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Return of the Gods

by Michelle Vachon | October 10, 2015

Over the past few years, Leang Seckon has been using his art to explore the turmoil that engulfed every Cambodian in the 1970s and '80s.

This started with his series "Heavy Skirt," named after the garment that his mother used to wear, patching it over and over again in the early 1970s as their village in Prey Veng province was being bombed.



Leang Seckon and his mixed media artwork, 'Indochina War,' in his studio in Phnom Penh (Jens

Welding Ollgaard/The Cambodia Daily)

Now, with the mural-size works he created for his first New York exhibition next week at the Sundaram Tagore Galleries, Mr. Seckon will seek to bring artistic closure to those decades of misery, using the recent repatriation of a looted Cambodian antiquity to symbolize the spiritual end of decades of civil war.

In May, a 10th-century statue of the Hindu monkey deity Hanuman, which is believed to have been looted from the Koh Ker temple complex in the 1960s, was returned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

For Mr. Seckon, having Hanuman back home means that the country is again under the protection of the deity. One of the most cherished figures in the country's mythology, Hanuman plays a prominent role in the Reamker, Cambodia's version of the Indian epic tale Ramayana.

In Mr. Seckon's new series, Hanuman embodies every Cambodian who left the country in the 1970s and '80s, took refuge abroad, and has longed for his homeland ever since. But the artist also sees the god as a symbolic protector of the country, which descended into turmoil in the decades after the statue was taken away.

Hanuman's journey is depicted in one of the pieces displayed in the show, a mixed media work entitled "Why Hanuman Returns to Cambodia." It features three visions of the deity: to the left, Hanuman is a weeping skeleton; in the middle, Hanuman is cut open to display a sword in his stomach and a map of Cambodia in his brain; and to the right, Hanuman is whole again, a warrior in gold and gray.



Mr. Seckon in his Phnom Penh studio (Jens Welding Ollgaard/The Cambodia Daily)

When the statue was taken away, Mr. Seckon said, “They installed him in the museum for people to see. He felt safe in the museum, but he was not happy at all, crying and crying and looking skinnier and skinnier because he missed home.”

“People could not understand why he was crying and getting thin. So they decided to take him to a hospital,” he said. As they carried Hanuman out of the museum, according to the artist’s version of events, the sun shined on him, illuminating his innards and enabling the museum staff to see that he had a sword in his stomach and a map of Cambodia imprinted on his brain, as well as on his right hand and heart.

“They realized the statue belonged to Cambodia. So they returned it,” he said. “Now, Hanuman has returned to protect the country.”

In another piece, entitled “Indochina War,” two warriors depicted in traditional fashion are wrestling on the left side of the painting, while on the right they have become statues with their arms missing. They represent two other sandstone sculptures from the Koh Ker complex that were looted in the 1960s and also recently repatriated, representing Bhima and Duryodhana. In the background, an eagle holding bombs—a reference to U.S. bombings in the late 1960s and early 1970s —flies over tall palm trees. At the bottom, a Khmer Rouge soldier in black is shown among red rats carrying sacks on their shoulders. The work is done with acrylic paint on canvas, while the bodies of the characters are made of fabric and intricately cut-up sheets of leather.

Born in 1970, Mr. Seckon is from the first generation of post-war visual artists who began to exhibit in the late 1990s. Now one of Cambodia's most prominent artists, his work was shown in London last year and in Hong Kong a few months ago, and is currently on display in Lille, France.

In New York, Mr. Seckon's works will be part of the show "REV | ACTION: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia," which features 10 artists from the region.

Exhibition curator Loredana Paracciana said Mr. Seckon had a "fascinating approach to contemporary art," using collage and mixed media to weave deeply personal narratives together with the story of his country's history. Taken together, his work "breathes life [in]to pieces of history, personal and collective," she said.

The exhibition opens on Thursday.



'Rice and the Gold Bracelet' from Kim Hak's 'Alive' series (Kim Hak)

The exhibition in New York, which focuses on Southeast Asian artists revisiting their history in view of today's concerns, also includes works from Cambodian photographer Kim Hak's series "Alive," which features objects that people risked their lives to hold onto during the Khmer Rouge regime. "I took a keen interest in the 'Alive' series, which relates intimately with Cambodia's history that is still very raw for many of the more senior Cambodians, as well as for the younger generation of Cambodians like Kim Hak, who is attempting through images and compositions like those in 'Alive' to unburden the memory of a painful history," said Loredana Paracciana, the exhibition's curator. Works on display include photographs of two notebooks

damaged by the elements, a pair of scissors shown against blue-gray hair, and grains of rice next to a gold bracelet—both priceless during those years of starvation. Photos from the 34-year-old photographer's "Alive" series were featured in Cambodia, Australia, Thailand, Slovakia and the U.K., and are currently being exhibited in Lille, France. His photos of Kep and Phnom Penh are also part of this month's "Architectural Landscapes" exhibition at the Queens Museum in New York.

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