

**mak
remissa**

**left
three
days**

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Published in French and translated
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Mak Remissa, Left Three Days

by Christian Caujolle

On 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh ending almost ten years of civil war, triggered by the 1967 Battamabang riots. These riots had been fuelled by the military coup, wholly supported by America, and led to General Lon Nol's rise to power in March 1970, overthrowing Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The global context of the Cold War together with the so-called Vietnam War (Cambodia was to become the most bombed country in former Indochina) generated the most terrifying of Communist dictatorships, resulting in the disappearance of over a quarter of the population. The Maoist-inspired regime, led by French-educated intellectuals, claimed to be capable of creating a classless society, purged of colonial, capitalist and religious influence, within a self-sufficient framework. These claims were upheld by leaning on the agricultural workers, whom the regime considered to be the only "uncontaminated" portion of society. Generally extremely poor and illiterate, these workers, many of whom were forced to enlist, made up the armed faction of a regime whose death toll would reach at least 1,7 million victims.

French reporter Roland Neveu (1) documented the first days of the "new era" following the town's occupation. His photographs show the army's weapons piled up high at a crossroads, inhabitants lining the boulevards, applauding the new masters as they parade through the streets on trucks or on foot, teenagers posing with guerrillas straight out of the jungle. The fighters are for the most part surprisingly young, mere teenagers dressed in black, bearing oversized weapons, their kramas tightly wound around their necks. They are the lifeblood of the Angkar, the Communist Party of Kampuchea. They are the ones who paved the way for victory against the corrupt and universally hated powers that be, at a huge cost in human lives.

Mak Remissa was five in 1975. Like all of the capital's inhabitants - as well as those of other big cities in the country - he was forced to flee Phnom Penh in the hours that followed the occupation. Using the pretext of imminent bombing by the American army, the Khmer Rouge ordered the population to leave "for three days only" to escape the danger. They advised against taking too many possessions, since they would soon return. At that time, Phnom Penh had become a sprawling metropolis, refuge to two million people, many of them fleeing civil war in the provinces. Within three days, everyone had gone. For 3 years, 8 months and 20 days, it became a ghost town consumed by nature, its only inhabitants a few civil servants working in the principal ministries, until 7 January 1979 when the Vietnamese troops drove out the Khmer Rouge (2, 3).

Amidst unbelievable chaos, crowds fled the town whilst foot soldiers dressed in black searched the houses one by one to hound out the occupants. Everyone left; most on foot, some on bicycles, motorbikes, rickshaws, carts for the luckier amongst them. They all gathered as many belongings as possible, understanding that their return was unlikely, and they walked on and on... Even the hospital emptied out, patients with drips still attached

to their arms were chased out. Those who were too weak collapsed and fell; the first victims abandoned by the wayside.

Mak Remissa fled with his family. It is hard to get him to talk about what happened. In the mid 1980s, I made the mistake of questioning him directly. I will never forget the look he gave me. That stare ensured that I never ask him again. Like so many survivors, vocalising the past seemed impossible. Nevertheless, five years later as we were having lunch, he reminded me of my question. I was then unable to halt the flood of horrors that he had endured in a children's camp. Forced to get up at five o'clock in the morning, he would witness a teenage torturer randomly choose a victim in the line to brutally execute in front of the others.

And so it took forty years for Mak Remissa to begin to talk or at least to lend shape to his memories of those hours in 1975 when he had had to flee Phnom Penh with his parents. Exactly the same amount of time it had taken Rithy Panh, another survivor, to allow himself to speak of his own experience. He has spent most of his life as a filmmaker making documentaries around the history of the Khmer Rouge. This is troubling and all the more so, but we will come back to that, since both men, alone and in ignorance of each other, created artistic processes which resonate deeply with one another.

It was only once Remissa had become a photographer, that he found himself able to conceive a series dealing directly with his personal history. He was among the first students at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh to specialise in Photography. To maintain a direct link with reality, perhaps, but also, undoubtedly, to avoid an art form based on reproduction or copying, such as painting, sculpture or ceramics. In addition, and on a more prosaic note, photography enabled him to have a profession and to obtain work. He developed a passion for black and white printing, which he could indulge at the French Cultural Centre as a recent graduate in the 1980s. Nevertheless, he wanted above all to learn "how to tell stories", like those commonly found in the press. His main objective was to gain recognition as a professional. He wished to convey news efficiently with a single shot, yet was simultaneously interested in developing a narrative component which would enable him to respond to the increasing demand for a new type of magazine feature emerging in the Phnom Penh press. His demanding and precise style of photojournalism allowed him to make a living very quickly. Although he is now considered to be one of the best reporters in his country, generously helping to train future generations, he has learned to put his journalistic activity into perspective. His status as correspondent to an international press agency - now also requiring him to work on video, which he does not relish - offers him a certain financial stability. He is practically the only professional reporter, whose practice-based research culminates in the production of a strictly personal series of fine art photographs every year or so.

