

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hidden Identities in Contemporary Cambodian Photography

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Abstract

This article examines the works of three photographers, Kim Hak (b. 1981), Khvay Samnang (b. 1982), and Neak Sophal (b. 1989), all born in the post-Khmer Rouge era and all established relatively early in their careers. These third-generation Cambodian photographers construct portraits that steer away from identity to address the larger issues of individuals and local communities in present-day Cambodia, which still lives in the shadow of the trauma of the Khmer Rouge. Kim's photography avoids a direct representation of people who suffered through the Khmer Rouge regime and instead presents small, ordinary objects that were kept secretly in their household; Khvay documents the hardship of local communities in Phnom Penh and their questioned identity by portraying masked faces; Neak questions the hardship of the youth, women, and townspeople through the erasure of face in her series of photographs depicting various community groups in Cambodia. This subtle avoidance of portraying individuals in a direct, straightforward way signifies a multi-faceted interpretation of the traumatic past, its resilience, and the newly added social problems of contemporary Cambodia, which struggles in the aftermath of the genocide and more recent economic growth.

Keywords: Cambodian photography; contemporary Cambodian art; national trauma; photography; post-Khmer Rouge

Against a blurred background of a field and forest stands a human figure in a natural, frontal pose (Fig. 1). The subject, perhaps a boy, wears a buttoned shirt with short sleeves and dark navy trousers. The photograph looks like an ordinary three-quarter profile portrait except for one noteworthy fact—a giant banana leaf covers the boy from his shoulders upward. The erasure of the face is puzzling: Will anonymity protect this boy's identity? Does the artist expect us to look beyond the figure and discern the underlying socio-political problems? This photograph belongs to the *Leaf* series by Neak Sophal (b. 1989), a Cambodian photographer currently active in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. For her subjects, Neak chose children and teenagers under eighteen who lived in the village of Wat Po in Cambodia's Takéo province. In an interview with the author in 2020, Neak said that she wanted to reveal through her work the violations within Cambodian society of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) agreements on child labour restrictions. Most of the photographed kids were raised in poor, low-class families and discontinued their study in or after primary school to work in the city in order to financially support their families. According to the artist, the erasure of the face makes it possible to discuss child labour abuses within contemporary Cambodian society. Neak hopes to invite different perspectives from the viewers by covering the faces of the children (Interview with Neak 2020).

Artwork that renders a person's identity invisible or obfuscated invokes "concealed stigmatized identities", which is a particular type of identity that can be hidden from others and that is negatively stereotyped and undervalued in a society (Quinn and Earnshaw 2013). This concept of hidden identities can be found in selected works and projects by three Cambodian photographers, Kim Hak (b. 1981), Khvay Samnang (b. 1982), and Neak Sophal. This article examines these photographers' efforts to depict the



Figure 1. Neak Sophal, *Leaf #4*. From the series *Leaf*, 2013. C-print, 100 cm × 67 cm. © Neak Sophal, 2021.

current lives of ordinary Cambodian people and the era after the Khmer Rouge (abbreviated KR). Although the three photographers are distinct, they share a common approach to hiding identities. The three artists—all born after the KR era—established themselves as noteworthy photographers at a relatively early age, and each one created a variety of projects in the 2010s that deal with issues in Cambodian society and its people. All these photographers construct anonymised portraits to address the uncertain identities of local communities and socially marginalised groups in present-day Cambodia. Kim's *Alive* (2014) series archives the forgotten personal histories of Cambodian people mainly through still-life photographs of objects. Khvay documents the hardships of local communities living in a soon-to-be-demolished building and probes their questioned identity by putting masks on the portrayed faces in his *Human Nature* (2010–2011) series. By portraying various community groups in her *Rice Pot* (2012), *Leaf* (2013), and *Hang On* (2013) series, Neak questions the status of women and townspeople within Cambodian society and issues of child labour. Despite the diverse themes and visual expressions, the three share a mutual apprehension of revealing the identity of the pictured object. These photographic series signify a multifaceted interpretation of newly emergent social problems in a Cambodian society that struggles to regain a lost sense of personal and cultural identity, and exhibits resilience in the wake of the trauma of the KR regime.

The onset of a radical communist movement brought on the worst genocide in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, during the reign of the KR. The widespread massacres and great human loss became an unforgettable part of Cambodia's modern history and continue to affect the current generation. Since the 2010s, Cambodia, under Prime Minister Hun Sen (b. 1952), has experienced a huge expansion of agriculture and a strong push toward industrialisation (Heder 2012: 105). The country underwent economic growth with the expansion of exports to the U.S. and E.U., with internal demand for goods and a surge of investment and aid from China into construction, tourism, manufacturing, and agriculture

(World Bank 2019). As the economy expanded, Phnom Penh, the capital city, grew significantly between 2009 and 2019. As of 2019, the city had approximately two million residents—a 3.16% increase from 2018. Due to expanding international trade, it became the largest and fastest growing city in the country (World Bank 2017). Phnom Penh was once the home of wealthy French and Khmers during the French colonial period (1863–1953). The buildings built during this period, despite their historical significance, are regularly razed by the government to make room for skyscrapers (Nie 2012). Rapid urban growth since the 1990s has come with changes in lifestyle, culture, and the surrounding environment. It has resulted in an increase of social divisions and inequality, with a wide gap in development between urban and rural areas (Peou 2016). Low-class workers struggle to find jobs and are marginalised from mainstream economics, and in rural areas, unethical and illegal practices in housing and child labour persist.

