

**sophal
neak**

hang on

**immanences
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mekong series
par / by
christian
caujolle
4**

soissons, 2018

The palladium over ink prints of the six photographs from the series Hang On, by Sophal Neak, have been made by Anne-Lou Buzot on Arches Platine paper.

The texts were set in Helvetica Neue and Baskerville by Florent Fajole.

Letterpress printing by Hannah Harkes at Labora studio, in Tallinn, on Bunkoshi paper by Awagami, and on Shojoshi paper handmade by Kiyotaka Ozaki (Kochi Prefecture, Japan).

First edition print run of thirteen copies, of which eight are numbered from 1 to 8, and five hors commerce numbered from I to V.

These prints are numbered, signed and titled by Sophal Neak.

The cases have been made by Justine Delval (Atelier du cartonnage, Arles, France).

Size of the prints: 39 cm x 58 cm
15.35 x 22.83 inches
Size of the portfolio: 42 cm x 60 cm
16,53 x 23,62 inches

Bilingual edition French / English.
Translations by Michèle Bergot.

Soissons, July 2018

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immanences éditions
anne-lou buzot
florent fajole
& nicolas peyre
éditeurs associés

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Identities

by Christian Caujolle

Like so many contemporary Cambodian artists, Neak Sophal questions identity, the possible - or impossible - identity of her contemporaries, as much as her own. Choosing to conceal the faces of the inhabitants of Phnom Penh she persuaded to pose for her, with symbols or signifiers of their social function, her work analyses the situation of her country. At the same time, it develops a reflection on the essence of portraiture itself. In a country whose collective photographic memory was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge - we were unable to find any trace of studio work. In fact, many family portraits, which could have been construed as “evidence” of belonging to a hated bourgeoisie, were buried or hidden throughout the period of Communist dictatorship because keeping them had become dangerous. Nowadays, choosing to develop a portraiture practice is a radical statement. The country’s historical visual memory is undeniably systematically tied to portraits of its victims who, between 1975 and 1979, were taken to the sinister S 21 Centre in Tuol Sleng, where they were kept and tortured. Nearly 15 000 people were routinely photographed on arrival there, yet when the Vietnamese army freed the camp, they found only seven survivors.

From the very beginning of her artistic endeavours, the young woman who had come from the country to study in the capital and graduated - in painting and graphic design - from the Royal University of Fine Arts, chose portraiture. First of all, there was *Rice Pot*, a series of photographs of women, which evoke the dedicated housewife, mother and wife in a macho world.

Following on from this came two major series. In *Leaf*, produced in her native village of Wat Po in the Takeo province south of Phnom Penh, teenagers, and poor farm workers, who for the most part were unable to stay on at school because it was too far from the paddy field in which they lived, seem at one with nature. The poses are invariably simple, static, facing the camera, frozen in the moment; although the subjects are upright, we never see their feet. They have become enigmatic statues whose faces are forbidden, hidden behind large green leaves. They become part of the green landscape and the clear horizon allows the various shades of green, standing in for their faces, to emerge against the clear blue sky. This can be interpreted as an ode to nature, a form of pantheism, a way of affirming the essential relationship between humanity and nature. For Neak Sophal, these makeshift “masks”, made out of banana or palm leaves, of lotus leaves from the marshes and other familiar plants, are above all a denial. And a way of expressing her concern. Despite the fact that they are the future of this country, the government is not interested in these young people.

They are either destined to remain in the paddy fields, becoming strange hybrids, between plant and human, or to leave their place of birth and move to the city, sometimes to Thailand or even further away in order to survive and provide for their families. They are the forsaken. The invisible. The *Sonleuk* - 'leaves' in Khmer - become the metaphor for a situation: young people are as necessary to a country as leaves are to a tree. They are life and the future of life. In one of the countries most affected by climate change, a target for mass deforestation whilst also facing the problems provoked by the excessive number of dams along the Mekong River, these silent protestations speak volumes. Yet who is prepared to question the inequalities caused by the countryside being drained of its inhabitants - and where some take possession of land illegally - and the anarchic growth of the sprawling city? "There is no place in society for these young people, this is why their faces are hidden. They can't see what's at stake and society itself can no longer see the issues clearly either, nor is it willing to look", adds the photographer.