The first of these is based on the Cambodian proverb "When the water rises, the fish eats the ant; when the water recedes, the ant eats the fish", a perfect metaphor for the fight for survival, for life itself, of which the animal kingdom sets an example all too often followed by humanity. These colourful, shiny, spectacular scenes are incredibly precise. The photographer used real ants, and tiny live or dried fish for the shoot. The results are

absolutely stunning. A “reportage” in which certain scenes are staged, something he refuses to do in his press photography; these images, which have not been retouched in any way have been exhibited all over the world as a magic fable. These elegant compositions in which he demonstrates an infallible sense of colour, humour and choreography, are grounded in serious philosophical reflection, yet offer a light and dynamic vision of the world.

The photographer uses the same elements of mise-en-scene and inspired, obsessive bricolage to undertake a vast project on the four elements. The project echoes his dismay over two of the most serious ecological issues facing his country: the overriding lack of respect for the environment and deforestation. “Water” and “Flamed Forest”, the first two chapters in this on-going series, engage explicitly with painting. For “Water”, which is “indispensable to life and which we waste, pollute, re-direct as with the dams along the Mekong River”, Remissa photographed fish, molluscs and crustaceans underwater alongside a human figure and a sunken rowing boat. However, he photographed them through the surface of the water, onto which his son would throw oil paint, which would spread out unevenly, forming abstract, sensual and fluid shapes. He then selected from the thousands of photographs taken, those whose composition seemed the most satisfactory. This involved days of work, of doubt, of going back to the images again and again in order to pinpoint the one defining photograph that would represent each depicted species. The series on “Fire” is like an epic poem, taking us from the savannah where animals hide, to the destructive blaze annihilating the natural habitat of any form of life. The work is strongly reminiscent of the highly skilled craft of engraving. Black and white engravings, initially, a latticework of curlicue foliage behind which lie the shapes of elephants, dogs, monkeys, buffalo or birds which then give way to pared-down versions of the same animals, composed of flames against a black backdrop. The last of these evokes a human silhouette on fire, the inevitable suicidal fate of those who do not respect nature.

The series evoking the evacuation of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975 came about when looking for a way to tackle the theme of “Earth”. It is impossible to really know or understand the how or the why. Memories, perhaps, of dust in the dry season or of moving, from the city to the earthy colours of the countryside. It is immaterial. For the first time, Mak Remissa reclaimed his own history and revisited his tragic past with a first-person narrative. He was inspired by the traditional shadow puppet theatre in which figures cut out of black calfskin leather or buffalo hide for the larger silhouettes, are placed against a white sheet lit from behind by the flames from burning coconut skins. He worked with paper cut-outs, each representing a scene, installed them on the pebbly soil and burnt the surrounding coconuts, in the manner of traditional Cambodian puppet shows. There are small men in black, the Wat Phnom, the city’s founding temple, abandoned scooters and the crowd, pushing bicycles or motorbikes, carrying as much as they can, like walking ghosts. On two occasions, there are children, small children, with Remissa amongst them no doubt. There is even a corpse, behind whom a passing procession of women, carrying pathetic bundles on their heads, can be seen. The limited palette is sombre, almost monochrome, black and white with shades of brown for the ground, the sole exception being the symbolic scene in which bank notes in similar hue are fluttering around in the fumes of a motorbike, thereby evoking the Khmer Rouge ban on money.