Depicting survivors of the KR era or documenting its traumatic past dominates Cambodian art (Corey 2014: 65; Thompson 2013). The contemporary art scene has diversified since the mid-1990s, as Pamela N. Corey states, when local curators in Cambodia supported artists involved in works that encouraged social rebuilding and the preservation of the country's cultural heritage (Corey 2014). Roger Nelson has addressed how the works by contemporary Cambodian artists, such as the site-specific live performances of the *Buddhist Bug* series (2012–) by Anida Yoeu Ali (b. 1974), engage with multicultural and hybrid identities of Cambodians by filming and documenting local sites, densely packed roads, and pathways of Cambodian cities (Nelson 2015: 9–11). Local curators such as Erin Gleeson and Vuth Lyno supported Cambodian photographers, including Kim, Khvay, and Neak, by organising exhibitions in Phnom Penh through non-profit art spaces like Sa Sa Art Projects and SA SA BASSAC.

Contemporary Photographers in Cambodia since the Early 2000s

Kim, Khvay, and Neak belong to the third generation of Cambodian photographers. The first generation of Cambodian photographers emerged during the Vietnam War (1954–75), when the U.S. army hired Cambodians as photographers to shoot war scenes (Zhuang 2016: 242–269). It is hard to call these people professional photojournalists, as they were hired only to lower the risk of American photographers being captured and killed in the crossfire. During the KR regime, at least 20 of these photographers died (Zhuang 2016: 247). Even after the rule of the KR, the country suffered until 1989 under the subsequent rule of the Vietnamese, resulting in a second generation of photographers, emerging only in the 1990s, who pursued mainly photojournalism and documentary photography. An example is Cambodian photographer Heng Sinith (b. 1964), who took photographs of the middle- and lower-level KR cadres to explore his nation's trauma. It was only in the early 2000s that photographers, including Kim, Khvay, and Neak, began to recognise photography as a method of visual representation that would expand the territory of photography to art *per se* and help to introduce, construct, and reaffirm issues of identity in local Cambodian communities. With professional training at universities and live participation in workshops and international photo festivals, such as the international Ankor Photo Festival, held annually since 2005 in Siem Reap, Cambodia, these photographers received strong support from both local and international organisations to promote their art projects and undertake residency programs overseas.

Kim Hak was born in Battambang City, Cambodia, and currently lives and works in Phnom Penh. Born two years after the fall of the communist regime, Kim grew up listening to accounts from his family's vivid memories of the genocide (Interview with Kim 2020). After graduating from the University of Kuala Lumpur in 2009, Kim was trained as a professional photographer by enrolling in various photography workshops in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Cambodia. In 2014, Kim joined the contemporary art and history project *Jornng Jam*, which means “to remember” in Khmer, directed by Western Australian curator, film director, and producer Pip Kelly. *Jornng Jam* is an ongoing collaborative project and exhibition series featuring the work of the younger generation of Cambodian artists. The project includes Kim, filmmaker Neang Kavich (b. 1987), sculptor Kong Vollaak (b. 1983), and Neak, and its aim is to commemorate and document the untold personal stories of Cambodian people before, during, and after the KR era through art.¹ In 2015, Kim was an artist-in-residence in Brisbane, Australia collaborating with the local Cambodian–Australian community, which was supported by Arts Queensland. In

¹<http://www.jornngjam.com/history-of-the-project/>, accessed 15 December 2020.

his project *Alive*, Kim continues to show his interest in archiving the personal histories of his subjects, regardless of their age, but he carefully protects their identity in some of his works by avoiding frontal portraits and replacing human portraiture with still-life representation of objects that stand in for their human owners.

Khvay Samnang, born in Svay Rieng, Cambodia, graduated from the Department of Painting at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, where he currently lives and works. He was a founding member of Stiev Selapak (Khmer, “art rebels”) in 2007, an art collective committed to re-examining the history of Cambodia and “exploring continuities in visual practices disrupted by civil war and the KR regime”.² Khvay’s multidisciplinary practice, based on installation art, film, and photography, shows his interest in past and current historical events and the traditional heritage of the Cambodian people. Like the other two artists, he directly engages in his projects with local communities in Cambodia. He was an artist-in-residence at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Germany, from 2014 to 2015, and at Delfina Foundation in London, U.K. in 2019.

Neak Sopal was born in Cambodia’s Takéo province. She was trained as a graphic designer at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, where she now lives and works. She learned photography through workshops run by the French Institute in Cambodia and the Angkor Photo Festival. Through staged portraiture, Neak’s work explores social issues, hidden memories, and fear in Cambodian communities. She problematises identity by hiding her subjects’ faces in some of her projects. Like Kim, she was an active member of Jorng Jam and an artist-in-residence overseas, with Kim at Brisbane, Australia in 2015; at S-AIR in Sapporo, Japan in 2016; and at Làng Art Dorm in Huế, Vietnam in 2018. Her *Rice Pot*, *Leaf*, and *Hang On* series exemplify her genuine interest in local communities and socially marginalised groups such as Cambodian women, children, and street workers.

