

# **jorng jam kong vollak**

**immanences**

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**collection**

**mekong series**

**par / by**

**christian**

**caujolle**

**5**

Each copy of Jorng Jam, fifth volume of the Mekong series, includes eight chromopalladium prints and one palladium print made by Anne-Lou Buzot on Bergger COT 320 paper, including one enhanced with gold color by Kong Vollaek.

The prints are numbered, signed, and titled by the artist.

The texts set in Baskerville and Helvetica Neue fonts by Florent Fajole are printed with digigraphy technique on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Duo 276 g. paper. The title labels are printed on Labora paper by Nestor Ljutjuk with letterpress technique at Tallina Paberikoda studio in Tallinn.

This original edition includes thirteen copies: eight copies numbered from 1 to 8 and five hors commerce copies numbered from I to V.

The portfolio is kept in a handmade box created by Justine Delval in Arles.

Bilingual Edition French/English.  
Translated from the French by Karine Leroux.

Size of the prints: 27 cm x 39 cm  
Size of the portfolio: 30 cm x 40 cm

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# **Jorng Jam, Kong Volla**

## **Christian Caujolle**

Ou Savat thinks he was born in 1945. He does not know exactly because, at the time, the civil registry was fledging and, anyway, all administrative archives were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era. Ou Savat looks good for his age and still works as a doctor in Phnom Penh: in a country where the health system being frail still, one does not quit what amounts to a commitment. Ou Savat was born into a family of farmers, in the province of Prey Veng, east of Phnom Penh, on the other bank of the Mekong river. In this region, named after a forest that gradually disappeared to make space for agriculture, the population is dense but resources are plentiful. This explains why Ou Savat's relatively well-off family would fairly regularly go to the city of Prey Veng, the regional capital city, or even Kampong Cham, the capital of the bordering province where a large Muslim community lives, and sometimes Phnom Penh where part of the family lived. In these three cities, when he was but a baby, he was photographed with his close relatives in a studio. Later on, he can be seen in family portraits, then an ID photograph shows a teenager with shoulder-length hair, before he was photographed again a few years later as a young man in a perfect hippy outfit, complete with flared trousers, a bandana in his long hair and a shoulder bag worn cross-body. Pictures that, along with portraits of his younger sister, he'd glue in a lined notebook.

When in the 1970s, the civil war intensified and the Khmers Rouges came closer to Phnom Penh, the family, like many other Cambodians, took refuge in the capital city, staying with friends, relatives or acquaintances. And when it became clear that Phnom Penh was going to fall, they buried their money, a few items of jewellery and photographs deep in the basement of the house that sheltered them. Because all of this was extremely dangerous and, in the eyes of the radical communists, made them enemies of the people and the photographs themselves were evidence of a middle-class spirit that had to be eradicated. On 17 April 1975, following the entry of the Pol Pot troops into the city, Ou Savat and his family, like all the inhabitants, had to leave Phnom Penh, which remained deserted for nearly four years. They headed for the countryside, the camps, and forced labour. The young man survived. Other relatives disappeared in the turmoil. When he returned to Phnom Penh, he visited the house that had sheltered him before the tragedy and he dug the ground. He soon realised that someone had been there first. Indeed, the new people in charge had explored the basements of all the houses in the capital, grabbing everything of value. That is, financial value, of course.

There was neither money nor jewellery left. But the seven photographs were still there. A invaluable treasure for the young man. The only thing that remained from his years of childhood and youth, the only thing that survived from those days of happiness.

Ou Savat generously accepted to entrust Kong Vollak with these pictures, as well as an eighth one that depicts him, after the war, lying down in front of the great Angkor Wat temple, during this first visit that so many Cambodians made as if to reconnect with a millennial past that could ward off the recent horrors and heal the raw wounds. He accepted after the young artist, born in 1983, who trained in sculpture and visual arts at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, showed him the work he had undertaken. In 2015, on photos of his own family, this man, who divides his time between teaching art in schools and his own creation – mostly drawings depicting invented or dreamt architectures or interpretations of architectures marked by history, started the project that he calls Jorng Jam (memory, in Khmer).

