Sisavanh / Legacy of Art

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Sisavanh Houghton  Laotian Artist/Professor

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a cause that helped our own people even though most of us were born there but not raised there. This became a Laotian diaspora, where many Laotians were scattered mainly in France and North America. Even though I was in Laos for only two years, I realized I will always be connected to my birthplace because I am Laotian.

Channapha’s speech was motivating, and her drive to make Laos a safer place is no doubt sincere. I find myself more of an advocate than an activist. I support and promote the cause. I am not trying to bring about a political change but am engaged in a humanitarian act of kindness. There has been some political struggle in Laos to get rid of the bombs, because some political figures do not want to relive that horrible historical event. Some would rather forget it and forge on, even though 20,000 people have been injured or killed from UXO explosions and 50 percent of them have been kids.

**As a war refugee yourself, has the current political climate informed your artwork?**

My work has always been a little political and about social change or awareness. It is important for me to contribute as an artist, but more importantly to have a conversation about what is going on in the world—to not be ignorant, but open to all ideas whether one agrees or disagrees. This work does explore the challenges of being a refugee and an immigrant, no doubt via the gestures, movement, hard and soft edges, imagery, and traditional Laotian colors. The feeling of displacement and the confusion of traditional Laotian roles and expectation as a woman was all a lot for a kid who grew up as the youngest with four brothers and a sister. As I got older, I came to terms with my struggle with my Laotian roots and tried to understand, respect, and accept the culture.

Even if you do not know anything about art, my hope for the audience was to get hit in the face with bright colors, chaos, movement, confusion—become discombobulated in the fractal landscape because that is how my family and all refugees and immigrants feel when they move to a country where they don’t speak the language, know the terrain or even the culture. Most step into darkness hoping to find their footing and a path that will lead them to safety, hope, and opportunities they could not provide them in their native war-torn country. Nothing different from what is going on in Syria’s Civil War: similar conflicts, refugee crisis, violence, abuse, death, and destruction.
Sisavanh Phouthavong-Houghton is an associate professor of Art, teaching advanced level painting courses. She recently took a sabbatical to teach in Thailand.

Tell us about your trip to Thailand.

The first two weeks in February, I was in Phuket (pronounced Poo-KET), Thailand. Dale Meier, a visual arts teacher and MTSU alum, invited me to visit Phuket International Academy as an artist/teacher in residence. I engaged with the students in a mural, demonstrated various painting techniques, was involved with ongoing critiques, assisted in the classroom, and had a mini solo show of my collages on paper at the library. I toured downtown Phuket, where I visited local artists in their studio spaces. I connected with local businesses who were interested in bringing the arts to Phuket. Phuket is booming and supports muralists, graphic designers, photographers, painters, animators, and art educators. There is definitely opportunity for our alums to make an artistic impact in Southeast Asia. I also visited Ani Academy, a painting/drawing school on the island of Ko Yao Noi, run by Rodney O’Dell Davis. The rigorous curriculum is based off of artist Anthony J. Waichulis. Anybody from all over the world may submit their work, and if they are accepted, they spend 3½ years being classically trained. Students are only required to pay for housing and food.

The third week of February, I traveled to Northeast Thailand to Nong Khai, a historical site where over 17,000 Laotian refugees fled the revolution and the repercussions of the Communist group, Pathet Lao, after the Vietnam War. My memories of Nong Khai were through the eyes of a 4-year-old. As a child survivor of the Vietnam War, my understanding and comprehension of the hardship and experiences that my family and many other families have gone through cannot be put into words. As a visual learner, I needed to physically visit that specific environment.

The fourth week of February I spent in Bangkok visiting Chulalongkorn University, where I met with Sukumar Leksawat, ceramic professor, and Krasin Inswang, printmaking professor. I connected and critiqued with some of the senior painters and ceramic students in their studio spaces. We discussed their artist residency program and curriculum. I visited Bangkok Art and Culture Centers, MOCA of Bangkok, National Gallery, Queens’ Gallery, and Chakchuchak, a huge open market where you will find local artists working and selling their work on the spot.

How did this trip impact you as an educator?

Working with our MTSU alum, Dale, was an amazing experience for both of us. I am still in contact with him and some of his students. The learning environment at the private school allowed me to see the pros and cons of private versus public schools. Their core mission statement is to create a warm, caring learning community that offers an all-round education with social emotional learning and mindfulness. We meditated and sat in silence for about 10 minutes every morning. After visiting the Ani Academy classically trained art school, I was able to see that work ethic is still the core of education.

Visiting Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok was a great experience to see the similarities and differences in their program in comparison to ours in the States. Being able to sit in on a critique and hear similar conversations I would have with my own students was uplifting—a lot of commonalities in the approach and curricula. I also found out they have a year-long artist residency program for ceramic artists, which would be a great opportunity for our alums or faculty.

Tell us about the personal side of reconnecting with a place your family had experienced as war refugees.

As a researcher in Nong Khai, I was able to truly immerse myself in the foreign land where I spent two years of my life as a child before we left for the U.S. I spent the week asking random strangers what their connection was to the refugee camp. I came to Nong Khai knowing that the refugee camp is no longer in existence. It is now a huge police/military headquarters, all fenced off from the public because the government is ashamed of the events that transpired in the refugee camps.

Most local people are not interested in sharing their experiences about the camp. The people who visited the Nong Khai refugee camps were builders, family members, lovers, salesmen/women, and partygoers. Being the youngest of seven, I have no memories of the camp, so I allowed myself to reflect, listen, and converse with the locals about their experiences with the refugees. Apparently, it was the place to visit. It sounds nice, but the facilities were horrible, people were starving, and overall, the quality of life was grim.

I ended the trip with over 20 interviews and a load of photos for future work. I am currently making an 18-foot-by-6-foot painting for Nashville Arts in the Airport which will be installed in February. I also have been invited to participate in a three-person show at Lauren Rogers Museum of Art in Mississippi starting in January.

Your latest exhibit, Legacies of War, was recently featured at Tinney Contemporary art gallery. What went into making this series?

I met Channapha Khamwongsa, founder of the Legacies of War, at the Lao Writers Summit in San Diego in May 2016. The organization’s mission is to advocate and educate for the removal of UXO (unexploded ordinance). About five years ago I started to make small works based on drawings of the victims of the bombings in Laos. However, it was not what I expected, so as an artist, I laid the idea to rest until I met Channapha and a great number of Lao artists. I was truly inspired by their stories, challenges, and the similarities we had as a group. Not only were we Lao professionals in all fields, but we were passionate about...
sisavanhphouthavong Great News! These four pieces will be going to a permanent collection in the new American Embassy building in Paramaribo, Suriname (smallest country in South America) Collaborated with awesome And talented Jarrod Houghton! Thank you Sarah and Susan Tinney! http://tinneycontemporary.com #resin #artinembassies #oilpainting #bronze #hummingbird #victorian #collage

chelseabastoky #putabirdonit

mikegenostudio Nice!

xxnickmurphyxx 😍😍😍😍

randy PURCELL Those are amazing!👏

carmen melkins You’re world famous Sisavanh!

sisavanhphouthavong Thank you everyone!