.

² Rithy Panh, dir. *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, 2003.

hundreds of letters, written to Barbara from 1968 to 1975. Night raids, teaching, research. His baby. An intellectual, he was among the estimated two million people killed by the Khmer Rouge during their reign from 1975 to 1979.

The father became a concept.

For her project *Unfolding*, Sanford creates a single channel video installation of herself scanning the letters in Boston, where she has kept them in storage since her stepmother's death. Accompanied by print images of the letters, which are thin and fragile like onion skin, the video makes visible the excavation of history through repetition—the unfolding, scanning, and folding of objects that hold a tenuous world in their delicate creases. The video loops back onto itself, with no beginning and no ending. Like the search for one's past, there is no one entry point and there is no origin to find. By sharing the process of opening these letters, the artist invites the viewer to reflect on how our daily routines are affected by war and genocide, and how objects from the past can help us live in the present.

When the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities and forced everyone to return to their villages of birth, they began a nightmare that would leave a quarter of the eight-million population dead by torture, starvation, disease and hard labor, and at least another million forced into exile. Artists, intellectuals, the middle class, landowners, and anyone associated with the Lon Nol government were among the first executed. LinDa Saphan's father was an engineer who disguised himself as a fisherman. Saphan's mother was a teacher who taught French, wore glasses and had soft hands. She cut her hair short, broke her glasses and hid them, scratched her hands on the ground until her skin bled and her nails were caked in dirt. The Khmer Rouge thought she was the village idiot, and she and her husband survived their reign doing hard labor.

In 1982, Saphan left Cambodia for Montreal, Canada, with her mother and siblings. Her mother supported the family by working as a seamstress. After school, Saphan would help her sew, and her mother would tell her stories about Phnom Penh—visiting her favorite haunts, cruising the streets on a Vespa, listening to the soft flutter of the breeze as neighbors passed the night on the balcony.

Saphan's drawings on rice paper titled *Still Loving It* are panoramic views of shop houses and apartment buildings in downtown Phnom Penh. A vernacular architectural style imported by the Chinese and common in Southeast Asia, these shop houses are three to four stories high and split between a ground floor reserved for commercial use and residential spaces above. Among the drawings are four of "The White Building", an apartment complex built in the 1960s to offer housing to low and middle income families. In the post-Khmer Rouge years, artists, students and civil servants occupied the structure. One of the few remaining buildings from the Golden Age of Cambodian modernist architecture, The White Building has been targeted numerous times by the government for demolition to make way for expensive high-rises. Saphan's drawings pay tribute to the people who were forced to leave their homes by the anti-capitalist Khmer Rouge, and now face eviction by a government eager to embrace global capitalism and development. The more abstract drawings in the series look like maps. The

building facades become a labyrinth of streets and alleyways, paths of imagination that allow one to wander around the city, to reclaim that freedom of vision.

Lyno Vuth is a photographer and curator who is part of a collective in Phnom Penh that runs a space called Sa Sa Art Projects in the White Building. He and his fellow artists work with residents and visiting artists to create projects and events that involve the community. They are building an archive of images and written documents about the history of the building. For one of his own projects, titled *Thoamada II*, Vuth made diptych images of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people posing by themselves and with their families. *Thoamada* translates as “normal, everyday, commonplace”. The Khmer Rouge had forced many men and women to marry each other as part of the constitution of a new society under an anonymous entity called Angkar. In a world of such forced marriages, signs of non-heterosexual behavior would have been highly dangerous. Vuth’s documentary photographs give visibility to that which had become a fatal taboo.

While Vuth uses art to create community in Phnom Penh, Pete Pin uses photography to recover fragments of the past and to reconstitute community in the diaspora. Like thousands of civilians caught between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese invading forces in the post-1979 period, Pete Pin’s family fled toward the border with Thailand. After staying in a refugee camp called Khao-I-Dang, they settled in the U.S. Pin grew up in California, knowing little of his family’s past. For many immigrants displaced by war, silence becomes a way of surviving. It is often too painful for the adults to talk about the lives they left behind—one loses dozens of family and friends, whole social and work networks, one’s understanding of the world and one’s place in it.

For the project *Cambodian Diaspora: Memory*, Pin made diptychs showing a person with an object such as an old identity card, an airline ticket or an old photograph. The present is foregrounded in *Cambodian Diaspora*, which documents Cambodian American communities. We see people dancing at a nightclub with hand gestures learned from traditional Cambodian dance, gathered for a wedding ceremony, praying at a family shrine in the backyard of a home, posing with friends and family. As he expands the project, Pin has led workshops to teach other Cambodian Americans photography so that they can create their own images. Documentary photography here serves as a mean of recovering one’s ability to look back at the past and rebuild community through visuality.

Anida Yoeu Ali and her family also had to seek safety in a refugee camp in the post-1979 period. The camps along the border with Thailand comprised hundreds of rows of barracks made out of thatch and branches. Her family does not talk about the war years. But when her mother saw television images of people standing in line during the First Gulf War, she said, “It’s happening again”.

Ali’s *Camp Series* is a video installation and set of four images of the family in the camps. For each print, an image of a photograph is silk screened onto fabric; on top of that image, a part of the same image that has been cut is silk screened a second time, and then stitched. On top of those images is barbed wire embroidered in black. The printing, cutting, and stitching perform a

process of tracing, retracing, narrating, and living. The obsessive repetitions perform an act of remembering necessary for moving forward. While the prints present snapshots of the family in the camps, the animation video projected onto a screen made out of mosquito nets enacts the past not as a static history written by a genocidal regime, but as a present in which the living tell their own histories. A common domestic object in Southeast Asia, the mosquito nets hang like ghosts, reminders of a past that survives in the losses that every family has had to endure.

One of the ongoing historical dramas playing out in Cambodia is the fiercely contentious trials of Khmer Rouge leaders. These trials are not just about retribution for past crimes, but very much speak to how the country's collective memory and history will be written and remembered. Art has become an important arena of excavation, and artists in Cambodia and the diaspora are creating work that insist on remembering—recovering that which has been forbidden and broken, that which refuses to be forgotten.