Deconstructing the Image

Common to the photographs of Kim, Khvay, and Neak is the avoidance of direct evidence or reference to personal identities. In some photographs from Kim’s series *Alive*, small objects are displayed alone, subtly obfuscating their ownership. The erasure of identity is even more strongly emphasised in Khvay’s *Human Nature* series as well as in Neak’s *Leaf* and *Hang On* series by faces covered with masks, leaves, and other items. With the identities of the object’s owner and the portrayed subject carefully concealed, the viewer confronts the image without any prejudice or clear link to historical circumstances. Photography can document the object at the moment the picture is taken, but, lacking any other context, as here, it compels the viewer to impose his or her own interpretation on the image, which Roland Barthes (1915–1980) defines as ‘subjectivity’ (Barthes 1981: 18). The connoted message rooted in subjectivity is stronger than the denoted message (objectivity) that can be commonly shared by everyone. That is, the image with hidden faces can mean different things to different viewers, and thus the subjective side of photography (what an individual viewer brings to the image) is stronger than the objective side. Therefore, meaning becomes predominantly subjective rather than objective. Analogous to Barthes’s analysis of photography, the viewer can more freely question and imagine the story behind the object in the photograph—even more than when its identity or context is directly represented. Barthes even suggests the best way to achieve absolute subjectivity is to shut our eyes to make the image speak directly to us in silence (Barthes 1981: 55).

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981), Barthes mentions how *punctum* (“prick”, “sting”, or “wound”) is different from the general excitement and joy we have when we see a photograph, which he calls the *studium*. Barthes explains the difference through Alexander Gardner’s *Portrait of Lewis Payne* (c. 1865), a photograph of a young boy who was waiting to be hanged after being found guilty of attempting to assassinate U.S. Secretary of State William Henry Seward (1801–1872). Here, the viewer’s *studium*—the interesting setting of the background and the handsome boy’s striking facial features—stands in sharp contrast to the *punctum* of knowing that an execution would follow soon after the photograph was taken. This tension holds our gaze without any reference to its meaning. According to Barthes, in addition to the “absolute past of the pose (aorist)”, the viewer suddenly confronts the understanding that death is in the near future (Barthes 1981: 94–97).

²<http://www.khvaysamnang.com/biography-cv/>, accessed 15 December 2020.

Another example of Barthes's theory of *punctum* is the interrogation photos from the Tuol Sleng Archive in Cambodia. The Tuol Sleng prison in the suburbs of Phnom Penh, code-named S-21, was a former school and interrogation centre established by order of Pol Pot (Saloth Sar, 1925–1998), the Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea who led the KR regime. At least 12,000 people were executed here between 1975 and 1979. Factory workers in the city knew the prison as a “place of entering, not leaving” (*konlanh choul ot cenh*) (Brewer 2015; Chandler 2008: 266). As many as 20,000 prisoners were held in S-21 during these years; only twelve survivors are known.³ Even though the KR regime were ousted by Vietnamese troops in 1979, the massacres and great human loss have become an unforgettable part of Cambodia's modern history, affecting younger generations even today. In 1980, S-21 became the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and the black and white mugshots of the prisoners were displayed to help Cambodians identify their families. As Stéphanie Benzaquen states, the publication of S-21 photographs made these photos into “icons of atrocity and injustice that make us feel and even project ourselves into such suffering” (Benzaquen 2010: 5). For the viewer, the mugshots of S-21 prisoners have a *punctum* similar to that evoked by the *Portrait of Lewis Payne*. The shots were taken right before the execution. The victims were blindfolded, and the blindfolds were removed right before facing the camera (Ly 2003: 73). The viewer is struck by looking directly into the victims' terrified faces. The photograph creates a catastrophic effect on the viewer, whose *punctum* comes regardless of whether he or she knows the historical context.

Whereas the *Portrait of Lewis Payne* and the S-21 mugshot photographs reveal the identity of the sitter, the selected works by Kim, Khvay, and Neak, in contrast, eliminate any hint at the fate or emotion of the person who is portrayed. The viewer's gaze cannot decipher any significant meanings or determine the sentiment of the person as their faces have been carefully erased. Therefore, the *punctum* does not exist. There is no prior knowledge of the identity of the sitter, age, or even the heritage of Khvay's and Neak's portraits, or of the owners of the objects that Kim photographs. Instead, the viewer now must ask open-ended questions, deconstruct the singular, fixed identity of the subject, and work outside the stereotypical portrayal of Cambodian people and their local communities. The viewer must open himself up to look at “others” who have been forgotten from history and left behind. The blatant contrast between the seen and unseen recalls paintings by the Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte (1898–1967), such as his famous *Son of Man* (1964), which is believed to be his self-portrait. The man in the painting is rendered in a three-quarter portrait, just like the sitter in Neak's *Leaf* series (Fig. 1). Wearing an overcoat and a bowler hat, he stands in front of a relatively low stone wall. The sea and the sky provide a clean, flat horizon in the background. Most significantly, the man's face is hidden behind a green apple with leaves and branches. The apple does not fully cover his face and the outer edges of both eyelids are partially visible. In this painting, Magritte withdraws from objective reality and ultimately denies the objective world (the visible) and any special importance apart from his own inner world (the hidden). As Magritte describes it,

