

By resolutely eschewing class analyses and avoiding the big questions, Prakash misses the opportunity to reflect any more deeply on the Emergency and its place in postcolonial Indian history than most of his predecessors have in their journalistic accounts, memoirs, and histories. Here, as in many of those works, the set-pieces do not quite add up. Clearly, Prakash fashions himself more as a storyteller than an historian. Indeed, he does not rise to the historian's task of interpreting, rather than merely chronicling, events. It is no accident, then, that *Emergency Chronicles* reads like a film treatment—not unlike his *Mumbai Fables*, which fittingly made it to the silver screen as *Bombay Velvet*. Prakash would have been served better had he taken his wares directly to Bollywood instead of labouring on yet another, tired retelling of the Emergency. *Emergency Chronicles* would make for a nice film, though.

PRATINAV ANIL  
University of Oxford  
[pratnav.anil@sjc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:pratnav.anil@sjc.ox.ac.uk)

TRACES OF TRAUMA: CAMBODIAN VISUAL CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF GENOCIDE. By BORETH LY. pp. 190. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2020.  
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As crises of public health, racial injustice, and economic recession spread worldwide, millions are experiencing distress, conflict, and vulnerability. Boreth Ly's first monograph *Traces of Trauma* establishes that this mélange of unnerving emotions is hardly new for Cambodians. Between 1975–1979, when the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, about a quarter of the country's population died of infectious diseases, weapon wounds, and malnutrition. Ly's thesis is that studying the visual culture of contemporary Cambodia and its diaspora allows us to encounter the still-fresh scars of the genocide and of related upheavals and to critically appreciate strategies evolved to nurture resilience.

In the 1950s charismatic, if also polarising, leaders and their followers quickly emerged in the countries carved out of former French Indo-China. For example, Norodom Sihanouk became independent Cambodia's first constitutional monarch, left-leaning revolutionaries came to prominence in newly independent North Vietnam and pro-West politicians gained support in South Vietnam. Before long the United States was fighting communists in the region. As the conflict spread from the Vietnams into Cambodia the country was secretly bombed by US armed forces: they dropped 2.7 million tons of explosives over 113,000 sites in the country. Sihanouk's government fell and a civil war erupted. The war ended in 1975. Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge comrades seized power. They claimed that they wished to create a classless agrarian society that valued obedience and uniformity. Yet, in just four years their policies led to the death of about 1.7 million Cambodians, crushed the expression of individual identity, and shattered agricultural systems and urban fabrics alike. In 1979, the Khmer Rouge's aggression towards neighbouring countries led Vietnamese forces to depose it and establish a decade long rule over Cambodia. By the early 1990s, UN-sponsored efforts had led to the drafting of a new constitution, reinstatement of Sihanouk, and transfer of power to an elected government headed by Hun Sen. He remains Cambodia's Prime Minister to date.

Ly's opening argument is that although a fuller reconstruction of Cambodia's political history is needed, such a task can never help us grasp the trauma that its citizens have experienced and whose

disfigurements they live with. This is because critical evidence of the above summarised turbulences has been destroyed and boundaries between perpetrators of terror and their victims have gotten blurred. Next, Ly contends that in this climate, listening can accomplish what history writing cannot. Many Cambodians use the Khmer words “*baksbat*,” meaning broken body or broken courage and “*snarm*,” meaning a scar to describe their condition. Thinking with and through these two words, Ly postulates is essential as influential theories advanced from an engagement with psychoanalytic theory, experiences of Holocaust survivors, and manifestos of Western feminists cannot adequately explain suffering since it is locally defined, expressed, and overcome.

In the book’s subsequent chapters, Ly descriptively analyzes the work of artists who exemplify trends in how Cambodians are responding to suffering. One trend considered in Chapter 1 involves repeating certain actions as a way of witnessing a bygone moment that women and men may not have been able to fully process at the time of its initial occurrence (or even see) and thereby (re)forge a connection with a lost loved one. Here are just two examples. While in prison, Sarith Peou wrote poems of his memories in forced labour camps where his companions reeled under hunger, disease, and death. Amy Lee Sanford who came to the United States as an orphaned infant has created performances where she drops clay pots associated with her ancestral village in Cambodia to the ground and then tries to glue them back together before uneasy audiences. Sanford also writes letters to her long-deceased biological father, a way of inserting herself into a trove of correspondence between him and her adopted mother.

