

# Silkwinds

SEPTEMBER 2019



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## UNCHARTED WATERS

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# A FRESH CANVAS

After the Khmer Rouge regime decimated a generation of creatives, the contemporary art scene in Siem Reap is starting over, thanks to young artists, hoteliers and newly opened galleries







*Words by Sanjay Surana  
Photos by Jorge Rodriguez*





# On a humid evening in late July,

a group of Cambodians and expats sip wine and mingle while the singer-songwriter Brak Sophanna delivers melodious ballads at Treeline Urban Resort. The boutique hotel in central Siem Reap prides itself on its displays of contemporary Cambodian art, and is on this day celebrating the opening of “Ti Prasap” (meaning “confluence”), a selection of works from the private collection of Australian lawyer Larry Strange, who has lived in Cambodia since 2003. The show, which runs until the end of September, is a testament to the interest and activity around contemporary art that has developed in Siem Reap over the past year.

“The art here is a new phenomenon. You can start to see the energy,” says Kang Hok, the youthful architect and owner of Treeline. The property, which opened in November 2018, is populated with art – from permanent pieces like the lobby’s seed-pod sculpture by Sopheap Pich (arguably the country’s

**Previous spread, clockwise from left**  
 Batia Sarem Gallery; elephant sculptures in Treeline’s courtyard exhibition space; Chan Phoun; Christian Develter; Lim Muy Theam





**From left**  
A miniature Bayon replica at Treeline; Sopheap Pich is a renowned contemporary artist; Theam's House is run by Lim Muy Theam and his sister

most famous modern artist) to room paintings by self-taught former architect Thang Sothea.

“Siem Reap should be an art destination,” Kang declares. While the city has yet to reach this ambitious goal, it’s undeniably a cultural magnet: The 12th-century Angkor Wat attracted over 2.6 million tourists in 2018, drawn to its awe-inspiring complex of rigorous craftsmanship and liberated expression in a country that’s recently suffered a fractured relationship with artists. The 1960s represented a golden era of Cambodian arts, film and music, until the brutal Khmer Rouge regime murdered 90% of artists in the 1970s. Some escaped overseas, a few survived here, but a country with a rich heritage was suddenly left without arts practitioners. Cambodia’s arts scene has had to restart from scratch. The contemporary arts evolution in Siem Reap needs to be nurtured as a bedrock for new traditions and collective memory.

“Contemporary art started here around 2000, [the Khmer Rouge officially disbanded in 1999],” shares Moeng Meta, the curator for “Ti Prasap”. “That’s when artists came back from overseas; they were creative and experimental.” With pieces dating from 2005 to 2018, “Ti Prasap” bridges the early stages of the movement with the current era.

This exhibition is just one facet of a burgeoning movement. Artists and gallery owners in Siem Reap are working tirelessly to build a strong contemporary art base. For example, Theam’s House gallery opened in 2011 on a bumpy unpaved road north of the city centre, and is run by Lim Muy Theam and his charismatic sister Maddy. Lim spent some years as a refugee in Thailand before living in France. He returned to Cambodia in 1995. Though he studied interior design, he found joy in painting old temples, bas-reliefs and people – works that tourists purchased. Lim now presides over a compound that includes a shop selling his signature lacquer sculptures and exhibition spaces showcasing his large paintings and the historical objects he has collected from around Cambodia and beyond.

“Nine years ago, I was one of the few artists [in Siem Reap]. Now there is new energy. That encourages younger people to show their work,” he points out. »









**Clockwise from facing page**

Nou Sary's artwork focuses on the experience of Cambodian farmers; the workshop at Theam's House; inside One Eleven Gallery

"The tourist market here has grown and quality hotels open their spaces to local artists. I think it will get better and better for artists in Siem Reap and I hope more and bigger dedicated galleries open."

Some already have. One Eleven Gallery opened in September 2017 on the Old Market Bridge roundabout, promoting local and international contemporary artists. Robina Hanley, the bubbly Irishwoman who co-owns the gallery – and runs Siem Reap Art Tours – has followed the rise of the art scene from the start. "I have lived in Siem Reap for 13 years and have seen many galleries open and close, some for personal reasons like illness or the owner relocating, some not giving themselves the right amount of time to establish their brand," she shares.

However, over the last two years, Hanley says she's seen a greater increase in the enthusiasm and commitment required to open independent visual art spaces. "Gallery owners now understand that just opening a space is not enough, they need to get their brand out there, promote their artists, make the right connections through the press, local businesses and high-end tour companies," she adds. "This is what is happening at the moment and it is working."

Among One Eleven Gallery's stable is Nou Sary, an internationally exhibited painter who lived through the Khmer Rouge era. He made it to art

school in France before returning to Cambodia in 2013. His work is primarily preoccupied with the experience of Cambodian farmers, and features thick brushstrokes depicting life in the rice fields through the vivid use of colour. When asked about Siem Reap's appeal as an artist's residence, Nou says, "The art scene is growing fast here, it's not far from the countryside and it's easy to get around."

Belgian artist and fashion designer Christian Develter is also among the artists on show at One Eleven. Known for his Chin series – bright, modern depictions of the tattooed women of Myanmar's Chin tribe – Develter works from his home-studio a short drive from the centre of Siem Reap. He'd lived in Thailand for more than two decades before moving here three years ago. "There is a great creative community spirit here and I could see the number of people in Siem Reap looking for contemporary art was increasing," Develter explains. "Something special was happening, and I wanted to be a part of it."

