



Svay Sareth

Wings of Throne



Detail of *Wing 3* (2020)

In Conversation with Svay Sareth

by Euginia Tan



Wings of Throne features eight pairs of Svay Sareth's soft sculptures in the form of camouflage dragon's wings. It was said that the monarch in current power is often supported by wings allowing a dragon to fly through Cambodia's history, spanning forty-five years. These wings are thus deemed as a necessary vessel to Cambodian society, wherein the rules to support the master crown are upheld with honour and true liberation.

We speak to the artist to find out a bit more on his role as an artist and citizen in Cambodia today.

Euginia Tan (E)

Svay Sareth (S)

- E: Hello Sareth, thank you for giving us this chance to understand your practice better. First off, let's discuss what your works revolve around.
- S: I was born in 1972, just a few years before the Khmer Red (or Khmer Rouge) was taking power over the country. Back then, my life was an endless moment of running in fear from the bombs, walking on eggshells through various land mines and escaping for survival into the jungle. We had nothing to our name: No education, no basic necessities. I lost some of my siblings to this war. My work reflects my personal experience as a refugee imprisoned by the aftermath of civil war in Cambodia.
- E: The aftermath of war features very heavily in the tone of your works. What does war mean to you?
- S: War, to me, implies the most stupid game in the quest for total power.
- E: Material-wise, there is a wide range of mediums and disciplines artists use to capture political art. There's a sense of gentleness and quirkiness to soft sculptures. Could you describe your choice of materials (Cotton, Kapok and Nylon) and how they convey the messages you are imparting?
- S: It is true that the material choices reflect certain performative elements contributing to my universe of expression. Since the majority of the world understands that war is cruel drama, I chose not to have my audience sensing violence immediately upon viewing my art work. Instead, I invite them to enter a space of connection to the messages I wish to convey. I'm very influenced by Charlie Chaplin movies- They make me laugh and forget real life for a moment. In a way, he helped relieve me of the tension in my drama. So to me, Charlie Chaplin is not only an actor, but also a doctor. His movies cured several of us after World War

Two. On that similar note, I want my works to be a reason, a mission and a responsibility as a witness to victims of war.

I'll take this chance to describe some of my current materials for this series. The camouflage fabric (as shown on the wings) were used for camouflaging when we were escaping. So it was kind of an armour for survival. Another use for it was for us to be concealed while we were hunting. Kapok is the name of a tree in Khmer, also known as Kor, which means mute/ silenced. The nylon ties were usually used to tie and withhold victims of war. However, in *Wings of Throne*, I chose to show them as a decorative proclamation of super power.



Fig: Kapok tree and fiber
Image source: <https://www.textileblog.com/kapok-fiber-properties-processing-and-applications/>

E: It's significant to note that you have experienced life as a refugee in the Site Two refugee camp near the Thai-Cambodian border.

The Site Two Refugee Camp was the largest refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border and, for several years, the largest refugee camp in South East Asia. The camp was established in January 1985 owing to guerrilla forces opposing Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Site Two was closed in mid-1993 and the great majority of its population was voluntarily returned to Cambodia.

Tell us a little bit of that period in your life. How did it impact your mindset and practice?

S: The camp was as good as a jail. More than 300,000 people crammed in a tiny space, without even a roof over our heads. We had no rights to get out and the land mine was just around the corner on the other side. Site Two was a big hostage waiting room for all the refugees in need of food, water, medicine, education... In the eyes of the people holding us hostage, a refugee was worthless.

We yearned for freedom: Freedom of taking charge of our time, freedom of speech, freedom of travelling. . . But at the time, the sole landscape I knew of was the jungle, our bamboo house and the

barbed wire fence around our camp. The violence seemed permanent and never-ending.

I waited for thirteen years to finally return to and discover my home land. To be able to smell the real Khmer food, and see our palm trees stand tall.

E: Describe your current works for *Wings of Throne*.