In the context of a collective project on memory – which remains one of the recurrent themes in contemporary creation in Cambodia – Vollak began to question his mother:

*«She'd never told me about the Khmer Rouge era, and I wanted to know how she had experienced it. In my family, there are very few photos, in fact only two of my mother. One is an ID portrait, dating from the eighties, just after. And another one, in poor condition, shows her as a young woman with her sister. My mother is not really expansive and does not express her feelings. To find a way of starting the conversation, I showed her that photo, and to my great surprise, she started to cry, to sob, really overwhelmed. And then her words came out freely, a stream, unbelievable. She explained that she had gone to town with her sister, that she had bought a new dress and had had her face made up to go to the photographer's. That's when I saw how much that photo meant to her. And knowing how rare they are, I decided to treat them as treasures and to enrich them with golden paint on part of the image. When I showed my mother the copy of her portrait with now a precious appearance, she started crying again. At the time of the Khmers Rouges' arrival, she had burnt all the photos but she could not resist keeping this one. She had folded it twice and hidden it in her bundle of clothes. Later, when a soldier had found it while searching her for money and jewellery, he had said that, fortunately, there was only one so it was OK and had left it.»*

Vollak wants to continue this work, enriching a rare memory with golden paint. He asks those who still have photographs, with a predilection for those predating the nightmare. Because *«often, that's all there's left of people who have disappeared during the Khmers Rouges years»*. Some of these photographs deteriorated while they were in the ground – or by the monsoon, damp being terrible for photographs – and have lost part of their gelatine, resulting in flaking images. The artist turns them into



icons, endowing them with the aura of a religious, or even mystical, picture in a country and culture that has absolutely none of this type of representation or figuration. Religious painting in Cambodia consists almost exclusively of frescoes that tell, in pagodas, the life of Buddha with bright colours. The major traditional arts are sculpture and dance – no painting and even less so photography.

The strength of this profound work comes from the fact that Volak is not concerned with aesthetics as a priority, even though he manages to impose a visually coherent, yet non decorative, interpretation, which takes its meaning from the discourse it communicates. *«I've done that also because, in a family, when they showed me photographs, they told me that they were more precious than gold.»* As unhoped-for memories that defy time and history, these fragile cardboard rectangles carry a need for remembering and their physical enhancement, which places them in an atypical category for the culture they are produced in, invites us to be quiet, centre ourselves and meditate.

# Kong Vollak

Born in Phnom Penh on 25 September 1983, Kong Vollak is a Cambodian contemporary artist who mostly makes artworks on paper and sculptures. After studying at the Phrea Yu kun Tor High School, he studied sculpture at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) for four years and he graduated in 2006. The following year, he obtained a diploma in pedagogy from the National Institute of Education.

He works mainly with charcoal, ink and graphite pencil to depict complex architectures that question the development and memory of cities. These plates, some of them in a large format, echo the anarchic mutations of the capital city – once characterised by a horizontal organisation – in which tall buildings grow while interwoven networks of cables punctuate public space. These motifs can also be found in engravings and lithographies that he regularly makes and illustrate the technical know-how that he acquired during his training. His sculptures, often made of wire with springs and found materials, address the themes of a distorted, fragile and unbalanced cityscape.

Photography, which he learnt first from Stephan Janin and which he practises sporadically – initially with films and today in digital format, led him to take part in a collective project about the seaside city of Kep for which he produced still lives with toys that bring the attention to environment and pollution issues. Since 2015, he has been working on the series *Jorng Jam/Memory* in which he highlights family photographs with golden paint, some dating back to the «golden age» of the 1960s-70s, before the Khmer Rouge tragedy. This concern for history and memory runs through his entire work and constitutes its basis. In 2007, along with five other artists (Vandy Rattana, Heng Ravuth, Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, and Vuth Lyno), he created the group *Stiev Selapak* – The Art Rebels – which later opened an independent gallery, the only gallery to be run by artists, and which has since become the Sa Sa Bassac, an independent gallery for contemporary art and training.

He has exhibited his work since 2003, initially at the RUFA, and later at the Centre Culturel Français and Java Arts (a major gallery in Phnom Penh) among others, and feels that his most important exhibition yet was at Sala Arts. He also took part in the following events: *Cambodia: Looking Back on the Future*, The Flinn Gallery, New York City, USA; *Invisible Conversations*, Java Art Gallery, Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2017); *Histories of Future*, National Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; *Silhouettes of Tomorrowland*, the Asia Foundation, Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2016); *Jorng Jam I*, Bophana Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2014); *Jorng Jam II*,

Logan Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia (2015); *Phadeth*, Bliss on Bliss Art Studio, in Queen, New York City, USA (2013). Thirty of his painted photographs from *Jorng Jam* were also included in the second edition of Photo Phnom Penh in October 2019.

Also a curator, he was in charge, among other events, of the Mekong Arts and Culture project in 2008 and 2009. He has participated in many conversations with foreign artists at festivals and residences, such as the Theertha International Artists workshop in Kandy in Sri Lanka (2008) and the Asian Cultural Center (ACC) in New York, USA (2011); he also took part in Art Camp, UNESCO Andorra (2018).

In 2013, he won the bronze medal for sculpture at the Jeux de la Francophonie in France.

Parallel to his drawing, sculpture, engraving and photograph practice, he teaches in high schools in Phnom Penh and the area. The notion and necessity of transmission are important to him.