Along with more artists and galleries, there is also more guidance for buyers. Mirage Contemporary Art Space, for example, first debuted in 2016 as a café but opened in a new location in September 2018 near the Royal Residence. Apart from exhibiting artwork by Khmer artists, they also offer tours of local artists' houses. "There's a large influx of local and international travellers coming to Siem Reap," Mirage director and co-founder Siv Serey shares. "That »



## Sticking with tradition

**Where to experience Siem Reap's classic artistry**

**Artisans Angkor**

Focusing on time-tested arts and crafts, this social enterprise employs 800 artisans who make traditional silver jewellery, stone carvings and more. [artisansdangkor.com](http://artisansdangkor.com)

**Angkor National Museum**

Experience the halcyon days of the Khmer empire through literature and inscriptions. [angkornationalmuseum.com](http://angkornationalmuseum.com)

**Angkor Handicraft Association**

Shop locally made silverware, bronze and wood carvings, hand-woven textiles and paintings. [aha-kh.com](http://aha-kh.com)



**From left**  
Phirom Styles is a former tuk-tuk driver turned photographer; Mirage Contemporary Art Space; artworks by Christian Develter



drives the market and I feel people are more and more interested in Cambodian contemporary art.”

Hanley’s Siem Reap Art Tours, too, offers tailor-made itineraries for visitors looking to get better acquainted with the city’s art scene. These tours offer clients a chance to meet gallerists and artists, visit studio spaces and see guided exhibitions.

The growing interest is also evidenced by two galleries that opened within a week of each other last December. Batia Sarem Gallery is the brainchild of two Parisian gallery owners and runs four to six exhibitions a year, all from contemporary Khmer artists. “The ambition is to build up the name of Cambodian artists and go to international art fairs,” gallery director Martin Phéline reveals. “Siem Reap attracts people in the first place because it has temples. The art could be another reason why they come here.” Phéline believes that international accolades like the Grand Prize of the Taiwan-based Wonder Foto Day awarded earlier this year to Cambodian street photographer Sovan Philong, who is exhibiting at Batia Sarem until 19 October, will bring fresh attention and interest to the city’s art scene.

Tribe Art Gallery was the second December opening, by British curators and collectors Terry McIlkenny and

Nat Di Maggio. When describing the challenges in the local art scene, McIlkenny was matter-of-fact about the destruction left behind by the Khmer Rouge. He says, “The people that became artists had no role models, no mentors.” The duo drew on their connections to bring UK street artists like Pure Evil and Fin DAC over to get press, raise funds and act as mentors.

“Before the galleries opened, artists sold their work through markets or hung it in hotels and restaurants, hoping a customer would buy their work,” McIlkenny says. Now, with galleries sprouting up around town, artists can find a mentor and enjoy access to the gallery owners’ network of collectors.

Such efforts have helped Tribe to discover talented young artists. One of them is Din (real name Teang Borin), who often paints *apsaras* (celestial singers and dancers). An example of his work is a mural in the alley around the corner from the gallery. The Tribe duo also discovered 19-year-old Nak Noy when they saw his hyper-detailed murals on the buildings of a local village. Then there’s Phirom Styles (real name Kak Sokphirom), who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and had

“There is a great creative community spirit in Siem Reap”



## Gallery locator

**Batia Sarem Gallery**  
[batiasarem.com](http://batiasarem.com)

**Mirage Contemporary Art Space**  
[fb.com/miragesiemreap](https://fb.com/miragesiemreap)

**One Eleven Gallery**  
[oneelevengallery.com](http://oneelevengallery.com)

**Theam's House**  
[theamshouse.com](http://theamshouse.com)

**Tribe Art Gallery**  
[tribeart.bigcartel.com](http://tribeart.bigcartel.com)



been a tuk-tuk driver in Siem Reap for years when a passenger gave him a camera. “I took a photo and fell in love,” he beams. He sold his tuk-tuk and started taking photos. In the gallery, his images of a railway line destroyed by the Khmer Rouge but relaunched in 2017 are haunting, filled with loss and hope.

In July 2019, the art space Open Studio Cambodia opened above Tribe, relocating from Kampot to Siem Reap to be a part of what it calls “the buzzing art city of Cambodia”. Chan Phoun, one of its co-founders, moved with it. The

24-year-old lost his right arm in an accident at a brick factory when he was just 13. He trained to draw left-handed and now creates fine-lined portraits. “After I lost my arm, people called me names. I lost friends because they were embarrassed to be with me,” Chan says. “Now I have proven that handicapped people have talent. I don’t want people to pity me but to appreciate that talent.”

With so much creative energy coalescing around Siem Reap in recent years, One Eleven co-owner Hanley is confident the city is poised for a major art event soon. She shares, “There have been a couple of attempts at art fairs and it is discussed between galleries regularly. We believe we can put something groundbreaking together within the next 12 months.” ■



## The next wave

Meet the woman nurturing Siem Reap’s next generation of artists

The Small Art School was set up in 2008 by Tomoko Kasahara, who after 29 years teaching high-school art in Tokyo, wanted to give back. Kasahara opened the school in Siem Reap to

give free art lessons to local children using money she’d saved over 20 years. The school, neighbour to Batia Sarem, has a small gallery downstairs with work by alumni, and a classroom

upstairs stocked with painting supplies for its 350 students, ages 2-32. “The art scene here has changed a lot,” Kasahara says. “There was always hidden talent – it just needed a driver.”



SilkAir flies daily between Singapore and Siem Reap