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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

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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