I have shown an apple in front of a person's face.... At least it partially hides the face. Well then, here we have the apparent visible, the apple, hiding the hidden visible, the person's face. This process occurs endlessly. Each thing we see hides another, we always want to see what is being hidden by what we see. There is an interest in what is hidden and what the visible does not show us. This interest can take form of a fairly intense feeling, a kind of contest, I could say, between the hidden and apparent visible. (Magritte and Torczyner 1977: 170)

Here, Magritte addresses an essential issue of his self-portrait: the relationship between the seen and the unseen. Marcus M. Silverman notes that the origin of Magritte's reality, his psychical reality, was expressed in a widespread denial of authentic, objective meaning (Silverman 2012: 90–91). The painting, which hides the conventional focal point of the artwork, Magritte's physiognomy, reveals unseen empathies between objects and relationships. In other words, the obfuscated face should be interpreted as a rejection of the obvious meaning. The viewer becomes curious about the real essence of the work if the objective reality—the face—is missing.

³<https://tuolsleng.gov.kh/en/museum/building/>, accessed 15 December 2020.

Kim's *Alive* Project

Kim's *Alive* project treats Cambodians who lived through their nation's modern history. In the 1970s, Cambodia went through multiple tragic events: the American bombing campaigns from March 1969 to August 1973, the fall of the short-lived Khmer Republic (1970–1975), and the takeover by the KR regime. With the mass killings and flight of millions of people to the countryside, this decade can be described as the darkest time in Cambodia's history. On 17 April 1975, Communist troops marched into the capital, Phnom Penh, and established a national government. The Communist regime, led by Pol Pot, officially renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea and carried out mass murders. Pol Pot populated the capital with top political leaders, military personnel, their families, and workers. Around two million Cambodians died from torture, execution, starvation, and untreated illness, while the elite class of intellectuals, business leaders, and politicians were targeted and executed (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2005: 1–8).

Kim focuses on traumatic experiences of post-genocide Cambodians who luckily survived, and particularly of those who chose to leave their home and country for another land. Kim's mother and father both survived the KR era; his *Alive* project started as an exploration of his family photographs. Since then, the project has expanded to other local families in Cambodia and the Cambodian diaspora in Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. The images are rendered as still-life pictures of various objects specifically chosen by the families, including photos taken by the families and identification cards. So far, Kim has created twenty-six works of art from survivors in Cambodia, eight in Australia, thirty-six in New Zealand, and forty in Japan. Each work depicts an item that belongs to the family. The objects allude to the traumatic experience of the erasure of identities under the KR, to memories that were perhaps not shared outside of the family, and to the fear and trauma of publicly revealing one's identity. Kim describes his aim in a recent interview with the author: "It is like a race against the clock because living witnesses are gradually disappearing. War can kill victims, but not the memory of the survivors. The memory should be alive and known and shared for the current research of human beings as well as a sensitive heritage for the next generation" (Interview with Kim 2020).

The process of archiving the survivors' memories is repeated for every family in and outside of Cambodia. In Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, Kim contacts local guides to connect him with families. He interviews the families, asking to see any personal items that recall their memories of the KR. During the interview, the artist poses questions about the history of each object and how life was different for them before and after KR rule. The photographs are usually taken at their homes and not in the artist's studio. Kim uses natural light and a dark or black background when photographing the objects. After the work is completed, Kim shows the families the images and asks for their approval (Interview with Kim 2020). There are various items, including a *krama* (traditional Cambodian scarf), photographs, old Cambodian identity cards, scissors, a gold bracelet, a rice bowl, a kettle, a perfume bottle, a silver spoon, a portable Buddha statue, a vase, and an army box.

Under the KR regime, residents of Phnom Penh were forced to evacuate the city, and many had to leave behind their belongings. People could carry only a few personal items such as clothes, cooking utensils, and a few family memorabilia. Overnight, money was banned, towns and cities abandoned, and all forms of commerce disbanded. Year Zero, referring to the takeover of Cambodia by the KR in April 1975, had begun. In an effort to eliminate the family unit and any traces of familial entities, Cambodians—even members of the former government and military—were ordered to destroy any identification cards. In many of the villages, district officials surveilled people who were deemed suspicious, often targeting the intelligentsia, the military, police, and public officials. People were asked to watch each other and report any suspicious activity to the headquarters office. Individuals considered to be a threat to the order were detained, sent to extermination centres such as S-21, and killed *en masse* (Hinton 1998: 113). Some who survived the KR era, however, smuggled photographs of friends and families out of their towns for safekeeping. While living in rural villages, many buried the photographs in their yards as time capsules, mementoes kept safe for future generations to remember the brutality of their families' past and the severity of the genocide.

In Kim's *Photo and Plastic Bag* (2014), a tiny black-and-white profile photograph of a young man in a suit is tucked into a small, transparent plastic bag (Fig. 2). The yellow discoloration along the left and



Figure 2. Kim Hak, *Photo and Plastic Bag*. From the series *Alive*, 2014. C-print, 40 × 60 cm. © Kim Hak, 2021.

right edges of the photo shows its age. The photo, standing partially out of the bag, seems a metaphor for the survivors of the genocide, but it provides no clue about who possessed the photograph, nor about the identity of the person depicted. It simply alludes to the fact that only fragments of their lives and identities are known, due to the strict control of the KR regime on revealing personal identities. As Kim states in one of his interviews, the photograph belonged to his father, Kim Hap, and the person depicted is Chhoa Thiem, a friend of Kim's father (Kim 2014). According to Kim, Kim's father had enjoyed his life in full before the KR era. Educated at Indradevi High School, and later at the University of Agriculture in Phnom Penh, his father and his friends drove old-fashioned motorbikes and enjoyed taking casual photographs. His father still had strong memories about Chhoa and his fondness for capturing moments in his friends' lives on film. Kim's father lost contact with Chhoa, however, when he left to study abroad in France in 1964 (Kim 2014). During the KR period, Kim's mother had to burn most of the photos of her family and friends to hide the family's identity. Unbeknownst to Kim's mother, his father secretly kept some of the photographs by carefully wrapping them in a plastic bag and burying it (Jin 2020).

