

**philong
sovan
in the
city
by night**

**immanences
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atelier alban
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collection
mekong series
par / by
christian
caujolle
1**

nîmes & paris, 2015

An ink over palladium edition
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and Anne-Lou Buzot
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including eight copies
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and four hors commerce copies,
numbered from I to IV.

The prints are numbered,
signed and titled by
Philong Sovan.

Each copy includes
six photographs
from the series
In the City by Night
(Une ville, la nuit)
and an essay
by Christian Caujolle.

Size of the prints
37,5 cm x 56 cm
14.76 inches x 22.04 inches

Size of the portfolio
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16.53 inches x 22.83 inches

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immanences-editions.com
contact@immanences-editions.com
+33 (0)7 81 67 96 92

Fou de lumière

by Christian Caujolle

She sits outside in the street, on the ledge of a low wall, leaning against the shiny black railing behind her. Cradling a toddler, she looks straight at the camera. She doesn't smile; her expression seems serious or indifferent. It's not clear whether she's posing. She doesn't mind being photographed. She is the young heroine of one of the first photographs in Philong Sovan's series *In the City by Night*. One of the settings is Phnom Penh, where Sovan documents aspects of daily life that are slowly disappearing in a changing world, as well as the most visible of these transformations. The young girl was photographed in Siem Reap, a town through which countless tourists pass on their way to visit the temples of Angkor. All day, she begs, hoping that charitable passers-by will be moved by the child on her lap.

In 2010, Philong Sovan, who had only been working as a professional photographer for two years, attended the annual workshop held at the Angkor Photo Festival, led by Antoine d'Agata. But what was there to photograph in this city entirely devoted to commerce and tourism? How could he escape its architecture, avoid the clusters of tourists following their guide's little flag? How could he stop himself from making an inventory of the accumulation of souvenirs, a mix of local craftsmanship and products Made in China? He could avoid daytime for a start. He went in search of those seldom seen, who live and work in the shadows in every sense of the term. From this radical decision and simple observation arose an original series on one of the most common themes tackled by photographers over the past quarter of a century: the city.

Despite their desire for "modernisation" and development, Cambodian towns are a far cry from the powerful megacities of Southeast Asia, such as Bangkok, Singapore, Hong-Kong or Taiwan, which they try to emulate. Medium-sized cities such as Battambang have managed to preserve their small-town character, often still marked by a provincial, somewhat old-fashioned atmosphere inherited from their time as a protectorate, where traces of colonial architecture can still be found. This is also the case of Siem Reap, leaving aside the frenetic building of hotels and tourist facilities. Apart from a few areas, frequented by foreigners, once night falls, lighting is poor or non-existent. As such, had you been walking, you might only have caught sight of the young girl Philong Sovan chose as his model at the very last minute as you stumbled upon her.

The same can be said of Phnom Penh, the capital. Despite having over two million inhabitants, outside the well-lit major arteries, the avenues crossing the city and the quayside where bars and restaurants can be found, the city is plunged into darkness as night falls at around six o'clock. The hustle and bustle continues, however. Small, poorly-lit restaurants, couples, night watchmen, Go or card players, a group of friends drinking around a low table on the pavement, families finishing their dinner on their front porches, children picking up empty cans to resell, others sniffing glue on a bench not far from some drunkards who haven't managed to get home, delivery men rushing to the vegetable market, craftsman working hard... These are just some of the things which can be glimpsed by the leisurely visitor, open to the town's surprises and chance encounters as he strolls through it.

The former “Paris of Indochina” has lost some of its charm as a result of its horizontal architecture being replaced by high buildings, with no sense of urban planning. It has nevertheless retained many aspects of its former pace of life, including its busy network of narrow streets, like villages within the big city. Gaining access to them, however, is another matter.

The most common means of transport in Cambodia is the small motorbike. A million little bikes can be found in the capital alone, forming impressive clusters at each set of traffic lights. Riding through Siem Reap thinking about how he was going to tackle his night pictures, Philong Sovan’s headlamp revealed unsuspected street scenes. He quickly realised that these “apparitions” would be his subject. He decided then to use his headlamp to light his subjects. Jokingly, he compares himself to the hunter who catches the rabbit blinded by the headlights. Admittedly, the set-up, with the bike on its stand, the camera on a tripod, revving the engine one last time to get the lighting right, may appear rather quaint.

