

ANIMATE BODIES OF WORK

By Erin Gleeson

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Outdoor holdings of sandstone Vishnus, Angkor Conservation Center, Siem Reap, Cambodia, December 2013. Photo Charlotte Huddleston. Courtesy Erin Gleeson.

Personal readings on fragmentation

Much of what is known as “Cambodian art” are fragments of figurative sculptures intended for spiritual, social and political functions in their ancient temple origins. Stone incarnations of Hindu, Buddhist and mythological gods, kings, warriors, vehicles, guardians, creators and destroyers were originally integral to the architecture of both public and private spaces of ancient Khmer cities. Since the French Protectorate in the mid-1800s, and especially during the conflicts between the 1970s and '90s, thousands of pre-Angkorean and Angkorean-era stone sculptures have been looted, trafficked, traded, gifted, sold, purchased and acquired—reincarnated in the cyclic market sphere of both public and private art collections worldwide.

Beheaded. Amputated. Bodiless. Limbless. In most collections, such fragments are presented as if whole, as aestheticized objects partnered with texts noting iconographic, stylistic and historic categorizations that lack critical contextualization that would allow the “artwork” to communicate the social, spiritual and political significance of its time.

In Cambodia, rare whole figures and uncountable fragments of such artifacts that remain in situ at local temples are now integral to its tourist industry. French-inherited systems of categorization, conservation and display, in repositories and national museums countrywide, are at play. At a large, archaeological depot in Siem Reap, sculptural fragments of similar body parts are convened, including a basket full of Vishnu’s conch-holding hand, another filled with several of Buddha’s *ushnisha*, and others containing right and left hands in various *mudras*, as well as pairs of feet on pedestals. Restoration goals are largely intended to reunite such pieces with their remaining parts. In Cambodia, whether in situ, in hiding or on display, it is common to see diurnal offerings of incense and flowers in front of the most wholly and holy represented figures—they are personal offerings from temple employees and the public alike that reveal the animate significance of the represented figure that continues to this day.

In the studios of Cambodia’s contemporary artists, as well as in exhibition spaces, we can also find animate fragments of the spiritual body. Like their figurative ancestors that they have appropriated, the artists’ sculptures, paintings, photographs and installations have varying degrees of spiritual, social, political and cultural purposes. Both directly and indirectly, reverently and critically, the following works by five of Cambodia’s most prolific artists offer complex departure points from which to consider the represented spiritual body in the context of the present. With a shared autobiographical instinct, these bodies of work also stand as personal readings of the notion of fragmentation that resonates with Cambodia’s more recent histories.

(Top)

SOPHEAP PICH, *Buddha 2*, 2009, rattan wire, dye, 254 x 74 x 23 cm. Installed for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, 2009. Photo by Natasha Harth. Courtesy the artist and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

(Bottom)

Installation view of **SOPHEAP PICH**'s solo exhibition "Cambodian Rattan: The Sculptures of Sopheap Pich" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), New York, 2013. Copyright and courtesy the Met.



Sopheap Pich, born in 1971 in Battambang, lives and works in Phnom Penh. Working principally in rattan and bamboo, his practice in handmade, open-weave orthogonal and curvilinear sculptures explores both the abstract and the representational. While his inspirations are most often presented as autobiographical and culturally specific, bound to memory, narrative and geography, he equally addresses form and labor in relation to Western Modernist histories.

Pich's *Buddha* was originally one of numerous pieces comprising his installation series "1979" (2009). Commissioned for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, "1979" is a reflection on the fragmentary nature of memory—specifically, postwar memory and visual impressions of the long walk he endured as a child leaving a prison camp following the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. The components of "1979" represent the litter of war: bomb shells, metal scraps, soldier's canteens and one broken religious sculpture. Pich's rattan *Buddha* is a portrayal from *ushnisha* down to the upper chest, from where the frame of the body begins to splay. Lines that give form to the figure separate as if incomplete; yet its end tips are treated in red dye to reference blood stains found on numerous temple walls that were used as prisons and execution sites during the war.

Pich's solo exhibition "Cambodian Rattan: The Sculptures of Sopheap Pich," curated by John Guy at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013, is an example of a growing trend by museums to situate contemporary works in conversation with their ancient collections. The second edition of *Buddha* was a centerpiece of "Cambodian Rattan," receiving acclaim for the spiritual tone inherent to its light, transparent body, but also for its suspended presentation—the work literally floated in the room among heavy, solid stone and wooden fragments on pedestals. An equally powerful impression that it gave was its inherent violence and its reflection on brokenness—both physically and psychologically—in the company of historical, precedent "ruins." Indeed, *Buddha II* represents a devastating historical period for the collective Buddhist body in Cambodia. The wall texts that accompanied the exhibition featured quotations by Pich, with the one for *Buddha II* reading in part: "Where there used to be the normal Buddha sculptures, there were just piles of broken things I couldn't see . . ."