As mentioned before, some works included in Kim's *Alive* projects strategically delete and anonymise the owner of the object. Moreover, in the artist's interview, Kim explained that he enjoyed infusing his own imaginative interpretation into his photographed objects (Interview with Kim 2020). He creates his compositions with one object that symbolises the memory of the family who possessed it and combines it with one object that Kim has carefully selected to make the representational image vivid. The combination of old and new creates a layered connection between the memories of KR and the post-KR generation.

Kim's *Alive* project was inspired by his *Kettle and Chicken* (2014, Fig. 3). In the image, two chicken legs stick out of the right side of a worn-out kettle that belongs to his family. The stark contrast between the black background, the silver kettle, and the vivid orange-yellow chicken legs creates a colourful depiction of domestic life. The crisp image recalls seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings: highly artificial compositions of various foods, dinnerware, and other objects which intrinsically have no deep significance but together create a metaphor for the complexity of human lives. The extended chicken legs, strategically placed inside the kettle, suggest to the viewer its connection with hearth and home, kitchen and family. The object's significance unfolds when we take a close look at the kettle. The worn object shows years of use as a valued tool for the kitchen, a vessel of warmth and familiarity. Soot has engulfed the body, spout, and handle. The handle of the lid is missing. The dents and dings suggest accidental drops on the floor over the years. The legs imply chicken soup, a staple meal in the home of village Cambodians. In thinking about the kettle, the artist wondered why his mother and sister continued to use it in the kitchen. He learned the history behind this item only after he asked his family to provide a household object that signified the family's history during the KR. After the family moved to the rural villages in 1975, food became scarce and village people often died of malnutrition and starvation. Kim's parents worked at a chicken farm, but they were not allowed to use the animals to feed their



Figure 3. Kim Hak, *Kettle and Chicken*. From the series *Alive*, 2014. C-print, 50 × 75 cm. © Kim Hak, 2021.



Figure 4. Kim Hak, *Krama and Barbed Wire*. From the series *Alive*, 2014. C-print, 60 × 90 cm. © Kim Hak, 2021.

own family. Kim recalls a story from his mother: one night, worried that her husband would not recover from his sickness, Kim's mother stole a chicken and cooked it, but Kim's father did not eat it as he was afraid of being caught and killed. This anecdote, told during the interview with the author, provides us context not apparent to most viewers (Interview with Kim 2020). The chicken represents both a toy the regime used to taunt Cambodians—a critical and essential food they were forbidden to consume—and a moment of subversion, as Kim's mother stole one to help Kim's family survive.

Kim's photograph *Krama and Barbed Wire* (2014) offers another example of the opposing forces of oppression and freedom during the KR regime (Fig. 4). The *krama* is a ubiquitous symbol of the hard-working people of Cambodia; it is usually a traditional scarf of gingham worn to cover the neck while working. The KR regime made the red *krama* a symbol of the working class. The one seen in the photograph belonged to Kim's father. During the regime, most Cambodians under Democratic Kampuchea had to work ten to twelve hours per day and twelve months a year to reach the goals set by the production plan. Many of those who were former white-collar workers and not used to physical labour died of malnutrition and overwork. Even the ones who had been farmers before the KR era found themselves working longer and harder than they had before. With no material rewards, limited access to their spouses and children, and very little free time, day-to-day life was a matter of extreme survival (Chandler 2008). In Kim's image, the barbed wire around his father's coiled and knotted scarf suggests something menacing and dangerous—sharp metal against a soft, protective fabric. It is as if the wire is suffocating the farmer's neck, wearing only the *krama*. It is a visceral reminder of the struggles and pain Kim's father and that generation had to endure under the Communist regime.

Rather than simply capturing the forgotten past of the Cambodian genocide, *Photo and Plastic Bag* should be understood as a juxtaposition of past and present. As Marianne Hirsch argues, the challenge of the artist working on post-genocidal images is “to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster, but that disallows an overappropriate identification that makes the distances disappear, creating too available, too easy an access to this particular past” (Hirsch 1999: 10). Here, Kim carefully develops his work by selecting objects owned by his family or others who survived the genocide. To Cambodians, many of the objects are familiar, thereby creating a shared experience for the viewer. Shared memories invoke a sense of community, yet each response to a photograph is individual. Kim is interested mainly in providing historic layers, commenting on the nature of humanity and a society after a genocide (Interview with Kim 2020).