In the City by Night is a singular project in terms of both form and content and as such sits comfortably within the body of work of a photographer who is passionate about light. Able to build a makeshift “filter” from bits of straw to soften the effect of the flash, Sovan is also passionate about documentary, about bearing witness, and about the social issues for which he tries to find a non-conventional aesthetic. He is self-taught by choice, having started out as a video editor. His enthusiasm for the still image arose by accident when helping out some friends with a publication. He immediately chose photography as his tool. Digital, of course, since in Phnom Penh there was no training in analogue photography and nowhere to develop or print. The fascination for what he calls “real photography” came after a year’s training in France, which now allows him to consider new series - his chosen mode of production - for which he also wants to use the darkroom. Through his experience as a press photographer, he quickly understood that he was ill-suited to the ephemeral and superficial daily coverage of events. He began to develop “personal projects”, not realising that this was quite common. All of these revolved around capturing light. Having documented the daily lives of the inhabitants of a former Catholic chapel now converted into a home, he began a series of portraits. Favouring mood over narrative, he asked his models to look into the empty screen of his laptop, with which he lit them. An eerie light for these mysterious, expressionless faces. (The sitters would probably never own a computer, yet their lives, like everyone else’s nowadays, are governed by them.)

There is also mystery at work in the tension between the desire to document and the fictional effect produced by Sovan’s choice of lighting in his exploration of the city. There is a feeling of an unidentifiable middle ground, between the photographic and the cinematographic in which everyday characters are either still or in motion, highlighted, enhanced, reinvented by light. We all know, and this has become a cultural and aesthetic given, that light in cinema, even when it appears credible and realistic, is fabricated. It has to be said, that the use of a key light - without the starkness of the flash - adds an unreal, cinematic dimension to the scenes, animating rather than freezing them. Without this light, none of what appears before us would be visible. The photographer rather likes the idea that photography also serves to reveal that which the naked eye in normal circumstances would miss. A photograph, exploring and probing reality by the means of a simple instrument, stages the world so that we can see it.

Somewhat paradoxically, this unassuming, minimal staging, based on what was seen or glimpsed before the shot was taken, is designed to accentuate the effect of photographic realism. The more each element is placed with precision within a given frame, the more this balanced composition, lit in a way that cannot possibly be real, appears credible.

A subtle, sometimes somewhat eerie, warm colour palette ensures the chromatic coherence of the whole. Subtle details emerge in the black tones, resulting in tableaux portraying scenes from everyday life without dwelling on the poverty. The photograph of the child begging in Siem Reap with its skilful use of muted browns and reds and both glossy and matte greens, is a fine example.

The combination of the natural light in the distance and the yellow light projected onto the figures, the way the shadows fall and, in so doing, shift the balance between the forms, results in a mood of controlled boldness alternating between depth of field and shades of orange, this photography could only be conceivable in colour.

The obvious acceptance of the models, who either look straight at the camera or carry on regardless - or at least pretend to - offers slices of nightlife which become representative of a situation. We discover a whole invisible population, portraits whose context confers on them a symbolic value. The odd jobs of the poor, motorcycle taxis, security guards, refuse collectors, the homeless, street children, the helpless, and so many more. City development and the increase in consumption of recent years have given rise to leisure activities with new purpose-built spaces, discotheques, new trends, and a fashion-conscious youth who want to be “hip” like the models beginning to be featured in magazines and on television. Philong Sovan began to approach and photograph them. They often find his method “modest” even if they think he’s quirky. They’re often more reluctant to pose than his first “ordinary” subjects who worry little about their image and willingly accept the ritual of having their picture taken once the photographer has explained his project.

This complex gallery of portraits has to be seen in the light of recent developments in the representation of the city. Over one century, our perception of the world has changed dramatically. It has adapted to the turmoil that has shaken its foundations, the shift from a rural society to urban concentration, from local roots to ever-growing possibilities of displacement, from a singular to a global identity accelerated by modes of consumption. This century, our vision of the world has radically changed. Once founded on practical and physical experience, our knowledge of the environment has been mediated more and more by its own images. Before being overthrown by the mass and overwhelming use of digital imagery, photography gave the illusion that it allowed us to know the different facets of the universe, from the infinitesimally large to the infinitesimally small, from the most to the least intimate. Photography had its heyday in the twentieth century. Its memory was founded then and with it came ambiguous representation, creating a tension between realism, verisimilitude and coded illusion which combined exoticism with fiction. A seductive wall of images has come between reality and ourselves, denying us access to the former, or at least, rendering it less accessible.

Over the last quarter of a century, understandably, an increasing amount of work has been devoted to the city and urbanism. Approaches and logics have been as varied as they have been contradictory, from purely objective descriptions to the poetic, from conceptual explorations to highly structured analyses, based on collaborations with architects and urban

planners. These corpuses of remarkable documentary or subjective work are nevertheless no longer able to compete with the dominant imagery repeated ad infinitum. Work like that of Corinne Vionnet (*Photo Opportunities*), an accumulation of tourist snapshots from around the world, highlights the way stereotype has become king: in each town, we photograph “the” emblematic monument, always taken from the same angle. This image, which pre-dates the real-life experience in situ, has been established via the postcard, then through specialised travel magazines and constantly reiterated by tour operators’ travel brochures. Travelling to an unknown destination becomes tantamount to going to check whether the image we already have of “elsewhere” really does exist. As such, it is perfect for taking selfies, which attest to the fact that “I was there”.