Leang Seckon, born in 1974 in Prey Veng province, lives and works between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. He is celebrated for a practice that





layers and juxtaposes his personal histories with Cambodia's social and political past and present, often weaving together elements from popular culture and mythological narrative.

Leang has long been a devotee of religious and spiritual iconography in his work as a means of storytelling. In the artist's most recent series of mixed-media works on canvas—created for the group exhibition "REV | ACTION, Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia" (2015), curated by Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani at New York's Sundaram Tagore Gallery—Leang pays homage to two successful repatriation cases of monumental pre-Angkorean sculptures by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Sotheby's, New York.

The painting *Indochina War* (2015) refers not to the war in its name, but rather the looting that took place during Cambodia's colonial era and the escalated complications between former Indochinese nations that affected the Cambodian civil wars, during which further tangible heritage was looted. Leang's largest work, spanning four meters, depicts two pairs of sandstone warriors from Koh Ker, a former capitol of the Khmer empire in the early tenth century—a period during which sculpture was uniquely refined. One pair is based on the sculptures of the monkey warriors Sugriva and Vali from the Hindu *Ramayana* epic, which have long been safely exhibited at the National Museum in Phnom Penh. The other pair are in reference to sculptures of the pavilion guardians Duryodhana and Bhima from the Hindu *Mahabharata* epic, which had been separated for decades, until recently when Duryodhana was returned to Cambodia by Sotheby's. In Leang's monumental collage, the past is forever present, where an eagle looms above delivering bombs, while below a soldier escapes down a rat hole. Incidentally, no significant figurative sculptures remain in situ at the entire Koh Ker complex today.

Anida Yoeu Ali, born in Battambang in 1974, lives and works between Chicago and Phnom Penh. Self-defined as a performance artist, poet and global agitator, Ali's practice is rooted in discourses around identity—diaspora, hybrid and transnational. Her often provocative semi-autobiographical performances result in images and videos that capture encounters between the carefully staged, ambiguous body and the ambivalent audience.



(Top)
LEANG SECKON, *Indochina War*, 2015,
mixed media on canvas, 200 x 400 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi,
London/Hong Kong.

(Bottom)
LEANG SECKON, *In Front of the Royal
Palace*, 2015, mixed media on canvas,
40 x 50 cm. Courtesy the artist
and Rossi & Rossi, London/Hong Kong.



Her most celebrated series, “The Buddhist Bug,” is an interdisciplinary performance project that considers the notion of “otherness.” In *Angkor Pride* (2014), Ali embodies the guise of a bug, posing at the site of Wat Ek Phnom—a tumbledown, 11th-century Angkorean-era Hindu temple, which today shares space with a modern Buddhist pagoda—located near the artist’s birth village, a small Muslim enclave called Dum Spey. Like many temples in Cambodia, Ek Phnom accounts for simultaneous and transformational religious beliefs within one site, poignantly reflecting Ali’s personal negotiation of her Cham Muslim ancestry and identity within a predominantly Buddhist nation—a concept that she expresses through the site of her body. The Cham in Cambodia are a diaspora community that fled from ancient Champa lands during Đại Việt invasions between the 15th and 19th centuries. Originally Hindu, an Islamic sect was formed following the onset of trade relations with Muslim merchants in the 11th century; thus, most of the Cham refugees to Cambodia were Muslim. Targeted during the Khmer Rouge, many Cham were murdered and some survivors became the next generation of refugees—as with Ali’s family, who fled to the United States during the 1980s.

Without arms, yet with the humorous surprise of feet positioned opposite Ali’s stoic face, the artist-turned-bug’s 40-meter-long orange cylindrical figure draws on both Islamic and Buddhist dress. Ali says the title *Angkor Pride* “references the often nationally driven pride of the diaspora in terms of anything ‘Angkorean’ and thus ‘Khmer’”—which in the case of her work is represented literally by the Cambodian flag and temple imagery captured in the performance’s photo documentation. At the same time, Ali expresses an element of nostalgia toward this and other works choreographed near Battambang, which were first exhibited at a show curated by Dana Langlois at Siem Reap’s 1961 Gallery between 2014 and 2015. “The Buddhist Bug” in *Angkor Pride* playfully explores sites of displacement and belonging, not only for the artist, but also as a way to question the attraction of tourism concerning the ancient, looted, archaeological sites.