Hang On, her most recent series has an obvious connection with the work that preceded it, albeit with a change of scenery, or at least of backdrop for the "models". We are in the city, in Phnom Penh, the capital. Construction workers, mobile street vendors, a Buddhist priest, a student, a road sweeper, a fisherman, office or hotel workers, small entrepreneurs, or salaried staff pose in the same way as the young people in the countryside. Here, the leaves have simply been replaced by signifiers of each person's job. The question asked is direct and clear: what is our identity today? Can it be reduced to our job? To our social status? She places certain types of activity side by side - the traditional hat seller alongside someone selling American-style caps (in all likelihood "made in China"), the woman selling plastic baskets next to someone selling rattan utensils, the farmer who harvests his own rice and the vendor offering Christmas decorations, combining them with portraits of construction workers. Neak Sophal thus highlights the changes in the city, in modes of consumption, in cultural references and expresses concern over the devastating effects of globalisation. She does this through mechanisms, which are as simple as they are radical, efficient, pertinent and transparent. She forces us to address the disappearance of the faces whilst maintaining a subtle connection to the sculptural tradition essential to Cambodian culture, giving it a modern twist. These individuals stand in for an entire nation, thousands of anonymous strangers, feeling increasingly crushed by the weight of work which ends up constituting their sole activity and sense of identity.

Neak Sophal is part of the young generation of Cambodian artists, the third, after the survivors of the genocide and those born in the 1980s, after Pol Pot. She is aware of her country's tragic history (in fact, she is currently working with archival images, looking for ways to make sense of them). She feels duty-bound, however, to speak about today in order to envisage tomorrow. This is what she has just accomplished with her new series, *Flowers*,

composed once again of portraits, which are not only facing, but also looking at, us. These are hand-tinted portraits of women whose faces are framed with flowers. An ode to feminine beauty, but above all, a feminist statement. The first models were sex workers, but so as not to stigmatise them, Sophal also chose women from her entourage. Her family and friends, aged from 13 to 40 posed for her thus fighting against the Cambodian saying "*Men are like gold; women like snow white sheets*" which establishes a hierarchy between the sexes, suggesting - at least that is the general interpretation - that men shine and that women will always be soiled. Questioning contemporary society through metaphor is at the heart of the young artist's work.

By working in series, Neak Sophal uses economic means to great effect. She thus relies on this characteristic associated with "documentary style", yet transgresses it by introducing a measure of poetic quirkiness. Whilst never avoiding direct confrontation with her representations, she skilfully combines different elements of reality in unexpected ways.

She is demanding on a photo shoot and uncompromising when selecting her images. She does this with impressive rigour, and allows time for careful deliberation in order to, as she puts it "*just show the problems I see. I think about these problems all the time, then, one day, I decide on the best way to show and share these concerns*".

In colour, facing the camera, directly.

Sophal Neak

Neak Sophal was born in 1989 into a family of rice growers from a village in the Takeo province. She always says that she was lucky to be able to pursue her education thanks to the support of her parents. She enrolled at university in Phnom Penh in 2007 opting to study Fine Arts a year later. In her first year at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), she studied painting, drawing and graphic design. She graduated with honours, specialising in the latter discipline.

This allowed her to find work quickly, and she has since become one of the most talented creative consultants at the communications and design agency, *Melon Rouge*.

Her connection with photography was initially forged by curiosity, her interest dating back to 2008 with the creation of the Photo Phnom Penh Festival. Following this event, she enrolled on the course run by *Studio Image*, a flexible structure established by the festival to allow for the training of young talent. There was nowhere to study photography in the capital. The first tutor on the course was Philong Sovan, whom she still claims as an influence, citing also Mak Remissa and John Vink. Her closeness to Kim Hak, somewhat of a mentor to her, allows for serious discussions regarding the conception of her work and its implications. She nevertheless continues to state that initially she did not even *“imagine that ideas could be expressed and stories told through photography. At home, there were of course some family photos on the wall, but these were just snapshots. When my brother, who lived in Phnom Penh, sent us some fashion magazines, I was very surprised and we hung some pictures up on the wall. This must have influenced me”*.

She attended several workshops and benefitted from artist residencies in Thailand, Japan and Australia. She also attended short courses at the Angkor Photo Festival.

From the very beginning, she worked in series and immediately concentrated on staged symbolic scenes relating to social issues. The female condition, among others, which she examined in the series *Hey Sister, Where Are You Going* and, in a more radical fashion, *No Rice for the Pot*, in which she asks women to pose with pots and pans. She continues to question the place of women in her most recent series produced in 2016 and 2017, *The Green Net* and *Flowers* in which she displays her talents as a graphic artist. In her series on female construction workers, she uses photomontage. She also uses collage, and watercolours to retrace the faces of female sex workers. Framing their faces with flowers recalls the traditional concept of *“feminine sweetness”* a familiar and recurrent portrayal in Cambodian proverbs and other sayings. Like so many contemporary Cambodian artists, the question of identity in the modern world is at the heart of the photographer’s quest. Her approach is clearly and firmly militant, her formal choices resolute but not spectacular. Her extreme calm renders her approach all the more effective. Her photographs are a result of long collaborative discussions with her models, an essential characteristic of her way of working, even when the figures are portrayed from the back. Neak Sophal always seeks to be as precise as possible whilst at the same time allowing the viewer a certain freedom of interpretation.