



Svay Sareth

The Breath of Change

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A Solo Exhibition by
Svay Sareth



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05 - 20 July 2019



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Excerpt from Memories and Meditation: Recalling Resistance and Resilience

Andrea Fam, May 2019

Sunflowers and water lilies appeal in ways that are easily discernible. They exude cheer and elegance, and continue to charm and inspire artists around the world and across decades. Symbolically, the sunflower and water lily represent admired qualities of 'resistance' and 'purity' and have been incorporated in emblems adopted in times of struggle for change. In "Beyond Sunflowers" and "Yell and Silent", Svay Sareth activates the form of the sunflower and water lily respectively as metaphors for past freedoms and present restrictions as experienced by self and society.

"Yell and Silent" is an installation comprising approximately 180 soft-sculpture water lilies surrounding a central anthropomorphic form enwrapped in camouflage-print cotton. Autobiographical in nature, the work follows the narrative of Svay, who as a young boy, recognised the importance of swimming as a life skill, and in the water lily pond near the refugee camp where he lived taught himself to swim. Being able to swim presented him with a sense of being freed, and triggered in him a yearn to live his life independent of confines. Before embarking on his life of determined independence, Svay offered his mother a large bouquet of water lilies as a gesture



of love, and hope for her trust in his decision to forge his own path. In these moments, he learnt about the value of freedom and since then has always recalled the water lily as a symbol of one's strength and resolve.

Trappings, as counter to the freedom described above, is regarded in the performance video, "Beyond Sunflower". The scene opens upon an aerial view of the monumental Angkor city. The viewer is taken on a bird's-eye journey of the magnificent former Khmer empire before being brought to settle within the city walls, whence one bears witness to the protagonist of the performance video who, donned in a sunflower mask, proceeds to forcibly victimise a Tro (traditional Khmer stringed instrument). Outcries of prolonged wails and stretched and strained resistance ensue from the contact made between bow and strings, conjuring an image of a tortured soul. In "Beyond Sunflower", Svay revises the position of the sunflower to one of aggressor, and with the Tro signifying Cambodia, proposes a visual metaphor for the fate of his country.

"Yell and Silent" and "Beyond Sunflower" are juxtaposed in tenor: the former speaks of a quiet determination and resistance that forged a strength and clarity of mind whilst the latter laments a resigned admission of an invading force. Yet whilst juxtaposed in tenor, the works bear the same immediacy of the performance and performative gesture: the act and undertaking of hand-sewing each individual soft-sculpture and the performance of possessing bow and string allowing Svay the presence of mind and meditation to commit to the repetitive and compulsive. The two works come together in the solo exhibition, "The Breath of Change", to highlight the artist's reflection on the consequence of considered and ill-considered choices and decisions and their repercussions.

Works





Yell & Silent, 2018, Cotton, silk and kapok, Variable dimension



Beyond Sunflower, 2018, Single-channel video, Duration 2 minutes 55 seconds, Edition of 3





Svay Sareth

Svay Sareth's works in sculpture, installation and durational performance are made using materials and processes intentionally associated with war – metals, uniforms, camouflage and actions requiring great endurance. While his critical and cathartic practice is rooted in an autobiography of war and resistance, he refuses both historical particularity and voyeurism on violence. Rather, his works traverse both present and historical moments, drawing on processes of survival and adventure, and ideas of power and futility. More recently, Svay confronts 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 Sareth was born in 1972 in Battambang, Cambodia during a period of political turmoil and violence that would last until he was 18 years old. Svay began making art as a young teenager in the Site 2 refugee camp, near the Thai-Cambodian border. He describes life as a refugee as “a void nationality...a time and place you imagine escaping from.” Drawing and painting became a daily activity for Svay – a process of bearing witness to the psychological and physical violence that was an everyday experience, as well as a way to symbolically escape and dream of change. After the wars ended, Svay went on to co-found Phare Ponleu Selpak, a non-governmental organization and art school in Battambang that continues to thrive today. In 2002, the artist continued his studies in France, earning the Diplôme National Supérieur d'Études des Arts Plastiques / MFA in 2009, after which he returned to Siem Reap to live and work.