The creation of artworks that reveal and conceal the bombardment of the Cambodian countryside is a second strategy developed by artists today. A rich analysis of this strategy permeates the book but is most evident in Chapter 2, where Ly writes about a series of color photographs taken by Vandy Rattana in 2009. These photographs depict lush paddy fields and unruffled pools. However, as Ly notes only when a viewer’s eyes drift from the pictures to captions bearing series title, “Bomb Ponds”, does she or he realise that these pools are places where bombs fell, instantly pulverizing communities and poisoning aquifers. Likewise, Leang Seckon’s *Samput Pkha Meas* (2010) which Ly regards as a work of “magical realism” depicts the orderly grid of an idyllic rural landscape dotted with homesteads, shrines, and stupas. But a bomber plane’s shadow painted on the canvases’ surface troubles this understanding. First, it jolts an unsuspecting viewer’s consciousness. Next, it leads the viewer to ponder just when a load of cluster bombs might drop. In this chapter Ly does not write about hundreds of dreamy oil paintings of herds of wild elephants bathing in ponds around lofty medieval temples on moonlit nights sold in the bazaars of Siem Reap. Still, his insights into “magical realism” lead to me ask if these paintings are also works of magical realism? And if so, do they provide their painters a chance to create an image of tranquility in a land where the sight of amputees and landmines sites are pervasive?

‘Magical realism’ stands in contrast with tactics adopted by the few billboard painters and carpenters who survived internment at torture and detention centres established by the Khmer Rouge. In Chapter 3, Ly shares snippets of interviews with some of them. We learn that these painters and carpenters painted photo-realistic portraits of Pol Pot from small black and white photographs that gaolers gave them and cast cement sculptures of the leader to save themselves from death.

A restrained engagement with the region’s medieval past is another strategy adopted by post-genocide Cambodian artists. It is also the subject of Chapters 4 and 5. Consider Cambodian American artist Chanthou Oeur’s *Snarm # 6* (2006). The sculpture takes the form of a roughly hewn vertically oriented piece of granite whose surface is speckled with drill marks. As Oeur explained to Ly, the sculpture was inspired by his visits to medieval Khmer temples which have remained standing despite their surfaces being ridden by bullets. *Snarm # 6*’s stands at the edge of a secluded forest in New

Hampshire, a location suggestive of the scars of Cambodians that are largely hidden by masses of tropical vegetation.

In the initial years of Sihanouk's reign, the royal family had been promoted an image of *apsara* dance as an unbroken tradition extending back to the 'golden age' of the Khmer Empire. They had even patronised Pol Pot's sister who was a performer at the royal palace. During the Khmer Rouge years, most classical dancers were killed. Ly explains that since the promulgation of a new constitution, classical dance has been cautiously revived to allow Cambodians to find wellsprings of meaning that might steady them in a fragile world.

No one book can accomplish everything. Ly barely acknowledges the impress of twelfth century Hindu and Buddhist temples that are widely regarded as emblems of Khmer national and cultural identity on post-genocide art. In fact, two of Cambodia's best-known artists, Sareth Svay and Sopheap Pich (who curiously remain unmentioned in the book), have systematically engaged with this past. Svay's *Ruins* series from 2014 reference monumental carvings of antigods at Angkor Thom but neutralises their power through acts of mimicry and hybridity: instead of stone they are made of soft kapok floss and dressed in military fatigues. Architectural sculptures in Pich's *Monument* series (2015–16) look back at temple mountains and look ahead to the future as they offer young Khmers opportunities to circumambulate fantastic new spaces. Ly also overlooks the impact of foreign aid-workers and non-governmental organisations (such the founders of Reyum Institute of Arts and Cultures who have nurtured a generation of crafts persons and found new markets for their works) as well as dedicated educators at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Despite these surprising omissions, Boreth Ly's book is a fine memorial to those who lost their lives and those who live on in agony. By helping us see trauma as a personal, even embodied event that can sometimes be overcome it is also a call to remain buoyant even in the midst of a sea of crises.

NACHIKET CHANCHANI  
*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*  
[nachiket@umich.edu](mailto:nachiket@umich.edu)