

Drawing Together

Siem Reap, Cambodia

Away from the temples and tourist throngs, Siem Reap's thriving contemporary art scene is helping to heal old wounds, through classes, exhibitions and joyous circus performances



Words by ABIGAIL BLASI

After the sun-baked Siem Reap street, with its dust, drink stands and buzzing mopeds, walking into Theam's Gallery is like stepping onto a willow-pattern plate. Lim Muy Theam has created a wonderland of interlocking courtyards, tiled-roof pagodas, a bridge, model traditional houses and antiques. Bougainvillea cascades; there are knotty banyan trees and orange-and-purple birds of paradise. A mynah bird bleats "hello". Maddy Lim, the artist's sister, shows me around. She's French-accented, erudite and as elegant as a designer's sketch.

Theam's paintings explore his country's history, with poppy-red lacquer set against black and white, portraits and crowd scenes against Cambodian backdrops. He looks out from one, with the saddest eyes you've ever seen.

Before the pandemic, Theam had 40 artisans working alongside him here, but now, just a couple. Siem Reap's economy, reliant almost entirely on tourism, has been hit hard by Covid. Dubliner Robina Hanley, long-term resident and my art tour guide, tells me that during lockdowns, the local government took the opportunity to fix all of Siem Reap's roads. "The place was ripped apart while we were broken inside," she says.

Now the roads are all good, and the tourists are slowly coming back. When the first Singapore Airlines flight returned, many people went to celebrate and welcome the plane at the airport.

Maddy Lim pauses in front of an old black-and-white family photograph. She was eight years old when it was taken, at a refugee camp as they fled from the Khmer Rouge. In frame, her brother is a couple of years older, a far-off expression in his eyes. ▶▶

“At White Gold, performers somersault, dance and juggle amid cascades of rice. Their joy is infectious, raw and exciting; it’s wobbly and heartfelt”

“My brother was in a working camp,” she says. “Escaping to France, he had a new life, studying at the École des Beaux-Arts, before returning over 25 years ago. He has been working ever since to revive local crafts decimated during the regime.”

Most tourists are here to visit Angkor Wat, the extraordinary temple complex enfolded in the jungle, but Siem Reap is becoming increasingly renowned for its contemporary art. Hanley takes me to meet Nou Sary, who paints impressionistic canvases recalling his early life. He worked in the rice paddies until he was 12 years old, then walked to Phnom Penh in search of an education.

A security guard during the day, Sary enrolled in night classes at the University of Fine Arts and, together with other students without lodgings, slept in the classrooms. He drew postcards and sold them to tourists for £1 so that he could afford to eat.

“Art is a tool that can change a person and can bring you very far. It’s a freedom,” says Svay Sareth, as he and Yim Maline, his wife, both artists, show me around their extraordinary studio and workshop-filled house, which they’re turning into an art school. Sareth, whose works can be seen in museums from New York to Singapore, discovered art as an escape, aged 7, at Site Two refugee camp. In one of his most renowned works, *Mon Boulet*, he pulled an 80kg, 2m-wide metal ball 250km from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh. To him it signified Cambodian history, “like a ball and chain”.

Site Two, which covered less than 8sq km, was home to nearly 200,000 people. Sareth says. “We lived in a bamboo hut, 5m by 4m for the whole family. Everything was rationed.” A French volunteer, Véronique Decrop, began art therapy classes, to help camp children cope with their trauma. “Feeling trapped, I was able to escape into drawings of an imagined landscape,” says Sareth.

His words resonate, especially today. Nine young Cambodians who studied drawing together, including Sareth, later created Phare Ponleu Selpak (“The Brightness of the Arts”), which offered classes in visual and performing arts.

Maline studied at the first generation of the school. Now she nurtures myriad gardens on their terraces, and her works focus on nature, zooming in on organic structures until they are fractal; abstract. She calls them “Decompositions”. At the end of our meeting, she disappears into her studio, paintbrushes in hand.

Phare was the genesis, too, for perhaps the most beloved fixture of the local art scene. It’s a circus, where the performers come from the performing arts school for disadvantaged children. I watch *White Gold*, about Cambodia’s most essential foodstuff, where the performers somersault, dance and juggle amid cascades of rice. Their joy is infectious, raw and exciting; it’s wobbly and heartfelt. Craig Dodge, who has worked with the circus for more than 10 years, tells me excitedly about the work, his love for the project palpable. “The thing that’s magical is that before, their reality might have been a rice field,” he says. Few places show as keenly as Siem Reap the power that art has to change lives.

THE LOWDOWN

Wix Squared’s three-night trip to Siem Reap costs from £1,500 (£1,200 if travelling as a couple), including accommodation at Jaya House River Park Hotel, private airport transfers and a day spent exploring the contemporary art scene in Siem Reap. Also included are return economy flights with Singapore Airlines from London Heathrow.

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LEFT: YIM MALINE, *Colorful Decomposition 7*, 2018, mixed media on paper, 76 x 99cm
RIGHT: SVAY SARETH, *Head & Power 2*, 2018, cotton and kapok, 100 x 95 x 45cm
Exhibition view *Home, lost and found*, 2018. Batia Sarem Gallery
Photo courtesy of the artists and Batia Sarem Gallery // Photo by ROUN RY