The case of Southeast Asian towns is particularly significant. Sometimes created *ex nihilo*, as is so often the case in China, they always attract more people from rural areas, hoping for the economic success they feel has been denied them. These towns have mushroomed, sometimes in an anarchic fashion, yet almost invariably vertically, becoming huge and giving the impression of being inhabited by a teeming mass of people. They are seen as cities inhabited by signs, marked by the never-ending blinking of coloured neon lights accompanying the incessant activity. The difficulty of representing a Cambodian city stems from here; for the time being, they do not correspond in the slightest to this description, even if we can see the capital hurtling towards this model.

The vast majority of recent approaches to the city have minimised those who live there, most often to the point of making them disappear in an effort to organise the space. It is to Philong Sovan’s credit that he places them at the centre of his work, to be seen as part of the city in all its complexity and at a defining moment in its history and development. His respectful approach, the precise, measured distance he chooses each time, his sobriety tinged with a sense of the poetic and the complete absence of storytelling is the style he has chosen to develop. This approach takes us back to his own life experience, devoid of pretence or affectation and the resulting images are paradoxical: floating yet irrefutably anchored in contemporary reality.

His interest in the photographic device, even at its most rudimentary, his obstinacy in choosing precisely, each time, how the direction of the ray of light from the headlamp of his motorbike will add something to the scene he stumbled upon in his meanderings through the city, this explorer has created a completely original documentary style. Staged, yet realistic, documentary yet completely made-up, his photographs do not aspire to tell “the truth”. Functioning as a *Deus ex-machina*, using light to raise the questions this young Cambodian has with regard to his country’s cities, he is obliged to both question the sense of their rapid transformation and to keep a trace of what still exists.

Two light beams in the eyes of the little beggar-girl of Siem Reap form her gaze. Her eyes aren’t shiny; it’s just the reflection on her pupils from the headlamp of Philong Sovan’s motorbike.

Philong Sovan

Philong Sovan was born in 1986 into a family of modest means living in the village of Prek Dach, in the Kandal province. He was sent to live with an uncle in Phnom Penh to continue his studies. On completing his secondary education in 2000, he went to the National University of Management (NUM) where he was awarded a degree in Information Technology in 2005. Like many of his fellow students, he took on odd jobs to pay for his studies.

From 2004-2008 he was head of the video department at the Catholic Social Communications (CSC) where he worked mainly in editing. He discovered photography when asked to take some pictures for one of the magazines owned by the CSC, which publishes material for the Catholic Church in the whole region.

Filled with enthusiasm, he approached Mak Remissa, the most brilliant Cambodian photographer of the time, who gave him both technical and professional advice.

After covering the first edition of the Phnom Penh Photo Festival for the French Cultural Centre in 2008, he became one of the staff photographers for the daily newspaper, *The Phnom Penh Post*, where he remained until 2011. During this time, as well as covering the news, he reorganised the digital archives and together with the editors, helped define a visual policy for photography, notably for the front page.

In 2009, he became the main tutor and figurehead at the Image Studio (*Studio Images*), a training centre established by the French Cultural Centre (which is now the French Institute of Cambodia). He remained there until 2015.

He attended two of the Angkor Photo Workshops in Siem Reap, the first run by Jake Picone, Stephen Dupont and Tim Page, the other by Antoine d'Agata.

Thanks to a grant awarded by the French Embassy in Cambodia, he spent a year in France at the Ecole nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière in 2012-2013. This experience introduced him to analogue photography and allowed him to visit museums and galleries as well as to attend different festivals (Images Singulières in Sète, the Rencontres d'Arles). It proved to be a decisive year, confirming his desire to work on personal projects, which have evolved into thematic series, alongside more commercial or commissioned work.

His work was exhibited at the Phnom Penh Photo Festival in 2009, 2010 and 2013, at the Quai Branly Museum's biennial Photoquai in 2011, at the Hotel de la Paix in Siem Reap the same year and at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Singapore in 2012. The same year he attended the World Event Young Artists Festival in Nottingham, Great Britain where he presented his award-winning project "My Samaritaine 2013". His work was also shown at the Getxophoto Festival in Spain in 2015.

Philong Sovan's work has been published in *The Phnom Penh Post* (Cambodge), *GLOBE magazine* (Cambodia), *Le Monde Magazine* (France), *Internazionale* (Italie), *Missions Étrangères* (Canada), *Report Without Border* (France), *De L'air* (France), *L'Express Styles* (France), *L'Oeil* (France), *Revue Noire* (France), *IMAGES Magazine* (France), *PUNCTUM* (Inde), *AZART* (France).