Khvay Samnang’s *Human Nature* Series

Khvay’s *Human Nature* series shares the concept of documenting and archiving local communities and forgotten memories of the modern past. Thirty-eight residents of the White Building, Phnom Penh, were photographed and documented in Khvay’s *Human Nature* series between 2010 and 2011. When photographed, the subjects were comfortably seated in rooms of their apartment units: housewives sitting in the kitchen, children doing homework, a young woman in front of the decorated wall of her bedroom, a lady posing in front of a wall filled with old wedding pictures and family photos, a man with his child in front of the child’s paintings, and families posing to commemorate someone’s birthday with balloons taped to the ceiling and the wall (Fig. 5). One important feature is that in every photograph, each subject is wearing a cheaply made face mask that covers his or her entire face.

The artist’s plan was to record the lives of the residents in the building complex called the ‘White Building’ (1963). This building, originally known as the ‘Bassac Municipal Apartments’, was located along the Bassac river in Phnom Penh. Starting from the Cambodian capital and crossing the border into Vietnam, the Bassac serves as an important transportation route between the two countries. The White Building was part of the Bassac Riverfront Complex project, supervised by Vann Molyvann (1926–2017). Molyvann was one of the first generation of Cambodian architects who studied abroad



Figure 5. Khvay Samnang, *Human Nature*. From the series *Human Nature*, 2010–2011. C-print, series of 28, 80 × 120 cm. © Khvay Samnang, 2021.

in Paris, France.⁴ His desire to create a large-scale residential complex in Cambodia—much as his professors and fellow architects had done in France and Europe—was first realised with the Bassac Riverfront Complex. Inspired by the unrealised project ‘Ville Radieuse’ by Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965), Molyvann dreamed of interspersing apartment blocks, gardens, and community centres based on a rational, geometrical plan (Daravuth and Muan 2001; Sereypagna 2020). Molyvann’s ideal of a clean, straight-forward, and uniform living complex was realised with the construction of the White Building. The well-known Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap (b. 1931) and the Russian-born French engineer Vladimir Bodiansky (1894–1966) designed the building. Following the key concepts of creating a standardised living space, the architects incorporated white walls and block-shaped unit housing. This four- to five-storey building included 468 modern apartment units that were offered to low- and middle-class Cambodian citizens (Ross and Collins 2006). At the time, it must have been one of the city’s most iconic examples of modern architecture, following the trends of Constructivist and International Style, sophisticated mechanics, and a commitment to the ideal of simplified forms.

Once the KR’s forced evacuation of the city was over, some former residents returned to the neighbourhood, and the community started growing again. It was originally intended to house municipal staff and cultural workers (Zhuang 2016: 261). Recent pictures of the White Building, though, reveal a completely different appearance. The all-white, streamlined, and minimalistic look has completely disappeared. The exterior and interior walls have probably never been washed or repainted or undergone any serious historic preservation effort. Most of the current citizens of Phnom Penh remember this building as a place inhabited by a rough community, shrouded in the shame and humiliation associated with poverty, drugs, sex work, dangerous construction, and poor sanitation.⁵ With approximately 2500 residents in the building’s final years, however, it maintained a strong sense of local community and was home to dancers, musicians, civil servants, craftsmen, business owners, and teachers. The property was unfortunately not preserved as cultural heritage and was demolished in 2017 (BBC News 2017).

In *Human Nature*, Khvey carefully documented the untold and forgotten stories of the residents who made their living in the White Building. Rather than addressing the criminality of the drug business and human trafficking that once happened in this historic building, the photographs shed light on the poorly understood working and living conditions of residents. The artist states,

The Building is alive! There are trees growing out from the walls! The Building has life! The people in the building, that live there, they have so much life. It is a community that has a lovely feeling. You know, my students there, they call that feeling *snit snaal*—it means so warm, and so friendly, and so lovely—and it is strong. It is a very strong feeling. From outside, people are scared. They see the violence and the falling down building and they don’t know, they don’t know what is inside..... If you want to know, you have to come, and not just talk, but enjoy! And spend time, not just one hour or one day.⁶

The intention seems to be clear: the artist wants to break through stereotypes by avoiding any stage-like activities or performances. In one of the series, a woman comfortably sits on her clean, well-made bed (Fig. 6). The room is brightly lit from the sunlight streaming through the window on the right. The wall behind her is covered with her professional profile pictures and wedding photos that she might have taken when she was younger. She did not bother to clean up her room before the shot: cosmetic bottles and other miscellaneous items are piled up on her vanity table, clothing bulges out from the open cabinet doors and lies around, and the pink cradle is filled with bedding, suggesting that a baby might also sleep in that room. Her pose is relaxed and comfortable, perhaps because she does not have to worry about revealing her identity due to the white, linen face mask, covered with glittered silver and light blue floral patterns. In another photograph from the series, a woman is captured at the moment

⁴Vann Molyvann studied architecture at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* (National School of Fine Arts) in Paris after awarding a scholarship to study in France in 1946. He returned from Paris in 1956, three years after Cambodia declared complete independence from France. For more information, see <http://www.vannmolyvannproject.org/meet-vann-molyvann> and <http://www.whitebuilding.org/en/collections/white-building-project>, accessed 15 December 2020.

⁵http://www.whitebuilding.org/en/page/about_the_white_building, accessed 15 December 2020.

⁶<http://www.whitebuilding.org/photoseries/human-nature-2010-11>, accessed 1 March 2021.