Khvay Samnang, born in 1982 in Svay Rieng, Cambodia, lives and works in Phnom Penh. The body has been central to Khvay’s multidisciplinary

ANIDA YOEU ALI, *Angkor Pride*, 2014, from “The Buddhist Bug,” a project of Studio Revolt, image of performance, digital color print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy Studio Revolt.

practice, which is guided largely by personal experience and hearsay and media surrounding contentious current affairs. His performances, as well as image-based and sculptural works, offer critical and lesser-known readings of Cambodia's past and present. During his yearlong KfW Stiftung-sponsored residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin (2014–15), Khvay researched the history between Cambodia and Europe during World War I, which revealed to him painful reminders of colonial infrastructures concerning land and labor that are still at work today.

Khvay's resulting exhibition at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, "Footprints of Yantra Man" (2015), reflected on the little-known fact of World War I regarding France's conscription of Khmer, Cham and indigenous Cambodian soldiers to join the Allies' fight against Germany. Khvay considered the personal and political aspects of these soldiers' lives, being far from their families and culture. In his exhibition catalog, *The Land Beneath My Feet*, Khvay writes: "I am thinking about knights and soldiers, who could be heroes and thieves and killers all at once, which for me relates to power in Cambodia today."

One of three works in the exhibition was *Yantra Man* (2015), a life-size metal armor inspired by the artist's visits to the German History Museum collections, and based on measurements of his own body. With pieces strewn across the floor, the dismembered armor is inscribed with intricate engravings inspired by *yantra* and *sak yant*—ancient Brahamic drawing and tattooing practices inherited by many areas of Southeast Asia—meant to bestow magical power and protection on the wearer of the armor. In the case of *Yantra Man*, however, Khvay complicates such elements of the Cambodian belief system: he treats them with respect (as his family had offered him *yantra* before his departure to Berlin), but also as subtle gestures of resistance against history and colonial domination and oppression, and as a tongue-in-cheek attribute to the artist's body, whose traces are invisibly present in the work.

Svay Sareth, born in 1972 in Battambang, lives and works in Siem Reap. His works in sculpture, installation and performance are made with materials and processes intentionally associated with war and refugee life, such as metals, uniforms, camouflage and actions requiring great endurance. While his critical and cathartic practice is rooted in an autobiography of resistance, he refuses both historical particularity and voyeuristic approaches to violence. Rather, his works traverse both present and historical moments, drawing on processes of survival and adventure and ideas of power and futility.

(Top)
KHVAY SAMNANG, *Yantra Man* (detail),
2015, steel and engraved lead, dimensions
variable. Courtesy the artist.

(Bottom)
Installation view of **KHVAY SAMNANG**'s
solo exhibition "Footprints of Yantra Man"
at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2015.
Courtesy the artist.



More recently, Svay has been confronting the idea that “the present is also a dangerous time” through the appropriation and dramatization of public monuments that hint at contentious political histories. Svay’s soft-sculpture series “Ruins” (2014–) was initially inspired by the ruinous state of his studio and garden during and after the making of his large-scale commission *Toy (Churning of the Sea of Milk)* for the 2013 Singapore Biennale, a work that referenced the narrative bas-relief at Angkor Wat where Hindu deity figures Asuras (“The Bad”) and Devas (“The Good”) are posed in a tug-of-war between the omnipotent ruler Vishnu. Strewn around Svay’s working spaces were molds and models of various body parts, simultaneously recalling war-torn scenes of the past and the uncountable Khmer stone ruins that are floating around as part of “art collections” worldwide.

“Ruins,” shown in the 2014 group exhibition “Traitor and Tradition” at Berlin’s ARNDT gallery, comprises corporeal fragments classified by titles according to character and body parts. Mythical and religious identities were made anonymous and dismembered, reduced to the mortal human elements that created them. Their hulking presence, camouflage-patterned skin and cartoonish, ornamental stitching strips romanticized notions around narratives that are seen in elegant, traditional stone carvings. Here, Svay’s practice of resistance is not only against past traditions of idealizing powerful figures, but also against the ongoing catastrophes that this idealization provokes.

Installation view of **SVAY SARETH**’s ongoing soft sculpture series “Ruins” (2014–) displayed at Arndt, Berlin, 2015. Photo by Image Bernd Borchardt. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin/Singapore.



ERIN GLEESON is a curator and the co-founding artistic director of SA SA BASSAC, a nonprofit gallery, reading room and resource center in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, established in 2011 along with the art collective Stiev Selepak. Gleeson’s recent projects include the Satellite 8 Program, “Enter the Stream at the Turn,” at Jeu de Paume, Paris, and CAPC, Bordeaux, and the research and archive initiative “Displaying Change and Continuity: Exhibition Histories in Cambodia, 1945–1979” with Vuth Lyno for ACIA Library Park, Gwangju. Gleeson is currently an Alphawood Scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (2015–16).