S: *Wings of Throne* is a continuous series of my works since 2020. They are symbols of the "Dirty Dozen", who are twelve of Khmer's dictator-generals blacklisted under the United States' Office of Foreign Assets Control.

About the Dirty Dozen: Cambodian premier, Hun Sen who was in power for over 30 years, nurtured and developed a dozen individuals who became the backbone of his autocratic regime. These twelve men had close political ties with their leader boosted his army and police to facilitate the Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) near perpetual rule and political oppression.

The Dirty Dozen have been implicated in some way or form of human rights abuse- ranging from land confiscations to the use of lethal force against protestors. Some of them also participated in the atrocities of the ruthless Pol Pot regime during 1975 to 1979.

These works commemorate my celebration of victory and justice for victims of social unjust. These wings are metaphors of the bloodied hands and corruption accompanying the wings of throne. From here, I want to pay tribute to the past and look forward to the future of contemporary democracy in Cambodia.

E: As corruption is a heavy and broad theme for different communities, inform us about how corruption affects society, particularly in Cambodia.

S: Corruption is a mega problem of an unfair system. It is also a censor for real development, and will prove to be a disaster for the next generation by giving them a bad example of stifling honesty, creativity and freedom, particularly in Cambodia.

E: Why is art-making important in a time of corruption?

S: Art becomes the mirror reflecting certain realities. From there, we can re-establish positive tools to build a better world with can accommodate freedom and justice for everyone.

E: From here, do tell us a little bit more on the work you do for Phare Ponleu Selpak (<https://phareps.org/>).

S: Phare Ponleu Selpak, which translates to The Brightness of the Arts in Khmer, is a Cambodian non-profit arts school located in Battambang. The school offers support to children, youth and surrounding affected communities through artistic community outreach and engagement programmes.

In 1991, on October 23rd, the Paris Peace Agreements (formally titled Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreements) were signed. This marked the official end of the Cambodian–Vietnamese War. My art teacher in the refugee camp, Véronique Decrop, along with some of my childhood friends, proposed ways to re-integrate citizens for the development of post-war Khmer society. We decided to teach art to children around the village who didn't have chances to go to school. From the years of 1993 to 1995, we built the Phare School and opened up the roads for easier access to the school. I was thus appointed as a co-founder of Phare Ponleu Selpak. I taught art while also managing the exhibitions of my fellow artists and Phare students until 2002. Then, I left to continue studying arts in France. Currently, I'm no longer involved with Phare anymore but I still support them to my best ability.

I have actually created my own art school in Siem Reap, the Blue Art Center (<https://www.blueartcenter.info/>), which I hope to officially open after the Covid-19 pandemic wanes. With the education of visual arts, Blue Art Center strives to provide an outlet for creativity that will enable the passion and history of contemporary artists' legacies for generations in Cambodia.

- E: Lastly, the remedy of war is often commonly associated with peace. What brings you peace? What is a peaceful message you would like to bring forth?
- S: To me, peace is the beginning of development, and the shape of freedom. Peace should also not be resistant to justice.





Wing 15

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
110 x 80 x 10 cm



Wing 11

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
160 x 110 x 14 cm



Wing 10

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
80 x 75 x 9 cm





Wing 8

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
100 x 80 x 11 cm



Wing 7

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
110 x 90 x 8 cm



Wing 4

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
65 x 55 x 6 cm



Wing 3

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
65 x 50 x 7 cm



Wing 1

2020
Cotton, kapok and nylon
90 x 50 x 8 cm





Detail of *Wing 11* (2020)



Svay Sareth

(b.1972, Battambang, Cambodia)

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 Selepak, 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.