Figure 6. Khvay Samnang, *Human Nature*. From the series *Human Nature*, 2010–2011. C-print, series of 28, 80 × 120 cm. © Khvay Samnang, 2021.



Figure 7. Khvay Samnang, *Human Nature*. From the series *Human Nature*, 2010–2011. C-print, series of 28, 80 × 120 cm. © Khvay Samnang, 2021.

of preparing veggies for a meal in her kitchen/living room (Fig. 7). Rows of pictures of young couples and models adorn the top part of the wall to cover the worn-out wallpapers and dirty spots. The left side of the space is filled with dishes, kitchenware, a fridge, and an electric rice pot, whereas the right space is her living room with a TV, video player, books, and a shoe rack. Like in the other picture, the room is filled

with memorable family photos, books, and household items, showing the resident's ordinary daily life. In this case, the white face mask she wears has been hastily painted over with light grass-green colour.

The masks the residents are wearing look as if they were used in theatrical stage sets or in a masquerade. With roughly finished rims around the face line, the masks are simple and show extremely generalised facial features: only eyes, a simple nose, and mouth are visible. The masks are covered with either red and blue gingham patterns, flower patterns, or sometimes just painted over with no specific physiognomy. The masks are not custom-made for each resident; rather, the artist supplied the masks and asked the residents to pick a mask of their choice and pose for the camera when he entered their homes. The masks the artist constructed were not intended to deceive the viewer but rather to give the residents the confidence to present themselves comfortably in their community and make themselves part of the scene. With his or her identity hidden, a subject can more freely pose and gain stability and confidence. At the same time, wearing a mask frees the sitters from needing to define their personal identity and social status or the community to which they belong. This is supported by Khvay's own statement that he used the natural setting of the rooms without making any changes and tried to create a "humane documentary of residents and their relationship with their homes".⁷

Neak's *Rice Pot, Leaf, and Hang On* Projects

Neak Sophal's photographs shed light on the trauma, anxiety, and struggle that Cambodia's contemporary history leaves in the psyches of its people and local communities. Her subjects are not limited to the generation who experienced the KR. She specialises in personal photographs of those who are neglected by society. In an interview with the author, Neak said a portrait of a middle-aged housewife hiding her face with her rice pot in *Rice Pot #7* (2012) was the initial photograph that inspired her to start the series with covered faces (Fig. 8). The first group of people Neak focused on were Cambodian women (Interview with Neak 2020). In the 1950s and 1960s, Cambodian women were expected to be exemplars of good virtue and were relegated to the roles of wife, housekeeper, and mother. As discussed above, the Communist government of Pol Pot destroyed the family unit, and women were considered to be part of the collective good of the regime. As a result, they took on roles traditionally reserved for men and attained positions of power at provincial and regional levels of the KR. Yet, despite their noteworthy involvement in various levels of Democratic Kampuchea's government, women were generally excluded from the top tiers of power. At the same time, they were expected to perform their ordinary gender roles: childcare, nurturing, and procreating (Crane 2015). Women survived conditions of severe malnutrition better than did men and they were targeted for execution and killed in combat less frequently. As a result, women's survival rates were higher than men's during the KR period (Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Heuveline and Poch 2006).

After KR rule, women continued to work in the public sphere while also managing the household (Maxwell *et al.* 2015: 3). Yet, contemporary Cambodia generally does not give a voice to women who work in the home, and society continues to be patriarchal. Women are expected to be subservient to men (Eng *et al.* 2010: 238) and higher education is limited mostly to males. Judy Ledgerwood explains the unstable status of women in Cambodia:

On the one hand, daughters are supposed to be protected; on the other, a teenage daughter might bicycle daily to the city to sell vegetables to help support the family, or a young woman might move into the city to work in a garment factory. Orphans and widows must live with little or no male supervision, because there are no surviving family members. This can cause their neighbours to "look down on them"; they lose status in society because they have no men to protect them. Women in Cambodia today must undertake all sorts of employment that involve being in office, factory or other situations alone with men. These kinds of circumstances lead to accusations regarding the virtue of individual women and to the general idea that "women just don't have the value that they used to". (Ledgerwood, n.d.)

⁷<http://tomiokoyamagallery.com/en/exhibitions/human-nature/>, accessed 15 December 2020.



Figure 8. Neak Sophal, *Rice Pot #7*. From the series *Rice Pot*, 2012. C-print, 100 cm × 67 cm. © Neak Sophal, 2021.

In her series on women, *Rice Pot*, Neak photographs Cambodian housewives, placing their role as caretakers of the domestic sphere in the spotlight of portrait photography. Neak's photography brings to the foreground the status of Cambodia's women who still live in an oppressive patriarchal society. The artist focuses on accounts of Cambodian women in "daily life", in fluid historical conjunctions, and in subtle opposition to collectivism. She helps the women tell their own personal stories through the photographic medium. For the *Rice Pot* series, Neak collaborated with women from her hometown in Takéo province, where much of her family still lives. The work's original title *No Rice for Pot* came from Neak's discussions with many women who complained about their domestic labour and how they felt about household work. Neak interviewed women in her town and photographed them in their lived environments. It was challenging for the artist to get approval from her subjects; many women were not comfortable with the presence of the camera (Interview with Neak 2020).