Since he was only a child, and his memories vague, Remissa questioned his mother. “What happened?” “Did I walk?” “Did you carry me?” For the first time in forty years, his mother spoke again of those dark days. Nissa, Remissa’s fifteen-year-old son, to whom his father had never spoken of these events, also wanted to know, his questions incessant. These fragile and poignant images, these evocations of pain trigger a surprising reconstitution of memories between generations. At the same time, Rithy Panh released *L’image manquante* (*The Missing Picture*) (4). Despite the fact that the two artists are of different ages, they experienced the same events. They are both survivors. They are both images-makers, they both know the complexities of working in the field of documentary. When rendering his own experience, each artist independently, out of necessity and with a sense of restraint, chose to work with symbolic imagery eschewing archive footage. For the filmmaker, this took the form of sculpted clay figures; for the photographer, paper silhouettes. In both cases these coarse, inaesthetic, crude objects, were enough to trigger memories. They never evoke pathos; avoiding direct testimony they simply impose clear and palpable emotions, easily accessible to all.

Mak Remissa lost his father, his grandfather and three of his uncles in these events. These images are dedicated to them and to all Khmer Rouge victims.

(1). *The Fall of Phnom Penh*, 17 April 1975, by Roland Neveu, Asia Horizons Books, Bangkok, 2009.

(2). *Au-delà du ciel. Cinq ans chez les Khmers rouges* (*Beyond the Horizon: Five Years With the Khmer Rouge*), by Laurence Picq, Editions Bernard Barrault, Paris, 1984.

(3). *J’ai cru aux Khmers rouges. Retour sur une illusion* (*I believed in the Khmer Rouge: An Illusion Re-visited*), by Ong Thong Hoeung, Editions Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 2003.

(4). Rithy Panh. *L’image manquante* (*The Missing Image*), 2013, Arte éditions. The clay figures were made by Sarith Mang.

One could also see all of Rithy Panh’s documentaries on the Khmer Rouge period. Amongst others: *S21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* (2002), *Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne* (1996), *La terre des âmes errantes* (1999), *Duch, le Maître des forges de l’enfer* (2011). These films are available from Editions Montparnasse.

There is also Davy Chou’s documentary, *Golden Slumbers* (2012) dedicated to the memory of Cambodian film, destroyed by the Khmer Rouge almost in its entirety. Over 400 films were produced between 1960 and 1975, of which barely a dozen remain.

Mak Remissa

Born in Phnom Penh in 1970 into a wealthy petit bourgeois family, Mak Remissa is now universally recognised as the most brilliant photojournalist in the country. This is his social and professional status, but it is also much more than that: he is a model for most of the young photographers in Cambodia. His mother was a schoolteacher, his father taught Natural Sciences at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. He was one of the administrators of the Olympic Stadium, an emblematic monument in the city centre run under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. This role affirmed his status but was also a way of being socially engaged.

After primary and secondary school, the young Remissa attended the Royal University of Fine Arts from 1985-1995. He was awarded his diploma in Photography after a two-year course funded by the Arts Cambodia association, the first institution in Cambodia to support photography.

In January 1995 he began to work on the *Cambodge Soir*, a French-language daily newspaper that had just been launched by the *Editions du Mekong*, and which closed in 2007. He very quickly became independent and though he still free-lanced for *The Phnom Penh Post*, he preferred corporate work - ANZ Royal Bank, Design Group, Royal Air Cambodge, Nestlé, Bates, Total Cambodge amongst others, and international organisations such as UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, the European Union. Early on, knowing that he had to complete his training in order to assure his professional future, Remissa attended the workshops run by the French Cultural Centre from 1996 onwards. He quickly became a passionate user of the only black and white laboratory in the country, created by this extremely active institution at a time when cultural activities in the town were still rare.

He participated in a collective exhibition held there in 1994 before presenting his photographs at the Club of Foreign Press Correspondents in Phnom Penh and subsequently in Paris. His first solo exhibition, "A Photographic Journey" took place in 1997 at the French Cultural Centre. In 2001, he was invited to exhibit at the National Gallery in Ottawa.

Since April 2006 he has been part of the staff at the European Pressphoto Agency (EPA), the German current affairs agency where he is the Cambodian correspondent. He often tires of the repetitive aspects of this full-time job, such as covering the institutional features of political life, although this does not stop him from creating a finely-crafted, brilliantly-executed personal series every two years.

Although his work has regularly been shown in Cambodia, in private galleries, cultural spaces or hotels as well as in the Photo Phnom Penh and Angkor Photo festivals, it has been more widely exhibited abroad - in Providence College (USA) in 2002, Noorderlicht Photo Festival (the Netherlands) in 2006, Photoquai (Paris) in 2007 and at the Université des Hôpitaux in Geneva in 2008 with the "Grain and Reality" exhibition.

He also taught at the Royal University of Fine Arts of Phnom Penh and at the Institut Français in Cambodia.