Svay Sareth

Educations

- 2009 MFA, Diplôme National Supérieur d'Etude des Arts Plastiques, avec felicitations, Caen
- 2007 BA Fine Art, L'école Régional Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Caen, France
- 2004 Certificate, Fine Art, L'école des Beaux-Arts de Beauvais

Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 *The Breath of Change*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2015 *I, Svay Sareth, eat rubber sandals*. SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2013 *Churning*, World Financial Center, NYC, USA
- 2012 *The Traffic Circle*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2011 *Tuesday*, Hotel de la Paix Arts Lounge, Siem Reap, Cambodia
- 2010 *La Terre Ferme*, French Cultural Centre, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2019 ART staged: No Booth, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2018 Gwangju Biennale South Korea
Biennale of Sydney, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia
Superposition: Equilibrium & Engagement, 21st Biennale of Sydney, Australia
DIASPORA: Exit, Exile, Exodus of Southeast Asia, MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, Thailand
- 2017 *Present Net Value: Art Capital, Futures*, Art Stage Singapore
Le paysage après coup, Centre d'art contemporain Faux Mouvement, Metz, France
- 2016 *Phnom Penh, Rescue Archaeology, The Body and the Lens in the City in Fragments & Empire: Cambodian Art from the Angkor Period*, John Young Museum of Art, University of Hawaii, Manoa, USA
Shapeshifting: Contemporary Art From Southeast Asia,

- 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong
Prudential Eye Awards Finalist Exhibition, Art Science Museum, Singapore
- Asia NOW Paris*, SA SA BASSAC solo booth A1, Paris
- Weaving the Asian Democracy*, Asia Culture Center, Gwangju
- 2015 *The Second China-ASEAN Biennale*, China
Global Control and Censorship, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany
I, Svay Sareth, eat rubber sandals, Asia Now, Paris, France
After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Contemporary Art, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Gods, Heroes and Clowns: Performance and Narrative in South and Southeast Asian Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Secret Archipelago, Palais de Tokyo, Paris
Eagles Fly, Sheeps Flock: Southeast Asia Plaform, Art Stage Singapore, Singapore
- 2014 *Traitor and Tradition*, ARNDT, Berlin
The Mirror and Monitor of Democracy in Asia, Gwangju Museum of Art, Gwangju
Phnom Penh Rescue Archaeology: The Body and the Lens in the City, Goldsmiths University of London for SEA Fest, UK
Looking at the Big Blue Sky, Meta House, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Phnom Penh Rescue Archaeology: The Body, The Lens, The City, The Disappearance, Center for Contemporary Art, Singapore
Our City Festival 2014, FCC, Siem Reap, Cambodia
Rescue Archaeology: The Body and the Lens in the City, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2013 *If The World Changed*, 4th Singapore Biennale, Singapore
Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology / Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia / ifa, Berlin and Stuttgart, Germany
Merging Metaphors / Indo-ASEAN traveling exhibition India, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia,

Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam

- 2012 *new artefacts*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Mon Boulet, French Institute, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
20 x 1, French Institute, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2009 *OFF/ON*, L'Usine Utopik à Tessy sur Vire, France
- 2008 *Voir Après*, Galerie L'Hôtel, Caen, France

Artist Talks / Workshops/ Residencies / Nominations

- 2018 The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia
MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, Thailand
- 2017 Artist Talk, Conference of the exhibition *Le paysage après coup*, Centre d'art contemporain Faux Mouvement, Metz, France
- 2016 Artist in Residence, Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore
Award Winner, Prudential Eye Award Best Emerging Artist Using Sculpture and Overall Best Emerging Artist in 2016
- 2015 Nominee, Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art, Singapore
- 2014 Artist in Residence, Center for Khmer Studies, Siem Reap, Cambodia
- 2013 Artist in Residence, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council at Governor's Island / IN RESIDENCE, Season of Cambodia, NYC
Artist Talk, Art Asia Archive in America, NYC
Artist Talk, *Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry*, In conversation with Leeza Ahmady, Modern Museum of Art, NYC
- 2012 Artist Talk, *Merging Metaphors*, Indo-ASEAN Artist Residency, Darjeeling, India
- 2011 Artist Talk, *Enter the Stream at the Turn: Performance Art in Cambodia and Southeast Asia*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2009 Nominee, ABD Signature Art Prize, Singapore

Public Collections

- Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- National Gallery of Victoria, Australia
- MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, Thailand



Andrea Fam

Andrea Fam is an Assistant Curator at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) where she oversees the Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam portfolios. She holds a B.A. (Hons) degree in Criticism, Communication and Curation in Art and Design from Central Saint Martins, London, UK. She is one of six curators in the upcoming Singapore Biennale 2019, 'Every Step in the Right Direction', and co-curated the 2016 Singapore Biennale, 'An Atlas of Mirrors'. She has also curated and co-curated several exhibitions at SAM, namely, the President's Young Talents 2018, 'Imaginarium: Over the Ocean, Under the Sea', and 'Odyssey: Navigating Nameless Seas'. Her research interests include investigations into the role of humour and play in society.



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