Education

- 2009 MFA, Diplôme National Supérieur d'Etude des Arts Plastiques, avec félicitations, Caen, France
- 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

Artist Talks / Workshops Residencies / Nominations

- 2018 The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia MIIAM 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

Collections

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

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2022 *Wings of Throne*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2019 *The Breath of Change*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2015 *I, Svay Sareth, eat rubber sandals*. SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2013 *Churning*, World Financial Center, New York, 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

- 2021-2022 *The 10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, The Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Australia
- 2021 *As We Were (Selections from the Michelangelo & Lourdes Samson Collection)*, Artspace@Helutrans, Singapore
- 2020 *The Possibility Of An Island: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia*, Arndt Art Agency (A3), Pavillion Gallery, Cromwell Place, London
- 2019 *Home Lost and Found*, Batia Sarem Gallery, Siem Reap, Cambodia
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, MAIM Museum, Bangkok, Thailand, 12th Biennale (*Imagined Borders*) Batia Sarem Gallery, Cambodia (*Home, lost and found*)
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 *Weaving The Asian Democracy*, Asia Culture Center, Gwangju, South Korea
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 Platform, 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

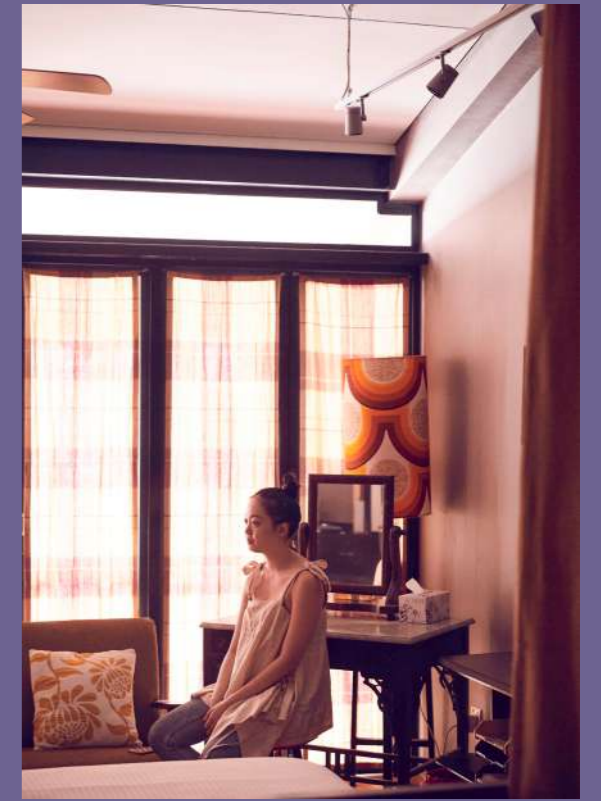
- Rescue Archaeology: The Body and the Lens in the City*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 2013 *If The World Changed*, 4th Singapore Biennale, Singapore
Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology / Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia / ifa, Berlin and Stuttgart, Germany
Merging Metaphors / Indo-ASEAN 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

Writer

Euginia Tan

(b. 1991)

Euginia Tan is a multi-disciplinary writer with experience in poetry, theatre and creative fiction/ non-fiction. Her curatorial writing for Richard Koh Fine Art includes - solo exhibitions for Faris Nakamura, Melissa Tan, Ben Puah and Odelia Tang, as well as group shows (In Our Own Frame, A Decade Apart/Together, Bread Crumbs) for the gallery's commemorative anniversaries and milestones.





🌐 www.rkfineart.com
✉ info@rkfineart.com

RICHARD KOH FINE ART

MALAYSIA

229, Jalan Maarof,
Bukit Bandaraya, Bangsar,
59100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Open by appointment only

☎ +6 03 2095 3300

☎ +6 019 330 5112

SINGAPORE

Blk 47 Malan Road,
#01-26 Gillman Barracks,
Singapore 109444

Open Tuesday – Saturday: 11 am – 7 pm

☎ +65 6513 2640

RICHARD KOH PROJECTS

THAILAND

2198/10-11, Art Warehouse, Unit A,
3rd Floor N22, Naradhiwat
Rajanagarindra Rd Soi 22,
Chong Nonsi, Yan Nawa,
Bangkok 10120, Thailand

Open Tuesday – Saturday: 11 am – 7 pm

☎ +66 2037 6944

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