

Returning to her roots, a young photographer leaves her mark

Fri, 11 October 2013 Will Jackson

A young girl wearing an Angry Birds T-shirt stands in a rice field, her face hidden behind a large lotus leaf.

It's a striking and unusual image. Most portraits focus on the subject's face and this deviation from the norm immediately sparks questions about the artist's intent.

For her latest exhibition, *Sonleuk* (the Khmer word for leaf), up-and-coming photographer Neak Sophal says she began wanting to convey the hopeless but largely ignored situation in which rural young people across Cambodia find themselves.

The final result came from a mixture of experimentation and interpretation.

Sitting on a stool in the back room of Phnom Penh's Romeet Gallery, the slight, softly spoken 25-year-old explains the concept behind her second solo exhibition this year.



'Banana' is one of the photos on display at Romeet. NEAK SOPHAL

"For this project, first I just saw in my village all the kids, especially from the far remote side, they stop study [because their schools are far away], they go to work outside [the country] to Thailand or something like that," she says.

"They are very important, the next generation, for developing our country but the government doesn't care about them."

With this idea in mind, one weekend earlier this year she went back to her home village of Wat Po in Takeo province, south of Phnom Penh, and followed some of the local kids around – including her niece and nephew – taking photos.

The Royal University of Fine Arts graduate tried different compositions and settings. She took action shots and posed portraits. She was improvising, like a musician noodling or painter sketching.

Upon returning to Phnom Penh and reviewing the results, one image stuck out.

In a pond near the village Sophal had spotted a large lotus leaf and, in a moment of inspiration, used it to cover her niece's face.

"To me in my head I thought 'we have something to say with this leaf' and when I put it in front of her face, it's like... secret," she says.

"At first I wasn't clear about the concept comparing the leaf to the kids...but then the idea came from this picture and follows with another leaf and many leaves in my village."

Over time she thought more deeply about the significance of the leaves, developing the idea, and then went back to the village with a definite vision in mind.

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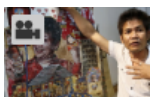
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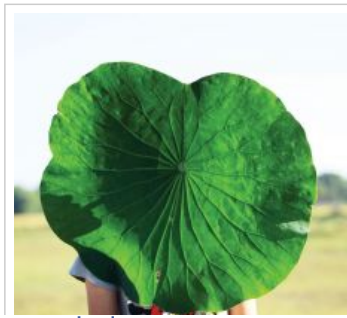
Cambodian artist hits the big time

Phnom Penh based artist Leang Seckon's collage reflections on Khmer society are featuring at the prestigious Art Basel in Hong Kong.



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The result was 12 portraits of children and teenagers, each a metre-high. Each has a leaf from a different tree or plant concealing the face.

"The idea of the leaf... [is that the youth] are the same as the leaf. Like the tree is the same as the society and the leaf is very important for the tree like the kids [are for society]," she says.

"And [the youth] are very useful [like

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photo, we have in the village and are very useful for each family.

"But the youth are hidden from society so that's why I hide their faces. And they cannot see clearly the society and the society also don't see them."

Sophal is a protege of veteran

Cambodian photographer Kim Hak and works full time as a graphic designer at the Phnom Penh office of communication and creative firm Melon Rouge Agency. She cites Mak Remissa, Sovan Philong and John Vink as influences.

Her first group exhibition was Intelligent Women in 2010 at Java Cafe and the following year she contributed a public art installation titled No Rice for the Pot as part of the international SurVivArt project.

Her first solo photographic exhibition earlier this year titled Behind at Java Cafe featured subjects with their backs turned to the camera evoking Cambodians' reluctance to be identified and singled out for fear of getting into trouble.

Sophal says she doesn't set out to always be political but feels a need to engage with social issues.

"Most of my work I just show the problems I see. I'm thinking all the time about the problems in my head and then I decide which way to show to the audience so that they can get this message," she says.

Romeet manager Kate O'Hara says she has been following Sophal's work since she exhibited in Hey, sister where you going? at the Sovanna Mall in 2010.

"I was struck by the intimacy of her portrait work," O'Hara said.

"She has a distinctive style, walking in to group exhibition you can always pick her work and I think it has as much to do with her thought process as her aesthetic as an artist."

Sonleuk runs at Romeet Gallery, Street 178, Phnom Penh, until November 10.

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