Photographed in natural light, the women, usually in their 50s or 60s, were captured at work in their kitchens. *Rice Pot #7* exhibits a woman hiding her face with a rice pot, an object, as in Kim's works, worn from years of use (Fig. 8). Her hands are rough—emblematic of a body weary of constant, daily manual labour. Neak recalled asking why she wanted to hide her face. The woman answered that she believed cooking every day was the biggest obstruction in her life and blocked her from so many opportunities to improve her living conditions. Her obligation to prepare all her family's meals prevented her from experiencing life outside the home; she could not study, have any leisure time, or socialise with other people (Interview with Neak 2020). The series of portraits speaks to the woman's primary role: preparing food for her family. By taking photos of them dressed casually and holding rice pots in their hands, the artist criticises the singular conventional role of women as housewives. The gesture symbolises how domestic labour erases the personal identities of women living in local communities.



Figure 9. Neak Sophal, *Hang On #10*. From the series *Hang On*, 2013. C-print, 100 cm × 67 cm. © Neak Sophal, 2021.

In the *Leaf* series, Neak followed a strict process when taking photographs of the children (Fig. 1). She watched the kids play for a while. Then, she invited the sitter, first asking whether he or she would be willing to cover his face with a favourite leaf taken from a banana tree, a sugar palm, or a water lily. Finally, she took the picture (Interview with Neak 2020). In her project *Hang On*, Neak wandered through the bustling streets of Siam Reap to photograph Cambodian citizens who make their day-to-day living from small street businesses (Fig. 9). This time, she asked them to choose an object that they would use in everyday life or sell to make their living and cover their face with that. In about twenty photographs, street people pose with shopping bags, magazines, handballs, handkerchiefs, towels, fishnets, cement-sack bags, and baseball caps wrapped around their heads or covering their faces. Neak demands that the viewer study the individual's body or background since facial expressions cannot give away the sitter's disposition.

As discussed earlier, the essence of Neak's portrait is the confrontation of images without access to the sitter's face—an absence that evokes uncomfortable, even disturbing reactions from the viewer. Unable to read his facial expression and with no knowledge of his identity, age, or even heritage, the viewer thus struggles to understand the sitter's significance. In Neak's photography, the erasure of identity can be interpreted as a silent warning to become aware of the "unseen", which could be the horrendous situation of child labour in Cambodia. The Cambodian government has established laws and regulations related to child labour and has ratified related major international conventions, such as the ILO C. 138 on Minimum Age, ILO C. 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour, UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict, Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography, and the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons. However, even though the Labour Code of this country bans work by children under the age of fifteen, it does not apply to children who are not formally employed. Therefore, the country does not meet international standards, which require that all children be protected under a

law that sets a minimum age for work (The Bureau of International Labor Affairs 2019). Even though the economic boom transformed the main cities of Cambodia into rich, global trade hubs, the gap in life expectancy between the rich and the poor has gotten wider and wider. The poverty rate in 2014 was 13.5 per cent of the Cambodian population and about 90 per cent of the poor live in the countryside (Asian Development Bank 2020). The poverty mainly affects children ages five to fifteen, who suffer, as a result, from malnutrition and marginal living conditions. This has caused a serious child labour problem for which the government has still found no solution. According to the U.S. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, children in Cambodia “engage in the worst forms of child labour, including forced labour in brickmaking and in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking”. As of 2016, it turns out that approximately 8.4 per cent of Cambodian children and teenagers between the age of five and fourteen, totalling 267,924, work. Although the law in Cambodia establishes free basic education and, as of 2018, 88 per cent complete primary school, there are still some children who are left out because their families cannot afford to pay additional school-related fees. Other reasons for discontinuing primary education is geographic distance. Denial of enrolment for children without birth certificates, limited transportation to schools in remote areas, lack of drinking water and toilet facilities in some schools, the language barriers, and an insufficient number of teachers can be added as known factors which specifically affect ethnic minority children, children with disabilities, and children from rural and disadvantaged communities (The Bureau of International Labor Affairs 2019). The artist feels her *Leaf* project could publicise the current situation and pressure the government to act. In an interview, she states that “there is no place for these young people in society; that’s why I hide their faces. They can’t clearly see what’s at stake, and society at large now ignores them; it doesn’t even see them anymore”.⁸ At the same time, Neak said she seeks to highlight “Cambodia’s cultural habit of not saying things to your face, keeping quiet, and complaining only in private” (Morelli 2018). The hidden faces are perhaps a vestige of the KR regime, when people needed to completely hide or erase their identity.

Conclusion

The personal histories of Cambodian people recorded by Kim, Khvay, and Neak can be described by the following terms: local community, social marginalisation, oppression, trauma, hardship of everyday life, and invisibility. Cambodian families who lived through the regime of Pol Pot, residents who had to evacuate old, historic homes to make room for new apartment complexes, children forced into labour, and middle-aged housewives are all forgotten due to the rapid economic growth and strengthening capitalist structures. A demonstration of individuality, freedom, and the formation of alternative identities is still needed in current Cambodian society. Yet, oversimplification and premature generalisations of these marginalised histories are likely to obscure the historical and cultural context behind them. After seeing the photographs, the viewer may realise that there are multiple histories of the Cambodian people that cannot be described or documented. We cannot talk about their stories with the well-worn phrases normally used to respond to Cambodia’s deepest tragedy.

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⁸<https://angkor-photo.com/apf-programme/leaf/>, accessed 15 May 2020.

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